Who is 'the other' anyway?

Stewart Brown

> Eh white bwoy, how you brudders dem
> does sen we sleep so? Me a pay monies
> fe watch dis foolishness. Cho!
> (from 'Test Match, Sabina Park' first published in the *Jamaica Sunday Gleaner,* 1973)

In the early 1970s, still in my early twenties, I was teaching art and metalwork in a secondary school in St Ann's Bay on the north coast of Jamaica. In what seems to me now an act of great cultural hubris, I decided to start a 'little magazine', *NOW*, with the aim of providing an outlet and platform for local writing, mostly poetry, alongside contributions from the UK and anywhere else the word might spread. I'd had a little experience of running such a magazine in the UK and had some faint connections with writers and editors in that underground-ish, counter-culture-ish, small press world. Duplicated on a mimeograph machine (the local betting shop let me use their machine through the night), the first issues of *NOW* were cheaply produced and rather tatty. But, miraculously, over the next couple of years, word spread and *NOW* published contributions from writers across the region, some of whom have gone on to become international literary figures – Kamau Brathwaite, Mutaburuka, Maria Arrillaga, Mervyn Morris, Victor Questal and Dennis Scott, among many others.

At the same time as I was editing *NOW* and making contact, pretty much entirely by post, with people making this new poetry across the region, I was reading my way through all the published Caribbean literature

that I could lay hands on, most of it only published in my lifetime. It was exciting to be reading George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, Andrew Salkey, John Hearne, Vic Read, Roger Mais *in situ* and in real time as it were. Their stories were a kind of commentary on the life around me, albeit set in different islands and milieux, some providing historical contexts, some suggesting different creole voices and inflections than those I was hearing in my rural Jamaican market town. I say 'all that I could lay hands on' because it wasn't so easy to come by Caribbean literature, almost all of it published in London, if you weren't in Kingston – and even in those few city bookshops you had to take what you could find. It was still very much a minority interest. I quickly exhausted the school and parish library stocks. The only Caribbean reader for students in the school textbook cupboard was *The Sun's Eye*, Anne Walmsley's wonderful 1968 anthology, which presented poems and prose extracts from a remarkable range of writers and provided short autobiographical notes by the authors which were almost as intriguing as the extracts themselves. For example, Sam Selvon's, 'I didn't complete my education because things were brown and I had to hustle a work…' or the Tobago-born poet Eric Roach's bleak self-portrait, which includes the sentence:

'My whole history is my immediate family, and dimly seen behind the parents, the generations of heavy slave folk trampled into the clay where the sweet cane prospered in our bitter sweat…'

Roach's 'Homestead' is one of just a few poems in *The Sun's Eye*, but I found a pristine copy of John Figueroa's foundational poetry anthology *Caribbean Voices*, which gave me some sense of the foundations of West Indian poetry, though not yet much evidence of what the editors of *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse* declared in the first decade of the twenty-first century was 'arguably the most life-affirming and spiritually uplifting body of poetry in the twentieth century.'

In St Ann's Bay in 1973, just a decade or so after Jamaica's Independence, that still seemed unlikely, but even so it did feel like a time of possibilities. And with *NOW* it was exhilarating to feel that I was in some minor way 'involved' in this relatively new and vibrant literature-in-the-making.

But who was I to be involved in this new literature at all – however tangentially? I was the 'white bwoy' to whom that enquiry at a cricket match was addressed:

Eh white bwoy, how you brudders dem
does sen we sleep so? Me a pay monies
fe watch dis foolishness. Cho!

Sitting in the crowd in the cheap seats at square leg in Sabina Park, Kingston, while England's opening batsmen were 'boycotting excitement, bravely', I was identified by the rosette of my skin as an appropriate target for such bantering resentment and frustration. In that part of the crowd at least, I was clearly 'the other', a stranger; in the context of this Test Match and given the inevitable symbolism of England/West Indies contests, the enemy. Nobody actually asked where my sympathies lay or who I was supporting. It didn't matter that as an aspiring fast bowler through my teens I had idolised Wes Hall, and that for me Garry Sobers embodied the true spirit of the game. I didn't care where they came from. But among those exasperated Jamaican fans that 'battered rosette' of mine denied me any entitlement to such heroes! And fair enough, really: '*don't is their country?*'

I had been reminded what colour I was every day since I had arrived in Jamaica, sometimes in a hostile way, as in shouts of 'Pork', sometimes ironically as 'Busha', but usually just as a matter-of-fact identifier, 'white bwoy', especially in situations where I really was a stranger. (In St. Ann's Bay, after a few weeks, I became just 'Teach' and my whiteness faded to an idiosyncrasy.) Ironically, many of my literary contacts assumed that I was a black Jamaican – this was decades before the internet and Brown is, after all,

the most common of Jamaican surnames. And just to add to the confusion I wrote a poem, 'Whales', speaking through the persona of a disgruntled black Jamaican, which caused a minor international incident after it was published in the *Sunday Gleaner*. In it, I imagined the attitude of some of my pupils in the secondary school (like the swagger boys in the football team I oversaw) on realising that their likely adult careers were in more or less servile and menial jobs in tourism. The poem suggested that such young men might harbour a counternarrative to the official attitude to tourists. The poem was read by some easily offended Canadian visitors and republished in *The Toronto Globe & Mail*, with a commentary suggesting it was the work of a dangerous black radical inciting racial hatred. The Jamaican Minister of Tourism – or one of his officials anyway – publicly disowned this particular Brown as an imposter and nothing to do with Jamaica. Almost half a century later, I was amused to see that the poem is currently included in the Caribbean Examinations Council anthology for students studying literature in secondary schools across the region!

This preamble is intended to give some kind of context for my response to a question that arises from the theme of dialogue between African and Caribbean literature – who or what constitutes 'the other'? My problem is – at the risk of seeming like a 'colour blind' fantasist or an old colonial buffer clinging to my white privilege – I don't accept the term 'the other'. And if I don't accept its validity in relation to myself, why would I accept it as a descriptor of anyone else, or of any category of people? Of course, I understand how such terminology works as a tool of academic analysis, how it can provide a broad-brush reading of colonial and imperial history or a formula for re-reading canonical literature. But outside the academy, 'the other' is too easy a generalisation, too indiscriminate, too imprecise a term

to be anything other than an accusation. It is itself an agent of exclusion. It wants me (or you – whoever you are) to be defensive, it asks me to identify my 'us' which can be opposed to any number of 'thems'. Back in the 1980s, when, in the UK, these literary/cultural battle lines were being drawn around categories like 'Black British' and 'West-Indian British', British Guyanese writer Fred D'Aguiar argued that 'the creative imagination knows no boundaries'. Certainly not limitations of race, colour or history. That's pretty much my position now in relation to the idea of 'the other' in discussions of contemporary culture. This is not, of course, to deny difference or indeed the importance of all sorts of differences in all sorts of ways – not least the ways in which we tell our stories and understand our histories. But I'd subscribe, rather, to Guyanese poet, Martin Carter's formulation that 'all are involved// all are consumed', whether we would be or not, in all aspects of 'making life'. Of course, we are all involved differently, but the differences are much more complex, the interactions and crossovers more nuanced, than the ways notions of 'the other' seem to allow.

After I left Jamaica, I spent some time studying, and then several years teaching, in a university in Northern Nigeria before returning to the UK, where I taught African and Caribbean literature at the University of Birmingham's Centre of West African Studies for almost 30 years. As part of that role, I was able to organise an extended series of readings by writers with all kinds of direct (or tangential) connections to those geographies and their multiple cultures. The aim of the reading series was twofold: I wanted the students to understand that this was a living, growing body of literature, born of particular and distinctive communities, histories and ways of saying. But I also wanted to provide a platform and a connection for writers and writings from Africa and the Caribbean *in* Birmingham – it was a version

of the ambition for *NOW* – indeed over the years several of the poets who appeared in *NOW* did come to read for us in Birmingham.

The readings were mostly free to attend, open to all and advertised as widely as we could manage across the city in those pre-internet, pre-social media days. There was always a questions and discussion element when, unsurprisingly, the most informed and challenging interventions often came from audience members who shared cultural roots with the writers. Those exchanges were in many ways as valuable as the readings themselves in terms of contextualising and revealing the lives and issues that informed the various writers' work.

Although most were not well known when they came to Birmingham, many of the writers who performed their work at the Centre of West African Studies in those years have since become major – even canonical – literary figures. The first was the now legendary Trinidadian novelist Sam Selvon – author of what was arguably the first novel of multi-cultural Britain, *The Lonely Londoners* – caught on a brief visit to the UK just a year or so before he died. Other remarkable writers to have read at the Centre included Jack Mapanje, when only recently released from a Malawian prison into exile; the outspoken Nigerian poet Odia Ofeimun, whose collection *The Poet Lied* had been banned in Nigeria; the radical poet Dennis Brutus while he was still in exile from the Apartheid regime in South Africa; three very different Jamaican/West-Indian British poets in James Berry, John Figueroa and Linton Kwesi Johnson, as well as Indo-Caribbean writers like David Dabydeen, Peter Kempadoo and Lakshmi Persaud. Female voices as alike and unalike as the groundbreaking Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta, Lorna Goodison who became Poet Laureate of Jamaica, Jackie Kay who is the current Scottish Makar and the South African dramatist and essayist Agnes

Sam each brought other concerns and cadences to the mix. Birmingham-based Nigerian poet and psychiatrist Femi Oyebode and the Trinidadian anthropologist Roi Kwabena – who became Birmingham's poet laureate – read alongside writers like John Haynes and Landeg White who had both grown up in the UK but had spent most of their adult lives in different parts of Africa and the Caribbean. Just that sample list of names and their briefest biographies suggests the variety of backgrounds and positions and attitudes on issues of politics, culture, performance and literary craft that they represented.

That amazing diversity of voices and perspectives was part of the point of organising the readings, to undermine lazy ideas of a homogenous 'African' or 'Caribbean' or 'black' literature. And, given that all these writers used some version of the English language to challenge – although I wouldn't have put it this way – simplistic, ill-informed and pernicious generalisations about 'the other', they also challenged a monolithic, impervious, closed perception of English literature.

Stewart Brown

Born in 1951, Stewart Brown is a poet, editor, critic and visual artist. Over five decades he spent periods teaching in schools and universities in Africa, the Caribbean and Europe. He has published four collections of poetry, including *Elsewhere: new and selected poems*. He edited or co-edited several anthologies of African and Caribbean writing, including *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Short Stories* and *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Poetry*. He has also

edited critical studies of the great West Indian poets Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite and Martin Carter. Most recently he published a collection of his own essays on poetry, *Tourist, Traveller, Troublemaker* and co-edited an anthology of literary writings on West Indian cricket, *The Bowling was Superfine*. In recent years most of his creative energy has gone into his work as a visual artist.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**