# POETICS OF INTIMATE VOICES: EXPLORING IDENTITY POLITICS IN US VIRGIN ISLANDS' POETRY

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> "… Caribbean literature cannot free itself totally from the multiethnic society upon which it floats, and it tells us of its fragmentation and instability". (Benítez- Rojo, 1996: p. 27)

My interest in US Virgin Islands' poetry as a rhetorical medium for the remolding of identities does not lean on any terminal perspective. Rather, I take cue from Antonio Benítez-Rojo's generalized proposition cited above to launch a provisional excursion into the poetic landscape of the United States Virgins Islands (USVI) toward understanding some of the rhetorical flourishes underpinning the politics of identity in these islands. The texts used for this paper include *Seasoning for the Mortar: Virgin Islanders Writing* in *The Caribbean Writer* Volumes 1-15 (2004), *Collage III: Poets of St. Croix* (1993), *Collage IV, Poetry from St. Croix* (1996), and *Archaeology of Names* (1993). My selection of these particular texts is based on the fact that it is possible to get a partial glimpse into the nuanced complexities of the rhetorical paraphernalia engaged through poetry to mask or to fully enunciate the performance of USVI identities in view of Benítez-Rojo's claim that the literatures of the Caribbean "tells us of [the] fragmentation and instability" (p. 27). In the case of the USVI this fragmentation and instability is more problematic because of their location at the interstices of all the cultures of the wider Caribbean and the continental USA. This frustrates any attempts at a reasonable formulation of identity theory. In view of this, I contend that USVI poetry is one of the best ways to seek to understand the cultural politics of identity in these islands.



Poetry provides a sturdy epistemology of necessity toward cultural resistance and recuperation of self in the struggle against former and current epistemologies of control and exclusion. In other words, USVI poetic language enacts re-significations of the multiple-ethnic identities that populate the islands. USVI poetry encapsulates and floats the epistemological fluidity of the people and reflects and refracts USVI heterogeneous identities. These epistemological multiplicities of modes generate uncontainable potentials, which Benítez-Rojo has labeled a Caribbean proclivity for

"fragmentation and instability" (p. 27). Epistemological multiplicities are evidenced in USV Islanders' argument that their linguistic modes cannot be learned in the classroom but instead must be learned in the field of interaction over a long period of stay on these islands: "unlike a standard language that can be learned, the prevailing sentiment is that Virgin Islands Creole cannot be learned, but only acquired through having spent one's formative years in the Virgin Islands. Attempts by Virgin Islands non-native residents to speak the dialect, even out of respect, are often met with disapproval" (Wikipedia). This argument however is challenged in Robin Sterns' (2008: 5) assertion that "Most people who live [in St. Croix] speak Crucian (insert USVI English lexifier Creole) effortlessly", but one wonders how long the foreigner really feels comfortable negotiating through the maze of USVI creoles. Hence I would agree with Marlene Nourbese Philip's statement (1992: 9) that trying to write Creole from any particular position ". . . is [often] a hazardous and difficult one, if only because [Caribbean Creole's] fluidity does a disservice to the fixedness implicit in the word position".

Similar then to poets from other Caribbean islands, engaging Creole as the language of creativity in the USVI is a daring epistemology of new cartography that inscribes new symbolic and syllabic meanings on and over old externally scripted texts to chart new and/or restore old paths to shared histories, struggles, and aspirations. Thus, poetry in the USVI, to echo Patricia Joan Saunders (2007), must be approached from an understanding of the "extent to which [USV Islanders] construct their identities through acts of the imagination" (p. 1). To do so entails a curtailing of the temptation to universalize and eliminate specificities created through "acts of the imagination" that "extend beyond the unconscious, to reshape the relational perspective of historical subjects to their surrounding" (p. 2) and which then calls for the development of a "critical perspective that acknowledges the countless ruptures of history, time, culture, identity, and being" (p. 3).



Countless ruptures, writes Derek Walcott, are the "shattered histories, shards of vocabulary" of the Archipelago that need re-mending. To Walcott, writing Caribbean identity is an "effort, the labour of Antillean imagination, [is the] rebuilding [of their] gods from bamboo, frames, phrase by phrase" (1998: 69). Subsequently, this task of rebuilding the broken vases of identities, especially in the USVI, involves both individual and collective sacrificial and constant undertaking. Walcott's metaphor of the shattered vase to reflect on the passionate need for the art of re-member(ing) the pieces of the broken vase is "the love that reassembles the fragments", in this case, the re-assembling involves re-visioning of roles of the broken shards, how they fit into the puzzles, regardless of which continent, culture, race, or history the piece may have originated.

In 'Islands, Borders and Vectors: The Fractal World of the Caribbean', Ottmar Ette (2007) furthers the argument and concludes that understanding Caribbean identities in relation to the Americas and the world is possible within a conceptual frame in which the fragmentariness of the Caribbean is perceived and interpreted as a model for contemporary literary theory that is always an unfinished genesis. This position echoes Gilles Deleuze's & Félix Guattari's "rhizome" theory developed in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004) to oppose traditional dualism, binarism, linearity, and hierarchy to create alternate conceptual frames that allow the engagement of multiple, non-hierarchical positions of representation and interpretation of ideas. Rhizome theory works on the idea of *mutualism* what I call symbiosis, and implies conceptual and perceptual multi-directionality and multi-dimensionality. Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, Édouard Glissant in P*oetics of Relations* (1997) then develops a Caribbean poetic theory of interpretation and representation that stresses a lateral pan-Caribbean worldview that recognizes particularities of individual islands without isolating and over focusing on them. Thus, this notion of lateral interdependency is crucial to any formulation of concepts about USVI identities as any theoretical positioning is transitory, mobile, heteroglossic.

Paula Bandia (2007) has argued the same position in "Postcolonialism, Literary Heteroglossia and Translation", contending however that notions of mutualism do not abrogate uniquely circumscribed historical antecedents and occurrences on individual islands. It is from this position that I share Arjun Appandurai's (1996: 18) vision of what he calls the complicated web of shifting identities in temporary and fixed geophysical, geopolitical, and trans-and cross-cultural locations over the centuries. Consequently, to adopt a rhizoid trope of reading, identity formation in the USVI does not exclude the presence of intersecting roots, for example different creole languages, that project some cultural specificities pertaining to individual islands and/or particular communities.



Creole language rises up for first mention in any discussion of a pan-Antillean sign that offers provisional scaffolding from which to conceptualize USVI identities. Certainly, differences do exist among the dialects of Creole spoken in the USVI and other Caribbean islands, but each one is part of the piece that defines their linguistic affinities with other Caribbean islands. To recognize and accept this fact is to challenge the polemic of English lexical creole language differentiations that bedevil each of these islands. The Creole spoken in the USVI is heteroglossic and comprises of elements from several islands, the United States, and remnants of USVI's traditional Creoles. Thus to borrow from Glissant (1997), USVI identities, no matter what the purists postulate, embrace the (in)tangible, visual and invisible emplacements of others, and we are thus compelled to recognize USVI identities as a horizontal and

continuously evolving entity born of the mutual heterogeneity of contact experiences among the various ethnicities of the past and the present: Taino, Dane, Dutch, French, Irish, English, Scots, Afong, Akan, Akkran, Akkim, Amina, Atze, Bandi, Fula, Igbo, Kanga, Kalabari, Kasanti, Loango, Dagao, Mandinga, Mangre, Mokko, Papaa, Sokko, Tambi, Uwango, Watje, Wolof, Yoruba, Indian, Lebanese, Chinese, Jew, among others as displayed at the Whim Museum in St. Croix. There is hence a need for a new ideology of reading based on the appropriation of all these inputs toward re-signification, re-creation, and re-assignation of working definitions of USVI identities.

I recognize the contemporary debates among Creolists in the search for an unproblematic traditional source of USVI Creole, especially in recognition of the multiplicities of contributory roots that inform USVI Creole. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into that debate, I believe that the living/dying oral traditions such as *quelbe/fungi* performed still in USVI folk festivals and dating back from slavery times through to the present, as Kenneth M. Bilby (2006) in his review of Andrea E. Leland's *Jamesie, King of Scratch* (DVD**,** 2006) rightly points out, are "an important repository of local history". This traditional mode of cultural representation and articulation in Creole influences some USVI poets of today, as they struggle to maintain aspects of this ancestral heritage, and translate it into a literary tradition.



Consequently, in *Seasoning for the Mortar*, USVI Creole is engaged as a poetic tool of social criticism. In these poems, the transitory nature of male/female relationships, especially the irresponsibility of men in relation to paternal responsibilities as positioned against female greed is stressed. Men complain that women demand too much attention, and perennially exact assurances of commitment from them. Thus, the poet, Alice V. Henry (2004: 23-24) engages Creole to interrogate these disruptive social behaviors in dramatized form. In the process she reflects on some of the – negative - social habits that threaten social harmony in USVI. In "Two Sides ah de Same Coin", generalized social relations issues between men and women are publically discussed: women say men are unreliable. "He won' pull his weight" and scatters children everywhere without responsibility: "Pickney here and on the Rock / 'bout marriage, he won't talk" (p. 23). The men respond by questioning the women's - uncomplicated sexual liaisons: "she don't feel enough / ain' real enough / she don' do enough" and is incompetent as a lover. Her "feelin' ain new enough / . . . / an' talk too much 'bout "we" / won't give you no space" and consistently wants to know what the man up to (p. 24). Though these accusations may appear to be facile and exaggerated for humorous effect, they nevertheless demonstrate the type of gender wars in the USVI that define male/female identities through gender/sex roles expectations and performances, and which are/were the traditional themes performed in *quelbe* music.

The cultural debates on the performance of gendered identities are further expounded by Barbara M. Callwood, (2004). She was born in Tortola, grew up in St. Thomas, and now works in St. Thomasas a high school teacher. In “Dey Music Gwan” we are treated to a dirge against male betrayal in love. The traitorous lover deserts but takes nothing, so she thinks at first: “Da way he had / O’ saying meh name sometime / Da change it to ah bluesy jazz note” (p. 25). There is the false dream that the man will keep memories of her deep inside him and this will bring him back. The lament progressively describes the relationship as built solely on sexual gratification for the man. Once sated, he absconds, taking nothing material or physical but her heart, and hence her illusion of happiness and dream of fulfillment as a woman: “He jus’ take dey sweet passion / He take all dey music / An’ gwan” (p. 26). It is often said that the language of a lament is the language that best defines a person’s identity. The seriousness of interpersonal and inter-gender relations treated in Creole undermines the uninformed positions that Creole cannot be used to represent serious issues, yet here it is used to convey what touches USVI people most deeply, their gendered and sexualized cultural politics. These poems articulate the gender disjoint that is so deep that only a mother tongue can best express it. Creole is a major tool of sharing these innermost energies of pain with others.



Extending this public discourse on sex/gender identities is Carmen Rogers-Green’s “Sarah Seh” (2004a: 84-85). Carmen joins the chorus of lamentations that stress that USVI males are untrustworthy as marriage partners and as fathers. The persona laments that while she is busy trying to earn enough to keep bread on the family table, her “husban busy romancin bout” (2004a: 84). George is not the only husband who is unfaithful, for as Sara says, “Cause husban wid rovin eye / Dem plentiful like san pan dis lil islan” (p. 85). Sara offers to help her friend through obeah, a practice involving magic, spirituality, herbal medicines, and rituals mostly claimed to originate in African beliefs, tracing the etymology of the word to Egypt or Ghana or Nigeria, but most recently also suspected of originating from a Taino word for spirit “opia” and the Taino practices of spirit appeasement through magic etc. Sara collects a thousand dollars to procure the cure for George’s infidelity from an obeah man. She testifies to the efficacy of this obeah man in relation to her own husband’s domestication, and that of Paula’s husband too. The medicine works too well, but the consequences contravene the expectations. George becomes the apotheosis of the domestic sex slave sought in the ritual. He becomes unrecognizable: the mangy dog of the poem that consumes the food meant for George and becomes George; George’s transgressed and transformed sex drive now targets, in its rapaciously uncontrollable newness, only the wife who had lamented George’s neglect. Though this is a cautionary tale to women to be careful about using obeah to control their men’s sexuality, or to get what they

want, the poem nonetheless reveals obeah practices as an aspect of the folk spirituality and beliefs that constitute USVI identity. Obeah practice is not limited to USVI. It is pan-Caribbean and pan-African. Belief systems are often the most tenacious vestiges of people's identity, and the fact that in pan-Antillean drama, poetry, novels, and song, this belief in the efficacy of obeah still persists declares to us that it still is an identity marker that traces its origins to slavery days and then back to African and Taino/Carib traditions inherited by USV Islanders.

Creole is not just a social tool for satiric innuendoes of sexual indiscretions between men and women, Creole is also a strident instrument for cutting criticism of the political culture of the USVI. In "Election Time-Again," Carmen Rogers-Green (2004b) engages Creole to expose the culture of false campaign promises made by politicians in the islands. Whereas, in the sexual laments there is no particular position taken, in the political poems, we see a new type of political identity being advocated: all must recognize that, "Is time dem stop mamaguy we" and "An is time we tek a stan" (p. 88) to end political brigandage because "Too much serious tings at stake / Fi'llow pol'tician ruin we lan'" (p. 88). In these poems, individual responsibility differs from collective responsibility. Sexual relations are individuated while politics is publicized. These issues are further exemplified in the creole poems of Althea Romeo-Mark (2004). She was born in Antigua to a mother from St. Croix and a father from the Dominican Republic, but grew up in St. Thomas. She worked in Liberia and England also. In the poems "Each One Must Walk This Way" (pp. 90-91), and "Carnival Stray" (pp. 91-93), Althea Romeo-Mark utilizes Creole to reflect on the inevitability of aging, and on male treachery.



Creole as an identity marker is engaged as an educational tool to impart, through poetic narrative, lessons about the disappearing culture that ensured the survival of USV Islanders over the centuries: fishing and the traditional economy within which human relations thrived, and were more important than the exchange of goods for money. Marvin E. Williams' "Downwind Tale" (2004b: 39-41) about the loss of traditional fishing culture, and subsequently, a loss of part of the historical and cultural identity of USVI is important in understanding this cultural phenomenon that has traditionally defined the identity of USV Islanders. Creole here functions perfectly as both the medium and the message. Through its esoteric nature, it becomes the most original tool through which the "old-timer" initiates the youth into the cultural secrets of the land; ritualized secrets that only they can share, because they originate in ancestral lore and are performed in an ancestral tongue. The language recalls the drama of old time fishing. The vividness of imagery, the music in the rendering, and the panegyric in honor of the boy's father instills a cultural pride in him and prepares him for the tasks ahead. "Bwoy, the oldtimer said, / donkey years ago / . . . / we does

be throwing in" (p. 39) every Saturday when the fishermen arrived at the beach with their catch, there was carnival of laughter created by the antics of the fish mongers: "mistress and daughter / used to flock /down by Flashbush, waiting" as the story goes for the boy's father Mack. The old timer unveils the various cultural and ritualized behavior used by different female age groups to sweet-talk Mack for extra fish. - The old timer laments the loss of the civilized days when USV Islanders knew how to be human and also be environmentally conscious. "Bwoy", (p. 41) the old timer laments, "Them days we / Used to be nice / In a buncha ways" to the ocean that provided their daily sustenance (p. 41). He ends by counseling the boy through the language of metaphor and symbol about the problems he will face in choosing a female life partner in today's USVI because every relationship is now defined by a cash-nexus callousness: "you caan complain, / you caan pick quarrel / with them,. . . " (p. 41) because they bound "to be doan careish, / to be vex . . . (p. 41). Creole here is not just an oracle of lamentation but it is also a conduit of creative consolation.

Nonetheless, Marvin Williams in another poem "The Tree Trunk in Neltijberg Bay", (1996: 66-67) is unapologetic for the political embrace of Standard English to the detriment of USVI Creole. His argument is rooted in the notion that the rejection of Creole in the educational field for economic and political expediency in the USVI does not necessarily signal the death knell of USVI culture or historical consciousness. " . . . You're / so entrenched in the earth / that decapitation creates not death" (p. 66), instead it signals "but a renaissance us slaves / who pursue our aboriginal tongue / can envy for you teach us" though the ability to perfect the use of the settler's tongue testifies to a nervous condition which is "neither survival nor experience / but responsibility, another burden" (p. 66). To Williams and others the accepted imposition of standard English, or better still, AEIOU (American English I owe You) is a smart economic and political gamble, a yes master technique to ensure `massa no go vex wit dem.' He argues that the downgrading of USVI Creole and upgrading of American English must be accepted as something "that enobles without seeking / a narrow nobility, without seeking / the headless backward stare" (p. 66) toward " . . . an entrenched but fading home" (p. 66). Thus, we have the two sides of the argument, in which - the official position of Standard English is being publically proselytized while in - everyday discourse Creole rules.



Such a position gives encouragement to recent immigrant poets of non-African-Caribbean descent in the USVI to claim timidity in their relationship to Creole usage in their poetry. They seem afraid of being accused of appropriation of a language forged by people of African descent out of the crucibles of their enslavement and exposure to discrimination. Moreover, the recent migratory experience as voluntary exiles on the islands, testify to some different historical, linguistic, and cultural

classifications that seem to frustrate total immersion into USVI cultural praxes. Nonetheless, I want to insist that a lot of these published poets, who mostly are European-Americans, and majority of whom sojourn on these islands for different spans of time, contribute to and nurture the literary culture of the USVI, and in the process bring new insights into the meaning of what identity means to USV Islanders.

A corollary to the use of Creole as a tool of identity marking is the invocation of ancestral presences that goes beyond historical recordings and enters into the world of the spiritual cartographies that define USVI identities. The first ancestral invocation is of the Ciboney or cave dweller in Taino language, with whom the Taino intermingled from about 5000 BC until the 15th century when they were conquered by the Caribs. Even at this period, a form of indigenous Creole developed between the Arawakan/Carib varieties spoken in the Antilles. Thus, cultural and linguistic creolization began on these islands before the advent of Europeans, Africans and Asians. David Gershator's poem: "Terra Incognita / Taino Incognito" (2004: 50-51) is a good starting point as it coincides with new research on Ciboney/Taino/Carib presences in the Caribbean.



The work of William F. Keegan and Lisabeth A. Carlson *Talking Taino: Caribbean Natural History from a Native Perspective* (2008) and Maximilian C. Forte's (2006) *Indigenous Resurgence in the Contemporary Caribbean: Amerindian Survival and Revival*, among others testify to this new broadening of identity politics in the Caribbean. For as the children of Africa in these islands insist on their ancestral rights to the land, arguing rightly that the blood and sweat of their forebears have fertilized the soils, created the wealth, and continue to cry out for reparations, the spirits of the Ciboney/Taino/Carib roam and wail from the soil, the coastlines, the winds, the rocks, the caves, for a hearing and a place in the discussion circle about USVI identities. The initial days of European conquistador brutality that guaranteed the sacrifice of the Ciboney/Taino/Carib on their Christian altars of greed, also saw the cruel dispossession of Ciboney/Taino/Carib lands through a spurious legality invented in Europe and backed by warped spirituality through a labeling of these lands as Tierras Incognitas. Therefore, if the lands had no people according to these invaders then the Ciboney/Taino/Carib could not be recognized as people worthy of honor. European immigrants could legally then imprint their vision of the world onto these lands and their peoples. But a people cannot be totally obliterated from the surface of the earth. There are often cell-memories left somewhere that rise up some day to challenge the lie of their disappearance. The Ciboney/Taino/Carib resurgence in Caribbean discourse at present testifies to this.

Consequently, though David Gershator was born in Mt. Carmel, Israel sometime between the two world wars, and educated in New York, his relocation to St. Thomas over a long period, he and his wife Philiss have made huge contributions to the cultural retention and memory of USVI. His work expands the debate of USVI cultural historiography with questions such as: "what was the primal name . . . / the first name given" (2004: 50) by the first inhabitants of these islands? For as he shows earlier, the moment Europeans, and now Americans envision these islands as paradise, the touristic labels tagged on to them become tags of cultural doom. They become islands with no Ciboney/Taino/Carib name for them, merely "an island blessed, damned, and cursed / like any place called paradise / in earnest or in jest" (p. 50). The allusion to Genesis is important. It problematizes the powerful allure these islands had on pirates, brigands, and other nations, and still have as tourists' paradise. Hence the urgency to initiate a cultural and historical project that would resist this new invasion and cultural erasure. Ancestral Ciboney/Taino/Carib presences must be invoked against current attempts to re-fossilize the archaeology of their memory through the concretization of USVI landscape and the commercialization of USVI identity through consumerist ideologies that promote big plantation malls and new forms of slavery, especially the slavery of dependency. To not rise up and oppose this, David laments, goes beyond benign neglect or sheer ignorance to an arrogance of ineptitude that forestalls attempts at recovering, reclaiming, and reconstructing USVI identities that include Ciboney/Taino/Carib presences. The neglect of appropriating Ciboney/Taino /Carib presences creates a perceptual myopia that subsequently encourages USV Islanders to look to other shores as the only legitimate sources of their imagined identities. This look of behind to either only Africa, or Asia, or Europe or North America, or even to other Caribbean islands, to authenticate their own identities is constructed on an illusion, a mythical, imagined or real connection to these places: "to rescue a past beyond their kith and kin / for some, Africa's the yearn" but "for others," like the Ciboney/Taino/Carib "oblivion" (p. 50). But this, Gershator argues, is not enough to resist the new essentialized and unilocalized edifices of false glory in the big consumer malls such as K-Mart that was erected over hallowed ancestral grounds.



In spite of this seemingly hopeless situation, the poet recalls the various ways in which the Ciboney/Taino/Carib named their islands. He iterates the various names, gods, heroes, compass points, etc. through which we can reconstruct a Ciboney/Taino/Carib past to help us remodel an identity that is both ancient and present, through the names Borinquen, Malliouhana, Ay-Ay, which still resonate a Ciboney/Taino/Carib presence: "some sounds, some meanings insinuate themselves / into conch shells, clay shards, midden mounds, zemis / Attabeira, Yucahu, Yaya, Yayael" and "Guabances of the hurricanes" (pp. 50-51). The current usage of these names moreover tells us that "some shadowy heroes and gods remain / hovering in the

air" (pp. 50-51), and hence necessitate a resurgence of effort to restore them in the debate for identity reconstruction. I feel a bit disappointed that David on the one hand after this revelatory promise in the above, lapses into despondency and despair about the possibility of USVI reclaiming this rich heritage: "but this island has lost its name / and there's no lost and found to reclaim it / . . . / its past, its sound, its echo, its name" (p. 51). But, on the other hand, if David is seeking to generate an awakening of cultural and historical consciousness, then there is the possibility of some revolutionary response. The rhetorical listing of names, objects, history, mythologies, among others may yet persuade USV Islanders to recognize and appropriate this rich past to re-conceive their collective identities. Thus, David's prescription is that USVI identity must begin with an intimate embrace of Ciboney/Taino/Carib remnants to enable them root those identities more deeply in the rocky soils of USVI.

Just as some works advocate a Ciboney/Taino/Carib resurgence, Gene K. Emanuel's "Awa / Ahwe" (2004: 81-82), Arnold Highfield's "The Guieneaman" (1993: 81-83) and "Epiphany Mas" (pp. 8-9), Jeanne O'Day's "Sahara Dust" (2004: 63) and David Gershator's "Dancepoem for an Island Princess" (1996: 18-19) all celebrate USV Islanders' identities through a link to the African gods and ancestral spirits that reside on these islands and ensure the survival of Africans brought as slaves and their free descendants. In "Awa / Ahwe" Emanuel appropriates selected historical struggles that happened in Africa and likens these to the struggles of African descendants in the USVI. Emanuel is not interested in locating the original nations of these heroes/heroines and gods. He mixes up his sources deliberately to show that in the new world ethnic authenticity does not matter, for the middle passage erased or fused any differential markers. He does not set out to deliberately engage the theory of the rhizome, but the philosophy behind his move endorses the idea of cultural heterogeneity in the contact communities that shaped the USVI. In this mutualism of historical existence what matters now is that the ancient sacrifices of rebirth and continuity have guaranteed African survival. "The wet blood of the white cock / Sperming the dry earth" (p. 82) becomes the answered prayer "To ancestors / in the dust to dust / To life . . . ." (p. 82). Thus, the natural "The waterfalls cascading / . . . / The ageless movement of the / Elemental core. . . . (p. 82) together with, "The sky crimson / With the blood of childbirth / Flowing from pools" (p. 82) testify to the continuous presence of Africa.



Emanuel's position here is buttressed by O'Day's "Saharan Dust" (p. 63). The environmental connection between West Africa and the USVI that is annually remembered in the dust haze from the Sahara desert is memorialized and transfigured into a spiritual connectivity. O'Day perceives this continuous connection between West Africa and the USVI as a pre-Columbian natural contact between the Ciboney,

Taino and Carib and their West African counterparts. The ancient flow of dust from West Africa to the USVI is hence a prophetic and propitiatory link that would usher in finally, albeit involuntarily, the arrival of Africans on the back of the same dust. To O'Day the dust is undoubtedly the work of African ancestors bringing fertile soil and rain annually to the rocky barrenness of these islands, as a way of preparing and ensuring the survival of African descendants when they arrive. Thus, O'Day advocates a transcendent reading of the days of the dust, to see them as days of environmental invigoration. The dust becomes "powdered bones of ancestors, an infusion / of the desert's lifeless breath. A riddling fog / of red powder obscures vistas as fertile" (p. 63) sands "traverse the sea on tradewinds, / seeding the seeded, casting cloud cover / where there are no clouds" (p. 63) in preparation for the resting of the ancestors. In celebrating the Saharan dust as ancestral blessing, O'Day basically endorses an Africa centered identity that not only recognizes the historical, cultural, spiritual, and racial connection with Africa, but also geophysical and environmental connectivity. Thus, it is impossible if not foolhardy to try to erase direct and continuous African presence in the representation and interpretation of USVI politics of identity. Africa is not merely an imagined reality, but it is a perpetually visible, responsible, and visceral reality. Distances and time are obliterated and borders cease to exist in this view of the African-Ciboney/Taino/Carib connection in the USVI.



Arnold R. Highfield's poem, "The Guineaman" (1993: 20-22), centers on a historical recall of the middle passage to highlight the terrifying moments of arrival of enslaved Africans to the shores of these islands. The branding, the chaining, the commoditization of their bodies and personhoods, yet the perpetual presence of their loa made sure that their history is never forgotten, for the land itself is saturated with that history. "These soils drink / their names; rains / and seas of cane" the poet insists "flood all recollection" (p. 20). By implication the legacies of African slaves' historical struggles, spiritual resistance, and cultural institutions and retentions are inseparable from contemporary USV Islanders' political and cultural struggles for identity. African drum language for worship is stressed through ". . . Bamboula-candomble / hammers sacred notes / opening the narrow way to God" (p. 20). Their gods hear them for "If God hears at all, / he hears the thunder in their feet" (p. 20), and the "Orishas nightly fly / as promises partly kept" (p. 20). Consequently, apart from physical poisonings of slave masters and executions of traitors, there are also the spiritual battles between the Christian religion and the African derived spirituality and religions that were brought to the islands. These struggles go beyond the struggle for the souls of the followers into a political activism toward liberation from servitude. "Church walls stand in practiced / . . . / Ancient sea walls such as these / secure the priests and dozing ferns" (p. 21). Here the Christian pastor who endorses slavery with

writs from biblical misrepresentation strolls in pious prayer "–as eyes suppose beyond the gate–, / finding by the grace of God / defence against silk cotton shades" (p. 21).

However, there is no effective spiritual defense "against the eyes, the tongue of Obayifo" the Africa slaves' shaman's incantations of revenge. Sacred drums communicate calls to slaves to rise up in rebellion and wrest their freedom from the European slave masters, similar to what occurred on every island with the supreme examples of the Haitian revolution and the Jamaican Maroon wars (pp. 20-21). In spite of these facts, the concerted efforts for centuries by European models of Church (p. 22) and state to downplay or outright erase the African spiritual presences in the USVI, African spirituality remains incontestably strong there. Thus, to Highfield, the cultural militancy, and the spiritual resiliency of the enslaved Africans and their emancipated descendants of today cannot be further disputed. The poem describes the "foreday" morning in July before `masta dey don' in Frederiksted. While the European overlords are luxuriating in their wealth, the Africans hold a sacred mass awaiting the arrival of Baddoe, the ". . . Guineaman, / the freefall of the anchor, / the protest of the chain, / Whatever brings the Guineaman- / salt, spoken tongues and names" (p. 22), the African who led the slaves in the then Danish West Indies now the USVI to wrest their emancipation from Governor-General Peter Von Scholten on July 3rd, 1848(1848???). It is this cultural militancy and survival that Highfield celebrates in "Epiphany Mas" (1993: 8-9). Though the poem is a prayer to a carnival mas player, Highfield infuses both the performer and the performance with historical and cultural meanings that trace to West Africa, to Goree island in Senegal, Benin in Nigeria, a journey to a cultural and racial relationship from which he is excluded. ". . . I danced in dead Quaco's shoes / but could not command his feet" (p. 8). He partakes in the dance moves dictated by the music, but he cannot enter into the inner ancestral and historical world of the performer which at this moment transcends the rocky geographies of USVI, and escapes capture by Euro-American intellectuals and cultural bibbers and appropriators. The moment of epiphany for Highfield arrives when the mas dancer thrusts a whip into his hand by a church (p. 8). This symbolic act recreates the history of the slave-master (black-white) relationship that has defined race relations in the USVI.



Similar to Highfield in "Epiphany Mas" (1993: 8-9), David Gershator in "Dancepoem for an Island Princess" (1996: 18-19) celebrates in steel pan rendition the West African origins of the physical beauty of USVI black women. In the poem, he does not trace this genetic inheritance to a particular ethnicity in West Africa, but shows off his knowledge of the multiplicity of nations that bedeck the coast of West Africa, and from where majority of the Africans were brought as salves to the USVI. The list can be authenticated at the Whim Museum in St. Croix. Thus in this poem, what Gershator

does is to use poetry and music performance as educational tools to make USV Islanders conscious and proud of their African racial roots. Gershator gives the reader a long list of possible origins: Asinni, Axim, Elmina, Accra, Keta, Kumasi, Ashanti, Fante, Akan, (Ghana) Whydah, Abomey, Dahomey (Republic of Benin), Badgari (Badgari is what appears in the poem Badagri, Ibibio, Ibo (Nigeria), Bambara, Mandinko (Guinea-Senegal), and then Bakongo (Central Africa) (pp. 18-19). The poem is a challenge to USV Islanders to do more research into their African cultural roots: "Go on, tell me where you come from / And how far you've come / Tell me if the drumbeat is far from home" (p. 19). The response to these questions is given by Ira Claxton in "Nagu Shaku". (1996: 18) In this confessional poem, Claxton sings a dirge for USV Islanders' inability to translate the African sounds still played in these islands into real spiritual experiences that reconnect them with Africa. The use of drum names to summon warriors and dancers in Africa is widely known. However in this poem, Claxton is now severely limited in his ability to respond to the call.

> Nagu Shaku!
> I do not hear the drums my forebears heard.
> Only the name.
> And even that is fainter with each cry
> Shadows seem to fall across the sound
> Nagu Shaku!
> Oh pain!
> To know the drums are in that name
> And not to hear!
> Nagu Shaku!
> The spirit tugs its mortal claims to seek release.
> . . .
> Nagu Shaku!
> Once more the name is whispered in the winds.
> The inclination of a drum is shadowed to the sound.
> And I, I am now a slow preponderous
> Heartbeat
> That is the love and memory of the past. (p. 18)



Similarly, Winston Nugent, born in Spanish Town, Jamaica, but raised in St. Croix, looks at the story of Columbus again in "Columbus Revisited" (2004: 96-97). In this poem, Nugent canvasses recognition of marginality as a historical legacy. He advocates a transformation of this position into monumental possibilities. In pursuit of this goal, and notwithstanding all the socioeconomic, historical, political, and cultural marginalization of Antilleans, in which the image of Makak the hero of Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* rises to confront him in "dreaming on monkey mountain / soaked by histories gone from / my cultural body/" (p. 90), he will see himself thus: "I the West Indian antique/the donkeycart/ the documented footnotes

behind memories/ I the son of Nanny–the maroon woman/" stands a " . . . a monument still dreaming . . . (p. 97). Ultimately, neither the trembling caused by "yampy dream" nor the fact that . . . 'fo'day morning dew damped / my cultural backbone/leaving cassava / belly children begging for maubi roots/" with emaciated hands (pp. 96-97) can stop him from continuing his big dream. But is it enough merely to dream? But there can be no action without visions, and visions come from dreams. I therefore want to contend that when the call to activism is made and is heard it will be from the strength of marginality. My use of the term marginality is hence not from a defeatist stance, but from a step-aside theoretical positioning of seeing. Marginality or peripheral positionality or even liminality as places of seeing are not always dis-empowering as dualists would make us believe. For to be at the periphery is to be free to keep one's secrecy while engaging the power of the gaze at those clamoring to be seated at the center. It is this marginality of existence that provides transitionality of perception, thus, a fluidity of self-definitions, or what sometime is known as deterritorialized re-visioning in which one observes the same object from multiple and mobile positions as in a festival grounds. Thus, Jeanne O'Day in "5th Grade Atlas", reveals the power of accepting the position of marginality: "It's as tho we're all in the margins here / The Caribbean span is reminiscent / of the ocean maps at Quisset laying out" without any pretentions, "the sea's underbelly, her hidden layers" (p. 62). He stresses how "We people her edges / We're all in the margins here" (p. 62), and later "All towns are border towns / down here. All of us are marginal, / marginality safe, trimming the tides" (p. 62).



What I have endeavored to show in this preliminary study is how problematic it can be when we seek to understand the politics of identity in the USVI through the poetic output alone. There are a lot of other poets such as Richard Schrader who has more than six collections, Dr. ChenziRa Kahina's *Listening to Ancestral Wisdom: Sacred Conch Shell Inspirations Poetry Collection*, Marvin Williams *Dialogue at the Hearth*, and *Yellow Cedars Blooming* a collection of USVI poets' works which he edited. Not to mention a crop or a new school of younger poets who influenced by slam, dub, rap poetic rhythms and styles are now rising to the challenge and support of Dr. ChenziRa with new poetic vibes that extend the rhetorical flourishes of identity discourse practice in poetry among others. If we therefore gather all the cultural discourses that seek to clarify USVI identities it will become imperative that we engage theories of multiple/plural intersectionality where there are no centers or peripheries, thus no hierarchies. The multiplicities of histories, cultures, languages, phenotypic displays, must all be invoked toward creating working paradigms in the quest through art. As the poets show, in the USVI, identity is constantly a negotiated position within psycho-somatic, historical, socio-economic, gendered, spiritualized, artistic and

cultural arenas. Al a wi is wan somtaim, and poem dem go bi di beta conduits to help us emerge into that clearing of understanding.

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