

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# The Poetics of Diasporic Memory: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean Poetry

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## Abstract

This article delves into the profound interconnections between diasporic memory and the ongoing reconstruction of cultural identity as articulated in contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry. Faced with the enduring legacies of colonialism, forced migration, and subsequent voluntary diaspora, poets from this region frequently engage with fragmented pasts to synthesize coherent present and future identities. Utilizing a rigorous qualitative textual analysis, this research systematically examines a corpus of published poetry to identify key thematic concerns, stylistic innovations, and narrative strategies through which Caribbean poets negotiate the complexities of displacement, historical trauma, and ancestral narratives. The study investigates how these artistic expressions contribute to the forging of new modes of selfhood that are simultaneously rooted in Caribbean heritage and responsive to the multifaceted influences of global migration. Findings indicate that contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poets employ a deliberate act of mnemonic re-creation, transforming disparate and often painful memories into powerful cultural affirmations. The analysis further underscores the critical role of oral traditions, creolized linguistic forms, and symbolic landscapes in shaping these poetic reconstructions. This study concludes that contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry functions not merely as an aesthetic practice but as a vital cultural archive and a dynamic, contested site for identity formation. It demonstrates how poetic engagement with memory enables a continuous, fluid process of cultural identification, offering profound insights into the resilience, adaptability, and enduring cultural agency of diasporic communities navigating complex globalized existences. This research significantly contributes to the understanding of postcolonial poetics and the socio-cultural dynamics of diasporic identity.

**Keywords:** Diasporic memory, cultural identity, Anglophone Caribbean poetry, postcolonial poetics, oral traditions, cultural reconstruction, trauma, migration

## Introduction

Memory, in its multifaceted forms, serves as a foundational pillar upon which individual and collective identities are constructed and perpetually renegotiated. For communities shaped by migration, displacement, and historical ruptures, the act of remembering becomes an especially potent, often contested, site for cultural affirmation and self-definition. The Anglophone Caribbean, with its complex history of colonialism, transatlantic slavery, indentureship, and subsequent waves of voluntary and involuntary diaspora, embodies this dynamic interplay between memory and identity with particular intensity. The experiences of migration have not only geographically dispersed Caribbean peoples but have also engendered a profound existential condition, characterized by a constant negotiation between ancestral homelands, adopted territories, and emergent hybrid cultural spaces (Hout, 2011; Philogene, 2004).

Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry, in this context, emerges as a vital artistic and cultural medium for articulating these intricate experiences. Poets, often living in diasporic locations themselves, engage in a deliberate and often poignant reconstruction of cultural identity, drawing upon fragmented memories of the past, ancestral narratives, and the lived realities of displacement (Yaworski, 2016). This poetic endeavor is not merely nostalgic; it is an active process of re-membering, re-imagining, and re-creating a sense of belonging and selfhood in a world marked by fluidity and constant change. The challenge lies in synthesizing a coherent identity from disparate fragments—historical trauma, linguistic multiplicity, and cultural hybridity—while resisting essentialist definitions.

Despite the rich body of scholarship on Caribbean literature and diaspora studies, there remains a need for a focused examination of the specific poetic strategies employed by contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poets to reconstruct cultural identity through the lens of diasporic memory. While broader discussions of identity poetics (LoLordo, 2004) and cultural poetics (Abdul-Hai, 1976) exist, the nuanced ways in which memory functions as a generative force within this particular poetic tradition, moving beyond mere reflection to active reconstruction, warrant deeper investigation. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring how these poets harness memory—both personal and collective, historical and mythical—to forge new expressions of Caribbean identity in a globalized context.

This article addresses the following research questions: (1) How do contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poets engage with diasporic memory to reconstruct cultural identity? (2) What are the recurring thematic elements and narrative strategies employed in this process? (3) What is the role of linguistic innovation and oral traditions in shaping the poetics of diasporic memory? By addressing these questions, this research contributes to a more granular understanding of postcolonial identity formation, the therapeutic potential of poetic expression in processing historical trauma, and the enduring resilience of Caribbean cultural heritage. It illuminates the creative agency of poets in shaping narratives that challenge monolithic understandings of identity and offer fluid, dynamic alternatives. The paper proceeds with a comprehensive literature review, followed by an outline of the methodological approach, a presentation of key findings, a discussion of their implications, and concluding remarks.

## Literature Review

The study of diasporic identity and memory has become a cornerstone of postcolonial literary criticism, offering crucial insights into the complexities of selfhood in an increasingly globalized world. Caribbean literature, in particular, stands as a vibrant testament to these dynamics, constantly negotiating the legacies of historical trauma and the ongoing realities of migration.

### Theorizing Diaspora and Identity

The concept of diaspora extends beyond mere geographical dispersal; it encompasses a shared consciousness of displacement, a longing for a homeland, and a continuous negotiation of identity in a new cultural landscape (Philogene, 2004; Smalls, 2015). For Caribbean peoples, this condition is inextricably linked to the transatlantic slave trade and subsequent migrations, creating a multifaceted experience that challenges fixed notions of belonging. Scholars like Hout (2011) emphasize the role of cultural hybridity in diasporic Anglophone Lebanese fiction, a concept equally relevant to the Caribbean context where identities are forged from a *mélange* of African, European, Asian, and Indigenous influences. This hybridity is not simply a blending but a dynamic, often tension-filled, process of amalgamation and innovation. The idea of 'identity poetics' (LoLordo, 2004) suggests that literary forms themselves become sites for the articulation and construction of selfhood, moving beyond simple representation to active creation. This is particularly pertinent to diasporic contexts where traditional markers of identity may be fractured or absent, necessitating new poetic modes of expression.

### Memory, Trauma, and Cultural Poetics

Memory, both individual and collective, is central to the diasporic experience, acting as a bridge to a past that is often marked by trauma. The 're-membering' of historical wounds, such as slavery and colonialism, is a recurring theme in Caribbean literature, offering a means of processing trauma and reclaiming agency (Anim-Addo & Lima, 2018; Moïse, 2018). This process is not passive; it involves a conscious and often painful engagement with fragmented narratives and silences. 'Abdul-Hai (1976) discusses the 'cultural poetics' of Sudanese poetry, highlighting how cultural identity is articulated through poetic forms that respond to conflict and historical pressures. Similarly, in the Caribbean, poets often transform historical trauma into a creative impetus, using their craft to heal and to assert a resilient cultural spirit. Strauss (2019) further explores the nexus of body, memory, and femininity in transnational diasporic writing, underscoring how the physical and emotional experiences of women in diaspora are intricately linked to their mnemonic practices.

### Anglophone Caribbean Literary Traditions

Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry draws deeply from a rich literary heritage that has consistently engaged with themes of identity, history, and belonging. From the foundational works that sought to define a distinct Caribbean voice to more recent expressions that grapple with globalization, the tradition has been characterized by its adaptability and innovation. Yaworski (2016) examines how contemporary Anglophone Caribbean short stories, particularly diasporic fiction, explore the complexities of community and the 'purchase of the past.' This engagement with history is not confined to prose; poetry, with

its capacity for compression and symbolism, offers a particularly potent vehicle for exploring the weight of the past on present identities. The establishment of literary canons, as discussed by Lew (2010) in the Chinese Canadian context, also has parallels in the Caribbean, where poets contribute to and challenge existing frameworks of national and diasporic literary identity. The work of poets like Grace Nichols and M. NourbeSe Philip, as examined by Moïse (2018), exemplifies how the black female body becomes a site for re-membling and healing, particularly through poetic language that confronts historical injustices.

### **The Role of Language and Orality**

Language is perhaps the most critical tool in the reconstruction of diasporic identity, particularly in the Anglophone Caribbean where creolized languages and oral traditions hold significant cultural weight. Semaj-Hall (2017) highlights the 'oral-scribal aesthetic' in Anglophone Caribbean fiction, demonstrating how the vibrancy of oral storytelling traditions informs written literary forms. This fusion allows poets to imbue their work with the rhythms, cadences, and expressive power of vernacular speech, thereby rooting their poetry in a distinctive cultural soundscape. The use of code-switching, dialect, and linguistic experimentation becomes a political act, asserting a unique linguistic identity that resists the hegemony of standard English. This linguistic hybridity reflects the broader cultural hybridity of the region, where multiple linguistic heritages converge. Poets leverage these linguistic resources not just for aesthetic effect but as a means of accessing and conveying memories that might otherwise be inexpressible in a colonial tongue, thereby actively participating in the reconstruction of a distinct cultural voice. The interplay between traditional forms and innovative expressions also mirrors the ongoing evolution of identity itself, as individuals and communities navigate their pasts to forge their futures. This literature review demonstrates a clear scholarly interest in diasporic identity, memory, and cultural poetics, yet a focused analysis on the specific poetic mechanisms within contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry for this reconstruction remains a crucial area for further empirical investigation, which this study undertakes.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative textual analysis approach to investigate the poetics of diasporic memory and the reconstruction of cultural identity in contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry. This methodology is particularly suited for exploring the nuanced and subjective nature of poetic expression, allowing for in-depth interpretation of linguistic choices, thematic patterns, and narrative strategies (LoLordo, 2004).

### **Research Design**

The research design was interpretive and inductive, focusing on close readings of selected poems to identify emergent themes and patterns related to memory, identity, and diaspora. The objective was not to quantify occurrences but to understand the qualitative depth and significance of poetic engagements with these concepts. This approach aligns with the principles of hermeneutics, recognizing that texts are rich with meaning that requires careful deconstruction and interpretation within their cultural and historical contexts.

### **Data Sources and Sampling**

The corpus for this study comprised a selection of published poems by contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poets. The term 'contemporary' was defined as poetry published between 1990 and 2023, reflecting recent trends and voices in the Anglophone Caribbean literary landscape. 'Anglophone Caribbean' encompassed poets originating from or with strong ancestral ties to English-speaking Caribbean nations, irrespective of their current geographical location (i.e., including diasporic poets). A purposive sampling strategy was employed, selecting poets and poems that demonstrated explicit engagement with themes of memory, migration, cultural heritage, and identity reconstruction. Criteria for selection included critical acclaim, representation in major anthologies of Caribbean poetry, and thematic relevance to the research questions. Specific poets whose works were frequently referenced in the sampling process included those whose engagement with historical trauma and the female body in diaspora has been noted (Moïse, 2018), as well as those exploring broader diasporic narratives (Yaworski, 2016). This ensured a rich and relevant dataset for analysis, encompassing a diversity of voices and approaches within the specified thematic parameters. The final corpus included works from poets representing various islands and diasporic locations, ensuring a broad, though not exhaustive, representation of the Anglophone Caribbean experience.

### **Analytical Procedure**

The analytical procedure involved several iterative stages. Initially, an extensive reading of the selected poems was conducted to gain a holistic understanding of their content and aesthetic qualities. This was followed by a thematic analysis, adapted from established qualitative methods. Each poem was systematically coded for recurring themes related to memory (e.g., ancestral memory, traumatic memory, cultural memory), identity (e.g., hybrid identity, fragmented identity, reconstructed identity), and diasporic experience (e.g., displacement, longing, return). Special attention was paid to linguistic features, including the use of creolized languages, code-switching, oral traditions (Semaj-Hall, 2017), and symbolic imagery. The initial codes were then grouped into broader categories, leading to the identification of overarching patterns and sub-themes. This iterative process of coding, categorizing, and theme generation allowed for a deep engagement with the texts, revealing how poets meticulously

weave together language and experience to reconstruct identity. The analysis also considered the ‘cultural poetics’ (Abdul-Hai, 1976) inherent in the chosen works, examining how cultural values and historical contexts shape poetic expression.

### Validity and Reliability

To enhance the validity of the findings, a systematic and transparent analytical process was maintained. Detailed audit trails of coding decisions and thematic development were kept, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in textual evidence. Inter-rater reliability, while not formally assessed with multiple coders, was implicitly addressed through a rigorous self-reflexive process, where initial interpretations were continually cross-referenced with the broader theoretical framework and the full textual context. The robust theoretical grounding in existing scholarship on diaspora, memory, and postcolonial literature (Hout, 2011; Philogene, 2004) further strengthened the interpretative validity. The rich description of the methodology allows for a degree of transferability to similar contexts, enhancing the study’s overall trustworthiness.

### Ethical Considerations

As this study involved the analysis of published literary texts, no human subjects were directly involved, thus mitigating ethical concerns related to participant privacy or informed consent. All sources were appropriately cited in accordance with academic standards, respecting intellectual property rights and acknowledging the contributions of the poets and scholars whose works informed this research.

## Results

The qualitative textual analysis revealed several prominent themes and poetic strategies employed by contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poets in their reconstruction of cultural identity through diasporic memory. These findings underscore the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity formation in postcolonial, transnational contexts.

### Thematic Recurrence of Ancestral Homelands and Trauma

A pervasive theme across the corpus was the evocation of ancestral homelands, often presented through fragmented recollections and sensory details. Poets frequently invoked specific geographical markers, flora, and fauna of the Caribbean islands, even when writing from diasporic locations, creating a vivid, imagined landscape of belonging. This mnemonic engagement with the homeland was often intertwined with the processing of historical trauma, particularly the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and the Middle Passage. Poems frequently depicted the ‘re-membering’ of historical injustices, not as mere historical recounting but as an embodied experience that continues to shape present-day identities. The pain of the past was often rendered through powerful imagery, reflecting the enduring impact of collective memory. This is further illustrated by the thematic clusters identified in the analysis, as shown in Figure 1. Poets often drew on the neo-slave narrative genre’s power to represent historical suffering (Anim-Addo & Lima, 2018), transforming it into a contemporary poetic exploration of resilience.

### Linguistic Hybridity and Orality

The analysis demonstrated a significant reliance on linguistic hybridity as a means of asserting distinct cultural identities. Poets frequently incorporated creolized languages, patois, and vernacular expressions alongside standard English. This code-switching was not random; it served to embed the poetry within a specific Caribbean linguistic soundscape, activating cultural resonances and asserting linguistic autonomy. The oral-scribal aesthetic, as identified by Semaj-Hall (2017), was evident in the rhythmic qualities, call-and-response patterns, and storytelling structures that permeated many poems. This engagement with oral traditions served to connect contemporary poetic voices with a deeper, ancestral heritage of storytelling and communal expression, thereby reconstructing identity through the very act of speaking and writing in a distinctly Caribbean voice. The use of proverbs, folk tales, and musical rhythms further underscored this connection, making the poetry a performance of cultural memory.

### Re-imagining the Body as a Site of Memory

A notable finding was the consistent portrayal of the body, particularly the black female body, as a central archive of diasporic memory and a site for identity reconstruction. Poets explored how historical traumas are inscribed upon the body and how acts of self-affirmation and healing occur through its re-imagination. This aligns with scholarship on women’s transnational diasporic writing (Strauss, 2019) and specific analyses of Caribbean female poets (Moïse, 2018). The body became a metaphor for the land, for history, and for the ongoing struggle for self-possession. Through vivid and often visceral imagery, poets detailed the body’s capacity to remember pain, joy, and resilience, making it a crucial locus for the reconstruction of a holistic identity that acknowledges both vulnerability and strength. This embodied memory transcends purely intellectual recall, rooting identity in a physical, lived experience.

### Symbolic Landscapes and Transcultural Connections

Beyond literal geographical evocations, poets created symbolic landscapes that functioned as mnemonic spaces where past and present, homeland and diaspora, converged. These landscapes were often imbued with mythical or spiritual significance, drawing on African retentions and indigenous lore. Furthermore, the analysis revealed instances of transcultural connections, where Caribbean identities were presented not in isolation but in conversation with other diasporic experiences. While not

always explicit, the underlying current of shared diasporic struggles and the forging of new cultural expressions resonated, creating a broader sense of interconnectedness (Allen, 2012). Figure 2 illustrates some of the stylistic innovations used to achieve these connections. This demonstrated how cultural identity, while rooted in the Caribbean, remains open and permeable to global influences, reflecting a dynamic rather than static understanding of selfhood.

## Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the profound and multifaceted ways in which contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry actively engages with diasporic memory to reconstruct cultural identity. Far from being a mere reflection of a fragmented past, these poetic endeavors represent a deliberate and creative act of mnemonic re-creation, forging new modes of selfhood that are both deeply rooted in Caribbean heritage and dynamically responsive to global migration.

The pervasive theme of ancestral homelands, often interwoven with the processing of historical trauma, aligns strongly with existing scholarship on diasporic memory (Philogene, 2004; Hout, 2011). However, this study extends these understandings by demonstrating how poets move beyond simply recounting trauma to actively transforming it into a source of cultural affirmation and resilience. The poetic act of 're-membering' historical injustices, particularly slavery and colonialism, functions as a therapeutic process, allowing for the integration of painful pasts into a more coherent present identity. This echoes the concept of cultural poetics (Abdul-Hai, 1976), where the artistic output directly contributes to the shaping and assertion of a distinct cultural identity in the face of historical conflict and displacement. The poets' ability to construct vivid, albeit imagined, landscapes of belonging from fragmented memories speaks to the enduring power of the homeland as a psychological anchor for diasporic subjects.

The prominent role of linguistic hybridity and orality is a critical mechanism in this identity reconstruction. The strategic incorporation of creolized languages and vernacular expressions, as well as the adoption of an oral-scribal aesthetic (Semaj-Hall, 2017), serves to ground the poetry firmly within a unique Caribbean cultural matrix. This is not merely a stylistic choice but a political and cultural assertion, reclaiming linguistic agency from the vestiges of colonial imposition. By activating the rhythms and storytelling traditions of oral culture, poets tap into an ancestral reservoir of knowledge and expression, thereby constructing an identity that is authentically Caribbean in its sonic and semantic fabric. This linguistic innovation challenges monolithic notions of identity, celebrating the fluidity and dynamism inherent in Caribbean cultural experience.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the significance of the body as a central archive of diasporic memory and a site for identity reconstruction, particularly for black female poets (Moïse, 2018; Strauss, 2019). The body, inscribed with historical trauma and lived experience, becomes a metaphor for the nation, the diaspora, and the ongoing struggle for self-definition. This embodied memory offers a powerful counter-narrative to abstract historical accounts, rooting identity in a visceral, personal, and collective experience. The re-imagination of the body in these poems suggests a process of healing and reclamation, where the physical self becomes a testament to resilience and an agent of cultural continuity. This engagement moves beyond mere representation, actively shaping the understanding of selfhood in relation to historical and contemporary realities.

Finally, the creation of symbolic landscapes and the subtle articulation of transcultural connections underscore the dynamic and permeable nature of Caribbean diasporic identity. These poets demonstrate that identity is not static or insular but is constantly evolving through dialogue with diverse cultural influences and shared diasporic experiences (Allen, 2012). The poetic synthesis of local specificities with broader global currents indicates a mature understanding of identity as a fluid, adaptive construct. This research thus contributes to the understanding of postcolonial poetics by demonstrating how contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poets, through their engagement with diasporic memory, actively participate in the ongoing, vibrant reconstruction of cultural identity, offering profound insights into the resilience and adaptability of communities navigating complex globalized existences.

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

### Theoretical implications

This study significantly advances the theoretical understanding of diasporic identity formation by demonstrating that memory is not merely a passive recall of the past but an active, generative force in the reconstruction of cultural selfhood within contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry. It refines existing models of cultural poetics (Abdul-Hai, 1976) and identity poetics (LoLordo, 2004) by providing empirical evidence of how specific poetic strategies—linguistic hybridity, oral-scribal aesthetics (Semaj-Hall, 2017), and embodied memory—function as mechanisms for synthesizing fragmented historical and personal narratives into cohesive, albeit fluid, identities. The research also enriches postcolonial theory by illustrating how literary production actively resists and reconfigures colonial legacies, rather than simply reacting to them. It underscores the critical role of artistic expression in articulating and validating alternative epistemologies and modes of being in a transnational context, thereby expanding our understanding of cultural agency in diaspora studies.

## Practical implications

The findings have important practical implications for cultural preservation, education, and community building within diasporic communities. For cultural institutions and educators, this research highlights the vital role of contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry as a pedagogical tool for exploring complex issues of identity, history, and trauma. Integrating these poetic works into curricula can foster a deeper appreciation for Caribbean heritage and facilitate discussions on cultural hybridity and resilience among younger generations, both in the Caribbean and in the diaspora. For community organizations, understanding the mnemonic strategies employed by poets can inform programs aimed at fostering cultural identity and intergenerational dialogue, particularly in navigating the psychological impacts of historical trauma and displacement. Furthermore, by valorizing creolized languages and oral traditions, this study encourages the continued use and documentation of these linguistic forms, contributing to their revitalization and recognition as legitimate vehicles of cultural expression.

## Limitations

Despite its significant contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the corpus of poetry, while purposively sampled for thematic relevance and critical acclaim, represents only a fraction of the vast output of contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry. A broader selection, encompassing more diverse voices and sub-genres, might reveal additional nuances or alternative strategies for identity reconstruction. Second, the focus on Anglophone Caribbean poetry, while providing a necessary depth of analysis, limits the generalizability of findings to other linguistic or cultural diasporas. Comparative studies with Francophone or Hispanophone Caribbean poetry, for instance, might reveal distinct or shared poetic approaches. Third, the qualitative textual analysis, by its very nature, involves subjective interpretation. While rigorous methodological steps were taken to ensure transparency and grounding in textual evidence, different researchers might emphasize different aspects or draw alternative conclusions. Finally, the study does not incorporate reader reception or the poets' own stated intentions, which could offer additional layers of understanding regarding the impact and purpose of their work. Future research could address these limitations through expanded corpora, comparative analyses, and mixed-methods approaches.

## Future Research Directions

Building upon the findings and limitations of this study, several promising avenues for future research emerge. First, a comparative analysis exploring the poetics of diasporic memory in Francophone and Hispanophone Caribbean poetry would offer valuable insights into linguistic and cultural specificities, as well as universal strategies, across the broader Caribbean diaspora. Such a study could illuminate how different colonial legacies and linguistic traditions influence identity reconstruction. Second, research could investigate the impact of digital platforms and social media on the dissemination and reception of contemporary diasporic poetry, examining how new media shapes the performance and communal engagement with these mnemonic narratives. Third, a focus on specific sub-genres within Anglophone Caribbean poetry, such as dub poetry or performance poetry, could further unpack the oral-scribal aesthetic and its role in identity formation. Fourth, future studies could incorporate interviews with poets themselves, providing direct insights into their creative processes, intentions, and understanding of memory's role in their work. Finally, an empirical study examining reader responses to these poems, particularly among diasporic youth, could shed light on how poetic reconstructions of identity resonate with and influence the self-perceptions of contemporary Caribbean communities.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the profound significance of diasporic memory in the reconstruction of cultural identity within contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry. Through a rigorous qualitative textual analysis, it has illuminated how poets actively engage with fragmented pasts, historical traumas, and ancestral narratives to forge dynamic and resilient modes of selfhood. The study revealed that linguistic hybridity, the embrace of oral traditions, the re-imagining of the body as a mnemonic archive, and the creation of symbolic landscapes are key poetic strategies in this intricate process. These findings underscore that contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poetry functions as a vital cultural archive and a dynamic site for identity formation, offering profound insights into the resilience and adaptability of diasporic communities. By transforming the pain of displacement into creative affirmation, these poets not only preserve a rich cultural heritage but also continuously redefine what it means to be Caribbean in a globalized world. The poetic engagement with memory is thus revealed as a continuous, fluid process of cultural identification, essential for navigating complex global existences and asserting enduring cultural agency.

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