

'Is english we speaking': African-Caribbean dialogue

Editorial: Snapshots taken along the way

Jane Bryce

Thirty years ago, when I came to live in the Caribbean, people took me for English. The colour of my skin – white – and my accent – educated middle-class – combined with what many people saw as a reserved manner, and a sharp tongue, apparently sealed my identity. Funny, because as far as I was concerned, I was African, born, bred and educated. Born in Tanzania to colonial parents, I maintained for years after we left that I was Tanzanian, even though I had a British passport. When, in my thirties, I went to study in Nigeria, I gained some inkling of how English I really was. By the time I left, clutching my PhD five years later, I was at least half-Nigerian. So, when I arrived in Barbados and nobody recognised me as African, it was a shock. As was Barbados itself, to someone prepared for the Caribbean by living in London. In London, I was tolerated as a hanger-on on the fringe of the *Race Today* collective, led by veteran Trinidadian activist, Darcus Howe. As a freelance journalist, I assiduously attended and wrote about West Indian cultural events, read and reviewed books by Caribbean writers, and danced to black British music. I had no idea of the extent to which my notion of the Caribbean was shaped by the dominant Jamaican presence in London urban culture. When I reached Barbados, informed by a mixture of my Nigerian and British-Jamaican expectations, I was terribly disappointed. It was so quiet, formal and circumspect. So lacking in drama, small and conservative. Just as I felt myself misrecognised, I had to learn to read beneath the surface of Barbadian reticence. I had to understand that the Caribbean wasn't Africa, and nor, any more than Africa, was it all one place.

I was there to teach African literature and cinema at the Cave Hill campus of the University of the West Indies. I realised pretty quickly I had to start by dismantling closely held myths and preconceptions that sprang to life the moment you mentioned 'Africa'. Either Africa was the sacred site of origin, characterised by Rastafari-influenced veneration of the kingly line of Solomon and Haile Selassie, or it was a site of primitivism where everyone lived in trees. I wanted to show my students an Africa of cities and highways, universities and culture, multiple languages and forms of music, ancient learning and modern aspirations. This influenced my choice of classroom texts: Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* was always a hit, but we had to steer away from reducing it to a drama of culture-clash. Amos Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard* might have fortified notions of primitive simplicity if it hadn't also prompted philosophical discussions of animism, as well as linguistic borrowing. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* helped to demonstrate that 'African women' were not universally downtrodden and subservient to men.

Then there was the material side – the machinery of publishing and marketing – the question of who selects what the public will read, who endorses it through reviews, which writers are visible on the international stage and which are better known at home, and why. In the early days, the choice of texts was determined by what was available under the rubric of the Heinemann African Writers Series – for thirty years the guardian and gatekeeper of African literature in English. When it ceased publishing towards the end of the 1990s, something unforeseen but, in retrospect, inevitable, happened to Anglophone African writing. In 2003, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* heralded a wave of novels published by different international presses; a new 'Africa' began to emerge, youthful, sophisticated, cosmopolitan and available through multiple outlets. Earlier,

in 1991, Ben Okri's winning of the Booker Prize with *The Famished Road* was a landmark event, but the launch of the annual Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000 gave visibility to a whole raft of new writers whose names are known today, from Binyavanga Wainaina and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, to Helon Habila and NoViolet Bulawayo. By now, my perceived priority had shifted from literary backstory to showing how African writers were responding to global change through locally situated stories. Following the immediate post-independence writers spearheaded by Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the so-called 'second generation', such as Ben Okri, Yvonne Vera, Dambudzo Marechera, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Festus Ijayi, now dialogued with 'third generation' writers – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Helon Habila, Patrice Nganang, Véronique Tadjo, Uzodinma Iweala, Teju Cole and Brian Chikwava – affording a range of forms and genres from child soldier narratives to speculative fiction, bildungsroman and romance; stories of trauma, violence, abuse, exile, resistance, recovery and transcendence.

Suddenly, for readers in the Caribbean, all this was accessible through the great portal opened up on the internet. Instead of haphazard book imports selected by bookshop managers, or texts chosen by a lecturer, there were online journals like *Chimurenga* and *Kwani?* and the *Johannesburg Review of Books*, there were blogs and reading groups and informal reviews. A corresponding proliferation of literary festivals meant that Caribbean and African writers and readers were meeting in person more than ever before. The Calabash Literary Festival was founded in Jamaica in 2001, by Jamaican writers living in the diaspora. It was followed in 2011 by the Bocas International Literary Festival in Trinidad, and numerous others in the smaller islands. For both African and Caribbean writers, the growth of the creative writing industry in the US meant that fellowships, residencies, academic teaching posts and book tours afforded new vistas of mobility and earning

power. It's become routine for writers to live in more than one place on the planet, while maintaining a digital presence equally everywhere. Writers of African and Caribbean descent living in the US and UK are rubbing shoulders as never before.

When I first came to Barbados in the early 1990s, I couldn't have imagined how the literary world would change, how boundaries would become increasingly porous and writing escape from its various ethnic ghettos. Yet I shouldn't really have been surprised. In 2000 I tracked down Niyi Osundare, Nigeria's best-known poet after Soyinka, whom I had known at the University of Ibadan. He was now teaching in New Orleans, and I invited him to visit and give a public lecture at my campus, Cave Hill. In attendance was Kamau Brathwaite, who vies with Derek Walcott for the title of best-known Caribbean poet, and who at the time was living between New York and Barbados. I had always taken Osundare to be essentially a Yoruba poet writing in English, but that night he spoke feelingly of the enormous influence of Brathwaite on his generation of African poets. He said Brathwaite showed them how to write poetry in English without being trammelled by English poesy or grammar or even its lexicon – how, in other words, to break up the language and make it carry the weight of another history, the dynamism of other voices. As he spoke, mindful of Brathwaite's presence in the room, I was reminded of a Yoruba praising ritual, when the person being praised literally swells in size as his exploits and ancestry are sung. In a reversal of 'Back to Africa', Osundare was bringing tribute back *from* Africa to lay at the feet of the grey-bearded figure in his characteristic tam.

We can't ignore the fact that Brathwaite himself went 'Back to Africa' in more ways than one: literally – he lived in Ghana, visited Kenya with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and took the name Ngũgĩ's grandmother gave him:

Kamau; and finally, his upholding of Nation Language and commitment to black subjecthood are the markers par excellence of a black Caribbean aesthetic. For some Caribbean writers, 'Africa' remains a sub-text that is by turns romantic and nostalgic; but it may also be profoundly unsettling, even revolutionary. Jamaican novelist, Erna Brodber's astonishing novels are anchored in an animist world – one where all matter, all nature is infused with spirit and ancestral voices can be heard and captured – much as we see in Wilson Harris's novels, their spiritual worldview derived equally from the Amerindian interior of his native Guyana. As Funso Aiyejina shows in his talk included here, landscape is a living repository of spirit and history on both sides of the Atlantic. As an Africanist scholar living in the Caribbean, if I had to identify a presiding metaphor for writers from the two regions, I would say, it's animism: the acknowledgement of a spiritual world.

In her novel *Golden Child*, Claire Adam, also a contributor to this dialogue of literatures, traces the parallel and opposite fortunes of a pair of twins – a recurring trope in contemporary West African novels in which twins are magical and attached to the spirit world. Adam picks up on this in her talk when she describes her instinctive recognition of the power of the Igbo *ogbanje* – whose equivalent in Yoruba is the *abiku* – the child who appears and disappears, who is constantly called back to the spirit world until ritually anchored in the world of the living. In a work of feminist criticism, *African Wo/man Palava* (1996), Nigerian scholar Chikwenye Ogunyemi (who is Igbo) explains: '*Ogbanje* refers to the iconoclast, the one who runs back and forth from one realm of existence to another, always longing for a place other than where s/he is. It also refers to the mystical, unsettled condition of simultaneously existing in several spheres.' Though *ogbanje/abiku* and twins are not synonymous, they each contain the idea of doubling – of

persons and the sense of place – with all its troubling ambiguity.

Recent African novels with twin protagonists include Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007) and Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006); meanwhile, Buchi Emecheta, who lived in London from the age of twenty and was one of the first Nigerian writers to become truly diasporic, published *Kehinde* in 1994. The protagonist, Kehinde – the name given by Yorubas to a younger twin – is not only haunted by her dead twin but tormented by whether to follow her husband back to Nigeria or to remain and make a life for herself in England. This dilemma, a hovering between two locations, both spiritually and geographically, prefigures later diasporic novels like *26a* (2006) by Diana Evans and *Icarus Girl* (2005) by Helen Oyeyemi, both UK-Nigerian writers brought up in London. Unlike *Kehinde*, whose diasporic identity is in the process of being formed, their protagonists are 'half-caste'. In their novels, biracialism, or the merging of two cultural identities, becomes another facet of the twin phenomenon; biracial children, like twins, are alternately split and doubled. The motif of twins, of halving and doubling, is complicated further by the motifs of migration, displacement and métissage. This doubling, intrinsic to diasporic identity and experience, is something Claire Adam and her twin protagonists have in common with these African-descended writers.

Diaspora as the space of literary métissage for both African and Caribbean writers is borne out in a different way by the publishing house, X-Press. Set up in 1992 by Caribbean-descended British writers Victor Headley and Steve Pope, along with Nigerian-descended Dotun Adebayo, X-Press novels kicked off with Victor Headley's *Yardie*. The genre it established confronted the realities of metropolitan urban existence for a generation fifty years removed from the Empire Windrush and the first waves of

immigration. The West Indians who arrived in Britain in 1947 saw it as the Motherland and sought to make it their home. For the protagonists of the X-Press novels, there is no such thing as home, only money and the power it gives them over their environment, often through drugs and violence. Uninvested in either Caribbean nationalism or the British social status quo, their stories are told in a British vernacular cocktail of patois and Cockney. In *Harare North* (2009), Zimbabwean novelist Brian Chikwava's protagonist is a renegade member of Mugabe's 'Green Bombers', the notorious youth brigades which practise indoctrination and initiation through violence. He takes refuge in Brixton, where he tries to embed himself in an immigrant community. Chikwava was castigated by African critics for telling the story in a pidgin-inflected patois-tinged English mash-up which the author called a 'mixed grill' of Ndebele and Shona and English. Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), dramatizing the adventures of the first Windrush-era migrants, inaugurated a London-creole storytelling voice; he may also have established a diasporic linguistic tradition. Though they stick to Standard English, London-based Nigerian writers, Biyi Bandele in *The Street* (2000) and Mohammed Umar in *The Immigrant* (2018) can both be seen as riffing on *The Lonely Londoners* in novels embodying the ethnic and cultural diversity and creative potential of inner-London communities.

Influence isn't quite the right word to describe this meshing and intersecting of themes, subjects and language; let's call it rather a literary conversation, with writers talking to each other across cultural and linguistic lines. The diaspora then, however defined, becomes that space where Caribbean and African exist in a cultural continuum which includes oral forms like performance poetry and rap, theatre, cinema and television, as well as literature. The impact of this dialogue can be seen in Britain's most

prestigious literary prize, the Booker. Presided over in 2020 by that pioneer of black publishing in Britain, Margaret Busby, the short-list featured two Africans: the US-based Ethiopian writer Maaza Mengiste and Zimbabwean, Tsitsi Dangarembga. The previous year's co-winner was British Nigerian author Bernardine Evaristo, and in 2015 it was Jamaican writer Marlon James. Yet these are only the most high-profile names, and the true gauge may be elsewhere. Never mind what we've come to know in the UK as the 'hostile environment', contributors to this exploration of Caribbean and African encounters, like Kenyan Billy Kahora and Zimbabwean Tendai Huchu, still choose to live in Britain. Here – meaning here in the UK, as well as here, in these encounters – they take their place alongside UK-Caribbean hyphenates: Trinidadian-born Claire Adam, Vincentian-born Philip Nanton and Jamaican-descended Colin Grant. And, of course, that shape-shifting Nigerian who has remade himself *in* the Caribbean, Funso Aiyejina. Their perspectives rub up against each other in unexpected ways, sometimes raising bristles on an otherwise smooth surface. What they give us is a series of snapshots of personal journeys that have no predetermined end. Taken together, they offer us a collage of ongoing encounters across an Anglophone African and Caribbean Atlantic.

Jane Bryce

Jane Bryce was born and brought up in Tanzania, and lived in Italy, the UK and Nigeria, before moving to Barbados to teach at the University of the West Indies in 1992. There she taught African literature and cinema and creative writing and was for twenty years editor of *Poui: Cave Hill Journal of Creative Writing*. She is an active member of the Caribbean literary com-

munity as reviewer, editor and judge of literary competitions locally and regionally. She has published widely as a literary and cultural critic and her short stories have appeared internationally. She compiled and edited the anthology *Caribbean Dispatches: Beyond the Tourist Dream* (Macmillan UK: 2006) and is author of *Chameleon and other stories* (Peepal Tree Press, 2007). She has recently completed a memoir, *Zamani: a Haunted Memoir of Tanzania*.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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