

In a Different Voice: Caribbean-Canadian Poetry for Children

It was Caribanna that started me thinking about this paper. Billed as the largest cultural festival in North America, this annual Toronto event claims to attract a million participants—in a city with a population of only about three million. In the hot summer days around the first weekend in August, Toronto celebrates the impressions made on the city by its Caribbean inhabitants. As the promotional blurbs explain, the festival that began in 1967 as a 'three-day event has now grown into three weeks of celebration, absorbing most of the city with its infectious feel-good vibes'.¹ 2012 marked its 45th incarnation. Although I appreciate that the feel-good party vibes—the music, the costumes, the food and the dancing—all suggest the dismissive tag of Stanley Fish's "boutique multiculturalism,"² I'd like to suggest that there is something more serious, more genuinely transformative about Caribbean-Canadian culture. There is a backstory to the timing of Caribanna, not an invisible story, but not the story splashing across the city in those high summer, mid-summer days. 6 August 1962 was, of course, the day Jamaica achieved independence. So 2012 marked its fiftieth anniversary. But there is another anniversary that's marked: 1 August 1834 was the date when slavery was abolished. In my twenty-minute paper, I partly want to attend to the ways in which Caribbean-Canadian poets have impressed themselves on the landscape of the city, how the city is shaped by its Caribbean inhabitants, but before I do, I want to set up an alternative beginning to the paper, because I want to make explicit the fact that I know that the Caribbean isn't one place and that the Caribbean diaspora isn't just a thing.

Maybe an alternative beginning for my paper is located in the difference between the islands of the Caribbean, between say, the coral island of Barbados and the volcanic island of Jamaica. Or maybe it is about the way that the people of the islands are part of an African diaspora, which isn't a single thing either. Or maybe—and this is the part that seems most difficult to disentangle, to express, to negotiate: Caribbean-Canadians aren't African-Americans. Don't laugh. The politics, as you know, are tricky, and I'm still stinging from having been rapped on the knuckles for not having included enough African-American poets in the poetry section of the *Norton Anthology of Children's Literature*,³ which I assembled and edited. For those of you who edit anthologies, I know you'll appreciate the difficulty in trying to establish a chronological and critical line, narrative coherence and a representative balance. When I tried to explain that I'd wanted to include a Caribbean-British poet (Grace Nichols, as it happens) as well as an African-American, that wasn't regarded as a sufficiently good answer. But it did make me worry about the fact that I'd not included, say, a Caribbean-Canadian poet, or that African-diasporic poets who identify as Caribbean somehow weren't real African

¹ <http://www.caribanatoronto.com/>. Accessed on 3 October, 2012.

² Stanley Fish, "Boutique Multiculturalism: Or Why Liberals are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech," *Critical Inquiry*, 23, 2 (Winter 1997): 378-95.

³ Jack Zipes, Lissa Paul, Lynne Vallone, Peter Hunt, Gillian Avery, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* (New York: Norton 2005).

diasporic poets. Forgive me. The whole discussion made me dizzy, but it also made me think about what is different about Caribbean-Canadian poets.

One of the first things I recognized, something that amused me at first, is that the Caribbean-Canadian poets don't particularly identify as such. They turn up anthologies of Caribbean poets,⁴ and of Canadian poets, but when they do they are often unmarked by the missing term, and unless you read the fine print in their bio lines or attend closely to some of place names or references in the poems themselves, you'd be hard-pressed to identify them—as a coherent group. I had been tempted, incidentally, to play a kind of guessing game in this talk, but it didn't seem fair. The question would have been, how many Caribbean-Canadian writer (at least one of whom is here) can you name. My short list of names would include—in alphabetical order—Lillian Allen, Dionne Brand, Christian Campbell, Cyril Dabydeen, Kwame Dawes, Nalo Hopkinson (a writer of speculative fiction), Pam Mordecai, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Olive Senior and Wendy “Motion” as she is known, Brathwaite—and if I've missed some I'm sorry. There are other African diasporic poets in Canada, who don't identify as Caribbean. I'd include George Elliott Clarke, Kanon and Dwayne Morgan. I can hear the next question: but are they *children's* poets? I'd answer that they are poets whose work is within the hearing of poets, and though some, like Pam Mordecai and Olive Senior, do publish for children, other poets, Kwame Dawes, Motion, K'nann—and most of the others, I'd suggest, are within the hearing of children. But I'm still stuck on the question of what constitutes—in an adaptation of Carol Gilligan's⁵ resonant 1982 phrase—the different voice, the voice that isn't African-American. Maybe it is something rooted in the both resistant and adaptive ways that Caribbean slaves in the earlier colonial periods forged new cultural and linguistic strategies, creating new communities, new social structures as Maroon and Creole. Maybe the difference also has to do with the fact that, as Stella Dadzie (writing about Olive Senior) points out that there was organized resistance to being enslaved from the beginning, and that the slave rebellions, especially those in Jamaica, date from the times of ‘the earliest Spanish settlements’.⁶ I have wondered whether or not some of those adaptive/resistant strategies have made Caribbean-Canadian poetry different. I've been conscious of how tuned those strategies are to revisioning the landscape.

When I planned this talk, initially, I'd intended to address the work of several of these Caribbean-Canadian poets, but in the end, decided that a focus on Pam Mordecai would enable me to use her work as a paradigmatic example. It seemed a fitting solution especially Pam Mordecai is the poet who probably first tuned me to the idea that Caribbean-Canadian voices seem to elide the hyphen. I should confess that when I initially encountered Pam's work in an

⁴ See for example, Cyril Dabydeen, ed. *Beyond Sangre Grand: Caribbean Writing Today*. Toronto: Tsar Books, 2011.

⁵ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard: Harvard UP, 1982.

⁶ Qtd in Emily Williams, *Poetic Negotiation of Identity in the Works of Brathwaite, Harris, Senior and Dabydeen: Tropical Paradise Lost and Regained*. Caribbean Studies, vol 5. Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press: 76. Stella Dadzie, “Searching for the Invisible Woman: Slavery and Resistance in Jamaica,” *Race and Class*, 33.2 (1990): 22.

anthology edited by Grace Nichols and John Agard, *A Caribbean Dozen*,⁷ I didn't appreciate that Pam was living in Toronto, where I live. My first formal reference to her work was in an essay I contributed to Morag's *Poetry and Childhood*, as I'd been arrested by the way one of her poems, 'Lament of an Arawak Child, presented an inversion of Sarah Coleridge's 1834 'Good Things Come from Distant Places'. Coleridge regarded the Caribbean as a supplier of goodies for British children, a place providing commodities. The Caribbean is a place where 'hummingbirds are caught'. Pam's post-colonial poem mourns the fact that 'now there are no more hummingbirds' because 'strange men ... plundered all we had'.⁸ As I continued to read Pam's work I became increasingly conscious of how she was able to repopulate the lost birdsong with other kinds of singing. So, in 'Caliban Calypso or Original Pan Man', a poem for Kamau Brathwaite, she conjures a new song:

As for the creole boy child
Him tongue twining with curses?
Muttering glossalilic nonsenses
Him find him can decline
Him pain in verses, start spirits with words,
And the birds, if him call dem, will come.

When him listen, him heart flutter
For him hear the crying stones;
The rattle of creation waking
Bones reaching for bones
(*Certifiable* 30)⁹

And she replants the landscape, as in a few lines from 'Chinese Gardens—UWI', in her 1989 collection *Journey Poem*:

Eden each morning as this place
wakes to praise cobwebs crocheted
into the grass all foliage
wet with the beads of birth

⁷ John Agard and Grace Nichols, *A Caribbean Dozen*. Boston: Walker Books, 1996.

⁸ See my discussion in "Ted Hughes and the "Old Age of Childhood", *Poetry and Childhood*, Eds. Morag Styles, Louise Joy and David Whitley. Stoke-on Trent: Trentham, 2010: 33-44.

⁹ Pamela Mordecai, *Certifiable*. Fredericton: Goose Lane, 2001.

I came feet naked to the sun
my children's footsteps splashing green
seduce my loins sweeter than lust
another life another life

The condom garlands on the ground
proclaim the irony at me
but they are dead—this garden's calm
chinoiserie contains no passions

And I smile back for the tight buds
The lizard's egg bird's nest
the glow behind the hill
are things about to be

(Journey Poem 26)¹⁰

After I got over focusing only on my initial admiration of Pam's brilliant rhyming of 'irony' with chinoiserie', was able to turn my attention to the way she plays out the tensions between the sterility of manufactured landscapes (the dead 'condom garlands on the ground') and the vitality of the 'cobwebs crocheted in the grass', and 'the foliage wet with the beads of birth'. Although the poem does not appear in a collection for children, it does seem fully accessible to children—and I'm not going to bother here about arguing the suitability of sexual explicitness.

The point is that Pam revitalizes the landscape, something I think she does with equal visionary grace in her reconstruction of the Canadian landscape. Poems, from her 2001 collection, *Certifiable*, demonstrate her capacity for reimagining concrete buildings in downtown Toronto, which is--when I try to describe it to people--I generally just say it is the Margaret Atwood neighbourhood, the neighbourhood of the *Robber Bride*. Pam populates the sterile concrete. Here is a section of 'my sister red':

My sister's supporting
The wall of the Jewish
Community Centre

¹⁰ Pamela Mordecai, *Journey Poem*. Kingston: Sandberry Press, 1989.

On the south side of Bloor
At Spadina. She watches
The man cross the road
With a face like old snow.
He stares back like he's viewing the Devil's own sibling.
She observes him disposing
Of *Outreach* a poor people's
Paper that retails for dollar. . . .

(*Certiifiable 65*)

And in contrast to the white man with the 'face like old snow,' is 'sister red':

Too, my sister is wild
Lit up bright with Labatt's
Red Stripe Red Deer Red Dog
Any-old-craven canine
With scour-belly moonshine
For sale. Regard her outside?
Not a sign that the rot's
got her brain. She's a woman
Aglow with a rain
Of black hair that just
Stirs in the burp of
The subway's hot air
as it spurts from a grate.

(*Ceritifiable 66*)

I wrote to Pam about that poem, and some others, Toronto poems, suggesting to her that her writing of the neighbourhood, our neighbourhood, constitutes a way of imprinting, impressing her vision of it, on the building itself, changing the way it looks. 'sister red' is a local drunk and, though not explicit here, the allusion is to—forgive me-- a 'drunken' Indian. And if you lived in the neighbourhood of Sister Red and the Jewish Community Centre, known as locally as the JCC, you would also know that the local Native Cultural Centre is about half a block north of the Jewish Community Centre.

Pam suggests that in the poem there is a ‘reciprocal impressioning’. As Pam sees her, ‘sister red’ is as a “woman aglow,” and thanks to Pam’s gloss on the poem, I know that she had in mind the WA movement, the Women’s Auxiliary of the Evangelical church. The rest of Pam’s response to my query was so unexpected and so generous that I’m going to quote the whole thing. About my ‘sister red’, Pam says: ‘I’ve upended the image (maybe this is how I make a literal impression—I don’t know?) so it can celebrate my drunken native person sister by presenting her in an anastatic state, uplifted, either pregnant, or herself the sleeping babe in the tepee of her body’.¹¹ How cool is that, I thought, an anastatic state, a relief etching. But Pam also wants to make sure that I understand that the red woman is not Romantic. She is ugly and homeless and snoring. Yet the poem, invigorates my Toronto, it is my Toronto: the red woman, the man with the ‘old snow’ white face, being watched by the black woman alluding to the Christian WA, in front of the Jewish Community Centre is where I live. As Pam winds down the poem she writes:

Now many folk agree
is sake of types like she
and types like me hijacking
the provincial treasury—
is we make the budget can’t balance. In more common parlance
minorities screw up
the numbers. Which is
true. The average migrant family does better than two point three.
But you see the red girl? She
won’t come from nowhere
She always was here.

(Certifiable 67)

Pam nudges us, nudges me, to see the red, white, black and yellow faces in our Toronto ‘hood’, and to see that they do balance the budget. Oddly, when I’m out of my neighbourhood, and in more monochrome places, I’m deeply uncomfortable, feeling that they are unnatural. I find myself ill at ease, wincing, conscious of the unfamiliar, unhomeliness of both monochrome and dichrome. Yet I can’t also help but think about Dionne Brand or bell hooks, both describing their sense of being relaxed and at ease in places where the people around them are black, and uneasy in places where people are white. In my own neighbourhood, my whiteness is just mingled in colours of the general mix. Maybe the plural places in the world-- London, New York, Toronto--are the incubators of cultural change, and that one of the things that Pam does brilliantly is speak the language of difference. Pam, in an essay on Kamu Brathwaite, attends to

¹¹ Private email from Pam Mordecai, on 7 September 2012. Cited with permission.

the idea of prismatic, she defines her cognition as 'prismatic',¹² and I can see how that works.

I worry about narrow definitions of any kind. As it happens, I recently received a query about children's books that would reflect a Caribbean-Canadian childhood. I suggested Pam's stories, *Pink Icing*, about her childhood in Jamaica. That was apparently the wrong answer. Only a story about a Caribbean child growing up in Toronto in—I'm guessing here—the 1980s and 1990s—would have provided the right answer. Pam doesn't see childhood or history like that. And although I'd not told Pam about the rejection of my suggestion, she did, in a note, provide a kind of explanation which I'd hope would convince my questioner to think differently. Pam suggests that Caribbean people can make easy cultural impressions because their "cultures do not inhere in things." She goes on:

That is why they could retain some intactness after the Middle Passage crossing. We carried our culture in our bodies. We lock onto the music, song, language, cooking, dance, celebratory rituals, etc. of the places to which we migrate, and overhaul them.

Which brings me back, of course, to boutique multiculturalism, and in Pam's writing. Boutique multiculturalism becomes a celebratory term, not a term of disdain. So it seems right that I should end with a kind of beginning, an alphabet, from Pam's unpublished collection, 'Angus Miller's Animals', the full title reads:

An Alphabet of Bununoonus

Cautionary

Dip-and-fall-back

Eagle-eye

Fool-fool

Glib

Ha-ha

Illuminating

Joyous

Kiss-teeth

Loud-laugh

Make-up-story

Poems for Caribbean

Children

¹² Pamela Mordecai, 'Three Poems: To No Music: Will's Flowers; Caliban Calypso or Original Pam Man', *For the Geography of the Soul: Emerging Perspectives on Kamau Brathwaite*. Ed. Timothy J. Reiss. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001: 269-276.

Let me end with an excerpt from Pam's new alphabet. Here's her N, for Napoleon, which did originally appear in *New Caribbean Junior English*.

Napoleon's
a hummingbird
who's awfully busy
flittering
from flower to flower
bush to bush
and tree to tree

with his little wings
vibrating
as he sits upon the air
drinking juices
from a sweet cup
tasting, tasting everywhere.

Not Napoleon –
he's a wanderer
forever on his way ...

He must really
be exhausted
at the end of every day.

That seems a good note on which to end.