Features of Caribbean culture in the work of Caribbean writers in the diaspora.

ABSTRACT

Writers of Caribbean ancestry who live outside of the region are usually described as having dual allegiance (Caribbean/American for example). This is eminently justifiable since there is usually a recognizable Caribbean flavour to the writing. This paper tries to identify the features of Caribbean culture incorporated in three texts (Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow*, Kwadwo Kamau's *Flickering Shadows*, Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*) and to comment on how these features are manipulated and with what effect. Some comment on the relative strength of cultural features should be possible as a result of the exercise.

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Features of Caribbean culture in the work of some Caribbean writers in the diaspora

The influence of the dead on the lives of the living is taken for granted in many Caribbean communities. Command performances of ritual Kumina in Jamaica, Shango in Trinidad, the Dugu in Belize are examples that come to mind.

Ancestor related phenomena and practices associated with them are fascinating aspects of Caribbean culture if their popularity in the creative output of the region is anything to go by. In the real situation, belief systems that incorporate ritual associated with the spirits of the dead tend to be regarded as African and so as part of the environment in which the poorer and less educated classes of the society live. Eurocentric education and mores have ensured that this attitude towards them remains entrenched. The Euro culture of the educated minority maintains its position as high or great and the Afro culture of the ignorant majority low or little. Recently however, writers, turning the social order on its head have sought to make the people and the practices associated with the majority population, central to their stories. I have written elsewhere about the Balm Yard, the location in which the Balmer/Healer/Myal man operates as the central location in Erna Brodber’s novel Myal and Olive Senior’s short story “Discerner of Hearts” (Pollard 1996). In Myal Brodber has exploited the powerful spirit world and its possible effect on the world of the living, more perhaps than any other Caribbean writer.

Ancestor-related cultural practices and machinations within the spirit world have proved equally attractive to Caribbean descendants writing outside of the region. This paper looks at these phenomena in three novels by artists representing three generations of writers: Paule Marshall Caribbean/American (born in the twenties), in her Praisesong for the Widow, Kwadwo Kamau Caribbean/American (born in the fifties) in his Flickering Shadows and Nalo Hopkinson Caribbean/Canadian (born in the sixties) in her Brown Girl in the Ring.

Marshall’s novel begins with a dramatic decision made by Avey Johnson, 64 year old black widow, heroine of the story. Prompted by a dream she decides to leave an expensive Caribbean cruise and return home to New York. In the dream she has a fight with her great Aunt Cuney many years dead:

...she had gone to bed early that evening, only to find herself CONFRONTED the moment she dropped off to sleep, by her Great Aunt Cuney...” (p31)
“She had been there in her sleep, standing waiting for her on the road that led over to the landing...” (p32)

The authorial comment is that “The old woman... was someone Avey Johnson couldn’t remember having dreamed of before.” (p31) The language describes the usual dream sequence in which the sleeper is the agent. The sleeper dreams and dreams of
someone. The Creole cultural tradition allows for an alternative sequence where the sleeper is patient and there is an external agent, usually an ancestor from the world of the spirits. Within such a sequence Marshall’s sentence would read: “The old woman was someone Avey Johnson could not remember having dreamed her before”.

If the image of Aunt Cuney CONFRONTING the heroine (quoted above) is juxtaposed to the narration of the sequence as it is and both are considered together with the strength of the impact on the life of Avey Johnson, the dream becomes a phenomenon in which an ancestor appears to instruct the dreamer on future action. There are cases in which it simply enlightens the dreamer about what is happening in his/her life. The dream is more like a vision.

The dream experience in Marshall’s novel is powerful enough to make the heroine quit the cruise and move into what the blurb describes as a “harrowing Odyssey” which brings her "finally to an understanding of what she has lost- and found." She had traded blows with her great aunt in a battle which was really about choices, about deciding which of two roads to follow. The road that was culturally true would finally win.

Lebert Joseph of Carriacou is the embodiment of the ideas of the late Aunt Cuney of Tatem. He introduces Avey Johnson to the celebration of the Big drum and through it to the relationship between the dead and the living. It is he that will open the door to the strange but important physical and psychological experiences Avey Johnson must have. He will help her cleanse her mind and make it ready for the next phase of her life. He enlightens her about the history of her people through lively description and illustration of the celebration that takes place for the ancestors and so mesmerises her that she decides to cross the water from Grenada to Carriacou.

The Nation dances, identifying African nations individually, are a feature special to Carriacou. The importance of the attitudes of the dead to the lives of the living and how that plays out in the real life situation becomes clear as Lebert Joseph speaks. He insists that the celebration has to happen to ensure that the ancestors remain pleased:

“I tell you, you best remember them! If not they'll get vex and cause you nothing but trouble. They can turn you life around in a minute you know. All of a sudden everything start gon wrong an you don’ know the reason” (p165)

Those words from the mouth of Lebert Joseph might well describe the activity of the “Old Parents” in Kwadwo Kamau’s novel.

Flickering Shadows begins with the Spirit/narrator, describing the occasion of his death. Government/the authorities decided to ban the “Bretheren” church whose members were
chiefly peasants in the farming community, Hill, in which the story is set. Police raid the church and seize ceremonial paraphernalia mostly drums. The narrator tells how he held on to his refusing to give it up. A policeman cracked his skull but he survived long enough to be present at the trial of all who resisted arrest.

The trial of the Bretheren, the law against the people is very dramatic. A pregnant woman miscarries in the courtroom while the judge hammers and bangs for order in the court. An incensed prisoner asks the judge if he doesn't have a mother and shouts obscenities at him. A gang of policemen rain blows on the prisoner who threatens to kill everybody. It is then that the narrator dies:

My heart couldn't take it. It couldn't take it. I drop down right there in the courtroom. Dead.

They buried me right next to my Clementina in the cemetery up on the Hill (p14)

The death described here is not his first. He identifies Clementina as his best wife in three hundred years. Occasionally she appears beside him as he interferes in the lives of his offspring and their colleagues. He has had a number of re-incarnations. As the story unfolds we realize that he is about to be reincarnated again but does not feel quite ready for it.

The tension in this story is mainly between the forces of government and politics and the forces of humble people and their style of religion. In the end a community is destroyed as a result of the selfishness and greed of politicians who are able to coopt a white missionary into their plans. The Bretheren church goes underground after the events described above and becomes a church of mostly women. When however a foreign missionary, white and highly suspicious to the village people, arrives with his kind of religion the government gives him full support. Some of the more enlightened villagers suspect that the missionary and his wife might be CIA and suggest that they throw them out of the village before they can do harm.

While the story is about what happens to the people living in the village, the strings that control their actions are frequently manipulated by members of the colony of the dead, a parallel population which gets augmented as villagers die. As soon as the missionary and his wife arrive there is a fierce hurricane. Houses are destroyed and several people perish. The reader knows, before the village people discover it, that both the popular Miss Wiggins and her visiting nephew have died. It is Miss Wiggins’ spirit that gives the reader some idea of how the missionary’s wife (mis)behaves after the hurricane (Page 67). She is hysterical. Her husband tries to calm her down. Miss Wiggins is shocked by her response: “CALM DOWN? IN THE MIDDLE OF A FUCKING HURRICANE AND THATS ALL YOU HAVE TO SAY? CALM DOWN?...” and turning to our narrator... she asks: “Where him get her from nuh? outa some whorehouse?” Miss Wiggins feels his questioning stare and explains her sudden presence “the old heart give out”
The coming of the missionary is a significant event. There is pathetic fallacy here. Nature introduces a violent hurricane the day of his coming and the narrator with his spirit power, imposes a foreboding dream on his grandson Cephus, the character on whom the narrative focuses most constantly. And change is imminent. Cephus and his friend-cum-brother-in-law Boysie will return to the Bretheren meeting. Cephus had been talking about such a return before; but the visitation from one of the traditional Caribbean spirits—the ball of fire, galvanizes both men into immediate action. The authorial comment is that fear is a cold hand siezing Cephus' heart as he recognizes—"the ball of light, he know is a hag— the obeah woman that live up the hill by herself and who does leave her skin and travel around the village at night sometimes like this"(1) Cephus turns to see what causes a sudden breeze to fan him and catches sight of Boysie "tearing open his gate door and rushing in his yard"(Page 85) Neither of them will confess what has happened when Inez, Boysie’s wife and Cephus’ sister asks “What the France wrong with you?” She only is aware of the effect of whatever has happened when she goes towards the door to leave for the Brethren meeting and Cephus says “W-wait f-for me.” Boysie echoes “Me too”(page 87). She is speechless. This has not happened in many years.

The meeting that marks the reappearance of the two young men in a gathering that had become a meeting of old people and young women comes to have great significance in retrospect. Cephus’ experience there is dramatic and frightening. Amid the intoxicating music of drum and flute and lively committed singing, soon after Brother Joseph, the leader intones “the missionary is a curse on ths Hill. Mark my words!...Beware backra—men bringing gifts...” Cephus begins to experience a vision of horror— a yellow bulldozer scooping up not earth but mangled arms and legs; blood all around and buzzards swooping down to collect scraps of body being flung about by a white man. It is a preview of things to come.(page 94). The vision is given to Cephus by the spirit of his grandfather, the narrator.

In Paule Marshall’s novel discussed earlier, the motivating “dream” is experienced in sleep. This phenomenon is considered normal in the Caribbean context. In fact people await such an event to know that their loving dead remember them. In Kamau’s novel while the sleep/vision exists, sleep is not a prerequisite for a vision. The will of the spirit motivator is what allows Cephus to have the dramatic vision above. Three sleep visions however force Darcy, son of Miss Scantlebury who dies while the missionary is preaching, to leave New York to find out what his mother is up to: “My mother dream me last night “ he tells his skeptical partner Gloria (248), using the Creole idiom in which “dream” is an active verb, the subject being the dead mother. The missionary had in fact unceremoniously buried his mother with unseemly haste and was in the process of appropriating her property to cover, he says, funeral expenses.

Kamau’s novel describes the destruction of a community. Yellow bulldozers looking for bauxite destroy the Hill and relocate some of the villagers. Later Hill people are beaten and put in jail for allegedly plotting against the government. The missionary is murdered in front of his house by nobody knows who and finally soldiers massacre the young men of the village because they dare to resist an assault by the police. The narrator of the story
who had intervened in earlier catastrophies (eg letting young men out of the police lock-up) is helpless at the end because he has been re-embodied in Kojo the “jacket” (2) child of his grandson Cephus. The massacre as he looks on at it is reminiscent of an onslaught three hundred years earlier in an African village when he had his first death and began his first spirit life. The aggressors then had been white men like the missionary.

Hopkinson’s (1998) Brown Girl in the Ring (Warner Books, New York) is set in New Toronto after the downtown area of that city has become one large neglected dump, taken over by the rejects of humanity after all the services have been moved out with all government agencies, to the suburbs. The family of the story’s main focus for example, is one of Caribbean migrants. Among the family’s friends is a gypsy woman (who actually speaks Romany).

The basic story is simple. A minister of government needs a heart transplant. For some reason it is politically expedient to use a human heart at a time when transplant operations had been using porcine hearts for many years. It is the access to the heart that unites this story with the main narrative of the text. For the woman who has been identified as the donor, with the correct but unusual bloodtype AB, a history of clean (non narcotic, non-alcoholic) living is a seer woman who keeps a healing facility, known as a balm yard or a seat of obeah depending on the speaker’s perspective. She lives with her granddaughter and great grandchild whose father has been abandoned by its mother because he is hooked on drugs and works for the “posse.” It is he that Rudy, the powerful leader of the evil posse chooses to do the job of procuring the heart.

The seer woman Mami/Gros Jean is multidimensional. She has access to orishas from the Yoruba tradition used in Haiti in Voodoo and in Cuba and Puerto Rico in Santeria. Her daughter Mi Jean is a Soucouyant, a supernatural folk figure known and feared in the Eastern Caribbean. She is the “Hag” referred to in Kamau’s story. A similar figure is accessible to Guyanese and Jamaicans as Ole Higue. Mami is also a herbalist in the tradition of the Jamaican balmer (who owns the balm yard) and has knowledge of Western medicine having been a health care provider in Toronto before the city was dismantled. Her arsenal includes herbs as well as antibiotics and other western medical paraphernalia stolen from hospitals and sold to her or bartered with her by the people who stole them. She objects to the label “obeah” when it is used to describe what she does: “I don’t work the dead, I serve the spirits and I heal the living” (page 59).

The minister of government represents legal, established society which no longer feels responsible for the city centre and its poor which includes Mami/Gros Jean and all the people who interact with her. In the end the victory of the little/low tradition over the great/high, the Afro over the Euro, is exemplified in Gros Jean’s success in spite of death. Gros Jean dies but her heart lives in the body of the woman politician. The events leading up to her new beginning are dramatic. The transplanted heart begins to be rejected by the host body. The death of the politician seems imminent. The doctors are rushed out of their beds for emergency service. Then the excitement dies. The patient will
live. The reader understands that the body decides to settle down and allow the new heart to control its mind. Considerations for example of means for the encouragement of small business in the rejected downtown area now become a part of the Minister's plans. This unusual change of focus completely confuses her supporters.

But the drama which gives the story its force and power, surrounds the cut and thrust between the factions in the spirit world as they are manipulated by Mami/Gros Jean, the powerful grandmother, herbalist, Shango priestess and Rudy her long time husband now arch enemy a man who runs the posse ring that offers services (like finding a heart for a hospital procedure). Rudy is old but this does not become clear until he loses his power over the "Duppy" (the soucouyant he controls and keeps fed with blood chiefly of street waifs). Her services ensure him eternal youth.

Hopkinson has martialled and put together all the available strands of Caribbean belief in the spirit world to create a powerful work in the science fiction genre. An example of the merging of myths is the persona "Duppy" who is Crazy Betty from the streets, who is also the spirit of Mi Jean, daughter of Mami/Gros Jean and mother of Ti Jean the heroine of the story. The Jean trimatriarchy is easily recalled from communal Caribbean literary memory. In Derek Walcott they are Ti Jean and his brothers (The debt to Walcott is duly acknowledged by Hopkinson "for writing the play Ti-Jean and His brothers, one of the first examples of Caribbean magic realism I ever read. (P249)) Very early in the story the pregnant TiJean refers to her unborn child as "Bolom" which is the name of the yet to be born in the tradition out of which Walcott writes his play. And the story ends with her smiling at the child and saying "So, bolom baby, what we going to name you?" (page 247)

Judiciously placed throughout the text are other items of the vocabulary associated with spirit worship in the Caribbean. There is the Shango galaxy, the names of all the Orishas are given. There is the "palais" where the main Shango ceremony takes place.(Note that this palais was, in an earlier time, the chapel attached to a crematory, in other words spirits are not new to this place). There is also the balmyard and the Soucouyant mentioned earlier. All these are used to build a powerful example of what Hopkinson herself describes as “contemporary speculative fiction". She says of the prizewinning novel: “I saw it as subverting the genre, which speaks so much about the experience of being alienated, but contains so little written by alienated peoples themselves” (Inside back cover)

The selection of "person" of the narrative voice is one of the decisions the novelist has to make before the writing can really begin. The third person narrator is the most commonly used partly because it allows the teller to be omnipresent, to have access to all relevant activity. The first person voice however, although it is more restrictive, is attractive to writers because of its intimacy, the feeling of involvement it allows the reader. The use of spirit characters allows the writer to have the best of both persons. Other writers use other strategies. Lovelace for example mixes voices. At significant points in the narrative of his latest novel Salt, he switches from third to first person narrative allowing the
character being talked about suddenly to speak. Kamau and Hopkinson have harnessed the world of spirits and have interwoven its existence into that of the real world for the purposes of their literary adventures.

The three novels selected for comment here, represent a kind of development from Marshall who allows the world of spirits to influence human behaviour, to Kamau who allows spirits to manipulate humans to Hopkinson who allows spirits to be part-time humans.


The exploration/exploitation of the spirit world of Afro/Caribbean societies may indeed be motivated by such considerations.

NOTES

1. Allsopp’s Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage gives the following definition for soucouyant, fire-hag, hag, old-heg, old higue, old suck depending on the country in which you are speaking: A legendary evil, wrinkled old woman, who hides by day, but by night sheds her skin which she carefully hides in a jar, then becomes a ball of fire roving in the air to seek out and light upon sleeping victims, esp babies, whose blood she sucks before returning to her skin which may have been peppered and salted by those hunting her down to get rid of her by this as their only means. (page 520)

The Haitian “Lougarou” (see Nzengou-Tayo) is a comparable creature.

2. A “Jacket” is a child fathered by a man who is not the current partner of its mother. The term “Readymade shirt” is used in some territories.