



# THE ACHIEVEMENT OF MOCKERY THROUGH LITERATURE AND MUSIC IN JOHN AGARD'S POETRY<sup>1</sup>

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**T**his article explores the essential link between music and literature in Caribbean poetry and, more concretely, in the work of the Afro-Guyanese writer John Agard. As a member of a former British colony, Agard seeks to create a powerful Caribbean voice that subverts the political, economic and cultural power of the Empire, and he does so by resorting to Caribbean music rhythms and orality. Accordingly, I attempt to demonstrate that musicality and performance play a fundamental role in Agard's endeavour to 'write back' against the Empire. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's notion of 'mockery', I close-read two of the most representative poems by this author, namely "Listen Mr Oxford Don" and "Alternative Anthem". More specifically, I pay attention to the dialogue between content and acoustic features in the selected poems and to the ironic effect sought by the author. In addition, the analysis of the poems is enriched with a close look at how the poet

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himself reads them out. Therefore, his role as a poet-singer also proves meaningful in this respect. As regards conclusions, it has been found that the selected poems' musicality and performance contribute to enhancing Agard's mockery against the British Empire, hence making visible the individual and collective stance of the subaltern.

**Keywords:** musicality; Caribbean poetry; John Agard; mockery; the subaltern

## 1. Introduction

Literature can be said to have an inherent component of musicality. In his essay “La Musique et les Lettres”, the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1947) writes: “Oublions la vieille distinction, entre le musique et les lettres [Let us forget the old distinction between music and literature]” (79). This means that music and literature should by no means be seen as opposites; rather, elements of music such as pitch, rhythm, harmony and timbre are also characteristic of literary expression (Cook 1961, 304). In the case of Caribbean poetry, which is the focus of study in the present paper, authors such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1984), Lauri Ramey (2004) and Morag Styles (2013) highlight that it is based on the music rhythms of the region. Indeed, Brathwaite argues that Caribbean life “comes out of the same experience as the music of contemporary popular song: using the same riddims [sic], the same voice-spreads, syllable clusters, blue notes, ostinato, syncopation and pauses” (1984, 45-46). Not coincidentally, music and rhythm are modes through which Caribbean people—especially blacks—have “asserted and enacted their historical and political agency” (Munro 2010, 222). In many cases, the emphasis of Caribbean poetry on orality and musicality reflects the poets' need to assert the complexity of their Caribbeanness and, accordingly, challenge reductionist views of national belonging (Ramey 2004, 119). Such notions are of great relevance in the development of Caribbean identity, since the history of this specific setting is marked by European colonisation. Actually, Caribbean countries such as Dominica and Guyana were colonies of the British Empire, and it is to the latter one that the poet whose work will be close-read belongs.

As a member of a former British colony, the Guyanese-born poet John Agard uses acoustic features and performance in order to enhance the musicality of Caribbean poetry and, above all, to ironically comment on issues to do with identity and power. In this respect, his poetry reflects the need of Caribbean writers to find a powerful voice that disseminates the complexity of both their identity and culture. The unavoidable link between formal features and the accomplishment of irony in Agard's poetry has been recently explored by Pavlína Flajšarová (2018) and Kathie Birat (2019). The former assesses how this diasporic author uses language and humour to bitterly criticise the social subordination and othering to which non-white Britons are subject. The latter focuses more overtly on voice and performance: she examines how the author's deliberate use of silences conveys a reaction to the untold stories of the colonial past. My study takes the performative silence underscored by Birat as a starting point. This article aims to elaborate on the potential that orality and performance have in making these hitherto neglected (hi)stories visible. Once the silences in the cultural history of the Caribbean people have been identified, it seems mandatory to answer back to the disregarding Empire through a more categorical, subversive voice. Considering the inseparable link between voice, orality and music, this study attempts to contribute to the debate on how musicality underlines Agard's 'writing back'. Accordingly, there will be an in-depth exploration of the relationship between musicality and content in two of his most representative poems: the first one is "Listen Mr Oxford Don", published in his 1985 collection *Mangoes and Bullets*; the second one is "Alternative Anthem", which gives title to his 2009 anthology *Alternative Anthem: Selected Poems*.

This article aims to provide new insights into postcolonial studies in general and Caribbean poetry in particular. More concretely, I attempt to show how the poetry written by Agard reflects the need of Caribbean writers to boldly assert the complexity of their cultural identity and ultimately emerge as powerful figures who break down any reductionist views on their culture. My main contention is that the acoustic features in Agard's selected poems contribute to enhancing the irony used against the Empire. What is more, the subversive purpose of these poetic pieces is intensified by the way the author reads them out. My analysis of the poems puts

the accent on the close relationship between their themes and their acoustic aspects. In order to explore the thematic dimension, I will draw on postcolonial theory. More concretely, I will consider the notion of ‘mimicry’ as exposed by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994). As regards the form, I will consider the rhythm and rhyme, repetition, changes in tone, use of creole English, and register. Finally, I will enrich my close reading of the poems with some comments on Agard’s performance, which is heavily influenced by oral poetry. As regards this article’s structure, prior to the close reading of the poems there is a section that presents the theoretical framework to be followed in the analysis: first, there is a brief description of the main features of Caribbean poetry, with an emphasis on Agard’s; after this, there is an explanation of Bhabha’s theory. Then, there is an analysis of the relationship between acoustic features and content in the two selected poems. Finally, the last section offers some conclusions and future lines of research.

## 2. The Powerful Voice of Caribbean Poets: Mocking the British Empire

The defining feature of Caribbean poetry is its multifariousness in formal and cultural terms. As Ian McDonald and Stewart Brown (1992) expose, West Indian poetry lays claim to a “diversity of forms, of attitudes to language, of notions of purpose and of the sheer range of cultural references” (xv). Stewart Brown (2007) maintains that Caribbean poetry is characterised by “an engagement with the diverse and often hidden sources of Caribbean history and culture and the determination to refashion those materials into poetry which speaks of and into the present in voices that the peoples of the region would recognise as their own” (155). Accordingly, the poetry of well-known artists such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Mahadai Das, and Derek Walcott draws on elements from a variety of African, American and European environments, thus showing the complexity of Caribbean identity. For instance, they often make use of West African rhythms and jazz music while alluding to classical mythology (McDonald and Brown 1992, xv-xvi). This many-sidedness can also be perceived in Caribbean music genres such as reggae, which in words of Dick Hebdige (1976) is

“transmogrified American ‘soul’ music, with an overlay of salvaged African rhythms, and an undercurrent of pure Jamaican rebellion” (140).

As highlighted in the quotation by Stewart Brown, Caribbean poets are eager to disseminate this Caribbean complexity through a literature that deals with the present situation of their people. In order to meet this purpose, they are required to find a voice that represents Caribbean people. Thus, West Indian poetry “comes to life in spoken form and performance” (Brown 2007, 52), therefore having an inherent component of orality. The orality of Caribbean poetry aims to be a communication channel that links the voice representing Caribbean people and a recipient that is not necessarily Caribbean, but might be from a different origin. As Rachael Gilmour (2014) contends, this poetry “becomes a craft that can travel between languages and art forms; cross the ocean between the Caribbean, the US and Britain; navigate between sound and form; draw poet and audience together” (2). By relating poet and audience together, such literary manifestations enable the recipient to elucidate the complexity of Caribbean identity. One of the features that proves crucial in the depiction of Caribbean history and identity is the use of Caribbean rhythms. As Brathwaite defends, “the hurricane does not roar in pentameters”, so there is a dire need to develop “the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience” (1984, 10). It is strongly argued that Caribbean experience cannot be expressed in pentameters. Indeed, the use of such an institutionalised pattern would reduce the strength of the Caribbean people’s voice, as they would be unconsciously acknowledging the hierarchy of the Empire and ultimately perpetuating their subjection to colonial discourse. Hence, what seems necessary is to develop a Caribbean style that sprouts from the rhythms of the region.

One of the strategies to which these artists resort is the use of irony enhanced by musicality. This is precisely what characterises the poetry of the Guyanese writer John Agard, who is famous for his “biting wit and mischievous use of irony” (Styles 2013, 53). In poems such as “Listen Mr Oxford Don” and “Alternative Anthem”, he conveys a certain degree of irony that is strengthened by the experimentation with vernacular forms and creole language

(Gilmour 2014, 4), which alternate with Standard English. This interplay of creole language and more standard forms of English often becomes a powerful tool that enables him to write back against subaltern visions of the colonised. Moreover, it serves the writer's purpose to defend that, despite prejudiced views of creole languages as "jungle talk" (Wong 1986, 118), these languages actually have an underlying message that is powerful in that it unites different cultures. This is related to what Hebdige (1976) contends about reggae and the use of creoles: "Distortion of the original form appears to be deliberate, as well as inevitable; and inversion seems to denote appropriation, signifying that a cultural transaction has taken place" (142). This scholar is suggesting that such a musical and poetic genre partakes of a deliberate and shared effort to formally deviate from fixed, canonical genres. Such an endeavour to distort the original form is deemed inevitable, since otherwise Caribbean poets would confine themselves to repeating already existing conventions that were shaped in Europe. By proposing an innovative and unconventional poetry, Caribbean artists manage to appropriate a discourse that had been negated to them as they were subjected to the metropolis. Hence, a cultural transaction takes place, whereby the former colonised Caribbean poets seize the linguistic power previously belonging to the colonisers with the aim of expressing and ultimately asserting their cultural identity. In order to better understand the distortion of form carried out by Caribbean poets, there should be a brief explanation of Bhabha's notion of 'mimicry'.

In his seminal work *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) puts forth that colonialism exercises its authority through a discourse that is "rich in the traditions of *trompe-l'oeil*, irony, mimicry and repetition" (122). As for colonial mimicry, he defines it as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (122; emphasis in the original). In other words, what colonisers attempt to ensure is that the colonised people assimilate the values and customs of the dominant culture, but not to such a degree that they become equal to the ones in power. However, Bhabha warns that there is an *ambivalence* inherent to mimicry: for this imitation to be effective, it "must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (Bhabha 1994, 123). In this context, the colonised may use mimicry

as a means of imitating the colonisers but with a difference, thus using it as a subversive tool. In some cases, the colonised might go a step beyond mimicry and use the strategy of *mockery*, where, in words of Bhabha (1994), “the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double” (124). Hence, once the colonised have assimilated the dominant culture of the Empire, they could have the potential to use mimicry as a tool that is not only subversive, but also a form of mockery. This form of mockery ultimately enables the hitherto neglected colonised to gain both visibility and power: by subversively imitating colonial discourse Caribbean poets are indeed undermining it, and this is why Bhabha considers the decentring strategy of mimicry as potentially threatening. This process of mocking the Empire is done in the poems that will be analysed below. As has been explained in the previous paragraph, Agard uses wit and irony in order to challenge reductionist views on the culture of the Other, such prejudiced constructions being perpetuated by the European empires. Accordingly, the following sections provide an analysis of the selected poems that explores this use of mockery in terms of language, themes and form, with a focus on its acoustic features and on how the author reads them out.

### 3. Reversing the Hierarchy of Standard English in "Listen Mr Oxford Don"

In “Listen Mr Oxford Don”, Agard uses creole English and rhythm in order to mock the hierarchical role of Received Pronunciation (RP), an acrolect of spoken English that has its origins in London and its surroundings. In this dramatic monologue, the poetic speaker addresses an alleged speaker of RP who, considering Agard’s status as a Caribbean poet, might stand for the English colonisers. It should be explained that this addressee is not a mere speaker of RP, but a representative of Oxbridge, a symbol of Western educational excellence, but also exclusiveness. In the performance of this poem, Agard as poet-singer first reads its title and uses a low-falling tone when uttering the word “don” (Agard 2012, 1:06). Since he is addressing a person who is likely to have held a monolithic view of Caribbean culture, Agard may have chosen this specific tone in

order to sound contemptuous. This anticipates the general tone of the poem, which is that of mockery.

For this mockery to be effective, he must find an assertive voice, and this may be the reason why the first word in the poem is *me*: “Me not no Oxford don/ me a simple immigrant /from Clapham Common” (Agard 2009, 16). Actually, in his performance Agard pronounces this personal pronoun with a high-pitched voice, thus giving himself self-importance (Agard 2012, 1:09). This implies that the poetic speaker is proud of not being an Oxford don, but a representative of the colonised. In the poem’s performance, this sense of Caribbean pride is enhanced by Agard’s shaking of his head (2012, 1:16). By no means does he want to belong to the English intellectual elite. Despite not having attended university, he has control over discourse, therefore having the potential to destabilise the Empire. This is strengthened by the stark opposition that he makes between “graduate” and “immigrate” in lines 4 and 5: “I didn’t graduate/ I immigrate” (Agard, 2009, 16). This opposition is attained by means of two devices: contrastive stress and rhyme. As for contrastive stress, the nuclear stress falls on the prefix of “immigrate” for ironic purposes: the poetic speaker makes clear that, his lack of refined education notwithstanding, he is not as narrow-minded as colonisers are, since he is an immigrant. Hence, he partakes of different cultures and, as a representative of Caribbean people, is aware of the complexity of Caribbean identity. This convergence of different cultures might be strengthened by the perfect rhyme attained by the words “graduate” and “immigrate”. Given his migrant nature, the lyrical subject is somehow a traveller, “a man on de run” (Agard 2009, 16). This travelling component is reflected in the rhythm of lines 7, 8, and 9, whereby cadence together with the anaphora might be said to evoke the dynamic nature of the seasoned traveler: “I’m a man on de run/ and a man on the run/ is a dangerous one” (Agard 2009, 16). This is also suggested by the way in which Agard reads this lines, singing a melody that resembles the ones sung by pirates at sea (2012, 1:22). At the end of the stanza, however, the rhythm is decreased in order to mark the utterance of the word “dangerous”. This word is read by Agard (2012, 1:25) with a falling intonation, thus showing that the information which is presented for the first time in the poem is highly relevant. Indeed, it is shown that the Caribbean poetic

speaker can be dangerous in that he might pose a threat to the Empire's stability.

In the following stanza, this type of danger is strengthened by Agard's performance (2012, 1:28): he makes a brief pause before uttering the two prominent words in lines 10 and 11, "gun" and "knife": "I ent have no gun/ I ent have no knife" (Agard 2009, 16). In terms of sentence stress, these words carry the nuclear stress not only because there is parallelism, but mainly because he wants to make clear that he rejects physical violence: "Mugging de Queen's English/ is the story of my life" (Agard 2009, 16). As a representative of Caribbean people, he will not try to mug English people aggressively; he will mug "de Queen's English" through language and music by using creole instead and by resorting to a rhythm that resembles that of Caribbean popular music. This contrast between physical violence and the use of mockery as a subversive tool can also be seen in the following stanza: "I dont need no axe/ to split up yu syntax/ I dont need no hammer/ to mash up yu grammar" (Agard 2009, 16). By means of parallelism, the poetic speaker wants to make clear that he will not use an "axe" or a "hammer" to break the foundations of the English language. Agard is using mockery in order to enhance the stark opposition between such different elements as language and war, and he achieves this ironic effect through rhyme ("axe" and "syntax"; "hammer" and "grammar") and tone. With regard to tone, Agard (2012, 1:40) reads out this stanza as if he were a soldier giving orders. In a way, he is mimicking the discourse of the colonisers to deride their patronising tone. Therefore, he is certainly resorting to prosody in order to mock the Empire and, probably, their military imposition of force.

As for the reason why he decides to use mockery instead of violence, it might be covertly suggested in line 13, where there is an emphasis on the word *life*: "Mugging de Queen's English/ is the story of my life" (Agard 2009, 16). In Agard's performance, this specific word is sung in a whisper and with a degree of resignation (2012, 1:37). This choice in terms of tone might point to the fact that Caribbean people's history has been a troublesome one, since they were subordinated to the British Empire. In the case of Agard, such a hardship is aggravated by his being a representative of the black people of Guyana, whose ancestors were likely to have been slaves.

Hence, the use of mockery serves Agard's purpose to reverse the subordinate and neglected role of Caribbean people in the Empire. This mockery is also attained in lines 18 to 21 by means of prosody: "I warning you Mr Oxford don/ I'm a wanted man/ and a wanted man/ is a dangerous one" (Agard 2009, 16). Despite lacking punctuation, a colon might be inserted at the end of line 18, which retakes the idea of a threat. Therefore, lines 19 to 21 would be a single tone unit whereby the ending of each line presents an enjambment that enables the speaker to give voice to his threat with no hesitation whatsoever, thus making it more effective. This menace is strengthened by Agard's performance, in which he reads these lines with a more open mouth closure, especially in "man" (Agard 2012, 1:54). Moreover, the poet-singer confirms this threat in line 21, where he gives prominence to the word "dangerous" by making a pause immediately before this adjective (Agard 2012, 1:55).

The menace notwithstanding, the poetic speaker reveals that he is a "peaceful man" (Agard 2009, 16), and this is related to his previous contention that he is averse to violence. Therefore, he does not hesitate to explain of what he has been accused, and this is what he does in lines 22-28:

Dem accuse me of assault  
 on de Oxford dictionary/  
 imagine a concise peaceful man like me/  
 dem want me serve time  
 for inciting rhyme to riot  
 but I rekking it quiet  
 down here in Clapham Common. (Agard, 2009, 16)

The poetic speaker has been accused of attacking the English language by "dem", which may refer to those British purists who defend the correctness of the RP accent. In this stanza, Agard's performance is slightly modified in that he replaces the abruptness of the tone used in the two previous stanzas by a significantly lower pitch. Indeed, he sounds as if he were making an aside in his quasi-theatrical performance. This aside may point to the fact that there is an apparent change in terms of addressee: he may be trying to explain readers why he has been accused in an attempt to gain sympathy. This is strengthened by the use of the imperative in

“imagine”, which is uttered with a degree of earnestness (Agard 2012, 2:04). This seriousness in tone is likely to be effective for the poetic speaker’s purpose to gain compassion, since it points to the frankness of the message. Moreover, the specific verb in the imperative mood brings to the fore the idea of imagination and hence literary creation: it aims to clarify that this member of the Caribbean community will use literature as a weapon to destabilise the power of the colonisers.

From line 29 to the end of the poem, the poetic speaker retakes the dramatic monologue so that his main thesis can be left imprinted in the memory of Mr Oxford don:

I’m not a violent man Mr Oxford don  
 I only armed wit mi human breath  
 but human breath  
 is a dangerous weapon

So mek dem send one big word after me  
 I ent serving no jail sentence  
 I slashing suffix in self-defence  
 I bashing future wit present tense  
 and if necessary

I making de Queen’s English accessory/ to my offence. (Agard 2009, 16)

In the first of these three last stanzas, the first line is slightly longer than the other three lines: since the information that it carries has been unveiled before, Agard reads it rather swiftly in his performance. By contrast, the shorter lines are read more slowly because their content is more relevant and hence the poet-performer has to ensure that his addressee decodes the message easily. Accordingly, he gradually reduces speed in line 30 in order to enhance the most prominent word in the stanza: “breath” (Agard 2012, 2:30). Since Agard is using poetry as a subversive tool to attack the British Empire while acknowledging the power and complexity of Caribbean people, he utters the onomatopoeia which corresponds to human breath, and hence strengthens the humour inherent to the use of mockery. Moreover, when saying that his human breath is a “dangerous weapon” he tilts his head so as to look more resolute (2012, 2:36). This determination suits the purpose of

the poem, since the poetic speaker should sound decided so that mockery can be achieved. Hence, in line 33 (“So mek dem send one big word after me”), the lyrical subject uses monosyllabic words with the exception of “after”. This choice of monosyllables is by no means arbitrary: it might enhance the resoluteness and straightforwardness of this representative of Caribbean society. Furthermore, he makes use of parallelism and rhyme on the following lines not only to enhance his determination, but also to explain what actions he is performing in order to achieve his goals: to mock the British Empire by means of language and, ultimately, to gain power in a system characterised by rigid hierarchy.

The use of language as an enabling tool for mockery is highlighted by line 35, in which there is an instance of sibilance: “I slashing suffix in self-defence” (Agard 2009, 16). This device creates a snake-like hissing which implies danger: it points to how dangerous the poetic speaker can be provided that he gains mastery in the English language and eventually uses it as a subversive tool. This idea of threaten is implied in line 37, which ends with a reduced conditional clause (“if necessary”) that gives way to an enjambment linking the penultimate line to the last one, which is graphically separated from the previous lines in the stanza. Due to this enjambment, Agard slows down the rhythm in his performance and makes a brief pause prior to reading the last line of the poem. This slow and deliberate pace enables both the poetic speaker and the poet himself to transmit the message in the final line in a clear way. Hence, what the poet-singer does in his performance is pronounce the content words in the last line with a high degree of intelligibility (Agard 2012, 2:55). Actually, he is reading the sentence written in creole English as is done in RP, in a way highlighting that he is using the standard accent of the English language in England for ironic purposes. This is precisely the message conveyed in the last line: “I making de Queen’s English accessory/ to my offence” (Agard 2009, 16). The last line of the poem is thus a summary of what has been asserted throughout the poem: the colonised people have the potential to attack the ones in power through language, the irony being that this is the imposed colonial language.

#### 4. Displacing the Colonial Discourse in "Alternative Anthem"

In "Alternative Anthem", Agard uses a type of English radically different from that of "Listen Mr Oxford Don". Whereas the former poem resorts to the transgressive Caribbean creole, the latter is entirely written in Standard English. This piece of poetry reflects how Bhabha's strategy of mimicry is put into practice to such an extent that it produces a devastating effect of mockery. In this case, the Guyanese poet lends the voice to an allegedly Caribbean lyrical subject that mimics the patriotic discourse of the British Empire. This is an alternative anthem that, as the title suggests, is disseminated by the unofficial bard of the Empire; indeed, it has been created by an artistic representative of the former colony of Guyana and subsequently made visible so that the previously repressed voice of the colonies can be heard. Likewise, the term *alternative* also points to the subject of the poem. This is an anthem that, far from praising the magnificence of the Empire or the deeds of British heroes, pays homage to the tea. Hence, Agard's strategy from a thematic and stylistic point of view is firstly to undermine the milestones in the history of Britain by focusing on the tea instead; secondly, he mimics the patriotic discourse of the colonisers in order to carry out his endeavour to mock the Empire; finally and most importantly, he enhances his ironic purposes by incorporating Caribbean musicality in both the written text and his performance, as will be explored in the following paragraphs.

The first stanza introduces both the theme and the mood of this alternative anthem: "Put the kettle on/ Put the kettle on/ It is the British answer/ to Armageddon" (Agard 2006, 35). Despite the lack of punctuation marks, the syntactic structure suggests that the poem starts with an instance of direct speech: "Put the kettle on/ Put the kettle on". In the first half of the stanza, the poetic speaker is reproducing an allegedly British order to turn on the kettle, while in the second one s/he is explaining that this is supposedly the British answer to the Bible's final battle. By reproducing such a request, the poetic speaker appears to be mimicking a British officer. This sense of command is strengthened by the repetition in the second line: the soldier might want to ensure that everyone has understood the instruction. In addition, in the poem's performance Agard highlights this military-like tone by strongly aspirating the plosive in "put" and

placing the nuclear stress on the adverbial particle “on” (Agard 2008, 0:21). However, the poem’s commanding tone is by no means serious, since Agard is using musicality in order to mock the British army. Thematically, this mockery is reflected in the poetic speaker’s explanation: the army’s answer to a catastrophic battle is simply to make a cup of tea. Such an instance of irony is also conveyed in Agard’s performance: in the last line of the first stanza, he makes a pause after the preposition “to” and subsequently verbalises the word “Armageddon” in order to contrast the seriousness of the battle and the unfruitful solution proposed by the Empire (Agard 2008, 0:27). It is no longer the boldness of the soldiers that is foregrounded, but the effects of a drink that was actually imported from overseas.

The second and third stanzas elaborate on the idea that, no matter how adverse circumstances are, Britain’s devotion to tea will guarantee the nation’s welfare:

Never mind taxes rise  
 Never mind trains are late  
 One thing you can be sure of  
 and that’s the kettle, mate.

It’s not whether you lose  
 It’s not whether you win  
 It’s whether or not  
 you’ve plugged the kettle in. (Agard 2006, 35)

Both stanzas are parallel in terms of structure and musicality. In each case, Agard makes use of anaphora in the first two lines with an ironic purpose. In the former stanza, the poetic speaker mockingly downplays major problems of the Empire such as tax increases and train delays, while in the latter s/he attaches little importance to the result of the battle. In terms of rhythm, such a parallel structure entails a more fluid cadence that goes in line with the idea that any obstacle will be trivial provided that the kettle has been plugged in. In his performance, Agard reads the first two lines of each stanza with a faster pace, thus suggesting that the addressees should not worry about such particular difficulties. However, he makes a halt after the most relevant word in the poem: the kettle (Agard 2008, 0:35). When uttering this noun, the poet-singer sounds

earnest and resolute, in contrast with the lack of interest shown before. This produces an effect of mockery, as the speaker grows serious when dealing with a beverage that has actually been given more prominence than economic and social issues. Once mimicry and mockery have been performed, the poet-singer goes on to invite readers to join his endeavour. He does so by pronouncing the word “mate” with a low-rise intonation (Agard 2008, 0:36). This intonation pattern suggests that the poet-singer is eliciting a response, and such a request for an answer is enhanced by the choice of the term “mate”, which denotes comradeship. Therefore, Agard may be inviting readers and hearers—regardless of their nationalities—to mock the British Empire and thus denounce their having silenced the voice of the subaltern.

The stanza that follows also partakes of Agard’s technique to repeat syntactic structures in order to attain a patriotic, military tone that proves a mockery against the blind and reductionist nationalism of the British Empire: “May the kettle ever hiss/ May the kettle ever steam/ It is the engine/ that drives our nation’s dream” (Agard 2006, 35). The parallelisms in the first two lines contribute to reinforcing the prominence of the two verbs that can be found at the end of the tone unit: “hiss” and “steam”. These verbs are related to the pivotal idea in the poem, which is the kettle and, above all, the tea. Hence, the nuclear stress falls on these two meaningful parts of speech. Accordingly, in his performance Agard utters both verbs with extra emphasis (2008, 0:46-0:48). In the case of “hiss”, he lengthens the sibilant in order to mimic the hissing sound of the kettle. By stretching the sound of the /s/, he might be relating the incessant hissing to the adverb “ever”, thus suggesting that the power of the kettle—and hence that of the British Empire—will last forever. He conveys the same idea in the following line: Agard pronounces the /i:/ in “steam” with extra length, and therefore he connects this verb with the adverb “ever” and, semantically, with the tea, where <ea> is pronounced with the long vowel /i:/ as well. However, this acoustic feature is not bound to provide a jingoistic portrayal of the Empire. Rather, it proves a witting instance of mimicry as mockery: Agard is aware that, even if he lengthens the sibilant and the vowel, the political, economic and cultural power of Britain over its colonies will by no means be eternal, since the British Empire had vanished by the time this poem was written. Along the same lines,

in the second half of the stanza there is a run-on-line whose aim is to highlight the noun “engine”. Considering the mockery explained above, the view of the kettle as the engine is highly ironic: it is an engine that steams and hisses, so it may be actually on the verge of failing. Given that the engine as representative of the Empire’s essence is deteriorating, the poet is ironically commenting on the decline of the Empire. This is the reason why, on the last line of this stanza, he utters the verb “drives” with an excessively passionate tone (Agard 2008, 0:51). Such an excess entails mockery, since he is laughing at Britain’s being actually driven by a powerless engine.

The idea of the British Empire as a declining entity is elaborated upon in the last two stanzas. As has been recurrent throughout the poem, parallel structures are used with a view to mockingly subverting the political, economic and cultural power of the Empire:

Long live the kettle  
that rules over us  
May it be limescale free  
and may it never rust.

Sing it on the beaches  
Sing it from the housetops  
The sun may set on empire  
but the kettle never stops. (Agard 2006, 35)

Apart from the subversive effect produced by these syntactic features, the poetic speaker—and Agard as poet-singer—makes use of a patriotic tone in order to attain the endeavour of mocking the previously oppressive Empire. Such a fervid tone is enhanced by the formula “long live” and the modal verb “may”. In the first stanza, it is hoped that the mighty kettle will never have limescale deposits or rust. However, such a burning desire is an instance of mockery, since the previous stanza has acknowledged that the Empire is driven by a failing engine. Now that the Empire has collapsed, the poetic speaker urges people to sing the two final lines in the poem: “The sun may set on empire/ but the kettle never stops” (Agard 2006, 35). It is implied that, even if the Empire is declining, the kettle is still working. This idea summarises the content and objective of this piece of poetry. Considering the strategy of

mimicry used in the poem, the never-ending kettle might be seen as an appropriation by the hitherto subaltern: from being a key element in the configuration of British culture, it has turned into an image that represents the Caribbean people's attempt to give visibility to their (hi)stories. Actually, an acoustic relationship could be established between the hissing of the kettle and the musicality and orality defining Caribbean poetry and folklore. In this context, now that the sun has set on Empire, the kettle has acquired a new type of musicality: the rumbling of the kettle now represents the incessant voice of the subaltern, a powerful cry that is claimed to never stop.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study shows that Agard's work is illustrative of the key role played by music in Caribbean poetry. The intrinsic relationship between acoustic features and literature enables the Guyanese artist to craft a truly Caribbean manifesto that counteracts the political, economic and cultural power imposed by the British Empire and hence by colonial discourse. In doing so, he is speaking for the Caribbean subaltern and thus making visible the stance of a collective whose (hi)story had been silenced. With a view to subverting the power of the Empire, he uses the strategy of mimicry to such an extent that it becomes mockery, and such an ironic purpose is enhanced by his poems' musicality.

In "Listen Mr Oxford Don", the lyrical subject uses creole language as a subversive and empowering tool that aims to debunk the exclusiveness of Oxbridge. The "man on the run" proves a sharp representative of the subaltern that, making use of his breath, proves threatening to the stability of the Empire as a cultural and moral construction. However, the verbalisation of the lyrical subject's stance is not enough to destabilise the hierarchy of the Empire; the culmination of this endeavour is achieved using acoustic features such as rhythm, pitch and tone. In the case of "Alternative Anthem", Agard attains the goal of mocking the British Empire by creating an alternative anthem, that is, a piece of speech that implicitly conveys the feeling of the subaltern. Such a feeling is foregrounded by ironic strategies to do with rhythm and music, such as repetitions, vowel and consonant stretching, nuclear stress and, most interestingly,

performance. With regard to the latter, Agard's performance of the poems contributes to strengthening their musicality and, above all, the strategy of mimicry as mockery. Thus, his reading out demonstrates that acoustic features prove essential for the specific purposes of his art and, on a large scale, of Caribbean poetry.

This study aims to contribute to the debate on how writers of the Caribbean diaspora strive to underline their cultural hybridity by resorting to musicality and performance. The wide array of acoustic features that Agard exploits is revealing of the complexity of Caribbean music and identities: just like their music amalgamates influences from Africa, Europe and the West Indies, their identity is shaped by manifold origins that debunk the one-sided view of the colonial discourse. While this article gives prominence to the poet's subversive 'answering back', it could be interesting to assess to what extent musical poetry takes a more horizontal approach to history and identity. In line with the interconnectedness characterising our global age, future lines of research into this topic may consider Édouard Glissant's "poetics of relation" (1997) and, more concretely, his use of the rhizome. Glissant's theory would enable a dialogic perusal of Caribbean identity that leaves behind the celebration of hierarchies or the establishment of new centres of power. Similarly, it would be illuminating to explore how this poetry allows for a dialogue between Caribbean rhythms and memory. Accordingly, the application of models such as Michael Rothberg's "multidirectional memory" (2009) would suit the relationality demanded by present-day cultural paradigms.

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