

ANTHONY KELLMAN'S POLYPHONIC POETIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

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I repeat 'impossible dream', impossible quest for wholeness. In the same token, however, I know that those values are true and that the impossibility of their achievement nurses, prompts, gives reality to the creative imagination and instills one with profoundest paradox, with insight into the numinous character of all things, all features, all aspects of being. (Wilson Harris, 1987: 1)

I was polyphonic (fictional) author. (...) Polyphonic in reflecting alien voices in familiar texts, internal/external counterpoint, deformities of spiritual gold and mystical silver, perversities of epic, blind rendez-vous with Ghost, diverse masquerades, self-revelations, self deceptions. (Wilson Harris, 1987: 12)

The purpose of the present study is to analyze the polyphonic characteristic which marks Anthony Kellman's poetic creation. This characteristic originates in the weaving together between historical facts and fiction or inventiveness, musical devices and discursive strategies borrowed from the narrative and descriptive genres, imagery pointing to regional reality and international or universal configurations. The complex texture stemming from the interplay of so many factors or voices is not characterized by fragmentation but rather by an all-encompassing sense of connectedness or wholeness.

The complexity of this wholeness or polyphonic totality echoes the author's multifarious cultural identity and experience. In fact, Kellman is not only a writer but also a musician. Aside from that, he is a literary critic and a Professor of Creative Writing. He was born in Barbados and is also an American citizen, thus being both a critic of Imperialism and an author living in a dominating country.

Anthony Kellman's polyphonic discourse not only apprehends the multiplicity and contradictions of his own personal experience but also those of Barbadian culture, generating a sense of identity of a universal nature, in which apparently incompatible terms are ingeniously reconciled. This sense of identity is translated and transfigured into the construction of a

multitudinous self – one that transcends individuality and uniqueness, acquiring the multifaceted nature of a cubist painting.

The complex, dialogic and simultaneous self that emerges from Kellman’s work does not oppose its counterpart – the self-as-other – but rather includes it and embraces it. Which is to say that, in his poetry, we are not faced with a tension between identity and otherness. Instead, we are invited to enter a territory where a logic of inclusion prevails.

In the present discussion, I am going to focus on some aspects of identity as a polyphonic and inclusive concept as it appears in Anthony Kellman’s epic poem, *Limestone (L.)*, a masterpiece in which this concept is tangibilized through a variety of devices and focused on from many distinct angles. The importance of the book is undeniable in that it is the first epic poem of Barbados. Also, Kellman’s contribution to Barbadian identity and to the development of world literature is vital as a result of the creation of his altogether innovative poetic form – the Tuk verse, which is a literary counterpart of the indigenous Barbadian music – Tuk music.

1. Polyphony

Polyphony is a term that was borrowed from the area of musical theory by literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) in reference to the multilayered structure of Dostoevsky’s novels. What Bakhtin remarks in relation to Dostoevsky can also be applied to the configuration of Kellman’s epic poem. Here, the author captures the multiplicity of his nation’s voices, explicitly referring to the way they “pile” up, generating a complex oneness and a dialogic identity. This identity is apprehended by the recurrent metaphor of “limestone”, which appears as the title of the poem:

*island voices piled like limestone
on her dreams, her peace assault. (L, p.181)*

*like layered coral reefs or plumbing
depths like hidden limestone caves. (L., p.128)*

*.....Deep in her bones
she felt her limestone island calling. (L, p.179)*

I came back to limestone, to the rock where I was born. (L., p.157)

The polyphonic “harmony”ⁱ in *Limestone* manifests through a variety of effects. Firstly, through the blend of narrative, descriptive and poetic devices which make up the complex fabric of Kellman’s epic work as a whole. The narrative genre presents an account of historical facts. This is evidenced in many examples like the ones below, in which place, time and facts are clearly outlined and recalled:

*...Red uniforms
A sounding conch and a
militiaman falls and more whites*

*stumble on their knees on
the ground. But I knew they’d
send signals quickly for more troops.*

*Tuesday, remnant slaves all
gather at Bailey’s.
Death or glory, capture never.*

*We fought them there and fought
at Golden Grove..... (L, p.58)*

*In 1838 the last chain link snaps
the planters scowl, then, think perhaps,
it’s an advantage not to care
for their slaves’ food or health, and where
self-serving kindness fitfully held place,
planters’ now show their truest face:
a hobble thrust in freedom’s course
made without one morsel of remorse,
fulfilling with draconian
fist, their divine right since time began. (L. p.67)*

*In those early years all the zest
of new policy, programmes that stressed
education, tourism, local
manufacturing, healthcare for all;
from sugar we diversified,
developed livestock farming, tried
to raise investment in the economy;
built the Cave Hill campus of UWI.
It was a moderate programme. (L., p.114)*

Description not only vividly depicts the context of the narrative and of poetic creation, but also characterizes a scenery filled with emotion and longing:

*She sees the pines surround the islands.
Water land. Two bluebirds dip by
Echo Lake, then onward soaring fly.
Faith stretches until her eye lands*

*on a wooden house, its black roof
humped dark on green rolling hills
where dogwoods foam with joy. She feels,
she knows, one day she'll own one, proof*

*that heart's wholeness lies in homestead,
the sense of landscape's rightness here,
right now. (...). (L., p.180)*

*to the bed of Brandon's soft sand
bathed in light streaming on the shore.
Now blessed by coral's hissing cure (L., p.188)*

Poetry colors narrated facts and described scenarios, transfiguring them into elaborate aesthetic effects:

*Heaven's darkness cloaked our
skins in well-matched tones,
our bodies taut as love-vines on the walls. (L., p.55)*

*arcing cranes ascending
their pentatonic scales
over stalks and crushing rollers; (L., p.33)*

The verbal fabric of the text is invaded by music, as can be evidenced in the last extract above and in many other examples such as the following:

*Fiddle? None. Nor fipple
flute, nor Scottish fife.
Plenty drum, though, with skins that slice
the night (...). (L., p.43)*

*.....eyes bright like fireflies,
adults driven by pride that rises (L., p.112)*

The whole book is artfully composed in literary Tuk, ingeniously translating the complex vocal and melodic patterns from Tuk music – the indigenous music of Barbados. The epic poem does not only follow these patterns on formal grounds but also refers to the Tuk songs from which it borrows its very structure. In doing so, it points to the fact that the author is both a writer and a musician – a composer, singer as well as piano, guitar and drum player – thus incorporating a clearly autobiographical dimension to its total configuration:

.....Songs rang
Through every dusty village street.
Tuk Bands played, people stomped their feet.

but I thrilled to smell the salt breeze,
taste rice and peas, hear calypso
and tuk, and bathe in sun's fading glow, (L, p.103)

He clung to music, his last hope;
wasted it seems his English Lit. degree,
since other kinds of opportunities
for work had crumbled like burnt rope. (L., p.128)

Plucking notes in a ruk-a-tuk
stylee, a startled Livvy turns, (...) (L., p.141)

In Hyde Park, or here, he penciled songs
that'd make rainbows weep, or the one last

programmed lemming cut its date with death.
His songs shaped in a Creole style
(Euro-African folk) battle
aloneness with its frosty breath. (L., p.146)

The song relieved yet saddened him.
Making art from experience
was art's freeing gift, jubilation
and song's sorrow, those crazed jealous twins. (L., p.149)

The weaving together of verbal creation and music, and consequently that of the writer's and the musician's voice can be ultimately apprehended by the fact that the book has a musical counterpart – a CD which is also named *Limestone*, containing the author's / composer's songs interpreted by himself. The two voices – that of the musician and that of the writer – as well as the dual melodies or tunes carried by both the fictional and the autobiographical subject are intertwined together so as to contribute to the harmonious polyphonic texture of the whole book.

2. Identity, otherness

In *Limestone*, polyphony reflects upon the sense of identity and upon the way this identity is configured in many other forms. One of them is the fusion between identity and otherness which permeates the structure and the content of the text as a whole, originating in compound poetic images.

Mexican poet, translator and critic Octavio Paz (1976: 38-39) postulates that poetic creation is a domain where such images play a central role. He claims that, no matter what concept of image one endorses, it will always imply the conjunction between opposed realities. According to him, “the image is always scandalous in that it defies the principle of contradiction: what is heavy is also what is light”. Images imply that “this is this **and** that is that”. However, at the same time, in images “this **is** that” [emphasis mine]. According to Paz (1976: 41), poetry makes it possible for Western thought to approach Eastern concepts of reality. Paz points to the fact that “Eastern thought has not suffered from the sentiment of horror in relation to the other” which marks the Western society, for which things are either “this” **or** “that”. Paz embraces Upahishad Chandoya’s ideas that can be summarized by the formula “you are that”. We can thus conclude that Paz postulates a sense of identity based on a logic of inclusion rather than one of exclusion, according to which identity and otherness merge into a compound image.

If we accept Paz’s assumptions, it naturally follows that Kellman’s creation has a genuinely poetic characteristic. In the realm of his works, identity and otherness coexist on various levels. Initially, a logic of inclusion rules a systematic blend between autobiographical and fictional data. He is a real-life writer, and a character entering the verbal texture of his own fiction. The ego of the writer (1st person or identity) is transfigured into a third person character (or “other”), seen from without in its entire and naked otherness.

*Next week, at the Auditorium,
a local poet named Kellman
summed up my mood in a poem
“Conversation with a Dead Politician.” (L., 119)*

Secondly, characters are sometimes unfolded into two beings, one of which is a spectator and viewer of himself. This happens in a poignant, tragic and moving way on pages 61 to 62, where a slain slave views, narrates and describes details of the scene after his own death. Thus Kellman’s strategy seems to have affinities with the mechanism of *carnivalization* as discussed by

Russian theorist M. Bakhtin (apud Hayman, p.36) according to whom “carnival is a spectacle where there is no stage or any separation between actors and spectators” [translation mine].

The strategy by means of which characters analyze themselves from the outside while remaining as impartial and impeccable observers echoes the versatility and dialogism marking the author’s own life. In fact, he is both a Barbadian citizen experiencing exile, a critic of the imperialistic domination which may be a factor triggering and motivating exile, **and** an American citizen. Also he is a writer and a literary critic, a creator and a professor of creative writing, thus being both an artist and a theorist of art.

In his epic poem *Limestone*, the dialectic process integrating identity to otherness into a single texture acquires a postmodern tone, by splitting the concept of *self* into a multiplicity of *selves*. That is to say that in the author’s work, identity coincides with a hybrid sense of otherness or with the dialogue among a variety of othernesses:

*Rawle, Clennel and Charles comprised
my first self. I, Grantley, the second*

.....
*I know there were other selves:
two yet nameless, lurked in the shadows,
selves to be controlled like the wild
worker hot-heads full of envious bile.*

.....
*Features grew on my third self’s shadow,
this self was a puzzle to me.....*

.....
*I’d watch this Clement make his name,
.....
But there in the shadows lurked my fourth self,
still featureless, unable yet to say its name,
yet burning each day with a hotter flame.*

*Over the sea-green lawn raced my joy,
fifth self, a scrawny fair-skinned boy,
protected now but groomed for politics. (L., pp.91, 97 and 98)*

*Here Creole voices, black and white,
and all else in between, in plural
patchwork bless with carnival,
each one same but yet unique. (L., p.190)*

The weaving together and tension among a plurality of selves can be compared to Wilson Harris's construction of "a new dynamic, hybrid post-colonial identity" which acts as a counterpoint to the formulaic configuration of "the colonized subject as unitary, fixed, stable and utterly dominated, being the complete 'other' – or 'stranger' – external to and distant from the colonizing subject" (Menezes de Souza, 1995: 56).

Identity emerges as a polyphonic construct which defies imperialistic rhetoric. Denying the notion of "[a] stable unchanging and continuous frame of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions, and vicissitudes of our actual history" (Hall, *apud* Festino, 2002: 121), identity is here redefined as *positioning*, a concept which is "based on the idea of heterogeneity and diversity", "thriving in difference and hybridity".

Kellman's hybrid multitudinous self denounces imperialistic prejudice:

*But could he show these his people
a pathway from their provincial
little England? Would they ever know*

*that latent within their many selves
lay a deeper nation, rising
like layered coral reefs or plumbing
depths like hidden limestone caves. (L., p.128)*

This self sometimes acquires the face of the imperialist dominator itself, being one with it, thus allowing for identity and otherness to overlap:

*Speaking now for those who of old
I'd helped oppress, I accepted their cold
response and the surprised, uncertain eye
of those who tightly gripped the economy.
.....
.....For the first time shame,
though I'd long known they didn't trust
me. Could I blame them? I had thrust
myself into white arms, destroyed Black
leaders, married an English lass.
The fact was, Clement and I were one. (L., 92-93)*

The overlap and oneness between the master and the serf seems to corroborate J. Baldwin's (1963: 21) view that "the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together in the same society", and Said's (1994: xxiv) according to which "Western imperialism and Third World nationalism

feed off each other". Kellman critically points to the bond that irrevocably connects the two terms of this dichotomy and which allows them to feed each other in a never-ending and vicious cycle.

The resolution of this dilemma is not simply protesting or reversing the relative position of the terms in the dichotomy, since this would keep the perverse bond between oppressor and oppressed. What Kellman proposes is an utterly new identity, a self-as-wholeness, a self-as-connectedness. This self is equivalent to a free and all-encompassing Barbadian subject, one that transcends individuality and narcissism, coinciding with a mature national identity – an identity which does not belong to this or that citizen. It is the country itself, the island itself. To the

*Swells of variegated immortelles [which]
reminded me of my duelling selves,
a battle still not quite over (L., 98),*

and to the rejection of *a multitude of crimes to self (L.98)*, Kellman counters a broad self, where union and communion may resolve contradiction and tension.

*Clement was gone, exiled to Trinidad,
I admit his deportation made me glad.
I was now an island, its width and depth. (L., 97) [emphasis mine]*

3. Identity, Past; Fiction, History

The construction of a complex and multitudinous Barbadian self-as-oneness seems to be based on a method which has much in common with Wilson Harris's "strategy of re-vision", by means of which "cultural deprivation" can be overcome (apud, Menezes de Souza, 1995: 57). Menezes de Souza calls this strategy "'a pedagogy of re-visioning' through which members of cultures may have access to their long-forgotten internal resources, to what Harris calls 'the multiple heritage of the past', the unconscious strata of memories, the 'source of unending parallel possibilities'".

Kellman goes back to this past, "re-visioning" the Barbadian subject – a subject that is at the same time the image and epitome of the Barbadian historical citizen, and the island or nation itself - and revisiting his past, by writing an epic poem in which History, fiction, personal

impressions and feelings, as well as poetic inventiveness coexist, making up a single polyphonic texture.

Gilmore (http://www.peepaltreepress.com/review_display.asp?rev_id=403) extensively discusses the historical dimension of *Limestone*, a book which he views as “an ambitious attempt to tell the story of Barbados and its people”. He summarizes the journey of the historical subject construed by Kellman as one involving three parts. In the first one, the author focuses on the way “the original Amerindian inhabitants of the island [are] driven from their homes by the arrival of the Europeans”, swiftly moving

to the arrival, in a Barbados abandoned by the Amerindians, of the first English settlers, who bring with them enslaved Africans and all the horrors of slavery. The story is then taken down to the slave uprising of 1816, usually known after the name of one of its leaders as the Bussa Rebellion.

In the second one, the text presents the panorama of

the period from the aftermath of slavery and ending of the apprenticeship system in 1838, through the long years when the formerly enslaved and their descendants had to struggle for survival in a system which told them they were now free and equal, but which preserved great disparities of both status and opportunity based on colour and class, to the campaigns for political equality and freedom in the early twentieth century, Independence in 1966, and down to the death of the island’s first prime minister and “Father of Independence,” Errol Barrow, in 1987.

The third and final part moves the narrative to the present, and suggests “the continuance of the problems of the past into the present”, by showing how this continuance reflects upon the partly fictional, partly autobiographical character’s -- Livingstone’s -- “diasporic wanderings, caused by the lack of career opportunities at home”,

The historical dimension of Kellman’s poetry merges with fictional inventiveness, which reinforces the polyphonic nature of the text. Livingstone and Levinia, for instance, are characters that have no historical existence. Facts which are the product of the author’s imagination intermingle with events which actually took place in reality. Gilmore points to some inaccuracies in Kellman’s account of the history of Barbados, thus not taking into consideration that *Limestone* is not a document produced by a historian, but rather a dialogic and polyphonic work of a literary

and extremely poetic kind. As the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa reminds us, the poet is a liar, a pretender.ⁱⁱ This means that he can freely invent reality and compose it out of elements from history or from the permissive territory of imagination and fantasy. This is precisely what Sir Philip Sidney (*apud* H. de Campos, 1976: 26) reminds us of: “the poet ... asserts nothing. Therefore, he never lies”.ⁱⁱⁱ

In a never-ending dialectic process, Kellman's fictional characters are not only invented and imaginary; they often present a real-life dimension. An epitome of this polyphonic character is Livingston – a fictional character that borrows many of the characteristics and experiences from the author himself, at the same time being a “living stone” - a symbol of “the rock”, “the island”, that is to say, of Barbados itself.

*Dah good. Livvy stand for Living Stone,
also Tamer of the Seas. (L., p.161)*

Through his polyphonic fictional, historical and autobiographical epic poem, Kellman courageously goes back to his own past and to that of his country. By confronting oppression and the errors from the Past, he avoids oppression, which, according to Baldwin (1963: 24) is “the inevitable result of things unsaid”. The story Kellman tells us is not always a beautiful story. It is a story which points to the horrors of slavery and power. As Baldwin would say, “it is not a very pretty story: the story of a people is never very pretty”.

*These hard symbols mirrored their ruins,
their grim histories, a truth that hymns
every living woman, living man. (L, p.191)*

Kellman manages to change facts which are not “pretty”, and that reflect a “story [which] is gloomy and often discouraging” (Said, 1994: xxiv) into an aesthetically and ideologically harmonious construction. The polyphonic texture of his *Limestone* presents the reader one of the most beautiful experiences in Post Colonial literature.

CONCLUSION

Limestone creates a compound poetic identity of both a collective and individual nature which transcends and aesthetically “re-visions” the formulaic figure of the post colonial subject, changing it into a multifaceted image of a universal kind. The book depicts important events in the history of Barbados, at the same time pointing to their broader humane meaning and repercussions. The universal dimension of the text is permeated with a poignantly emotional sense of longing. Throughout the text, exile and homecoming intermingle, polyphonically coloring the poet’s voice with affection and nostalgia.

Limestone is not a book like any other. It is a door that opens to freedom, to re-visioning, and to avoiding “flight from the self” (*L.*, p.159). It is a cathartic way of healing the wounds caused by slavery and exile.

*But something crucial is being
revised here, something is healing
the deep pain so much repressed (L. p.159) [emphasis mine]*

The poet craves for a homecoming:

*the calm comforts of home,
the only Eden I could call my own. (L. p.102)*

The homecoming Kellman points to is not only an individual homecoming, having to do with exile. It is the homecoming of human nature to its essence, to its very humanity. Kellman outlines a historical and mythical Barbadian nation which is not merely a nation but rather the archetypal matrix – the stone or the rock - upon which the collective human psyche lies.

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ⁱ - a term I'm here also borrowing from the theory of music, that is, harmony here refers to the use of simultaneous tones and notes or chords. In musical theory, harmony embodies chords and their construction as well as chord progressions and the principles of connection that govern them.

ⁱⁱ *O poeta é um fingidor/Finge tão completamente/que chega a fingir que é dor/ a dor que deveras sente*. The poet is a pretender/ He pretends so fully/ that he ends up pretending/ to feel the pain that he really feels [translation mine]

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Benjamin states that even historical reports have no absolute validity, in that they are merely a "narrative", a "historiographic" construct distorting reality according to a biased point of view, which usually coincides with that of the oppressor.