

ENGL 3840: Poetry Since 1950
Professor Langdon Hammer

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Oteng-Agyei Kankam

Talking Drums, Talking Back: Sounding Resistance Across the Atlantic
by Oteng-Agyei Kankam '27

The linguistic spelling of my Akan name—Kwa-BÉ-na | A-DÓM | O-téng a-JÉ-yi | KÁN-kam—carries a rhythm before it carries a meaning. Spoken aloud, it moves with a cadence: a steady rise and fall, vowels and consonants used not only to identify me, but also to echo a lineage, culture, and sound. Sound shapes Akan culture: tones characterize our language. I've grown up surrounded by a language that moves, tones that carry meaning, and names that beat like drums. These sonic influences shape how I listen for rhythm, as both a form and an embodiment of history and survival. More than anything, the sounds connect to a longer history of rhythm as a vessel of resistance—an idea embodied by the Akan drum, a carved wooden drum from the Akan tribe in Ghana that once crossed the Atlantic and now rests, silent but enduring, in the British Museum.¹



Like this drum, poetry can speak with more than words. “Caliban” by Kamau Brathwaite—a sonic archive that uses rhythm to remember what history tried to forget—transcends the mere use of words to evoke meaning. Brathwaite draws on Afro-Caribbean sonic traditions to create a poem that not only describes resistance but also sounds it. He transforms

¹ Crafted by an Akan artisan in Ghana between 1700 and 1745, the drum was transported across the Atlantic on a slave ship, collected in Virginia by Rev. Clerk for Sir Hans Sloane, and eventually entered the British Museum in 1753—misidentified for centuries before its true origins were recognized.

the trauma of the Middle Passage—the transatlantic voyage of enslaved Africans from Africa to the Americas or the West Indies during the Transatlantic Slave Trade—into a rhythmic choreography of survival. To write about Brathwaite’s “Caliban” is, for me, to enter a conversation from a different position, grounded in my identity as a Ghanaian from the Akan tribe. I do not share Brathwaite’s Caribbean history of creolization or surviving on colonized islands shaped by exile. Yet we are both what Stuart Hall calls the “diaspora”, a space of rupture and relation, where black identity is never singular or static but is always formed “through, not outside of, difference.” This is the framework through which I can place my rhythm side by side with Brathwaite’s. In conversation with the legacy of the Akan drum, Brathwaite’s “Caliban” becomes a performance of defiance, where rhythm carries identity, memory, and the refusal to be silenced.

The Akan drum, one of the oldest surviving African objects in the Americas, provides a powerful historical foundation for understanding sound as a vessel of resistance. Constructed in the Akan tribe in Ghana, the drum served as a language. Its—boom-boom-ba-dum—declared celebrations and wars, announcing life and death. Only “in-group members” understood “Akan drum language”, consequently contributing to the formation of group identity. The “talking drum” served a communicative function in Akan society, transmitting messages, marking rituals, and carrying communal memory through rhythm. During the Middle Passage, the Akan drum became something else: a sonic artifact of forced displacement. The sounds of the drum served as an unspoken, common language for slaves who didn’t understand each other’s spoken language. Slaves intertwined sound and rhythm with resistance and survival. As an Akan, I recognize the drum not just as history, but as inheritance. Despite efforts to silence it, the drum’s beats continue to echo across the diaspora, finding home in Brathwaite’s “Caliban.” “Caliban” revives that oppressed sound through poetic form, voice, and performance, becoming the voice

the drum has been denied since 1753. Much like “Caliban,” the Akan drum embodies the tension between historical trauma and cultural survival. Both the poem and the drum rely on rhythm as a carrier of memory and a way to transmit identity across rupture. In this way, the drum and the poem work in tandem: each an instrument that holds pain, history, a defiant sound, and most importantly, a rhythm.

Brathwaite’s “Caliban” stages its sonic resistance first through structure. The poem is divided into three sections that mirror the three phases of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: the journey to the coast, the Middle Passage, and the arrival in the Americas or the West Indies. It begins with dense, block-like quatrains that visually and rhythmically weigh the page down. The repetition of “ninety-five percent of my people poor/ ninety-five percent of my people black/ ninety-five percent of my people dead” (Brathwaite, lines 1-3) evokes a heavy dirge-like cadence. Tightly spaced with constrained syntax, the stanzaic regularity mirrors the claustrophobic conditions of both the journey to the coast and the Middle Passage. As the rhythm accelerates, fixed rhythm gives way to fragmentation where words descend into mostly monosyllabic, staccato fragments: “And/ Ban/ Ban/ Cal-/ iban” (Brathwaite, lines 33-36). The form ruptures, and verticality replaces block. The formatting change makes it practically impossible for the reader to analyze without implementing some kind of rhythm in which to read the poem. This rhythmic demand is echoed in Brathwaite’s live reading of the poem to a crowd in Manhattan, where faint taps of his finger against his chair accompany his voice in this segment.² That moment resonates with me, not just as a literary device, but as a rhythm reminiscent of village ceremonies and family gatherings, when rhythm bridges past and present

² Brathwaite’s “Caliban” has a very particular musicality because it demands to be read aloud, embodied, and put into rhythm. His tapping acts as an extension of the poem’s rhythm, illustrating how the body itself becomes an instrument of memory and resistance.

through the body. This increased pace echoes the beat of a drum, a drum silenced in the poem's beginning but given new meaning through Brathwaite's cadence: the Akan drum. Not only does this allow the listener to hear the drums calling to the narrator, but it is also a testament to the drum's ability to mimic speech and embody a form of communication that transcends words and syntax.

The middle section of the poem utilizes strong diction to reflect the psychological and spiritual collapse of the Middle Passage. Littered with the repetition of “down / down / down,” “where the music hides him,” “where the silence lies” (Brathwaite, lines 88-99), the section adds a kind of rhythm to a particularly sorrowful experience where the body bends and the voice falters. In the closing section, the lines lengthen again—but now they rise: “up / up / up / and the music is saving me” (Brathwaite, lines 134-137). Here, Brathwaite illustrates how adaptive, transformed music becomes a cultural legacy in the Caribbean. This legacy offers not just survival but rebirth: an image of being lifted—“saved”—through rhythm across the horrors of the Middle Passage. As the speaker makes his first “hot / slow / step / on the burning ground” (Brathwaite, lines 138-141) of the West Indies, we hear and feel the rhythm of the “drummer calling me” (Brathwaite, line 129) as “the music is saving me” (Brathwaite, line 137). The imagery here is particularly striking. The ground is aflame, requiring slow and seemingly thought-out steps. The ground, which normally should offer support, instead burns beneath the speaker. Yet through rhythm, he finds the strength to rise above. He willingly expects the pain that comes with every fresh step, and now “the drummers are praising [him]” (Brathwaite, line 132). The poem's structure tells a story not only of form, but also of feeling—tracing a journey from despair to hope, stasis to movement, and silence to sound.

Brathwaite's discussion of 'limbo' marks perhaps the most lyrical moment of “Caliban”—a moment he underscores through singing in his live performance. Limbo, a dance

that originated within the West Indies, features a person with “knees bent like a crab” (Brathwaite, 4:51). Offering commentary during his reading, Brathwaite describes the dance as maneuvering to “such a successful degree so as to move from a position of nothingness on the ground, rising like the sun to the wonderful beat of the drums on the other side of the stick” (Brathwaite, 6:51-7:21). He compares “the limbo stick [to] the silence in front of me” (Brathwaite, line 98); the stick, in itself being a form of limbo, stands poised between movement and stasis, speech and suppression. Brathwaite describes the moment when the “stick hit[s] sound and the ship like it ready” (Brathwaite, lines 107–108), transforming the stick into percussion, propulsion, and preparation all at once. It echoes the Akan drum not just in tone but in function: organizing movements, commanding bodies, marking transitions. But here, it is distorted; it is not a drum of initiation or healing, but rather it is the whip’s rhythm, a beat of domination. The tension strengthens when the speaker declares, “stick is the whip” (Brathwaite, line 117) and “drum stick knock and the darkness is over me” (Brathwaite, line 121). The whip and the drumstick share a motion: a strike against a surface and a consequential forced resonance. By exposing this dual symbol of a stick, Brathwaite conjures the trauma of the ship hold, allowing the reader to feel this percussive motif like a heartbeat or a pulse of dread. However, within that dread, rhythm persists. Even in its harshest form, the stick holds memory. It becomes the shadow of the Akan drum—not a tool of ritual, but of punishment—still carrying sound, still refusing silence. It forces the poem to remember, without diluting the harsh experiences of the Middle Passage. Through that remembered rhythm, “Caliban” recounts suffering and moves rhythmically and defiantly through it. Brathwaite’s description of the limbo as a “bittersweet residual memorial of the slave trade” (Brathwaite, 5:51) encapsulates rhythm ability to reanimate instruments of subjugation into vessels of remembrance—where the stick, once used for violence and discipline, now marks the beat of survival, endurance, and black diasporic identity.

Limbo is a particularly interesting word as it refers to something that cannot concretely be defined—a sort of in-between. In the Akan language, “sankofa” means to go back and get it. This word has the symbol of a bird with its head turned backward, retrieving an egg from its back. Sankofa is not about regression; it is about learning from the past to move forward. In a similar spirit, the limbo dancer bends backward to go forward.



Brathwaite describes the persona’s motion as “pran- / cing up to the lim- / bo silence / down / down / down” (Brathwaite, lines 42-47). What is crucial about this is its contradiction in direction: the phrase begins with “pran- / cing up”, suggesting joy or ascent, yet quickly drops into “lim- / bo silence / down / down / down.” This collapse into silence and descent mimics the Sankofa symbol, and dramatizes the limbo’s double meaning—it is both a celebration and a reenactment of historical trauma. The dancer bends their back not just physically, but historically: returning to the memory of the Middle Passage, to the ship’s limited physical space. Nevertheless, by moving through that space between the stick and the ground, the dancer survives it. Like the bird who turns its head to retrieve an egg from its back to move forward, the limbo dancer looks backward—into the past, into silence, into trauma— not to remain there but to reemerge. Though Brathwaite’s limbo is rooted in Caribbean history, I recognize in its backwards motion something deeply Akan—an embodied retrieval of what was lost and a striving towards what is ahead.

Brathwaite’s rhythmic resistance is not only cultural or historical— it is also literary. His Caliban emerges from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, where the character first appears as a symbol of subjugation who repurposes the colonizer’s language to a form of linguistic resistance: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / is I know how to curse” (Shakespeare 1.2. 437-438). Shakespeare’s Caliban is a figure of linguistic resistance, but also one that ultimately remains

confined within the play's colonial power structure, specifically the European form of iambic pentameter. Brathwaite takes this moment, particularly the line "Ban, Ban, Caliban; has a new master, get a new man" (Shakespeare 2.2.190–191), and retools it. In "Caliban", the line becomes a sonic fragment: "And / Ban / Ban / Cal- / iban"(Brathwaite, lines 33-36), breaking free from the smoothness of iambic pentameter, a symbol of European poetic form. Brathwaite's refusal to use that meter is not incidental. The fragmented nature formally rejects Western oppression and order. Infusing a diasporic twist, he creates syncopated and jagged rhythm. Brathwaite riffs on Shakespeare—borrowing, breaking, and reanimating language and rhythm. In so doing, Brathwaite creates a Caliban who does not simply speak back, but speaks differently, through rhythm. His Caliban does not just curse the master; he remakes the language in a beat of his own. This retooling of language through rhythm finds an echo beyond literature—in the very movements of diasporic memory across the Atlantic.

The Akan drum and Brathwaite's "Caliban" both originate from Africa, yet they have moved differently through the Atlantic world. The drum preserves a steady ancestral voice, while *Caliban* invents a broken, resistant rhythm. Both, however, ask the reader to listen—not just to history, but to the survival inscribed in rhythm itself. The drum, born in Ghana, travelled to Virginia, silenced yet still intact. It speaks of continuity and the preservation of ancestral sound even when forcibly removed from its context. This contrasts with Brathwaite's Caliban—a reimagined version of Caliban in *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. Brathwaite transforms this Western form into his Caribbean rhythm. His rhythm is jagged: a forged clash between Shakespearean language and a longing for his mother tongue, the beats from Africa. While the drum holds memory through stability, Caliban holds memory through instability and fragmentation. Neither is passive; both use rhythm to resist erasure. As an Akan reader, I hear the rhythm differently. I hear not only Caribbean defiance but also echoes of Akan culture of

sound as memory and return. In this rhythm, whether drummed, spoken, danced, or broken into lines, is the deepest connection between Akan and Afro-Caribbean culture. I see in the limbo stick not only the trauma of confinement of the Afro-Caribbeans and the ritual bending of time that Sankofa teaches—going back to recover what must be carried forward. Diaspora, in this sense, is not a shared story, but a sonic strategy: sound as survival and rhythm as a way to speak back. The poem invites other ideas of rhythm, extending the definition of rhythm beyond sound into something transcending time and space, inviting listeners to hear a particular story. His emphasis on orality, rhythm, and performance is inherently dialogic, meant to be echoed and responded to. In his reading of “Caliban,” he interrupts himself often to offer a brief narrative about a limbo dancer. The rhythm of his poetry mimics call-and-response traditions, an invitation to respond. Brathwaite coined the term “tidalectics” to describe the cyclical, flowing, interwoven nature of Caribbean history, language, and identity, establishing a framework based on exchange, movement, and rhythm, not fixed ideas. The ability to hear the echoes of Akan culture in “Caliban” strengthens the poem’s idea of rhythm, resisting oppression and forgetting. Rather than a detour, this connection testifies to the drum’s traveling rhythm.

Rhythm, in both physical instrument and poetic voice, becomes a revitalized diasporic strategy of resistance and remembrance, learned from ancestors who used transformed rhythm as a symbol of hope. The Akan drum, stilled in the British Museum, does not remain silent. It waits for someone who knows how to listen. Brathwaite’s Caliban, chanting and dancing under the limbo stick, teaches us how to listen to the drum’s beat. The beat goes on—across the very oceans it travelled over— through silence into a sound of survival echoed across the Black diaspora.

Works Cited

Brathwaite, Kamau. “Caliban.” *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*. Oxford UP, 1973.