

body of the book, it seems to have come as an afterthought. One would have loved to see these theories applied early on.

Nonetheless, *Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics* is a good book for researchers and students interested in exploring the pan-African diaspora nature of African diaspora poetry. It articulates well how African diaspora poetry has always been a battleground: to restore the language of individual and national racial identities. This language begins as a recording of presences through mythic mediation as creative and performance history in the work of Francis Harper, Cristina Ayala, and Auta de Souza within a larger process of thinking and enacting the drama of African liberation in poetry.

Marion Bethel. 2009. *Bougainvillea Ringplay*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press. 87 pp. ISBN: 9781845230845.

María del Carmen Quintero Aguiló
Department of English, College of Humanities
University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus
mariaquinte@gmail.com

In Marion Bethel's latest poetry collection, *Bougainvillea Ringplay*, the poet takes us back to our childhood days when we could not wait for the school bell to ring to have our own personal carnival in the schoolyard where we would rebel and revel through song and dance. In an interview broadcast in *Tongues of the Ocean*, Bethel was asked about the role of the poet; she quickly replied that it should be able to surpass that of the preacher, priest and politician by being able to "hold ambiguities in order to make life more elastic; life is not rigid" (Writers on Writers 2009). This is precisely the journey in which the Bahamian lawyer turned poet takes us, to a world of performance and duality, where all things show one thing while concealing another. Where the traditional game of ringplay becomes an adult's weapon of choice for revealing what lies beneath our innermost depths, but is able to "get away with it" by disguising it behind the seemingly harmless children's game. But immediately into the collection, it is quite noticeable that this is not the traditional game of ringplay, for there is the nominal adjective of the bougainvillea flower preceding it, letting the reader know that thorns, vines and potential danger are behind an otherwise alluring plant. Hence, the collection mostly alludes to the existential fact that all things under the sun have two stories, including flora and the natural phenomenon

of the hurricane. But instead of penalizing the hiding of one and the dissemination of the other, Bethel celebrates duality by keeping it in a type of chiaroscuro, where beauty lies in ambiguity.

After having won the Casa de las Américas prize for her collection of poems, *Guanahani, My Love* (1995), there was much anticipation for her following creation and there is no doubt that Bethel delivered. Mostly placing the action once again on her native land, the collection begins with poems that focus on a sense of performance vs. “backstage happenings” where the poetic voice retells personal as well as others’ stories at times in free verse, at others in prose poetry. The first poem of the collection titled “Tobacco Dove” sets the tone for the first part of the book by telling the tale of a dove whose life is interrupted when it is run over by a car. The dove looks back on its life from beyond and realizes that its daily familiar path became its killer. The dove is none other than the poet realizing her own mortality that results in her admittance of generality. Her life ends at a point where the familiar becomes terminal-unfamiliar and she realizes that all creatures and all creation—including artistic creation—are not exclusive, but inclusive and part of an entirety of cosmos.

I was on the road
 doing what tobacco doves do
 olive-bearing tree don’t grow here
 and I wasn’t no messenger
 for the dried out earth of Noah. (8)

The dove/poet gives the reader a warning that affirms that she comes from a place of vast, deep, sometimes beautiful, but sometimes-dreadful knowledge similarly to the bougainvillea itself. Following this poem we encounter stories of Christian hypocritical weddings, hangings performed by church-going men in “Sweet Chariot,” priest affairs, a soldier’s rape, a proper lady wanting to trade in her cream colored slacks for a red dress in “Decree Absolute.” All these stories of duality encircle, like the ringplay, the poet’s memories of her childhood in “Splinters of Wood” where she recalls her mother’s plea for trading in their cool wooden house for one made out of cement: “it was a house of ambition purified and sanctified where my mother’s dreams were cast in concrete the splinters of wood buried in her body could not be removed” (20). These closing lines reveal the subject of duality, for no matter how much concrete surrounded the speaker’s mother; the splinters of wood were there to stay, buried deep into her skin forever. It also suggests a sense of cathartic pain associated with being rooted and grounded in one’s culture, in this case the Bahamian culture. This poem, as well as others in the collection is written in prose, suggesting which

voice is retelling the story of the poem. In “Splinters of Wood” it is the adult voice of the poet looking back at her life in transition, something that almost instinctively tends to take the shape of prose narrative. Such a technique might explain why the preceding poem titled “Toy Soldiers” has a more familiar/traditional poetic structure, for it tells the tale of a boy who sees a soldier raping a female rebel through the bamboo bush. In other words, for Bethel, poems that allude directly to her life take on a more open form than those that are more objective, to which she is a type of onlooker. The unifying theme that inhabits the first ten poems of the collection is perhaps best exemplified in “The Frontier of Art & Home” as the poetic voice firmly states:

for the sake of self
they are at war
with art
painting a truth
of hollow echoes
of cracked eggshells
breaking the safety
of idyllic sense
and scene. (23)

The poet is vexed with artists’ desire to mask the real face of art for the sake of aesthetics. She does not believe in the notion of “art for art’s sake.” Instead, Bethel affirms that the role of the poet is much more than that, becoming thus a prophetic, reputable and communal point of reference for society that should surpass that of the politician and priest: “that is enough/like bone/and skull/and teeth/our art will/outlive us/it could win/in the afterlife/of these paintings” (26). The two remaining poems “The End of October” and “In the Marketplace” feature the transition of the birth of the poet where she recounts childhood memories of school and the marketplace retold through musical/ringplay rhythms where she finally sheds her coat to reveal her original, non store-bought tongue.

The collection then takes a turn towards the emergence of the poet and her role in society in the following section of poems beginning with “Rocks of Refuge” where nationalism, carnival, child games, history and education produce a sense of cool dread in the reader, amounting to the climactic moment of “Bougainvillea Ringplay,” the epicenter of the collection both literally and metaphorically. In these poems a sense of religion and ritual give the sense of the poet conjuring up her ancestors and ancestral enemies into her present and refashioning them into her story. “In my school of 1492 on School Lane in Nassau this is my story [...] we trade chiclets for cassava with the Lucayan children before the end of the beginning with the blessings of Hatuey we unbury the hatchet”

(45). So the “splinters of wood” and the thorns of bougainvillea are emerging just as the poet is emerging by appropriating what she though was not hers. In these poems there is thus a carnivalesque inverting of order in the voice of child revolt that is seemingly harmless in ringplay. But this ringplay is a rebel yell of resistance to the empire. All this builds up to the poem that takes on the collection’s title. “Bougainvillea Ringplay” is the adult ringplay where there is no longer disguise or duality, but instead a sense of cool menace, tempered by the atoning effects of adulthood where the uncontrolled antics of childhood become solidified and thus strengthened, but with the essence and intention of children nonetheless. “I come to you straight/shaping vision beyond sugar-in-a-plum/winding my waist tight in your face” (52) evokes a sense of threat mixed with sensuality and gaiety; elements that are typical of ringplay and carnival. The beauty of this artistic revolt lies in the fact that the voice and presence of the poet cannot be silenced, for it is in the context of child play and carnival.

The last section of the collection takes the reader from revolt to introspection featuring more somber and meditative poems dealing with creation and destruction leading the reader full circle to the beginning of the collection where the poet/dove realizes her mortality in the midst of a whole universe of death and creation. The way in which she represents such a concept is through the ever-present menace of the hurricane with its power to destroy and simultaneously create. “Stormy Imaginings” meditates on the very humane nature of the hurricane. The poem is thus a personification of this phenomenon and how it also succumbs to duality:

hurricanes feign neutrality
 no pride of purpose
 or pattern of prejudice
 they mask their longing
 months before exit
 from a point
 of dead reckoning. (74)

Only to arrive at the expected truth represented in the hurricane’s aftermath:

... and in the morning
 we see the myth
 mockery of indifference
 a pre-planned punch
 of pleasure
 gone raving mad. (75)

The poet resents the tendency to hide, to lie, to disguise; she

therefore turns to child play/ringplay, evoking the child voice where earnestness rules, and the blunt truth comes out. Because only out of truth can art be born; “the mask falls away” (79) in the voice of children who love things passionately, fiercely and irrevocably with an intensity that is many times, if not always, lost in adulthood. This galloping unstoppable love is channeled through the poet and given to us in words, and it is through the love of the words she gives us that we can travel back in time and become children again in order to undertake this poetic journey.

Bethel's affinity for childhood can also be evidenced in her choice of orthography, or better said, lack of it. Throughout the collection there are no punctuation marks that denote pause such as periods, commas, semi colons or capital letters to start off sentences. In other words, the traditional markers that usually *tell* readers where to pause are nowhere in sight, giving the reader freedom to stop or not stop at whatever spot they feel like. Bethel therefore not only evokes child play in the content of the poetry, but also concretizes it through the act of reading the poetry itself. The only orthographic symbols that grace the page are question marks and exclamation points together with capital letters for names of people and places for these symbols are not imposing and do not rule one's reading of a text, like pauses usually do. At first, this may make the reading somewhat difficult, resulting in several readings of one single poem, but once the reader lets go of these “parental control” devices, he or she is able to roam these poems as if they were his or her own world through which to travel, never taking the same path twice. The absence of pauses also suggests infinity, where there is no beginning and no end, therefore furthering the metaphor or, at this point, conceit of the ringplay where there is no head or tail in circularity. Bethel thus joins other Caribbean writers such as the Barbadian poet/critic/historian Kamau Brathwaite and Trinidadian novelist Dionne Brand, as well as critics like Paul Gilroy and Édouard Glissant in their concept of journey when it comes to describing/defining the Caribbean subject through a non-linear, non-western approach.

Through *Bougainvillea Ringplay* Marion Bethel not only reconstructs the traditional Bahamian song and dance of ringplay, but she is also presenting us with wordplay. In the same interview, the poet said that she loved words and through a poetry collection such as this, the love is evident. She plays with words and structures them in a way where there are no imposing rules to tell us how to read the poems on the page, but crafts the tensions and the rhythm so perfectly as to never cause ambiguity or lack of sense. Marion Bethel might have become a lawyer before becoming a poet, but the poet has reigned supreme in this one woman's soul and body. Her poetry reveals the elegance, eloquence and succinctness of words typical of one who exercises the law, along with the

rhetoric, strength and persuasive power of words where one is seduced and convinced of an initially ludicrous idea without notice. I fell prey to her seductive ways and before I knew it, I had become completely accustomed and extremely comfortable with this poet's style of writing that denotes full liberty, where there is order in seeming chaos. And this is the beauty that should characterize what means to be Caribbean, whether from the islands or the continent, to embrace that order of madness, the circularity of forever and the timeless pleasures of ring/wordplay.

With numerous allusions in her collection to Christianity, flora, nature and folklore Bethel is strengthening the chain of Caribbean artists that create from within the Caribbean as opposed to producing from exile. Her love for her native Bahamas and her decision to remain in her land after years of study abroad in England and North America, remind me why I have also stayed. Writers of the Diaspora write of their land once they no longer inhabit it, thus creating the impression that they may simply be writing out of nostalgic need. This poet writes of her experience from the place where those experiences were lived, while writing about her life abroad from her native land. Bethel is therefore reverting and restructuring the Caribbean subject's impulse of writing that has become the norm ever since the last century. Bethel not only breaks or sets us free from grammatical rules; she also breaks the shackles of creative convention.

In the interview featured in "Writers on Writers" in *Tongues of the Ocean*, Marion Bethel was asked the following question: "Why do you write?" Unwavering in her answer, she stated that she *had* to write, because she loved words in the same unbridled way children love all things. She added that this sort of love is lost through formalized education and that it is her duty to look towards her inner child of pre-formal education so as to retrieve the pleasures that accompanied this state and use language to bring it to life and create literature. It is quite clear that Bethel was describing the concept behind her latest poetry collection and there is no doubt that she succeeded. *Bougainvillea Ringplay* indeed takes us back and forth around and round this endless dance we call Caribbean life with raw grace, cadence, revolution, nostalgia, sensuality, and the just the appropriate amount of cool dread.

Reference

Marion Bethel. 2009. Interview. "Writers on Writers." *Tongues of the Ocean: Words and Writing from the Islands*. Web. 29 Mar. 2009.