

TIGER LILY

JOURNAL BY WOMEN OF COLOUR

Double Issue



In the groundbreaking 'Emerging Woman', 1989, bits of ceramic shell (from the ceramic mold of the bronze cast) are left over the figure's eyes and body, giving it the appearance of having been dug up after centuries underground. Bronze, steel, resin, ceramic shell, 16 ¾" high, 14 ½" wide, 6 ¼" deep.

**Black Women Writers
1857-1991**

TIGER LILY
JOURNAL BY WOMEN OF COLOUR

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Journal by Women of Colour

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Artis Lane

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With special thanks to Artis Lane, for the use of her masterpiece, "Emerging Woman" on the cover and to Adrienne Shadd for her kind assistance in this matter.

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In Celebration of Black Women Writers

"A people without the knowledge of their past, history and culture is like a tree without roots."

Marcus Mosiah Garvey

One of the most treasured memories of my youth was the ritual of storytelling. Every Saturday evening just as the sun was disappearing behind the Blue Mountains my friends and I sat in a circle under the ligum vitae tree, eating sweet potato pudding and coconut ice cream as we waited in anticipation for the storyteller.

These marvellous performers not only fueled our imagination with vibrant and colourful images, they also whetted our fledgling reading appetites. What I did not know then, but know today, was that these storytellers were practising an ancient tradition. And more importantly that they were — and still are — the gatekeepers of our culture and our history.

'Folktales' are the oral literature for Black people and it is from the telling of these tales, legends and myths that African culture has survived in the New World despite the prejudices of Eurocentric critics. Unfortunately, these prejudices have helped to shape our omission from literary cultures throughout the diaspora and have termed our creative works 'marginal'.

The arrival of Black people in the New World was traumatic. Filled with despair at the loss of family, language, religion, history, culture and country, it seemed impossible and improbable that we would be able to be creative. Yet despite our enslavement, we learnt and mastered new languages, adapted new images to our tales and myths, founded new clans, made our presence and culture felt on many islands and states and still we always remembered our spiritual homeland, Africa. It is from this heritage that the 19th century

Black woman writer emerged. But she now had an additional oppression to deal with: sexism.

Honoured as the first writing in the New World is the work of African-American poet Lucy Terry's (1730-1821) *Bars Fight* published on August 21, 1746. The first novel to be published, also by an African-American, was *Our Nig* by Harriet E. Wilson in 1859. In the Caribbean there were also some firsts. Bermudan-born Mary Prince's book, *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave*, related by herself, was published in 1831 in London and had its third printing by the end of that year. The Jamaican-born nurse, Mary Secole, known as the Black Florence Nightingale, wrote her biography *The Wonderful Adventures of Mary Secole in Many Lands* which was also published in the U.K. in 1857.

In Canada various kinds of writing were also taking place. The well-known educator, newspaper editor and community activist Mary Ann Shadd Carey's book *Notes of Canada West* was published in 1854 and became the Bible for Blacks fleeing the United States. The lone Black fictional writer of that time and second writer of fiction to be published in North America, was Amelia Etta Hall Johnson who was born in Toronto (1858-1922). Her novels *Clarence and Corrinne* (1890), *The Hazeley Family* (1894), and *Martina Meriden* (1901) were all published in the U.S. by the American Baptist Publication Society. Another Toronto-born writer and poet was Mrs. M.E. Lampert who had two of her poems — *Hymn to the New Year* and *My Dreams* — published in the *Review*.

The contemporary Black Canadian woman writer fares no better than her fore Sisters. For they, too, have the evils of racism, class and sexism imposed upon them. And like their sisters before them they continue to write whether they get published or not.

Among some of the writers whose works are published in this issue of *Tiger Lily* are also many firsts. *Sans Souci and Other Tales* (1988) by Dionne Brand was the first book of short stories to be published by a Black woman writer in many, many years; Marlene Nourbese Philip was the 1988 winner of the prestigious *Casa de Las America Award* for her book of poetry *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* — the first Black woman in Canada to win this award. Claire Harris is the winner of several awards — she is the 1985 winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Award for her book *Fables from the Women's Quarters* and the 1987 multiple winner of The Writers Guild of Alberta Award and the First Alberta Culture Poetry Prize for her book of poetry *Travelling to Find a Remedy*.

This issue of *Tiger Lily* is dedicated to our foremothers who empowered us with the gifts of creativity, spirituality and tenacity.

Ann Wallace

The Wonderful Adventures Of Mrs. Seacole In Many Lands

by Mary Seacole: 1805 - 1881

MY BIRTH AND PARENTAGE — EARLY TASTES AND TRAVELS;
MARRIAGE AND WIDOWHOOD

I was born in the town of Kingston, in the island of Jamaica, some time in the present century. As a female, and a widow, I may well be excused giving the precise date of this important event. But I do not mind confessing that the century and myself were both young together, and that we have grown side by side into age and consequence. I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins. My father was a soldier, of an old Scotch family; and to him I often trace my affection for a camp-life, and my sympathy with what I have heard my friends call "the pomp, pride, and circumstance of glorious war." Many people have also traced to my Scotch blood that energy and activity which are not always found in the Creole race, and which have carried me to so many varied scenes: and perhaps they are right. I have often heard the term "lazy Creole" applied to my country people; but I am sure I do not know what it is to be indolent. All my life long I have followed the impulse which led me to be up and doing; and so far from resting idle anywhere, I have never wanted inclination to rove, nor will powerful enough to find a way to carry out my wishes. That these qualities have led me into many countries, and brought me into some strange and amusing adventures, the reader, if he or she has the patience to get through this book, will see.

Some people, indeed, have called me quite a female Ulysses. I believe that they intended it as a compliment; but from my experience of the Greeks, I do not consider it a very flattering one.

It is not my intention to dwell at any length upon the recollections of my childhood. My mother kept a boarding-house in Kingston, and was, like very many of the Creole women, an admirable doctress; in high repute with the officers of both services, and their wives, who were from time to time stationed at Kingston. It was very natural that I should inherit her tastes; and so I had from early youth a yearning for medical knowledge and practice which has never deserted me. When I was a very young child I was taken by an old lady, who brought me up in her household among her own grandchildren, and who could scarcely have shown me more kindness had I been one of them; indeed, I was so spoiled by my kind patroness that but for being frequently with my mother, I might very likely have grown up idle and useless. But I saw so much of her, and of her patients, that the ambition to become a doctress early took firm root in my mind; and I was very young when I began to make use of the little knowledge I had acquired from watching my mother, upon a great sufferer — my doll. I have noticed always what actors children are. If you leave one alone in a room, how soon it clears a little stage; and, making an audience out of a few chairs and stools, proceeds to act its childish griefs and blandishments upon its doll. So I also made good use of my dumb companion and confidante; and whatever disease was most prevalent in Kingston, be sure my poor doll soon contracted it. I have had many medical triumphs in later days, and saved some valuable lives; but I really think that few have given me more real gratification than the rewarding glow of health which my fancy used to picture stealing over my patient's waxen face after long and precarious illness.

Before long it was very natural that I should seek to extend my practice; and so I found other patients in the dogs and cats around me. Many luckless brutes were made to simulate diseases which were raging among their owners, and had forced down their reluctant throats the remedies which I deemed most likely to suit their supposed complaints. And after a time I rose still higher in my ambition; and despairing of finding another human patient, I proceeded to try my simples and essences upon — myself.

When I was about twelve years old I was more frequently at my mother's house, and used to assist her in her duties; very often sharing with her the task of attending upon invalid officers or their wives, who came to her house from the adjacent camp at Up-Park, or the military station at Newcastle.

As I grew into womanhood, I began to indulge that longing to travel which will never leave me while I have health and vigour. I was never weary of tracing upon an old map the route to England; and never followed with my gaze the stately ships homeward bound without longing to be in them, and see the blue hills of Jamaica fade into the distance. At that time it

seemed most improbable that these girlish wishes should be gratified; but circumstances, which I need not explain, enabled me to accompany some relatives to England while I was yet a very young woman.

I shall never forget my first impressions of London. Of course, I am not going to bore the reader with them; but they are as vivid now as though the year 18— (I had very nearly let my age slip then) had not been long ago numbered in the past. Strangely enough, some of the most vivid of my recollections are the efforts of London street-boys to poke fun at my and my companion's complexion. I am only a little brown — a few shades duskier than the brunettes whom you all admire so much; but my companion was very dark, and a fair (if I can apply the term to her) subject for their rude wit. She was hot-tempered, poor thing! and as there were no policemen to awe the boys and turn our servants' heads in those days, our progress through the London streets was sometimes a rather chequered one.

I remained in England, upon the occasion of my first visit, about a year; and then returned to Kingston. Before long I again started for London, bringing with me this time a large stock of West Indian preserves and pickles for sale. After remaining two years here, I again started home and on the way my life and adventures were very nearly brought to a premature conclusion. Christmas day had been kept very merrily on board our ship the "Velusia"; and on the following day a fire broke out in the hold. I dare say it would have resisted all the crew's efforts to put it out, had not another ship appeared in sight; upon which the fire quietly allowed itself to be extinguished. Although considerably alarmed, I did not lose my senses; but during the time when the contest between fire and water was doubtful, I entered into an amicable arrangement with the ship's cook, whereby in consideration of two pounds — which I was not, however, to pay until the crisis arrived — he agreed to lash me on to a large hen-coop.

Before I had been long in Jamaica I started upon other trips, many of them undertaken with a view to gain. Thus I spent some time in New Providence, bringing home with me a large collection of handsome shells and rare shell-work, which created quite a sensation in Kingston, and I had a rapid sale; I visited also Hayti and Cuba. But I hasten onward in my narrative.

Returned to Kingston, I nursed my old indulgent patroness in her long last illness. After she died, in my arms, I went to my mother's house, where I stayed, making myself useful in a variety of ways, and learning a great deal of Creole medicinal art, until I couldn't find courage to say "no" to a certain arrangement timidly proposed by Mr. Seacole, but married him, and took him down to Black River, where we established a store. Poor man! he was very delicate; and before I undertook the charge of him, several doctors had

expressed most unfavourable opinions of his health. I kept him alive by kind nursing and attention as long as I could; but at last he grew so ill that we left Black River, and returned to my mother's house at Kingston. Within a month of our arrival there he died. This was my first great trouble, and I felt it bitterly. For days I never stirred — lost to all that passed around me in a dull stupor of despair. If you had told me that the time would soon come when I should remember this sorrow calmly, I should not have believed it possible: and yet it was so. I do not think that we hot-blooded Creoles sorrow less for showing it so impetuously; but I do think the sharp edge of our grief wears down sooner than theirs who preserve an outward demeanour of calmness, and nurse their woe secretly in their hearts.

STRUGGLE FOR LIFE — THE CHOLERA IN JAMAICA — I LEAVE KINGSTON FOR THE ISTHMUS OF PANAMA — CHAGRES, NAVY BAY, AND GATUN — LIFE IN PANAMA — UP THE RIVER CHAGRES TO GORGONA AND CRUCES.

I had one other great grief to master — the loss of my mother, and then I was left alone to battle with the world as best I might. The struggles which it cost me to succeed in life were sometimes very trying; nor have they ended yet. But I have always turned a bold front to fortune, and taken, and shall continue to take, as my brave friends in the army and navy have shown me how, "my hurts before". Although it was no easy thing for a widow to make ends meet, I never allowed myself to know what repining or depression was, and so succeeded in gaining not only my daily bread, but many comforts besides, from the beginning. Indeed, my experience of the world — it is not finished yet, but I do not think it will give me reason to change my opinion — leads me to the conclusion that it is by no means the hard bad world which some selfish people would have us believe it. It may be as my editor says:

*"That gently comes the world to those
That are cast in gentle mould;"*

hinting at the same time, politely, that the rule may apply to me personally. And perhaps he is right, for although I was always a hearty, strong woman — plain-spoken people might say stout — I think my heart is soft enough.

How slowly and gradually I succeeded in life, need not be told at length. My fortunes underwent the variations which befall all. Sometimes I was rich one day, and poor the next. I never thought too exclusively of money, believing rather that we were born to be happy, and that the surest way to be wretched is to prize it overmuch. Had I done so, I should have mourned

over many a promising speculation proving a failure, over many a pan of preserves or guava jelly burnt in the making; and perhaps lost my mind when the great fire of 1843, which devastated Kingston, burnt down my poor home. As it was, I very nearly lost my life, for I would not leave my house until every chance of saving it had gone, and it was wrapped in flames. But, of course, I set to work again in a humbler way, and rebuilt my house by degrees, and restocked it, succeeding better than before; for I had gained a reputation as a skilful nurse and doctress, and my house was always full of invalid officers and their wives from Newcastle, or the adjacent Up-Park Camp. Sometimes I had a naval or military surgeon under my roof, from whom I never failed to glean instruction, given, when they learned my love for their profession, with a readiness and kindness I am never likely to forget. Many of these kind friends are alive now. I met with some when my adventures carried me to the battle-fields of the Crimea; and to those whose eyes may rest upon these pages I again offer my acknowledgments for their past kindness, which helped me to be useful to my kind in many lands.

And here I may take the opportunity of explaining that it was from a confidence in my own powers, and not at all from necessity, that I remained an unprotected female. Indeed, I do not mind confessing to my reader, in a friendly confidential way, that one of the hardest struggles of my life in Kingston was to resist pressing candidates for the late Mr. Seacole's shoes.

Officers of high rank sometimes took up their abode in my house. Others of inferior rank were familiar with me, long before their bravery, and, alas! too often death, in the Crimea, made them world famous. There were few officers of the 97th to whom Mother Seacole was not well known, before she joined them in front of Sebastopol; and among the best known was goodhearted, loveable, noble H— V—, whose death shocked me so terribly, and with whose useful heroic life the English public have become so familiar. I can hear the ring of his boyish laughter even now.

In the year 1850, the cholera swept over the island of Jamaica with terrible force. Our idea — perhaps an unfounded one — was, that a steamer from New Orleans was the means of introducing it into the island. Anyhow, they sent some clothes on shore to be washed, and poor Dolly Johnson, the washerwoman, whom we all knew, sickened and died of the terrible disease. While the cholera raged, I had but too many opportunities of watching its nature, and from a Dr. B— who was then lodging in my house, received many hints as to its treatment which I afterwards found invaluable.

Early in the same year my brother had left Kingston for the Isthmus of Panama, then the great high-road to and from golden California, where he had established a considerable store and hotel. Ever since he had done so, I had found some difficulty in checking my reviving disposition to roam, and

at last persuading myself that I might be of use to him (he was far from strong), I resigned my house into the hands of a cousin, and made arrangements to journey to Chagres. Having come to this conclusion, I allowed no grass to grow beneath my feet, but set to work busily, for I was not going to him empty-handed. My house was full for weeks, of tailors, making up rough coats, trousers, etc., and seamstresses cutting out and making shirts. In addition to these, my kitchen was filled with busy people, manufacturing preserves, guava jelly, and other delicacies, while a considerable sum was invested in the purchase of preserved meats, vegetables, and eggs. It will be as well, perhaps, if I explain, in as few words as possible, the then condition of the Isthmus of Panama.

All my readers must know — a glance at the map will show it to those who do not — that between North America and the envied shores of California stretches a little neck of land, insignificant-looking on the map, dividing the Atlantic from the Pacific. By crossing this, the travellers from America avoided a long, weary, and dangerous sea voyage round Cape Horn, or an almost impossible journey by land.

But that journey across the Isthmus, insignificant in distance as it was, was by no means an easy one. It seemed as if nature had determined to throw every conceivable obstacle in the way of those who should seek to join the two great oceans of the world. I have read and heard many accounts of old endeavours to effect this important and gigantic work, and how miserably they failed. It was reserved for the men of our age to accomplish what so many had died in attempting, and iron and steam, twin giants, subdued to man's will, have put a girdle over rocks and rivers, so that travellers can glide as smoothly, if not as inexpensively, over the once terrible Isthmus of Darien, as they can from London to Brighton. Not yet, however, does civilization rule at Panama. The weak sway of the New Granada Republic, despised by lawless men, and respected by none, is powerless to control the refuse of every nation which meet together upon its soil. Whenever they feel inclined now they overpower the law easily; but seven years ago, when I visited the Isthmus of Panama, things were much worse, and a licence existed, compared to which the present state of affairs is enviable.

When, after passing Chagres, an old-world tumble-down town, for about seven miles, the steamer reached Navy Bay, I thought I had never seen a more luckless, dreary spot. Three sides of the place were a mere swamp, and the town itself stood upon a sand-reef, the houses being build upon piles, which someone told me rotted regularly every three years. The railway, which now connects the bay with Panama, was then building, and ran, as far as we could see, on piles, connected with the town by a wooden jetty. It seemed as capital a nursery for ague and fever as Death could hit upon anywhere, and those on board the steamer who knew it confirmed my opinion. As we arrived a steady downpour of rain was falling from an inky sky; the white

men who met us on the wharf appeared ghostly and wraith-like, and the very negroes seemed pale and wan. The news which met us did not tempt me to lose any time in getting up the country to my brother. According to all accounts, fever and ague, with some minor diseases, especially dropsy, were having it all their own way at Navy Bay, and, although I only stayed one night in the place, my medicine chest was called into requisition. But the sufferers wanted remedies which I could not give them — warmth, nourishment, and fresh air. Beneath leaky tents, damp huts, and even under broken railway waggons, I saw men dying from sheer exhaustion. Indeed, I was very glad when, with morning, the crowd, as the Yankees called the bands of pilgrims to and from California, made ready to ascend to Panama.

The first stage of our journey was by railway to Gatun, about twelve miles distant. For the greater portion of that distance the lines ran on piles, over as unhealthy and wretched a country as the eye could well grow weary of; but, at last, the country improved, and you caught glimpses of distant hills and English-like scenery. Every mile of that fatal railway cost the world thousands of lives. I was assured that its site was marked thickly by graves, and that so great was the mortality among the labourers that three times the survivors struck in a body, and their places had to be supplied by fresh victims from America, tempted by unheard-of rates of wages. It is a gigantic undertaking, and shows what the energy and enterprise of man can accomplish. Everything requisite for its construction, even the timber, had to be prepared in, and brought from, America.

The railway then ran no further than Gatun, and here we were to take water and ascend the River Chagres to Gorgona, the next stage on the way to Cruces, where my brother was. The cars landed us at the bottom of a somewhat steep cutting through a reddish clay, and deposited me and my suite, consisting of a black servant, named "Mac", and a little girl, in safety in the midst of many packages, not altogether satisfied with my prospects; for the rain was falling heavily and steadily, and the Gatun porters were possessing themselves of my luggage with that same avidity which distinguishes their brethren on the pier of Calais or the quays of Pera. There are two species of individuals whom I have found alike wherever my travels have carried me — the reader can guess their professions — porters and lawyers.

It was as much as I could do to gather my packages together, sit in the midst with a determined look to awe the hungry crowd around me, and send "Mac" up the steep slippery bank to report progress. After a little while he returned to say that the river-side was not far off, where boats could be hired for the upward journey. The word given, the porters threw themselves upon my packages; a pitched battle ensued, out of which issued the strongest Spanish Indians, with their hardly earned prizes, and we commenced the

ascent of the clayey bank. Now, although the surveyors of the Darien highways had considerably cut steps up the steep incline, they had become worse than useless, so I floundered about terribly, more than once losing my footing altogether. And as with that due regard to personal appearance, which I have always deemed a duty as well as a pleasure to study, I had, before leaving Navy Bay, attired myself in a delicate light blue dress, a white bonnet prettily trimmed, and an equally chaste shawl, the reader can sympathise with my distress. However, I gained the summit, and after an arduous descent, of a few minutes duration, reached the river-side; in a most piteous plight, however, for my pretty dress, from its contact with the Gatun clay, looked as red as if, in the pursuit of science, I had passed it through a strong solution of muriatic acid.

By the water-side I found my travelling companions arguing angrily with the shrewd boatmen, and beating down their fares. Upon collecting my luggage, I found, as I had expected, that the porters had not neglected the glorious opportunity of robbing a woman, and that several articles were missing. Complaints, I knew, would not avail me, and stronger measures seemed hazardous and barely advisable in a lawless out-of-the-way spot where

*"The simple plan,
That they should take who have the power,
And they should keep who can,"*

seemed universally practised, and would very likely have been defended by its practitioners upon principle.

It was not so easy to hire a boat as I had been led to expect. The large crowd had made the boatmen somewhat exorbitant in their demands, and there were several reasons why I could engage one for my own exclusive use, instead of sharing one with some of my travelling companions. In the first place, my luggage was somewhat bulky; and, in the second place, my experience of travel had not failed to teach me that Americans (even from the Northern States) are always uncomfortable in the company of coloured people, and very often show this feeling in stronger ways than by sour looks and rude words. I think, if I have a little prejudice against our cousins across the Atlantic — and I do confess a little — it is not unreasonable. I have a few shades of deeper brown upon my skin which shows me related — and I am proud of the relationship — to those poor mortals whom you once held enslaved, and whose bodies America still owns. And having this bond, and knowing what slavery is; having seen with my eyes and heard with my ears proof positive enough of its horrors — let others affect to doubt them if they

will — is it surprising that I should be somewhat impatient of the airs of superiority which many Americans have endeavoured to assume over me? Mind, I am not speaking of all. I have met with some delightful exceptions.

At length I succeeded in hiring a boat for the modest consideration of ten pounds, to carry me and my fortunes to Cruces. My boat was far from uncomfortable. Large and flat-bottomed, with an awning, dirty it must be confessed, beneath which swung a hammock, of which I took immediate possession. By the way, the Central Americans should adopt the hammock as their national badge; but for sheer necessity they would never leave it. The master of the boat, the *padrone*, was a fine tall negro, his crew were four common enough specimens of humanity, with a marked disregard of the prejudices of society with respect to clothing. A dirty handkerchief rolled over the head, and a wisp of something, which might have been linen, bound round the loins, formed their attire. Perhaps, however, the thick coating of dirt which covered them kept them warmer than more civilized clothing, besides being indisputably more economical.

The boat was generally propelled by paddles, but when the river was shallow, poles were used to punt us along, as on English rivers; the black *padrone*, whose superior position was indicated by the use of decent clothing, standing at the helm, gesticulating wildly, and swearing Spanish oaths with a vehemence that would have put Corporal Trim's comrades in Flanders to the blush. Very much shocked, of course, but finding it perfectly useless to remonstrate with him, I swung in my hammock and leisurely watched the river scene.

The river Chagres rolled with considerable force, now between marshy shores, now narrowing, between steep, thickly wooded banks, It was liable, as are all rivers in hilly districts, to sudden and heavy floods; and although the *padrone*, on leaving Gatun, had pledged his soul to land me at Cruces that night, I had not been long afloat before I saw that he would forfeit his worthless pledge; for the wind rose to a gale, ruffling the river here and there into a little sea; the rain came down in torrents, while the river rose rapidly, bearing down on its swollen stream trunks of trees, and similar waifs and strays, which it tossed about like a giant in sport, threatening to snag us with its playthings every moment. And when we came to a sheltered reach, and found that the little fleet of boats which had preceded us had laid too there, I came to the conclusion that, stiff, tired and hungry, I should have to pass a night upon the river Chagres. All I could get to eat was some guavas, which grew wild upon the banks, and then I watched the *padrone* curl his long body up among my luggage, and listened to the crew, who had rolled together at the bottom of the boat, snore as peacefully as if they slept between fair linen sheets, in the purest of calico night-gear, and the most unexceptionable of nightcaps, until somehow I fell into a troubled, dreamy sleep.

At daybreak we were enabled to pursue our journey, and in a short time reached Gorgona. I was glad enough to go on shore, as you may imagine. Gorgona was a mere temporary town of bamboo and wood houses, hastily erected to serve as a station for the crowd. In the present rainy season, when the river was navigable up to Cruces, the chief part of the population migrated thither, so that Gorgona was almost deserted, and looked indescribably damp, dirty, and dull. With some difficulty I found a bakery and a butcher's shop. The meat was not very tempting, for the Gorgona butchers did not trouble themselves about joints, but cut the flesh into strips about three inches wide, and of various lengths. These were hung on rails, so that you bought your meat by the yard, and were spared any difficulty in the choice of joint. I cannot say that I was favourably impressed with this novel and simple way of avoiding trouble, but I was far too hungry to be particular, and buying a strip for a quarter of a real, carried it off to Mac to cook.

Late that afternoon, the padrone and his crew landed me, tired, wretched, and out of temper, upon the miserable wharf of Cruces.

Originally published in 1857 in Great Britain by James Blackwood.

Mary Ann Shadd (1823-1893) was born October 9, 1823 in Wilmington, Delaware. In 1851, she came to Canada and settled in Windsor and Toronto. She was the first Black woman in North America to found and edit a newspaper, *The Provincial Freeman*. She was an advocate of women's rights and an abolitionist, educator and lawyer.

Notes Of Canada West

by Mary Shadd Cary

Windsor, C. W. June 21, 1852

Professor G. Whipple,
Respected sir, —

. . . I send by this mail . . .
a copy of a tract I have had the presumption to get out, and beg you to overlook the innumerable errors with which it abounds. I could not get out a faultless thing, but really I am not responsible for the many errors in it; The spirit of slavery is so implacable that my corrections on the proof-sheet that I saw (I could not see all) were entirely unheeded, and in some instances their own words substituted — paragraphs cut up into little sentences &c [etc.] but as they must pay for themselves I have thought it unwise to suppress them. Another edition I hope will look better. . . I do not know now Mr. Whipple, if this is not altogether gratuitous on my part but I send it to you not exactly in your official character but as one interested in this movement.¹

The "tract," so scrambled and mauled by the presumably racist printer, was a little pamphlet of 44 pages. The title, in the fashion of the day, was almost as long as the text itself: A PLEA FOR EMIGRATION OR, NOTES OF CANADA WEST, IN ITS MORAL, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL ASPECT: WITH SUGGESTIONS RESPECTING MEXICO, W. INDIES AND VANCOUVER'S ISLAND FOR THE INFORMATION OF COLORED EMIGRANTS.

In this age of mass communication with its tendency to information overload, it is difficult to conceive of the problem that lack of information posed during the last century. Blacks living in America and desiring to leave often had no idea of any suitable alternatives. One place they needed to know about was Canada West, the traditional end of the Underground Railroad.

*You know, it's eased my mind
To reach the end of the*line.
Don't know what's ahead of me:
Just know what's behind
Just know what's behind
Just know what's behind. . .*

The need for such a little book describing Canada West was clear. Along with the lack of information, a flurry of myths and misrepresentations confused the prospective emigrant and delighted anti-emigrationists. The *Voice* was certainly valuable, but the information it contained was scattered about its pages, and varied from issue to issue; and, it cost \$1 per year in advance. Something small, inexpensive and concise was needed.

Mary Shadd set out to fill that need, apparently collecting data and conducting interviews from the moment she arrived in Canada. It is a typical example of her awesome capacity for work, that in the few short months, during which she was also tremendously busy setting up and conducting classes (for two of those months, both day *and* evening classes), she had worked her material into a cohesive and interesting format that would be readily understood and could be cheaply produced. *Notes of Canada West* would be available at 12½¢ per copy; it was intended that the price would cover her costs.²

Such industry and "goaheadiveness" (as the 19th century styled such assertiveness) were rare in a woman of her day, especially one in her rather modest circumstances. Her efforts did not go unnoticed in the local press. Combining warmth and sarcasm, Henry Bibb remarked in the *Voice*, "Miss Mary A. Shadd, of Windsor, C. W., is getting out a little work of some thirty or forty pages, which will be laid before the public in a few days. . . We have no doubt of the work being well got up, as we know that Miss Shadd has

given much attention to the subject, together with her ability and experience as an authoress; and not only so, we think that there can be but little doubt of the mechanical part of the work being well done, as it is executed by a *white gentleman* in Detroit, who is able to do a good job, so that there can be no prejudice against the sale of the work on the ground of its having been printed on the *Queen's free soil* [author's emphasis]."

Bibb felt eminently free to chide Shadd for using a non-Canadian printer. After all, he had just announced the publication of "a little work" of his own. It was a "compilation of the most interesting anti-slavery songs for the times," and had been printed *locally* in Windsor. Indeed, as the *Voice* itself now emanated from Windsor, we can assume that Bibb either maintained his own printing enterprise or used a local printer.

It is unclear why Shadd chose an American printer. Due to her rapidly deteriorating relations with the Bibbs, she may have feared that the Windsor printer would be pro-Bibb and hostile to her, or incompetent, and perhaps both. It is also possible that the American printer would extend credit to her, or do the work cheaper — which would have been no small considerations.

Her concerns regarding the ultimate form her little pamphlet would take were echoed many years later by her friend, William Still, when he spoke of the pending publication of his monumental work, *The Underground Rail Road*. "... with regard to the Mechanicle skill, in every particular, it is to be first class. No black man's book." Thus spoke a black man determined to put out a book that could not be dismissed by bigots because of its lack of technical expertise.

In the next issue of the *Voice*, Henry Bibb continued the honey-and-vinegar treatment. He had now seen a copy of *Notes* and could comment more extensively. "The accomplished and talented authoress has been prompted to the present undertaking from 'the increasing desire on the part of the colored people, to become thoroughly informed respecting the Canadas, and particularly Canada West.' Considering the paucity of documents of reliable information that it was possible for her to have access to, Miss Shadd has certainly accomplished wonders. The information concentrated within the small compass of this pamphlet, collected by extensive correspondence, personal examination of society, and reference to the laws of the Province, was truly no small task; and ably has she accomplished her undertaking. We regret that we cannot pass the same compliment on the mechanical execution of the work. However, the typographical errors, do not mar the clearness of ideas beaming through the subject, to justify the deep chagrin that we know the precise authoress feels in relation to them. . ."

Having chided Shadd publicly as regards her choice of printer (a white man and American, at that), Bibb no doubt felt vindicated by the final shape of her booklet. Personal antagonisms aside, Bibb felt constrained to support

her effort, "The work is direct and to the point — above all it is practical. It should be extensively read by and circulated amongst the free colored people of the U.S. at this time when their minds are paralyzed between doubt and fear, as a sovereign panacea to determine them at once what to do."³

"**W**hat to do?" remained a recurring and painful question to the black person, free or self-emancipated, struggling to live a self-respecting life in the "free" Northern states. Decades earlier, a society had been formed with the intent to solve the problem of the black person by shipping him "home" to Africa.

Nowadays, "back to Africa" has appeal as a mode of self-discovery, as a reuniting of a people with their roots, their source. Then, free blacks were quick to discern the taint of racism in a scheme that boldly sought to transplant thousands of city-dwelling American blacks to the wild reaches of "mother" Africa. When Mary Shadd was a small child, her father joined with other Wilmington blacks to remark soberly upon the aims of their colonizationist "friends" and to suggest that free blacks had other champions among white Americans "whose sympathies and charities need not the Atlantic between us and them, before they can consent to assist in elevating our brethren to the standing of men." These Wilmington blacks suggested that education and uplift of the black man was the key. Remove the prejudice, not the person.⁴

To the modern eye, the failure of these men to point out that a revolution in the hearts and heads of Southern slaveholders and Northern racists was also and foremostly needed seems odd, but — especially in these early years (Abraham Shadd and the Wilmington blacks met in July, '31) — black men were careful to be exceedingly clear regarding their awareness of the need of improvement and education among their race as a concomitant to true equality. They usually left it up to their white brothers-in-abolition to make it equally clear that major changes must be wrought among whites as well. Some, like William Lloyd Garrison, Elijah P. Lovejoy and Lucretia Mott, did.

Abraham Shadd and other free blacks briefly considered "the Canada venture" as an alternative solution to their problem, but the tide of interest turned and theoretical reform became the focus of their attention. In the words of one historian, "the enthusiastic reformers sought to theorize Utopia into being." Despite the hard work, as well as the fond imaginings of both black and white abolitionists, things seemed to get worse instead of better.

Emigration was again of vital interest to blacks, particularly, said Mary Shadd, "since. . . the passage of the odious Fugitive Slave Law has made a residence in the United States to many of them dangerous in the extreme. . .

The people are in a strait, — on the one hand, a pro-slavery administration. . . on the other, the Colonization Society. . . Information is needed. — Tropical Africa, the land of promise of the colonizationists, teeming as she is with the breath of pestilence, a burning sun and fearful maladies, bids them welcome. . . Again, many look with dreadful forebodings to the probability of worse than inquisitorial inhumanity in the Southern States. . . Certain that neither a home in Africa, nor in the Southern States, is desirable under present circumstances, inquiry is made respecting Canada. . . [Believing] that more reliance would be placed upon a statement of facts obtained in the country. . . than upon a repetition of current statements made elsewhere, however honestly made, I determined to visit Canada, and to there collect such information as most persons desire.”

With these words, Mary Shadd introduced *Notes of Canada West*. Clearly, she entered the country with *Notes* already conceived. It is probably that the need for such a tract was a major inspiration for her emigration at that time.

From the introduction, Shadd went immediately to a discussion of the climate of the Canadas, dismissing Canada East (now Quebec) within a few lines, “extremely cold, cheerless winters.” On the other hand, the climate of Canada West “is highly conducive to mental and physical energy. Persons in the vicinity of the Great Lakes, and the neighboring districts, say. . . that owing to the great body of ice that accumulates in the Lakes, the people living in the States bordering, suffer more severely from the cold than Canadians, — the ice making more intense the north winds sweeping over it.”

Shadd went on to the telling point of geographical position, “we well know that many flourishing towns in Canada are farther south than a large portion of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, Michigan and Oregon. . . I have thought proper to allude to the cold, at first, for the reason that it is the feature in the climate most dwelt upon — the solicitude of friends, ignorant on this point, and of persons less disinterested, often appealing to fear having no foundation whatever, when the facts are fairly set forth.”

She then proceeded to discuss matters of interest to the farmer, knowing that this, above all occupations, offered excellent opportunities to fugitives. With regard to the option of plains land or forested land, she remarked, “The advantage of timbered land, to purchasers of small capital, over plains, is considerable.” The emigrant’s first task would be to clear his land for tilling, and he would be well paid for his labour, because “wood ever meets a ready and cash sale, and more may be realized from firewood than to three times pay the cost of a farm. . . From the many instances of success under my observation, (particularly of formerly totally destitute colored persons,)

I firmly believe that with an axe and a little energy, an independent position would result in a short period."

With these encouraging words to would-be settlers, she went on to explore the varieties of produce that could be successfully grown, the domestic animals that were raised in Canada West, and the market value of these as well as the price of land.

Those of you who enjoy cataloguing the continual rise of inflation will find the following interesting:

Beef	4 and 5 cts.	per pound
Mutton	5 "	"
Veal	4 "	"
Pork	5 and 6 "	"

There was a footnote that cautiously informed the reader, "Prices of meat are not uniform, as before said, and owing to the increased demand prices have risen very recently, [compared] to the ordinary price in the States. That, of course, will not be the rate henceforth, but will be determined by the supply."

For those of town-dwelling penchant among her readers, she had this to say, "In Canada, as in other recently settled countries, there is much to do, and comparatively few for the work. The numerous towns and villages springing up. . . make labor of every kind [*plentiful*]. . . no man's complexion affecting his business. If a colored man understands his business, he receives the public patronage the same as a white man. He is not obliged to work a little better, and at a lower rate. . . every man's work stands or falls according to merit. . . Builders, and other tradesmen, of different complexions, work together on the same building and in the same shop, with perfect harmony, and often the proprietor of an establishment is colored, and the majority or all of the men employed are white." About the worst thing that one could say regarding this somewhat rosy view of Canadian business practices was that it was slightly out of date. With the 'fifties and the flood of fugitives, there were alterations in Canadian responses that, to be fair, may not have been at all apparent as a trend in 1851-52.⁵

Regarding the spiritual life of the province, Shadd said, "I was forcibly struck, when at Toronto, with the contrast the religious community there presented, to our own large body of American Christians. In the churches, originally built by the white Canadians, the presence of colored persons. . . elicited no comment whatever. They are members, and visitors, and as such have their pews according to their inclination, near the door, or remote, or central, as best suits them." Rather than being herded into an upper balcony or a few back rows.

"The number of colored persons, attending the churches with whites, constitutes a minority, I think. They have their 'own churches.' . . . that is the feature in their policy, which is productive of mischief to the entire body. . . . I have heard men of many years residence. . . . express deep sorrow at the course of colored persons, in pertinaciously refusing overtures of religious fellowship from the whites; and in the face of all experience to the contrary, erecting Colored Methodist, and Baptist, and other Churches. This opinion obtains amongst many who, when in the United States, were connected with colored churches. Aside from their caste character, their influence on the colored people is fatal. The character of the exclusive church in Canada tends to perpetuate ignorance. . . . In her bosom is nurtured the long-standing and rankling prejudices, and hatred against whites, without exception, that had their origin in American oppression, and that should have been left in the country in which they originated. . . . 'tis that species of animosity that is not bounded by geographical lines. . . ."

A hard fact: emotional scars are part of the baggage of every emigrant, and it was no less true of American blacks. Fugitives, so used to ill-treatment and unfairness, were at times unable to respond generously and naturally to the advances of Canadian whites. And even while fugitives turned away from friendly whites, a rising tide of prejudice against blacks from other quarters in the white community made itself known in virtually every aspect of their lives. As one historian has remarked, "The persistence of self-conscious Negro associations. . . . and of all-Negro churches, were both a symptom of prejudice and a contributor to it." The rise of prejudice in the 1850s was thought to emanate from several sources in Canada West: American-born settlers and former planters from the West Indies (both groups bringing their own particular emotional baggage), and Irish settlers as well as other recent immigrants who competed with fugitives in the unskilled and semi-skilled labour market.⁷

Shadd went on to discuss the activities of white missionaries among the fugitives, speaking with great warmth and enthusiasm of their efforts, possibly the first and almost certainly the last time she would be so moved. "The missionary strength, at present, consists of but six preachers — active and efficient gentlemen, all of them, and self-sacrificing in the last degree, and several women engaged in teaching, under the same auspices." Here Mary Shadd did not identify herself as one of these teachers, nor did she see fit to name the AMA as the sponsoring body.

"Much privation, suffering, opposition and sorrow await the missionary in the field. If it were possible, for him to foresee what is in store for him there, a mission to India, or the South Sea Islands, would be preferable; for, in that case, the sympathy of the entire community is enlisted, and his

sojourn is made as pleasant as possible. . . In this less remote field — almost in speaking distance — neglect from friends, suspicion, abuse, misrepresentation, and a degrading surveillance, often of serious and abiding consequences, await him.

"Not directly from the fugitives — those designed primarily to be benefitted — may assaults be looked for, at first. They [*fugitives*] possess a desire for the light, and incline to cluster around the missionary invariably. There are those [*however*] who pretend to have been enlightened, and to have at heart the common good, whose influence and operations, he [*the missionary*] will find designedly counteracting his conscientious efforts, the more effectively appealing to a common origin and kindred sufferings — secretly striking behind, and bringing his character as a missionary, and his operations, into discredit in the eyes of a sympathizing Christian community."⁸

With the majority of the AMA's missionaries stationed within a few miles of Windsor, these remarks patently refer to influential members of the local black community, and evidently former slaves at that, as free blacks were then fairly rare in those parts. This leaves the comment "common origin and kindred sufferings" to refer almost certainly to the slave-born. Persistence personified, Henry Bibb had escaped from slavery five times, so that the prominent and sometimes "Reverend" Mr. Bibb seems indicated by these remarks. Bibb's Refugee Home Society, according to an intimate of his in conversation with Shadd, "was gotten up on the principle that the whites owed the blacks and would never be done paying them." While this remark was made some time after the publication of *Notes of Canada West*, Bibb's attitude toward benevolent whites generally was certainly known to Shadd and most likely elicited those foreboding remarks. At any rate, Bibb probably *thought* she meant him!⁹

"This, and more," she went on, "awaits those who may be called to the field; but the case is not a hopeless one. The native good sense [*of the*] fugitives, backed by proper schools, will eventually develop the real character of their operations and sacrifices." In all fairness to Henry Bibb and/or whomever else she meant, Mary Shadd's estimation of the "real character" of missionary "operations and sacrifices" would shortly be enough to burn ears and grit teeth all the way back to New York City.

Continuing, she wrote of education and the strong desire among fugitives for "intellectual culture" and discussed common schools as well as tax-supported separate schools, giving chapter and verse of "the school law that directly related to them." Regarding fugitives and separate black schools, she reiterated, "They are not compelled to have a colored school."

After remarking that Toronto schools and colleges offered ample opportunities to all races, she made reference to missionary-supported schools such as her own. "The operations of missionaries being chiefly

among colored people, they have established several schools in connection with their labors, yet they are open to children without exception. The colored common schools have more of a complexional character than the private, which, with no exception that I have heard of, are open to all."

And, speaking of "complexional character," Shadd went on to discuss several black settlements among them the newly-organized Refugee Home Society. She dealt briefly with the legal rights of black emigrants, asserting, "... the laws of the country give to them, at first, the same protection and privileges as to other persons not born subjects; and after compliance with Acts of Parliament affecting them, as taking oath, &c., they may enjoy full 'privileges of British birth in the Province.'"

Election laws, currency and other matters were mentioned in some detail. Of the present black residents of the province, Shadd was moved to remark, "no equal number of colored men in the States, north or south, can produce more freeholders [*land owners*];" and she quoted an anti-begging tract penned by three Kent County, C.W., blacks.

She stated implacably, "Notwithstanding the prosperity and liberal sentiment of the majority, there is yet a great deal of ignorance, bigotry, prejudice, and idleness." Interestingly enough, she is speaking here of blacks. "There are those who. . . tend to make broad the line of separation they wish to make between them and the whites; and they are active. . . to perpetuate, in the minds of the newly arrived emigrant or refugee, prejudices, originating in slavery, and as strong and objectionable in their manifestations as those entertained by whites towards them. Every casual remark by whites is tortured into a decided and effective negro hate. . . The recently arrived fugitives, unacquainted with the true state of things, are '*completely convinced*' by the noisy philippic [*tirade*] against all the 'white folks,' and all colored ones who think differently from them, and he is thus prepared to aid demagogues in preventing the adoption of proper measures for the spread of education and general intelligence to maintain an ascendancy over the inferior minds around them, and to make the way of the missionary a path of thorns."¹⁰

One is reminded forcibly of Shadd's account of the Windsor meeting at which she stood opposed to the Bibbs' plan to start "a colored Government school." She offered to lower her fees to teach an — at least nominally — integrated school, remarking later, "I stood alone in opposition to caste schools." But the very next week, Bibb suggested that *she* be the teacher for the proposed school and she refused, reaping, no doubt, further antagonism between herself and the King and Queen of the Fugitives.¹¹

Of this harshly anti-white group, Shadd said sadly, "The only ground of hope is in the native good sense of those who are now making use of the same instrumentalities for improvement as are the whites around them."

Of white prejudice against the fugitives, she said, "The disposition of the people generally towards colored emigrants. . . so far as the opinions of old settlers may be taken, and my own observation may be allowed, is as friendly as could be looked for under the circumstances. The Yankees, in the country and in the States adjoining, leave no opportunity unimproved to embitter their minds against them." For the solution to this problem, she quoted Samuel R. Ward, "Let the ignorance now prevalent on the subject of slavery be met by fair and full discussion, and open and thorough investigation, and the apathy and prejudice now existing will soon disappear."

Shadd went on to admit that blacks had encountered prejudice in some taverns and on some boats, but she enjoined emigrating blacks to avoid the two extremes of "servility and presumption." And if a civil attitude didn't do the trick, she suggested smartly that such consistently offending "tavern keepers and other public characters" could be taken to court.

The few remaining pages of Mary Shadd's little book are devoted to brief remarks on "THE BRITISH WEST INDIES — MEXICO — SOUTH AMERICA — AFRICA" and "VANCOUVER'S ISLAND." We have already been treated to a summary of her views, at this time, of Africa. Her attitude toward "the West Indies, Honduras, and ultimately South America" was dictated, in the main, by the conviction that slave interests in the States had their eyes on those areas. "To preserve those countries from the ravages of slavery, should be the motive to their settlement by colored men." Jamaica, "properly garrisoned by colored free men, may, under Britain, promptly and effectually check foreign interference in its own policy. . ." One begins to see, as perhaps Mary Shadd saw, strategic placements of armed black men, hovering south as well as north of the U.S. border, exerting a containing influence on American slavery or expansionism, if nothing else.

Regarding Mexico, Shadd was not sanguine. While the Mexicans themselves were known to be strongly anti-slavery, the same could not be said of the Spanish aristocracy. "The hankering of the old Castilians after lost power, is much greater in Mexico than farther south; and to regain that [power] there would not be scruples about a coalition with American Slaveholders, even. The spirit of democracy has never so thoroughly pervaded the country, as those under the shadow of Simon Bolivar."

Shadd completed her survey with brief but fascinating observations on Vancouver Island (just west of the modern City of Vancouver and immediately adjacent to the United States territory that is now the State of Washington). "Though remotely situated, and comparatively uninhabited. . . it will, it is said, be the first island in importance on the globe. . . the people there settled, of whatever complexion, will be the 'merchant princes of the world,'" partly because "the current of affairs is so clearly setting west."

(These were the days of Greeley's injunction, "Go west, young man, and grow up with the country.") Black emigration was strategically important because a "Vancouver's Island" settled by free blacks would be a hindrance to any American contemplation of annexation. It was, nevertheless, several years before a large party of California blacks made an orderly retreat from encroaching racism in San Francisco to "one of the garden spots of this world," and related that Vancouver Island was a "place which has unfolded to us in our darkest hour, the prospect of a bright future."¹²

In her concluding remarks, Shadd stated, "The free colored people have steadily discountenanced any rational scheme of emigration, in the hope that by remaining in the States, a powerful miracle for the overthrow of slavery would be wrought. What are the facts. More territory has been given up to slavery, the Fugitive Law has passed, and a concert of measures, seriously affecting their personal liberty, has been entered into by several of the Free states. . . There would be more of the right spirit, and infinitely more of real manliness, in a peaceful but decided demand for the freedom of the slave, than in a miserable scampering from state to state, in a vain endeavor to gather the crumbs of freedom that a pro-slavery besom [*broom*] may sweep away at any moment. May a selection for the best be made, now that there are countries between which and the United States a comparison may be instituted." At this point, Shadd concluded the pamphlet with a line of rare eloquence and power. "A little folding of the hands, and there [*will*] be no retreat from the clutches of the slave power."¹³

Postscript

In the same issue of the *Voice* that announced Mary Shadd's *Notes* as pending, there was a review of Dr. Martin R. Delany's new book, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*. In his review, Bibb took a swipe at Delany for the many "puffs" (exaggerated praise) for *free* blacks which appeared in his book. Again, Bibb seems to be exhibiting a razor-edge sensitivity to the slave/freeborn division. In this case it may have been complicated by the fact that one of the free blacks who was so favourably noticed by Delany was Mary Shadd. All in all, however, Henry Bibb felt "that the book contained many useful facts," and he quoted Delany on his preference for "Canada West to any part of North America as a destination for the colored people."

And so Shadd and Delany were again in print and again in accord, although he was the sharper of the two in his judgment of creeping "Americanism" among Canadians.¹⁴

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- ¹ MAS to Whipple, June 21, 1852.
- ² MAS, *A Plea for Emigration or, Notes of Canada West*. . . , pp. iii-iv, 6.
Voice of the Fugitive Prospectus (AMA Archives, Amistad Research Center, Dillard University).
Voice of the Fugitive, 1851-1852, *passim*.
 MAS to Executive Committee (AMA) April 3, 1852.
Voice, June 17, 1852 (Vol. 2, No. 13).
 MAS to Whipple, June 21, 1852.
- ³ Chatham Provincial Freeman, April 19, 1856 (Vol. 3, No. 13).
Voice of the Fugitive, June 3, 1852 (Vol. 2, No. 12) and April 22, 1852 (Vol. 2, No. 9).
 Still to MASC, April 13, 1871.
Voice, June 17, 1852 (Vol. 2, No. 13).
- ⁴ Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, p. 154.
 Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization*, Part II, pp. 36-40.
- ⁵ Bell, *A Survey of the Negro Convention Movement 1830-1861*, P. 34.
 MAS, *Notes of Canada West*, pp. iii-iv, 5-16.
 Winks, *op. cit.*, p. 248.
- ⁶ MAS, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.
- ⁷ Winks, *op. cit.*, p. 250.
- ⁸ MAS, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.
- ⁹ Murray, *Canada and the Anglo-American Anti-Slavery Movement*. . . p. 428 quoting Mary Shadd in the *Liberator*, March 4, 1853.
 Winks, *op. cit.*, p. 396.
 MAS to Whipple, December 25, 1852 and June 21, 1852.
- ¹⁰ MAS, *Notes of Canada West*, pp. 19-33, 36.
- ¹¹ MAS to Whipple, July 21, 1852.
- ¹² MAS, *Notes of Canada West*, pp. 34-43.
 Winks, *op. cit.*, pp. 272-3.
- ¹³ MAS, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- ¹⁴ *Voice of the Fugitive*, June 3, 1852 (Vol. 2 No. 12).
 Delany, *Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, p. 131.

Sans Souci

by Dionne Brand

Rough grass asserted itself everywhere, keeping the earth damp and muddy. It inched its way closer and closer to doorsteps and walls until some hand, usually hers, ripped it from its tendrilled roots. But it soon grew back again. It kept the woman in protracted battle with its creeping mossiness — she ripping it out, shaking the roots of earth. It grew again the minute she turned her back. The house, like the others running up and down the hill, could barely be seen from the struggling road, covered as it was by lush immortelle trees with coarse vine spread among them so that they looked like women, with great bushy hair, embracing.

In Sans Souci, as the place was called, they said the people were as rough as the grass.

She may have looked that way, but it was from walking the hills and tearing out grass which grew until she was afraid of it covering her. It hung like tattered clothing from her hips, her breasts, her whole large body. Even when her arms were lifted, carrying water to the small shack, she felt weighed down by the bush. Great green patches of leaves, bougainvillea, almond, karili vine fastened her ankles to her wrists. She kept her eyes to the floor of the land. Her look tracing, piercing the bush and marking her steps to the water, to the tub, to the fire, to the road, to the land. The woman turning into a tree, though she was not even old yet. As time went on she felt her back harden like a crab's, like the bark of a tree, like its hard brown meat. A man would come often; but it was difficult to know him. When she saw him coming, she would never know him, until he said her name. "Claudine." Then she would remember him, vaguely. A bee near her car. Her hand brushing it away.

Sometimes she let the bush grow as tall as it wanted. It overwhelmed her. Reaching at her, each new spore or shoot burdened her. Then someone

would pass by and not see the house and say that she was minding snakes. Then, she would cut it down.

She climbed the hill often when the bush was low around the house. Then she went for water, or so it seemed, because she carried a pot. Reaching the top, her feet caked with mud, she would sit on the ground near the edge of the cliff. Then, she would look down into the sea. How fast the sea would come toward her. Probably not. The cliff was not vertical enough. Her body would hit tufts of grass before reaching the bottom. She could not push off far enough to fall into the water. Musing on whether it would work or not, she would lie down on the ground, confused. Spread out, the pot beneath her head, she would be faced by the sky. Then her eyes would close, tired of the blue of the sky zooming in and out at her gaze, and she would be asleep. She never woke up suddenly, always slowly, as if someone else was there, moving in on her sleep, even when it rained a strong rain which pushed her into the ground or when she slept till the sky turned purple.

Her children knew where she was. They would come up the hill when they did not see her or go to their grandmother's. She never woke up suddenly here, even when the three of them screamed her name, "Claudine!" The boy, with his glum face turning cloudier, and the girl and the little boy, looking hungry.

Three of them. In the beginning, she had bathed them and oiled their skins in coconut and dressed them in the wildest and brightest of colours and played with them and shown them off to the other inhabitants of the place. Then they were not good to play with any more. They cried and felt her hands. They cried for the roughness of her hands and the slap. If he was there he would either say, "Don't hit them" or "Why don't you hit those children?" His ambiguity caused her to hesitate before each decision on punishment. Then she decided not to touch the children, since either instruction he gave, he gave in an angry and distant voice, and for her the two had to be separate thoughts, clear opposites. So, after a time, the children did not get bathed and dressed and, after a time, they did not get beaten either.

The people around spoke well of him, described his physical attributes which were, in the main, two cheloidal scars on his chin and face. The scars meant that he was afraid of nothing. When he came he told them of his escapades on the bigger island. Like the time he met the famous criminal, Weapon, and he and Weapon spent the night drinking and touring the whore houses and the gambling dens and Weapon stuck a knife into the palm of a man who touched his drink.

He brought new fashions to the place, the wearing of a gold ring on his little finger and the growing of an elegant nail to set it off. The men, they retold his stories until he came with new ones. They wore copper rings on their little fingers.

If she wasn't careful they would come into the house and tell her what to do again. The shacks up and down the hill were arranged like spiders crawling toward her. One strong rain and they'd be inside of her house — which was not at the bottom of the hill, so there was no real reason to think that it would actually happen. Looking at them, the other people, she saw they made gestures toward her as they did to each other, to everyone else. They brought her things and she gave them things and they never noticed, nor did he, that she was not her mother's child nor her sister's sister nor an inhabitant of the place, but the woman turning into a tree. They had pressed her with their eyes and their talk and their complicit winks first into a hibiscus switch then into a shrub and now this, a tree.

He didn't live there. The dirt path beside the house ran arbitrarily up the hill. Whenever he came, he broke a switch with which to scare the children. This was his idea of being fatherly. Coming through the path, he made his stern face up to greet the children and the woman. He came and went and the people in the place expected her to be his. They assumed this as they assumed the path up the hill, the steady rain in March. He is a man, you're a woman; that's how it is.

Those times, not like the first, he would sit on her bed like a piece of wood, his face blunt in the air, dense and unmoving. He had no memory. Almost like the first, his breathing and his sweat smelling the same hurry thickness as before. Like something which had walked for miles with rain falling and insects biting, the bush and trees slapping some green and murky scent onto its body, a scent rough, from years of instinct, and horrible. Now he grew his fingernails and splashed himself with cheap scent; but sometimes, when he lifted his arm, she recalled and forgot quickly. And sometimes she saw his face as before. Always, in and out of seeing him and not seeing him, or wondering who he was and disbelieving when she knew.

Those times he would sit on her bed and tell her about a piece of land which his maternal grandmother had left him. He was just waiting for the day that they built the road across Sans Souci and that was the day that he was going to be a rich man. It was good agricultural land, he said, and only a road was holding it back. He went on about how he would work the land and how he was really a man of the earth. She listened, even though she knew that his mouth was full of nonsense. He had said that, for the last many years.

How many? . . . was he the same as the first. . . somehow she had come to be with him. Not if he was the first, not him.

His hands with their long fingernails, the elegant long nail on the right finger, could never dig into the soil. She listened to him, even though she knew that he was lying. But he really wasn't lying to deceive her. He liked to hear himself. He liked to think that he sounded like a man of ideas, like a man going somewhere. Mostly he repeated some phrase which he heard in

a popular song or something he had heard at the occasional North American evangelist meeting. He had woven these two into a thousand more convolutions than they already were, and only he could understand them — he and the other men in the place and Claudine, who couldn't really understand either, but liked the sound of him. His sound confused her; it was different, not like the pig squealing, that sorrowful squealing as it hung in front of the knife, not like its empty sound, as it hung for days, years — its white belly bloodless when it hung with no one seeing it, none around except the air of the yard, folding and sealing pockets of flesh, dying. His sound covered an afternoon or so for her, above the chorus of the pig's squeal, at once mournful and brief in its urgency — the startling incident of its death mixed with commonplaceness and routine. She liked to have him sit with her as if they were husband and wife.

II

She had met uncle Ranni on the Carénage; she never thought that he would ever get old; he used to be quick and smooth, with golden rings on his fingers. Each time he smiled or laughed — that challenging sweet laugh of his — the sun would catch the glint of his rings and throw it onto his teeth so that they looked yellow. He would throw his head way back, revealing the gold nugget on his thick chain. He was a small man, but you would never know, looking at him when he laughed.

Even when he talked of killing a man he laughed that sweet laugh, only his eyes were different. They cut across your face for the briefest of moments, like the knife that he intended to use. Once he even threatened to kill his father and his father believed him and slapped his face and never spoke to him again.

She poured everything out to him now, hoping he would kill the man this time. Everything about Prime's exhortations and his lies. It came out of her mouth and she didn't know who was saying it. Uncle Ranni's laugh only changed slightly. No one in the family ever really believed that he'd ever kill anyone; but no one ever dared not to believe either. Something about his laugh said that he'd never kill a man if he didn't have to and if he did, it would be personal. With a knife or a machete. Never a gun, but close, so that the dying man would know who had killed him and why. She'd caught a glimpse of him once, under a tamarind tree, talking about cutting a man's head off and the eyes of the head open, as it lay apart from its body in the dirt. He had told it and the men around, kicking the dust with their toes, had laughed, weakly.

Claudine told him everything, even some things that she only thought happened. These didn't make the case against Prime any worse, they just made her story more lyrical, inspiring the challenging laugh from Ranni.

"This man don't know who your uncle is, or what?" This only made her say more. Prime had lied to her and left her with three children to feed.

The new child, the fourth, moved in her like the first. It felt green and angry. Her flesh all around it, forced to hang there protecting this green and angry thing. It reached into her throat, sending up bubbles and making her dizzy all the time. It was not that she hated it; she only wanted to be without it. Out, out, out, out, never to have happened. She wanted to be before it, to never know or have known about it. He had said that the land was in her name. He had even shown her papers which said so and now he had run off, taken a boat to St. Croix.

"St. Croix? It don't have a place that man can hide; he don't know me," uncle Ranni said. Claudine got more and more frightened and more and more excited as she talked the story. It would serve Prime right to have uncle Ranni chop him up with a knife; she would like to see it herself. Uncle Ranni was old now. Sixty-four, but when he laughed like that she could see his mouth still full of his white teeth. It surprised her. Her mother's brother. He had looked at her once, back then, as if she had made it happen — looked at her as if she were a woman and contemptible; but it passed quickly like his other looks.

She'd only been talking to an old man about her trouble. She had not been paying attention. His old face had lit up briefly with that look and his teeth were as white as when he was young. His skin was tight and black, as she remembered it years ago. He seemed to laugh out of a real joy. She remembered liking to hear him laugh and see his white teeth against his beautiful skin. He would spit afterward as if there was something too sweet in his mouth. Now, when she'd first seen him on the Carenage, she had seen an old man with grey eyelashes and a slight stubble of gray on parts of his skin and face. She had told him everything in a surge of relief and nostalgia, never expecting him to do anything; but it was he, uncle Ranni, she had told. She almost regretted saying anything, but she needed to say it to someone.

The look across her face as before, cutting her eyes away, cutting her lips, her head, slicing her, isolating sections of her for scrutiny and inevitable judgment. Her hand reached to touch her face, to settle it, dishevelled as it was, to settle it on her empty chest. All that she had said was eaten up by the old man's face and thrown at her in a quick lacerating look which he gave back. Her eyes sniffed the quickly sealed cut and turning, fell on a wrecked boat in the Carenage.

A little boy jumped off the end not submerged in the water. The glum-faced boy at home came to her. She hurriedly made excuses to uncle Ranni about having to go and ran with a kind of urgency toward the tied-up boat to Cast Island, disappearing into its confusion of provisions, vegetables and goats. She did what she always had to do. She pretended to live in the present. She looked at the awful sky. She made its insistent blueness define

the extent of what she could see. Before meeting uncle Ranni she had walked along pretending that the boat was not there; that she did not have to go; wishing she could keep walking; that the Carenage would stretch out into the ocean, that the water of the ocean was a broad floor and the horizon, a shelf which divided and forgot. An end to things completely. Where she did not exist. The line of her eyes furthest look burned her face into the sunset of yellow, descending. The red appearing behind her eyelids, rubbing the line with her head. She had wished that the water between the jetty and the lapping boat was wider and fit to drink, so that she could drink deeply, become like sand, change places with the bottom of the ocean, sitting in its fat-legged deepness and its immutable width.

III

After the abortion, she went to Mama's Bar, even though she was in pain and even though she knew that she should lie down. Mama's was a wooden house turned into a restaurant and bar and Mama was a huge woman who had an excellent figure. Mama dominated the bar; she never shouted; she raised her eyebrows lazily when challenged. There were other women in the bar. Mama always sat with her back to the door, which proved just how dangerous she was.

The walls of the bar, at unaccounted intervals, had psychedelic posters in fluorescent oranges and blues. One of them was of an aztec-like mountain — dry, mud brown, cracked, strewn with human bones. Nothing stood on it except bones of feet and ribs and skulls. It would be a foreboding picture, if not for its glossiness. Instead it looked sickly and distant. It was printed by someone in California and one of Mama's visitors had bought it at a head shop in San Diego. Mama thought that it was high art and placed it so that people entering the bar could see it immediately.

Claudine walked down the steps to the bar, closed her eyes, anticipating the poster, then opened them too soon and felt her stomach reach for her throat.

Mama's eyes watched her walk to the counter, ask for a rum, down it and, turning to leave, bump into the man with the limp. A foamy bit of saliva hung onto the stubble on his face. He grabbed Claudine to save himself from falling and then they began dancing to Mama's crackling stereo.

They danced until lunch time, until the saliva from the limping man's face stretched onto the shoulder of Claudine's dress. Mama had not moved either. She controlled all of it with her eyes and when they told Claudine to leave, she sat the man with the limp onto a stool and left. Going somewhere, averting her stare from the mountain strewn with human bones.

IV

She went to the address on the piece of paper someone had given her. 29 Ponces Road. When she got to the street there was no number on any of the houses. She didn't know the woman's name. It was best in these situations not to know anyone's name or to ask anyone where. She walked up and down the street looking at the houses. Some were back from the curb and faced the next street over so there was no way of telling. Maybe something about the house would tell her. What does a house where a woman does that look like, she asked herself. She walked up and down the street thinking that maybe it was this one with the blue veranda or that one with the dog tied to a post. No, she couldn't tell. Maybe this was a sign or something. She gave up, suddenly frightened that it may just be a sign — holy mary mother of god — and bent her head, walking very fast up the street for the last time.

She passed a house with nine or ten children in the yard. Most of them were chasing after a half-dressed little boy. They were screaming and pointing at something he was chewing. She hadn't seen the woman on the wooden veranda until one of the children ran toward her saying something breathless and pointing to the woman. Then she saw her, as the woman on the veranda reached out into the yard and hit a flying child. It didn't seem as if she wanted to hit this one in particular or any one in particular. The group of children gave a common flinch, accustomed to these random attacks on their chasing and rushing around, then continued after the boy. Faced with finally doing this, Claudine didn't know anymore. She hesitated, looked at the woman's face for some assurance. But nothing. The woman looked unconcerned, waiting for her, and then turned and walked into the ramshackle house, her back expecting Claudine to follow. Claudine walked toward the yard not wanting to stand in the street. Now she moved forward because of the smallest reasons; now she was trapped by even tinier steps, by tinier reasons. She moved so that her feet would follow each other, so that she could get away from the road, so that she could make the distance to the house, so that it would be over. Nothing had come from the woman's face, no sign of any opinion. Claudine had seen her face, less familiar than a stranger's. Later, when she tried, she would never remember the face, only a disquieting and unresolved meeting. Like waking in between sleep and catching a figure, a movement, in the room.

V

He had raped her. That is how her first child was born. He had grabbed her and forced her into his little room and covered her mouth so that his mother would not hear her screaming. She had bitten the flesh on his hand

until there was blood and still he had exploded her insides, broken her. His face was dense against her crying. He did it as if she was not there, not herself, not how she knew herself. Anyone would have seen that he was killing her, but his dense face told her that he saw nothing. She was thirteen. She felt like the hogs that were strung on the limbs of trees and slit from the genitals to the throat. That is how her first child was born.

With blood streaming down her legs and feeling broken and his standing up and saying, "Nothing is wrong, go home and don't tell anyone." And when she ran through the bush crying that she would tell her mother and stood at the stand pipe to wash the blood off her dress and to cool the pain between her thighs, she knew she could tell no one.

Up the hill to the top, overlooking the water, she wanted to dive into the sea. The water would hit her face, it would rush past her ears quickly; it would wash her limbs and everything would be as before and this would not have happened — a free fall, a dive, into the sea. No. Her body would hit tufts of grass before reaching the bottom and it would hurt even more. She could not push off far enough to fall into the water.

She said nothing. She became sick and puffy and her stepfather told her mother that she was pregnant and she begged her mother not to believe him, it was a lie, and her mother sent her to the doctor and told her not to come back home if it was true. When the doctor explained the rape, he said, "Someone put a baby in your belly." And she could not go home. And when it was dark that night and she was alone on the road because everyone — her aunt first and then her grandmother — had said, "Go home," she saw her mother on the road coming down with a torchlight. Her mother, rakish and holding her skirt, coming toward her. Both of them alone on the road. And she walked behind her all the way home silent, as her mother cursed and told her that she'd still have to do all the work and maybe more. Every day until the birth, her mother swore and took care of her.

He denied it when the child was coming and she screamed it was "you, you, you!" loud and tearing, so that the whole village could hear that it was he. He kept quiet after that and his mother bore his shame by feeding her and asking her, "How things dou dou?"

From then, everyone explained the rape by saying that she was his woman. They did not even say it. They did not have to. Only they made her feel as if she was carrying his body around. In their looking at her and their smiles which moved to one side of the cheek and with their eyelids, uncommonly demure or round and wide and gazing. She came into the gaze of all of them, no longer a child — much less a child who had been raped. Now, a man's body. All she remembered was his face, as if he saw nothing when he saw her, and his unusual body resembling the man who slaughtered pigs for the village — so gnarled and horrible, the way he moved. Closing her eyes, he seemed like a tamarind tree, sour and unclimbable. Her arms

could not move, pinned by his knotted hands and she could not breathe. Her breathing took up all the time and she wanted to scream, not breathe — more screaming than breathing.

That is how her first child with him was born. Much as she tried, her screaming did not get past the bush and the trees; even though she tried to force it through the blades of grass and the coarse vines. Upon every movement of the bush, her thin and piercing voice grabbed for the light between; but the grass would move the other way making the notes which got through dissonant and unconnected, not like the sound of a killing.

Dionne Brand is a Toronto writer. Her latest book is No Language is Neutral. Sans Souci and Other Tales was published by Williams-Wallace.



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NOTES ON AMELIA ETTA HALL JOHNSON: was a 19th century Toronto writer whose book, *Clarence and Connie*, was published in 1890. Amelia Etta Hall Johnson, novelist, editor and poet, wrote the second novel to be published in book form by an Afro-American woman. The book, *Clarence and Corinne; or, God's Way*, was issued in 1890 by the American Baptist Publication Society. Mrs. Johnson was not only one of the society's first women authors but the first black to be published by the organization. The novel also has the historic distinction of being the first Sunday school book written by a black writer.

Born in Toronto, Canada, in 1858 of parents who were natives of Maryland, Amelia Etta Hall was educated in Montreal; she moved to Baltimore in 1874. Three years later, she married a leading Baltimore minister, the Reverend Harvey Johnson, on April 17, 1877. Dr. Johnson, a Virginian, was an early civil rights leader, successful pastor of the Union Baptist Church, and author of a book and several religious pamphlets.

Amelia became interested in writing poetry at an early age, but it was not until after her marriage that she began to write and publish in earnest. Instilled with a concern for young people, she felt there should be a journal in which black women could publish short stories, poetry, and articles for them. Thus, in 1887, she began an eight-page monthly paper, the *Joy*. A year later, to encourage reading among black children, she started a second publication, the *Ivy*, which focussed on black history.

Mrs. A. E. Johnson's second novel, *The Hazeley Family* (1894), followed four years later. It was another Sunday school book dealing with the evils of drink and family separations, but in which people reunite in the end.

The third novel, *Martina Meriden; or, What Is My Motive?* (1901) features a similar family group of a girl, Martina ("Tina"), and her two brothers, Billy and Joe.

Like her fictional families, Amelia Johnson had a daughter, Mrs. N. A. M. Shaw and two sons, Prentiss and Harvey, Jr. She died in Baltimore on March 29, 1922 after a two-day illness at the age of sixty-four. She was remembered more as the wife of Dr. Harvey Johnson, whose prominence may have overshadowed her literary accomplishments. Her obituary in the Afro-American newspaper on April 7 noted nothing of her writings, only of her union with Dr. Johnson, which was "happy" and "ideal." Amelia E. Johnson's literary pursuits suffered when she, like many women of her day, placed them second to her husband's career and their home.

Connie's New Home

by Amelia Etta Hall Johnson

1858-1922

A month had elapsed since Corinne first entered her new home. It was now July. One warm morning, Miss Rachel, seated in her accustomed place, sewing, was dividing her attention between her work and the little girl, who was washing and polishing the front windows. She had rubbed the panes again and again, until her arms ached, and still Miss Rachel declared that they were not fit to look at; "but you can't stand there rubbing all day, so they'll have to do, I 'spose. Go, now, and scrub that kitchen floor, and mind, if it don't suit me when you're done, I'll make you do it over till it does; and don't be long about it, either."

The small tired arms and hands hastened to get pail and brush, and to scrub, scrub, scrub, only to be told that the floor looked "as bad as before." Poor child! it had been this way ever since the day she came there from the cottage, and it seemed to her that, hard as her lot had been before, it was doubly so now. Nothing but hard work from morning until night. Not a moment of the day which she could call her own, her hard task mistress begrudging her the time spent in eating the meagre food she allowed her; and sometimes even the privilege of eating at all was on the slightest pretext denied her. As a general thing, the child arose from her bed hungry, and retired to it again hungry when the day was over. She cried herself to sleep nearly every night, partly from weariness, partly from grief.

If Miss Rachel had only spoken a kind word to her once in a while, she thought she would not have minded so much about the rest; but the hard features of the seamstress had no smiles for the sad-faced little Corinne, and the thin lips voiced no words for her, more pleasant than an order to do something, or a complaint that some other thing had not been satisfactorily

done. It was no wonder, then, that the child grew thinner than ever, as the weary days dragged themselves by.

Clarence had been to see her once one day, while Miss Rachel was out. The doctor could not spare him often, he said. He looked well and happy, and Corinne had been so glad to see him that she had disliked to mar the pleasure of his visit with complaints. Young as she was, she felt that nothing could be done about the matter, so she had given herself up to the enjoyment of the moment.

This visit had cheered the little girl very much, and her heart felt lighter that night as she lay down to rest, and she thought of her brother a long time before she fell asleep. He had talked to her about his situation and the kindness of his employer, and had confided to her his plans, which seemed to her simple mind nothing short of wonderful; and the thought of these plans made her forget, for the time being, that for her the old, dreary, uneventful life would commence again with the morning light.

Clarence had drawn the conclusion, from the very tidy appearance of the house, that his sister was fortunate in having such a home, especially since Corinne had made no complaints, and had evaded his question as to whether she liked to live there.

The boy himself was doing well. Naturally quick, and scrupulously honest and truthful, he had proved very useful to the good doctor. He felt that he had now "the chance," as he expressed it, for which he had wished so long; and he had fully made up his mind to improve it to the utmost.

The doctor, seeing that the boy was ambitious to make something of himself, sympathized with him and gave him some old school books, which he found stowed away in a corner of his bookcase. These books the boy studied carefully during his leisure moments, with occasionally a little help from the doctor. He had told Corinne that he meant to make a man of himself, and also that his fixed determination was to make a home for her; and when he had pictured to her that home, and the many comforts it was to contain, she had been too happy to do anything but clasp her hands and say, "Oh, Clarence!"

These were the plans that brightened the hours of the night after her brother's visit. Indeed, the memory of that visit and the vision of the home her brother was to make for them was the subject of her thoughts for days afterward.

She did not know it, but there was another glimmer of light coming into her dull life. It came after this fashion: Her friend, Miss Gray, had been absent during the summer holidays with her sister. They had been to pay a visit to one of their father's relatives who lived in the country, several hours' ride from N——.

It was the latter part of August when they returned. One of the first things Helen Gray did was to call on Miss Rachel Penrose, ostensibly to have a chat, but in reality to see how Corinne was getting along. The child was out at the time, so she seated herself and began talking to Miss Rachel, who, having always on hand an abundance of topics upon which to talk, was by no means adverse to having a little conversation. In answer to her queries, she told her caller all that had happened during her absence; not that there had been any very important happenings, but such as there had been were made the most of.

Her visitor listened apparently much interested, but inwardly wishing that Corinne would come. At length, just as she was about to go, the child came in, looking hot and tired, and so thin and wretched that Helen could scarcely repress an exclamation of pity. But feeling that the keen gray eyes of the seamstress were looking at her sharply, and fearing that she might make trouble for the little girl, she checked herself, and simply said: "Why, Corinne, how do you do?"

Corinne, overjoyed at sight of the kind familiar face, had noticed the fleeting expression of sympathy in it. She was a little disappointed at the indifferent tone of Miss Gray's voice when she spoke to her. She tried, however, to smile and answer cheerfully, as she knew Miss Rachel desired her to do; but it was a very pitiful smile, and she was only too glad to hurry away before her stern guardian should notice the quivering lip and gathering teardrops.

Helen had seen enough to convince her that the poor motherless child was unhappy and oppressed. She soon rose to go, saying as she did so, as carelessly as she could: "Miss Rachel, I would like it if you would let Corinne come to see me next Sunday afternoon. Does she go to Sunday-school?"

"No," was the answer, "she's no time to go; besides, what would she like of her want there? It would just put notions in her head, and she'd be getting above her place."

"But ——," gently remonstrated Miss Gray, startled out of her caution. "But you are a church member yourself, and surely you would not want the child grow up like a heathen?"

"I'd wish you to know, miss, that I know what's my duty, and what's not, too," retorted Miss Rachel; adding "and I need none of your telling."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Penrose," Helen hastened to say, feeling that she had injured her own cause. "I beg your pardon! Of course, you know your duty; I did not mean to say you did not; but won't you let Corinne come to see my sister some Sunday afternoons? She would like so much to have her to teach. You know she is an invalid, and can't go out much, and she does long so to have a class in the Sunday-school. It would please her to have Corinne. You will let her come, won't you?"

"Well," said Miss Rachel, slowly, somewhat mollified by the coaxing tones, "well, I can't promise for often, but maybe she can come sometimes, seeing it's you as wants her."

"Thank you," said Helen, congratulating herself upon gaining her point so easily. "May she come next Sunday?"

"I'll see about it; maybe so," was the reply. And the visitor took her leave.

When Helen reached home, she found her sister lying upon the sofa, with her eyes closed. Thinking her asleep, she stole softly to her side, and stood looking down into the face so sadly pinched and drawn by sickness and pain, the face so dear to her; and the thought that it looked thinner than ever caused her heart to beat, with the dread that one day she might miss from her side the only being left upon earth whom she could claim as her own. But only for an instant did she allow this thought to tarry; stooping, she lightly kissed the brow of the supposed sleeper. As she did so, the dark eyes unclosed, and Mary looked up into her face with her sweet smile, and said: "Did you think I was asleep?"

"Why, of course I did, you naughty child," returned her sister, pretending to be displeased. "What do you mean by shamming in that way?"

"I wasn't shamming — at least, I didn't mean to be."

"What were you doing then? You said you were not asleep," said Helen, curiously.

"I was just thinking, as I do lots of times when I am all alone."

"Thinking of what, dear?"

"Oh, of different things. Just then I was wondering if I had a mission, and what it was."

"Well, that's easily enough answered," said Helen.

"Your mission is to be my sweet little sister and companion; isn't that mission enough for you?"

"No, Helen, I don't think it is; it's almost too pleasant to be considered so; besides, if there's any mission about it, it belongs to you. There is little I can do for you, and you do all for me. I am not necessary to you, but you are to me."

"Now, there's just where you are wrong, my dear; you are altogether and entirely necessary to me. But if it will please you better, my mission is to care for you, and yours to care for me; will that do?"

"Yes, that will do very well, so far as it goes."

"So far as it goes; you ungrateful girl! What do you mean?"

"Why, I mean that I'd like to do something for some one else besides you. I want to feel that I am doing good to somebody."

"Oh, if that's all, I think your wish can be gratified."

Helen had left her sister's side during this conversation, and had busied herself with laying the table for the evening meal. Having set the tea to draw,

she came and sat down near Mary's sofa, and taking some sewing from the little workstand beside her, began to stitch away.

"How can my wish be gratified?" asked the invalid, watching the deft fingers of her sister with her large liquid eyes.

"Just this way," was the reply: "That poor child, Corinne Burton — you remember Corinne, don't you, whose mother died just a little while before we went to the country?"

"Oh, yes," answered Mary. "And whose father went off and left her and her brother all alone. I remember Corinne. What about her?"

"Well, she went to live with that prim Miss Rachel Penrose, the seamstress. I was so glad, because being apparently a very exemplary woman, I was quite sure she would have a good home."

"Well, didn't she?" queried Mary, anxiously.

"The home is good enough," said Helen, "but she isn't treated well."

"How do you know?"

"Because I went to see her to-day, and she looks very thin and weak; as if she were overworked. Miss Penrose spoke so crossly to her too; in fact, the child looks more miserable than she did when she was living at home in that wretched old shanty."

"Oh, Helen!" exclaimed Mary. "How sorry I am for her! But what can you do, and what has she to do with what were talking about just now?"

"A great deal. I've coaxed Miss Penrose to let her come here Sunday afternoons — partly that Corinne may have a pleasant change, and partly because I thought you would like to give her some Bible lessons."

"Yes, indeed, Helen dear; that's just what I should like of all things."

"I thought you would; and you can do the poor child ever so much good. But come, Mary, you must have your tea." And rising, she placed her arm about her sister's waist and tenderly led her to her seat at the table.

Amelia Etta Hall Johnson was a 19th century Toronto writer.

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Caribbean Carnival:

The Art Of Transformation

by Leah Creque-Harris



Part I

Caribbean Carnival, is a comprehensive art form developed by the collective creativity of the people, each contributing their single creative expression to produce the whole. The intersection of the fine arts exemplifies the meeting of diverse cultures in the context of historical development. What is so distinct about Carnival is that its artistic richness cannot be captured on the walls of a museum or in a concert hall, rather, it is a participatory art form, an artistic experience in which the observer is not distant and separate from the art. It is this multi-ethnic collaboration of peoples across all social strata that promotes the unity that characterizes Carnival.

In modern times, Carnival has come to mean more than an art form and cultural expression of the Caribbean; along with tourism Carnival has become an industry fueling the economies of the Caribbean basin. In each of the islands where Carnival is practiced, political and economic concerns are suspended while the populace devote their energies to Carnival.

As a ritual with complex meaning, Caribbean Carnival will be discussed in the context of Caribbean history, anthropology and the many art forms that it comprises. This essay will further explore the phenomena of Carnival principally through an examination of the predominant West Indian Festivals of Jonkonnu in Jamaica and Carnival in Trinidad. Replications of these two festival art forms are found throughout the Caribbean generally and are similar in form and function.

Most importantly, this essay seeks to explore through the Caribbean Carnival phenomenon the human urge to reckon with the mysteries of our existence through ritual. Despite changing historical and societal conditions the festivities of Caribbean Carnival are as timely and relevant to human need as the first carnival type festival. At the recent historical event of the decade, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the people with chisels in hand were described by network news commentators as having carnival. Although they wore no masquerade, music, dance, revelry, and an exceptional *esprit du corps* characterized their celebration as a folk festival, carnival. Perhaps the Berlin Wall was the mask that they were tearing away now that their transformation was complete.

These speculations aside, the important role of art as an accessible vehicle of expression and transformation for the people of the Caribbean is an essential vantage point for us to have. Moreover, the multiplicity of forms, meanings, derivatives that comprise carnival are essential, as well, for us to consider. The lone African mask on a pedestal in the museum is not the art that the ancient created without the costume which was attached, the motion it made as it moved and the music that accompanied it and the story that was told in song about it. Similarly, if we isolate one aspect of life and overlook the total experience of living, the entire human experience loses meaning. If we look at one discipline without seeing the threads of all knowledge we cannot learn. That is why Caribbean Carnival, the modern vestige of all ancient world traditions, is such an apt topic for an interdisciplinary essay!

CARNIVAL IN ANTIQUITY

Carnival is an ancient rite of celebration that has been observed in most cultures in some form or another as seasonal activities and behaviours that are ceremonial expressions of merriment and abandonment. Although no exact date or place of origin for Carnival can be given, it can be traced in

written records as far back to antiquity as 1,100 B.C. in ancient Greece (Rector 38). In Greece carnival festivities were used in connection with the worship of various gods, the Dionysian Festival being the most well known of these. Roman festivals paid homage to Bacchus and Saturn. These festivals were known for their costumes, merrymaking, and licentiousness. Carnival celebrations occurred throughout the European Middle Ages. During the Renaissance Carnival was influenced by the popularity of the masked balls introduced by Pope Paul II in the sixteenth century. The association of Carnival with the Catholic Church as a three-day pre-lenten festival provides some clues to the origin of its name. Carnival referred to Shrove Tuesday, the first day in which the Church forbade the eating of meat. From the Latin *carnelevare* the term was modified into *carne, vale!* meaning "farewell to meat" (Sebeok 39).

The Caribbean Carnival tradition, examined here, while related to Western European traditions, has also definitive elements of African cultures. These elements provide the richness of form and meaning that authenticate the Caribbean Carnival experience of today. African elements in Carnival are most evident in the art of masquerade, music, dance and drama. The earliest records of African ceremonial arts in Africa are located in the rock paintings and engravings of the Sahara desert depicting the arts of masking, body painting and sculpture, coiffure and ceremonial dress that date back over 3,500 years ago (Cole 12). The medieval empires of Benin and Ashanti prior to the fifteenth century became centres for the creation of art whose primary function was ceremonial. African ritual in antiquity united the arts of masquerade, costume, dance, music, storytelling and song to unite the opposing forces of the world and to transform everyday human experience into a powerful spiritual realm while commemorating such remarkable occasions as harvests, birth and death, initiation rites and marriage.

Such rituals were familiar to the African slave community who suddenly found themselves on alien shores faced with abhorrent cruelties and conditions. It was these African ritual observances that were used to restore some semblance of order and a balance of power to their lives. The European observances of carnivalesque festivities in the new world provided an opportunity for elements of their African culture to be preserved under the sanctions of European slaveholders whose festivities were similar in intent. Two of the predominant figures of Carnival throughout the Caribbean have direct linkages to African ritual: Moco Jumbie, the stilted figure with a long skirt and strips of cloth and John Canoe, whose costumes vary but contain elements of the African art of masquerade with elaborate headdress.

Reports of early Jamaican masquerades describe Africans and their descendants dressed in animal costumes with

feathers, mirrors, animal horns, shells, and glitter. Later in carnival and Jonkonnu, animal parts, along with Christmas tree bulbs, sequins, beach balls, plastic whistles, beads and magazine cutouts, would be incorporated into costume making. (Nunley, Bettelheim 35)

THE HISTORY OF CARIBBEAN CARNIVAL

Caribbean Carnival is, in effect, historical evidence of the many ethnic groups that have inhabited the Caribbean: the various European cultures, African cultures, Asian cultures and the indigenous Carib, Arawak, and other Indian groups. The Europeans began their entry into the Caribbean as early as the late fifteenth century when Columbus "discovered" Hispaniola on behalf of the Spanish crown and later "discovered" Jamaica in 1494 and Trinidad in 1498. Although the African presence in the Caribbean predates Columbus, (Van Sertima 14) it is the large influx of Africans via the slave trade through the sixteenth to the nineteenth century that solidified the cultural identity of the Caribbean as predominantly African.

Carnival, then, is shaped by the historical, social and geopolitical realities of the Caribbean. Slavery in the Caribbean antedates the Afro-American experience by 100 years and differs dramatically in character. These unique characteristics shaped the development of Carnival. The nature of the Caribbean economy dominated by sugar, tobacco and cotton left room for the wealthy planter only and the hordes of slaves needed to produce these crops. The small farmer could no longer survive. According to Eric Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery*, in Barbados in 1645 there were 11,200 small white farmers and 5,680 Negro slaves; in 1667 there were 745 large plantation owners and 82,023 slaves. In 1645 the island had 18,300 whites fit to bear arms: and; in 1667, only 8,300. With land appropriations dwindling, white farmers began to leave the islands (Williams 23). Similar population figures are cited for Trinidad from the year 1783, the first recorded citing of Carnival celebrations:

Pre-Emancipation Trinidad Population Figures

1783 Population				
	White	Coloured	Slave	Indian
Spanish	126	245	310	2,000

1797 Population				
Spanish	150	200	300	1,127
French	2,250	4,700	9,700	

1826 Population				
	White	Coloured	Slave Creole	Indian
Spanish	450	2,154		
French	617	2,150	15,291	655
British	938	1,594		
African		1,450	African	
American		1,056	7,832	

Source: "Carnival in Nineteenth Century Trinidad", *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 4 No. 3 and 4, (Port of Spain: Paria Publishing, 1956).

The significance of the population figures of pre-emancipation Trinidad, where Carnival has flourished, indicates several factors that have a bearing on the evolution of Carnival. One, the African population exceeded that of other groups. Two, the phenomenon of absentee ownership allowed slaves a relative amount of freedom to plan gatherings and create a sense of community, thereby allowing them to preserve a bit of their language and culture. Thirdly, Caribbean society was stratified by the few in the wealthy planter class and their numerous slaves, with no classes in between. Fourth, in the case of Trinidad, the culture and customs of the French aristocracy gained dominance over the Spanish who no longer ruled Trinidad. Their fondness for Carnival and masked balls provided fertile ground for slaves to blend elements of African ceremonial arts that resulted in the unique Carnival tradition of the Caribbean. Although the French influence made the culture more hospitable to the practice of Carnival, the Spanish influence should not be minimized for its injection of music and dance which dominated Spanish cultural observances:

... the African, like the Indian, was quick to adapt the Spanish forms to his own rhythm structures brought from Africa. The marriage of Spanish and African dance has proved to be one of the most fruitful and successful of unions. (Lekis 54)

Festivals celebrated in the Caribbean went through yet another evolution in the early nineteenth century when the British, who already ruled Jamaica, gained control of Trinidad. The British observance of carnival-like festivities at Christmas set the precedent for pre-emancipation Carnival to be celebrated during the Christmas season as was the case with the Jonkonnu celebrations in Jamaica.

At Christmas time on the various islands, slaves were given time off for merrymaking while their masters and "freed coloured" participated in masked balls, carnivalesque street parades, and house-to-house visitation. In Trinidad and other British West Indian colonies Christmas time was ideal for these practices not only because of the English' serious observance of Christmas holidays, but, also because of the declaration of martial law during Christmas throughout the colonies. Martial law which lasted from December 23 to January 8, brought business to a standstill. The merrymaking, the review of the militia and marching bands, along with the crowds who came to watch provided the foundation and the ambience for the development of Carnival. In Jamaica, Jonkonnu represents the creolization of carnival tradition that resulted from these Christmas observances.

During these opportunities for theatre and festivity, the Jonkonnu tradition developed, incorporating such African-based characters as the Cowhead, and African instruments such as the gumbay drum as well as such British based characters as the King and Queen or the Squire and the Lady. In the dance itself, the merging of African based steps like the "hip scoop" or "legs" and European based steps such as the quadrille balance also probably reflects these occasions when all classes were able to observe, and even to criticize, one another's theatrical skills, and to gather aesthetic information. (Nunley, Bettelheim 45 - 47)

The traditional Jonkonnu celebrations in Jamaica which began in the eighteenth century during the Christmas season are still primarily observed at Christmas. The precursor to Trinidad Carnival which began at Christmas and continued up to Lent, is now known as a Pre-Lenten Festival with the intensity of preparations beginning at Christmas.

Role reversal of whites playing slaves and slaves playing kings and queens in the selection of costumes was a custom in Jamaican Jonkonnu festivals as well as in the Trinidad Carnival. In Trinidad the festivals were primarily restricted to the upper classes with limited participation of free coloureds. Slaves were onlookers and were only allowed "contained celebrations" in the slave quarters of the plantation. Ironically, in Trinidad and other Caribbean islands, the favourite masquerade of the white upper

class involved role reversal, as well. Women dressed as sultry "mulatresses"; men, as "negre de jardin" (more commonly known in patois as *neque jadin*, meaning field hand). These whites, dressed as slaves holding torches and beating drums, would act out the drama of the slaves when fire broke out on a neighbouring plantation. It was the custom that when a fire broke out slaves from neighbouring estates were summoned with whips to assist the affected plantation. This observance became known as *Canboulay* from the French "Cannes Brulees", a representation of the slaves grinding burnt cane before it was totally damaged.

Though organized during slavery by slaveholders, Canboulay and Jonkonnu became important observances for Emancipation celebrations after 1830. It is important to note that these Caribbean festivals took on a new character after emancipation. Whites and elites slowly dwindled in their participation and the creolization of the masquerade, music and dance intensified with the use of African forms. By the middle of the nineteenth century Carnival became known for its licentiousness and as a practice for the lower classes. The tension between the police and the revelers reached an all-time high in Trinidad in 1881, resulting in the Canboulay riots and the temporary suspension of Carnival until the 1890s when under government guidance Carnival was practiced and accepted widely by all segments of the community.

Jonkonnu, also has had its peaks and valleys. In Jamaica it moved from being an urban, estate-based festival to the rural areas after emancipation. It re-emerged strongly once again during the 1950s when the government sanctioned its practice as a celebration of Jamaican culture and heritage by offering national competitions. Once again Jonkonnu is being revived through the declaration of an annual "Jamaican Carnival" that will be launched in April, 1990.

The various forms of Caribbean festivals have served as a barometre of social and political conditions. Through the years these festivals have gone through many evolutions and continue to do so. A perfect example of this is the overwhelming participation of women in the governance and actual masquerading in Trinidad's Carnival. Women now outnumber the men in Carnival's lavish production, which was once the purview of men. One can also trace historical developments through the types of costumes that are featured annually. During this decade there has been a proliferation of costumes depicting the technological age, creatures from outer space, robots and the like.

The singular most important innovation to Caribbean festivals, however, has been the introduction of the steel drum as a musical instrument and the consequent commercialization of calypso music. With heavy emphasis on

native music, Trinidad Carnival now includes the components of the famed calypso tents, panorama (battle of the bands and calypso king and queen competition) as well as the road march competition. In the case of Jamaica, the indigenous reggae music has been well received all over the world. Though not as well-integrated into folk festivals as calypso, reggae has become the signature of Jamaican culture in particular and West Indian culture in general and is incorporated into all West Indian celebrations. Although calypso and reggae music have evolved from simple acoustic instrumentation to the use of electronic sounds fueling a multi-million dollar industry, the use of the music to express wit, humour and political commentary is as ancient and ritualistic as the chants and songs of the first Carnivals of the eighteenth century.

The twentieth-century expansion of the African diaspora from the Caribbean to Europe, Canada and the United States has brought about another development in the history of Carnival. Millions of expatriate West Indians have brought Carnival with them. New World Carnival is enthusiastically and authentically celebrated in London, New York, Toronto, Miami and most recently, Atlanta. Though these celebrations are not quite like home, they represent the growing significance of the Caribbean community in these major Western cities.

THE MODERN CARNIVAL EXPERIENCE

The modern Carnival experience in Trinidad has many components; chief among them is what Errol Hill refers to as "the triumvirate of the Carnival experience, namely, the masquerade, the calypso and the steel band." These three elements are showcased as the ingenious creativity of the people during a week-long celebration prior to Ash Wednesday. However, the preparations for Carnival are quite extensive and begin as soon as one Carnival is over and intensifies after the Christmas season.

The masquerade of Carnival is a big industry, with the organization of "bands" (groups of masqueraders) by exquisite costume designers who select a theme for the band and the appropriate expression of that theme through the costumes of the King and Queen and as many as 2,500 masked revelers per band. Overall, Carnival participants number in excess of 100,000. During the two days of Carnival the masqueraders parade their costumes through the streets and across the savannah stage. The kings and queens of Carnival compete at the *Dimanche Gras* celebration prior to Carnival and lead the bands during the two days of Carnival. It then becomes the task of the designer to fashion with outlandish creativity costumes that are both showy and mobile to allow for dancing. King and Queen costumes can be very large, as tall as 15 feet high and 20 feet across. The meticulous artistry is astounding. David Picou, a leading "mas" designer offers the following

description of the "Sacred and Profane" costume fashioned for the band "Papillon":

Quite a large costume, relatively light, but the designer wanted to have the King's chest bare and yet he had to be mobile and carry and distribute a load of the type we are talking about. The King has an unevenly developed back. . . Two of us made a mould of his back out of plaster of paris as though he had broken his spine, and then took that mould to Ken Morris at the last minute for him to make a reverse cast of the mould. From that, the back brace was made of reinforced fibre-glass with the proper inserts and so on for the rigid steel structure. When worn it was very rigid and comfortable." (Picou 159)

The role of the artists and craftsmen in planning for the masquerade is enormous in that their involvement with carnival never ends. Ken Morris, a well known costume designer, provides this distinction:

If you call our Carnival a parade, I don't see why you should not put on the same costume every year. So it's not a parade. It is something else. . . (Morris 168)

Modern "mas" designers such as Peter Minshall have been known to finance their "mas camps" (site of costume production) by incorporating their operations and selling stocks. The "mas camps" can be located in several sites and employ large numbers of seamstresses, painters, decorators, etc. Costumes for individual masqueraders can cost as much as \$200.

Although contemporary themes are selected for each band, the costume design is an updated version of the old Carnival masquerade. If one interprets the costume design one can see traces of such traditional masquerades as Pierrot Grenade, The Midnight Robber and Sailors. What characterizes modern Carnival from old Carnival is the attention to colour and skimpier costumes for ease of movement.

Along with the costumes, the music of Trinidad is featured and celebrated. Since the invention of the steeldrum in the late 1930s, calypso music took on a new significance and became an integral part of the carnival celebration. Its unique sound complemented calypso lyrics and enlivened Carnival dancing which had formerly been accompanied by shak-shak, brass bands, etc. Preparations for Carnival calypso competitions begin in the "pan yards" where arrangers and musicians diligently practice their repertoire. The Panorama competition is the leading showcase for pan music and is a nightlong battle of the steelbands prior to Carnival.

Because of problems with amplification, the steelbands are no longer the major accompaniment for the masqueraders in the street. Instead, the deejay truck with theatre-sized speakers plays recorded calypso music for the revelers to dance. Many lament the diminishing role of the steelband in Carnival. However, the steelband music is still prominent as concert music and has been incorporated into other idioms such as jazz.

Today the typical Carnival itinerary includes: fetes (parties) leading up to Carnival to keep up the excitement; series of steelband competitions and costume judging, culminating in the *Dimanche Gras* (King and Queen Competitions) for masqueraders and calypsonians and Panorama, the grand steelband competition. The excitement in the street begins at daybreak for *Jouvay* (from the French *Jour Overt*), the opening of Carnival when thousands wearing old Carnival costumes, some smeared in soot, oil and mud, congregate in Independence Square. Folklorists say that the oil and mud are used to symbolize the burnt cane from the slavery era's Canboulay Festival. Other theories say that the soot, oil and mud are symbolically used to ease the entrance of the participant into the Carnival space, the world of unreality. The Jouvay celebration includes parodies and dramatizations. Those who are "playing mas" proceed to the Savannah stage. The mood is less organized than Carnival Tuesday which is Carnival's grand finale when all of the masquerade bands are judged. The most popular calypso is also judged by how many bands selected it for their musical theme. This song is then distinguished as the Road March for that year's Carnival.

Carnival ends at midnight and the revelers enjoy "las lap" to finish off the Carnival energy. On Ash Wednesday there is no trace of the Carnival madness. Radio stations intentionally play no calypso music in favour of popular American music. Many of the revelers, after having received their ashes, head for the beaches and resorts to relax. Many return to work. No one dares mock the other for participation in Carnival. After all, it was a dream that was soon forgotten.

The modern festival experience is well-organized and government sanctioned. Throughout the Caribbean, festivals are heavily promoted abroad to stimulate tourism. In Trinidad all Carnival activities are regulated by the Carnival Development Committee which consists of a cross-section of government officials, artists and private citizens. In Jamaica, under the administration of the Minister of Culture, there exists the Jamaica Festival Commission, which provides for festival production and coordination. Since Jamaica's Independence in 1962, festivals have been generated as a way of preserving their unique cultural heritage and identity. Though not as pervasive as the Trinidad Carnival, the Jamaican festivals incorporate all elements of Jamaican culture: the masquerading which is chiefly characteris-

tic of the Jonkonnu festival; arts and crafts; reggae music and traditional dances. Jamaica has successfully used the festival as a vehicle for cultural identity and development as a nation. Rex Nettleford, Jamaica's leading cultural theorist, has eloquently summarized the significance of Caribbean festival arts in his book, *Caribbean Cultural Identity*:

If the people of the Caribbean own nothing else, they certainly can own their creative imagination which, viewed in a particular way, is a powerful means of production for much that brings meaning and purpose to human life. And it is the wide and variety of products emanating from the free and ample exercise of this creative imagination which signifies to man his unique gift of culture. (xxv)

Caribbean festivals have, in fact, become the major vehicle for national pride and cultural identity, engendering loyalty and camaraderie among West Indian people. As a signature of West Indian culture, Carnival has also become one of the Caribbean's "best sellers" fueling the tourist industry's promise of sun, surf, sand and sea. Yet, the casual tourists who flock to these festivals by the thousands soon realize that these festivals are not merely superficial week-long parties, but are cultural observances that are rich in content and meaning.

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A Matter Of Fact

by Claire Harris



The girl waits until the man from the capital begins to dress before she asks diffidently, "Where you leave your car?"

Burri buttons his shirt carefully before he replies, "It on the other side, near the big house. It park round the bend near the temple. Why you ask?"

"We could go for a drive."

"We could go for a drive!" He smiles. "Jocelyn, you ain't see how late it is? What your mother go say, girl?" His smile broadens, he strikes a pose and asks again, "You want she coming after me with a cutlass?"

"Well we have to talk."

"Eh, eh! I thought we was talking. What you have to say you can't say here?" He is laughing as he says this.

"It too late to stay here. . . I can't afford to catch cold!"

With a flourish, "Here, put on my jacket." Then seeing her seriousness, "You see how warm you get." His arm goes around her shoulders. He nibbles on her ear and chuckles.

"Look, I want to talk!"

"SO, talk!" He still nibbles, moving down the column of her neck, his fingers turn her face away from the river to face him.

"I ain't get my menses this month, again."

"What you saying. . ." he begins casually, then suddenly alert he sits up, "You ain't get. . . Look girl, what you trying on me?! His voice is rough. His movements abrupt.

"Nothing! Is true. I pregnant."

"Well, that's great!. . . So, you see a doctor? When?"

"I get the results Monday."

He stares at her, frowning.

"I want you to come and see my mother."

He has decided to be cool, "Me! What I want with your mother!" His eyes are wide. He is smiling. He puts his arm around her. "Is you I want." He pats her stomach. "I'll bet is a boy!"

"How we go marry if you ain't talk?"

"Marry!" He is amazed. "Look girl, I ask you to marry me? Is the man does ask?! He scowls, "I ain't ready to marry nobody."

"But ain't you say you love me? What you think my mother go say? Where I go go?"

He is contemptuous. "Is town you go to school? You never hear about tablet? If is mine, ask your grandmother to give you a tea to drink, because I ain't marrying nobody." He begins to gather his things together. He checks his car keys, his wallet. Draws his Seiko on over his wrist.

"But I can't. . . I ain't never. . . nobody. . ."

Now he is gentle again. He takes her hand and seems to think. "Girl, I sorry. Don't do anything yet. I go think of a way. Don't say nothing if you frighten."

"What you mean?"

"A way to fix everything. What? You think I just go leave you?" He smiles, bends to kiss her, straightens, looks around. "But look how late you keep me here! Is a good thing it have moon. How else to see to go through all that bush?"

"When you coming back?"

"Thursday."

The lie trips from his tongue as smooth as butter, and the girl hears it though she is desperate to believe. She stands on the ledge by the falls watching him bound down the hill towards the river. His jacket slung over one shoulder flaps in his lean surefooted grace. He does not look back until he comes to the clump of bamboo before the bend in the river and sets foot on the path. She knows he has turned, because she can see the trim white shirt tucked neatly back into his pants, and the gleaming silver buckle in his belt. He has come to her straight from his clean civil service job in the

intimidating red pile of the Legislature. She does not return his wave. But waits to stop the tears that come of their own volition. When she is no longer shuddering, she wipes her face and begins to plan how to get to her room at the back of the house without coming face to face with her mother. Later she will claim a headache. This at least is true. She begins to climb up to the road to the village. Her fingers stray to the medallion dangling against her sore breasts.

Of all this: the river valley, the girl Jocelyn, the pregnancy, Burri as snake, the old storyteller will say nothing. She has no truck with this simple form, with its order and its inherent possibility of justice. Though she speaks the language, she knows the real world where men wander is full of unseen presences, of interruptions, of rupture. In such a world, men have only tricks and magic. When she makes her old voice growl, or rise and fall on the flutter and flare of candlelight, her tale is not only a small meeting: chance and the implacable at the crossroads, i.e. in the individual. Her tale is a celebration, and a binding of community. Her theme is survival in the current of riverlife, liferiver. Her eyes scan the gathered children fiercely, "You can learn how to deal with life; you cannot avoid what nests in you." There is something of the ancestral, of Africa in this. The children hear. They are polite. They nod solemnly. But their eyes lust after the story.

She laughs in the disconcerting way of old women, lights the candles, orders the electric lights switched off. Now she is ready.

"See-ah," she growls.

"See-ah," the children growl back.

"See-ah, Burri See-ah."

"See-ah, Burri See-ah," the children sing hugging their knees and moving closer, almost huddling.

"It have a man, Burri, he go see he girl by the river and he stay too late. They must have had talk or something because usually he leave while it light because he know about forest, riverbank, and La Diabliesse. Well, this Burri, he hurry long through the tunnel form by the arching bamboo. All time he watching the forest, looking round and thing. He ain't really 'fraid, but he know in a few minutes darkness be King. Only moon for light. He ain't running, but he walking real fast. He feel he got to get to the car quick. It seem to him he walking and walking but he ain't getting nowhere. He think perhaps he miss the crossing stones. But he can't see how he do that because it ain't got no turn off. Well, this Burri, he decide to stop for a minute and light a cigarette. Well is who tell Burri do that?

"See-ah, Burri See-ah."

"See-ah Burri Mammy oh."

"See-ah Burri Mammy oh," respond the children.

"Crick-crack," says a small boy who wants to get on with the story.

"First thing he know he can't find his lighter anywhere. He check breast pocket, breast pocket say, 'check shirt pocket.' He check shirt pocket, shirt pocket say, 'check pant pocket.' He check pant pocket, pant pocket say, 'check jacket pocket.' He check jacket pocket, and jacket pocket say, 'ain't my business if you drop it.'

Is now he in big trouble. Pitch black and no way to make a light. He begin to really hurry, and see heself looking straight into old eye of mappipi zanana. Snake straight and flat on the branch. Now he really begin to run. He run like he mad. Like snake chasing him. Branch catch at him, grass like it want to hold him back. A bird fly straight up out of the ground in front of him flapping and screaming. He running so hard that Burri half-way cross the clearing before he realize it.

He slow heself down. He bend over holding his knee like Olympic runner. When he heart return to he chest, he look back to the mouth of the bamboo grove. He ain't see nothing. He walk on now. He thinking how big and bright the moon. And is so it hanging low over the river. Well, is finally he come to the steppin stones and them. The water low in the river and he ain't think it go be slippery. And he standing there, shivering a little, because like is something cold trying to bind him, when he see a flash of something white. Like it moving in the trees on the other side of the river. Even before she come out in the moonlight he know is a woman. Is so some of those men does be. Anyhow she standing in the open looking frighten, and he see one time she pretty for so. Real pretty-pretty. And she got that high-boned face and full lips like the girl he just leave. Not that he thinking about she. What he thinking is how the moonlight so bright-bright, and how he clothes so mess up with all that running and thing. Instant he begin to fix up he shirt, and he jacket, he even take he tie out he pocket and put it back on.

And all the time he whistling. Like somebody give he something, and he real, real please.

See-ah Burri See-ah

Burri cross de river oh

Burri itch he scratch-oh."

"Burri itch he scratch-oh," sang the children happily.

"Crick-crack," says the small boy who knows his role.

The old woman turns to the small boy, "You is man, all you don't have no real hard sense. Is not only what you see that there." She pauses a moment, "And not all what smell sweet does taste sweet." Then she begins again.

"Well, now that he tidy, Burri feel that he is who he is. He walk to the stones and all the whole he smiling at the girl. He measure the first jump

and he start crossing, jumping from stone to stone, and like he showing off a little for the girl. So he look up to see how she taking it, and he see her eyes. They like a lasso. They like a fishline and Burri hook. He fall. He slip and he fall and feel heself struggling, the water close over he head, he thrash out and kick up, and he know the water ain't deep. But he head butt against sand, he eye open to the green wall of a pool. Current catch him, he toss like twig. His chest heavy and hurting, he see stars, and white light exploding, and red. Sudden he is boy again. This girl, Anita, skin like clay pot, that colour, her hair trailing in the water, he breast buds glistening, she floating on the surface of the river. Fragile and open as if she alone, as if none of the rest of them there. He swim over to her quiet, quiet, then he grab a bud in his mouth. How after the shock she scream and scream, and she grab his head and hold it down in the river bottom. How the thin wiry legs scissor and ride him. How the blood roar in he ears, and the darkness catch him. And then the weight lift and the light break through. How he jump and jerk and fight the line, the hooked finger. And how in the end he flop on the bank. How he lungs burn in the moonlight and water pour from eyes, nose, mouth. Meanwhile the woman just standing there under the cocoa. She ain't say nothing. He land on the riverbank at she feet where the skirt circle her in a frothing green frill.

Well, Burri fright leave he as he see the woman kind of smiling, like she just too polite to laugh out loud. So now he start to feel stupid for so! But the girl bend down and give he a hand, and he stand up, and she say real nice, 'You ain't careful, you catch cold!'

He just nod he head. Burri no fool, he figure he go let she do the talking and just nod and thing. He know if she start feeling sorry for him, he set. And right away he want to know she real, real well.

'You have far to go?' she voice have this sweet lilt.

Burri say, 'It quite town I have to go!' He shiver a little bit then he say, 'Is only my chest I 'fraid.'

'You could come by me and dry out. Is only my grandmother there.' And she smiling real sweet, and her voice like she promising something.

Burri ain't stop to ask heself how come a girl standing out there in the moonlight by sheself. He ain't ask heself how come he feeling so happy all of a sudden. He feeling happy, he just feel happy. And the woman herself, she just looking prettier and prettier. The woman self, she too happy because normally she does have to beg, but this one he just coming with her easy-easy.

"See-ah Burri See-ah." The old woman is drumming on her knees.

"See-ah Burri See-ah." The boy has got a bottle an' spoon.

"See-ah Burri See-ah"

Burri lock in a box oh

What lock he in, can't open oh."

Knees bent, turning slightly sideways, the old lady does a calypso shuffle,
"What lock he in, can't open oh."

Arms waving, pelvis shifting, the children dance around the room.

"What lock he in, can't open oh

See-ah Burri See-ah."

The boy gets tired of the bottle an' spoon. He decides to assert control.

"Crick-crack," he says. And again, "Crick-crack!" The old lady sighs, sits.

The children collapse at her feet. The old lady eyes the boy, "Your pee ain't froth, you can't be man," she says. The boy's eyes go round with surprise. The girls giggle. The old lady is talking rudeness! For a moment her voice crackles as she picks up the tale.

"Well now, Burri, he going up the hill with the lady. And he noticing how sweet she smelling, like is flowers. And how she turn she head, and walk a little sideways. He thinking how lucky he is. And how he never realize Lopinot have so many pretty girls. His head so full a plans for the girl, he never notice she limping until they get to he car. Is when playing real gentleman he open the car door for she that he see the funny foot. Still his mind ain't tell him nothing. Is so when you talking love you don't see what you don't want to sec. Burri get in the car, take out he car keys, and say to the girl, real formal, 'So where do you live Miss. . .?' and he kind of pause like he waiting for she to give he a name, but she ain't say no name. She just give him directions for a road near the ravine. The ravine about a mile and a half up the road. Burri thinking is so she want to play it? If she ain't give me a name, I ain't giving she one neither. He look at she sitting there beside him, and he thinking how smooth she skin, and he wondering what she grandmother going to say, and he hoping she real old. Perhaps is thinking of old that make he think of death. Anyway it suddenly hit him what the scent in the car remind him of. Is how the house smell when they bring all the wreaths for his mother funeral. Burri really love he mother now she dead. Just thinking about her could bring tears to his eye. The girl ain't saying nothing. She just sitting there smiling to sheself private like. Burri car have signal in the engine. But he begin to do show-off drive. He open the car window and begin to make pretty-pretty signal with his whole arm. Then he reach for he cigarettes. As soon as she see the cigarette, she begin to frown. She say 'That does make me sick, yes!'

Burri forget all about he wet clothes, which practically dry by now. He thinking this woman bold, yes! She ask me for a lift. Now she telling me I can't smoke in my own car! Is right now to see who is boss.

He say, 'The window open, you don't see?' But she smart too. Quick as crazy ants her hand move to the dashboard, and she grab the extra lighter he

does keep there. All the time she laughing like is joke. Burri ain't think is joke, but he laugh like he think is joke.

He smiling and he smiling, but he mind working overtime. 'God!' he say, 'but you stubborn yes! And in my own car too!' Is because he was looking at her that he see she face slip a little when he say 'God!' He think, 'I ketch! Now is Lawd help me!' And he see she face. He see it slip. And she put she hand up to hide it, and he grab the lighter from she. The whole car filling up with the scent of dead flowers. And he light the cigarette."

"Au Burri!" the children exclaim.

"So what you think happen next?" the old lady asks. She is relaxed, at ease.

"You lucky, eh Burri, You lucky."

The children vie with each other in their banshee wailing,

I woulda break you neck fuh you

de devil eat you, Burri."

They try to fill the room with wild laughter.

"Well, then she disappear," the old lady says, *"Is so Burri tell me and now I come here to tell you."*

A small girl fingers her face. "Ah, Burri," she sighs, eyes busy with the horror of a face slipping. Is it possible to be a Ladiablesse and not know it, she wonders, where would you go when they found you out?

"But how she sitting here in the dark like that?"

"Girl, turn on the electricity and throw some light on things."

I'll try. But this isn't easy. For one thing, I doubt the ability of anyone to relate a series of facts accurately. For another, I doubt that it is possible to consider any event a fact except in the simplest use of that word. Take, for instance, the laughable, the incontrovertible idea that I am writing this. True, these are my hands that strike the keys. But I have so little control over what is being written that I know the story is writing me. I have been brooding over these events since I rediscovered them in 1983. Once I was determined to write a straightforward narrative. A soupçon of horror. A fiction. Yet this has become an autobiography. Of sorts. And this short paragraph a kick against that fate. For we do not know if any of this really happened. Yet I remember the story being told. I remember the old woman. And I am sure the story was told as I have written it because that is how the

books say Afro-Caribbean tales are told. Your books, I mean. But this is not really about style. This is about plot. For, a few years later, seven years after the telling, to be precise, I met John Burian Armstrong.

He was dressed all in white except for a navy shirt. Close-cropped greying hair topped what I was later on to learn was called an ageless face. At the time I thought that in spite of the deep crevasses that ran down to the corner of his mouth, he was young. There I was curled up in my father's chair on the verandah, reading, I am sure, though I am not sure what I was reading. He stood there smiling at me, sucking at his lower lip as if I reminded him of food, and in spite of his cane, or perhaps because of it, managing to look Mr. Cool.

"You must be Mr. Harris' daughter!"

It crossed my mind suddenly to say coldly, "Not really, I'm a Ladiablesse in waiting."

Well. . . Not really.

I'm trying for fact. A little artistic licence here, a little there, and the next thing you know I'm writing history.

A few minutes later I heard him say to my father, "I'm John Burian Armstrong. People around here say I should talk to you."

I was not very surprised by this opening. 'Talking to' my father was something the villagers did all the time. He was the recipient of their dreams and their fears. As the only educated black man who came to the village regularly, he was frequently asked to help when anything 'official' or unusual came into their lives. Sometimes, perhaps often, the villagers simply needed someone to know what life, or 'they who does run eveything' had done to them, again. So when Armstrong introduced himself, my father sat back in his dark mahogany easy chair with the cushioned slats and prepared to listen.

"Oh! So what is it you have to tell me, Mr. Armstrong?"

"Everyone calls me 'Burri'."

"Burri, then."

"Sir what I have to say is God's truth! People say I was drunk. But that time I didn't drink. A drink now and then, yes. But drink to get drunk, no! Not even till today."

It was the name, Burri, that did it. "*See-ah Burri See-ah.*" I moved a Morris chair as close to the windows looking on the verandah as possible. Very quietly indeed I prepared to eavesdrop.

"Let me start from the beginning. Is true I get a girl pregnant. Is true I had no mind for marriage. We argue a bit and it get late. I leave her there and I start to walk along the river to get to the path what you cut there from the pool. Nothing so strange happen until I reach the steppin stones. Just

before I cross to come to this side I see a girl standing on the bank, she just standing there on this side near the big cocoa tree where the steps begin."

"What time would that have been?"

"About what o'clock? About seven for the latest. I kind of wave to her and I start crossing. Half way I slip on the stones, fall into the water, and the current sweep me in to the little cave it have under the bank near the bend. I really thought I was gone. Every which way I turn I coming up water. Anyway the girl bend over and give me a hand."

"Did you see her do that yourself?"

"Well, Mr. Harris, there wasn't anybody else there! I figure it have to be her."

"Reasonable. But it's always better if you tell me exactly what you know for a fact. Not what you think it must have been."

"Well, when I get back my strength, I start talking and she offer to take me home with her to dry off my clothes. She tell me her mother gone to visit her sister in San Fernando, but the rest of the family, home. I ask her her name and she tell me 'Mera,' is short for 'Ramera.' I tell my name, Burri. Is true I never hear that name before, but they have lots of 'pagnol' people living up here, so I ain't surprise."

"And she didn't look like anyone you know? Not even a little? You know how moonlight tricky."

"To tell you the truth she look a lot like the girl I was seeing. I thought they might have been some relation. But she herself I never see before."

"Go on."

"We come to the top of the road, and as I crossing over to the car I see she limping. I figure is a stone or something and I walk over to the other side. I open the car door and I get in. She tell me where she live and I start driving. The car smelling musty so I roll down the car window. I don't want the girl thinking my car nasty. Mosquitos start coming in the car so I reach for a cigarette. She say smoke does bother her. I reach for my lighter and my hand touch the bible with the Christopher medal my mother put there when I first buy the car. As God is my witness, Mr. Harris, I light the cigarette. The next thing I know the car rushing into the bank and I can't do anything. Sametime I look over, put out my hand, and the woman ain't there. Before the car hit the bank I see the whole thing. The car door stay close but the woman gone!

The car crumple like somebody fold it up. I wait there half an hour before anybody come. Then they couldn't get me out."

"You never saw her again?"

"I'll tell you. While I was waiting for the ambulance and the police, I tell the people there was a woman in the car. I describe her. They say perhaps she fall out. They look all night. Nobody see anything. Two days later the police come, question me. They say nobody reported missing. Nobody dead."

"You sure you didn't lose consciousness? Sometimes it's hard to tell."

"Well, I'll admit. My doctor tell me so too. So I come up here and I question everybody. Nobody ever hear of the family. Is that what convince me."

"You know you ought to write that down. One hears of these things, but no one ever has first-hand experience."

"But if I think like that could happen what kind of world is this?"

What kind of world indeed! For Mr. Armstrong claimed to have had his amazing experience three years earlier. Four years after the night we had danced wildly around the back verandah chanting:

"de dévil eat you, Burri"

First you point out to your sceptical parents that you have never before or since heard the name Burri. Have they? No they haven't. Infected by Newton and the church, they insist on coincidence. You are invited to clean up your imagination, and to attend daily Mass. But something lovely has been given to you. A world in which each fact like the legs of runners photographed at slow speeds is an amalgam of variations of itself. Myriad versions of event reaching out of time, out of space, individual to each observer.

It is March, 1954. Though he has friends among the villagers, we never see Mr. Armstrong again. My father, however, has discovered that his cane is merely a matter of fashion. "Just practising," he says, looking at me quizzically, "just practising."

The fiction persists that autobiography is non-fiction. A matter of fact. The question, of course, is what is a fact: what is reality. Though the myth of La Diablesse sticks to convention, the stories themselves are specific to a particular event. Is it possible that that old lady bodying forth a world in that long ago August night gave it flesh?

Or was it Burri himself? The power of his experience/delusion stretching both backwards and forwards into time.

Or did the face of reality slip?

Here are the notes I made over thirty years ago for the last half of the story.

- (I) In the darkness he slips and breaks his legs.
- (II) the villagers hear him calling in delirium but are convinced that a spirit calls them to doom.
- (III) He calls the girl by name: there is a dream sequence.
- (IV) He is found four days later by a hunting pack. Barely alive.
- (V) His leg never mends properly. (Serve him right!)

SEQUEL

He changes. Nice girl meets him and falls in love. He refuses to marry her and blight her life because of his leg. Somebody dies and leaves him a million dollars (US). The girl, who is poor, agrees to marry him because her little sister has nearly died from polio. The money helps them to buy better doctors. End on a kiss.

I could have been a romance novelist.

These I know to be facts: the 'Burri' tale; John Burian Armstrong; the Lopinot river; Jocelyn. By stopping here, I am being a purist. It is possible that the writing of this, this telling, began in 1983, when, on one of my rare trips to the island, I set out to visit the old lady, the storyteller of my childhood. I would have gone to see her anyway, but I also wanted to know if there had been an accident; more than that, I wanted to know where her story had come from. She was then 103 years old, this Great Aunt of mine, and she had the telegrams to prove it.

She looked at me cynically and observed, "All you so, ain't know what true from what ain't true!"

"You know. You tell me."

"You don't tell thing so to strangers."

"Come on! I am not a stranger!"

"Overseas water you blood! Don't know if you going or coming! Youself!"

She wouldn't sell me a plot of land either. She owned thirty acres, "All you had and you throw it away!"

But there had really been an accident. That much I had got from her.

I discovered that a friend, Dr. Harry Wilson-Janes of UWI, could get me into the *Guardian* morgue. I wanted to find out if Mr. Armstrong's accident had been reported. It had been. Strong black lines to give it prominence. But I found it only by the merest fluke and in a paper dated *five* years after Mr. Armstrong's visit to my father:

AROUCA - The police are interested in interviewing the woman who was riding with Mr. John B. Armstrong when his car crashed near the half mile post on the Lopinot Road at approximately 7:40 p.m. on Thursday, February 18, 1959. A witness saw a young woman get into the car about 7:36 p.m. You are asked to contact Inspector Jarvis at the Arouca police station. (J. Badsee)

After a few days of dithering, I called the Arouca police station. Inspector Jarvis had retired. But the desk sergeant cheerfully gave me his number at home. Because I didn't have the nerve to ask a retired Superintendent of Police whether he remembered a traffic accident which had taken place twenty-four years earlier, face to face, I decided to phone him. It took me several tries to contact him, but when I did, his voice was strong and clear.

Mine was hesitant. Did he remember the Armstrong accident? He did. He certainly did. Why was I asking? Armstrong had been a friend of mine. . . I had been away. . . some very funny stories going around. When had the accident taken place? February 1959. He was certain. Had there been another accident in 1954? 1953? No. He was sure of it. Armstrong had had only one accident. God knows he had made it his business to find out everything there was to know about that man. And he went to his funeral in 1980; yes, and made sure to check out the coffin. Did he ever find the woman? That was a funny, funny thing happened there. He remembered it still. Couldn't get it out of his head.

(Here he paused for several minutes to check out my genealogy: Which Harris? Oh, so soandso is your cousin! Which brother was grandfather? Oh, so you relate to soandso!

In some quarters it takes three generations to establish trust. Both sides of the family.)

His next question was direct and much to the point. Did I believe in the old-time things? Convince me. I don't know what I believe. Like everybody else. Silence. W. . . ell, it was a long story, he would cut it short for me. When they got to the crash, Armstrong was conscious. Trapped. His legs

twisted up. But his mind was clear. He said he picked up this woman and was taking her home when the car crashed. Asked him where the woman was. Funny look come over his face. Said he didn't know. To tell the truth, Jarvis thought it was going to be one of those gruesome cases. He and Sergeant Dick organized village search parties. Lanterns. Torchlight. Flambeaux. Ten groups of three spread out. Nothing. No woman. Next day, dogs and the police teams. Nothing. House to house; signals to every police station in the island. Signals to Tobago, Grenada. Nothing. He and Dick by themselves talked to every woman in the place. All the little tracks and hillhouses. Nothing.

By then the whole place started to panic. Country people. Taxi-drivers refused to drive after dark. Buses breaking down in the garage, come five-thirty. Visiting nurses sicken-off. Pressure! Pressure! He went to see Armstrong in the hospital, and Armstrong told him a strange, strange story. Went back to the accident reports. First thing, no skid marks. Yet that car, folded up like an accordion. De Silva, what own the plantation, he had called the station. Went back to see him. He wasn't there, he talked to his wife. The lady, English. At that time she was only here eight months. The lady didn't know anything about Trinidad. She swear she was sitting on her verandah having a drink after dinner. She, De Silva, and his brother. The car was parked under the hill, round the bend, after that is straight road. They saw the man come out the trees on the river track. They was watching for him because of the pretty-pretty car. He had a girl with him. She know the girl young because she very slim, and though she had a limp she walk real queenly. Also she had on a very long skirt with a frill, like she was going to a ball. She thought it was funny to see that in the country, coming out of the bush. You know how those colonist type does think! She said it was bright moonlight.

Then the husband come in. He had hear all the rumours and he was kind of looking as Jarvis funny. Stressing that his wife English. He said they watch the couple get in the car. He stressed how modern they looked together. His wife laughed and said, "Like an advertisement." But then they get serious, and he said they watch the car drive real slow and kind of erratic as if the driver had only one hand on the wheel. Then the car head for the bank. De Silva gave him a queer look and said (he remembers his exact words), "The car head for the bank like it was going home. Quiet and peaceful. It hardly make any noise. The horn blare once and shut off." They stand up on the verandah arguing about going down. His brother didn't believe the car crashed. They sent one of their men down to check and he came running back up the hill, shout up is a bad crash. De Silva said he

didn't know why he asked him, but he ask his foreman, "How many people in the car?" The man said, "One."

There was a long silence. After a while I said, "Thank you. It's hard to get the truth of such a thing. The facts, I mean." Superintendent Jarvis wished me well. Then he said, "Nobody knows exactly what happen there that night. But is the kind of thing you think is story. . . You have to think is story."

*Reprinted with permission of the author from **Biography of a Line**. Claire Harris lives in Calgary, Alberta.*

Headlines

by Nonqaba Msimang



THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

who are these women?
with scarves around their heads like mama
with overladen tired carry-all bags like mama
with rivulets of fatigue in their faces like mama
with parched thick lips like mama
with overweight red eyes like mama

who are these women?
with shouting red lips and nails like auntie nokusa
with parcels from department stores like auntie nokusa
with silk stockings and mini-skirts like auntie nokusa
with borrowed ginger hair like auntie nokusa

who are these women?
with closely-cropped hair like xinyamisi
with bulging kenya raffia bags like xinyamisi
with alert black eyes like xinyamisi
with copper bracelets and brass earrings like xinyamisi

who are all these women?

LOVE LETTER

what happened to the yellow
that creeps in through closed shutters
of a Zulu hut at dawn
licking open the eyes of
izintombi nezinsizwa
amakhehla nezalukazi

I searched for the yellow sunflower
that stands on tip toe
challenging the sunrays to a duel
mocking the yellow in the rainbow

what happened to the yellow flowers
that illuminate the hills and valleys
of kwadedangendale: move aside
let me spread my blanket and relax

what happened to the cornstalks
that flirt with the indian ocean breeze,
pregnant yellow cobs that
tease the lush black soil
as it awaits expectantly
their fall from grace

what happened to the long dry grass
that lies in yellow horizontal bundles
next to khulu's kitchen
as she bides her time
for a sunny day
to enthrone the brick house
she is preparing for her
second daughter-in-law

what happened to the overfed
yellow pumpkin that

IDENTIFICATION PAPERS

don't you have
an english name?

five million visitors in south africa
shunned sesotho, venda, xhosa, zulu names
25 million visitors in canada
scorned inuit, ojibwa, cree names
two million visitors in nigeria
scoffed at ibo, hausa, fulani names

don't you have
an easier name?

life is not a bed of roses
my ancestors had the land
they also had hospitality
which grandma calls *ubuntu*
they let the pale visitors
settle on a piece of land

When they woke up the next morning
they were squatters
slaves on the transvaal farms
their pockets lined with permits
defining the obvious
a permit to venture into the land
they originally owned

don't you have
a shorter name?
my people are not short
they are as tall as the Zimbabwe
as stately as the pyramid

sits on its hunches in the backyard
keeping its fingers crossed that
it doesn't get mutilated for
baby's feed
what happened to the pumpkin flowers
which defy all gravity
born of a creeping family
they take back the light
grow tall like giraffe
what happened to the
yellow in the Royal Ontario Museum?

NATIONAL ANTHEM

an enigma, a mystery
a trickster, a recluse
a sanctuary, a greenhouse

they say you are
a haughty snow-tipped mountain
the highest on the rockies
perhaps the unidentified
creatures of the tundra
maybe the generous prairies
with their interminable space

some say you are a chameleon
with different shades of self
others say you are one colour
despite your kaleidoscope
the riot of colour is a front
to lure unsuspecting victims
into a web of non-being
oblivious to the peril, they
sigh and coo: O'Canada

some say you are
neither morning nor sunset
just an expanse of blackness
as defiant as the yukon winter
others swear by the endless
brilliance of the yukon summer

i asked a man in the Pas
about your coat of arms
you were a fraud he said
a figment of someone's imagination
to get a seat at the United Nations

as the sun began to shine
and followed me around

how can my name be short
when it prophesized the coming
of the white sea-birds
that overstayed their welcome
flapping their wings
in iron arrogance
over the motherland Africa

how can my name be short
when it tells the story
of my brothers
who, consumed with greed
ripped the family apart
forcing the younger one
to flee for cover
across the zambezi

my name is not tidy
into first and last
the last is the first
the first the last
it's not two names
it's what your language
calls a sentence

a sentence is the whole
story of my people of
their mountains, skies, fields,
loves, jealousies, conflicts
victories, tears, laughter

my name is not short
it's as long as **CREATION**

my people are not short
they are awesome, brilliant
like the african sun
which kisses open rose buds
which laminates the corn yellow
the spinach green
the avocado green
the guava pink
the grapes black

my people are not short
their million years existence
is curved like the rainbow
after a cranky stormy night
my name explains the
different colours
in the lives of umama nobaba
it chronicles their highs, their lows
it explains the families which merge
to produce me
splendid daughter of africa

how can my name be short?
ghana gave birth to
me on a monday,
tuesday, wednesday, thursday
friday, saturday and sunday

how can my name be short
when it is a granary of history
of how Britain uncivilized Africa
of how christopher columbus
exposed the nudity of his mind
when he 'discovered'
continents which have been there
in the beginning, as far back

their history is as long as the umzimkhulu which meanders ,
arrogantly through the valleys of natal
provoking mountains and trees alike
on its way to the promiscuous lover
the indian ocean

Nonqaba Msimang is a writer from Azania who now lives in Toronto.

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The Face In The Mirror

by Theresa Lewis



I liked the room. It meant the end of a long search for suitable digs; the end of trudging the streets after work, facing nice, and sometimes not so nice, landladies, who often asked questions which I thought were completely irrelevant to the fact that I only wanted to rent a room. But this was London, and not unusual, as some of the other secretaries at work would confirm. . . those who, like myself, had come here from the provinces in search of better jobs.

It was Monica who had heard of it. Monica was a gem, really, though sometimes a bit overwhelming, she always seemed able to come up with the solution to a problem, because she had the right contacts. A friend of a friend of hers was returning to Australia and the flatlet would be available, a large, nicely furnished bed-sitting room, in one of the less expensive areas of Hampstead, its chintz-covered settee and matching drapes a little out-dated perhaps, but in keeping with the character of the huge Georgian

house. The tiny adjoining kitchenette with built-in cupboards was a real treasure.

Mrs. Stuart, the Scottish housekeeper, was a pleasant, motherly person who made you feel at home immediately. I remember the first time any feeling of uneasiness troubled me. It was a Sunday morning. I had got up late and was in the bathroom around ten o'clock when, looking up and into the mirror above the sink a shadow fell across my image and I turned around quickly to see what had caused it. The venetian blind was lowered and the strips closed so that nothing outside the window could possibly have disturbed the lighting in the room. I turned back to the mirror and for a moment fancied that there was, vaguely, a twin image there, but before I could fully grasp this, one reflection only remained: my own.

'I'm not yet fully awake', I thought, 'after going to bed in the wee hours of. . .' and thought no more of it until, a few weeks later, when Mrs. Stuart came in for a natter and a cup of tea. She stood in the centre of the room, showing off how much weight she had lost owing to the new formula in one of the weekly magazines.

"Look. . ." she said, one arm akimbo, "Ah've lost nearly a stone, and. . ."

I didn't hear the rest, for as I caught her reflection in the mirror, there was also another. In amazement I watched someone *else* come into focus, someone much younger than Mrs. Stuart, much slimmer and darker. From where I stood it could not be me. As swiftly as it had come it disappeared and I was left with the tantalizing question of whether I had imagined it or had I been hallucinating?

Mrs. Stuart hadn't noticed anything. She went on talking, praising the new slimming guide, telling me how much better it was than the ones she had used before. I listened, trying to appear interested but all the time wondering whether my imagination was playing tricks or whether I had, in fact, seen another face in the bathroom mirror, and now. . .

I was sorry when Mrs. Stuart left, though I was not afraid. There seemed nothing, then, to be afraid of. I was just wondering. . . that's all!

These two incidents had almost been forgotten — having been caught up in an unusual round of parties during the Christmas season, and looking forward to meeting, at one of them, the American cousin of one of my girlfriends. 'Dishy' was the word used to describe him and having caught a glimpse of him one day, I had decided to make sure that he would think that I was 'dishy' too. At first I could not decide what I should wear. Trousers. . . No. . . A cocktail dress. . . Out. Our crowd was too 'with it'. This would put me in the 'square' category. . . Then it struck me. . . m-m-m definitely. . .

Now, with a feverish excitement, I was getting ready for the party. My mind flashed back to the long search I had undertaken in order to find the outfit which I was about to wear, a search to which I wouldn't normally have put myself. But on this occasion I don't know what possessed me, whether

it was the idea of making myself particularly attractive for the American cousin, or whether it was because I had taken a liking to some of the newly-designed styles now appearing in the shops. Whatever it was had taken such a strong hold on me that I could not fight the urge, or the compulsion if you will, to wear anything but a long black skirt with the white lace blouse I had bought a month or two before. I remembered the lengths to which I had gone in order to get the skirt. Having decided on wearing the lace blouse I had, for some inexplicable reason, also decided that nothing — nothing but a black taffeta skirt would do. It had to be full-length as well.

The shops had been combed in my spare time, without any luck. There were woollen ones, suede ones, everything but black taffeta. Some compelling force would not permit my settling for anything else. As the date of the party neared I became frantic, forgetting at times the actual reason why I wanted the skirt. Remembering only that it must be black taffeta. Becoming more and more obsessed with this idea the American cousin took second place. I *must* have it I thought. . . I *must*. Then, in desperation, I remembered the Antique Market in Kensington. As I approached the stall there it was, hanging outside. Just what I wanted! The length, the size, everything was right. Although secondhand it seemed almost new and I didn't even bother to try it on. The tape measure assured me that this was not necessary and I left the market feeling very pleased indeed. I had noticed that there were only two small, black, glass buttons on a front panel which formed a 'V' from the waist to about four inches down the front. 'Four would have looked better' I thought, 'instead of just two' but I dismissed it.

Now I had everything on but the skirt. My make-up was on, my hair combed in a bouffant style, and my underskirt. . . the only thing I was not too happy about were my narrow high-heeled shoes, a little outdated perhaps in this age of antique fashions. I would have preferred them to be black satin pumps which would have been more in keeping with the gear I was wearing for the party: a white, long-sleeved blouse with old Victorian lace, buttoned up at the neck, and a crudely-shaped jade pendant on a narrow velvet ribbon which I knew added finesse to my outfit. The full-length underskirt swished around my ankles and I nearly tripped. Now for the skirt. This was the highlight of the evening. Excitement mounting I pulled the skirt over my head, smoothed it down at the front, turned, straightened the seam at the back and made a half-turn with arms uplifted, to ensure it looked the way I had expected. Then, as I faced the full-length mirror again, head proudly erect, I saw the face. . . what should have been *my* face. I stared at it, fascinated, confused, alarmed. The face in the mirror was not mine. The skirt, the blouse, the rest of me were there, but the face was that of a stranger. There were similarities to my own, but *it was not my face*. The hairstyle was the same, or nearly. The forehead seemed slightly wider, the

eyes a deeper brown. It was an older face. A bit fuller too. Similar, *but not mine*.

I spun around expecting to see someone else in the room, an unknown twin. There was no one. I looked again into the mirror and the strange face looked back at me, its unfamiliarity even more pronounced. The expression made the greatest difference. Filled with a confusion mingled with fear I felt a sense of impending disaster, terror and bewilderment. But there was no fear in the face, only a sad and pained, almost effusively gentle expression, of patient suffering. Horrified, I could only stare, faint whispers escaping from my throat. I heard myself saying:

"Go away, whoever or whatever you are. You are not me, you are not *mine*. Go away. . . Please go away."

I touched my face with both hands, one palm against each cheek. I saw my uplifted arms move mechanically to the face, saw the closed fingers of each hand as they rested lightly on either side. But I felt nothing. The touch did not register, neither did the amazement which should have shown in my eyes. The alien thing in the mirror was becoming more alien and the mumbling which escaped my half-closed lips grew fainter as the words 'go away' reached my ears.

The discordant ringing of the doorbell jerked me back to a reality which eluded me. The ringing of the bell became important. It was real, though vaguely out of place. I must get to it. There lay my salvation, my sanity perhaps. An escape from the strange face in the mirror.

'Perhaps it was Rogêt de Montefort ringing the bell. He was taking me to the soiree.' Soiree. . . ? These days one didn't go to soirees. . . I knew no Rogêt. . . Fort. . . or whatever. Where did I get that name from? What was I thinking?

I tripped over the skirt, the heel of my shoe tearing the fabric. I steadied myself against a chair. The hook at the waist snapped and I let the skirt slip to the floor, quickly stepped out of it.

Monica Baine's cool elegance was reassuring when I opened the front door.

"Da. . . ar. . . ling. . ." her eyebrows went up. "You look absolutely ghastly. . . Aren't you ready yet?" "What's the matter? You look as though you've seen a ghost. Aren't you going to the party?"

I didn't know which question to answer first. She hadn't asked the one I had anticipated. Didn't she see that I was different? That it wasn't really *me* standing there, but some stranger who resembled me?

"I don't know whether you are dressed or not. . ." She looked at my underskirt quizzically, "but at least you could ask me in, if you aren't. . . It's time we were on our way." She glanced at her watch as I stepped aside.

"Haven't you noticed anything different about me, Monica. . . about my face?"

There was a pause.

"Well, you do look a bit pale. Not feeling under the weather, are you? Oh, I like your hair. . ."

Monica did not usually wait for replies. She was already at the door to my room.

"Monica. . ." I just had to know.

"Yes, dar. . . ar. . . ling. . ."

I wished she would stop calling me dar. . . ar. . . ling in that acquired, stagey tone of voice.

"Isn't there anything. . . about. . . my face. . .?" We were now in the room. She looked inquiringly at me.

"No! Except that you could do with a little make-up, perhaps. You *do* look a bit pale. Please hurry, we're already late. Where's that dishy skirt you're supposed to be wearing tonight?"

I ignored the question. We were both at the mirror, Monica patting her hair into place and moving her head from-side to side while my own, dear familiar face looked back at me inquiringly. The face I had known all my life.

I listened to Monica's chit-chat as she drove. My mind was pre-occupied. I could not tell her what had happened. She would be sceptical. One did not expect much sympathy from Monica under such circumstances, good friend that she was. She was too practical a person.

"Pity about your skirt. Quite nice, too. Oh, well, you could have it mended and ready for my birthday party next week."

I heard her through a fog of thoughts. I was searching mentally for some opening so I could broach the subject which was uppermost in my mind. . . though I had conflicting emotions about it. Should I speak with someone? Or try and think it out myself? It struck me then that when Monica had been helping me to move into the house, she had dropped a remark about tragic stories which had allegedly happened a very long time ago in one of the houses on our street. In a truly Monica-like fashion she was not quite sure of the facts, nor of which house it was, but thought it may have been mine.

"These Georgian houses. . ." she had said, "are all alike to me. But I think it was this one. . ."

She had gone on to relate how, during the latter part of the eighteenth-hundreds, two sisters who had been very fond of each other, lived there. The elder sister, Sarah, was a rather demure person in her late twenties and, by the standards of their time, an old maid. The younger and more vivacious sister was in her late teens and considered quite a beauty. Sarah had fallen in love with someone with a French-sounding name, Monica couldn't remember what it was either. Anyway, a few weeks before they were to be married, Sarah was dressing to go out with her boyfriend. That evening she found a note left by her sister which said that she was cloping with Frenchie.

Apparently poor Sarah took it very badly. The next day, after many fainting spells, and smelling-salts sessions, she disappeared. She was found, a few days later, seated in a chair in the attic. Quite dead. One small button from her skirt was clasped tightly in each hand, as if they had been dislodged while she toyed with them. Or were they plucked off in despair. . . I wondered.

I thought of this story often during the evening.

When I saw the tiny, scarcely visible spots on the skirt where two more buttons might have been, I knew why the suspicion nagged and would not leave me. And why it was that as soon as I returned home I *had* to examine the skirt. I was sure now that there was some connection between the skirt and the face in the mirror. And I wanted nothing more to do with it.

It was difficult to get this incident out of my mind. I became afraid of looking into a mirror, fearing that there might be a repetition of the incident. Yet I found myself often glancing into the mirror more than I would do ordinarily, yet not really wanting to, just in case, but afraid of not overcoming my fear. I did not know what to think, or what to do. Should I mention it to Mrs. Stuart, or Monica? Would they think that I was heading for a nervous breakdown?

After this I went to bed early for as many nights as possible, having concluded that I'd been living it up too much and needed rest.

Time passed and with no further incident occurring, the memory of my strange experience was beginning to fade. Whenever I remembered it I reminded myself that it was not likely to happen again, that it was just an hallucination, a trick of the lighting perhaps, or a trick of the eye or nerves, after a busy day.

A few weeks later I went up to the attic where I had stored a large box of odds and ends when I moved into the house. I noticed a huge gilt frame resting against the box. It may have been put there during one of the housekeeper's cleaning days for I had never seen it before. It was easy to tell from the tarnished gilt, and the heavy coating of dust, that it had been dug out recently from some corner of the attic. Perhaps the housekeeper had been curious. I looked at it carefully. It was an ornate, clumsy thing, fascinating. I dragged it to the window as the light in the room was rather poor. I lifted an old curtain which lay nearby and gently dusted it. As the cloth passed over the surface of the painting I realized I was looking into the face I had seen in the mirror and it looked back at me. Despite the age and condition of the painting, I could see that she was dressed in a lace blouse and a long black skirt.

There was nothing frightening about the portrait. No reason for suddenly feeling a slow fear threading its way around me. Or why the room should suddenly change temperature, becoming cool and damp. I sensed that I was not alone and the curtain fell from my hands. I turned to face the doorway which had been left opened and there, framed within its space, stood the

woman in the portrait, her features recognisable despite the shadows of an unevenly lit attic and the corridor behind. The same sad eyes in the mirror stared into mine. I became terrified. For an instant I felt trapped. I wanted to scream, to cry out to her to get away from the door, to let me leave the room. But her sad half-smile fascinated and repelled me, and I watched, helpless, as she stepped forward.

A sound distracted us both. Mrs. Stuart puffed her way in and, simultaneously, the woman vanished. Mrs. Stuart was breathless from the exertion of climbing the stairs.

"Canna gie yer a han, dearie. . .?" she chimed. . . Then, in a changed tone, added, "Why, yer look as if y'd seen a ghust. . ."

"Yes. . ." I whispered, trying desperately to control my shaking. "Can you. . . help me. . . to take this box. . . downstairs?" I managed to say. . . "I'm moving."

I could not see the surprised look that I knew would be on the face of the woman. So I bent over and began to drag the box across the floor.

*Theresa Lewis is a Toronto writer and poet whose most recent book is **Things Elusive**.*

The Absence Of Writing Or How I Almost Became A Spy

by Marlene Nourbese Philip



I wasn't hard-backed but I definitely wasn't no spring chicken when I started to write — as a way of living my life I mean, although like a lot of women I had been doing it on the quiet quiet filling up all kinds of notebooks with poems, thinkings — deep and not so deep — curses and blessings.

The last thing I expected to end up doing was writing, and when I upsed and left a safe and decent profession — second oldest in the world, they say — for writing, I was the most surprised person. Is in those growing up years as a child in Trinidad and Tobago that you will find the how, why and wherefore of this take-me-by-surprise change.

If someone had asked me when I was growing up to tell them what pictures came to mind when I heard the word 'writer' I would have said nothing. What I wanted to be most of all was a spy, and after reading about

spies in World War II, spying was much more real to me than writing. After all there was an Empire and we, its loyal subjects, had to defend it. Black and brown middle class people — my family, short on money but long on respectability, belonged to this class — wanted their children to get 'good jobs' and, better yet, go into the professions. Massa day was done and dreams were running high high — my son the doctor! Education was open to everyone, girl and boy alike — my daughter the lawyer! And if your son or daughter didn't manage to get that far, there was always nursing, teaching or accounting. Failing that there was always the civil service.

Some people might say that this was normal since the writers we had heard about — all white — had usually starved and you couldn't say this about doctors or lawyers. Education was going to be the salvation of the black middle classes — so we believed — and a profession was the best proof that you had put servitude behind you, and were becoming more like the upper classes. Writing was no help in this at all.

In high school I was learning and learning about many things — English literature, French history, American history and finally in my fifth year, West Indian history — poor-ass cousin to English history and the name V. S. Naipaul was there somewhere. V. S. Naipaul, writer. It was a sister of his who taught me in high school who first mentioned him to us, her students. But V. S. Naipaul was Indian and, in the context of Trinidad at that time, in the eyes of the blacks, this was a strike against him. V. S. Naipaul the writer we didn't understand or care to understand. Maybe, without knowing it, we were already understanding how he was going to use us in his writing life.

Books for so! I wasn't no stranger to them — they were all around since my father was a headmaster and living in the city meant I could get to the library easily. Books for so! Rows and rows of them at the library as greedy-belly I read my way through Dostoevsky, Moravia, Shakespeare, Dickens. Books for so! Other people were writing them. I was reading them.

I wasn't different from any of the twenty or so girls in my sixth-form class. None of them were looking to writing as a career, or even thinking the thought as a possibility. Profession, vocation, career — we all knew those words; we, the black and brown middle classes, scholarship girls whom our teachers were exhorting to be the cream of society, the white salt of the earth. Profession, vocation, career — anything but writer.

Some people are born writing, some achieve writing and some have writing thrust upon them. My belonging is to the last group, coming slowly to accept the blessing and yoke that is writing, and with so doing I have come upon an understanding of language — good-english-bad-english

english, Queenglish and Kinglish — the anguish that is english in colonial societies. The remembering — the revolutionary language of 'massa day done' — change fomenting not in the language of rulers, but in the language of the people.

Only when we understand language and its role in a colonial society can we understand the role of writing and the writer in such a society; only then, perhaps, can we understand why writing was not and still, to a large degree, is not recognized as a career, profession, or way of being in the Caribbean and even among Caribbean people resident in Canada.

What follows is my attempt to analyze and understand the role of language and the word from the perspective of a writer resident in a society which is still very much colonial — Canada; a writer whose recent history is colonial and continues to cast very long shadows.

Fundamental to any art form is the image, whether it be the physical image as created by the dancer and choreographer, the musical image of the composer and musician, the visual image of the plastic artist or the verbal image, often metaphorical, of the writer and poet. (For the purposes of this essay I will be confining myself for the most part to the concept of image as it relates to the writer.) While, however, it may be quite easy to see the role of image as it relates to the visual artist, it may be less easy to do so with respect to the writer. The word 'image' is being used here to convey what can only be described as the irreducible essence — the i-mage — of creative writing; it can be likened to the DNA molecules at the heart of all life. The process of giving tangible form to this i-mage may be called i-maging, or the i-magination. Use of unconventional orthography, 'i-mage' in this instance, does not only represent the increasingly conventional deconstruction of certain words, but draws on the Rastafarian practice of privileging the 'I' in many words.¹ 'I-mage' rather than 'image' is, in fact, a closer approximation of the concept under discussion in this essay. In her attempt to translate the i-mage into meaning and non-meaning, the writer has access to a variety of verbal techniques and methods — comparison, simile, metaphor, metonymy, symbol, rhyme, allegory, fable, myth — all of which aid her in this process. Whatever the name given to the technique or form, the function remains the same — that of enabling the artist to translate the i-mage into meaningful language for her audience.

The power and threat of the artist, poet or writer lies in this ability to create new i-mages, i-mages that speak to the essential being of the people among whom and for whom the artist creates. If allowed free expression, these i-mages succeed in altering the way a society perceives itself and, eventually, its collective consciousness. For this process to happen, however, a society needs the autonomous i-mage-maker for whom the i-mage and the

language of any art form become what they should be — a well-balanced equation.

When, in the early 1900s, Picasso and his fellow artists entered their so-called 'primitive stage' they employed what had traditionally been an African aesthetic of art and sculpture and succeeded in permanently altering the sensibilities of the West toward this aesthetic. In the wake of European colonial penetration of Africa and Oceania the entire art world was, in fact, revolutionized and the modernist art movement was born. These changes did not necessarily increase the understanding or tolerance of the West for Africans and Africa, but people began to perceive differently.

I-mages that comprised the African aesthetic had previously been thought to be primitive, naive, and ugly, and consequently had been dismissed not only by white Westerners, but by the Africans themselves living outside Africa — so far were Africans themselves removed from their power to create, control and even understand their own i-mages. The societies in which these New World Africans lived — North and South America, England, the Caribbean — lacked that needed matrix in which the autonomous i-image-maker could flourish. The only exception to this is to be found in musical traditions, where despite the hostility of these predominantly white societies, the African i-image-maker in musical art forms was successful in producing authentic art which has also permanently influenced Western music.

Caribbean society has been a colonial society for a much longer time than not, and the role of the i-image, i-image-making, and i-image control are significant. The societies that comprise the Caribbean identity may be identified by:

- (a) a significant lack of autonomy in the creation and dissemination of i-images;
- (b) opposition by the ruling classes both at home and abroad to the creation of i-images that challenge their i-image making powers and the status quo;
- (c) restricting of indigenously created i-images to marginal groups, e.g. reggae and calypso.

While changes like independence have improved some of these circumstances both within the Caribbean and within Caribbean societies in the large metropolitan centres overseas, these factors continue to affect the artist and particularly the writer. The tradition of writing for the Caribbean and Caribbean people is a brief one, and briefer still is the Afro-centric tradition in that writing.

I argued above that at the heart of all creative writing is the i-mage; the tangible presentation of this is the word, or word symbol as I prefer to describe it. The success of the execution of this i-mage, be it poetical or in the extended metaphor of the novel, depends to a large degree on the essential tension between the i-mage and word or words giving voice to the i-mage. Tension is created by the interplay of i-mage and word — i-mage creating word, word giving rise to further i-mage and so on. This process is founded upon familiarity with word and i-mage, 'familiarity' being used here in the sense of being kin to, a part of, related to. What is assumed here, but probably should not be, is also a growing familiarity with be-ing and how it relates to the outer world.

If this process is as it should be, then the autonomous i-mage-maker serves the function of continually enriching the language by enlarging the source of i-mages — in particular, metaphorical i-mage. If we accept that living language continually encapsulates, reflects and refines the entire experiential life and world view of the tribe, the race and consequently of society at large; and if we accept that the poet, the story-teller, the singer or balladeer (through their words), express this process in their work, then we must accept that this process becomes one way in which a society continually accepts, integrates and transcends its experiences, positive or negative. For it is through those activities — poetry, story-telling and writing — that the tribe's experiences are converted and transformed to i-mage and to word almost simultaneously, and from word back to i-mage again. So metaphorical life takes place, so the language becomes richer, the store of metaphor, myth and fable enlarged, and the experience transcended not by exclusion and alienation, but by inclusion in the linguistic psyche, the racial and generic memory of the group.

The progenitors of Caribbean society as it exists today created a situation such that the equation between i-mage and word was destroyed for the African. The African could still think and i-mage, she could still conceive of what was happening to her. But in stripping her of her language, in denying the voice power to make and, simultaneously, to express the i-mage — in denying the voice expression, in fact — the ability and power to use the voice was effectively stymied. We could go further and argue that with the withering of the word in the New World, not only did the i-mage die, but also the capacity to create in one's own i-mage. The bridge that language creates, the crossover from i-mage to expression was destroyed, if only temporarily. Furthermore, alien and negative European languages would replace those African languages recently removed and, irony of all ironies, when the word/i-mage equation was attempted again, this process would take place through a language that was not only experientially foreign, but also etymologically hostile and expressive of the non-being of the African. To speak another language is to enter another consciousness. Africans in the

New World were compelled to enter another consciousness, that of their masters, while simultaneously being excluded from their own. While similar prohibitions extended to music at various times, language was one of the most important sites of struggle between the Old World and the New World. The outcome of this struggle was the almost absolute destruction and obliteration of African languages. Together with the accompanying act of renaming by the European, this was one of the most devastating and successful acts of aggression carried out by one people against another. African musical art forms probably owe their survival and persistence to the fact that they were essentially non-verbal.

Once the i-image making power of the African had been removed or damaged by denial of language and speech, the African was then forced back upon the raw experience without the linguistic resources to integrate and eventually transcend it. The resulting situation became one in which the African was decontextualised, except in so far as her actions generated profits for the owners. The language within which that decontextualisation flourished was in itself and *at best* a decontextualised one for the African. At worst the language would serve to destroy. Language, therefore, succeeded in pushing the African further away from the expression of her experience and, consequently, the meaning of it.

The African in the Caribbean could move away from the experience of slavery in time; she could even acquire some perspective upon it, but the experience, having never been reclaimed and integrated metaphorically through the language and so within the psyche, could never be transcended. To reclaim and integrate the experience required autonomous i-image makers and therefore a language with the emotional, linguistic, and historical resources capable of giving voice to the particular i-images arising out of the experience. In summing up his efforts to augment the English language in the sixteenth century, Sir Thomas Elyot wrote, "I intended to augment our Englyshe tonge, whereby men should as well expresse more abundantly the thynges that they conceyved in theyr harts (wherefore language was ordeyned) hauynge wordes apte for the pourpose." That the African needed to express "more abundantly the thynges. . . they conceyved in theyr harts" is undisputed; that the English language lacked "wordes apte for the pourpose" cannot be denied. Over and above her primary function as a chattel and unit of production, the English language merely served to articulate the non-being of the African. The purpose for which language was ordained would remain unfulfilled. I would argue further that it is impossible for any language that inherently denies the essential humanity of any group or people to be truly capable of giving voice to the i-images of experiences of that group without tremendous and fundamental changes within the language

itself. In the instant case, however, since there was no possible expression of the New World experience within any African language, the i-maging could only be expressed through the English language.

Essentially, therefore, what the African would do is use a foreign language expressive of an alien experiential life — a language comprised of word symbols that even then had affirmed negative i-mages about her, and one which was but a reflection of the experience of the European ethnocentric world view. This would, eventually, become her only language, her only tool to create and express i-mages about herself, and her life experiences, past, present and future. The paradox at the heart of the acquisition of this language is that the African learned both to speak and to be dumb at the same time, to give voice to the experience and i-image, yet remain silent. That silence has had profound effect upon the English-speaking African Caribbean artist working in the medium of words.

Speech, voice, language, and word — all are ways of being in the world, and the artist working with the i-image and giving voice to it is being in the world. The only way the African artist could be in this world, that is the New World, was to give voice to this split i-image of voice silence. Ways to transcend that contradiction had to and still have to be developed, for that silence continues to shroud the experience, the i-image and so the word. As the poet, Cecilia Bustamante, writes in *The Poet and Her Text*:

. . . within this radius (of language) she discovers that having adapted herself as a vehicle of communication for historical and cultural moments between a dominant culture and a dominated one, language is becoming one more tool for subordination, replacement, pressure and distortion. Its potential is unexpressed, a proof that it suffers from marginalization of the dominated, or rather — the threat of being unable to internalize her own culture which has been violated. In order to express this reality, the social function of language fosters either its communicative values or silence [my emphasis]. Reflecting a similar stress it detects the multiple structures of violence, its authenticity is tested in the confusion of recognition in the tense structures of violation and domination that, whether paradoxical or contrary, are always obstructive. . . This is the dilemma of the dominated: to disappear or change at the prices of their lives.

Concerning literature and the Caribbean, C.L.R. James has written that "language for us is not a distillation of our past."² If by 'language' is meant

Queen's or King's English as we know it, this statement is true, because that language, for all the reasons given above, can never be a distillation of our past. But what the ordinary African, the African on the Papine bus, or the Port-of-Spain route taxi, or the Toronto subway, produced from the only linguistic behaviour allowed her — that is, functionality (at its barest level) in the English language — is truly and surely a distillation of her past. It may not be the clearest distillation, but it remains a distillation all the same.

In the vortex of New World slavery, the African forged new and different words, developed strategies to impress her experience on the language. The formal standard language was subverted, turned upside down, inside out, and even sometimes erased. Nouns became strangers to verbs and vice versa; tonal accentuation took the place of several words at a time; rhythms held sway. Many of these 'techniques' are rooted in African languages; their collective impact on the English language would result in the latter being, at times, unrecognizable as English. Bad English. Broken English. Patois. Dialect. These words are for the most part negative descriptions of the linguistic result of the African attempting to leave her impress on the language. That language now bears the living linguistic legacy of a people trying and succeeding in giving voice to their experience in the best and sometimes the only way possible. The havoc that the African wreaked upon the English language is, in fact, the metaphorical equivalent of the havoc that coming to the New World represented for the African. Language then becomes more than a distillation, it is the truest representation, the mirror image of the experience.

Language of the people. Language for the people. Language by the people, honed and fashioned through a particular history of empire and savagery. A language also nurtured and cherished on the streets of Port-of-Spain, San Fernando, Boissiere Village and Sangre Grande in the look she dey and leh we go, in the mouths of the calypsonians, Jean and Dinah, Rosita and Clementina, Mama look a boo boo, the cuss buds, the limers, the hos (whores), the jackabats, and the market women. These are the custodians and lovers of this strange wonderful you tink it easy jive ass kickass massa day done Chagaramus is we own ole mass pretty mass pansweet language. A more accurate description of this language would be to call it a demotic variant of English. The Caribbean demotic. The excitement for me as a writer comes in the confrontation between the formal and the demotic within the text itself.

In the absence of any other language by which the past may be repossessed, reclaimed and its most painful aspects transcended, English in its broadest spectrum must be made to do the job. To say that the experience can only be expressed in standard English (if there is any such thing)

or only in the Caribbean demotic (there *is* such a thing) is, in fact, to limit the experience for the African artist working in the Caribbean demotic. It is *in the continuum of expression* from standard to Caribbean English that the veracity of the experience lies.

One can never be less than self-conscious as an African Caribbean writer working in any of the demotic variants of English, whether the demotic variant be a form of standard English or Caribbean English. And for the writer from the Caribbean, language must always present a dilemma. At its most simple, the dilemma can be resolved to an either/or dichotomy: either one writes in a demotic variant of English, or one writes in straight English. Choice of one or the other in this scenario is often seen as a political choice and much bad writing takes place on either side of the divide in the name of linguistic validity. It is not sufficient, however, to write only in dialect, for too often that remains a parallel and closed experience, although a part of the same language. Neither is it sufficient to write only in what we have come to call standard English. The language as we know it has to be dislocated and acted upon — even destroyed — so that it begins to serve our purposes. It is our only language, and while it is our mother tongue, ours is also a father tongue. Some writers — Derek Walcott and Wilson Harris immediately come to mind — have publicly acknowledged their gratitude for the ‘blessing’ conferred on them by the imposition of the English language and have, in fact, refused to acknowledge that there even exists a dilemma; others like Earl Lovelace have taken up the challenge that the anguish that is English presents for all African Caribbean people.

The issue is, however, more complex than the either/or dichotomy suggests. The place African Caribbean writers occupy is one that is unique, and one that forces the writer to operate in a language that was used to brutalize and diminish Africans so that they would come to a profound belief in their own lack of humanity. No language can accomplish this — and to a large degree English did — without itself being profoundly affected, without itself being tainted. The challenge, therefore, facing the African Caribbean writer who is at all sensitive to language and to the issues that language generates, is to use the language in such a way that the historical realities are not erased or obliterated, so that English is revealed as the tainted tongue it truly is. Only in so doing will English be redeemed.

Subversion of the language has already taken place. It began when the African in the New World through alchemical (al kimiya, the art of the black and Egypt) practices succeeded in transforming the leavings and detritus of a language and infused it with her own remembered linguistic traditions. Much more must now be attempted. If we accept the earlier premises, that at the heart of the language lies the i-mage, metaphorical or otherwise, and

that to the artist falls the task of articulating and presenting this image to the people, then the attack must be made at the only place where any true change is ever possible: at the heart of the language — the i-mage and the simultaneous naming of it. The African artist in the Caribbean and in the New World must create in, give voice to and control her own i-mages. This is essential for any group, person, or people, but more so for the African in the New World, since in one sense, our coming upon ourselves, our revelation to ourselves in the New World was simultaneous with a negative re-presentation of ourselves to ourselves, by a hostile imperialist power, and articulated in a language endemically and etymologically hostile to our very existence. In a very real sense, it can be argued that for the African in the New World learning the English language was simultaneous with learning of her non-being, her lack of wholeness.

The experience of the African in the Caribbean and the New World is now, however, as much part of the English collective experience as England is part, for better or worse, of the African experience (in the same manner, for instance, that Germany will always be a part of the Jewish collective experience and vice versa). That experience expressed in the language — a language that is shared yet experientially different for both groups — has been and continues to be denied, hence terms like broken or bad English, or good English, all of which serve to alienate the speaker even further from her experience. If the language is to continue to do what language must do; if it is to name and give voice to the i-mage and the experience behind that i-mage — the thing we conceive in our hearts — and so house the being, then the experience must be incorporated in the language and the language must begin to serve the re-creation of those i-mages.

There are certain historical and sociological, not to mention etymological, reasons why when we hear certain words and phrases, such as 'thick lips' or kinky hair', the accompanying images are predominantly negative; such expressions connote far more than they denote. From whose perspective are the lips of the African thick or her hair kinky? Certainly not from the African's perspective. How then does the writer describe the Caribbean descendants of West Africans so as not to connote the negativity implied in descriptions such as 'thick lips'?

Journal entry Dec. 11, 1986 (Testimony stoops to Mother Tongue)

*I want to write about kinky hair and flat noses —
maybe I should be writing about the language that
kinked the hair and flattened noses, made jaws
prognathous. . .*

This was how I tried to meet this particular challenge in a particular poem; it is but a small example of the challenge facing the African Caribbean writer who is interested in making English her home. The challenge is to re-create the images behind these words so that the words are being used newly.

The African in the Caribbean and the New World is as much entitled to call the English language her own, as the Englishman in his castle. However, just as we have had to make that i-mage our own, so too must he be made to acquire our i-mages, since we are both heirs to a common language, albeit to different linguistic experiences. Our experiences have touched, in both negative and positive ways, and we remain forever sensitive to each other through the language.

For too long, however, we have been verbal or linguistic squatters, possessing adversely what is truly ours. If possession is, in fact, nine-tenths of the law, then the one-tenth that remains is the legitimisation process. It is probably the hardest part, this reclaiming of our image-making power in what has been for a long time a foreign language. It must be done.

It is, perhaps, ironic that New World Africans, descendants of cultures and societies where the word and the act of naming was the focal point and fulcrum of societal forces,³ should find themselves in a situation where the word, their word and the power to name was denied them. Traditionally, for instance, in many West African societies, until named, a child did not even acquire a recognizable and discernible human identity. In the New World after the destruction of the native peoples, Africans would be renamed with the name of the stranger. If what the artist does is create in her own i-mage and *give name* to that i-mage, then what the African artist from the Caribbean and the new World must do is create in, while giving name to, her own i-mage — and in so doing eventually heal the word wounded by the dislocation and imbalance of the word/i-mage equation. This can only be done by consciously restructuring, reshaping and, if necessary, destroying the language. When that equation is balanced and unity of word and i-mage is once again present, then and only then will we have made the language our own.

This Is Not A Conclusion

What happens when you are excluded from the fullness and wholeness of language?

What happens when only one aspect of a language is allowed you — as woman?

— as Black?

What happens when the language of ideas is completely removed and nothing is given to replace it?

Surely thought requires language — how can you, without language, think or conceptualize?

What happens to a language that is withheld or only used in a particular way with its users — does it become dissociated?

— one level business

— one level orders, commands, abuses, brutality

— one level education to a specific purpose and level

What of celebration?

What of love?

What of trust between individuals?

There can be no conclusion to the issues raised in this essay since language is always and continually changing — a fluid phenomenon. One version of this paper was published many years ago in the journal *Fireweed* (1983), and at that time I called this section Postscript and wrote that it was “not a conclusion because the issues raised here are still very much undecided.” The questions I raised then were “how does one begin to destroy a language? How does one replace the image behind the word?” I replied then that those questions remained unanswered and would “probably remain so for a long time.” I am now struck at how prescient I was in that original article about many of the issues I was to deal with in my writing subsequent to the writing of the paper. The *Absence of Writing* could be seen as something of a blueprint for my poetic and writing life.

Have I answered those questions, or do they still remain unanswered? I believe I have come closer to answering them than I did six years ago. The manuscript, *She Tries Her Tongue*, has taken me a long way towards the goal of decentring the language. This is not the same thing as destroying a language which is a far harder thing to do. Also, destruction connotes great sturm und drang when, in fact, what works just as well at times is a more subtle but equally profound approach. For instance in the poem, ‘Discourse on the Logic of Language’, the issue that I raised in the earlier Postscript — that of father tongue vis-à-vis a mother tongue, some sort of balance is achieved despite the anguish of English, and despite the fact that English is both a mother tongue and a father tongue. In the accompanying journal I kept as I worked on *She Tries Her Tongue* I write as follows:

I am laying claim to two heritages — one very accessible, the other hidden. The apparent accessibility of European culture is dangerous and misleading especially what has been allowed to surface and become de rigueur. To get anything of value out of it, one has to mine very, very deeply and only after that does one begin to see the connections and linkages with other cultures. The other wisdoms — African wisdom needs hunches, gut feelings and a lot of flying by the seat of the pants, free falls only to be caught at the last minute. It calls for a lot more hunting out of the facts before one can even get to the essence, because in almost exact reversal with European culture not much has been allowed to surface — am almost tempted to say that one can for that reason trust that information more.

I must add now that lack of information bears directly on one's ability to make i-mages.

The linguistic rape and subsequent forced marriage between African and English tongues has resulted in a language capable of great rhythms and musicality; one that is and is not English, and one which is among the most vital in the English-speaking world today. The continuing challenge for me as a writer/poet is to find some deeper patterning — a deep structure, as Chomsky puts it — of my language, the Caribbean demotic. The challenge is to find the literary form of the demotic language. As James Baldwin has written, "Negro speech is not a question of dropping s's or n's or g's but a question of the beat."⁴ At present the greatest strength of the Caribbean demotic lies in its oratorical energies which do not necessarily translate to the page easily. Just as the language that English people write is not necessarily or often that which is spoken by them, so too what is spoken in the streets of Trinidad, or by some Caribbean people in Toronto, is not always going to be the best way of expressing it on the page. To keep the deep structure, the movement, the kinetic energy, the tone and pitch, the slides and glissandos of the demotic within a tradition that is primarily page-bound — that is the challenge.

In the former Postscript, I wrote that it was "perhaps, ironic that a critique of the use and role of English in a particularly brutal, historical context should be written in standard English, but that in itself throws into sharp relief the dilemma described above." I was not completely satisfied with my argument then that the dilemma as to what language was appropriate was answered by my argument that the English language in its complete range belonged to us, and whatever mode best suited our needs should be

used. In fact, the problem was that the piece itself did not, as I now believe it ought to, reflect that range that I spoke of. Unlike the former piece, the opening paragraphs of the present piece, explaining the absence of writing in my early life, are written closer to the Caribbean demotic than to standard English. Could or ought I to have continued the entire piece in this style? Perhaps, but I do believe that the present piece is a far truer reflection of how I function linguistically than the original one.

While I continue to write in my father tongue, I continue the quest I identified in 1983 to discover my mother tongue. Will I recognize this tongue when I find it, or is it rather a matter of developing it rather than finding it? Whatever metaphorical i-mages one uses — discovery or development — the issue of recognition is an important one, since implied within the word itself is the meaning, the i-image of knowing again.

There was a profound eruption of the body into the text of *She Tries Her Tongue*. This represents a significant development for me as a poet. The manuscript has become a blaze along a poetic path. In the New World, the female African body became the site of exploitation and profoundly anti-human demands — forced reproduction along with subsequent forceful abduction and sale of children. Furthermore, while the possibility of rape remains the amorphous threat it is, the female body continues to be severely circumscribed in its interaction with the physical surrounding space and place. How then does this affect the making of poetry, the making of words, the making of i-mages if poetry, as I happen to believe, “begins in the body and ends in the body?”⁵ *She Tries Her Tongue* is the first blaze along the path to understanding and resolving this particular conundrum.

I continue, as I did in the former Postscript, to see the issue as being one of power, and so control. I still, as I did then, fear being reductionist, but writing does entail control in many areas — control of the word, control of the i-image, control of information which helps in the process of i-image-making and, equally important, control in the production of the final product. By the time the manuscript *She Tries Her Tongue* comes into print it will be almost two years and many, many rejections after its completion, despite its winning the *Casa de las Americas* prize in 1988. As a female and a black living in a colonial society of Trinidad and Tobago, control was absent in each of these areas, hence the absence of writing, especially creative writing, and hence the lack of recognition of writing as a possible vocation or profession. As a female and a black presently living in a society that is, in many respects, still colonial (I refer here to Canada's relationship with the United States of America), and a society which is politely but vehemently racist, while I may have gained some control of my word and its i-image-making capacities, control of information and production is still problematic.

For the many like me, black and female, it is imperative that our writing begin to recreate our histories and our myths, as well as integrate that most painful of experiences — loss of our history and our word. The reacquisition of power to create in one's own i-mage and to create one's own i-mage is vital to this process; it reaffirms for us that which we have always known, even in those most darkest of times which are still with us, when everything conspired to prove otherwise — that we belong most certainly to the race of humans.

*Reprinted with permission from the author. Marlene Nourbese Philip is a Toronto writer whose most recent book is **She Tries Her Tongue**.*

FOOTNOTES:

- ¹ Readers interested in exploring Rastafarian language further are referred to the works of the Jamaican writer, Valma Pollard.
- ² C.L.R. James "The Artist in the Caribbean," in *The Future in the Present*, Westport: Lawrence & Co., 1977, p. 1984.
- ³ Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu*, New York: Grove Press Inc., 1961, p. 125.
- ⁴ *Conversations with James Baldwin*, Ed., Fred L. Standley & Louis H. Pratt, University Press of Mississippi, 1989.
- ⁵ Burnshaw, Stanley, *The Seamless Web*, New York: George Braziller Inc., 1970.

Challenges of the Struggle for Sovereignty: Changing the World versus Writing Stories

by Merle Hodge

My very dear friend Michael Anthony, one of the writers of the Caribbean for whom I feel a great deal of respect and affection, once said to me, expressing alarm at the activist role I seemed to have opted for: "But you have to devote your time to writing stories—you can't change the world!"

I am very confident that it is people who change the world and that people must continually engage in actions aimed at changing the world for the better. For me, there is no fundamental contradiction between art and activism. In particular, the power of the creative word to change the world is not to be underestimated.

Fiction has immense political power. Its power can be revolutionary or, of course, the opposite: it is a prime weapon of political conservatism. That is why it was important for us to study the literature of the British Isles during the colonial era; that is why today, in the era of independence, it is important to saturate the Caribbean people with American soap-opera and situation comedy and Rambo-style adventure.

I began writing, in my adult life, in protest against my education and the arrogant assumptions upon which it rested: that I and my world were nothing and that to rescue ourselves from nothingness, we had best seek admission to the world of *their* storybook. (I first began writing in childhood, and those pieces which survive are a testimony to the power of the fiction to which I was exposed: namely, the power of the storybook.) The genesis of modern

Caribbean writing lies, I think, in such a reaction, conscious or unconscious, against the enterprise of negating our world and offering us somebody else's world as salvation.

The protest against this imposition has developed, in my case, into an abiding concern with the issue of cultural sovereignty and beyond that, into an unapologetic interest in the political development of our region. Cultural sovereignty is an abstraction to a vagrant digging in dustbins for food on the streets of Port of Spain or a family that cannot send its children to school because there is no money for books.

For me, cultural sovereignty is part of the larger issue of Caribbean liberation—the struggle of the Caribbean people to finally inherit the Caribbean and its resources, the ongoing struggle of the Caribbean people for political power. In this struggle, cultural sovereignty is both a means and an end: we can neither achieve the liberation of the Caribbean without affirming and enthroning our culture, nor affirm and enthrone our culture in any real sense until we have won full political sovereignty.

And what, in all of this, is the use of writing stories? The potential of Caribbean literature for positively affecting the development of the Caribbean is an untapped resource. Caribbean fiction can help to strengthen our self-image, our resistance to foreign domination, our sense of the oneness of the Caribbean and our willingness to put our energies into the building of the Caribbean nation.

The cultural penetration of the Caribbean which we are witnessing today is a serious business. It is as serious as the invasion and continuing occupation of Grenada. It is perhaps even more serious, for you can recognize a military invasion when you see one. Invasion and occupation in the guise of entertainment are another kettle of fish.

And there are direct links between the continuing underdevelopment of the Caribbean and the continued—the renewed—suppression of Caribbean culture.

The culture of the Caribbean, the culture produced here on Caribbean soil by the ordinary working people of the region, has never gained full recognition in our society. It has never gained official recognition, and has never been fully recognized and valued by the very people who created it and who continue to create it every day of their lives.

Governments of the region recognize and pay attention to one aspect of the culture—the performing arts—not because they have any interest in the people who created the steelband and calypso and reggae and Carnival but because in the development of tourism and the quest for foreign exchange,

these things can be turned into commodities, packaged, and sold. (Right now the government of Trinidad and Tobago is talking about "selling steelband to the world.")

But culture in its total definition—the full spectrum of responses that a people makes, collectively, to its specific environment, to ensure its survival in that environment—has yet to be properly addressed in the Caribbean context. Caribbean people suffer great ambivalence regarding their culture. We do not acknowledge or give value to our own most deeply rooted behaviour patterns, our most intimate psychology. In the first place, we are not fully aware of what constitutes our specificity. We recognize our culture only in a negative, rejecting way: we see in our people tendencies and characteristics which we regard as aberrations to be stamped out—"aberrations" because they do not fit the norms suggested by storybook and television.

Let us take some very fundamental aspects of culture: language, family, and religion. Ninety-nine percent of Caribbean people, for ninety-nine percent of their waking hours, communicate in a Creole language that is a fusion of West African syntax and the modified vocabulary of one or another European tongue. These languages have stubbornly survived generations of disrespect and active suppression in the home and in the education system. Possibly they have survived because they express *our* personality, our reality, our worldview in a way no other language can. Caribbean Creole languages have been fashioned to fit our communication needs, and they have not only survived but developed—and they continue to develop as our communication needs become, perhaps, more complex.

In the "English-speaking" Caribbean, statistics from the education system show that only a very small proportion of the population may be said to possess English. If we use as an indicator the passing rate for the English language Examinations Taken at the end of high school, we must question just how English-speaking the "English-speaking Caribbean" really is. In the Caribbean as a whole, only a small percentage of the population gains admission to high school, and only a small percentage of this percentage demonstrates proficiency in the English language upon graduation.

Creole is the main medium of communication in the Caribbean. Almost everybody uses Creole. But the attitude of the Caribbean people to the language they speak is incredible. Parents who speak nothing but Creole severely reprimand their children for speaking Creole. Educators at the highest level become too hysterical to argue rationally when they are presented with the very simple proposition that Caribbean people can be armed with *both* standard English and their mother tongue, Creole; that the

teaching of English must never be accompanied by efforts to discredit Creole—just as the education system, of say, Denmark or Nigeria seeks to equip its people with an international language in addition and with no detriment to its mother tongue. Think of the implications for our mental health—we speak Creole, we need Creole, we cannot function without Creole, for our deepest thought processes are bound up in the structure of Creole, but we hold Creole in utter contempt.

The same goes for our family forms and the religions born on Caribbean soil. We live, very comfortably, in certain arrangements that perform all the functions of family—the socialization of the young, the provision of the material and emotional needs of all family members, the regulation of sexuality. Again, these arrangements do not fit the storybook prescription: in our family systems the head of the family can be female or male; legal marriage is not mandatory; the family spills beyond one household to include cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and even godparents as functional members of a family.

These arrangements have survived for generations, despite official disrespect and attempts to force us all into the storybook family mold. And again there is ambivalence, a contradiction between our daily experience and the norms to which we subscribe, for we firmly believe that a “real” family consists of husband, wife, and children, with the husband as head, and that any variation on this model is an anomaly—even if it is an anomaly which we live.

In religion there is the same contradiction between “standard” religion—that is, Christianity—and a certain interpretation of the supernatural and styles of worship inherited from our African past which hold a strong attraction for us but which we are very careful to disown.

The culture of the Caribbean, then, has never gained validity in the eyes of Caribbean people. In the colonial era, Culture with a capital “C” was the culture of the colonizing country. Whatever we were practising was not “real” culture. The colonial era came to an end and we moved into independence. Theoretically, we could now begin to build up a sense of our cultural identity. But we immediately found ourselves in a new and more vicious era of cultural penetration. Television, which is basically American television, came to Trinidad and Tobago in 1962, the year the British flag was pulled down. The same pattern can be seen all over the Caribbean—withdrawing the most obvious trappings of colonial domination and installing a Trojan horse instead.

Today we might be even further away from sovereignty than we were in the colonial era. Our already weak self-image continues to be undermined in an even more subtle way than before, and this paralyses us, allows us to be manipulated and makes us less capable of taking our destiny into our own hands.

From the colonial era to the present time, one of the weapons used to subjugate us has been fiction. The proper role of fiction in human societies includes allowing a people to "read" itself—to decipher its own reality. The storyteller offers a vision of the world which is more coherent, more "readable," than the mass of unconnected detail of everyday experience. Fiction also brings to our attention and puts in place parts of our reality that are not visible to us or are normally overlooked, allowing us to form a more complete picture of our environment than our own observation allows. Paradoxically, the world of fiction appears more real to us, more *vital*, than the real world: it is more imposing and impressive than the real world. This is because of the greater coherence of the artist's creation, and also because of its greater intensity. The world of the story has a greater impact upon our imagination than does the diffuse scenario of everyday living.

When fiction draws upon our world, when it recreates our reality, it helps give validity to our world. It helps us to first make sense of our world, for it shows us underlying patterns and connections which give our reality a satisfying order. But also, in a way that is perhaps difficult to fully account for, *fiction gives substance to reality*. Beside the world of fiction, the real world pales in significance. For fiction (and perhaps all art) casts a redeeming and enhancing light back upon the reality from which it springs, endowing it with meaning, credibility, and authority. It allows a people not only to know its own world but to take it seriously. This is why an important element of the socialization of the young in every self-respecting society is exposing them to the fiction of their society. In preliterate societies this means teaching them the stories, songs, and poems of the tribe or enacting the life of the tribe through drama. In modern society it means putting the literary classics of a people on their school curriculum.

Caribbean people have only very limited exposure to their own literature. Caribbean literature courses are available at the University of the West Indies, and some texts have been introduced into the curriculum of secondary schools through the CXC (Caribbean Examinations Council) Exam. But access to secondary education remains limited, and the great majority of students study literature only in the first three years of secondary school,

during which time they are likely to read all of three Caribbean texts, if indeed so many.

If we recognize the process by which fiction validates reality, it becomes clear that people steeped in imported fiction are not likely to develop a healthy relationship with themselves or their environment. They are more likely to reject the real, palpable world in which they live in favour of the world presented to them in fiction. Indeed, Caribbean people are capable of a kind of "mental desertion" of their own environment, which is not matched, I think, by any other people on earth.

Such was our situation during the colonial era, and such is our situation today. In this situation creative writing becomes, for me, a guerrilla activity. We are occupied by foreign fiction. Fiction which affirms and validates our world is therefore an important weapon of resistance. The most apolitical of writers becomes part of the struggle for Caribbean liberation—even a writer like V. S. Naipaul, whose vision of the Caribbean does not include anything as sentimental as "liberation" and who would be very alarmed if he were to be described as a Caribbean freedom fighter, has contributed enormously to sharpening our fuzzy self-image, if not to boosting our self-esteem.

For merely to portray Caribbean experience with the power of art is to pluck this experience out of limbo and give it a distinct shape and a name. And this, in our context, is potentially an act of guerrilla warfare. I am not talking about writers idealizing Caribbean reality. Literature contributes to a people's growth by portraying them both respectfully and *critically*, not by flattering them.

If we agree that Caribbean literature can contribute to the political process of empowering Caribbean people, then we must set about solving another problem: how do we deliver Caribbean literature to the Caribbean people? How do we compete with the great volume of foreign fiction that our people consumes?

One of the problems is that in speaking of Caribbean literature we are referring to a body of writing which is, in general, highly accomplished and very sophisticated, by any literary criteria. The Caribbean can boast of a relatively literate population, but our people are no more *literary* than any other. And the percentage of Caribbean people who will devote an evening to a novel of classical quality, Caribbean or otherwise, rather than to "Knots Landing" or Mills and Boone, is the same as elsewhere.

We might have to consider developing a modern tradition of popular literature, for which we have some precedent in, for example, the Onitsha market literature of Nigeria. There is not much in Caribbean literature to

counterbalance the easily accessible paperback novel that comes to us from the United States, Canada, England, and even Australia. The idea of developing such a literature in the caribbean may be fairly controversial. But I do not think that it necessarily involves a complete compromise of literary standards. A great deal of what is today revered as classical literature started out as fiction aimed at a mass audience rather than a highly educated elite. One example of this tendency is the work of nineteenth-century French novelists, which first appeared in serialized form in newspapers.

One of my specific concerns or ambitions is to one day be able to participate in the development of a strong popular theatre. In Trinidad and Tobago—and, I think, in much of the Caribbean—the theatre is perceived as an urban, middle-class activity. We have a duty, I think, to restore theatre to its popular roots. We must take it out of the sophisticated urban theatre building and into community centres, church halls, and school buildings around the country; we must also infiltrate the electronic media with a popular theatre grounded in caribbean experience.

The development of Caribbean children's literature is another of my concerns. One of the reasons why Caribbean literature has not yet fully invaded the school curriculum is that there is not a sufficient body of good fiction suitable for all age groups. Children in secondary school are exposed to Caribbean literature that is aimed at an adult audience; and at the primary school level, teachers seeking to bring Caribbean literature into the curriculum tend to rely heavily on folk tales.

Thus far I have said nothing on the subject of women. I am, of course, very interested in the redressing of imbalances, both in the projection of women in Caribbean fiction and in the participation of women in the creation of caribbean fiction. I am not sure that feminism has always been a conscious concern or a motivating force in what creative writing I have done. When I wrote *Crick Crack Monkey*, I do not think that I knew the world *feminism*, and I may have been only vaguely aware of such a thing as a women's movement. What I did know was that there were types of women whom I greatly admired and other types for whom I felt a certain amount of disdain. I had developed these attitudes during the course of my childhood.

I later came to understand that as a child, I admired women who did not know their place—women who did not seem to pattern their lives after the rules laid down by nice Trinidadian society, by the church or by storybooks. These were self-possessed women who seemed to be operating by a different

set of norms with regard to work, their understanding of their own physical being, their sexuality, their relations with men, their family relations—women like the grandmother and aunt with whom I spent long periods of my childhood.

It is Caribbean women such as these who will continue to inhabit the world of my stories, for our struggle for Caribbean liberation will include putting ourselves fully in touch with these everyday models of sovereignty.

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Women In Africa And Her Diaspora: From Marginality To Empowerment

by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie

Does this trajectory from marginality to empowerment belong only to the experience of African women and her diaspora? Granted that all the terms of feminist and women's studies discourses need to be defined and re-defined in their contextual specificities and perspectives, African women wherever they are, are not the most marginalised women on earth, contrary to the Western social Darwinian habit of assuming that the African rests at the bottom of every scale. In some ways, African women had economic and social structures which gave them more social space and clout than their European sisters. Nonetheless, all women of the world are discriminated against and subordinated firstly as women and secondly as members of subordinate classes. In their biological subordination and exploitation lies a certain undeniable and binding global sisterhood.

If I am to think quickly to enumerate the common bonds of our global sisterhood, I would say 1) biological oppression 2) patriarchy 3) exclusion from the material and mental resources of our societies 4) overwork; our double, triple sometimes quadruple overload, physical hardship and suffering within production and reproduction 5) persecution for demanding equity and ending the silences used to entrap and divide us as women; persecution for organising ourselves at last and for seeking to empower ourselves psychologically and structurally in society. The U.N. Women's Decade brought the women of the world together to educate us about our differences which enrich our similarities.

In Nairobi, Kenya (1985), we discussed our "connections" and made our "acknowledgements," Gloria T. Hull says. The women's movement discovered itself as women all over the world discovered each other, over and above the often spacious and divisive confrontations between Western Feminism and Third World Womanism, often actively promoted by enemies of the women's movement particularly male sexists.

We could problematise the story title of this essay from marginality to empowerment? When were women marginal? In their different societies and cultures? What were the natures of these marginalities? When did women's empowerment begin? What is power and powerlessness? In what time and space in their various societies were women powerless and empowered? How did marginality and empowerment work across the mediations of gender, race, class, nation, ethnicity and culture?

As African women of colour who have been displaced into the United States of America, and the Caribbean, Britain and Canada, as displaced Africans, we have our own particular insertions into these problematics. At the risk of not having the time and space here for explicatory refinement, I suggest that women of Africa and her diaspora desire within communitarian ideals, respect for and recognition of their contributions to their communities as individuals with collectively acknowledged identities. They do not wish to be worked to death productively and reproductively any longer and they also wish to share and enjoy the world's resources. They wish to share in whatever there is to be learned and enjoyed in this wide, rich and beautiful world, not to live and die only as somebody's pots of culture and suffering, the pots which receive the filtered water of other people's indigo dye of fulfillment; living vicariously only.

To these ends, African women in Africa and her diaspora like other women of colour around the world are identifying their own issues (and not always antagonistically to other groups) though insisting that women of hegemonic societies and classes must eliminate their destructive patterns whether they be socially expressed or just internalised. Women of colour across classes know that they have to struggle for physical and spiritual survival as bell hooks once pointed out in a racist cosmos where race has been a factor of historical and economic oppression.

Women of the African heritage know they must discover and affirm healthy and genuine versions of their various identities. They must discover class roles which will contribute to the positive development of women locally and globally. They must give voice to the historically harassed Black women of African descent and empower them to subvert their own self-crippling silences. They are coming together now as Black women of African descent around their identities as the great woman poet, Audre Lorde, says in an impassioned essay (1986), questioning and re-defining what that Africanness could mean within our particular communities, and upon the

world stage; and not in the abstract either but concretely as in the lives of Afro-German or Afro-Dutch women, for example. We must discover "diaspora literacy" and through it strengthen our similarities through our differences and our unalienable historical common origins and experiences. Not only "race through oppression" links us but also culture as filtered and burnished through the crucibles of captivity, displacement and oppression. Throughout these excruciating processes, the resiliencies of our spirits and original cultures have come through.

We celebrate these resiliences, the "getting over", ourselves and our peoples, women and men, who evolved these cultures!

What does empowerment mean to us as black women of African and her diaspora? It means social recognition and dignity just as, most of all it means space to speak, act, and live with joy and responsibility as it has always meant for our ever-so responsible foremothers wherever they were in history. Our work, writings and our exhortations as women in various forms and media show that we want to end our silences and speak our truths as we know them. We wish to have power which recognises responsibility in dignified freedom; power which positively promotes Life in all its forms; power to remove from our path any thing, person or structure which threatens to limit our potential for full human growth as the other half of life's gendered reality; power to collapse all screens which threaten to obscure our women's eyes from the beauties of the world.

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The Personal is Political

by Evelyn Marrast

A Burst Of Light:
Essays by Audre Lorde
Firebrand Books
pp. 134/\$7.95

Readers already familiar with Lorde will be delighted by the collection of essays in *A Burst of Light*. These essays, even the most political and polemical, reveal an amazing charm. They are evidence that the familiar feminist slogan "the personal is political" is not empty boasting but a guideline for daily living.

The collection ranges from a critique of racism, sexism, and homophobia on the lives of Americans (especially Black women) to a triumphant exposition of Lorde's fight with cancer of the liver. Throughout the essays Lorde attempts to reveal the inter-relatedness of the oppression of Black people everywhere, and the barriers within the Black community which prevent the effective organization of Black women. As feminists we must analyze, in depth, our oppression. The politics of racism in America forces Blacks into a position of ideological schizophrenia which attempts to blind us to the ways in which we are rendered impotent economically, politically and sexually as women. Lorde stresses the recognition of community, of our commonalities as a people, as an important tool in our survival. In the essay "Apartheid U.S.A." she reminds us that "our survivals are not separate, even though the terms under which we struggle differ."

The systematic disempowerment of women is another recurring theme in this collection. Black women must re-examine the fears and taboos, not only of America as a whole but of the Black community itself. Lorde sees homophobia not only as a weapon used against gay men and Lesbians but

also as a device for silencing straight Black women. Black women must not become unwilling accomplices in attacks on the gay community but must work instead to redefine such institutions as the family, which are still being defined by white, middle-class paradigms which render the lives of all Blacks marginal. Where almost everything Black people do is considered aberrant and pathological we must attack the criteria of normality and not our brothers and sisters in oppression.

The essay "Turning the Beat Around" is Lorde's experience of parenting in a Lesbian household. It is also an interesting illustration of just how political every aspect of one's life is. For Blacks the decision to have children takes courage and a determination to survive despite the genocidal attempts against our reproductiveness. Black parents must unlearn the lessons of self-destructiveness which make us direct our anger against our children. In the face of our vulnerability Lorde sees truth: an "accurate picture of the world", as very important armament indeed. This, and the support of other women, are essential in the fight to raise children who will have a realistic sense of the context of their lives at all levels of society.

The title piece is a collection of journal entries written while the author was fighting a battle with cancer. The writing here is surprisingly untouched by sentimentality. Even in the face of death Lorde's vision is at all times focused on her political commitments and struggles. Cancer is likened to racism. One must approach it with inexorable aggression and a determination to survive. The fight against cancer in America is as political a fight as any. One must not only struggle against a patriarchal medical establishment accustomed to assuming omnipotence in the lives of women but one must also be aware that the U.S. commitment to fighting cancer is secondary to supplying aid for the contras in Central America. Lorde's ability to contextualize her fight with cancer is what makes this a journal of significance.

This collection illustrates Lorde's assertion that "the subject of revolution is ourselves. . . our lives". And she does live life on her own terms. She is at all times a poet. Her language and style reveal both beauty and strength. This collection will both delight and instruct.

Evelyn Marrast is a student in the department of Women Studies at York University, Toronto.



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