

Declarations of the Sacred: An Autobiographical Glimpse into the Psyche of the English-Speaking Caribbean

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Abstract

For good or ill, in this essay I use aspects of my own experience as a matrix for my critical exploration of literature generally and Caribbean literature specifically. In the process I suggest maintain that parts of my own experience are paradigmatic of the condition of the English-speaking Caribbean. Therefore, the essay can be rightly regarded as my attempt to respond to the call of writers like Erna Brodber, Wilson Harris, Sylvia Wynter, Stephen Slemmons, and Paule Marshall for criticism that not only foregrounds the lived experience of Caribbean people but also finds its theoretic matrices within Caribbean. My personal story therefore becomes a cite for critical inquiry as well as the locus of conceptual data that I employ to probe for nuggets of my life's meaning.

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Introduction

My existence for more than seven decades—two of these decades as Co-Founder and Director of the International Conference on Caribbean Literature (ICCL)—has endowed me, I hope, with the right to use my own experience as a matrix for my exploration of literature generally and Caribbean literature specifically. You will find, therefore, that while in this essay I make reference to a few Caribbean writers and scholars, for good or ill I use some aspects of my life as paradigmatic of the condition of the English-Speaking Caribbean. In this regard, I am attempting to respond to the implicit and explicit call of writers like Erna Brodber, Wilson Harris, Sylvia Wynter, Stephen Slemmons, and Paule Marshall for criticism that not only foregrounds the lived experience of Caribbean people but also finds its theoretic matrices within the Caribbean culture. My personal story therefore becomes a cite for critical inquiry as well as the locus of conceptual data that I employ to probe for nuggets of meaning.

Genesis

Early in my childhood I was baptized, like millions of Caribbean people, into a theology of terror: fire, brimstone, damnation, sin, fear, and guilt. It started when at the age of eleven I began to be deeply disturbed by pictures of a place called Hell painted with imaginative and rhetorical flair from the pulpit of our village Baptist church. If you are familiar with Jonathan Edwards' sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," you know exactly what I mean when I say that these sermons scared the living daylight out of me. And you will not be surprised, then, when I tell you that on numerous occasions, during tremulous altar calls, I walked penitently down the aisle, knelt at the mourner's bench in front of the altar and asked Jesus to "come into my heart" to save me from the flames of Hell: "Please, Jesus! Please!" But though I prayed and wept, wept and prayed, Jesus did not come. With the congregation urging me on—"Come to Jesus; come to Jesus; come to Jesus just now"—I pleaded: "Into my heart,

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into my heart. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.” But nothing happened. Jesus did not come. If he did, I would have known, for I had been taught—and I completely believed—that when Jesus came into one’s heart, a feeling of “joy unspeakable and full of glory” came over one, a feeling of epiphany manifested by one’s shouts of *hallelujah!* or *praise God!* or *thank you, Jesus!* or by one’s body being taken over by a holy dance (which we called “having the Spirit”). I had also been taught—and I completely believed—that the fact that Jesus did not come meant that I had to be one of those souls not “called by the Holy Spirit” and therefore lost forever, forever damned to “eternal perdition.” For what seemed like an eternity, each day I walked on nightmares strewn along my way, nightmares which reminded me of my damned condition and from which I seemed utterly unable to liberate myself.

I kept this unholy secret of my shattered consciousness to myself, for I had neither the courage nor the vocabulary to communicate its absolute horror. That I was not rendered completely insane over the next few years or, put another way, that I did not drown in this sea of theological terror, is today one of the sacred mysteries of my life; for, with an unfathomable irony, the horror story that put an abrupt end to my childhood and profoundly disturbed both my adolescence and parts of my adulthood somehow gradually morphed into a narrative of reclamation: I would have said “*self-reclamation*,” were it not for the fact that to this day I cannot attest to playing anything but a reactionary role in the drama, completely beyond my control, that lifted me, with excruciating slowness, from a bottomless pit of despair. Over the years I have come to credit my “salvation” not to any faith that I may have had in the colonial iteration of the biblical Jesus or to any of his brothers and sisters in cultures all over the globe, but to the ineffable grace of the human condition, a condition which I have come to regard as sacred and which translates itself, for me, through structures and modalities specific to my Caribbean experience. I have also come to realize that my experience in my village church triggered my on-going quest for a bearable self-knowledge and for an affirmative sense of cultural belonging.

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I have recounted this childhood experience of spiritual and psychical deracination in some detail here because it constitutes my best point of entry into the literal and discursive hell of the Middle Passage, the *sine qua non* of Caribbean reality. It is within the structures of my own hellish rite of passage—my acceptance of a theology of damnation, the dictatorial and predatory role of the colonized church, and the extreme violence wrought on my childish imagination--that I am afforded glimpses into the interior of my Caribbean ancestors' condition. It is while trying to wrest meaning from my own soul-shattering disruption—triggered by and through colonial evangelism—that I can best imagine, and empathize with the oceanic depravity of my ancestors' experience on the slave ship, the emotional and psychical upheaval that ruptured their collective consciousness and bound their immediate progeny to a genesis of dislocation. And because of my rite of passage, I can imagine and empathize with my ancestor's connection, before the Middle Passage, to a pre-colonial, pre-Christian, Ausarian mythology against whose backdrop even the Middle Passage becomes a harbinger of the resurrection of a cosmic self-consciousness.

Indeed, the saga of Osiris' (the Divine Father's) body being hacked into fourteen pieces and scattered throughout the world, inciting Isis (the Divine Mother) to find and re-member the pieces of that Body in a manner that allowed for the immaculate conception of Heru ("uncolonized" Jesus) accrues meaning as we in and of the Caribbean attempt to re-member and resuscitate parts of ourselves drowned in the Middle Passage and other parts of ourselves currently being fractured under the colossal weight of colonial religious institutions throughout the region. Seen from this vantage-point, our psychical situation assumes a sense of urgency, as implied in the call of writers like George Lamming, John Hearne and Jan Carew (to name a few) for a poetics of inclusiveness and recovery. This call is a recognition of the need for this re-membering of our ancient and current shattered Self and, correspondingly, a mnemonic insistence that the Caribbean is forever caught-up in the inchoate process of

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creating and recreating itself. By vivifying and reifying this process, these writers (and many others) sacralize our history of Self.

Exodus

My childhood trauma also functions as a portal through which I enter the conversation regarding the nature of the poetic imagination, Caribbean or otherwise. Ironically, the church of my psychological and emotional evisceration was situated in the heart of Fox Hill, at the time an otherwise idyllic—if not Edenic—community built within a lush expanse of tropical bushes near the eastern end of the island of New Providence. These bushes were known for their firmamental silk cotton trees and divine sapodilla trees. I say “divine” because the fleshy, gold-brown fruit of the sapodilla tree, roughly the size of a small delicious apple, tasted like food for the gods. We referred to the sapodilla in the vernacular as “sapadilly” or simply as “dilly”. Dillies were, still are, sensually succulent, seductively and delightfully scrumptious. Indeed, they were, still are, ambrosial. The little boys of Fox Hill lived by the unwritten law that dillies were community property, no matter whose tree we had to climb to steal them. Like Adam and Eve lusting after the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, we pined for the dilly. In fact, the story of Adam and Eve made sense to us only if we could make ourselves believe that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was a dilly tree and that, therefore, the fruit over which Adam and Eve risked the wrath of God just had to be a dilly. So when the preacher in church referred to it as an apple, we just knew that those preachers were “liein’ tru deir teeth.” And when the preacher declared that God kicked Adam and Eve out of the garden, we sucked our on teeth and said, “Shucks, if dey didn’t have any dillies in de Garden of Eden, then God een had ta kick us out; we woulda been gone long time—soon as we take one good look aroun’ de place and didden see no dilly.”

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Years later, the saporilly would be the inspiration for one of my first meager attempts at poetry, which I titled “From Eden to Fox Hill.” The poem is brief enough to quote here in its entirety:

Be calm, Fox Hill, be calm and calmly know
Your sons and daughters crave the juicy taste
Of gold-ripe saporillies that you grow.
Adam and Even loved not the apple more.
It is the saporilly that becomes
The fruit of our undoing, our lives’ core.
We fail to understand the Creator’s choice,
For if by chance there were no dillies in that place,
Then we are glad that we were driven out,
For then we could not be true children of the garden,
We would have left it any way, eventually,
To search for you, Fox Hill, among the various bushes of the world,
Led by the sinful scent of gold-ripe saporillies.

And so it was, in retrospect, that I attempted in my own fumbling way to awaken my somnolent need—a need I share with the entire Caribbean—for myths that issue from, and seek to frame, the collective consciousness of the people: a mythology conceived in our own image and imagery, signifying the specificity of our own ontology. Such specificity may well be necessary for the dramatization of what we in the Caribbean bring to the world—necessary, no doubt, for a proclamation of how we participate in the universal quest for, and production of, meaning. Without a mythos of specificity, it seems to me, a people cannot contribute to an understanding of the universal human condition in which they participate. That I replaced (in my own mind) the apple of a colonized imagination with the dilly of my Fox Hill experience

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is symptomatic of the kind of psychological exchange that announces embryonic signs of personal and cultural departure and arrival.

Years later, that venture into the world of my creative imagination—a psychological trip (from Eden to Fox Hill) that jettisoned me back to a primal need for relevance—would prepare me to recognize the people of Fox Hill in the faces of the characters of the fictional Bournehills in Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, who intuitively understood the spiritual price we pay when we fail to prioritize our own history—when we fail, that is, to use aspects of our history for the creation of a self-sustaining and self-perpetuating mythology (Rahming, 1994). I also recognize these Fox Hill faces in other imagined Caribbean communities—in Roger Mais’ *The Hills Were Joyful Together*, Sylvia’ Wynter’s *The Hills of Hebron*, Orlando Patterson’s *Children of Sisyphus*, and Earl Lovelace’s *The Dragon Can’t Dance*, to name a few. Like many of these characters, I seemed unable to move beyond paralysing astonishment at the condition in which I found myself. They and I could be freed—so it eventually seemed to me—only through the grace of a decolonized imagination. It is reasonable, then, that I would include the creative imagination in my declarations of the sacred.

Re-memembering the Body Eclectic

My childhood experience would continue to inform the quality of my life in ways that were unpredictably re-generative. It was what sent me running to literature and film—and eventually to literary criticism—for relief from the burden of my self-consciousness and for a cosmology more bearable than that which suffused the walls of my colonized church and, it seems to me, the walls of Caribbean Catholic and Protestant churches in general; a cosmology within which my own fractured consciousness—and that of Caribbean people generally—may conceivably be cohered. This search for a bearable cosmology charted the direction of my career as a teacher.

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No wonder, then, that I came to regard the classroom as a sacred space. No wonder, too, that I was attracted to those moments when colleagues would assemble locally or nationally to engage in and advance critical discussion of literature, especially Caribbean literature.

But this attraction did not go unexamined. Was there, I asked myself, any validity to the proposition that these professional conferences mattered to more than an esoteric few? Did they improve the condition of the world (at least the Caribbean)? What role did they play in the real-life saga of our collective re-membering? On these questions the jury may still be out. Meanwhile, however, I have come to embrace the richness of the relationships I've formed along the way, the tangible feeling of admiration that flowed between participants, the joy of camaraderie, and the heart-warming sense that, despite our differing personalities and characters and our different ways of being and knowing, we were all made of similar stuff, shaped by the same magical Force. Annually, we give each other some intangible but necessary thing that can hardly be gotten in any other way: a sense of psychical belonging which has little to do with familial, religious, political, racial, or national ties. Blessed be this *kindredness* we share.

My attraction to these professional events is even more complex: Probing, as they do, the imagined vistas of Caribbean literary artists, scholarly gatherings like the International Conference on Caribbean Literature celebrate the region's movement toward the fulfilment of our ancestors' dream, a dream of collective self-realization: complete psychological, intellectual and spiritual decolonization. For this reason, I came to regard these conferences as the on-going creation of another sacred place—the critical imaginary—that operates as a necessary corollary to the creative imagination. The difference between the critical imaginary and the creative imagination resides, I think, in the fact the former is an organized response to the products of the creative imagination, while the latter is an organic, interior response to individual and cultural circumstance.

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I suggest that these gatherings of scholars and writers also play an important societal role in that they frame the conceptual manoeuvres we make to gather and taste the fruits of the creative imagination. Put another way—and to shift back to the initial metaphor—the conferences foreground the Caribbean writers’ contribution to the region’s conscious and imaginative attempts to cohere the scattered pieces of our make-up: lost paradigms of spirit, forgotten paths to knowing and being, lost ways of appreciating and transcending gendered spaces, forgotten modes of apprehending the individual and communal relationship to Cosmic order, forgotten systems for the education of the soul, lost rituals of healing and remembrance, etc., etc. In accessing and interrogating the products of the creative imagination, these conferences map the routes our writers travel to find, activate, or re-create aspects of the psyche necessary for an ever-empowering ontology—that is, they tend toward the expression of a collective consciousness at once indigenized and global.

Doxology

In the above narrative discussion, I have tried to trace a few episodes—psychical, creative and professional—in my on-going attempt to discern and unravel some threads of my consciousness. The psychical effects of my childhood trauma, my venture into my own creative imagination, and my pursuit of professional *kindredness*—these three interior responses to my individual circumstance combine to form a matrix for my own embryonic production of meaning from my life. In my evolving consciousness I have come to accept that though I may lose my way over and over again, I cannot ever be irretrievably lost. I cannot be irretrievably lost because, at the deepest/highest level of my being, I participate in the omniscience, omni-presence and omnipotence of THE GREAT I AM. It is my opinion that none of us can be irretrievably lost because, at the deepest/highest level of *our* being, we are all a part of the faculties and attributes of a dis-membered God.

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Reference

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