

A blog about the Department of English Language & Literature at the University of Waterloo

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## Professor Veronica Austen recounts a tremendous conference experience

Posted on [October 2, 2012](#) by [WIP](#) | [2 Comments](#)

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*(Thanks to Veronica Austen for this guest post.)*

There are moments when you love your job and moments when you LOVE your job. I recently had the opportunity to attend the *Caribbean Poetry Conference: Word and Sound* hosted by Homerton College (Cambridge, UK). When my paper was first accepted for the conference, I hemmed and hawed a bit, wondering if a trip to the UK (my first trip to the UK!) during the second week of Fall term was really the wisest idea. Nevertheless, observing that the conference programme promised to bring together academic papers with readings by many influential Caribbean poets, I knew I had to attend, the threat of death-by-jet-lag be damned.



The Great Hall, Homerton College, Cambridge UK

I imagine many of us have read about conferences with historical significance, the kind of meetings that proved groundbreaking in retrospect. One cannot really know whether history will record this particular conference as one such event, but throughout its three days, it certainly maintained that kind of air. It is hard not to partake in a collective delusion of grandeur when you have such legends as Linton Kwesi

Johnson in your midst. . . not to mention Grace Nichols, Mervyn Morris, and Velma Pollard, just to name a small few.

As part of a larger project interested in the teaching of Caribbean poetry, this conference brought together people with a shared sense of purpose and, in fact, a shared sense of literary passion that unfortunately is all too rarely manifested at academic conferences. The people I encountered were people immersed in Caribbean poetry (though particularly Anglo-Caribbean poetry), people who could offer looks of understanding rather than blank stares when a particular poet or poem was mentioned. What a rare treat, since so often to study poetry, let alone Caribbean poetry, is to find oneself the odd duck trying to discuss and/or defend a maligned (or even just neglected) “difficult” genre.

Perhaps the most pleasant surprise for me at this conference was the number of papers about the work of poets who are part of the Caribbean diaspora in Canada. Lorna Goodison, M. NourbeSe Philip, and Olive Senior were the poets most represented by the academic papers and they are all centred in Canada (at least for part of the year, in Senior’s case). (Brief aside: Olive Senior was in attendance for, I think, all of the papers on her work; how’s that for added pressure, panelists?). That Philip’s work, for instance, is being studied not just by me in Canada, but by a scholar in Australia and a scholar in Brazil was a wonderful realization. It was my own small moment of Olympic pride in nation . . . though admittedly without my HBC Canada mitts.



A bit of a break before the final reading  
(Olive Senior and Mervyn Morris) of the conference.

So, in the end, the fact that our conference days were long – 9:30 am-11 pm on one of the days, I’m not exaggerating! – was something to celebrate rather than lament. There was not a moment of the gathering to miss. The poetry readings, in particular, were once in a lifetime opportunities; I can’t, for instance, imagine ever again getting to see John Agard perform his “no no viagra in my cocoa” poem (or ever again being part of an audience responsible for shouting out that refrain!). The importance of performance to the vitality of poetry was something especially brought home by this conference. I had

earlier in the week seen an exhibition on the Han Dynasty at the Fitzwilliam Museum (<http://www.tombtreasuresofhanchina.org>), and the terracotta figurines of guards, musicians, dancers who are meant to come to life in the afterworld seem to provide a nice analogy for the experience of poetry on the page versus the experience of hearing poetry aloud. In the Han philosophy, what was still becomes animate. And poetry too. . . Poetry comes alive when it is voiced. When the body possesses it (or is possessed by it), poetry again lives.

These are things I know, but often forget. But thankfully, we have the upcoming St. Jerome's Reading Series (<http://canlitkicksass.blogspot.ca>), the various events planned by *The New Quarterly* (<http://www.tnq.ca/wildwriters>), and even the English Department's upcoming Arts Night to remind us that literature is rarely meant to stay on a page. It's meant to find voice; it's meant even to dance.

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## 2 RESPONSES TO PROFESSOR VERONICA AUSTEN RECOUNTS A TREMENDOUS CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE

**Gord Higginson** | [October 2, 2012 at 11:32 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

I hope Professor Austen will turn her work on Philip into a book sometime in the near future.



**Heather Smyth** | [October 9, 2012 at 9:33 am](#) | [Reply](#)

Thanks for the vivid description, Veronica! I wish I could have been there too. I'm glad St. Jerome's works so hard to give us a local venue for this kind of enthusiasm about writing.



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