# Caribbean Technopoetics: Episode 02

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Ana María Caballero

*CARIBBEAN TECHNO POETICS*

*EPISODE 02*

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*The following year, the Department decided to support the second*

*phase of the project, which focused on post-production of the interviews, subtitling, and the development of a web archive hosted on GitHub. The archive provides access to the complete bilingual episodes (English-Spanish), the posters designed to establish the visual identity of the video capsules, PDF editions in both English and Spanish, and links to access the podcast on YouTube and Spotify.*

*The publication and archive are part of an ongoing research project on Caribbean techno-poetics and seek to contribute to the documentation, circulation, and preservation of these*

*CARIBBEAN TECHNOPOETICS*

*Translation by Nicolás Gerardi Rousset*

# CARIBBEAN TECHNOPOETICS

## EPISODE 02

ANA MARIA CABALLERO
NICOLÁS GERARDI ROUSSET

# Caribbean Techno Poetics Episode 02_Ana María Caballero

*Conventions: titles of works and publications, personal names, and historical movements or events are set in italics; dates are set in bold. Speaker turns are marked* **NGR** *(Nicolas Gerardi Rousset) and* **AMC** *(Ana María Caballero). The text has been edited from the episode transcript: fillers, repetitions and false starts were removed, and names and facts corrected, while preserving the meaning and the voice of each speaker.*

**NGR:** *Welcome to Caribbean Techno Poetics, a podcast devoted to exploring the intersection of art, poetry and technology. Today we have a very special guest: Ana María Caballero, named by Forbes among the fifty most influential women in Latin America; an excellent writer and poet who also thinks about how the medium, the support of the word, shapes its meaning – her whole formal practice turns on that reflection – while her thematic concerns touch on motherhood and ecology, always in a pretty contemporary register. Thank you so much for being with us. Ana María, how are you?*

**AMC:** Very well, thank you for

having me.

**NGR:** *I'll start with the questions. Ana María Caballero, how did you get into writing? When does your vocation as a writer begin, and when does your interest in technology, in electronics, in dance, in thinking about literature outside its usual support, the book?*

**AMC:** I started writing very young: by eleven, twelve, I was already writing, filling notebooks with my verses and with short stories. I studied literature at Harvard and took creative writing courses back in high school, so it's been, in a way,

a process going back to when I was very small — I knew my passion was the written word. It was later that I began exploring the relationship between poetry and technology, and that has a lot to do with the fact that I started publishing my verses, started publishing books, and started to understand a little how the publishing world worked, and the opportunities it offered writers. I felt I wanted more options, more opportunities to share my work with a wider audience than the traditional ways of publishing could offer. Obviously this coincided with the explosion of social media, with how

one could share one's work, and also with the era of blogs: I created a blog and started sharing my digitized verses there.

**NGR:** *Could you share the name of your blog?*

**AMC:** It was called The Drugstore Notebook, a kind of homage to the notebooks I used to buy at the drugstore, which I'd go through so quickly I'd constantly have to go back and buy another one. The logo was one of those black-and-white, blue-lined composition notebooks they sell at drugstores. And it was

through that exploration of how to carry my work beyond the page that I fell in love with the technological world. I thought: there's something very special here, something that can also hold the voice — not just the word, but the voice, visual movement — and that led me down a whole line of exploration.

**NGR:** *If we had to place it on a timeline, we have your first major prize in* **2014** *– if I did my homework right. Already in* **2014**, *were you thinking, flirting with the idea that the writer, in a way, has a system of production shaped by the technologies of the book? I'm curious*

*whether you were already prefiguring the work to come, or whether it was more organic, something that emerged as you kept publishing and understanding the publishing logic, until you decided to open up your own path.*

**AMC:** Look, I had my first child in 2012 — he's about to turn thirteen soon. When he was born I stopped working; I worked for the Colombian government, on all kinds of communications-related things: journalism, documents, copywriting for companies. It was only when my son was born that I stopped that job, and it was in that same

moment, in 2012, that I created my blog and really began venturing into everything digital. When my first book came out it was a huge, very exciting surprise, but I had already been on that path through social media, sharing what I was reading, my thoughts about it. It was at that point, once I'd left the office job that kept me too busy, that I finally had the time to think about how to take my passion for literature further. That's when I created the blog, and also started sharing on Instagram, with an account where I posted photos of what I was reading.

**NGR:** *Something I'm very interested in – and I haven't asked this in any other interview – is that I feel your intention with poetry, with literature in general, is to restore the writer's practice to that of an artist: an artist within art circuits, art markets, art spaces, rather than literary spaces. It's a bit of a theoretical question, but the people who follow this account are also interested in getting inside the heads of authors a little. From your point of view, when do you think poetry drifted away from contemporary art, from the visual arts, and what's this effort you're making to reconnect that lost bridge?*

**AMC:** I think that in the era of the

Surrealists, for instance, there was a very close connection between poets and visual artists, and also a very close collaboration. But there's a logistical problem in how poetry can be exchanged: you can buy a painting, hang it, and that has a decorative value, a value in terms of occupying space, and that helps galleries take an interest in selling that kind of work. Even though poetry was very close to visual artists at one point, poems remained objects that weren't really considered worthy of being hung on a wall. There were people who did it, sure, but it's not the same as a Dalí painting. For me,

what I try to do is make the poem itself, in its natural, wild, on-the-page state, worthy of being hung on the wall: to give it the same importance as a more pictorial, colorful, representational, symbolic work, whatever you want to call it, but for the poem to carry that same value. And that, I think, is something fairly new for a lot of people: thinking of the poem itself as a work of art.

**NGR:** *I'm also interested in how that idea of the poem as a work of art lines up with the idea of generating resources from writing, as a way of pushing back against the strict austerity regime that*

*writers are, I wouldn't say condemned to, but certainly predisposed to – used to, rather. We were talking about how your first child gave you the time to not depend on a job, the time to write. What tactics have you developed to integrate this idea of treating the poem as a piece of art, and trying to bring the economy of literature closer to the economy of art than to the economy of writers – so heavily mediated by publishing houses, by legal processes, which in the contemporary world doesn't really manage to make writing pay for itself? What tactics have you developed to remedy that structural austerity?*

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**AMC:** I think it's a change that's mostly psychological, a leap poets themselves have to make. And I also feel that, by presenting my work so consistently in unexpected spaces, it starts to sink in, starts to echo — the idea that this poem is worth it, worth approaching, worth exhibiting, valuing, framing, hanging. I've also experimented with formats not usually associated with poetry: sculpture, poetry rendered as sculpture, dance, choreography, the performative, things related to computational algorithms, to artificial intelligence. I've experimented with so many ways of bringing my verses into con-

temporary art spaces that previously weren't welcoming to poetry. For me it's been a path of persistence and experimentation.

**NGR:** *I've heard in several of your interviews that, besides experimentation and the algorithm, there's an almost magical, numerological thinking around certain numbers. I've found this in other authors I've interviewed too: this idea that on one hand there's technology; on another, this sacred act of writing, which goes back to the Egyptians; and, on a third level, that this sacred act has a becoming, a magical dimension, an energy that somehow gets set in motion*

*there. And numerology – the algorithms, at bottom – connects precisely through mathematics. I'd love to know what your relationship is with numerology, with magic, with this thinking about number as one more tool for arriving at things.*

**AMC:** I love that question. For me, the energetic, subtle energies, subtle bodies, matter a great deal. When you're writing, it's a very profound act of faith, because you don't know who's going to read it, who's going to publish it: it's a leap into the void. Sometimes you're experimenting — my writing is very experimental — and that's a risk, because

obviously publishers want to publish things that are easy to sell; that's the reality, big publishing houses are looking to sell books, and the moment they hear the word "experimental" they run for the hills. I consider that my work breaks with a lot of conventions, with what's considered a poem: sometimes I use articles, punctuation, sometimes I don't, and I allow myself that space of experimentation knowing it's a risk. There's a kind of act of magic, then, in what you're writing: an invocation for those words to find a happy ending, which is to be read, and to connect with another reader.

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For me that's very esoteric. When I write, I always try to penetrate the text with my energy, and to think that it's going to reach wherever it needs to reach.

**NGR:** *I'm also curious about your working process. I've seen you've been nominated for the Lumen Prize several times, with different projects. Which projects have been nominated, and how does this esoteric side connect with artificial intelligence, with the algorithm, to produce this work?*

**AMC:** With the Lumen Prize — one of the most important prizes for art

and technology — I've submitted several projects that I think deserve consideration. There's a series called Being Borges, built around The Book of Imaginary Beings, written by Jorge Luis Borges together with Margarita Guerrero. This series takes twelve creatures from that book and turns them into visual objects through artificial intelligence: I'm playing there with the original Spanish text by Borges and Guerrero, and also with the translation Borges himself supervised, by Norman Thomas di Giovanni. Then I write an original poem about each creature — not a translation,

not a reinterpretation of the original text, but really a poem built out of that text, though very close to my own personal interests. I use those poems to generate visual images that represent, for me, an evolution in language brought on by this era of generative artificial intelligence: the word becoming literal by way of the visual. Before, you'd read a text and could imagine a thousand, a million, infinite things in your head — every reader has a different reading of every text — but through artificial intelligence you can take a text and turn it into an image, and that image starts to generate

anchors to the reality of whoever is looking at it. For me it's something that's a little startling: how the word, being a system of meaning we sometimes consider stable, concrete, fixed, becomes something far more open than we usually allow it to be; whereas the image, by contrast, can sometimes be more limiting. You see the image of Borges's text and feel almost enclosed by it, as if the image were too small for Borges and Guerrero's text. That, for me, is something we can now, with artificial intelligence, investigate in a much more deliberate way; it wasn't possible before that technology existed.

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This collection, then, is an exploration with a lot of nuance around the impossibility of translation, around our relationship with the word versus the image. It also tries to connect new readers with classic literature, to bring them closer to Borges and Guerrero's work, and, finally, to reclaim poetry as a work of art, because what I offer the collector is the print of my poem.

**NGR:** *Not the printed image?*

**AMC:** No: the poem.

**NGR:** *That's exactly where I wanted*

*to go, because I'm very interested in the way you work with poems and books, where the poem has different becomings depending on the medium – it can manifest in different forms, adapting to the singularity of each support – but there's also a material, physical component, which is the book as artist's book, controlling the number of copies: the exact opposite of publishing logic, which, instead of printing eighty thousand copies to compete with another eighty thousand in a bookstore, chooses to make fewer books, carefully counted, that demand a lot more attention when you come across them. I find, for instance, that when I go to a bookstore, the sheer number of*

*covers is so overwhelming that in the end I don't know what to read, and you end up going back to what you already know. I'm interested in exploring how these algorithmic, esoteric, magical processes also have a becoming tied to the book as an artist's book: the book remains a faithful support for literature, it's just that the logic behind its production is different. That's one of the things I love most about your work. Could you expand on that a bit? How do you arrive at those conclusions?*

**AMC:** Something I care about is valuing poetry. For example, I've created a series that I'm going to

close at eight copies, and after that I'll probably create a different one.

**NGR:** *Can you explain to our audience why specifically the number eight?*

**AMC:** Of course: eight is a number that represents abundance. I want abundance for poetry; I want it to be valued, to generate a whole world of benefits both for its readers and for its writers, and some of those benefits can be spiritual, emotional, about awareness, but hopefully also the poet being able to live sustainably off their work: there's an economic abundance to pursue

there too. I love the number eight because it's the number of infinity — obviously, turned on its side, it's the infinity symbol — and in many cultures it represents abundance. This series, which I call sculpture books, has only eight copies: I want them to have the abundance poetry deserves. What I'm doing there is inverting the relationship between scarcity and the value of the book. As you said, publishing logic is about printing as much as possible and selling as much as possible, but the reality is that you buy a book and it becomes, almost the moment you do, an object with little value

in itself — obviously a Hemingway book will always carry the value of a Hemingway book, but the object as such, a used book, doesn't represent much value, unless it's a unique or first edition. So what I do is print one poem one hundred and ninety-seven times inside a single book. Why one hundred and ninety-seven? Because one plus nine plus seven is eight — the number of abundance again. What it's about, then, is making the book's value increase: I present it as a unique object, exhibited in a gallery, like a work of art, priced like a work of art, and there's only one. It's a single book that I

print with an artist's-book publisher that does special projects, with just one edition — plus one copy that I keep for exhibitions and demonstrations, but there's only one commercial copy. This book also comes with a video in which I read the poem while a page turns endlessly. Why? Because voice is something the digital has that the book doesn't. This series traces, then, the evolution of how we've shared our memories, our precious moments, from the page to the digital archive — which is also an archive — and it also includes an inscription on the Bitcoin chain, with just the text of

the poem.

**NGR:** *You've set up the next question perfectly: how do you carry this logic of turning the poem into a work that enters the art market, under the logic of the art market, over into the world of cryptocurrencies? And, while we're at it, what solutions do you see, given the collapse of NFTs and everything that's happening there? Because on one hand, cryptocurrencies offer ways of exchanging resources more horizontally, but at the same time, behind every new development in that world there's a lot of opacity in how things actually work. I'd love to know how you carry your writing, this practice*

*of turning the poem into a unique piece, into cryptocurrencies, and what alternatives you're exploring given everything that's changing in the crypto space.*

**AMC:** I think there are some mistaken ideas here. The first is that cryptocurrencies aren't necessarily tools for speculation: they're objects of value, like any currency — the dollar, the Venezuelan peso, the Colombian peso, the euro — that a lot of people have decided to assign value to, and so they have it. Today, currencies are worth almost exactly what the market wants to give them, and right now, today, September

3rd, **2025**, cryptocurrencies are at a high point; they've also had low points, but for me that's irrelevant. What matters about cryptocurrencies is that they come with the technology that creates digital goods: you can certify ownership of an NFT — a token tied to a transaction within the blockchain — and that lets you trade a piece of work in the future, creating a market for digital goods. Digital works obviously existed before the blockchain, but the way you'd hand one over was a USB drive, a WeTransfer to a collector; today you can still do that, sure, but you can also give the collector

a certificate that they — he, she, or they — own that digital piece. That certificate is anchored to a blockchain — whether Bitcoin, Ethereum, or others — and stored in the collector's digital wallet: a way of safeguarding ownership of a digital file, and what that's produced is a very dynamic market for digital goods. It's a new market, and when new markets arrive there are moments of fervor and moments of crashes, moments of chaos, of disorganization; that's happened throughout history, over and over — from the American gold rushes, where people went out of their minds looking for gold and

often found none, to the Dutch tulip mania, to rubber in Latin America. The same thing happened with NFTs: a bubble formed, that bubble deflated, but the technology remains intact, and the works of art that have real value, that are grounded in that technology, have held onto their value. I, for instance, started out selling my digital poems for around a hundred dollars, and today I sell them for ten thousand. Why? Because there's now a consolidated market around my work: because I've kept developing it, because I've been showing at certain institutions, because I've been

winning certain prizes, just like any other artist in any other medium. So you can't say that NFTs in general have crashed or lost value: some of them were pure speculative collections, with no real criteria backing their value at any given moment, but works of art have followed the trajectory of a mature market, like any art market. There are sculptures of mine, for instance, inscribed on Bitcoin, that sell for a set price, and it's very important to clarify this for anyone just starting to explore the world of digital goods: we're not talking about a hundred-percent speculative market, but a pretty logical

one. We're obviously a digital culture: how could digital goods not have a price? They already do, thanks to blockchain technology, which lets you exchange them fluidly, without intermediaries, and without needing a physical object — a USB drive, an email — but instead transferring ownership, the certificate anchored to the blockchain.

**NGR:** *And I think there's something interesting about NFTs and blockchain in general, which is that they limit the number of copies and points of access: the poem you turn into a token doesn't have a thousand identical tokens*

*floating around. In a way, it follows that same logic of keeping the poem's constitution closed in on itself, as a work of art that can hold up both in physical and in digital space.*

*To start wrapping up, I'm very interested in what we were saying about the Lumen Prize, about submissions: I read on one of your podcasts that they're going to publish, or already published, your first novel, after ninety submissions; I remember the image you posted, with those ninety applications. I'm curious how you deal with rejection, with silence, and what strategies you'd recommend for cultivating that persistence.*

**AMC:** It's that same faith I was talking about: when I write, there's that moment of faith where you believe your work deserves to be published, to be read, to touch other people. For me it's very important to believe in my own work before expecting anyone else to: the first person who has to start is you. When I finish a manuscript, there's a hard stretch of work where I send it to every opportunity that comes my way, and a lot of the time nobody answers — sometimes I even have to write and withdraw a submission, telling them the novel already found its home. But you never know. My

latest novel ended up winning a very important prize with a University of Texas press, something I'd always dreamed of, because publishing with a university press carries a lot of prestige: it's an important mark on a writer's path. If you give up, the book obviously never gets anywhere; and if you get tired, you have to stop and do something else. It helps, sometimes, to have more than one book in progress, more than one project, because some projects get stuck, the energy dissipates, and things stall — so you set it aside for a while and pick up something else. That way, I think, when you go

back to submitting that manuscript that had gotten stuck, you feel fresh about it again; if you send it out without energy, without enthusiasm, it doesn't find a happy ending.

**NGR:** *So even for submissions, for sending out texts, you need to gather that...*

**AMC:** Yes, totally: it's an extra bit of mental space, telling yourself, "I'm going to find even more energy to keep persisting."

**NGR:** *The last question has to do a bit with geography. Being from Colombia, having also lived for a while in Mia-*

*mi, do you feel that Latin American, Caribbean geography shaped the way you understand literature and technology? Do you feel your heritage, your roots, have something to do with this singular perception – with this theory you've already put into practice through your own work? Do you feel it has something to do with being Colombian, having grown up in touch with Miami and with the tropical climate, or do you really not think it influenced you in any way?*

**AMC:** No, hugely: I believe a lot in origin. In fact, I like reading books where place matters, and my novel, for instance, is largely built around

Madrid, where I've lived for just a few years now. I feel that place is indispensable to creation, and being Colombian, having lived in the United States, knowing both cultures well — the American and the Colombian, the Latin — and also having lived in Miami, where you start to get to know other Latin cultures too: Venezuelans, Mexicans, Argentinians, Chileans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans. I didn't just live in Miami: I also lived in north Florida, in New York, in Boston, so I know American culture well, and I obviously know Colombian and Latin culture well too. There are

nuances that are hard to pin down, that you sense more than name, and that give a lot of flavor to each culture and to each piece of literary creation. Gabriel García Márquez, for instance, was able to describe the Colombian Caribbean, and the Caribbean of many Latin countries, but there's something in there that's very Colombian, and that common ground only comes from having a place of your own. I always say that from the personal you reach the universal, that from the mundane you can arrive at the transcendental. If you're writing a novel that has no place at all, no connection to its

surroundings, that shows: people feel lost, and place matters a great deal. So yes, I do believe that being Latina, having passed through the United States, and now being in Spain, deeply influences the literary and artistic work I'm producing.

**NGR:** *To close, I can't let you go without asking for three key authors to recommend to our audience: if someone wants to start exploring, understanding, venturing into this point of intersection where writing, the visual arts and technology cross, what should they read? If you had to recommend three books for a classroom, three books we had to read*

*this semester...*

**AMC:** Look, for me it's very important that creative literature stay very individual, very personal, and I think that if you're writing good literature, the visual-arts side of things will follow on its own. I don't necessarily think you need to read syllabus-type books, curriculum books, because any class will give you those: what matters more is reading what actually moves you as an individual. What moves me deeply, for instance, is the work of Maggie Nelson, of Anne Carson, of Clarice Lispector. I feel I belong to that lineage of wo-

men writers who work in fragments, who break with narrative perspective, who break with the notions of what it means to be a woman and to be a woman writer. It's far more important to place yourself creatively within a literary canon than to read one more how-to manual.

ANA MARIA CABALLERO