Caribbean Migratory Experiences in Queen Macoomeh’s
_Tales from Icebox Land_ and Mutabaruka’s Poetry

Babacar Mbaye
Kent State University

Dr. Babacar Mbaye, Department of English and Department of Pan-African Studies, Kent State University bmbaye@kent.edu

Abstract: This essay analyzes the various ways in which Queen Macoomeh’s _Tales from Icebox Land_ (2007) and selected poems of Mutabaruka represent the conditions of Caribbean immigrants in either Canada, England, and (or) the United States since the 1960s and 70s. The paper attempts to uncover the subversive, diasporic, and postcolonial qualities of pivotal West Indian literature that mainstream journals and scholars have neglected. In an attempt to reveal the intellectual and resistive nature of such literature, I place the two authors’ writings in historical contexts which reveal the multifaceted experiences of expatriate West Indian populations who have fought hard for equality, citizenship, admissibility, and cultural space in Canada, England, and (or) the United States since the middle of the twentieth century.

Introduction

Queen Macoomeh’s _Tales from Icebox Land_ and Mutabaruka’s poems are neglected writings that serve as literary tropes which signify the complex ideological and economic challenges of Caribbean immigrants in their Western host countries where classism, racism, and xenophobia weaken the promises of equality and democracy that prompted them to move to these nations. Such injustices are apparent in the ways in which Macoomeh and Mutabaruka use Caribbean dialects as a means for representing the sardonic and fluctuating relationships between West Indian immigrants and the white superstructure in their host countries, such as Canada and the United States, as economically disparate forces whose conflicts mirror those between colonized populations and colonizers. The two narratives suggest the hypocrisy of Western nations which use Caribbean immigrants mainly as laborers, ignoring the humanity and contribution that these workers bring to the economic development of First World countries that continue to benefit from neocolonialism.

Like Mutabaruka’s poems, Macoomeh’s book is neglected in mainstream Western intellectual circles because no mainstream academic journal has reviewed either one of the books, revealing the serious levels at which the canonization of literature as an exclusively Western art has alienated many black Third World authors from the current “ivory tower” literary establishments. Racism and its corollary prejudices play a part in this exclusion of
major black literary voices such as Macoomeh and Mutabaruka in “ivory tower” institutions which are mainly reserved for the aesthetics and viewpoints of white men. As Joan Shelley Rubin points out in The Making of Middlebrow Culture (1992), “the process of canon formation” has “functioned to exclude writers who were not white males in the Western tradition” and has excluded “women, black, or non-Western authors” (165). Black writers such as Macoomeh and Mutabaruka, who use black dialects, are directly affected by this exclusion because they provide counterpoints to the canon’s standardization of English, art, culture, and ideology according to white male aesthetics and concerns.

Moreover, like Macoomeh’s narrative, Mutabaruka’s poetry incorporates Caribbean dialect in order to counter literary and artistic conventions which expect postcolonial authors to use the languages of their former masters and colonizers. The two black authors’ writings are part of the postcolonial writers’ resistance against the canonization of English as an “international language,” which is a revolution that Feroza F. Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock describe as stemming from the British Empire’s establishment of English “as a language of trade, government, and education, in that sizable part of the world ruled by the British” (4). The critics use Salmon Rushdie’s phrase, “The Empire writes back,” in order to signify how “minority” and “émigrés” writers from the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, India, Trinidad, and South Africa utilize language to challenge “the hegemony of writers from the mainstream” (3). Jussawalla and Dasenbrock state: “It [the postcolonial world] uses the language of the former colonial power, but it speaks in its own independent and quite original voice, often contesting the way it has been represented by the earlier [European] writers. The writing that emerges in this process issues from a remarkably complex combination of cultures, as the postcolonial writers draw on indigenous traditions and languages of their own as well as on the resources of the tradition of writing in English” (4). Drawing on similar theories, this essay will examine the complex ways in which Macoomeh and Mutabaruka develop various linguistic and ideological strategies in order to signify the racism, exclusion, prejudice, and other oppressions that have confronted Caribbean immigrants in Canada, the United States, and England since the 1960s.

Unlike Macoomeh’s narrative, which is set in Toronto, Ontario, Mutabaruka’s does not focus on a particular city or state. Mutabaruka’s poems are generally set in the global North even if they frequently allude to the United States and England. In an attempt to delineate the geographic locations and contexts of the writings of Macoomeh and Mutabaruka, this essay uses the concept of “diaspora” as a word that refers to the Caribbean immigrants in Canada and the United States only. This usage of the term “diaspora” allows us to localize a term which generally defines the movement of black populations from Africa into many parts of the world as a result of historical forces such as slavery, colonization, and voluntary migrations. My concept of “diaspora” is indebted to Kezia Page’s definition of the notion of “diaspora” as an ideology of “Caribbean
cultural settlement outside of the geographical space of the Caribbean” (17). Page writes: “By diaspora I mean the idea that nation states exist beyond their geographical boundaries as their nationals form migrant communities on other shores/within the geographical spaces of other nations . . . Obviously there is overlap as diasporic discourse or the idea of diasporic consciousness does not preclude experiences of anomie, dislocation and loss, but ‘exile’ as concept places more emphasis on these” (17). Yet, although it is not a synonym of the notion of “exile,” the concept of “diaspora” aptly describes the history of New World black populations who have felt the effect of forced displacement from homeland since slavery time. Discussing the persistent manner in which Rastafarians of Jamaica evoke Africa as a place to which they should return from the atrocities of the West, Rex Nettleford writes: “The Exile and the yearning for the Return are both the cause and the occasion for that endemic state of crisis in which Africans in the West, and even those who imprison the Africans-in-Exile, find themselves. Such a situation calls for a Message and the Rastafarians have willingly provided it, drawing unashamedly on the Book of Revelations of the New Testament which have for centuries provided consolation for and restored faith to sufferers in time of chaos” (xiii). Thus, religion also serves as a major tool which Caribbean people at home and in the diaspora have used to cope with the dilemma that exile creates in their lives.

Defining Tropes

In Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies, Mimi Sheller defines the concept of trope as “a figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression” (112). Sheller also writes: “Developing this dual meaning, Srinivas Aravamudan suggests a process he calls ‘tropological’, based on the early eighteenth-century definition of trope: ‘Trope, tropus, in rhetoric, a word or expression used in a different sense from what it properly signifies. Or, a word changed from its proper and natural signification to another, with some advantage’ (112). This eighteenth-century definition of the trope is further explained in Thomas Gibbons’ 1767 book, Rhetoric, or a View of its Principal Tropes and Figures, in their Origin and Powers: With a Variety of Rules to Escape Errors and Blemishes, and Attain Propriety and Elegance in Composition. According to Gibbons, using a “Trope” consists of “changing a word or sentence with advantage, from its proper signification to another meaning” (1). Gibbons also writes: “Thus for example, God is a Rock . . . Here the Trope lies in the word Rock, which is changed from its original sense, as intending one of the strongest works and surest shelters in nature, and is employed to signify that God by his faithfulness and power is the same security to the soul that trusts in him, which the Rock is to the man that builds upon it, or flies for safety to its impenetrable recesses” (2). In addition, Gibbons writes: “6. They [tropes] may be wild and extravagant . . . 7. They may be mean and low . . . 8. They may be far-fetched and obscure . . . 9. They may be harsh and unsuitable . . . 10. They may be finical and fantastic . . . 11. They may be filthy and impure” (1). Though it was
developed in 1767, Gibbons’ definition of trope remains important because it stresses the value of signification and obscene language that also permeate the writings of Macoomeh and Mutabaruka. Drawing on additional tropes such as those of “Icebox Land,” and “Callaloo Land,” “Babylon,” and the “whiteman country,” which are pervasive in such writings, this essay uncovers the significance of texts that signify the difficult conditions of Caribbean immigrants in the West even if they may appear “filthy and impure” to the elitist or untrained eye. The four terms allude to the various locations in the Americas where Caribbean populations have migrated as a result of the history of slavery, colonization, and globalization that fragments them in two diasporas: their old homeland and the new country(s) to which they emigrate. Such migrants are part of the blacks that Stuart Hall describes, in his 1993 essay “Negotiating Caribbean Identities,” as “twice diasporized” (28). Macoomeh and Mutabaruka reveal the consequences of this double rupture that Caribbean immigrants experience in separate locations of their new diasporas.

Queen Macoomeh’s Tales from Icebox Land

Written by Nathalie Taghaboni, who uses the pseudonym Queen Macoomeh in the book, Tales from Icebox Land (2007) weaves storytelling and socio-political satire in order to represent the conditions of recent Caribbean immigrants in Toronto, Canada. Set mainly in Toronto, the book also depicts Macoomeh’s life in Trinidad where she lived before she moved to Canada in 1977 to join her mother. Although it alludes to Macoomeh’s life in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, where she was born, the book primarily deals with her experiences in Toronto, providing us with important insights about the strengths and limitations of Caribbean immigrants in this part of Canada.

Canada was a major destination for Caribbean immigrants during the 1960s and 70s although, as Robin W. Winks’ The Blacks in Canada: A History (1971) suggests, West Indians’ voluntary relocation to Canada can be traced to the early twentieth century (310). While it was minimal during the first half of the twentieth century, Caribbean migration to Canada became substantial between the end of World War II and the mid-1960s. Winks states: “In 1946-50 there had been 947 black arrivals, or 0.22 percent of the total number of immigrants; for 1961-65 there were 11,835, or 2.37 percent of the total; and by 1966 blacks—largely West Indian—comprised over 3 percent of all immigration” (444). In a 2009 World Bank study, Emiko Todoroki, Matteo Vaccani, and Wameek Noor assert: “Since the late 1960s, Canada has been an attractive destination for migration from the Caribbean region due to its relatively open immigration policy and geographic proximity. Immigrant inflows into Canada have helped sustain economic growth, with the foreign-born population strongly contributing to the demands of the Canadian labor market. In 2006, there were an estimated 580,000 individuals of Caribbean descent in Canada, with immigrants from the region accounting for approximately 3 percent of the overall foreign workers reaching Canada” (xviii). Canada’s openness to
Caribbean migration can be traced back to 1966 when, according to Winks, “the Canadian government issued a White Paper on immigration which stated that there would be ‘no discrimination by reason of race, colour or religion’” (444). This declaration is part of the legislations that Canada has enacted since the mid-1960s in an attempt to attract more immigrants to its nation. In their essay, “Ethnicity and the Identity of African-Canadians: A Theoretical and Political Analysis” (2005), Korbla P. Pulpampu and Wisdom J. Tettey describe the Immigration Act of 1967, the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the 1988 Multicultural Act as “policies” that reflect “Canada’s efforts to build an inclusive and democratic society” and her desire “to address some historically embarrassing episodes in the treatment of certain groups of people” (25-26). Yet Caribbean immigrants have experienced mistreatment in Canada since the mid-twentieth century due to the incapacity of policies to change racist and other intolerant behaviors towards blacks unless they are enforced and supported by cultural change. In his 1985 study, Racial Discrimination in Canada and the Black Experience, James W. St.G. Walker observes: “The historical record reveals that the basic issue in Canada has been racial stereotyping — the assignment of personal characteristics, economic opportunity, and social acceptance on the basis of perceived attributes — and, further, that those stereotypes were founded on ignorance, hearsay, and coincidence. The problem is embedded in history, and historical understanding is essential to unlocking solutions with any promise of success” (24). Macoomeh’s Icebox Land helps us “unlock” the lingering historical misunderstanding in Canada, since it reveals the ambivalent lives of Caribbean migrants who face alienation, prejudice, and racism despite the socio-economic success and cultural creativity they achieve in this nation.

Theorizing “Icebox Land”

An anonymous reviewer describes Tales from Icebox Land as a “combination” of “column(s)/stories” which “uses satire and humour as its main ingredients with observations on such topics as North American politics, general societal ills and world politics to name a few.” Such use of satire and humour to comment on North American and global politics is apparent in the passages in which Macoomeh criticize “de big pappy people in Enron [who] teef people money” (28), “de commess dey [Britain] make in Calalloo land; all de sugar an oil an bauxite dey teef [from Calalloo islands]” (37), and the “badjohns [drug and gun dealers]” who are “bringin in deze tings to Canada an sellin it to dem duncey heads” (111). The words “teef” that Macoomeh defines as a synonym of “thief” (158) has been added to The Official Dictionary of Unofficial English: A Crank Omnibus for Trillionaires and Bampots for the Ecozoic Age in which Macoomeh is quoted urging, “All yuh fowl teef who feel de internet is a free-co [to] have some respeck” (129). Macoomeh’s characters live in an imagined country called “Icebox Land” that she identifies as different and fluctuating geographical zones. In the glossary of her book, Macoomeh defines “Icebox Land” as a “fictional name to describe North America” (153). Yet, early in the narrative, she represents “Icebox Land” as the
Americas, as is apparent in the passage in which she says, “Ah livin up here in Icebox Land since before Columbus boat capsides dong by we an he swim ashore an start tellin people he discover we as if we was stannin up in a corner waitin” (xi). Likewise, “Icebox Land” refers to a Pan-National geographic space that spans from Trinidad and other parts of the Caribbean to the United States and Canada. Macoomeh’s Icebox Land alludes to the theory that Columbus discovered the Americas, which is a common thread in colonialist discourses which represent inhabitants Europeans found in the New World as savages at best and absent beings at worst in order to exploit them economically and culturally while pretending to civilize them. Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Frances Drake, and other explorers assumed that Native Americans they met in the New World had inferior cultures, lifestyles, foodways, religions, and practices. Yet the European explorers did not turn their back on the so-called ‘savage’ lands they supposedly ‘discovered.’ Nor did they provide a valid and plausible excuse for their brutal treatment of Indian people and cultures they viewed as barbaric.

Rooted in her cultural experiences in Port-of-Spain, Macoomeh’s narrative is not an essentialist text since it suggests the complex ways in which Caribbean people in Toronto contribute to the development of hybrid and cosmopolitan identities built around the Caribana parade. These migrants use Caribana as a means for resisting the challenging effects of exile and alienation in the diaspora. Discussing the identity of “[Caribbean] blacks who have completed the triangular journey back to Britain,” Hall states: “This is more than just a diaspora and living in a place where the centre is always somewhere else: we are the break with those originating cultural sources as passed through the traumas of violent rupture” (28). Such a ruptured black identity is also visible in Macoomeh’s narrative where blacks from different parts of the Caribbean use Caribana as a tool for preserving the folklore of their particular homelands while creating a communal identity that helps them overcome the political, social, economic, and cultural forces that oppress them in Icebox Land.

The concept of Caribana is associated with the word “Bacchanal” which has plural definitions that all stress the idea of communal celebration among Caribbean people at home and abroad. The word “Bacchanal” has distinct meanings. In Jamaican patois, “Bacchanal” means a “big Party,” “heavy quarreling,” “noise,” or “confusion.” Yet, according to Daniel Miller, in Trinidad, “Bacchanal” means either “scandal,” as in David Rudder’s 1989 calypso song, “Bacchanal Woman,” where it also signifies “confusion” or “disorder” (507). In this vein, Miller writes: “The two major connotations are linked by the other unfamiliar term in the calypso, that is ‘commess’. In dictionaries commess is translated as extreme confusion which results from scandal” (507). Yet, as Miller argues, outside Trinidad the term “Bacchanal” will “connote some kind of orgiastic or frenzied celebration, and so it is not surprising that the term is also frequently applied to the ideal Carnival” (507). Finally, Jodi Fodor defines the word “Bacchanal” as “a
drunken fiesta,” “a party,” or “a loud celebration” which “was named after the Bacchus, the great god of wine” (15). As Fodor points out, the term “Bacchanal” was “named also for intoxication” (15).

Another term which needs to be defined is “Caribbana.” According to Nkechinyelum A. Chioneso, “Caribbana” (another written-form of the word “Caribana”) is “a musical and costumed street parade akin to popular Caribbean festivals/carnivals” (77).5 The history of Caribana is summarized in the book, Trinidad Carnival: The Cultural Politics of a Transnational Festival, in which Lyndon Phillip discusses the efforts that “Charles Roach and a group of West Indian students, professionals, and workers” such as “nurses, domestics” and other laborers put together to organize the first Caribana festival in Toronto in 1967 as “the West Indian contribution toward Canada’s centennial celebrations” (106-107). Roach’s group is considered as the originator of Caribana since it exposed Canadians to aspects of Caribbean culture they had never seen before Toronto’s Bacchanal. According to Lyndon Phillip, a 1968 issue of The West Indian News Observer reveals the main objective that Roach and his fellows (such as Peter Marcelline, Elaine and Alban Liverpool, Sam Cole, and Romain Pitt) had when they founded Caribana (107-108). Phillip writes: “The Caribana founders spoke about how they were going to transport a never before seen Carnival to Toronto. In addition to the traditional parades of the bands, their Caribana (a name that joins Caribbean and Bacchanal) was to include a fancy Ball, catered boat cruises along Lake Ontario and an island picnic on Toronto’s Olympic Island. Charles Roach remembers that there was great community support for Caribana at that time” (107-108). Therefore, Caribana allows the Caribbean community in Toronto to create space for Caribbean culture in a new nation state where they create a second diaspora within a colonizing culture. Depicting similar communities that blacks have formed in the Caribbean and the rest of the world since slavery, Hall uses the term “the other Caribbean” to signify these societies’ ambivalent status between their original and new homelands. He writes: “they [these societies] have been always surrounded by the colonizing culture, but importantly – and to some extent today, imperatively – retaining something of the connection. They have been often unrecognized, often evident only in practice, or often unreflected” (29). The modern Caribbean community in Toronto is part of “the other Caribbean” since it is able to create agency, social-building, admissibility and acceptance for Caribbean culture in the city despite the stringent racism that has confronted it since the 1960s.

Dialect, Satire, and Humour in Icebox Land
The use of the Empire’s language to retrieve unwritten experiences, which is the process that Jussawalla and Dasenbrook identify as “that complexity [which] has been and continues to be tremendously enabling” (4), is apparent in Macoomeh’s recovery of her Trinidadian English dialect as a means for resisting neo-colonialist bliss and expressing her worldview through the prism of her own language even if such
an idiom inevitably bears the indelible imprints of the colonizer’s vernacular. In this vein, an anonymous author states: “Explaining her choice to write her highly popular column in Trinidad & Tobago’s vernacular, Queen Macoomeh says, ‘Just because I choose to write in this style of grammar does not mean that I cannot write in standard English. Like a muse wanting to inspire, I adapt to my audience. Communication is ineffective otherwise.’” Thus, Macoomeh is not ashamed at forcing and validating the English dialect of blacks of Trinidad as a proper and independent linguistic form that deserves as much respect as has been given to mainstream English. Anticipating the discomfort of readers who may find her speech difficult to understand, Macoomeh writes: “Now fuh all doze who goin to read de book but not accustom to we English, doh leh de words frighten yuh eh? Take yuh time an read troo, yuh go get de riddim. Yuh go hear de music in de words. Yuh might fine it easier to talk out de words so yuh go hear de tory. Dis is a tory telling book, not a essay” (x).

Macoomeh’s use of Trinidadian English dialect reflects the distinctive style of her writing that an anonymous author calls, “Caribbean flavor.” Such a “Caribbean flavor” can be tasted in Macoomeh’s language which transcends the distinction between conventional and unconventional English. Challenging this difference, Macoomeh makes a humble gesture that allows the untrained reader (who may easily misconstrue her book as non-intellectual) to appreciate her idiom and narrative that mainstream scholars may view as unsophisticated and improper.

Yet a careful reader soon finds out that Macoomeh’s book is intellectual, since it theorizes the dilemma of immigration and modernity in the contemporary West Indian society in the black diaspora. Drawing on the culture of both her native Trinidad and of Caribbean immigrants in Toronto, Macoomeh represents these blacks’ resistance against alienation and socio-economic problems they face in the city. Her use of culture is apparent near the end of her book where she writes: “We is a abidin people, doh doubt dat. Inside we heart, deep dong where Icebox Land law, racial profilin, immigration rules an all de dis an dat cah reach, we is Caribbean People. An is dat what keepin we afloat” (147). This passage suggests Macoomeh’s allusion to the challenges that await blacks in Icebox Land. One of these challenges is the set of trouble that white Canadians create for Caribbean people who want to immigrate to Canada even when they like certain elements of West Indian culture. As Macoomeh suggests, even if the “Iceboxians” like to “drink de rum, smoke all kine-ah ting, interfere wid Calallooian women” when they are in the Caribbean, they “run back up in Icebox Land to pass a nex immigration law to make it harder fuh Calallooians to travel” (36). Such exclusion of blacks from Canada can be traced to 1910 when, as Winks suggests, a new “restrictive, exclusive, and selective” Canadian immigration law was passed (307). According to Winks, when T.B. Macaulay, the founder of the Canadian-West Indian League, made a resolution about a possible federation between Canada and “one or more of the British West Indian colonies,” the Governor of the Bahamas, Sir William Grey-Wilson made racist remarks about blacks from
these islands (307-308). In an attempt to appease Canadians who were chocked by this proposition, the Governor said that “the ignorant blacks would be shut out” and the security of “the white woman in the midst of negroes” would be protected if “the Bahamas joined the confederation” (308).

Likewise, other Caribbean blacks had been marginalized in Canada during the twentieth century. For instance, as Winks points out, in 1911 the Winnipeg Board of Trade called for a “head tax” on “those Negroes who had taken land in Canada” and had “not proved themselves satisfactory as farmers, thrifty as settlers, or desirable [as] neighbors” (309). According to Winks, these racist charges were made “despite the obvious fact that most of them [the ‘Negroes’] had been in the Dominion less than eighteen months and had yet to harvest their first crop” (309). The conditions of these early Caribbean immigrants in Canada resemble those of expatriates who have lived in the nation since the mid-1960s. According to Heron, since 1965, “relative to native and immigrant whites, many [Caribbean, Latino, and Asian immigrants] have not attained the level of economic success commensurate with their skills or educational qualifications. The credentials of some groups of immigrants are perceived to be inferior by employers in receiving societies and are not as highly rewarded as degrees earned in Europe and North America” (18). Such conditions show that white Canadians are hypocritical in their relations with Caribbean migrants since they isolate them from socio-economic opportunities while perceiving them as culturally different. In this vein, Chioneso argues that “Caribbean Africans residing in the Toronto metropolitan area were perceived as ‘differentially incorporated’ (i.e., marginalized) due in part to their cultural attributes” (71). According to Chioneso, “Demographic data indicate that almost half of Continental African (47%) and two thirds of Caribbean African (66%) immigrants prefer to settle in Ontario, particularly within the Toronto metropolitan area” (72). Paradoxically, Caribbean heritage allows West Indians in Icebox Land to maintain a sense of sanity and community despite the fragmentation that modern life creates in their society, corroborating James W. St.G. Walker’s argument, in The West Indians in Canada (1984) that “Circumstances in Canada encourage West Indians not only to retain their Caribbean cultural traits but to maintain loyalty and identity links to their lands of origin” (20).

Caribana, Bacchanal, and Subversive Language in Icebox Land

The importance of culture in the resistance of Toronto’s Caribbean population against oppression is further apparent in Icebox Land where Macoomeh suggests that carnivals allow the West Indians to counter their alienation in Canada. Discussing the history of a carnival called “Bacchanal Bobol Brigade or BBB for short,” Macoomeh shows how Toronto’s Caribbean immigrants founded this organization as a means to resist Canada’s freezing weather. She writes: “Once upon a time, over forty years ago, in a lan so cole yuh could freeze awf yuh
nem-nem an hear it fall PING! On de pavement, dere lived a group of people call de Calallooians. Deze people miss where dey come from, so dey form de Bacchanal Bobol Brigade or BBB for short” (74). Therefore, Toronto’s Caribbean immigrants use carnival as a means for connecting with their original homeland and creating an identifiable community.

Yet the promotion of Caribbean traditions and cross-cultural understanding are central in Macoomeh’s narrative since it empowers her struggle for human rights and full citizenship in Canada. Depicting the wide reception of the BBB among Toronto’s cross-racial audience, she writes:

Watch how people movin like dey in a different worl; a worl dat doh have no crime, no murder, no hatred, no war. People laughin an makin skylark while dey waitin fuh dere ban to pull out. Walk troo de area an watch Black people, White people, Indian an Chinee people an what ever else it have. Dey chippin, ole talkin an singin. Even de chirren, dey tired out already but dey still game. Feel de energy surgin in dat Stadium an tell me Papa Gawd not dere. (69)

Macoomeh’s reference to the ways in which the carnival’s main participants “Walk troo de area an watch Black people, White people, Indian an Chinee people an what ever else it have” (69) celebrates the diversity the BBB creates in Toronto. By walking through Toronto in such a manner, the carnival participants bring joy to people of different backgrounds. In this sense, Bacchanal creates a space in which Caribbean migrants establish points of contact with other communities, such as Indians and Chinese expatriates, who share their status as settlers in Canada. Tina K. Ramnarine’s Creating Their Own Space: The Development of an Indian-Caribbean Musical Tradition (2001) describes how immigrants from India organize in Toronto “Chutney [music shows],” that are “gaining increased popularity” in the city where they are settled (10). Bacchanal allows Toronto’s Caribbean migrants to create a similar space where they can share their traditions with other members of the metropolis.

Macoomeh’s resistance tools are also crafted out of the “Jumbie” traditions of her homeland of Trinidad she uses as means for creating space and success in Toronto. The term “Jumbie,” or “spirits of the dead,” is a pan-Caribbean term which, according to David H. Brown, derives from the word “Moko Jumbie” and “descends from Bantu-wide lexicon related to spirits of the dead, such as kiyumba, which means a spirit-embodying skull relic, and nfumbi, which means dead spirit, in the Afro-Cuban Palo-Monte tradition” (80). Yet, as Geoffrey Holder argues, in Trinidad, the term “Moko Jumbie” also means “a mysterious dancer on stilts, face covered” and “dressed as death,” who crosses the streets, threatening people for “money” or their “life,” and scaring the children who “take refuge behind their mothers’ skirts or hold on tight to their fathers’ strong arms” (10-11). “Jumbie” allows
Macoomeh to remember her homeland, as is evident in the chapter in which she writes: “It’s strange how memories can transport you to a time and place far from your present. I was a long way and a long time away from my birthplace but yet there I was, in my mind, back in the house in Port-of-Spain” (52). Among things such as “sorrel,” “assorted nuts,” “sponge cake, pone, sugar cake and sweetbread,” that her mother used to cook for her in Trinidad, Macoomeh also remember her “Jumbie.” She recalls, “Up in the back of the house was my jumbieland” (52). In Toronto, Macoomeh vividly remembers “Jumbie” as she observes her son play from her window:

As I stood at the window and watched him I felt a certain pang of sadness that I couldn’t offer him the same simple things. I once received dolls that could walk with me; he received electronic play stations. I had had cakes and sugared goodies, he lived in an age where nothing was good for you to eat. My jumbie was in the dark in the back of the house buzzing close to my face. (53)

Therefore, “Jumbie” has a strong influence on Macoomeh’s memory and life since it is like a totem in which her ancestral spirits live, helping her negotiate her ambiguous situation between tradition and modernity. As Hall points out, the use of “symbolic return” to a homeland is important in the attempts of New World black populations to find “a place in modern history” (31). This search for modernity is evident in these blacks’ ongoing quest of identity that Hall theorizes as their attempt to “decolonize,” “regenerate and ground the political and social life of the society [in which they live] not in an absent picture or image that could never be fulfilled or in the nostalgia for something outside the society but in the complicated realities and negotiations of that society itself” (31). Macoomeh successfully negotiates “complicated realities” of Canadian society since she firmly believes in the capacity of her “Jumbie” to provide her son with tradition without shielding him from the inevitable forces of modernity, hybridity, and progress. She asserts: “The past served to bring the present into sharp focus. I could not shield him from the impact of civilization” (53). Thus, Macoomeh perceives herself as a person whose memory of “Jumbie” in Toronto allows her to plant deep roots in Canada, helping her navigate the wide seas between her original homeland and the new nation in which she has permanently settled with her family. Her capacity to establish strong connections with both Trinidad and Toronto through culture and memory suggests the Caribbean immigrant’s ability to overcome the difficult separation between homeland and new nation-states that exile brings about. Similar success is apparent in Ransford W. Palmer’s argument, in “Caribbean Development and the Migration Imperative” (1990), that while “most Caribbean immigrants entertain thoughts of returning home later in life, perhaps to build a house, establish a business, or just retire,” the truth is that “few immigrants ever return to live out their old age in a country where their children and immediate relatives do not live” (10). Customs such as Bacchanal
and “Jumbie” help these immigrants mediate the persistent pull between their old and new homelands.

Moreover, Macoomeh represents Caribbean culture as hybrid traditions that strongly influence Western culture, causing North American reporters to perceive it as an infectious terror. This prejudice is apparent in the fictive story of CIA infiltration of Trinidad in search of “terrorists” that Macoomeh tells in her narrative. In the story, a fictive journalist describes “Several women [who] were [allegedly] seen to remove their masks and other clothing” to be photographed by “See Nen Nen” reporters (46). As the narrator suggests, these women had “banners” which were “part of the terrorist underground language in Trinidad” (46). Later, the narrator says:

US troops were unable to subdue this elite group of highly trained militia. The troops were sprayed with a toxic liquid locally made called “babash”. It caused disorientation and almost an entire regiment was infected. Another unfamiliar weapon was called “wine” but not the alcohol kind. (46)

The infectious language and “wine” that the narrator describes are metaphors for the unstoppable, defiant, and malleable force that the music, dance, costumes, songs, Bacchanal and other elements of Caribbean culture bring to Toronto. “Jumbie” is an important part of this resistive culture since, as Macoomeh suggests, a US secret agent reported that a “fundamentalist leader [named] Look Abu Bu Dey Montano was caught on tape training other youths in the art of ‘Jumbie’. . . . Montano has taken his training techniques to Toronto and New York where terrorist cells are said to exist. It is reported a large meeting will be held in Toronto under the code name Caribanana” (47). This story uses the language of North American international campaign against Al Qaeida as a rhetorical tool that signifies the attempts of Canadian society to resist the infiltration of a “contagious” Caribbean culture into itself. By poking fun at the North American attempt to fight Al Qaeida in the Caribbean, Macoomeh subtly berates the conservative forces that resist the linguistic and cultural influences of Caribbean immigrants in Canada. In so doing, Macoomeh laughs at the ways in which white Canadians attempt to control the infiltration of infectious Caribbean culture into Canada. In his web article, “How They Kept Canada almost Lily White: The previously Untold story of the Canadian immigration Officials who Stopped American Blacks from Coming to Canada,” Trevor W. Sissing dismisses liberal Canadians who quickly apply the word “racist” to the United States. According to Sissing, this tendency ignores how, during the first years of the twentieth century, “the Canadian government consciously and carefully applied a policy of nearly total exclusion of American blacks. This is why Canada today has comparatively few blacks, why it is still possible for us to think of race problems as things that happen to other people.” Such hidden history of racial exclusion has had drastic effects on the black populations in Canada. Sissing writes:
It is not a pleasant chapter in our history. It involves no boldly stated policy of the kind that goes into the school textbooks. There was nothing public about it, as with the "Keep Australia White" policy. Rather it was a back-room effort, almost entirely successful, to "discourage" the many thousands of American and West Indian blacks who might otherwise have moved to Canada.

There was -- as government correspondence in Ottawa records now makes clear--a long, long series of letters exchanged among immigration authorities worried about how to be functionally anti-black without seeming anti-black.

In this sense, even if it brings Caribbean cultural diversity to the forefront of Canadian society, Caribana alone cannot dismantle structural racism, provide full citizenship to West Indians, or win the admiration of white Canadians who perceive blacks and their ancestral traditions as foreign, primitive, and dangerous. Annemarie Gallaugher registers the triple condescension of white Canadians towards Toronto’s West Indian community when she argues, in her essay, “Constructing Caribbean Culture in Toronto: the Representation of Caribana” (1995), that during Caribana, “multicultural value is often evidenced” not “as coming from within the Caribbean community itself, but as a projection of white, dominant culture onto Caribbean culture. The appearance of members of the white, dominant culture in the parade, or newspaper accounts which perpetuate stereotypical associations of Caribbean culture with touristic ‘exotica,’ and the close attention paid to crime and violence are all clear examples of this type of projection” (405). Toppling this racism in Canada requires not only the unlearning of primitivizing of blackness but also the implementation and enforcement of structural policies that treat blacks as full citizens.

Language has a major role in Macoomeh’s resistance since she theorizes it as one of the “Weapons of Mas[s] Destruction” that “is a highly developed form of warfare taught at terrorist training camps all over Trinidad. It was deduced ‘ting’ is similar to ‘ent’ and are both noun and verb and possibly diphthong” (47). This statement suggests the strong influence of Caribbean vernacular in Macoomeh’s liberative strategy. Macoomeh surely draws on this rhetorical weapon since she uses Trinidadian linguistic code-switching as a means for rewriting history from her own vantage point as a modern Caribbean woman immigrant in Toronto who is not afraid to speak against injustice. Linguistic usage is vital in her survival since it allows her to overcome her sense of alienation and loneliness in Icebox Land. Such use of language is apparent in the passage where Macoomeh describes the estrangement she feels from people who seem to frown at her Caribbean accent or keep pretending that they cannot understand what she says to them. She writes: “I have to spen de day talkin to people who refuse to try to understan meh accent so I have to put
on an song like dem. Mine you, when ah pass in Chinatown to make market, dem Chiney people doh change de way dey talk to help people understan. You ever notice dat? Home now if you doh understan we, we just talk louder. If you cah understan a West Indian, you must be deaf. But ah not home. I live in Icebox Land. Nobody sen an call me” (120-121). Yet estrangement is a double-edge sword since it is sometimes facilitated or self-inflicted by Toronto’s Caribbean people themselves, especially th ose wo are ashamed to wholeheartedly embrace their original homeland’s culture in their new country. Some of these people would include those Macoomeh describe as “some fresh water Caribbean people who forget how we does talk back home an tellin me how ah making dem sweat to remember everything” (131). In this sense, there are Caribbean people in Toronto who develop elitism amongst one another by categorizing recent immigrants against those who are perceived as more established, cultured, and sophisticated, replicating the dichotomies that Europeans themselves used to make between early and late enslaved Africans in the New World. Such oppositions are apparent in the expression, “fresh water Caribbean people,” which probably derived from the expression “fresh water ‘Negroes’” that Europeans used during slavery to differentiate “seasoned” from “unseasoned” slaves.

Macoomeh’s subversive use of language is also apparent in the part of her narrative in which she uses the short phrase “Cric’ Crack Monkey break he back wid a piece of Pomera” (35) in order to poke fun at “de [many] Iceboxians [who] akse to become citizens of Calalloo,” but “was refuse base on strict Immigration Law of De Calalloonians, especially if dey doh have Calalloo Experience” (34). The Cric’ Crack clause comes from the folklore of Trinidad and Tobago in which it refers to a variety of folktales with animal trickster characters who struggle for survival in precarious social and economic conditions in a mythological world. Yet, as Philip M. Sherlock and Hilary Sherlock argue, the term “Crick-Crack” also derives from “Crick Crack stories” of many Caribbean islands such as Tobago, Trinidad, Jamaica, and Martinique which “tell of a number of different animals” (xvi). As the two critics argue, even if such tales are called “Anancy stories,” they are part of opening formula of tales in which “One calls out, ‘Time for a Crick Crack story, Tante Lucie, time for a Crick Crack story,’ and while silence falls and the night shadows creep over the land, Tante Lucie begins” to say “‘Crick Crack’ / And the children say, ‘Break my back’” (xii).

The notion of Crick-Crack serves as a means for satirizing the challenges that Caribbean migrants face in their western host countries, thus allowing us to do a materialistic or sociological interpretation of Caribbean migrant literature. In this context, Cric’ Crack describes Macoomeh’s retrieval from her Trinidadian folklore of a satiric and subversive language that serves as an effective weapon of resistance against precarious social and economic conditions in a diaspora. Such subversive use of language is apparent early in Macoomeh’s narrative where she says, “De book come from all de ole people talk ah uses to hear as a chile” (ix), suggesting that her
vernacular comes from the traditional slave folklore out of which modern Caribbean literature derives. This influence of slavery on West Indian literature is apparent in Paula Burnett’s argument, in her introduction to The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English (1986), that “with the oral tradition of the (Caribbean) slaves it is possible to build up a picture of a complex cultural phenomenon of great vigour and originality: a tradition of vocal self-expression in which all members of the community were involved and which played a part in all aspects of community life” (xxx).

Macoomeh uses Caribbean vernacular folklore by verbally signifying the structural racism that white Canadians perpetrate against Caribbean immigrants in Toronto. Macoomeh uses the term “Iceboxians” to identify these white Canadians who try to control the flow of “the Calallooians” in Toronto (34-35). The whites who police the movement of Caribbean migrants in Toronto remind us of the racism blacks have faced in Canada since the early twentieth century. In The West Indians in Canada, Walker describes the housing and employment discriminations West Indians experienced in Toronto during the 1970s and 80s in addition to the “racist abuse” they faced from police agents that subjugged them based on the stereotyping of all blacks in Canada “as criminals” (18). This racism is worsened by the increasing unemployment that immigrants have faced in Canada since the late 1980s. In his essay, “Racism in Canadian Contexts: Exploring Public & Private Issues in the Educational System” (2005), George S. Dei writes: “In 1999, a total of 196,871 immigrants arrived in Canada, of which 133,201 were classified as skilled and business classes . . . Fourty percent of the immigrants arriving in Canada had first degrees. Yet a good number of highly qualified and educated immigrants recount stories of disappointment in terms of the inability to secure jobs commensurate with their educational qualifications” (101).

Moreover, Macoomeh uses a trope (which she calls ‘Nancy Story’) as a means to refer to the complicated interactions and relations between white Canadians and Caribbean immigrants in Toronto. Her “Nancy Story” is a trope that appropriates the deceit of Pan-African trickster figures such as Nancy and Monkey whose duplicity mirrors those of the hegemonic figures in Macoomeh’s story. Using the trope of the “Nancy Story,” Macoomeh suggests the manipulative ways in which the “City Faddas” of the “Iceboxians” give money to Caribbean people who want to organize a parade called the “Bacchanal Bobol Brigade” in Toronto while expecting them to mismanage the funds (34-35). According to Macoomeh, the prejudice of the “City Faddas” somewhat came true when, as soon as the blacks got some funding, some members of their committee who were supposed to handle the funds began to embezzle them to buy cars, travel home, open businesses, and “Next ting you know, de BBB doh have a red cent in de bank an de City Faddas only laughin ‘kick kik kik’” (34). This laughter shows that the white Canadians did not believe that Caribbean people could organize a parade in Toronto. Through this laughter, the Iceboxians use the colonial strategy of divide-and-conquer (34) which allows them to weaken the Callalooians from “within” by fostering
partition, competition, and greed among them, thus distracting them from their main goals. The above anecdote suggests Macoomeh’s ability to use the Nancy trope as a way of showing the irony of racialized oppression that one notices in the Callalooians’ imitation of the same capitalistic and individualistic strategy that the Bacchanal is intended to resist, suggesting the absurdity of ethnic and social othering. By deriding Callalooians, Macoomeh infuses into her “Nancy Story” the trope of the “Cric’ Crack Monkey [who] break he back wid a piece of Pomerac” by parodying, through the reckless managers’ waste of the Bacchanal’s funds, the paradox of strengthening Toronto’s black community when its leaders would rather profit from their members’ trust just as they are manipulated by the larger white Canadian elite of Toronto. By showing the foibles of these black leaders, Macoomeh employs the discursive strategy that Keith Sandiford describes as “counterorder,” or the foregrounding of “factors [which] counterorder the structure not in the sense of disrupting its coherence, but of interpenetrating and inflecting it with other consciousnesses” (105).

Macoomeh’s use of “counterorder” is noticeable when she praises the leaders of the Callalooians who gain a new consciousness and sense of solidarity and put their irresponsible behaviors and divisions aside in order to resist the oppression of the Iceboxians. As Macoomeh suggests, Callalooians later understood the Iceboxians’ “divide and conquer” strategy and began to create unity and self-financial control (34). Macoomeh writes: “De Calallooians en realize de way to win de battle an control de parade an dey destiny was to work togedda an stop lining dey own pocket” (34). This solidarity and self-consciousness allow the Caribbean migrants to prove the white Canadians wrong by keeping the wealth generated from the Bacchanal parade among themselves. As Macoomeh suggests, the next time they organize a parade, the Callalooians make better use of this money by hiring solicitors, accountants, and convicts to clean the roads before telling the “City Faddas” that “none of dey patrons would buy even a pin from a Iceboxian vendor unless de vendor buy a permit from de Callalooian community. No patron go take a room in a Iceboxian hotel unless de hotel give de Callalooian community a percentage” (35). By making these firm demands, the Caribbean immigrants in Toronto use the master’s tool against him by turning around the table of oppression and flipping his own language and ridicule against him. From this resistance, Toronto’ West Indians use carnival traditions in order to lay the terrain that Lyndon Phillip calls “representational space,” that is, “an uncontested space in terms of notions of blackness” (134). This blackness is materially, rather than biologically based, since its goal is to prevent black wealth from being lost by the recklessness of the “Cric’ Crack Monkey [who] break he back wid a piece of Pomerac.” Macoomeh’s trope suggests the ability of the Caribbean migrants in Toronto to shift power-relations by placing the white “City Faddas” in the difficult position in which Monkey found himself on the ground by falling from a tree due to lack of care and attention for other people.
In addition, Macoomeh reveals the harshness of life in Icebox Land, especially in the introduction of her book where she says, “Den ah come up here in Icebox Land an meet plenty more people – some who ah doh want to come across again nuh, some ah miss too bad. Ah learn hard lesson, easy ones, and all went in dis book” (ix). The hard lessons Macoomeh talks about include the precarious, fragile, and volatile nature of the lives of Caribbean immigrants in Toronto. These populations face serious social, political, and economic predicaments in Toronto even if they greatly contribute to the cosmopolitanism in the city. Leaving Trinidad where the socio-economic conditions were and are quite similar to those of developing African nations, immigrants such as Macoomeh find in Toronto a replication of the same neocolonial barriers that confront their original homelands. In their new locations, the migrants have difficulty adjusting to environments in which the support of families is replaced by a cold social atmosphere in which the angst of modernity are all the more present. Walker mentions the “vague feelings of alienation from white Canadians” that West Indians in Toronto felt in the 1970s and 80s as they frequently faced “rejection” and other difficulties such as “insults, name-calling, [and] even physical attacks” (The West Indians 18). Macoomeh is familiar with these harsh conditions since, as an anonymous reviewer suggests, “she [Macoomeh] migrated to Canada in 1977. While pursuing further education, she became increasingly frustrated with imbalances in her new chosen society in Canada, and its close cousin, USA.” Many Caribbean immigrants in Canada face similar challenges in the Icebox Land in which they are alienated from one another and lose the comfort and security that they often received from family members at home. Moreover, in Canada, Caribbeans and other black populations are subjected to the pressure of discrimination and punitive capitalism. In his essay, “Racism in Canadian Contexts,” Dei describes “the exclusionary practices that Blacks, particularly Caribbean immigrants, had to endure as they sought entry to Canadian society” (99). According to Dei, “Today, the primary manifestation of racism is the pervasiveness of institutional racism in the educational system, employment, media, and immigration. There are continuing instances of overt individual and institutional acts of racism and physical violence directed particularly at non-White populations” (99). Such tragic conditions of Caribbean immigrants in Canada are alluded in Macoomeh’s representation of Toronto as a city where Caribbean expatriates have limited job opportunities and are perceived as aliens in their host countries which they can difficultly call home due to its intolerance of misteps. As Macoomeh suggests, “Icebox Land” is not like back home where de root of dis ting is an yuh could afford to play de backside wid it because is yours in your lan. In Icebox Land you still have to pay rent an when de landlord decide he doh like yuh head, is out he puttin you out. You an all yuh culture I export right back whey yuh come from. Up here
you is always a immigrant. (84)

This statement suggests that white Canadians further alienate black immigrants by constantly reminding them of their status of “immigrants.” As is apparent in the landlord’s power to evict the West Indian immigrant who does not pay rent, the capitalistic structure of Canadian society keeps Caribbeans at the end of the social ladder by developing zero-tolerance-policy towards them, thus shifting the blame of their hardship on blacks themselves rather than on the economic system which favors the racial elite.

Another racism that black immigrants face in Icebox Land occurs at Canada’s border entries. This racism is noticeable in Macoomeh’s description of the terrible ways in which she was treated by Canadian custom officers during one of her return trips to Canada. Macoomeh writes:

One time when I was comin back up troo Niagara Falls wid two bottle-ah brandy an a bag wid some nice Basmati rice. Dem people stop me an tell me I only allow one bottle an no rice. Dey take way meh brandy an rice an gone wid it in de back – probably to drink it out an make a pelau by deyself.

Now akse me dis question. How it is my extra bottle-ah brandy an my bag-ah rice goin to upset de economic, cultural or political balance of Icebox Land? But yet still, while dey busy harassin me, guns passin troo wholesale. (110)

Another encounter Macoomeh had with racism in the West was the time when she was harassed in a bus within the United States. She writes: “Is not like home when you do catch a bus, even doh back home bus does run one every 2 weeks. But here one time ah get meh half-slip stick in de door. Ah just had chance haul it out before Mr. Driver drive awf. He din even see me pullin pullin” (120). This statement suggests Macoomeh’s awareness of the rough and condescending behaviors of Americans towards Caribbean migrants, which reveal subtle and incipient racism at best, and nativism at worst. Without qualm, Macoomeh denounces this racism when she writes, “If you only cough too hard after 9pm, neighbours callin police. An here police shootin black is white” (142). The above examples help Macoomeh suggest the stark differences in the life of the Caribbean immigrant in Trinidad and in the West. In Trinidad, people seem to be patient and deferential, unlike people in the West where they do not show kindness to neither one another nor to immigrants.

Another issue in Macoomeh’s narrative is the post-migration dilemma West Indians in Canada face in their relationships with people from their original homelands who want to live abroad, yet are unable to do so due to poverty. It is this poverty that had led Macoomeh to leave Trinidad in 1977 with her mother and sister to live in Canada (138). She writes: “But I in Icebox Land. Ah come up here to live.
because everybody say tings better here” (119). The representation of Icebox Land as a land of riches is a belief that Macoomeh examines evenhandedly by suggesting both its strong and weak foundations. Certainly, Canada provides many Caribbean immigrants with jobs, material things, and a better economic standing. Yet, such gains are made at a heavy price, such as the severe winter, high cost of funerals, and life and death insurances that Macoomeh describes as some of the necessities that the immigrant must buy in Canada, as opposed to Trinidad where the family would be exempted from these purchases either by poverty or by the availability of a community that serves as a network of social, psychological, emotional, and economic support (138-139). Recognizing the importance of this Caribbean community in Trinidad, Macoomeh suggests how people living in Icebox Land must find “a babysitter” before social workers take their children away from them (140). As Macoomeh shows, even if people’ roof may not “have leak” in Icebox Land (119), they have to work hard to have such luxury (119). In the same vein, Macoomeh writes: “Livin up here is not jes nice warm powdery snow an en-less paycheques. Speakin of paycheques...well...look let me leave dat fuh anudda letter” (141).

Furthermore, Macoomeh theorizes the black immigrant in Icebox Land as an individual whose predicament in the West is unknown to his or her relatives in his or her original homeland. Macoomeh attempts to dismantle the ways in which people in her Caribbean homeland perceive the life of an immigrant in Canada as easy. She writes: “Now I not tryin to stop you in comin up eh? Is jes I fine too many of we rush up here tinkin life sweet an easy. An I suppose you have to really live here a good few years before you realize is not so. Yes I realize tings not rosy dere nidda but is home” (143). This assertion suggests the complicated ways in which the black migrant in the diaspora is confronted by the impossible task of helping his or her compatriots at home to understand the truth and daily realities of life in the West: that the streets of Icebox Land are not, and have never been, paved with or full of gold and fancy cars independently of what the media and uninformed travelers tell them about the romanticized Eldorado[s] of the Western world. As the beginning of Macoomeh’s above quotation suggests, it is not easy to dissuade Third World people from coming to Icebox Land because they are repeatedly indoctrinated by the romanticized image of Canada as a land where they can fulfill the Canadian dream. Strangely enough, the Canadian dream is best expressed in the novel Family Matters of Indian-born Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry in which the character Yezad says: “The generosity of the Canadian dream makes room for everyone, for a multitude of languages and cultures and peoples. In Canada's willingness to define and redefine itself continually, on the basis of inclusion, lies its greatness, its promise, its hope.” Yet such a Canadian dream is not attainable to thousands of Caribbean immigrants in Toronto who are not never considered full citizens. One of these immigrants is Macoomeh herself who says, “You doh have no idea how nice it is to be home. When you can live here tirty, forty years an dey still look at you like a immigrant” (143). As this statement suggests, the Caribbean
immigrant in Canada has yet to gain the admissibility and acceptance that come with full citizenship and true multiculturalism.

The Trope of Babylon in Mutabaruka’s Poetry
As a 1975 article from The Gleaner notes, Mutabaruka was born as Allan Hope, on December 26, 1952, in Rae Town, Kingston. In a September 30, 2010 interview with The Nations, Mutabaruka describes his early biography as follows: “I grew up in Jamaica with my mother and father and have two sisters. My father died when I was eight. I went to primary school and high school and used to do electronics before I started poetry. I left that and became a Rasta and that was the end of ‘my career.’” Mutabaruka’s early life was not easy since he was born and raised in a ghetto that reflected the drastic impact of neocolonialism in the Third World. As The Gleaner suggests, Mutabaruka grew in Rae Town “where shanty dwellings peeped out from behind secretive zinc fences at the maximum security prison nearby, an ominous reminder of the tenuous distance between detention and poverty . . . As a child he often witnessed gang warfare in his neighborhood and the sinful activities of sailors and prostitutes in their nocturnal pursuits of the Hanover Street bars and brothels.” These images of economic and social deprivations that mainly benefit the sexually and hedonistically-driven Western tourists are reminders of a neocolonialism that led Mutabaruka to demise globalization in his 2002 song, “Life and Debt,” in which he disparages the World Bank’s “ecological plan” as a hoax policy that benefits the Western farmers and weakens Third World nations and peasants. Mutabaruka says:

Is life and debt
All a wi a fret
Life and debt
Freedom not yet

Farmers get a blow
Foreign food suh an suh
Amerikan farmers get a upper hand
While our farmers goin one by one. (58)

This poem suggests the exploitative conditions in Jamaica that led many of the nation’s citizens to seek a better life elsewhere, especially to the United States and Canada which have become major destinations for Caribbean immigrants since the late 1960s and early 1970s. In To Be Immigrant (2006), Kay Deaux writes: “Since the passage of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act, immigration to the United States from the Caribbean has continued to grow, most often to New York City, home in the late 1990s to approximately half a million West Indian immigrants . . . Other areas in the United States have also experienced a rise in Caribbean immigration” (171). Contrasting the United States with Britain, Deaux notes the decline of Caribbean immigrants in the latter country in the past decade. Deaux states: “By comparison, in 2001 only 10 percent of London’s population was black, approximately half of whom were Caribbean immigrants—a substantial number, but also a decrease from a decade previously” (171). The decline of Caribbean migrants in England probably stemmed from the
increased racism and prejudice against immigration that have prevailed in Britain since the late 1950s. Addressing this issue, Leo Lucassen argues that whereas the first wave of Caribbean immigrants in England (of the early 1930s) “were looked upon with a mixture of curiosity and benign interest, as soon as it was clear that they were the forerunners of immigration on a far larger scale, attitudes changed” (124). According to Lucassen, “The size of the group of immigrants was also seen as a threat because West Indians were not the only colored immigrants in the 1950s that profited from the free movement of persons within the commonwealth: West Africans, Indians, and Pakistani found their way to Great Britain, too” (124).

The challenges of Caribbean immigrants in England are also apparent in Mutabaruka’s poems in which they are theorized as the consequences of racism on postcolonial nations. Discussing such predicaments that Caribbean people have historically faced in England, Winston James and Clive Harris argue, in Inside Babylon: the Caribbean Diaspora in Britain, that it is racism which determines how blacks are positioned and policed in Britain (2). James and Harris write: “It is racism which assaults their humanity in psychiatric hospitals; and it is the effects of racism, too, that have been internalized. In short, it is racism against which the struggle has to be fought. Not difference” (3). In this regard, James and Harris differ from Paul Gilroy who argues, in The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993), that in Britain, “cultural difference rather than biological hierarchy” is “the core substance of the nation’s postcolonial problems” (33). James and Harris also differ from Gilroy because they blame the predicament of British blacks and other people of color in Western metropolises on the residue of imperialism and racism rather than on the idea that such populations are unwilling to integrate into mainstream or pluralist societies. Mutabaruka would certainly disagree with this facile multiculturalist viewpoint because he often alludes to the racism against blacks in England, especially in two poems in which he satirizes Britain’s physical abuse of these populations. In “Old Cut Bruk,” Mutabaruka writes:

```
great Britain great Britain  
yu can si  
dat yu domination is  
history  
yu greatness cease  
yu colonies decrease  
de seed yu sow get rotten  
now yu affi start use dem  
baton  
ina landan  
ina birminam  
ina brixton  
yu subjects nah tek nuh  
more  
dis yah cut nu have nuh  
cure fi sure  
dem a guh bruk dung yu  
door. (6)19
```

This poem suggests the tensions that Britain faced in the 1970s and 80s as hundreds of young blacks rose up against discriminatory practices such as police raids, abuse, and violations of their civil rights. In Black Atlantic Politics: Dilemmas of Political Empowerment in Boston and Liverpool (2000), William E. Nelson Jr. argues that a 1987 study of the Institute of Race
tensions are apparent in Mutabaruka’s poem, entitled “Whiteman Country,” which develops a chaotic vision of the Western world by representing the life of the person of African descent in Babylon as precarious, difficult, and shaped by alienation. While, in this essay, Babylon identifies the places in the Western world in which Caribbean immigrants live in uncertain and desperate situations, the term comes from Rastafarian language in which it describes “the power of imperial Europe” against which “the voice for black Africa” must fight. Babylon’s dilemma are apparent in the line “It no good fi stay inna whiteman country too long” that Mutabaruka repeats sixteen times in his 1983 poem, “Whiteman Country,” suggesting the challenges and transformation that blacks experience in the West when they dwell in it for too long. “Whiteman Country” registers Mutabaruka’s status as a revolutionary poet who clearly understands the dilemma that racism, colonialism, and estrangement create in the life of blacks. This predicament is apparent in the ways in which Mutabaruka’s poem describes the acculturation that the narrator’s mother experiences after she went to live in America. Mutabaruka writes:

In the fifties, mi mudder
sister ran go England

Now Mi mudda gone
america, she turn
American.

This passage is somewhat autobiographic because it relates to Mutabaruka’s own life. Through this statement, Mutabaruka probably refers to his mother’s journey abroad which
has been suggested in his 2005 interview with Desmond Allen. As the interview shows, when Mutabaruka was a young adult, “his mother went overseas to work and he and Peters rented a house in Washington Gardens in Kingston. Mutabaruka was now of age.”23 This assertion is one of the rare occasions in which Mutabaruka talks about his parents’ life and the connections between his mother and the United States. Such biographic information is important because it suggests that the migration of Mutabaruka’s mother impacted the poet’s life and music, as is apparent in the narrator’s representation of his mother as a Jamaican who has turned into an “American,” registering Mutabaruka’s perception of the Caribbean person as an individual whose emigration into the United States or Britain alters her or his sense of cultural identity. Warning this immigrant, the narrator lampoons the ways in which s/he may end up forgetting the language of her or his birth and begin to speak like a European. Mutabaruka lampoons the Europeanized language of the assimilated Caribbean in England when he writes:

When you dere you say ‘hey sir,’

When you go dere you say ‘hey mate it’s getting late.’24

Through its sardonic surface, Mutabaruka’s statement alludes to the inevitable change of cultural identity that the Caribbean immigrant in the diaspora experiences by becoming a person who saddles the two conjoined identities of his or her original homeland and his or her new settlement without being fully integrated into either one of them. Saddling two diasporic spaces without being fully-integrated in neither one of them is an existential anxiety that Hall theorizes as a quandary “that Caribbean people of all kinds, of all classes and positions,” face as they “experience the question of positioning themselves in a cultural identity as an enigma, as a problem, as an open question” (30). This dilemma is similar to the quandary that the Jamaican male immigrant often experienced during the middle of the twentieth century when he was disillusioned at both ends of his double diasporas. According to James, this immigrant was compelled to either return to Britain or move to the United States since he was perceived as “a foreigner” in his own country (Jamaica) where he was “dubbed, albeit jovially” as “the Englishman” (246).25 As James argues, this Jamaican was part of many “others who had returned home and realized that they had stayed ‘too long’ in Britain and could not re-adapt to a relatively parochial Caribbean lifestyle” (246).26 Dualistic alienation of the Caribbean in both the old and new diasporas is the crisis that Mutabaruka represents in his poem “Weh mi belong” by suggesting the further alienation that racial discrimination and disconnection from one’s original homeland create in the life of the Caribbean migrant. In “Whiteman Country,” Mutabaruka clearly warns this migrant against the hopelessness that racial discrimination created for the Caribbean migrant in both the United States and England in the 1950s. He writes:
And I listen the news and I get confused
A black man dying, the klu Klux clan

If you are white it alright
If you brown stick around
If you black get back cause you betta attack

Now the fire ago burn and the blood a run
Time big ben really rumble down
Anta say Him never gonna try this
But me say him shoulda burned down the palace

When you dere you say ‘hey sir,’ when you go dere you say ‘hey mate its getting late’

So them shoot real gun, them shoot the poor
Them shoot after the queen and you a taken fi a joke.27

Even if they were also meant to depict the tragic impact of racial discrimination and violence against blacks in the United States during the Civil Rights Movement, Mutabaruka’s verses are relevant to contemporary America in which police brutality and the other remnants of racism continue to reduce the life chances of black immigrants in the country. The last four lines of the excerpt apply to the contemporary United States in which unarmed black immigrants have been shot or beaten by police officers who saw them as criminals. Examples of this brutal treatment of black expatriates in the United States include the sodomization of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima in a bathroom with a plunger by four New York City’s police officers (on August 9, 1997) and the deadly shooting of Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo by four police officers in front of his apartment (on February 4, 1999).28 Such vicious incidents corroborate Mutabaruka’s depiction of the West as a land where “It no good fi” blacks to “stay” for “too long.” The reason for this premonition can be deduced from Mutabaruka’s representation of England and America as “whiteman” countries, since these nations mostly represent themselves as such in both structural conditions and normal affairs. Lost in this quandary, Mutabaruka asks, “Weh Mi Belang?” conveying the landlessness, dispossessions, and agony that geographical and cultural dislocations from a homeland create in the life of the Caribbean migrants in the diaspora. Mutabaruka also asks:

nigro?
nigga?
west indian?
den a which country i belong?
chinese - china
indian - india
european - europe
negro?
nigga?
west indian?
den a which country i belong.29

This passage reflects the kind of dilemma of the Caribbean migrant in the West that Bonham C. Richardson describes in his essay “Caribbean Migrations, 1838-1985” where he depicts the life of Puerto Rican immigrants in the United States as
characterized by dualism. Richardson writes: “The ambivalent character of the Puerto Rican situation . . . helps explain the relatively disappointing and impoverished conditions that many of them experience in the United States. With one foot on the mainland and another at ‘home,’ Puerto Ricans coming north have sometimes not carried with them the commitment found among would-be permanent immigrants” (220). Such a limbo and lack of patriotism towards the “north” is not particular to Puerto Rican migrants since Jamaican sojourners experience them also, as is apparent in the quandary in Mutabaruka’s following passage:

negro - black
but negroland no
nigga - stupid
but stupidland no
west yes
bui i nu indian
den a which country i belong?30

The passage suggests the kind of powerlessness and limbo of black populations in the kind of colonial and neocolonial states that had prompted Marcus Garvey to develop a nationalism that aimed at giving scattered and disenfranchised blacks the dream of a country they could call their home. As Hall suggests, the point is not whether such a home is found or not, but that this return to origins shows that “questions of identity are always questions about representation” (27). Hall continues: “They are always questions about the invention, not simply the discovery, of tradition. They are always exercises in selective memory, and they almost always involve the silencing of something in order to allow something else to speak” (26). If identity is invented, its use in Caribbean construction of African identity is not useless. Such a constructed African Caribbean identity was apparent during the 1920s when, as Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah argue, “Marcus Garvey was the Moses of twentieth-century black folk. His was a bold revolutionary vision of a ‘United States of Africa,’ a homeland for all the children of the diaspora” (95). Mutabaruka revives Garvey’s Pan-nationalist dream by searching for and using his African roots as a means for resisting homelessness and dislocation in the diaspora. He writes

i affe guh trace
my original place
try fe fine out
wa mi is all about
a come ya fram de east
dat i know
but in de east
there is no negro
nigga?
dat i caa figga
west indian?
a which country i belong?
wait
a rememba a land
weh man ack like man
dem use fe call wi
NIGERIAN
GHANIAN
ETHIOPIAN.31

By representing Africa as “a land / weh man ack like man,” Mutabaruka uses the African idea of man’s responsibility towards society’s well-being as a tool for opposing the alienation and homelessness of the Caribbean migrant in the diaspora. Mutabaruka
romanticizes Africa as “my original place,” conveying an ideology of African repatriation that is at the core of Rastafarianism. In his introduction to Joseph Owen’s *Dread: the Rastafarians of Jamaica* (1976), Rex Nettleford represents this ideology as the Rastafarian’s “most challenging bid for legitimacy and authority in Jamaican society” (xii). Nettleford also writes: “In fact, the notion of repatriation and the commitment to ancestral Africa, as well as the denunciation of the Jamaican colonial and neo-colonial society as ‘Babylon’ the oppressor, would suggest that there is no bid for such legitimacy and authority within Jamaica itself” (xii). Although he considers Rastafarians’ realization of their dream of an equal world as depending on their dismantlement of the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism, Nettleford recognizes the potency and originality of the movement when he states: “Rastafarians are Jamaicans. What is more, they are among the most creative of their compatriots since they have used all the elements at their command to forge imaginatively a set of beliefs and a perception of the world that would lead them out of the captivity of suffering, degradation, and ignominy” (xii). By stressing the Jamaican identity of Rastafarians — what Hall would describe as Jamaica’s ability to “ground” itself “where it existed” (35)—, Nettleford complicates the dilemma of a Rastafarian such as Mutabaruka who uses Africa as a continent for both ephemeral and permanent refuge from the quandary of Babylon. Focusing on a generic concept of the West, Mutabaruka represents its cities (Babylon) as sites where the Caribbean immigrant comes only to be given a temporary visa that limits him or her to the status of a visitor whose purpose is to work for the survival of the First World nation-states at the detriment of his or her own impoverished homeland. Such is the chaos that Mutabaruka blames on a Babylon of which end he forecasts in apocalyptic metaphors when he says, “Now the fire ago burn and the blood a run.” Mutabaruka’s assertion is a poetic signification of doom and destruction as the inevitable causes and results of capitalist greed and exploitation, thus using lyrics as a subaltern means of subverting the inequalities that neocolonialism has created in Jamaica. By prefiguring Babylon’s downfall in such bleak terms, Mutabaruka joins his voice to the Rastafarians whom Nettleford describes as being “in a sound tradition. For as persons who see themselves to be persecuted, to have been wronged and deprived, to be all but trapped in a situation of persistent material poverty and cultural degradation, and under the yoke of ‘alien’ oppression, the only way out short of violent aggression is through an apocalypse. For the signs of the end must surely be at hand and the unveiling of such last things is at once the cathartic scourge of the offending society as well as a cleansing purge of the oppressed” (xvii). Nettleford’s linking of aggression with apocalypse reminds us of Fanon’s connection of violence with catharsis. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes: “Violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (94). Thus, like Nettleford, Fanon sees violence as way out of chaos.
In a similar vein, Mutabaruka theorizes the plight of modern Caribbean immigrants as evolving from a form of colonial oppression in Babylon. Mutabaruka’s poem “H2 Worka,” which was also the title of his 1989 album Any Which Way Freedom, captures the complexity of this quandary of the Caribbean migrant in the West. A segment of the poem reads:

I am a H2 worka
coming from the island of Jamaica
I am a H2 worka
cutting cane inna florida
workin suh hard in de burnin sun
wonderin if slavery really dun
i’m workin…workin
workin on yu cane field still
workin workin
workin for yu meager dolla bill. (18)

Mutabaruka’s concept of “H2 Worka” refers to the term “H-2 Workers” which describes temporary international laborers in the United States. In their article, “Three Views of ‘Guest Workers’ in the United States,” Marcia Taylor and Dori Finley explain: “The guest worker (H-2B visa) program permits employers to hire unskilled foreign workers to come to the US and perform temporary nonagricultural work that is one-time seasonal, peak load, or intermittent. The H-2B program is used to recruit workers for entry-level positions in hotels and restaurants with seasonal business” (193). Taylor and Finley argue that 11,488 Jamaicans were issued H-2B visas in 2006, according to the Department of Homeland Security (2007) (193). Discussing the reasons why these workers were employed, Taylor and Finley state: “Jamaican workers have been in high demand by US resorts because they are considered hard workers, the population speaks English, and tourism jobs are valued” (193).

Such a labor model resembles the farm workers program which has allowed Canada to bring thousands of Caribbean migrants to work in conditions that are usually deplorable. According to Philip L. Martin, Manolo I. Abella, Christiane Kuptsch, this “Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program has allowed Canadian farmers to import foreign workers for up to eight months a year from the Caribbean since 1966, and from Mexico since 1974. About 80 percent of the migrants admitted are employed on fruit, vegetable, and tobacco farms in Ontario, where the average stay is four months and migrants fill about 20 percent of seasonal farm jobs” (110). These migrants are often marginalized and treated as cheap laborers just like their counterparts in the United States. Using neo-Marxist theory, Melonie P. Heron describes the conditions of these farm workers as “colonization migration” (11). Heron explains:

These migrants fill labor needs at the very bottom of the occupational hierarchy, working in jobs undesirable to natives . . . The work of ‘colonized migrants’ is typically restricted to agricultural or other (non-urban) extractive industries . . . Harsh
conditions of labor are justified by ideologies of cultural or racial inferiority or else by the economic benefits which accrue to both employers and the members of the receiving society as a whole (11).

Mutabaruka’s “H2 worka” alludes to this “colonization migration” since it represents the labor of modern Caribbean migrants in the West as a form of modern slavery. By saying, “i’m workin...workin / workin for yu meager dolla bill,” the narrator alludes to an exploitative labor system that confines him or her to a form of modern slavery and imperialism, corroborating Heron’s argument that some West Indian laborers in the United States and Canada are “colonized migrants” since “they are usually signed into short-term contracts for agricultural employees in the U.S. and Canada, and perform grueling labor under harsh conditions, especially in the sugar cane fields of South Florida” (11).

Like those in Canada, the Caribbean migrants who work in the cane fields of Florida are kept in the status of modern slaves because they are compelled to labor hard for money they cannot even survive with in the West. The term “modern day slavery” aptly describes Mutabaruka’s theorization of the plight of the Caribbean immigrant in Babylon. Mutabaruka draws on the Rastafarian imagery of apocalypse in order to demonize Babylon as a site of modern-day slavery that must be eradicated due to the inhumane ways in which it continues to exploit blacks without giving them equality. In his poem “Bun Dung Babylon,” Mutabaruka writes:

\[
\begin{align*}
yu \text{ tink a suh it a guh guh} \\
all \text{ de while} \\
yu \text{ use wi every day} \\
and \text{ tell wi fi pray} \\
and \text{ tings wi get well} \\
but \text{ wi still ina hell} \\
wi \text{ a guh bun dung} \\
babylon. \quad (8) \end{align*}
\]

Mutabaruka’s statement is a direct indictment of the role of empire, exploiter, and subjugator of blacks that Babylon has historically had. It is a radical proclamation which stems from the reasoned conviction of many black intellectuals that Western claims of civilizing and modernizing formerly enslaved and colonized blacks have often been used as strategies for re-enslaving and re-colonizing blacks. In Discourse on Colonialism (1955), Aimé Césaire un masks the deceptive and exploitative Western tactics by which the decisive actors in colonization are “neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law” but “the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies” (32-33). Césaire’s rationale shows that colonialism is a form of capitalism because it strives on conquest of new
territories and on expropriation of foreign goods.

The relationships between imperialism and capitalism are also apparent in Mutabaruka’s 1989 poem, “H2 Worka,” which reveals the continuity of colonialism in the lives of New World black expatriates. “H2 Worka” reflects the impact of exploitative labor conditions equating modern-day slavery that Jamaican immigrants faced in Florida during the late 1980s, contradicting Western claims of freedom and equality. Resisting this oppression, the narrator in “H2 Worka” says to Babylon,

  don’t treat me like I’m
  a slave here

  jus gimme a wage dat
  is fair. (18)35

The passage suggests the postcolonial subject’s ability to reclaim the humanity that slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism have attempted to take from him or her. By letting the “H2 Worka” demand “fair” wage from his or her employer, Mutabaruka empowers the Caribbean immigrant in the United States to demand to be treated fairly as a person who contributes to the social, political, economic and cultural development of the West. By demanding a “fair” wage and refusing to be treated like a slave, Mutabaruka begins a decolonization process that theorizes democracy as the end of modern-day slavery, the sharing of freedom and privilege across the globe, and the representation of people in the world as equal. In this logic, the postcolonial subject can expect the former colonizer’s descendants to firmly believe in the power of individual self-worth, human decency, and the importance of providing for oneself as well as for others. Mutabaruka stresses this cosmopolitan democracy by letting the character of the migrant Jamaican worker in “H2 Worka” demand the equal treatment to which his humanity entitles him. The worker says:

  betta yu did sen mi to war
den a woulda sit what a
fightin for
jus de needy
talkin to de greedy
jus de goodness
of de restless
wanting to make a betta
life
for mi children and wife
suh a come to yu lan to
help yu
to help mi
to help wi
dis is not slavery
just poverty
wanting democracy.
(18-19)

The narrator’s assertions, “dis is not slavery / just poverty / wanting democracy,” (18-19) suggest that the main factor that leads Caribbean people to emigrate is not lack of self-esteem, humanity, or self-worth, but the simple need to overcome the atrocity of economic limitations. Poverty is the major cause of displacement since, as Chioneso suggests, international migration is the “bottom-line survival strategy for the poorer households throughout most of the Caribbean and has been for years; the region as a whole sends out a greater percentage of its population than does any other world region” (72). Mutabaruka
recognizes the importance of this Caribbean migration abroad by representing the Jamaican migrant in the United States as a free laborer who is brought to North America by the search for economic opportunity and not the quest of serfdom. Through this argument, Mutabaruka stresses the need for the global North to better treat its immigrants and perceive them as people who want the same desire for freedom, equality, citizenship, and peace for self and community that the native-born inhabitants have. These aspirations are encapsulated in Mutabaruka’s assertion that the H2 migrant workers’ search for a better life in the United States is mere “wanting” of “democracy,” not a desire to be enslaved.

Furthermore, Mutabaruka’s poems reflect the consequences of ill-planned World Bank and International Monetary Fund’s policies on Jamaica whose relations with these institutions started in the late 1980s when, following a decade of social unrest, the country’s elected political leaders opened up to Western capitalism. According to Kathy McAfee, capitalism’s stronghold on Jamaica started in 1989 when, following the election of the government of the “new Michael Manley,” the U.S. ambassador to Jamaica, William Holden, announced its mission “to silence the trumpets of socialism” in the country and the rest of the Caribbean, (69). As McAfee argues, the World Bank and the IMF took Holden’s pledge as an opportunity to implant in Jamaica capitalist policies that would later thwart the country’s development. McAfee writes:“Manley and the PNP returned to power over a state with its independence greatly curtailed by foreign control and a society choking in the stranglehold of debt. To regain sovereignty over Jamaica’s economic and political affairs, the government would have to confront the world’s most powerful economic institutions, the IMF and the World Bank. It would have had to risk a showdown with the economic power, and very possibly the military might, of the United States” (69). New partnership with the United States did not always benefit Jamaica, as is evident in the 2001 documentary Life and Debt which shows how the Caribbean island was compelled to borrow money from the IMF in 1977, one year after Manley was elected President, beginning a deadly cycle of indebtedness masked as structural adjustment policies that have not yet produced their promised benefits for Jamaicans. In 2001, Jamaica owed over $4.5 billion to the IMF, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). Similar charges of indebtedness to Western financial institutions have been made against other nations with predominant black populations, stifling development in these countries and forcing talented and educated people to seek to migrate to Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world in search of work. In his song “Life and Debt,” Mutabaruka parodies the World Bank’s and IMF’s impoverishment of Jamaica and the rest of the Third World with debt. He sings:

Dem an dem economical plan
Still cyaa find a solution
Borrowin money fi lend
World Bank a nuh wi friend
Still cyaa find a solution
Borrowin money fi lend
World Bank a nuh wi friend
Is life and debt
All a wi a fret
Life and debt
Freedom not yet.37

Because of limited protections from foreign competition and lack of subsidies, large quantities of major Jamaican products such as chicken, milk, and banana were purged during the late 1990s, leading to the loss of thousands of jobs and the closing of factories tightly dependent on foreign funds. As the documentary Life and Debt suggests, “In 1993, one year after liberalization, millions of dollars of unpasteurized local milk had to be dumped, 700 cows were slaughtered pre-maturely and several dairy farmers closed down operations.”38 Within the same decade, Jamaica witnessed the massive dumping of low-grade chicken from the United States.39 Mutabaruka’s poem, “Junk Food,” alludes to this irony of Western replacement of Jamaican sustainable nourishment with cheap and unsustainable ones as the substitution of “granny’s” sweet rice, corn dumpling, and stew peas with “junk food.” Mutabaruka sings:

Junk food fullin up de place
dis is annada disgrace
junk food fullin up de place
a now good food a guh guh
to waste.40

The drastic World Bank and IMF policies led many Jamaicans to emigrate to the West where they sometimes find conditions similar to those of slavery. Mutabaruka signifies these conditions in his song “H2 Worka” in which he describes the precarious lives of migrant workers in the United States as follows:

i ama H2 worka
comin from de island of jamaica
i am a H2 worka
cutting cane inna florida
workin suh hard in de burnin sun
wonderin if slavery really dun
i’m workin. . . workin
workin on yu cane field still
workin workin
workin for yu meager
dolla bill.41

Indeed, Jamaican migrant H2 workers in the United States are not always fairly treated, as is apparent in South Florida where, according to Deaux, “Approximately 25 percent of Jamaican immigrants live[d]” in 2006 (171). In a Miami Herald issue of March 19, 2007, Mark Potter laments the drastic conditions of Jamaican “blue-collar” laborers in South Florida’s largest hotel and tourist businesses, who were recruited from their homes to staff positions that “local employees” (U.S. nationals) left due to skyrocketing home prices and the fear of “Labor advocates [who] worry [that] some could be exploited.” Even if the Jamaican H2 workers showed immense sense of determination by being “grateful and eager to work here” (in the United States), their situation depended on their employers. As Potter suggests, these workers' employers had “tremendous power over them, because the minute they complained they could
be deported."\textsuperscript{42} Such a likeliness of expatriation of Jamaican H2 workers from the United States suggests the precarious conditions of Caribbean migrants in the country.

Another major element of Mutabaruka’s poetry is its usage of Jamaican dialect, especially in his 1985 song, “The Monkey,” which was also part of his 2002 CD \textit{Life Squared}.\textsuperscript{43} This long poem suggests Mutabaruka’s ability to draw from the wisdom of the Monkey figure in Pan-African folklore as a means to satirize the greed and lack of cooperation that Capitalism creates in modern human society. He writes:

\begin{quote}
Three monkey sat on a coconut tree
Discussing things as they are said to be
Said one to the other now listen you two
There’s a certain rumour that can’t be true
That man descended from our noble race
The very idea is a big disgrace
No monkey ever deserted his wife
Nor her baby and ruin her life
Yeah the monkey speaks his mind.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

This poem signifies the sad ways in which Western countries, who benefit from globalization the most, sometimes dump their surplus products as “waste” into sea or use them for gasoline or oil, rather than share them with less fortunate nations whose agricultural product are not as subsidized as those of First World nations. By using the Monkey figure to depict globalization in such a derisive manner, Mutabaruka employs Jamaican vernacular as an idiomatic tool of political resistance, imitating many Caribbean authors who create their own art out of the vast repertoire of the English language. As Burnett argues, the Caribbean writer “can draw on any point of the language range between market dialect and courtroom English. The complexity of the heritage results in a great verbal flair and ready wit. The art of the pun is employed here as a delicate poetic tool,
while the Trinidadian tradition of ‘picong’ – from French *piquant*, satiric sparring with words – is typified by the superficially light verse which fledges a well-aimed dart” (xxv). Yet, Caribbean people do not speak the same way because they have different languages and dialects. Speaking about the different forms of Caribbean English, Burnett writes: “The isolation of island communities, their varied histories, and the huge extent of the region (over a thousand miles of sea separate Jamaica and Trinidad, for example), have resulted in marked linguistic differences, although these are probably no greater than regional differences within the British Isles” (Burnett xxvi). Thus one must perceive the Caribbean as a hybrid set of geographic, linguistic, and cultural entities rather than a monolithic unit.

**Conclusion**

Mutabaruka’s poems and Queen Macoomeh’s *Tales from Icebox Land* represent the difficult conditions of blacks in Canada, the United States, and England. Such representation is sociologically accurate since, as Melonie P. Heron argues, “in all three countries, foreign-born black immigrants tend to have worse socioeconomic outcomes in employment and earnings than the white native population” (38). As this study suggests, the conditions of black immigrants in Canada, United States, and England have been shaped by dislocation, alienation, and exploitation. Whether it is from Kingston (Jamaica) or Port-of-Spain (Trinidad), the literature about the experiences of Caribbean migrants in the West suggests the persistent effects of exile and alienation in the lives of modern blacks of the diaspora. Yet Caribbean immigrants in the West are not devoid of power since they use traditions including oral narratives, cultural remnants, and communal practices of their homeland as means for affirming agency and freedom that resist the precarious conditions of both Babylon and Icebox Land.

**References**


“A bout Life and Debt,” [http://www.lifeanddebt.org/about.html](http://www.lifeanddebt.org/about.html).


Besson, Gérard A. 1989. *Folklore and legends of Trinidad & Tobago*. Port-of-Spain, Trinidad: Paria.


“Interesting Muta Story.” [http://www.consciousparty.com/cgi-bin/bbs60x/webbbs_config.pl?md=read;id=41032](http://www.consciousparty.com/cgi-bin/bbs60x/webbbs_config.pl?md=read;id=41032).


*Life and Debt*. Directed by Stephanie Black. New Yorker Films, 2001, DVD.

Macoomeh, Queen. 2007. *Tales of Icebox Land*. Boardman, Ohio: Commess UP.


**Endnotes**


7 “Queen Macoomeh’s book Tales from Icebox Land.”


See Gérard A. Besson. *Folklore and legends of Trinidad & Tobago* (Newtown, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, WI: Paria, 1989) 43.


“Chancellor Queen Macoomeh.”


Edward Kamau Brathwaite, himself an Afro-Caribbean poet and historian of distinction, has not inaccurately summarized the position of the Caribbean writer as being that of an “eccentric at home and an exile abroad’. But this sense of homelessness and alienation is by no means exclusive to the intellectuals of the Caribbean. It can be found in equal measure among working-class Caribbean people returning ‘home’. (284)

See James. “Migration.” 284.


30 Mutabaruka. “Weh Mi Belang.”

31 Mutabaruka. “Weh Mi Belang.”


39 “About Life and Debt.”


