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Source: *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, Spring, 2019, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Spring, 2019), pp. 107-128

Published by: Centre for Arts, Humanities and Sciences (CAHS), acting on behalf of the University of Debrecen CAHS

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26899983

Bridging the Narrative Gap: The Ghost Narrator in Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014)

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HJEAS

In Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, the winner of the 2015 Man Booker Prize, the narrative voice of Sir Arthur Jennings creates a bridge between the cultures of orality and literacy, critically engaging in the erasure of thresholds of epistemological location. Sir Arthur functions in the novel as a link between past and present, between Caribbean and European traditions, and between pre- and post-colonial times, allowing the reader to locate James's novel in the tradition of "border thinking." In *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*, Walter D. Mignolo suggests that "border thinking" is a mechanism for intellectual decolonization and a way to break away from "Eurocentrism as epistemological perspective" (85). Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualization of "Borderlands" as the crossroads of different languages, cultural traditions, and collective sensibilities, as well as Abdelkébir Khatibi's idea of "an other thinking" (qtd. in Mignolo, *Local Histories* 71)[1], Mignolo defines "border thinking" as "a powerful and emergent gnoseology, absorbing and displacing hegemonic forms of knowledge into the perspective of the subaltern" (12), and calls for "an other thinking" as "a way of thinking that is not inspired in its own limitations and is not intended to dominate and to humiliate" (68). Breaking down various dichotomies central to imperial domination may thus be seen as a way to create a new locus of enunciation and the practice of "border gnosis" understood as "knowledge from a subaltern perspective, conceived from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world" (11). "An other thinking" implies "thinking from an other place, imagining an other language, arguing from an other logic" (313), all of which are strongly evident in James's novel.

James's polyphonic novel features an enormous cast of characters and several first-person narrators, among whom are gangsters, hitmen, a CIA agent, a journalist for *Rolling Stone*, dons of the gangster underworld, a woman appearing under different names, and the ghost of a dead man—the white politician Sir Arthur George Jennings. These are the novel's binding elements. The narrators' names appear in place of chapter titles and are disambiguated in a list provided at the beginning. Their narratives, many of which feature large sections of dialogue, are a series of interior monologues, reminiscent in their structure of William Faulkner's narrative technique in *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Divided into five parts, each with a different time period and focus,

Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies 25.1. 2019.

the novel presents Jamaica in the 1970s (a key event being an attempted assassination of Bob Marley in December 1976) as a place of political rivalry, organized crime, drug trafficking, violence, and deprivation. Sir Arthur's narration is assigned a special role, signaled by three aspects: its informative content, its position within the structure of the text, and the striking quality of its prose, markedly different from the voices of other characters. The book opens with Sir Arthur's monologue, situated straight after the epigraph, before Part One starts. Then, a successive four (out of five) sections conclude with Sir Arthur talking. Such positioning endows Sir Arthur with a distinct capacity for insightful opinion, discernment, and sound judgment—always desirable at moments of closure or denouement. In all but the fifth and final section the last words belong to Sir Arthur. It is also his voice that begins the novel with the insistent (and repeated) command "Listen," treating the readers as an audience and thus firmly placing James's book within the oral tradition of the Caribbean Islands.

Sir Arthur as a "white duppy"

The introductory "Listen" is followed by nine paragraphs that constitute a kind of prologue and a point of departure for a story of warring gangs, political conflict, drug business, and personal vendettas. Not only does this sequence introduce the main theme of the novel—"This is a story of several killings, of boys who meant nothing to a world still spinning" (3)—but it also, significantly, hints at a challenge to the existence of such polar opposites as those of life and death, past and present, pre- and post-colonial periods, Western and Caribbean cultures, modes of thinking, knowledge, and sensibility. In the character of Sir Arthur's ghost, right from the start, James blurs the dividing lines and interrogates apparent separation and antitheses. Sir Arthur is dead but he speaks to us. He was murdered several years earlier, and his murderer is a prominent Jamaican politician obsessed with power. At the outset the reader/listener is informed: "I didn't fall, I was pushed over the balcony at the Sunset Beach Hotel in Montego Bay" (1); "there's nothing to do but wait for the man that killed me, but he won't die, he only gets older and older and trades out wives for younger and younger and breeding a whole brood of slow-witted boys and running the country down into the ground" (2).

In Jamaican folk tradition Sir Arthur would be considered a duppy. As anthropologists and folklorists note, the West Indian belief in duppies originates in the Central and West African cultural conviction that a person possesses two souls. As MacEdward Leach has observed,

> in Jamaica each person possesses just two souls. One is the good soul, or spirit planted by God, and the other an earthy spirit or a secular one. These spirits can wander away from the body during sleep and then can engage in all sorts of activities which the person may remember as dreams. These wandering spirits may appear as shadows; they consort with shadows of material things like trees, food, and animals. Upon the death of the body the good spirit goes to heaven to await judgment; the earth or secular spirit remains for three days in the coffin with the body. Then, unless proper precautions to prevent its emergence are taken, it leaves the body often as a spiraling blue mist, or as smoke, or as a swarm of tiny flies, or as a shadow. It is now known as a duppy. (207)

Further, Leach clarifies: "Duppy has three related meanings in Jamaica: (i) the soul of a dead person, manifest in human form; (ii) the soul of the dead manifest in a variety of fabulous beasts, and also in the forms of real animals like lizards and snakes; (iii) an order of supernatural beings only vaguely associated with the dead" (207). Other scholars claim that duppy is "neither a ghost nor the spirit . . . but only the shadow of the departed" (Bryan 40).

Venetia Newall explains the significance of duppies for Caribbean people: "Death creates a gap in the community and a belief in ghosts can help to seal that gap, providing a means of coming to terms with a stressful situation. For Jamaicans it can also underline the feeling of continuity by providing a link with the past" (31). Thus, the character of Sir Arthur bridges the gap between life and death, past and present, as well as European and African. Many Jamaican beliefs and practices related to death, decidedly influenced by African ancestry, are variously treated as witchcraft, cults (Breiner 30), spiritual systems, "conceptual frameworks" (Paton 19), or forms of indigenous religion. Kumina, obeah,[2] and voodoo, for example, although consisting of multiple phenomena, are founded on the premise that the spiritual world is directly connected with the physical world and its powers can harm or heal. Because ancestors and spirits "have influence over the lives of living humans" (Paton 23), and can intervene in their lives, or even "provide beneficence" (Warner-Lewis 272), they need "to be cared for and respected" (Paton 23). Discussing the enduring presence of indigenous religions in Jamaica, Leonard Barrett argues:

> Unlike Haiti, where the slaves were forced to become members of the Catholic Church, in Jamaica the English planters adamantly refused to share their religion with the slave population. The Church of England with its "high" liturgy was considered too sophisticated for the people of "the lesser breed" . . . . So the slaves, left to themselves in things religious, developed elements of their remembered religions. (14)

Associated with slavery and signifying the presence of African inheritance in Caribbean culture, indigenous religions have thus come to symbolize the ultimate difference from Europe. Deemed as uncivilized and inimical to progress, they are often interpreted as an illustration of the gap existing between European (imperial and colonial as well as post-imperial and post-colonial aspects of Jamaica) and African cultures. In literature, elements of traditional religions can be read as ways of remembering. Leila Kamali points to the importance of the "connection to African cultural memory via Caribbean religious forms" (6), especially the use of the "tropes of spirit possession" (153). She stresses "the dynamic quality of these traditions, their capacity to epitomize the practice of crossing borders between worlds" (12), while Niblett suggests that the common African connection in many separate tribal traditions of Jamaica signals "the transformation of these traditions within the new environment" (11). In James's novel, the transcendental aspect of Sir Arthur's presence gestures towards the existence of temporal Borderlands, where past and present are interlocked and open up to the future.

Paradoxically, the novel's duppy is decidedly of British (thus European) lineage. In the past, Sir Arthur must have been an influential person whose social position rested on his colonial ancestry. The title "Sir," as well as a remark about seeing Noël Coward every summer and calling him "uncle," make him a pre-independence figure, a representative of imperial culture and heritage. Yet, simultaneously, he functions in the novel as an authoritative commentator on events, fulfilling the requirements of "an important traditional belief still widely represented in Jamaican folk culture" (Breiner 34), according to which "the dead are generally construed not only as part of the living community, but as its chief governing body" and thus possess "social and juridical authority" (Breiner 34). The dead can communicate with the living and direct their moves, influencing their behavior (Warner-Lewis 333). Partaking of both worlds the character of Sir Arthur bridges the traditional divide by linking the spiritual with the material through a constant state of crossover.

In most situations Sir Arthur is invisible. He may enter the house of his killer and watch the man make love to his new wife. Standing at the foot of his bed, he can smell all those people—over a hundred—whose death the man has orchestrated, but nobody sees him. Only the people who are about to die may see Sir Arthur's ghost. As he explains: "Those who are about to die can see the dead" (269). Demus, one of the four attackers who tried to kill Bob Marley, sees Sir Arthur and recognizes him as a duppy directly before his execution by the Rasta Avengers:

> Is the white man . . . . He right there. He looking at me and at them . . . plenty step behind them and he looking at them and at me and at the sky like he crying . . . and the white man looking but then he head gone . . . him head gone, no, it swing like he no have no neck then he use him hand what him doing? He putting him head back on him screwing it tight Jeesaz Christ Jeesaz Christ, bombocloth is not man is rolling calf. (271)

According to many sources (for example, Pradel 148) in obeah the rolling calf is a particularly malicious duppy, often an incarnation of a murderer. Ironically, it is Demus who is a would-be murderer, not Sir Arthur. The stress on Sir Arthur's whiteness further problematizes his presence among the Avengers, since he is neither one of the Rastamen nor a living representative of the system of law, neither fully dead nor alive, but existing in a liminal space, straddling both cultures of contemporary Jamaica.

Papa-Lo, the don of a shanty town of Kingston called Copenhagen City, sees Sir Arthur's ghost twice, first on the day when Demus is hanged as punishment for his attack on Marley, and then on the day of his own death, a year later. However, in his narration those two events blur and are recounted within the space of one chapter. Unlike in Demus's narrative, when the reader expects the character's death as punishment and is prepared for the forthcoming scene, here the fact that Papa-Lo sees a duppy builds an expectation of possible danger, heightening suspense.

> Why is a white man here? Why he behind them, looking at them, and why he turn around and look at me? When he look at me the breeze get cold . . . he looking up and down the rope and he looking at me and me want to jump and shout. Who you, white man? Who you be? You was following the Singer? . . . . Nobody don't see him. Me don't know but he look at them and stare at me. . . . Maybe him is a duppy. (355)

A paragraph later the word "duppy" is repeated. This time the spirit's presence heralds Papa-Lo's own death: "The white man still there. The white duppy. I blink and he in the car with me" (355-56). A few minutes later the car will be stopped and Papa-Lo will be shot dead. When the first bullet enters his head, a sequence of images pass through his mind, some of which are prophetic. "[M]e neck speaking blood me mouth can't open the angel of death sitting on the Singer shoulder the angel is a white man me see him already me know that now" (361). Feeling that he is dying, Papa-Lo also predicts the impending death of Marley. In later sections more characters will speak of duppies, yet the meaning of the word will only be explained in a conversation

with a white man. When Tristan Phillips talks to Alex Pierce he describes the reaction of somebody who thought him dead: "Man 'bout fi run since is must duppy did deh 'pon him. Duppy is a ghost, by the way" (473).[3] Although Sir Arthur is the only spirit in James's novel with a speaking part, the reader learns about other spirits who follow people. A duppy of a fireman killed by Josey Wales (a powerful don who replaced Papa-Lo as the don of Copenhagen City and another of Marley's assailants) "walks around him [Josey Wales], walks through him at times which Wales mistakes for a shiver. He tries to strike but goes right through him" (117). The way in which Sir Arthur explains the presence of the dead in the world of the living echoes the Caribbean folk creed that interprets distinctive or strange sounds as indicative of the supernatural:

> Dead. It sounds final but it's a word missing an *ing*. You come across men longer dead than you, walking all the time though heading nowhere, and you listen to them howl and hiss because we're all spirits or we think we are all spirits but we're all just dead. Spirits that slip inside other spirits. Sometimes a woman slips inside a man and wails like a memory of making love. They moan and keen loud but it comes through the window like a whistle or a whisper under the bed, and little children think there's a monster. The dead love lying under the living for three reasons. (1) We're lying most of the time. (2) Under the bed looks like the top of the coffin, but (3) There is weight, human weight on top that you can slip into and make heavier, and you listen to the heart beat while you watch it pump and hear the nostrils hiss when their lungs press air and envy the shortest breath. (1)

This passage stresses the unity of the spiritual and the material, while simultaneously casting some doubt on the possibility of rational explanation and truth ("we're all spirits or we think we are all spirits but we're all just dead") and, characteristically for Sir Arthur's narration, undermining the solemnity of the tone with humor ("We're lying most of the time"), adding some mockery to a scientific-like enumeration, which, with its listing of three items, transports the utterance into the context of different forms of knowledge. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa comments on the erasure of the indigenous ways of knowing and thinking, registering imposition: "I allowed white rationality to tell me that the existence of the 'other world' was mere pagan superstition. I accepted their reality, the 'official' reality of the rational reasoning mode which is connected with external reality . . ." (36-37). Thus, in Sir Arthur's voice James not only brings together disparate cultural experiences and domains of meaning, he also humorously unites diverse intellectual traditions by merging Caribbean folk epistemology, or what Mignolo calls "subaltern knowledge," with a parody of scientific explanation,

illustrating "the self-restitution of barbarism as a theoretical locus, and a progressive force offering valuable correctives to the abuses of post-Enlightenment reason, science and disciplinary" (Mignolo, *Local Histories* 309).

As the cited fragments make clear, Sir Arthur's melodious English can be instantly recognized as the language of a well-educated native speaker and stands in stark contrast to all other monologues of A *Brief History*, many of which are uttered in Jamaican Creole, some posing a real challenge for the reader. The speech of each narrator is different and unique, one of its kind, and James has been praised by many a reviewer for his deft handling of those many voices (Levine; Riemer; Tayler), each chapter providing a remarkable testimony to the undeniable interdependence of discourse and identity, and a clear indicator of the speaker's social position.[4] Sir Arthur does not speak in the vernacular, yet, as will be explained later, his community membership is manifest in other ways. Speaking for the community, Sir Arthur does not use the language of the community, which seems a contradiction. Yet, it is precisely for this reason that he occupies a position of both belonging and not belonging, transcending binaries and inhabiting Borderlands, while constructing a new locus of enunciation blurring the boundaries between the colonial and the post-colonial, as well as between Europe and the Caribbean. Sir Arthur's character as an agent in this process encompasses the view of threshold and liminality "as two sides connected by a bridge, as a geographical and epistemological location" (Mignolo, *Local Histories* 309).

Through "nation language" or Creole the population expresses its folklore.[5] The Jamaican proverb as the novel's epigraph is yet another indication of the culture of orality strongly present in James's book. Creole is also seen as a subaltern language, "closely linked to 'otherness' and 'Africanity'" (Warner-Lewis 339). Its employment in written narratives, going back to the late 1940s and V. S. Reid's novel *New Day*, which "pioneered the use of a modified Jamaican vernacular" (Niblett 4), is especially important for recognizing and accentuating the relevance of oral tradition to Caribbean experience, as well as articulating anticolonial attitudes (Dalleo 101). In both poetry and fiction, Creole has been used as a "subversive practice" (Cooper, "Islands" 7) and "a way of staking out space in the public sphere" (Dalleo 98) to mark the opposition between European literary culture and the vernacular tradition of the Caribbean.

Oral literature and the literature of orality

Scholars who discuss the literary genres that "dominated Jamaican consciousness" up to the nineteenth century (D'Costa 26) highlight the fact that orality, always associated with the common man, helped the West Indian

people to survive. Following Erick Havelock, Paul Cobley argues that "the creative seat of oral narrative is the collective tradition of storytelling itself rather than the talent of one individual" (107). Indeed, such a collective tradition thrived in the Caribbean and the art of story-telling, apart from offering a venue for passing on values and beliefs, functioned as a means of resistance.[6] For some, "the formulation 'oral literature' is an offensive oxymoron" (Johnson et al. xiv). Because of that, Michèle Praeger suggests that to speak of a contemporary literature of the Caribbean, the term "oral literature" should be replaced with the expression "a literature of orality" (91). Orality (*oralité*) is understood here in the sense given to the term by Meschonnic as "a signifying mode" (172), rather than as a mode of transmission or expression, thus found both in written and in spoken discourse characterized by rhythm.[7]

In *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization*, Mignolo makes a specific link between cultures of the written word and colonization. He observes:

> The celebration of the letter and its complicity with the book were not only a warranty of truth but also offered the foundations for Western assumptions about the necessary relations between alphabetic writing and history. People without letters were thought as people without history, and oral narratives were looked at as incoherent and inconsistent. (3)

The relevance of oral tradition to the experience of Caribbean peoples has by now achieved a wide recognition. Scholars such as Sindoni (2006) and Warner-Lewis (2003) argue that since many Caribbean genres exhibit characteristic traits which may not have corresponding equivalents in Western tradition, the tools of Western theory may often be inapplicable. Without doubt, James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* draws inspiration from Jamaican oral tradition and employs techniques and literary devices characteristic of the oral epic. Thus, the novel may be treated as an instance of continuing the oral within the written, where the oral can be detected both in the use of narrative devices and in the creation of a metaphysical framework. By doing so, it positions itself at the interstices of both the Western and the Caribbean—at cultural Borderlands.

Numerous studies of characteristic forms of oral craft point to a special role accorded to such forms as audience participation, dramatic monologues, proverbs, wise sayings, verbal exchanges, call and response, riddles, songs, moral tales, as well as "the practice of double meaning" and "dropping remarks" (Roberts 8), all of which re-enact a connection to the lost

homeland of exiled Africans and create a community bond. Kubayanda argues that to read competently Caribbean texts, one needs to be aware of the African legacy manifest in (among others): animism, the unity of matter and spirit, "the implied presence of a responsive audience," such rhetorical mechanisms as "jokes and riddles, which often play a parodic role," and "trickster tales" or Ananse stories (113-17). Many of these elements are included in Sir Arthur's narration and they enrich his measured, elegant prose with local color, pointing to Jamaica's vibrant multiplicity of voices and endowing Sir Arthur with a capacity to represent a community. Already in the first sample of his speech, alongside the initial command of "Listen," the reader can detect a strong presence of traditional elements of tale-telling, with an added ironic twist. Early on, Sir Arthur compares himself to a spider: "Me, I'm lying on the floor, my head a smashed pumpkin, with my right leg twisted behind the back and my two arms bent in a way that arms aren't supposed to bend, and from high up, from the balcony, I look like a dead spider" (2). The mention of a spider suggests the figure of Anancy, the archetypal trickster of West Indian legends. Coppola describes Anancy as "a figure marked by amazing linguistic skills and the mastery of figurative speech, thus embodying the manipulative power of language to resist and undermine the dominant (colonial) discourse" (683), while Wood points out that Anancy "thrives on the flaws, fissures and fault-lines in society . . . , the trickster exploits the weaknesses, fears and longings that are intensified by the imbalances and inadequacies in the society in which he lives" (72). Most importantly, however, as suggested by D'Costa, the spider figure exemplifies "the cunning hero of survival" (31), and thus Ananse (Anancy) tales can be interpreted as "a vehicle for moral and psychological insight" (31).[8] Characteristically for Sir Arthur's monologues, the reader is presented with a paradox. Contrary to traditional Anancy stories, where the spider is witty, resourceful, and usually a winner, here the spider image is an image of death, and yet no other narrative but Sir Arthur's contains so much insight and moral force.

Sindoni suggests that in Anancy stories "the weakest outwits his opponents, thanks to his ability to manipulate language. Words are thus evaluated not only for their informative power, but for their ability to convey performative values. Supremacy is possessed by those who can control words—spoken words" (xviii). As a ghost or duppy in the novel and contrary to Jamaican folk belief, Sir Arthur cannot intervene in the lives of the living. As a narrator, he exhibits verbal expressiveness surpassing other narrators, speaking in Standard English, the voice of the colonizer, "the patriarchal language of Empire" (Cooper, "Islands" 3), but he also quotes other characters speaking in Creole. He is a complex, subversive character,

transcending dichotomies, assuming a novel site of enunciation, which becomes possible only through recognition of alternative ways of perceiving the world.

Features of the oral narrative present in Sir Arthur's discourse include numerous repetitions of words, phrases and whole sentences, such as the sentence "Now something new is blowing" (430), which is repeated nine times within the space of seven pages. The style is often "additive and aggregative" rather than "subordinative or analytic," which characterizes spoken discourse (Ong 36-38). This technique coupled with a three-part pattern of listing enhances the rhythmic prosody of the monologue. For example, "the oma has hopped, skipped and jumped from your foot to your liver, lungs and brain" (435); "You wake up and smell sex, smoke and whiskey" (434); "nobody listens, nobody looks, nobody comes" (434). The use of apostrophe as a form of address implies interaction with a listener or an audience, even when the listener (audience) cannot be present, as in: "You look at me, and even in the dark I can see your red eyes blink fierce" (271)—said to Demus; "You're gone"—to Marley (436). There is occasional occurrence of non-standard grammar and code switching as in: "the sexy gals them hot and ready in tight jeans" (433), or: "is wah kinda fuckery this?" (434), or: "the afterlife is just not a happening scene, not a groovy shindig" (2). Rhetorical questions suggest reciprocity of the implied reader (listener), as in: "How do you bury a man? Put him in the ground or stomp out his fire?" (599).

One more important rhetorical trope typical of the oral tradition, which is strongly present in Sir Arthur's narration, is the practice of witnessing and testifying. Atkinson and Page observe: "Witnessing and testifying uses the act of communication as a metaphor for unity. It is a testament—tangible proof that validates one's existence as part of the group. To witness is to affirm, attest, certify, validate, and observe. . . . In the oral tradition . . . one who witnesses has an obligation to testify" (102). As a ghost, Sir Arthur bears witness to the events and conversations not related by other characters. He witnesses the death of Marley's assailants, other characters, and also the death of Marley himself many years later. He provides specific details of many occurrences that build the plot, and he also reveals numerous facts of the Singer's life that are only recognized by those who know his biography. His testimony sounds somber and grave, and the present tense in the function of conversational historical present is used to report past events. Referring to a fireman's death, Sir Arthur testifies that it was a murder, not accidental tragedy:

> Running to the fire on Orange Street, him fireman number seven. A fire set in a two-story tenement, the flames a mad snake looping through the windows, five children already dead, two shot before the fire. He grabs the hose, knowing the water will only sputter, and runs through the gate. His cheek burns on the right and his temple explodes on the left. The second bullet hits him in the chest. The third grazes the neck of the fireman behind. (117)

Witnessing Demus's death, Sir Arthur tells the reader:

> Rasta avengers all in white smell of ganja smoke and iron in the blood. Seven men with nothing to say . . . . Three of the seven have wrapped their head in white, like African tribal women . . . . A line, a gate, a fortress wall of Rastamen, most in white but some in colours hidden by moonlight, all in a line, side by side, with cutlasses and knives in hand, machine guns strapped across backs, as far as anyone can see. Man beside man, and beside him, men all the way across right, all the way across left, stretching so far that the lines disappear around the bends of the hill and continues. A band of men in a circle around a mountain that I know of, but cannot remember. (270-72)

Descriptive details authenticate eye-witness testimony, while the solemn quality of the prose adds to the atmosphere of doom, broken sentences accentuate the performative aspect of the monologue and the philosophical asides introduce a prophetic dimension: "The living, they never listen" (273). Sir Arthur's prophesizing sounds ominous and creates an impression of an ever-present, vigilant spirit who knows what is in the offing:

> I will be there when they kill Tony McFerson. I will be there when the Eventide Old Folks home goes up in fire and smoke. Nobody tries to save himself. I will be there when the boy buried alive crosses over but still thinks he's not dead and I'll follow him when he walks to the house of the reggae Singer. I will be there when they come for the last one in the old city. When three run into rough justice. When the Singer dancing with his undead toe falls in Pennsylvania and his locks drop and scatter. (269)[9]

The practice of witnessing and testifying not only highlights the performative element of Sir Arthur's monologues but it also suggests rapport with the audience. Sir Arthur testifies before his listeners/readers and thus the readers become co-witnesses and are involved in the act of moral judgment. Simultaneously, since an acknowledgement of the duty to testify reflects community membership, Sir Arthur's narrative bridges the gap between black Afro-Caribbean and white populations. The need to testify and tell the truth

after witnessing a crime is a proof of symbolic inclusion, even though the division into "us" (white, Western, colonial, European, British, Christian) and "them" (black, Jamaican, African, Rastafarian, anti-Babylon) is also present in Sir Arthur's story-telling. It is most strongly pronounced in the passage referring to Marley's funeral. Commenting on the Order of Merit granted to the Singer, Sir Arthur declares: "A fire that lights up Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique and South Africa doused by two letters, O and M. Now he is one of us" (599). The bitter irony underlying the claim to entitlement will, however, be revoked in Sir Arthur's final words when with the power of considerable insight, in rhythmically balanced oration, he declares:

> [I]n another city, another valley, another ghetto, another slum, another favela, another township, another intifada, another war, another birth, somebody is singing Redemption Song, as if the Singer wrote it for no other reason but for this sufferah to sing, shout, whisper, weep, bawl, and scream, right here, right now. (601)

His last words, a tribute to the reggae superstar, are a powerful acknowledgement of the popularity of his art among the dispossessed and a lasting proof of a "fire" that could not be "stomped out" (599). Cooper warns: "To write in the creole-anglophone Caribbean without reference to the rhythms and language of the street is to be cut off from the pulsating lifeblood of the (literary) community: literally, to be out of touch" ("Islands" 7). Superficially, Sir Arthur's monologues provide stark contrast to the utterances of other characters, especially those speaking "the language of the street," but simultaneously they pulsate with "the lifeblood of the community" on a deeper level.

Griot, omniscient narrator, or Greek chorus?

By speaking in riddles and paradoxes, by alluding to Jamaican folk beliefs, by revealing a distant past, as in "that slave rebellion was such ghastly business" (2), and an unspecified future, as in "He will die the only person thinking he had failed" (3), Sir Arthur manifests the faculty of foresight and wisdom. His voice is that of authority in the world of corruption and crime. With a voice so privileged, at times he assumes the role of the classical third-person omniscient narrator or the Greek chorus, exhibiting clairvoyance and offering decisive verdicts, the narrator equipped with a "godlike ability to go everywhere and to possess the power and control that derives from unlimited knowledge" (Cobley 91), which is usually denied to characters or *dramatis personae*. Similarly to the function of the chorus in a Greek tragedy, one of his

roles is commenting on present events and hinting at "intimations of the meaning" (Conacher 81), since the reader understands references in other monologues only through Sir Arthur's discourse. Like an omniscient narrator, he may be "above and beyond the events in the narrative" (Cobley 91). However, much more crucially, we might argue that Sir Arthur exhibits many of the characteristic traits of an African (and Caribbean) bard known as a griot.

Thomas A. Hale in the mid-1990s, noted that "[t]he griot from West Africa, a highly visible cultural voice . . . now operates in a global context" (71), simultaneously admitting that "in spite of the growing number of references to griots in both the popular and scholarly media, the social function and verbal art of these artisans of the spoken and sung word remain poorly understood outside of West Africa" (71). After some extensive research carried out in West Africa, he defined the profession of griot as one who "maintain[s] genealogies, sing[s] praises, compose[s] songs, play[s] instruments, narrate[s] history and serve[s] as [a] spokesperson . . ." (Hale 78). In his words, they are both "wordsmiths" (79) and "keepers of the oral tradition" (87). Some twenty years after the publication of Hale's work, Fritz H. Pointer states that one of the most important functions that griots perform is establishing "veracity and authenticity" (83), and that their "claim to truth" (83) often takes the form of wise observations, frequent use of aphorisms and proverbs with which they embroider their oral performance. Griots are poets and musicians (Finnegan 97), praise-singers and "guardians of verbal art traditions" (Novak 34), story-tellers, preachers, and archivists who exhibit the community's shared knowledge (Banks 3, 49). Okpewho grants special significance to their ability "to give us the benefit of [their] judgment" (232). As illustrated by the above-quoted fragments of Sir Arthur's narration, moral judgment and a claim to truth accompany the practice of witnessing and testifying. Thus, the character of Sir Arthur recalls the figure of the African/Caribbean griot not only through his rhetorical skill but also, crucially, through his moral authority, for the griot "upholds truth and justice in the face of moral corruption" (Bouchard 73) and is an oral historian who "documents the history of his community" (Cooper, "Mek Wi Talk" 113). Injustice and moral corruption are the order of the day in the Jamaica of James's novel and among the human types that inhabit the created world of *A Brief History of Seven Killings* only one person possesses special prerogatives which give his oratory the quality of credibility.

Moreover, Sir Arthur's monologues bear many technical characteristics of the griot's art of oral epic. As is often done by professional story-tellers, he gives precise information about the theme and content of his tale using the formulaic expression "this is a story of so-and-so." Such

"opening formulas serve to rouse the interest of the audience . . . as well as setting the mood for the start of the narration" (Finnegan 368). Additionally, Sir Arthur intersperses his discourse with warning and premonition, as in: "If you don't watch how you sleep, you'll find yourself the way the living found you" (2); "Rudeboys' bodies bursting like pricked balloons, fifty-six bullets" (2). Apart from the features characterizing spoken language enumerated earlier, we can also recognize those aspects of griots' tales which Pointer (32-41) and Sissao (xii-xiii) list as significant, for example: "clarify[ing] the profound meaning of events," providing "philosophical instruction," giving "fresh validity" to the life of the community, and playing multiple roles of adviser and historian, witness and exhorter, story-teller and interpreter. The griot is "master of the Word" (Sissao xiii) who can integrate into his stories contemporary social dilemmas and concerns of the group, historical facts, and diverse elements of his living experience.

Browne points to the fact that numerous Caribbean rhetorical modes "reflect the imaginative constructions of vernacular social reality" (32), and since "the historical domination of Caribbean people forms the core of their vernacular experience" (53), we may find in their oral tradition "negative themes" (53), such as death and defeat. Reflections on death provide a substantial part of Sir Arthur's monologues. On the one hand, they illustrate a logical preoccupation of someone who has met a violent and tragic end. On the other hand, they also firmly situate Sir Arthur's narrative in the hybrid culture of the West Indies. Passages that describe the physicality of death in its material detail coexist with references to the spiritual world: "Death changes where you die into a room where the body shames itself. Death makes you cough, piss, death makes you shit, death makes you stink from inside vapors" (111). "God puts earth far away from heaven because even he can't stand the smell of dead flesh" (269). "To be dead is to understand that dead is not gone, you're in the flatness of the deadlands. Time doesn't stop. You watch it move but you are still, like a painting with a Mona Lisa smile. In this space a three-hundred-year-old slit throat and two-minute-old crib death is the same" (2). Some of Sir Arthur's sentences sound like a sermon or an aphoristic pronouncement of truth delivered by a preacher: "Living people wait and see because they fool themselves that they have time. Dead people see and wait" (3); others verge on sarcastic humor: "They give the Singer an honour on his deathbed, the Order of Merit. The black revolutionary joins the order of British Squires and Knights, Babylon in excelsis deo" (599). Still others add tangible proof to the existence of an immaterial world: "every morning I wake up having to put my pumpkin-smashed head back together . . . . I seem to have misplaced the left half of my face" (2). Thematically, death

features extensively in oral narratives together with the topic of rivalry, confrontation, war and fighting. Walter Ong writes about "agonistically toned" (43) oral cultures and adds that "[e]nthusiastic description of physical violence often marks oral narrative" (44), and the high level of violence present in James's novel has been noted by several reviewers, such as Christopher Tayler, Mark Levine, and Randy Boyagoda.

Griot as a "master chronicler of the collective memory of the community at large" (Camara 33) transmits inter-generational wisdom and records history. If, following Halbwachs, collective memory is understood as "a current of continuous thought . . . [which] retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive" (140), then Sir Arthur's narration provides a link between present-day Jamaica and its history. The readers/listeners acquire memories of the group and remember events by being enmeshed in memories of other group members. Collective memory depends on the social practices and institutions which perpetuate shared memory and one of its functions is circulation of a preferred version of the knowledge of the past. In the case of James's novel, factual history concerning an attempted murder of Bob Marley and its socio-political conditions are faithfully reported. The names of prominent politicians (for example, Michael Manley, the leader of the People's National Party, and Edward Seaga, the leader of the Jamaica Labour Party) are given in full. Many other details are very thinly veiled. For example, the novel's shanty town of Copenhagen City corresponds to Kingston's Tivoli Gardens and the life-story of the character Josey Wales parallels that of Lester Coke, "a Kingston gang boss who burned to death, in unexplained circumstances, in a high-security prison cell in 1992" (Tayler n. pag.). Thus, by providing a historical discourse of past events underpinned by moral judgment and astute observation, Sir Arthur's narration serves as a vehicle to perpetuate a representation of the past while transforming it into shared knowledge of the community.

Conclusion

With his access to the future and his knowledge of the past, with his ability to observe the events happening at diverse places and with his immaterial presence, the character of Sir Arthur becomes not only a link between the spiritual and the earthly, but also a vital connection between pre- and post-independence Jamaica. He becomes a key agent bringing together orality and literacy, the African and the European heritage, as well as the living experience of the white colonizer and the native population. As a duppy, a haunting figure, traditionally associated with magic, the uncivilized and the

marginalized, Sir Arthur's presence disrupts the old binary distinctions between life and death, past and present, African and European. He is a duppy that watches over the life of humans, but cannot change the course of events or intervene in the lives of the living. Typically of Jamaican apparitions, he is both "powerful and ambiguous" (Barrett 13), yet his power rests exclusively on his eloquence and rhetorical virtuosity, not on magic or supernatural force. Nor can he represent an African ancestral heritage, since his presence in Jamaica stems from invasion and colonial rule. In Standard English—the language of the colonizer—he transmits knowledge that only he of all characters possesses and, paradoxically, gives voice to unarticulated inequality and injustice.

Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* thus presents a text that problematizes symmetrical polarities. It is a novel, a Western genre belonging to institutionalized literary tradition, but it is firmly situated within the oral (vernacular) culture of the Caribbean Islands. The character of Sir Arthur is a member of the powerful white elite associated with imperial domination and colonialism, but as a ghost or a duppy he represents the folk religion and worldview of the descendants of African slaves. Images of ghosts in literary texts may be interpreted as symptoms of something that is lost or vanished, of the past that is forgotten or silenced and begs to be rediscovered, or of shameful secrets that haunt collective consciousness waiting to be addressed. Spectres of the past—unsolved riddles of successful political campaigns, power relations built on foreign capital and crime, hushed-up machinations of ruling governments, orchestrated violence and police harassment—somberly resonate within the story, but they are undercut by sarcastic humor.

Being one of several narrating subjects, Sir Arthur joins the collective story-telling, providing only some of the building blocks of the narrative. Yet, his voice is privileged since it is through his narration—a narration reminiscent of the griot's tale—that the reader may arrive at some kind of truth and moral evaluation. His role is ambivalent, however: as the third-person omniscient narrator he aspires to objectivity and impartiality, while in the function of first-person tale-teller and griot, he relates events from his subjective autobiographical perspective. By shifting the terms of address and involving readers as co-witnesses, he creates a bond and implies participation in collective memory-building. But the humor and irony of his delivery, suggested already in the novel's title (the true meaning of "brief" history and "seven" killings is explained somewhere between pages six hundred and seven hundred, after scores of characters have lost their lives) undermines the serenity of message. With numerous riddles and paradoxes, James's novel remains a "haunting incendiary work" (Welsh qtd. in Riemer n. pag.), which

bridges several divides simultaneously opening up new cracks and fissures. In creating the character of Sir Arthur's ghost, James deconstructs "the old imperial fictions of the printed word" (Cooper, "Islands" 13) and carves out a new locus of enunciation.

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Notes

[1] The Moroccan writer and theorist Abdelkébir Khatibi in *Maghreb Pluriel* (1976) argues for cultural decolonization through a rejection of both Western and Eastern discourses and metaphysical traditions, advocating a simultaneous escape from Occidental metaphysics (Christian and secular) and, likewise, from the theological realm of Islamic thought.

[2] Obeah is a system of religious practice developed by enslaved Africans in the West Indies, known under different names in different islands (for example, "Shango" in Trinidad and "Voodoo" in Haiti). It is believed to represent the fusion of "diverse West and Central African rituals, spiritualisms and herbalism" (Barima, "Cutting across Space" 16) and to use manipulation of "immaterial forces, objects and plants to influence people and events" (Barima, "Obeah to Rastafari" 163). Barima notes that "Obeah symbolizes the struggles to root Africa in the 'New World'" (163) and may be seen as "the driving force in Afro-Jamaica's fight for justice and freedom" (Barima, "Cutting across Space" 16). When used in healing, obeah allows individuals to reconnect with spirits and ancestors, thus dealing with "the spiritual and the moral aspects of health and illness" (James, "Psychiatric Patients' Evaluation" 135).

[3] Characteristically, the explanation is uttered in Standard English, amid a long stretch of Jamaican Creole, as if the sentence was addressed more to the reader than another character, providing not only an example of code switching but also acting as a nod at the existing audience and an example of bilingualism, so characteristic of Borderlands.

[4] In Jamaica Standard English, as well as the culture of literacy, were features of colonialism and simultaneously instruments of control and indexes of prestige (Roberts ix). The language of the masses was (and still is today) Creole, or to use Edward Kamau Brathwaite's celebrated expression, "nation language," defined as "the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean" (qtd. in Innes 106) and evoking "the dynamics of cultural identity" (Cooper, "Islands" 8). Until today, the vernacular remains a symbol of "shared community membership" (Winford 18).

[5] Creole is the primary medium of Jamaican oral tradition preserved in such forms as chants, jokes, storytelling, performative poetry, and many others unknown to Western audiences. Maureen Warner-Lewis, writing about the presence of African tradition in the Caribbean, mentions the practice of *picong* (or teasing), word-dropping, "tracing," and "cussing out" (278-85), as examples of outspokenness and verbal abuse. Creole is also the language of Jamaican songs, stories, and proverbs, and, as Cooper notes, in the literature of the Caribbean Islands, proverbs may provide "conclusive evidence of the socially recognized truth" (*Noises* 37). She quotes Mervyn Morris's opinion that "proverbs often serve to widen the significance of a particular incident or situation" and "represent the distillation of generations of experience" (qtd. in Cooper, *Noises* 42). One such proverb serves as the novel's epigraph and gives the reader a good idea of what to expect, stressing the text's fidelity to fact: "If it no go so, it go near so" (n. pag.).

[6] Both Ruth H. Finnegan and Michèle Praeger note that people brought up within the written tradition of the West generally assume oral literature to be "crude and artistically underdeveloped" (Finnegan 3) and belonging "to the domain of folklore and regionalism" (Praeger 91). Sindoni observes: "Despite the fact that it [oral tradition] involves a highly complex aesthetics, it has been assessed only as the product of 'inferior societies'" (47-48). Studies that focus on the difference between the scribal and the oral, such as Goody's *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (1987), Havelock's *The Muse Learns to Write* (1986), and *The Origins of Western Literacy* (1976) as well as Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982) locate orality in ancient times and decisively link civilization with writing, which might lead to a simplified view of the oral craft. Although later research discredits tendencies to equate literacy with rationality and disputes the theory of "The Great Divide" (Soukup), today, as observed by Johnson, Hale, and Belcher, "there are still questions about the definition of oral literature. Literature, after all, is based on the notion of 'letters' and thus of writing" (xiv).

[7] Meschonnic's concept allows one to dismantle the old binary divisions between speech and writing as well as between civilized and primitive (or archaic), providing a new lens through which to view oral tradition. Although any text may thus be examined in its relation to oral tradition, it is particularly African and Caribbean storytelling which might provide ample evidence of rhythm constituting "historicity of the text" (Wesling and Sławek 169). Discussing orality in Jamaican popular culture, Carolyn Cooper uses the term "oraliture" to refer to "the oral/scribal literary continuum" (*Noises* 34), highlighting the fact that oral discourses often contest official, written histories and are thus ways of empowering the speaker since verbal performance can act as a weapon of the politically powerless, and the term "lit/orature" to suggest "mutuality of oral and scribal discourse" ("Islands" 7).

[8] The spelling "Ananse" refers to the Akan spider of Ghanaian stories, while "Anancy" is a corresponding figure in West Indian tales (Finnegan 335).

[9] The reference to the "undead toe" concerns Bob Marley's cancer which started from his toe. Doctors suggested amputation but as a Rastafarian he refused. So he kept his toe ("undead toe" means that Marley is still alive and in one piece). But since he agreed to chemotherapy, in consequence he lost his hair ("his locks drop . . .").

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