Reviews

« Muslim, Interrupted
Toward an Aesthetics of Earth »

Post-postcolonial?

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Christian Campbell, *Running the Dusk* (Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree, 2010); 81 pages; ISBN 10-1845231554 (paper).

In an interview with Lisa Allen-Agostini published last year in the *Caribbean Review of Books*, Trinidadian-Bahamian poet and professor Christian Campbell cites the usual suspects—British Romantics (John Keats), Latin American exiles (Pablo Neruda), West Indian Nobelists (Derek Walcott, "a first love")—as his literary influences. [1] Then the line breaks and a funny shift happens. In quasi-verse form, Campbell's taxonomy grows encyclopedic—Jamaican reggae artists (Buju Banton), American jazz divas (Sarah Vaughan), Mexican surrealists (Frida Kahlo), Russian freestylers (Aleksandr Popov), Japanese breastrokers (Kosuke Kitajima)—a lovely crescendo that gives way to the inevitable diminuendo: "All the Africans, Amerindians, East Indians, and others that made me." One pictures a broad-chested Campbell when he declares, "Whatever else it may mean, I think that [post-postcolonial] may be one way to locate my work generationally. I am very much a post-Independence (and post–Civil Rights baby). What are the tongues for these times?"

Prodigious talents often create new categories for themselves, but "post-postcolonial" feels particularly clumsy on the tongue. What does *post-postcolonial* mean? Homi Bhabha's meditations in *The Location of Culture* provide a hint: "If the jargon of our times—postmodernity, postcoloniality, postfeminism—has any meaning at all, it does not lie in the popular use of the 'post' to indicate sequentiality—*after*-feminism; or polarity—*anti*-modernism. These terms that insistently gesture to the beyond only embody this restless and revisionary energy if they transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment." [2] Campbell's voice is, if anything, "restless and revisionary." The characters in his poems refuse one "post"; they are eccentrically ex-centric, committed to the idea that defining themselves in opposition to colonial legacies is not only insubstantial but self-defeating. In his début collection, *Running the Dusk*, Campbell presents a vision of a post-postcolonial Caribbean culture teeming with cosmopolitan nomads and shameless migrants, characters at once deconstructing the absurd contradictions of history and improvising sophisticated ways to move beyond their limitations.

While nomads and experimentalists are common in Caribbean literature, Campbell's characters are exceptionally self-conscious—and even self-righteous—about their peripatetic tendencies. They are constantly on the move. "Children squawk on a swing, flying, / Bahamian children in the night" (16). "Serene as a turtle," a diver enters the water, "looking for shells/and pebbles, bits of coral, to turn over/and over in [his] hands" (29). In Barbados, the poet goes for a morning jog to Dover Beach, which he makes clear is "not going someplace where 'the cliffs of England stand'" (22). [3] These travelers each enter indeterminate spaces: night, ocean, and, notably, *non*-Englishness. In "Ballad to Oxfraud," Campbell satirizes members of an earlier generation of Caribbean migrants who reified bastions of English culture like Oxford, the "City of dreaming spires / City of beaming liars" (25). An aspiring Bahamian poet imitates T. S. Eliot's "deadpan, faux English accent. / Island colonial with good practice already." In his Oxford dormitory, "poor Vidia / Naipaul" wakes up "in a sweat, / swamp-wet nightmare that he was back / in Trinidad" (24).

Campbell, a 2002 Rhodes Scholar, concedes that Oxford remains a destination for many bright Caribbean students. Yet, while Sir Vidia and company were focused on mimicking Englishness, Campbell's generation is interested in taking Englishness apart. In "At Buckingham Palace," a post-postcolonial Bahamian student meets the Queen for the first time, though he "had the flu" and "nearly stayed home." He describes the Queen not in terms of her inherited symbolism but rather in terms of her physical appearance: "red dress," "horrid black gloves," "hair like rigor mortis" (34). Likewise, Buckingham Palace is a composite of random things. The student stands in the center of the space, suspiciously scanning the ornaments around him. It is worthwhile to note that he visually gravitates to Baroque art—Van Dyck and Rubens—relics from the curlicue excesses of seventeenth-century Europe. Still, the student's analysis is informed as much by a sense of absence—"secret rooms," "no crown jewels / from India," "none from Benin"—as it is by his observation of objects. This perceptiveness leads the student to *gaze* rather than to marvel. He understands that twenty-first-century Buckingham Palace is not the ordered temple of colonial mythology. Buckingham Palace is a study of symbolic contradictions.

The post-postcolonial student can choose to explore English architecture—or he can construct buildings of his own. It is safe to assume that Campbell's student elects to do the latter. On receiving the Queen's award, he thinks:

> *Light up your spliff,*
> *Light up your chalice,*
> *Make we smoke it inna*
> *Buk In Hamm Palace.* (35; italics in original)

Though we smile on first read, the poem bluntly refocuses our attention from the palace's gilded objects to the student's desire for a space to think and consider—for an opportunity to explore *himself* on his own terms. This breed of brazen self-exploration pervades Campbell's collection. In "Lightskinned Id," he invites readers to "look hard" at all the colors found on his body: "the white/hand side" of his palm, "veins branch[ing] out/like green pipes," a "libido of gold," skin by turns "peanut-butter oreo," "crème brûlée," "molasses," and "bronze" (43). "O the chiaroscuro of my self," the poet, channeling Whitman, exclaims. Campbell's inquiry possesses a musical quality. "My id is El DeBarge. / . . . How my id misses the eighties," he pines (44). Many characters in *Running the Dusk* take similar pride in riffing and messiness and play in the way of jazz musicians, who agree to perform in F with their band, while accepting that the very nature of their art gives them license to improvise *away* from that key. In "Vertigo," a little Bajan girl waiting to board her New York–bound flight, spins in the airport terminal. While doing so, she "cocks out her chest" (56). "Singing goes with / twirling," the poet observes, "and this requires fierceness." Campbell's weed-smoking Oxonian, his Freudian twenty-something, and his assured little girl—

at which others in the terminal "are staring / sensible and still" (57)—each embody the post-postcolonial revisionary spirit. Following distinctive paths, these characters unabashedly walk the borderline between urbanity and earthiness, progressivism and patience, intelligence and intuition.

Nevertheless, the poet reminds us that our vertiginous little girl "likes her Bajan / ways" (56). As nomadic as Campbell's post-postcolonial characters may be, their traveling signifies not an abandonment of their pasts but rather a quest to discover ways to speak about them. Before the Oxford scholar in "Legba" can even saddle his high horse, he recalls how his Anglophile grandfather, honored with membership into the Order of the British Empire in his youth, has no choice but to confront his origins in his final days, falling "blank and silent / as any road in Nassau / the morning after junkanoo" (28). There are quiet notes of acceptance—even of healing—that help to balance Campbell's collection. In "Listening to the Body," a teenager pierces his ear for style in part one ("smooth, a sting, a new self"), while in part two an old man dies: "He lays there. / His penis dumb and covered, / sheath to tube to piss-bag" (30). So different from the earnest lyricism found in most of Campbell's descriptions of bodies, the latter image is sterile, blunt—and brutally honest. It is the sort of honesty described in unexplained one-line upper cuts like this reflection on Goodman's Bay, Nassau: "All this beauty for nothing" (17).

Such lines lead us away from any sensationalistic construction of the post-postcolonial present. The narrator in "Curry Powder" realizes, after all, that his identity was formed through the unlikely unions of his Trinidadian ancestors, and these unions—experimentations—were not without controversy. Modern attempts to simplify historical contradictions can carry consequences as absurd as the contradictions themselves:

> But Panday in power now, and Mummy warned
> me to say *Indian* not *coolie*. One of my small
> cousins told me, with a grown-up intuition, *You know*,
> *in Trinidad, you not black, you dougla*. (36–37; italics in original)

The post-postcolonial person's dilemma involves making sense of and moving beyond the linguistic simplifications—all of ambiguous origins—that were whispered in public and reinforced in private by previous generations. When did "Indian" become *coolie*? When did "black" become *nigger*? How peanut-butter oreo must one's skin be to qualify as *dougla*?

If forging a new future is tricky for members of the post-postcolonial generation, understanding their histories is no easier task. Nevertheless, Campbell's poems encourage the post-postcolonial generation to take a prismatic approach in both writing their histories and building their futures—to embrace the many shades of stories, languages, and myths that make up their present. Though Campbell's satire of Anglophile members of the postcolonial generation is soft, his criticism of them is firm. Sir Vidia, sweating at Oxford, and the Bahamian student, imitating Eliot, both mimicked English culture as a means to make order out of the cultural confusion they encountered at home. To perfect the English accent, however, was to veil the conflicting voices of their realities, an impulse that—however convenient at the time—worked to perpetuate cultural delusions and, in the long term, may have caused them profound personal sadness. Walcott, in his essay "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," frames the problem like this:

> By writers even as refreshing as Graham Greene, the Caribbean is looked at with elegiac pathos, a prolonged sadness to which Lévi-Strauss has supplied an epigraph: *Tristes Tropiques*. Their *tristesse* derives from an attitude to the Caribbean dusk, to rain, to uncontrollable vegetation, to the provincial ambition of Caribbean cities where brutal replicas of modern architecture dwarf the small houses and streets. The mood is understandable, the melancholy as contagious as the fever of a sunset, like the gold fronds of diseased coconut palms, but there is something alien and ultimately wrong in the way such a sadness, even a morbidity is described by English, French, or some of our exiled writers. It relates to a misunderstanding of the light and the people on whom the light falls. [4]

Campbell's post-postcolonial characters take up a new attitude toward the dusk. They are attempting to understand "the light" and to particularize, rather than narrowly categorize, the "people on whom the light falls." Progress requires new modes of interpretation that do not mask historical and social complexities but rather honestly interrogate them. Doing so requires understanding the "uncontrollable," the marginal, the messy, so that, as Walcott puts it, the proportions of the Caribbean city are not "measured by the traveller or the exile, but by its own citizenry and architecture." [5]

Campbell gives us characters in the process of this cultural reinterpretation. They clear away the flawed hermeneutics of the past. Rather than privileging the English yardstick, for example, the artists, activists, and scholars in *Running the Dusk* look at Englishness with a curious distance; Englishness is one influence out of many. The post-postcolonial character is open to exploring influences outside expected norms, and he demands the freedom to stitch those influences together as he sees fit. He embraces the multiple: "Do you see my colours, my dazzling terror?" the poet challenges. Yet, at the same time, he realizes that his brash experimentations—particularly those requiring a move away from the Caribbean landscape—inspire a problematic kind of performativity. "Watch my style, my chalkface charade, rude / work harvesting hymns. Break way. Look good," he boasts (48). These lines suggest that, if the *tristesse* of the postcolonial character lies in his unintended mimicry, the *tristesse* of the post-postcolonial character lies in his self-conscious masquerade. What prevents his masquerade from becoming wholly disingenuous, however, is his understanding that he is permitted to wear *multiple* masks, just as he is permitted to speak in multiple tongues. Identity need not involve identification with *one* nation. The Oxford scholar will return to Nassau. The little Bajan girl will invariably return from New York, knowing that the opportunity to study or teach or work there one day would not make her any less "Caribbean." In the post-postcolonial framework, a relationship to a single place is often rendered impractical due to social, cultural, or family dynamics. Campbell's post-postcolonial characters are comfortable, therefore, with citizenship in a suspended space, an experimental state of heterogeneity, ambiguity, and uncertainty—a self-conscious process of constant *becoming*.

A revisionist approach to history, a tendency toward transnationalism, experimentations of language and dialect: the *post-postcolonial* tropes emerging from Campbell's poetry sound familiarly *postcolonial*. So, how does one differentiate between the two critical constructions? It seems that Campbell, on first read, simply uses the prefix *post* to indicate temporal differences; Campbell writes that he is post-Independence and post–Civil Rights. Historically, he sets himself apart from twentieth-century Caribbean and American movements for democracy and equality. In doing so, however, he does not suggest that he is *above* or *beyond* those movements—they permeate his collection. Rather, he emphasizes that his work represents *more* than them. Campbell's post-postcolonialism is marked by more ordinary social phenomena, as well. The post-independence generation of Caribbean students is increasingly drawn to education in North America. (Campbell, in addition to having studied at Oxford, holds a bachelor's from Macalaster and a doctorate from Duke. He currently teaches at the University of Toronto.) The influence of American popular culture is clear in Campbell's poems. His collection reminds us that, for the post-postcolonial generation, national boundaries are growing increasingly porous through the ubiquity of social networking tools like Twitter and Facebook. Textually, Campbell's poetry engages in a dialogue with poets and critics traditionally categorized as *postcolonial*—Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire, Lorna Goodison. While he "gives thanks" to them, he also distances himself from the *postcolonial* category into which they are frequently placed—that is to say, he distances himself from any critical definition chiefly constructed in opposition to the Caribbean's ties to England. And so, Campbell neither frames dusk in terms of *tristesse* (Naipaul) nor historical acceptance (Walcott), but in terms of something new—the opportunities latent in an existence *self-consciously* beyond categorization.

Ultimately, however, Campbell's chief aesthetic preoccupation seems to be less with all that I have written above, and more with the two brothers below, starting a footrace down a road in Goodman's Bay:

> We run the dusk
> at dusk. Everything
> is open and live
> with silence. God,
> there is too much
> red in the sky! (16)

While it certainly can be debated whether too much limitlessness can lead to "slackness" (Lady Saw's "Madness now. Melody / like a tripped alarm") or caricature (Trinidadian-born, Queens-bred Nicki Minaj's wigs that shift from Barbie blonde to pink), one senses that Campbell prefers his experiments to be, at some point, at least, quiet, considered, and serious (52). *Running the Dusk* leaves us with the hard-to-place feeling that members of a new generation—however you categorize them—are flourishing in ways that their parents might have once found inconceivable. Campbell's poems call to mind ambitious Caribbean youth—the Bahamian environmentalist rewriting climate-change policy at the United Nations, the Guyanese researcher developing novel treatments for cancer, the Jamaican activist advocating for LGBT rights. Campbell encourages us to ask questions about their futures that go beyond convenient definitions. What will become of the restless brothers running the Nassau dusk? What about our twirling little Bajan girl? And what about our Rhodes Scholar visiting Buckingham Palace for the first time, craving weed, dreaming of home, his promising career only about to begin?

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[1] Christian Campbell, "I Must Make Trouble for the Nation," interview with Lisa Allen-Agostini, *Caribbean Review of Books*, 22 July 2010, http://caribbeanreviewofbooks.com/crb-archive/22-july-2010/i-must-make-trouble-for-the-nation/.

[2] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 6 (italics in original).

[3] Campbell references Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (line 4), first published in 1867.

[4] Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), 76.

[5] Ibid., 76–77.

This entry was posted on Thursday, 30 June 2011 at 9:50 am and is filed under Christian Campbell, Stephen Narain, sx salon 5. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.

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