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Jamaica to the World:
A Study of Jamaican (and West Indian) Epistolary
Practices

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degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The Caribbean islands have been distinguished by mass migratory patterns and diasporic communities that have moved into and out of the region; as a consequence, the genre of the letter has been an important one to the culture and has provided a template for many creative works.

This dissertation is the first major study on West Indian epistolary practices: personal letters, emails, verse epistles, epistolary novels, letters to editors, etc. It focuses on a contemporary period – from the 1930s to the present, and on examples that have come out of Jamaica. The dissertation offers both close-readings on a range of epistolary texts and theoretical frameworks in which to consider them and some of the ways in which Caribbean people have been addressing themselves to each other, and to the wider world.

My first chapter looks at the non-fictional letters of Sir Alexander Bustamante and Sir Vidia Naipaul. It reflects on the ways in which the public personas of these two men had been created and manipulated through their public and private letters.

My second chapter tries to expand a critical project which has been satisfied to simply place contemporary epistolary fiction within an eighteenth century genealogy. I propose another conversation which understands recent examples of West Indian epistolary fiction within their contemporary cultures.

My third chapter looks at examples of Jamaican verse epistles and considers how three poets – Lorna Goodison, James Berry and Louise Bennett – have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to create an epistolary voice that is both literary and oral.

My fourth chapter looks at the popular Jamaican newspaper advice column, Dear Pastor. It considers the ways in which evangelical Christianity has impacted on the construction of a West Indian epistolary voice and consequently the shape of a West Indian public sphere.

My final chapter considers how technology has changed epistolography; specifically how the email, Facebook messages, and tweets have both transformed and preserved the letter. I end with a presentation of a personal corpus of emails titled *The Cold Onion Chronicles* with some reflections on remediation of epistolary forms.

Once Joseph, Seamus and I decided we would make an emblem of styles to summarise our own work. I remember Seamus saying ‘bogs, bogs, bogs’. I think I described Joseph as having a skeleton of a soul at night, in winter—a kind of lonely ether.

Mine, I decided, was just ‘Wish You Were Here’. There’s a lot to be said for postcards and why there are postcards.

– Derek Walcott

Contents

Acknowledgments	5
‘So I arrived in London. It was a cold day...’: An Introduction.....	6
‘It’s what I’m introducing myself as’: Self-fashioning & Self-fictioning in Sir Busta’s and Sir Vidia’s non-fictional letters.....	27
‘My sister, being the good Jamaican, went to Western Union and sent me £100’: Cultures of Remittance as represented in West Indian Epistolary Fictions	56
‘I became the ‘Manchester Slam Poetry Champion’ which doesn’t thrill me ’: Scribal/Oral tensions in Jamaican Verse Epistles.....	83
‘PrayformeasIprayformyselfinJesusNameAmen’: Church Testimony as discourse in a Jamaican diasporic Public Sphere	112
‘The genre I’ve apparently settled into writing is the ignoble Email Forward’: The letter remediated and re-addressed in the Post-Postal Present	144
Bibliography	Error! Bookmark not defined.

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‘So I arrived in London. It was a cold day...’: An Introduction

‘So I arrived in London. It was a cold day, as if there is no other way to arrive in this city.’

This is how I began the present project six years ago. Rather than a Ph.D., I was conscious then of beginning a series of correspondences with my friends. It was 2004 and I had just left Jamaica for England. In terms of academic degrees, I was beginning a Masters in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. A part of that degree involved the writing of what would become my first novel, *The Same Earth*, but by the end of the year I had, almost unwittingly, completed another book-length project – a collection of letters from which that first sentence comes. The letters were emails sent to a group of friends, mostly back in Jamaica, and were called ‘The Cold Onion Chronicles’. At the time of this coinage the name did not have much meaning beyond being a spoof on another very similar set of emails, ‘The Colonial Chronicles’, which my friends, Nadia Ellis and Stephen Russell, had written while they were Rhodes scholars at Oxford. It is only now in hindsight that the onion seems an obvious metaphor for the multiple layers that exist in epistolary narratives – layers which the present project will attempt to explore.

When I wrote ‘The Cold Onion Chronicles’ I was conscious of being part of a tradition of epistolary writing, but one that had only begun with the aforementioned friends – Nadia and Stephen. This was short-sighted of me. In truth, I had joined a much wider and a much older tradition. A vibrant culture of West Indian Epistolary practice has arguably been inevitable given that the Caribbean has been a profoundly fractured society characterized by mass migratory patterns and diasporic communities that have moved out of and into the region. Caribbean citizens have traditionally relied on the exchange of letters to maintain familial and cultural bonds. Creative writers from the region have also been aware of this culture and have often trafficked epistolary modes into their writing. So although this thesis has its genesis in my own practice (and in the end I will indeed return to a selection of ‘The Cold Onion Chronicles’), it is this wider tradition of West Indian epistolography that is my focus here and which this dissertation will discuss. Letters have been important cornerstones

to Caribbean communities and I want to consider their places in both popular and literary culture.

The phrase I have chosen as a title for this project, ‘Jamaica to the world!’ (Or in its more creole form, ‘Jamaica to di werl’) has recently become a popular expression of nationalism on the island. In the recently concluded World Games in Daegu, South Korea for instance, after Usain Bolt had convincingly won the 200 meter event, Twitter users from the Caribbean began to tweet (and indeed trend¹) this simple expression. I am intrigued by its epistolary conceit – how it conjures up the act of Jamaicans posting their updates, their achievements’ and sometimes their concerns, to loved ones and to the wider world.

We can find many trenchant commentaries on acts of epistolography in Caribbean popular culture. Consider the 1994 British sketch comedy series, *The Real McCoy*. In one memorable episode the scene opens to a Jamaican woman shuffling towards her door to answer a knocking. Upon opening the door she is visibly surprised at the other woman she finds there, come so early in the morning to visit. The woman of the house suspects an ulterior motive, but still invites her visitor in. It takes a while, but the visitor at last comes around to the point of her visit: she remarks that she has heard a rumour that the woman of the house is planning a trip back to Jamaica. She wonders then if this woman would be so kind to take “a little something” to the island on her behalf. The response however is less than accommodating. It is in fact a hostile “No!” The owner of the house asks, “You ever see plane take off to Jamaica? It lean so!” and demonstrates a plane taking off at an askew angle. “And you know what cause it to lean so? Is all them little little things that cause it!” The visitor frowns and feels compelled to clarify that all she was going to ask her friend to take back were a few letters. The owner of the house softens at this clarification and guiltily agrees to take the letters for her friend. The end of the sketch sees the visitor, triumphant, going outside only to lug back in a sack of letters which had been left at the door, heavy enough it seems, to indeed make a plane “lean so!” Perhaps we can use this sketch from *The Real McCoy* to think literally and

¹ On the social media site Twitter – words, phrases and topics which in a short space of time are posted by multiple users are said to ‘trend’.

metaphorically about the weight of letters – the significance they have held for members of the West Indian² community.

The Caribbean has been a site of multiple migrations, both as port of arrival and point of departure. As is well known, the islands at first accommodated a large influx of various peoples and became what George Lamming claims was a meeting place for the modern world (Lamming, 2005). More recently, as its own social and economic development has slowed or even regressed, the Caribbean has become a place that people have moved away from, seeking their fortunes in newer, more prosperous metropolises. For people who have lived such peripatetic lives, one could say the Caribbean has naturally written and been drawn towards ‘discourses of separation’. The letter quite obviously is a genre that accommodates such a discourse.

A Discourse of Separation

The Caribbean has been marked out by very complex matrices of separations or breakings. These are in nature geographical, historical, social, cultural and psychological, to name but a few. It will be useful to outline something of the geography and the history of the region.

The Caribbean is mainly an archipelago of islands³ which means it is already physically distinguished and marked out by multiple separations. In contrast to “the continent” for instance, “the islands” clearly suggests various interruptions of sea and ocean between different land masses. Already we suspect that any creative attempt to represent a discourse between these islands might very easily and usefully employ an epistolary motif.

The history of the Caribbean is possibly even more marked by separations than the geography. When Christopher Columbus happened upon⁴ the Caribbean at

² It had once been the convention to speak of the English-Speaking Caribbean as the ‘West Indies’ while the term Caribbean was a wider umbrella that included all the islands and all the language groups. West Indian Literature therefore would not include Gabriel Garcia Marquez but ‘Caribbean Literature’ would. However, these terms have become unstable. What umbrella for instance does Junot Diaz (A Hispanic Caribbean writer who writes in English) or Edwidge Danticat (A Haitian Caribbean writer who writes in English) fall under? I therefore use the adjectives ‘West Indian’ and ‘Caribbean’ interchangeably at times.

³ Though the Caribbean is mainly made up of islands, there are exceptions: Belize is part of mainland Central America; Guyana is part of South America and technically not washed by the Caribbean sea – it’s association with the Caribbean is cultural and historical rather than strictly geographical; Though Hispaniola is itself an island, the two nation-states that occupy it – Haiti and the Dominican Republic – obviously are not.

⁴ ‘happened upon’ seems to me a more palatable term than the problematic word ‘discovered’. See for instance Peter Fitzpatrick who contemplates the supposed ‘discovery’ of America in his monograph

the end of the 15th it signaled the beginning of what would be a profound change to the region. Europeans en masse moved to the Americas, unfortunately carrying with them diseases such as small pox which had previously been alien to the native inhabitants. Thus unknowingly armed with more than just their muskets, European settlers all but wiped out the indigenous population (erroneously called ‘Indians’ by Columbus) and thus depleted what the Spanish explorer had advertised in his own letter to King Ferdinand as “so many slaves, that they are without number” (Ife 1992: 52). Discovering then that not only did these ‘slaves’ have a number but that that number was limited and plummeting, the new colonists turned their attention to the African continent. For over three hundred years Africans were captured and shipped as slaves to the Caribbean. The abolition of the slave trade in 1806 and the end of slavery in 1838 saw the white plantocracy yet again in need of a labour force to harvest the sugar cane and tobacco that was being grown in the colonies. On this occasion they went to Asia, importing Chinese and Indian workers under a scheme of indentureship. But the mass movement of peoples to the region was not restricted to European colonial settlers and their importation of a labour force. As a place of increasing wealth, the Caribbean became attractive to many others. Jewish, Lebanese and Syrian merchants began steadily migrating to the New World lured by the promise of new markets. It is in light of this history that George Lamming makes his famous statement –

The world met here... In one way or another, through one upheaval after another, these people, forced to use a common language which they did not possess on arrival, have had to make something of their surroundings. What most of the world regard today as the possibility of racial harmony has always been the background of the West Indian prospect....We in the West Indies can meet the twentieth century without fear; for we begin with colossal advantages. The West Indian, though provincial, is perhaps the most cosmopolitan man in the world. (Lamming 2005: 36-37)

‘Modernism and the Grounds of Law’: - “Perhaps the most compendious point to be made about ‘discovery’ in this present setting is that it involves something specifically more than the word’s ordinary meaning. What the word normally imports is the uncovering or the disclosure of what is already there. In this sense the word is contrasted to invention, to the creation or inauguration of what was not already there. However the prefix ‘dis-’ does have privative import with its connotations of actively denying or undoing a previous condition. What this intimates for discovery is that that the thing discovered is now different for having been discovered. It is now denied its cover and put on a new scene, one pertaining to the discoverer.” (161-162)

In Lamming's imagination, the Caribbean emerged as the modern world's first real metropolis – the first locale (before London or New York) to house within its single geographic space, several international communities. But if on one hand he celebrates the possible cohesions, it is with an awareness of the history of separations. The narratives of separation are many and profound, for not only are the islands physically separated from each other but the people who populate them were themselves separated from their original homes. Indigenous Caribbean religions are obsessed with this fact of separation. Voodoo and Obeah are filled with images of people learning how to fly home, while Jamaican Rastafari has imagined black people in the Caribbean as a new tribe of Israel, forced into exodus and condemned subsequently to live their lives in a 'strange land'.

The complex matrix of separations in the Caribbean is not however relegated to the past. When at last in the early twentieth century, the descendants of all the various race groups began to forge a unified identity and see themselves as Caribbean people, then it is they also begin to migrate – to separate themselves from the islands which had finally become *home*. In 1951, only three years after the SS Windrush ship had journeyed to Britain, the population of West Indian immigrants had already begun to rise, swelling to 15,301, almost a 50% increase from where it had plateaued for the past four decades. The next census in 1961 showed that the population had once again swelled, this time dramatically, by well over 1000%. There were now almost 172,000 Caribbean immigrants living in Britain. In 2011, fifty years later, migration out of the Caribbean has seemed to slow. A report published on the World Bank website as recently as March 2010 waves a very stern finger in the Caribbean's face, warning the region about the impact they will suffer from a too-high migration rate.

According to "The Nurse Labor and Education Markets in the English-Speaking CARICOM* - Issues and Options for Reform," the region is facing a rapidly growing shortage of nurses as demand for quality health care increases due to an aging population, and high numbers of nurses emigrate drawn by higher paying jobs in Canada, the UK and the US.

These shortages have tangible impacts that may compromise the ability of English-speaking CARICOM countries to meet their key health care service needs, especially in the areas of disease prevention and care. (World Bank Report, 2010)

Reports such as these highlight forms of economic migration, but recent scholars such as Ransford Palmer and Elizabeth Thomas-Hope have begun to offer a more nuanced reading of the phenomenon, eschewing this rather common-view that Caribbean migration is always the movement of a working-class labour force in search of economic opportunities. While this is true for much of the inter-regional movement between Caribbean nations in the very early twentieth century (the building of the Panama Canal for instance) and further international movements out of the Caribbean in the mid twentieth century (to post-war Britain for example), such an account erases a host of other cultural impulses. Significantly, it pretends that migration has happened only amongst the working and lower-classes⁵. Thomas-Hope argues, ‘migrants have been regarded as a socially homogenous group, or else it has been assumed that only one social class migrates. In either case the differences in the migration pattern and behaviour have been subsumed or not recognized at all.’ (Thomas-Hope 2002: 3) A closer analysis indeed shows that migration has happened in different waves, and each wave has been the movement of different groups from the Caribbean responding to different impulses, whether that is a largely male group moving to Great Britain in the 50s and 60s in response to the demands for a manual labour force, or the movement of women to Canada and the United States in the 70s and 80s in response to the demand for a domestic labour force, or the mass exodus of Jamaican upper and middle-class families in the mid70s fleeing the threat of socialism and the rise of black-power, or it is the steady movement of young people seeking specialist training in higher education institutions in the United States and Britain.

Migratory patterns out of the West Indies are various and complex and the phenomenon is one that profoundly touches and affects all levels of Caribbean society. Migration/separation has become an integral part of Caribbean imagination and discourse. Kamau Brathwaite goes so far as to posit that ‘the emigrant and the islander are the two main types that make up the present West Indian sensibility’; Lamming, thinking about families that very much maintain strong links despite the separation of many thousands of miles, has recently elaborated on the concept of

⁵ Perhaps this is also a fault of terminology: working class immigrants are often called immigrants, while middle-class immigrants are often called ‘expats’, a word that at least etymologically distances them from the act of migration.

‘transnational families’ and ‘transnational households’; Barbara Lalla (1996), identifying tropes that she sees running through Jamaican fiction, has named the abandoned child as one – that is, the children who are forced to live with their grandparents because their own parents have migrated to the USA, Canada or the United Kingdom.

Perhaps it is inevitable that wherever there has been a strong culture of migration from a literate culture in the postal era⁶, the letter has emerged as an important social document. Scholars are often fascinated by letters from such communities even as they complain that such letters are mostly unavailable for analysis. CR Fay’s lament while researching immigration history in England is a common one. ‘Hundreds of letters no doubt crossed the ocean from every quarter of the globe to some farm or village of the British Isles; and if we had but one percent before us, we could attempt a real history of immigration.’ (Fay, quoted in Richards 2006: 56)

West Indian literature itself is largely a product of migration. It is a great irony that the region’s literature becomes its most accomplished and innovative self when it moves to a ‘home’ many miles away from the islands. The docking of the SS Windrush signaled not only the beginning of a seismic change to the British cultural landscape, but also a seismic change to the landscape of Caribbean literature. Writers such as George Lamming and Samuel Selvon, and even others such as Una Marson who had arrived before the Windrush generation, began writing Caribbean-themed texts (novels and essays in particular) in the cold of London. Interestingly, where Lamming makes the point, that ‘the world met here’ meaning the Caribbean, in an interview with Susheila Nasta, Selvon makes the counterpoint, that the Caribbean ‘met itself’ in London:

You see when this immigration happened, for the first time the Trinidadian got to know the Jamaican or the Barbadian, because in the islands themselves the communications were so bad that they never really got in touch with one another, they never got to know what happened in the other islands. And it was only when they all came to London that this turned out to be a kind of

⁶ I mean to draw attention to shifts that have happened recently where the postal letter as a means of regular communication has been eclipsed by the email and other social networking platforms. No one has yet made the distinction between a Postal-era and Post-Postal era, but it is one I will speak to more fully towards the end of this PhD.

meeting place....it's a very strange thing that they had to move out of their own part of the world, and it was only when they came to London that this kind of identity happened to them. (Nasta 2004: 14)

The question my thesis raises is not the sociological one of causes (what accounts for these multiple movements?) but rather a literary and aesthetic one of genre (*how* can we account for these multiple movements? What form of writing can the West Indian author draw on to speak to this unique history and geography?). The resounding answer is the letter. For where the Caribbean, on one hand, has experienced a long history of separations, the letter, on the other hand, is the most obvious genre of that separation. As far back as the 2nd century when rhetoricians began to consider and theorize the letter, they built into their definition this fact of rift and rupture – “in [a letter] one speaks to an absent friend as though he were present.” (Malherbe 1994: 12) Today, Linda Kauffman agrees, arguing that absence is inevitably the seed from which epistolary practice grows: “[I]f the beloved were present, there would be no need to write.” (Kauffman 1986: 17)

My suggestion of a link between an epistolary tradition and the Caribbean reality must be carefully qualified however – for that the Caribbean, because of its particular history and present, has been conducting a discourse on separation does not mean the main form of that discourse has been epistolary. It hasn't always. My point is simply that there is a profound synergy between the culture and history of the Caribbean and the form of the letter.



Caribbean epistolary practice has not attracted much scholarly attention. To my knowledge there are only two noteworthy forays into the field. Isabel Carrera Suarez's essay, 'Epistolary Traditions in Caribbean Diasporic Writing: Subversions of the Oral/Scribal Paradox in Alecia McKenzie's "Full Stop"' looks specifically at one short story while trying to locate it within a wider tradition of the epistolary in Caribbean prose fiction and poetry; Rhonda Frederick's monograph, *Colon Man A Come*, devotes a chapter to 'Epistolary Narratives of the Panama Canal'. Perhaps we could say that Suarez begins the work of looking at the fictional use of letters while Frederick begins the work of theorizing non-fictional epistolography within Caribbean communities and histories. Both works are useful to this project and indeed will be to anyone interested in Caribbean letters, but to claim that research in the field

has gone beyond a very initial stage, or that the discourse has progressed in any significant way, would be an overstatement. It is this relative sparsity of scholarship that I believe justifies this project taking on such a wide cross-section of practices and looking at so many incarnations of the letter.

I see myself (I hope neither too dismissively nor too arrogantly) as the kind of scholar who goes into an overgrown field with a raised machete, swinging somewhat widely to clear a piece of ground. At its worst, perhaps my methods are not always the most systematic or ‘neat’, but at its best I hope to gesture rather generously to a woefully under- and over-looked field of research and to suggest a variety of ways in which we can begin to approach, to understand and to make sense of the raw material found there. There is of course always a risk with doctoral theses that they grow into monsters; this one is perhaps no exception, and has become a many-headed one to boot, a virtual ‘hydra’, with eyes cast in several directions – towards the literary, towards the sociological, towards the historical, towards the creative, and also towards an archive that includes novels, short stories, poems and letters to editors. At the end, this thesis also turns its attention somewhat inward – to my own ‘Cold Onion Chronicles’. Despite this polygamous focus however, the many eyes are in fact always trained upon a single thing: Caribbean epistolary practice.

My focus will be on the English-speaking Caribbean broadly, but with a significant bias towards Jamaica and its Diasporas in particular. This bias emerged as a matter of convenience; this project has been undertaken while at the University of Glasgow. For all its advantages, Glasgow does not boast an extensive Caribbean archive. My material had to be sourced on visits to the Caribbean, and these were almost always to Jamaica. I am interested then in the form of the letter and how it has been used as a social document in the lives of West Indian citizens to narrate, to make sense of, and to cope with their many movements. Also, I am interested in how the form of the letter has been incorporated in the works of creative writers. The range of practices I look at runs a wide gamut from epistolary fiction (both novels and short stories) to examples of verse epistle to the non-fictional letter (both private and public) and finally to new media – the new ways that we ‘post’ messages, particularly by email, but also blogs, Facebook notes and even tweets.

‘Post’-colonialism

Any project whose stated remit is epistolary practice in the West Indies, and in Jamaica in particular, all but announces itself as one that is concerned with the ‘post’ in a postcolonial world. Postcolonial literature has in fact often been understood through an epistolary metaphor – the notion of ‘writing back’ to the centre. In this sense Caribbean Literature could be seen, metaphorically, as a body of letters, a response or a ‘writing back’, perhaps even to one letter in particular.

In 1492 the Caribbean is introduced to its future colonial rulers via a letter. Christopher Columbus writes to the Catholic monarchs of Spain and describes an archipelago of islands full of exotic wonders⁷. He describes men with tails⁸; an island populated with only women; various strange and impossible creatures; and of course, a bounty of gold. The native is not given a chance to correct this fabrication and for hundreds of years after is condemned to suffer these perceptions. The poet Tom Leonard, thinking about the Scottish situation, puts it succinctly – ‘[t]he works assume that those supposedly described don’t read the literature that supposedly describes them.’ (Leonard 1995: 33)

Another pertinent example of this kind of ‘colonial letter’ comes from the poet Rudyard Kipling who describes the ecstatic moment of receiving the post in India.

In the name of the Empress of India, make way,
O Lords of the Jungle, wherever you roam.
The woods are astir at the close of the day--
We exiles are waiting for letters from Home.
Let the robber retreat--let the tiger turn tail--
In the Name of the Empress, the Overland Mail!
(Kipling 1933: 33)

All of the frightening and dangerous aspects of the colony – the jungle, the robber and the man-eating tiger – must retreat under the blinding and civilizing light of the letter which has come to connect the colonist back to his homeland. Kipling

⁷ Translated by and quoted in *Ife’s Letters from America: Columbus’s First Accounts of the 1492 Voyage* (1992)

⁸ Scholars such as Patricia Tuitt argue that this discovery narrative of ‘the deformed native’ which of course is an Other to Europeans, is at the heart even today of the construction of the ‘refugee’. In a sense she suggests that to challenge this idea of the Other we must go back to the moment of discovery and perhaps to Columbus’s first letter. See *False Images: Law’s Construction of the Refugee*, 1996.

sees the colonist as inhabiting a dangerously liminal space caught between the uncultured and the cultured, between a towering civilization and the corrupting jungle. The letter must come to save him before he ‘goes native’. Later in the poem the narrator imagines that the postman must overcome all kinds of trials – tempests, failed roads and even his own potentially failing health – just to fulfil his duty and deliver the all-important post without which the colonist would be trapped in this ‘heart of darkness’ and much like Conrad’s Kurtz be left to a possible fate of madness and death. The horror, the horror!

In the cases of Kipling and Columbus, their colonial letters seem to represent language and education, privilege and class – a discourse from which the colonized is excluded. Colonized people (whether they are East Indian or West Indian) are written about but supposedly do not do any writing themselves. It is understandable then that Caribbean Literature was initially a classically ‘post’-colonial/postcolonial discourse – a ‘writing back to the centre’, a correction of those narratives that had previously remained unchallenged. I would suggest that at its heart, the postcolonial project has been one of challenging such orthodoxies and hegemonic structures that have arisen when a more powerful society has had ‘contact’ (to put it rather charitably) with a less powerful society, and where the culture of the former has been imposed onto the latter.⁹

Jamaica Kincaid’s book-length essay does not announce itself as a ‘letter’ but it almost certainly is – written as second-person narrative and addressed to a clearly defined ‘you’. The addressed ‘you’ is a white tourist. Kincaid attempts to show this tourist a link between the activity he is involved in – tourism, and the older project of empire (colonialism) as started by his ancestors.

And so all this fuss over empire -- what went wrong here, what went wrong there -- always makes me quite crazy, for I can say to them what went wrong: they should never have left their home, their precious England, a place they

⁹ It is perhaps important to note that as globalization ‘appears to have appropriated much of [the] discursive space’ of postcolonial theory (Brydon 2004) many have begun to declare the ‘end’ of the Postcolonial project, including scholars such as Spivak (1999) who is generally seen as one of the founding mothers of the discipline. For more on this see Diana Brydon’s ‘Postcolonialism Now: Autonomy, Cosmopolitanism, and Diaspora.’ (2004); David Scott’s *Refashioning futures: Criticism after postcoloniality* (1999); Gayatri Spivak’s *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present* (1999)

loved so much, a place they had to leave but could never forget. And so everywhere they went they turned it into England; and everybody they met they turned English. But no place could ever really be England, and nobody who did not look exactly like them would ever be English, so you can imagine the destruction of people and land that came from that. (Kincaid 1988: 23-24)

In his own letter, the poet Benjamin Zephaniah takes up this cry against 'empire' when he is offered an OBE (Order of the British Empire). In an open letter published in the Guardian, Zephaniah declines the honour. He explains to Queen Elizabeth II and the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair:

I get angry when I hear that word "empire"; it reminds me of slavery, it reminds of thousands of years of brutality, it reminds me of how my foremothers were raped and my forefathers brutalised. It is because of this concept of empire that my British education led me to believe that the history of black people started with slavery and that we were born slaves, and should therefore be grateful that we were given freedom by our caring white masters. It is because of this idea of empire that black people like myself don't even know our true names or our true historical culture. I am not one of those who are obsessed with their roots, and I'm certainly not suffering from a crisis of identity; my obsession is about the future and the political rights of all people. Benjamin Zephaniah OBE - no way Mr Blair, no way Mrs Queen. I am profoundly anti-empire. (Zephaniah 2003)

Written from the peripheries and directed to the centre, Zephaniah's and Kincaid's letters are classic examples of a 'post'-colonial/postcolonial response. Indeed one of the purported advantages of a postcolonial perspective is its inclusion of other voices; we begin to hear from the Native rather than the Colonist. But one of the longstanding critiques of postcolonialism has been that it in fact maintains the status quo and keeps the old colonial power at the centre and everyone else on the periphery. As John McLeod notes, postcolonialism 'privilege[s] Britain as a central point of reference for the new literatures in English. ... It continues the *collecting and tethering of these literatures to the colonial centre* via the use of the term "postcolonial literatures".' (McLeod 2010: 281) The limits of this metaphor of

‘writing back’ is that it assumes that postcolonial literatures are always addressed to Europe. Britain continues to be the virtual centre of the world and the West Indian islands simply revolve around and are obsessed by it. Indeed, early West Indian writers seemed to affirm this notion. Lamming and Selvon for instance asserted on numerous occasions that they did not write for the Caribbean reader but for the English. But Lamming himself soon went on to disturb these notions of centres and frontiers. As Maria Cristina Nisco points out in a reading of Lamming,

What becomes evident, then, is that previous concepts of definitions and frontiers have to be extended; the nation (the Caribbean one in particular), has no centre, no boundaries and may comprise several realities far from each other. Its consciousness, stretching beyond geographical limits, exists within people.

(Nisco 2005)

Several of the novels and poems and letters looked at in this thesis are discourses that are written back to ‘centres’ – but unstable and ever-shifting ones. These letters travel across seas, but the centre is just as often the Caribbean as it is the USA or Britain. Oftentimes, these are neither conversations between British colonists secretly afraid of the natives they have conquered, nor are these the natives finally responding to the colonists. Rather these are conversations between the natives themselves, the inhabitants of the scary jungle, the people who were once thought to lack language. The colonial angst has long been rehearsed and their gazes have now turned inwards.

I find it useful then to consider these letters as existing both within and outside of the postcolonial, or perhaps it would be more straightforward, if not slightly colloquial, to say – they sit on the fence. Caribbean epistolary practice wants inclusion in the category of the postcolonial but only in the way that epistles, studious as they are, want to attend every ‘school’. Epistolary narratives have been used effectively to explore and complicate Bakhtinian theories of discourse, Foucauldian theories of Authorship, or to articulate new theories of transnationalism. This last one is important because if on one hand the letters that I look at are clearly missives that connect postcolonial people in what could be described as a postcolonial context, in other ways they resist these labels, pointing out that they emerge not so much out of

national contexts, but from a transnational and globalized world – the very conceits that have now been used to either undermine or to incorporate and indeed colonize the postcolonial project. These letters then do not attach themselves obviously to any single theoretical school, and can be mobilized to articulate several discourses. My position then is to acknowledge the postcolonial without especially privileging it as a discursive strategy.



If the postcolonial is not especially privileged, other theories and themes are. Most obviously, ideas of ‘epistolography’ (by this I mean the specific art and act of writing letters with special attention to its cultural context) and ‘epistolarity’ are at the heart of this project. It was Janet Altman Gurkin who introduced the latter term in her seminal work *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. She defined it as ‘the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning.’ (Gurkin 1982: 6) What is helpful in Altman’s formalist approach is that it allows us to read ‘epistolarity’ in texts that might not announce themselves to be letters, and similarly to dismiss other texts that do. For instance, I do not consider CLR James’ rather wonderful collection *Letters from London* (2003) or Jamaica Kincaid’s excellent short story ‘The Letter From Home’ (1992) or Derek Walcott’s poem ‘A Letter from Brooklyn’ in this thesis. Despite the titles that suggest otherwise, none of these are actually ‘letters’. To use just a few of Gurkin’s criteria: they are not first person narratives addressed to a ‘you’ in which the I and You exist in an interchangeable relationship (what Altman calls the ‘pronominal relativity’ of the letter); they are not narratives in which the present is multiple and almost impossible to locate – the present tense of the action described being necessarily different from the present tense in which the letter is written, itself different from the present tense in which the letter is dispatched, or received, or read or re-read (what Gurkin calls the ‘temporal polyvalence’ of the letter); and they are not missives which have been consciously posted to travel the distance between separated people. I would sum this all up by saying these pseudo-letters are not ‘discourses of liminality’ – and letters always are. Letters are discourses passed between an I and a you, they exist between various present tenses, and they travel the distance between a here and a there.

My project is interested in both epistolarity and epistolography, that is to say, the formal properties of the letter, but also the wider culture and practice of letter writing. I am interested in how West Indian writers have used the letter formally and

how they have fused or incorporated it into other genres – the novel or the poem for instance. But I am interested as well in the specific cultural production, transmission and reception of the letter in West Indian societies.

Concepts of public and private spheres are also potentially illuminating for a project such as this one. While letters obviously move between public and private spaces, such spaces need not map directly onto the more precise and nuanced concept of ‘spheres’. It was, of course Jürgen Habermas who pioneered the study of the public sphere with the German publication of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* in 1962. This work was only translated into English almost 30 years later as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). As has been noted by many other commentators, this German word ‘Öffentlichkeit’ is an ambiguous one and can be used to signify many kinds of publics and public spaces. In Habermas’s theorizing however, his 18th century public sphere was one that more specifically mediated between the private lives of citizens and the state. Arguably then, when enough private citizens get together to form a public and begin to rigorously and openly discuss matters that concern society as a whole, then this begins to constitute a ‘public sphere’. Eduardo Mendieta summarises Habermas’s work thus:

The public sphere that began to emerge in the eighteenth century, according to Habermas, developed as a social space – distinct from the state, the economy, and the family – in which individuals could engage each other as private citizens deliberating about the common good. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of this new social structure was its status as a space of reason-giving, a realm in which reasons were forwarded and debated, accepted or rejected. Nominally, the public sphere was an indefinitely open space in which all reasons could be expressed and heard. (Mendieta, 2011: 2-3)

While Habermas’s conception has formed the basis of many subsequent ideas on the public sphere, it has simultaneously been criticized, perhaps most stridently and eloquently by Nancy Fraser (1990). Fraser does see the need for public spheres to challenge and constrain sovereign powers, and indeed advances the notion of ‘counter-publics’ as an important way to reconceive how such spheres operate, but

she sees Habermas's ideas as idealistic in parts. For instance, Fraser disagrees that the 18th century public sphere was as open as Habermas imagined, pointing out how it excluded minorities and women. Also she disagrees that there is ever an easy way to define what is of 'public' concern as opposed to what is of private concern.

In thinking through West Indian epistolarity and epistolography it will be useful to keep these concepts in mind, to think of how some letters on one hand articulate the private lives and concerns of citizens while other letters move beyond this to not only articulate more public concerns but to effectively constitute a Jamaican or 'West Indian public sphere'.



In terms of a reading strategy or theoretical methodology what I have privileged above all others is a close-reading of the texts, though I do happily invoke a great many other theories and theorists when and if I think they become especially relevant. One of Jamaica's preeminent cultural theorists and critics, Carolyn Cooper, recently had to defend this eclectic approach. In a forum in the journal *Small Axe* four scholars¹⁰ wrote responses to her new monograph, 'Sound Clash' (2006) and Cooper in turn responded. Idara Hippolyte in particular seemed to suggest that Cooper's approach should have been more theoretical. Cooper explains her disinclination towards that kind of project:

Hippolyte wants me to be a thoroughgoing theorist who offers more than "smatterings of post-modern lingo". She dismisses as mere "theory-bashing" my attempt, first articulated in *Noises in the Blood* and again in *Sound Clash*, to "retheorise marginality and power" by "centring the ideological narrative on close readings of the texts themselves". My supposedly "un-theoretical" project—seeking to "discover what the texts themselves can be made to tell us about the nature of cultural production in our centres of learning"—is not at all valorized.

At the risk of being accused of the vanity of the forerunner, I see myself as a kind of trickster, Esu-Elegbara no less, deploying theory when it suits me and disdaining it when it does not. (Cooper 2006: 199)

¹⁰ Idara Hippolyte; Sonjah Stanley Niaah; Bibi Bakare-Yusuf; Michael Alleyne

What I appreciate in Cooper's approach is its wide-eyed honesty, for she does not submit to that peculiar romantic notion that texts ever truly speak for themselves. She knows that they are refracted through the critic's own reading and that they are 'made to tell us' things – a sort of ventriloquism as it were. In EA Markham's 1993 collection, 'Letter from Ulster & The Hugo Poems' one of the verse epistles begins:

I promised you relief from a letter
too stiff to compel reading between
the lines. A limp letter, then, and addressed
to someone, on another continent, not tempted
to read between our lines.

(Markham 1993: 20)

The irony is that the letter's insistence on its supposed limpness convinces the reader of the opposite, of its robustness; and also, its attempt to make us believe that it is only communicating on the surface compels us instead to read between the lines – to engage in a close-reading of the texts. This is the cue I have taken.

This thesis is composed of five chapters. Each of them focuses on what we might call a specific generic manifestation of the letter – how it has been used as a non-fictional discourse, how it has been incorporated in poetry, in fiction, in newspaper columns, and finally how it has been transformed by technology. As well, each chapter provides a substantial discussion of a theme that I think is crucial to our understanding of West Indian epistolography – those themes being cultures of religion, cultures of remittance, cultures of remediation, scribal/oral tensions, and practices of self-fashioning. The title of each chapter comes from a line from *The Cold Onion Chronicles*.

My first chapter is 'It's what I'm introducing myself as up here': self-fashioning & self-fictioning in the non-fictional letter. I look at the letters of the former Jamaican prime-minister, Alexander Bustamante, and the Trinidadian novelist, VS Naipaul who both grew up being called different names than the ones they are more popularly known by now (William and Vido respectively). I consider how the actual signature on their letters became a literal way to inscribe and re-inscribe new

identities for themselves, and how their letters became spaces in which these new identities were practiced, performed and consolidated. I also try to problematize the idea that letters such as these fit neatly into the category of the ‘non-fictional’. Bustamante carefully used the letter which is seen as a genre of fact, to disseminate various fictions about himself. Naipaul, as a young man interested in the aesthetics of story-telling, has a rather ambivalent relationship to the ‘facts’. In a genre that is often idealized as a spontaneous outflow from the heart, we see Naipaul carefully composing himself and indeed teaching himself how to be a fiction writer. The letter, it is clear, accommodates both fact and fiction, and it can also become a cocoon inside which people consciously create new versions of themselves.

My second chapter is ‘My sister, being the good Jamaican, went to Western Union and sent me £100’: cultures of remittance in epistolary fiction. I begin this chapter slightly tangentially by revisiting an old argument between the critics Linda Kauffman and Marjorie Pryse who both try to place Alice Walker’s epistolary novel ‘The Color Purple’ within an appropriate genealogy. I call this a tangent because while ‘The Color Purple’ is the first example of a black epistolary novel, it is not West Indian. Still the debate between Pryse and Kauffman is useful. Though Kauffman places Walker’s novel in the tradition of the black American slave narrative, she insists that it is equally descended from the 18th century European epistolary novel. Pryse is not convinced by this proposed relationship and suggests the link is far more tentative. I side with Pryse and argue that Kauffman’s position may, at worst, reveal an unwitting racism, and that the easy placement of every epistolary novel within a European genealogy effectively prevents us from engaging in a more illuminating discourse which would place these newer novels within a relevant sociohistorical context. I move on to consider four examples of contemporary Caribbean epistolary fiction from three Jamaican writers – Alecia McKenzie, Paulette Ramsay and Anthony Winkler, and the Guyanese writer, Beryl Gilroy. I propose that one of the most illuminating ways to understand these letters is to look at how they represent cultures of remittance. I acknowledge the work done by Kezia Page to theorize the ‘remittance text’ within Caribbean literature, but I suggest that the letter (which she doesn’t acknowledge or focus on) is the most obvious example of such a genre.

My third chapter moves us from the world of prose to the world of poetry. ‘Oh Kei! That was wonderful. Now, could you please say something in creole’: Verse Epistles and the Scribal/Oral tension considers the particular struggle that three Jamaican poets – Louise Bennett, James Berry and Lorna Goodison – faced when attempting to write verse-epistles, and trying to fuse distinctly oral and scribal modes into the text. If we are to believe Gurkin, the letter has always been ‘obsessed with its oral model’ of speech, while the project of West Indian literature as well is popularly understood as an attempt to bring oral elements and inflections to the written word. But these three poets achieve varying degrees of success within their verse epistles. Louise Bennett leans especially close to a spoken voice and I consider the improbability of her dialect letters even while acknowledging the aesthetic success of her poems; James Berry’s 1982 sequence ‘Lucy’s Letters’ has been well received in England¹¹ but I am not as convinced of their merit as others have been. Berry falls into the same traps of improbability as his predecessor Bennett but without the technical sophistication of her verse to compensate or even to distract us from these lapses of logic. I argue that it is the poet Lorna Goodison who achieves the most convincing epistolary voice – a distinctly scribal construct that is textured by orality. Goodison is also more inventive in her uses of the letter form, writing poems that pretend to be letters of recommendation, wills, and even letters to people beyond the grave. Goodison simultaneously shows a keen sensitivity to the ‘sounds’ and rhythms of Jamaican speech while understanding that the letter is a written discourse; she creatively demonstrates how a Jamaican speaker might compose a letter on paper rather than how such a speaker would perform it.

In my penultimate chapter, ‘PrayformeasIprayformyselfinJesusNameAmen’: Church Testimony as discourse in a Jamaican diasporic Public Sphere, I look primarily at the most popular newspaper column in Jamaica ‘Dear Pastor’ (an advice column whose respondent is Rev. Dr Aaron Dumas) and I also make some reference to another popular epistolary column, ‘Dear Jamaica’ written by Jennifer Keane-Dawes. I propose that we could consider these two columns as constituting part of the public sphere in Jamaica, and particularly, its diaspora. To accept this proposal

¹¹ Though published in 1983, as recently as 2010 the sequence was featured on a BBC radio 4 programme. James Berry also continued to write letters in the series after the original sequence was published.

however is controversial as it would represent a very different kind of public sphere than the one Habermas imagined – the concerns of this Jamaican public sphere being both more ‘domestic’ and arguably, parochially religious. The letters published in *Dear Pastor* are often simultaneously dispatched in two directions – towards an actual readership of fellow citizens, but also towards God. They not only solicit prayers but in a way, they are prayers themselves. This language, learnt to a large extent in Evangelical churches, is quite typical of ‘Caribbean talk’ generally, and thus of West Indian epistolography as well. I argue then that discourse within West Indian public spheres, and the Jamaican diasporic public sphere in particular, is much more religious than the kind of secular European public sphere that Habermas imagined.

The final chapter ‘“The genre I’ve apparently settled into writing is the ignoble Email Forward”: The letter remediated and re-addressed in the Post-Postal Present’ represents a radical shift. It begins with a typically enough critical discussion about some of the ways epistolary practice has changed radically with technology. I particularly think of the shift from the postal-letter to the electronic mail through Bolter and Grusin’s theory of ‘Remediation’ which proposes that while new technologies try to replace older ones they also constantly reference and acknowledge the things that they have replaced. Emails then represent a kind of bridge, connecting the epistolary to New Media studies, and indeed revealing the epistolary roots in blogs, Facebook posts and tweets. Tellingly, much of the iconography and the language that describe participation in these new social media spaces come from epistolary culture (we post Facebook notes; we cc, sign and open emails; we open our inbox; we put envelopes in the trash, etc). I suggest then that it is within this world of technology that we can find how Jamaicans and West Indians are presently ‘addressing’ themselves to the world. I turn then to my own emails. It is the end of this chapter which represents a radical shift in discursive strategy; it becomes a presentation, or as I term it, a ‘re-addressing’ of the much mentioned and referred to collection of emails, *The Cold Onion Chronicles*. Projects of ‘re-addressing’ letters are crucially important to any academic consideration of the letter form; we must at least consider what it means to read letters outside of their original context and by readers who were not the initially intended recipients. Interesting to me as well is that within the technology of emailing is an inbuilt function of re-address, that is, to ‘forward’ emails to other recipients. Projects of re-addressing do not usually or

ethically change the content of letters, but the narratives often include footnotes in which the critical editor mediates or explains obscure aspects of the letter. This inclusion of footnotes is a major part of my own project of readdressing *The Cold Onion Chronicles*.

*

The epigraph I have chosen for this project comes from a recent interview between the St Lucian poet, Derek Walcott, and Dante Micheaux. Walcott, perhaps the epitome of the West Indian citizen, has lived between a number of islands (St. Lucia, Jamaica and Trinidad) and has also spent many years living in the continental diaspora. It is interesting then that Walcott suggests that we understand his work within an epistolary framework – ‘wish you were here’ – and tells us that ‘there is much to be said’ about the genre and the situations that produce or prompt it. This thesis attempts to say some of those things, to begin a discourse on a range of West Indian epistolary practices.

In closing, though I realize it may not be the convention of academic prose to express the wish that its readers enjoy the journey of its arguments or ‘di course of its discourse’, I express that wish right now.

Sincerely Yours,
Kei Miller
University of Glasgow

'It's what I'm introducing myself as': Self-fashioning & Self-fictioning in Sir Busta's and Sir Vidia's non-fictional letters

As noted, my first *Cold Onion Chronicle* began 'So I arrived in London.' It ended with the seemingly plain and un-extraordinary sign out, 'Yours, Kei.'

In fact it was the first time I had used that particular name as a signature and a parenthetical note had to be offered as an explanation: 'It's what I'm introducing myself as up here.' That I have subsequently become 'Kei' in almost all social and professional contexts makes it easy to forget the relative newness of the name change – that seven years ago all the people I was writing to would have known me instead as 'Andrew'. The new identity of 'Kei', sent from a brand new email account (kei.miller@gmail.com) was a conscious construction of the writerly self. I already had a sense that my books would be coming out soon but the name 'Andrew Miller' was taken¹². Perhaps the relative frequency of the chronicles, all duly signed as 'Kei' was a way to insist on and cement the new identity.

I want to consider similar processes of self-creation in the letters of the late Jamaican Prime Minister Alexander Bustamante and the Trinidadian novelist Vidiadhar Surajprasad (VS) Naipaul. As a pair the two men do not make obvious bed fellows. They do however provide interesting, even if very different, starting points for this project. Bustamante roots us in the world of Jamaican popular culture, while Naipaul roots us in the simultaneously wider and narrower world of West Indian literature. Indeed I am interested in the letter as both a literary and a popular genre. Perhaps another significant difference is this – that Bustamante's letters were circulated initially in the public sphere while Naipaul's letters were originally private. Despite these differences I argue here that both Sir Vidia and Sir Busta created new identities for themselves largely through the narratives of their letters and also through the names they chose to attach as signatures to their epistolary narratives.

¹² The experience of submitting a short story to the journal *The King's English*, and having been warmly praised that a writer of my supposed calibre should submit to them, and also for my believable 'Jamaican' accent, alerted me to the fact of this other 'Andrew Miller' – an English novelist who has won the Impac Dublin Prize for his novel, *Oxygen*.

It is of course Stephen Greenblatt (1980) who re-popularizes the notion and process of literary self-fashioning. Though some of his ideas have informed my own, for instance that '[s]elf-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language' (Greenblatt 1980: 7) his larger and particular theory of the self-fashioned identity in the sixteenth century as being constructed in a dialectic where a demonized Other is being opposed and an absolute authority is being idealized, is perhaps a little too particular to be helpful here. By 'self-fashioning' then I am invoking an earlier Sartrean concept. In his seminal lecture 'Existentialism & Humanism' Sartre argued

Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceived himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.

(Sartre 1989: 28)

Self-fashioning then could be defined as a process in which man both makes something of himself (a kind of assessment as it were) and then makes himself (a kind of self-determining). 'Self-fictioning' is my own coinage and I use it to signify a specific kind of self-fashioning – one done not only through language, but specifically through a literary exercise (in this case, that of writing letters). I also mean to draw attention to the processes of fiction and fictionality as they occur in a genre that is generally considered to be non-fictional.

The epistolary genre is often idealized as a genre of trustworthiness, authenticity and integrity. Mylne (1981) has even suggested that the 18th century novelist's incorporation of the letter was partly due to a moral concern at the time that the novel was a corrupt form which validated the practice of lying. By fusing it with a genre associated with truth-telling and instruction rather than lies and entertainment, the novel was redeemed. I wonder though that no one worried that this traffic would go in both directions: that is, not only would the supposed truth content of the epistolary infect the novel, but that the fictional content of the novel might 'pollute' the letter. The letter is an accepted form of autobiography. It is heralded as a genre in which the heart is supposed to speak freely and truly. It is often taken at its word, so to speak. The letters of famous men such as Sir Busta and Sir Vidia are thus often referred to and their various declarations taken as facts. My position, however, is that

the letter often exploits this vision of itself as an infallible document. Assuming the authority of a non-fictional genre it actively circulates several fictions. For those interested in reinventing themselves, the letter can provide a profoundly more authoritative space to achieve this than a simple wardrobe change.

Alexander Nehamas in a reading of Nietzsche talks about how the man is a 'creature of his own texts' and points out that Nietzsche himself had written, "The 'work,' whether of the artist or the philosopher, invents the man who has created it, who is supposed to have created it; great men, as they are venerated, are subsequent pieces of wretched minor fiction." (Preston, 2006: 10)

Naipaul especially, being the major writer that he is, might well bristle at this suggestion of any of his work being either 'wretched' or 'minor' – but certainly both he and Sir Busta can be considered 'great men' as each have been celebrated in their native Caribbean islands and in the wider world. Naipaul has been awarded the Trinidad Cross, won the Nobel Prize for Literature and is heralded in some circles as 'the greatest writer now living in Britain' (Appleyard, 2007). Alexander Bustamante, a union leader who became Jamaica's first prime-minister was made a national hero during his lifetime and, perhaps because of his Spanish last name, has recently (and erroneously) been claimed by Latin America as one of the region's 'Famous Hispanics'. Bustamante so distinguished himself in his life and career that he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II; Naipaul too was awarded a Knighthood of the British Empire (KBE) in 1989. Of course Naipaul's major work has been his novels and his travel essays; Bustamante's major work has been in trade unionism and politics. Their letters have been gathered and published after the fact of their fame, but I would like to show how their letters played a part in who they became, how they perceived themselves, and how they were perceived.

A note in the way of a disclaimer should be made though. Naipaul's letters were written to his family back in Trinidad when he went to study at Oxford and have now been collected in the volume, *Letters Between a Father and Son*, edited by Nicholas Laughlin; Bustamante's public letters printed in the Jamaica Gleaner have been gathered in a single edition *Bustamante and his Letters* edited by Frank Hill. When looking at such collections it is useful to bear in mind Janet Altman Gurkin's proposal that published letters have in essence become 'readdressed'. William Merrill

Decker expands on this, warning us that placed in a new context ‘much of a letter’s story may be invisible, buried, or lost’ and that readers are being ‘prompted by an editorial hand’. Later he states ‘[t]o account for the letter’s multiple rhetorical lives compels a consideration of whether, in passing from the autograph state to the print transcription, the letter undergoes a genre change, or whether the contracts by which letter exchanges go forward and those by which letters are appropriated for publication are so interdependent as to mark different phases of one generic practice’ (Decker 1998: 21). We ought to be aware then that collected letters have been decontextualized. Though we are reading the actual letters of the signee, housed in a new collection they inevitably constitute a new narrative. The editors may not have written these collections, but we can hardly discount their creative roles in the selection and arrangement which will have effectively created new stories for the reader.

Sir Busta

There has been a renewed interest in the letters of Alexander Bustamante. The call comes from people such as Kevin Obrien Chang who writes:

Bustamante first came to prominence through his letters to **The Gleaner**.

Between April 1935 and the end of 1937, he wrote maybe 100 more letters on strikingly varied topics, which gained him a national reputation as a defender of the poor. His language was forthright and rich in biblical imagery, and he displayed an impressive range of knowledge, an ordered mind, a lively wit, and a courtly regard for adversaries. He was indisputably the most effective letter writer in Jamaica's history. (Chang, 2009)

Chang asks us to return to Busta’s letters as an authoritative source from which we can learn something about the man. He is disturbed by other popular but fallacious stories that have come into circulation and that portray Bustamante conversely as a man with a rather limited range of knowledge, a disordered mind, and without any wit whatsoever. Busta’s reputation has suffered after his death, and in

popular imagination he has suddenly become the hapless buffoon, a man of greater physical than intellectual strength.

Consider a story that is and that isn't about Bustamante: In Earl Lovelace's novel, *The Wine of Astonishment*, the narrator Eva explains why she will not vote for Rufus, a man from her own village of Bonasse who is running for a seat in the General Elections. It isn't that Rufus does not have good intentions, but Eva feels that if he sat as an MP he would be an embarrassment rather than an asset to the community.

Rufus was tall, black, a ex-woodcutter with a voice like thunder and shoulders broad from his years of axing trees....Rufus had in him a passion, a kinda vexation that when he stand up before a crowd he would get all tangle up with his words and his feelings. But Rufus don't have the education.

They tell this story, how one night at a meeting, Rufus was talking about the cost of living.

'People can't eat book in this country,' Rufus say. 'People can't eat words. What the people need is bread – B R E D – bread.'

'Rufus, you leave out the A.' somebody from the crowd call out to him.

And Rufus correct himself, 'B R E D – A.' (Lovelace 1982: 83)

Jamaicans will recognize this anecdote but not as something fictional. Rather they would have heard it as a true incident in the life of Alexander Bustamante. The story inscribes into popular imagination the notion of Bustamante as passionate but uneducated, a politician who has mastered oratory but not spelling. But this story is not actually recounted in any of Bustamante's biographies, not even in the one book in which one might expect to find it, *Bustamante: notes, jokes and anecdotes* (2010). Bustamante scholars such as Frank Hill and Professor George Eaton have insisted that it is apocryphal. Indeed, another story that is circulated about Busta is more obviously so: Busta calls for his assistant, Miss Longbridge, to hand him his gun (he is often reported to have done this). In this particular anecdote, he spells the word for her, 'G as in Jesus, U as in Europe, N as in knowledge.'

Kevin O'Brien Chang dismisses these as 'nothing less than historical propoganda' (Chang, 2009) and suspects that such stories continue to be circulated through what has effectively become a conspiracy by the intelligentsia, a group that was never friendly to Busta and who by virtue of their places within the academy have largely controlled the production of knowledge and circulated their own versions of recent Caribbean history.

If Busta's reputation has suffered in the court of public opinion, Chang in calling attention to the man's letters is essentially calling him to the stand to provide evidence on his own behalf. Chang knows that Bustamante's letters were once very effective in creating a persona and public image for the man, and so he calls them back into service to do the same work a second time.

Bustamante lived a long time outside of Jamaica. He left at the age of twenty and did not return until thirty years later. In a sense, he had to reintroduce himself to the island when he returned and he did this through his letters. In the thirty mysterious years of his absence Bustamante had apparently lived in New York, Cuba and Panama.

Of some interest here is the work that Rhonda Frederick has done on Caribbean migration to the Panama Canal in the time in which Bustamante was there. Frederick's work is a historical intervention, but her wider theorization about epistolary narratives is both interesting and applicable, for just as Chang offers Busta's letters as an alternative narrative to the now-popular stories about him, so too does Rhonda Frederick suggest that letters of the isthmian workers provide an alternate narrative to the official history of the building of the canal (Frederick, 2005). Frederick points out that while there was indeed significant Caribbean involvement in the construction, the official US history of this engineering feat often underrepresents or completely ignores the contributions of the West Indian workforce.

One of the ways Frederick thus recuperates and incorporates these concurrent and silenced histories is through letters. In this way the Caribbean subject is able to write his own way into history and in a way that contradicts and complicates the more popular 'master narrative', disturbing previously accepted 'facts'.

Unlike other genres, epistolary narratives offer readers the most direct insight into Colon Men's personalities. Their transcribed voices conjure up images of how they saw themselves as individual, as members of families and communities, and as workers. (Frederick 2005: 65)

Frederick goes on to point out some of the ways more traditional historical narratives can become reductive:

Historical narratives often understood isthmian workers as men lured from the impoverished Caribbean islands by the promise of unprecedented amounts of money. While the LICCW¹³ letters affirm this financial attraction, they simultaneously show that money formed only a small part of contestants' motivations. The range of contestants' economic and migratory goals complicate simple push/pull analyses, invoking their pre-migration imaginable truths as well as their Canal Zone lived realities. (Frederick 2005: 65-66)

I am similarly interested in how the letters of Bustamante intervene in the wider, more popular and sometimes apocryphal narratives of his life. One might be tempted to go for an alliterative triumvirate of verbs and suggest that his letters not only 'contradict' and 'complicate' other narratives – but that they essentially 'correct' them. However, as already stated, I am reluctant to idealise the genre in this uncritical way. As we will see shortly, though the letters of Bustamante do indeed correct certain untruths about him, they are conscious self-fictions as well.

Before we actually look at the letters of Bustamante which preceded his political career, a short primer on the political landscape that he then entered (of pre-

¹³ The abbreviation LICCW stands for *Letters From Isthmian Canal Construction Workers*, a volume of first hand accounts of life in the Panama Canal collected and published by the Isthmian Historical Society. As described by Frederick, the volume is not actually 'letters' but small pieces of memoir writing. She explains: 'As part of the events commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the 1914 opening of the Panama Canal, the Isthmian Historical Society planned a contest to elicit "stories of personal experiences of non-US citizens during the Construction Days." Through an advertisement that appeared in newspapers in Antigua, Barbados, British Honduras, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Lucia and St. Vincent, as well as in food packages provided for non-US citizens who retired from canal service (known as Disability Relief recipients), the Society asked for "the best true stories of life and work on the Isthmus of Panama [by] West Indians and other non-US citizens who were on the Isthmus prior to 1915."'

independence Jamaica and the characters who inhabited that landscape) will be helpful. Alexander Bustamante was first cousin to another of Jamaica's National Heroes, Norman Washington Manley, and to a large extent their stories are intertwined. Both men have been regarded as fathers of the island-nation. Norman Manley was founder of the People's National Party which, ideologically, was concerned about issues of nationhood and quickly began to agitate for political independence from Britain. Although Bustamante began working for his cousin's party, swelling it with members from his Bustamante Industrial Trade Union, he eventually broke away and formed another political organization, the Jamaica Labour Party taking the masses with him. If the PNP then represented the interests and the positions of an educated middle-class, the JLP represented the more immediate bread and butter interests of the normal worker. And whereas Norman Manley was seen as a man of towering intellect, a former Rhodes Scholar and Oxford-educated lawyer, Bustamante was eventually portrayed as his opposite – a buffoon who could not even spell the words 'bread', 'Jesus', 'Europe' or most damningly, 'knowledge'.

The notion that Norman Manley was a greater champion of education is not without foundation. Political power in Jamaica constantly moved between the PNP and the JLP (and in fact still does). In 1954 the Norman Manley led PNP came into power replacing Bustamante's JLP who had held office for ten years. A telling comparison between the JLP and PNP governments of that time is that in the entire decade of JLP leadership they had only increased spending on education from J\$1.8 million to J\$2.4 million. In the PNP's first five years in office however, they increased spending dramatically from \$2.4 million to \$8.4 million (Eaton 1995, 160). And whereas Bustamante seemed to genuinely have the interests of workers at heart, the famous exception was teachers who he saw as Pro-PNP.

The fictional politician from the Lovelace novel, Rufus, makes the impassioned point that 'people can't eat book in this country'. This also echoes Bustamante who in fact swept back into power on a campaign that insisted people needed 'saltfish' rather than education. For many subsequent years the returned JLP government would be dismissed by the island's intellectuals as a 'saltfish government'. Perhaps it was inevitable then that this man who championed 'saltfish' over books, who advocated for physical instead of intellectual sustenance, would soon be depicted as unintellectual himself.

Folk culture in Jamaica has been very happy to shower praises onto Alexander Bustamante, but not for his mind. Consider another popular story that is circulated and one which is indeed verified by several other historical accounts, witnesses and even photographs: in 1938 Bustamante leads a group of workers in protest against the conditions in which they were being forced to work. A large contingent of soldiers and police come to disperse the crowd and threaten the use of guns. Bustamante (this is well reported) tears off his shirt, offers his chest to the police, and demands that they shoot him first but to leave the ‘defenseless, hungry people alone.’ For this one act of bravery, there is not only a statue in Downtown, Kingston which recreates the moment of Sir Busta baring his chest, but there is a popular candy still sold today which is called ‘Busta’. Busta, the confectionary, is an exceptionally difficult candy to chew on, and if you inquire about the etymology of its name you will likely hear this explanation – ‘because it is as strong as Busta’s backbone.’ This indeed is the full name of the candy – Busta’s Backbone.

It is notable that while these kinds of narratives are happy to celebrate Bustamante’s physical and moral fortitude, they are equally happy to disparage his intellectual capabilities.

If today Sir Busta has been introduced to many Jamaicans through apocryphal stories which continually portray him as dim-witted, it is interesting to consider how Bustamante introduces, self-fashions and also fictionalizes himself through his letters. In an admittedly lengthy epistle which I take the liberty of quoting in full below, Bustamante who at the time was relatively unknown, appears to be responding to the question posed by a Mr Sharp – ‘Who is Bustamante?’ Mr Sharp’s question is clearly rhetorical; he is not seeking an answer but trying to undermine Busta’s authority. He is surprised at this unknown’s audacity to insert his voice and opinions in a particular matter. From the letter it is obvious that a tense situation was then developing between the island’s banana farmers and the umbrella group, the Jamaica Banana Producers Association. Predictably, Busta seems to have come out on the side of the workers. Though Mr Sharp was not looking for a response to his question, Busta obliges, and at length:

The Editor

Sir,

One Mr. S. W. Sharp wants to know who is Bustamante. I was born in Hanover. At a very tender age Spain became my home. I served in the Spanish Army as a Cavalry officer in Morroco, North Africa. Subsequently I became an Inspector in the Havana Police Force. Recently I worked as a dietician in one of New York's largest hospitals.

Bustamante is a lonely fighter; he belongs to no organization or club. He fights on the side of fair play. Not only that, he fights on the side of his enemy if he is on the side of justice, without fear of any consequence whatever. It is characteristic of him to always put his address with his name when writing to the press. I have not seen Mr. Sharp's address in his letter of today's date – makes me think!

Bustamante enjoys the privileges of possessing an irreproachable character, excellent health and fair amount of wealth. He pays taxes and license and does not work for anybody. He has a little banana but they are on the open market and are going to stay there – at least until the JBPA¹⁴ Associates are well organized and until the people have sufficient sense to make such a contract that the pockets of a few will not absorb all the profits so that we should not be like their beasts of burden as is the case today.

With regard to my authority for making the statement I did in a previous letter, I did not get it by sitting in my office at No. 1 Duke Street, but spending my own money travelling by motor car from Port Morant to Negril Point¹⁵ investigating the conditions of the land in which I was born.

In Mr. Sharp's last paragraph he writes: "finally if he has no good authority for making the statement he did he might remain silent". This is what I have done all my life, remain silent in things I know nothing about. But how can I remain silent when this top-heavy organization is being tilted over at the expense of the banana farmers? Why, Mr. Sharp, you could not keep your mouth closed even if you padlocked it.

In Spain I wrote of love and nature's beauty. In Jamaica I can only write of the miseries of injustices and of those persons who are endeavouring to deceive their countrymen and women and of those who are using their evil minds, their wicked hearts to instil in the public that other fruit companies intend to destroy the J.B.P.A. Association. This is untrue.

The Great Lord might have John the Devil closed up in some pen, but he certainly had let loose a lot of devils in Jamaica, sowing the evil seeds of injustice for their own personal benefit and their friends, while the masses suffer more and more, too weak to fight for themselves, praying to the Almighty God to liberate them from these of the Devil, some of

¹⁴ Jamaica Banana Producers Association

¹⁵ Port Morant is the eastern most point of the island while Negril Point is the most western. To travel then from Port Morant to Negril signifies travelling the whole length of Jamaica

whose writing make me feel they could better occupy their time by becoming theatrical clowns.

I could write forever on the stupidity of the last paragraph of Mr. Sharp's letter, but the best way for peace is silence.

I am a taxpayer but so many stupid people of this Island believe that unless a man is a taxpayer he has no right to open his mouth, but to become a member of the army of the masses and be voiceless so that evil propagandists like some of those who belong to the Fruit Company whose voices can be heard like a wildcat penned up by a herd of tigers. Is Mr Sharp one of these? I must now inform the public that everyone who is a citizen whether by birth or naturalization, has the perfect right to open his mouth and let his voice be heard just as strong as if he were a taxpayer.

Good luck, Mr. Sharp. We need more gallant questioners like you, at least I do, for you seem to be comically disposed.

I am etc
Alexander Bustamante
1a Duke Street
Kingston
July 3, 1933

(Bustamante quoted in Hill 1976: 61-62)

Many things can be said about this letter, not the least of which are its literary flourishes. In the second paragraph Bustamante slips into the third person with both ease and elegance and subsequently moves between first and third person voices, between a voice of direct address and a voice of story-telling. The letter becomes a conscious performance for the reader, but it is done so effortlessly that the reader might hardly be aware of the tricks which are being used to seduce him/her. The letter also becomes a kind of virtual tour; in the space of its two pages Bustamante takes us across the length of Jamaica, to Spain, to Cuba, to New York, and then metaphysically to heaven and to hell. As Bustamante's epistolary voice moves between first and third person narrative, the letter as a whole also moves easily between narrative and polemic, between casual response and rebuke. The letter is not only sophisticated in the number of literary tricks and techniques it incorporates, but also in its rhetorical cunning. Bustamante agrees with Mr Sharp when that agreement in fact exposes Sharp's unfounded presumptions (ie that Bustamante is speaking in

matters of which he knows little), and disagrees with him when that disagreement exposes Sharp's problematic elitisms (ie that only taxpayers should have voice and agency). Perhaps most impressively, Bustamante makes reference to Sharp's 'letter of **today's date**.' This missive then was not laboured or agonized over for a long time, but composed and sent off in a single day. The letter, more than any other genre, is generally regarded as one of spontaneity, and so it is impressive that Bustamante managed to compose something so crafted in a relatively short space of time. If this is testament to anything it is to his mental dexterity. Also, in an epistle which begins quite tamely with a self-introduction, it ends quite forcefully with what is a virtual call for Universal Adult Suffrage. This had not yet been achieved and would have been a brave political ideology to articulate at the time and indeed a position which could only have been the product of an independent and astute mind.

As Chang points out, Bustamante was never short of very forthright opinions and his letters touch on multiple topics. Another epistle tackles the Custos of Westmoreland, Hugh Clarke, for his insensitive use of the word 'bastard'. Clarke in his letter had talked about children who the government would care for, but then put within parentheses, supposedly for further clarification, the phrase 'bastards, etc.' Bustamante responded.

I take much exception to the word 'bastard' when penned by a gentleman as Mr. Clarke must be, as there was no rhyme or reason for it to be used as Mr Clarke had already said that the government took care of **all** children. Then why did he have to use the word? Why did he have to remind thousands upon thousands of respectable mothers that they had sinned? If indeed, they had sinned. Why did he have to remind thousands of respectable men and women that out of wedlock they came? Doesn't Mr Clarke know that the word 'bastard' used in that fashion is a slur...? (Hill 1976: 66)

Again, Bustamante shows a remarkable sensitivity to language – to words and their nuances. Though Clarke apparently tries to position himself as a liberal and open-hearted politician, Busta is able to swiftly expose him, showing that his concern for the nation's children is undercut by an inherently contemptuous and judgmental

tone. Bustamante mastered much more than just rudimentary spelling; he knew what words could do.

In another letter Bustamante thanks a fellow motorist who had helped out when his car ran out of petrol; another lends support to the work of the governor's wife, Lady Denham; and over and over Busta's letters fight the corner of blue collar workers – from banana farmers to the employees of a match factory to local musicians. In the case of this latter group, a letter asks '[w]hy are foreign bands allowed to perform in this Island when there are hundreds, if not a thousand native musicians unemployed here?' And his letter on behalf of the needleworkers opens with a wonderful sense of the dramatic – 'The forgotten needleworkers! They are despondent, they are in despair of the dismal future which will be worse than the cloudy present.' (Hill 1976: 98)

It is little wonder that some scholars are perplexed that popular stories have decided to paint Sir Busta in such a vastly different light from how he appears in his self-penned addresses. Bustamante emerges from his letters as an intelligent champion of the poor, one who is able to articulate their concerns with clarity and elegance. But this is not the way the Caribbean has tended to imagine its revolutionists¹⁶. There is, as mentioned before, Rufus from the Earl Lovelace novel, or else there is the famously illiterate demonstrator from Joan Andrea Hutchinson's poem 'Blockroading' who demands on her placard that the Jamaican Government give her 'J-O-S-T-E-S-S Justice!' (Hutchinson 2004: 39). It seems that the figure of Bustamante too has undergone the processes of fiction and has been rendered to be more in keeping with these two fictional buffoons.

But if popular stories perpetuate certain untruths about Busta, his letters do the same thing. While letters certainly participate in the construction of a self and persona, there is no guarantee that such a construction is 'authentic' or true. While

¹⁶ Take for instance the 2010 'civil war' in Jamaica, concentrated in the community of Tivoli Gardens. The war broke out with the government's attempts to extradite the drug lord Christopher 'Dudus' Coke, and the community's decision to defend him even to their own death. 73 young men from Tivoli Gardens were killed in that incursion. In the aftermath, a female resident and spokesperson for the Tivoli Gardens community famously complained to a news reporter, 'The people them what are deading, nuff of dem dead befront of dem mothers, nuff of them dead befront of them girlfriends.' (Thomas 2011) This particular sound bite went viral and supposed hilarity of her speech was rooted in her earnest attempts to speak a standard English but her lapses into malapropisms nonetheless. This, I suggest, is another clear example of how the Caribbean likes to imagine its rebels – passionate, but uneducated.

Bustamante's letters might ably demonstrate that he was not the buffoon that is portrayed in widely circulated anecdotes, his own portrayal of himself is no less fictional than the stories. Indeed, the man who signed his name 'Alexander Bustamante' was born William Clarke. As Olive Senior points out, '[h]e lived and worked in many countries, acquiring a dashing Latin style of dress and behaviour as well as the name Bustamante by which he was known thereafter, formally changing his name by deed poll in 1944.' The date here is significant, for it means that in the 1930s, the most active period of his letter writing, the name he signed was itself an invention.

Senior goes on, 'Historians have not yet managed to totally untangle the reality from the myths and legends of Bustamante's foreign sojourn.' (Senior 2003: 82). Indeed, he was always inventing and reinventing both his past and by extension, himself. The reasons for this have never been clear, but Sir Busta (oftentimes through his letters) actively participated in the mythologizing of his own self.

Mr Sharp's question, posed in the *Jamaica Gleaner*, of 'Who is Bustamante?' may in fact have articulated the curiosity of many newspaper readers who had no idea who this returning resident and prolific letter writer was. What Busta provided as a brief biography in response however was largely fabricated. Busta did not go to Spain at 'a tender age' nor fight in the Spanish Cavalry, and the big New York hospital in which he claims to have worked for several years as a dietician is curiously never named. In a later letter to the *Jamaica Gleaner* he would claim to have three separate degrees in Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, but such certificates have never been found. So although he claims in his letter of introduction to possess 'an irreproachable character', the many untruths sprinkled throughout that very missive and subsequent ones, say otherwise. Alexander Bustamante was at best, delusional, and at worst, consciously deceitful. It is at least arguable that Busta's insistence on withholding the facts of his past and shrouding it instead in mystery leaves it open to the processes of fiction.

George Eaton wonders why the man was invested in circulating so many untruths about his background.

One can only speculate as to why Bustamante thought it necessary to invent and promote the legend of his upbringing in Spain and military adventures in

that part of the world. One possibility is that he might have been concerned both to justify the assumption of the name Bustamante and to project the image of a colourful adventurer and fighter who was not to be trifled with. (Eaton 1995: 208)

Eaton also goes on to propose that perhaps Bustamante was perceptive to the power of having a shrouded past, of creating himself as an enigma. '[N]ot many men set out deliberately to create and propagate the legends which they feel are necessary to sustain their activities and career... [but] Alexander Bustamante was one such man'. (Eaton 1995: 207).

There are many **imaginable** possibilities – from trying to enliven a rather banal and unadventurous life, to trying to replace and re-narrate a sordid and shameful one; from a past full of illegitimate children and multiple women, to one filled with perhaps even more scandalous and intriguing sexual transgressions.

What is almost certain is that Bustamante – the reputedly flamboyant dandy, husband of no wife and father of no children, had to create himself as a viable alternative to his main political rival and cousin, Norman Manley, a decorated war hero and father of two sons. What I am now purporting as Busta's image is well recorded. One journalist has described Busta as 'Jamaica's most flamboyant...prime-minister' (Campbell, 2009) while a recent Times' obituary for Lady Bustamante also makes mention of her 'flamboyant husband' (2009). Sir Busta was indeed a tall and slender gentleman who by all accounts had a very keen sense of fashion. The online Jamaican poet David Smalling speaks of him as a 'dandy' and imagines '[his] extroverted flair flashing/ By the country paths'. While Busta did marry a first wife (an older American divorcee) she disappears from all accounts rather quickly. His more significant marriage to his secretary, Gladys Longbridge, actually begins when Busta is almost 80 years old, long past his sexual prime and perhaps more in need of a care-giver than a lover. Busta's letters and the stories therein are then curious hyper-masculine performances as if to counteract this popular impression of himself. His invented stories to account for the thirty year stretch in which he lived outside of Jamaica, see him instead living in exotic locales in both Europe and Africa and doing military service. Also, Busta's letters earnestly paint the picture of a chivalrous man.

Besides labourers, the group that Bustamante most often wrote in support of was women. He stoutly defends their beauty, their intelligence, their strength, and paradoxically, their fragility. But at times such pronouncements feel over-performed. One wonders about the imagined deficit he was trying to fill.

In the end then, though Busta's letters prove that he was hardly a man of trifling intellect, they do not shed much light on his actual life; in fact, they produce shadows. The letters invent fictions instead of attesting to truths. Many of the stories told today about Sir Busta are apocryphal, but there is perhaps a kind of poetic justice at work in that he too created and disseminated tales from his own Apocrypha, as it were. Busta's letters help to complicate his stories and, perhaps to his pleasure, help to further create the enigma that continues to be him.

Sir Vidia

If my own emails show the transition from 'Andrew' to 'Kei', and the letters that we have just examined show a transformation from the person of William Clarke to the person of Alexander Bustamante, then the letters we turn our attention to now show the transformation of a lovable son and brother 'Vido' into the caustic and abrasive author, 'VS'.

While I do not want to propose that the definitive key to Naipaul's fiction lies in his letters, there is compelling evidence that a kind of literary and stylistic traffic does happen between the two genres and that one informs the other. Certainly at the age of 18, Naipaul is a better letter-writer than he is a fiction writer, and it is when he learns to transpose the elegant and at times ruthless style he has developed in his letters to his fiction that the latter comes into its own, so to speak. The 'literary archaeologist' will also find the foundations of Naipaul's first great novel, *A House for Mr Biswas*, in his early letters. The letters then become, in essence, a kind of rough sketch for future work. Also in these early letters, we see Naipaul trying to articulate his peculiar position that a writer must be hated. Significantly, his father does not agree; but here it is, the outrageous Naipaul that we now know – part Author/part Monster – begins to form and perform himself within an epistolary practice. It is not only a style and perspective that is being developed; a self is also being formed.

By and large Naipaul signed his early letters as 'Vido' – the name he would have been known by in his family home. In one instance however, a very angry letter to his sister, Kamla, one that begins 'My dear little fool' and ends 'You have insulted me in the worst possible manner' (Naipaul 1999: 6-7), he signs out as 'VS Naipaul' a way to signal an unfriendly formality. In his next letter, things have clearly been forgiven and he reverts to 'Your loving brother, Vido'. It is the first time that we are aware of the conscious division between Vido and VS. It is actually important to Naipaul that he is reinvented as VS while living in England. He is upset, for instance, when he gets a letter from a family friend that does not acknowledge this more formal name in what he perceives as the correspondingly more formal setting of Oxford. 'The wretched girl had written to Mr Vido Naipaul...think of the colossal ignorance!' (Naipaul 1999: 55).

While he signs out from his letters home as Vido, he signs his articles in the Oxford *Isis* as *V S*.

I found to my surprise, that people whom I never knew had heard of me as 'the bloke who writes half *Isis*' – referring to the news pages, of course. The editor was intrigued by my initials and wanted to know why I always kept at *V S*, and never divulged the first name even. (Naipaul 1999: 79)

The self that is being invented partly in his letters and also in his signature is that of the author. It may not at first seem a radical suggestion to make that anyone should create themselves as authors through their letters – both, after all, are written forms. Both, however, are not equally 'authored'. Here I am invoking Foucault's observation about the kinds of discourses which are typically endowed with the author-function and those from which the author-function is withheld:

The Author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and culture. It has no legal status, nor is it located in the fiction of the work; rather, it is located in the break that founds a certain discursive construct and its very particular mode of being. As a result we could say that in a civilization like our own there are a certain number of discourses that are endowed with the "author

function” while others are deprived of it. A private letter may well have a signer – it does not have an author; a contract may well have a guarantor – it does not have an author. (Foucault 1991: 107 – 108)

Indeed, Bustamante, even when celebrated for his great skills as a letter-writer is not called an author. He was a trade-unionist and politician who wrote very good letters. In the impressive roll-call of real and fictional careers he has been said to have (prime-minister, advocate, unionist, dietician, soldier, policeman) ‘author’ is never listed amongst them. Foucault is correct that the letter is not a genre that is usually endowed with the author-function. To emerge as an author over a collection of letters is no easy task.

There are at least two explanations we must consider in the case of VS Naipaul being granted ‘authorship’ of his epistolary narratives. The first and most obvious is that Naipaul’s letters were gathered together and published long after he had already established himself as an author. The author function then would have easily been bestowed over any missive he had seemed to have a hand in writing. Some who read ‘Letters between a father and son’ may even be troubled by the plurality of signees within the book as compared to the singularity of the name those signatures are gathered under. For despite what the front cover and spine say, this collection is not written solely by V.S. Naipaul. We have an almost equal number of letters from his father, Seepersad (Pa); a significant number from his older sister, Kamla; some from his younger sister Satti; a couple from his mother; a letter even from a school mistress to Seepersad Naipaul on behalf of Kamla; and perhaps most endearingly, a short note from Shiva Naipaul who would go on in later life to author six books but who makes a kind of literary debut in these correspondences – a seven year old writing to his big brother, “I am behaving a good boy. I send you 1,100 kisses. Shivadhar.” (Naipaul 1999: 59) It is perhaps disturbing that Sir Vidia becomes the virtual ‘author’ of other family members’ lives and stories whereas they can only attach their signatures to missives written by their own hands.

The second thing to consider is the role of the editors and the story that emerges from their own manipulation. The editors, as has become a kind of

convention, claim to not be present in the volume. Nicholas Laughlin who compiled an expanded 2009 edition writes:

Gillian Aitken, the editor of the first edition of *Letters Between a Father and Son*, ‘adopted a policy of non-intrusion, permitting the sequence of letters to tell its own story’. I have done much the same. Only once have I inserted a brief narrative bridge, between letters 238 and 239, to account for the gap in correspondence caused by Vidia’s visit to Trinidad in 1956. (Naipaul 2009: xvii)

One can understand why the editors attempt this disappearing act. As already stated, the fiction that letter collections are committed to is that they present the authentic and unmediated voices of their authors. The fiction that editors are subsequently committed to is that their intervention in the volume does not dilute or compromise the letter-writer’s voice. We must be suspicious of such claims however. In the case of *Letters Between a Father and Son*, the collection begins when Naipaul sets off to England with the clear ambition of becoming a writer, and ends with the publication of his first book. This careful selection over a specific time period clearly imposes a narrative of literary emergence, from unpublished to published, from student to author. It is the editors then who also work to create Naipaul as an author through the narrative sequence and selection of letters.

However if we accept these as the only reasons that Naipaul emerges and is created as an author within and over his letters we may miss some of the ways (and I will list three of them) in which he himself plays with the conventions of epistolary practice and is from an early age, and through these letters, involved in his own self-fashioning. I would argue that he does this in three ways – by applying a distinctly authorial process to the composition of his letters; by assuming and performing in his letters the author-ity of the author; and by treating the letter as a virtual creative writing workshop space in which both he and his father especially encourage and learn from each other.

Applying an Authorial Process

By an ‘authorial process’ I mean to highlight the act of editing and revising which Naipaul insists upon. Indeed it is the assumed absence of these processes that has caused letters not to be endowed with the author-function. As stated earlier, the letter has been widely understood as a genre of spontaneity. From as far back as the 2nd century rhetoricians argued that the letter should have the texture of speech¹⁷ - a dynamic and free-flowing discourse. Abraham Malherbe (1988) sums up the positions of ancient epistolary theorists in four points. They believed that: 1. “a letter is one half of a dialogue”. 2 “in it one speaks to an absent friend as though he were present.” 3 “the letter is in fact speech in the written form”, 4 “a letter reflects the personality of the writer”. It is interesting that this basic understanding of the letter still exists today. It is a discourse that must not have the feeling of deliberateness or indeed be one in which anything was deliberated over. If the letter is to have the personality of the writer, it must be produced fairly quickly and without labored thought. In the letters between Vido and Pa, Pa very frequently exhorts his son towards a kind of writing that is characterized by speed, rather than by the processes of reflection, drafting and redrafting. He asks, ‘[h]ow long does it take you to knock out a letter of this kind? Five minutes or so at most, and for my part I find it a pleasure.’ (Naipaul 1999: 34) Even Vido at times seems to share this philosophy. In an early letter he praises his older sister, Kamla. ‘I must say however, that your letters have improved enormously. I wonder why. Is it because you are writing spontaneously, without any conscious effort at literature? I think it is.’ (Naipaul 1999: 5)

Yet in other instances it is clear that neither Pa nor Vido fully accept this philosophy. Though over and over they reiterate that the best way to write a response to a letter is to do it immediately, over and over they turn around and acknowledge the time-consuming nature of letter-writing. Indeed what they are doing is not so much writing letters as **authoring** them. In one missive, Naipaul writes:

Look here, I understand what letters mean. The porters probably get tired of my asking whether there is anything for me, and when does the next mail come in? I read my letters slowly, afraid to get to the end. But if I don’t write, it means that I really cannot afford the time. Take this letter for instance, I

¹⁷ a longer discussion on how the letter moves between scribal and oral modes is explored in the next chapter

began it at a quarter past eight after dinner. It is now ten to nine. (Naipaul 1999: 61)

It is clear that his letters take much longer than the paltry five minutes which his father proposes. Even the way in which he professes to read letters – ‘slowly, afraid to get to the end’ – seems to mirror a kind of reading usually associated with longer works of fiction in which words are savoured. Naipaul shows a certain reverence to the text of the letter and to the art of writing it that elevates it as a discourse worthy enough to be endowed with the author-function.

Even more telling is an earlier confession that he makes: ‘Just last night I tore up a letter that I had written to Kamla [...] I get into certain moods and write things which, when read the following morning, read badly and are usually disgustingly maudlin.’

Unlike Bustamante who wrote his own missives in a single day and sent them off, Naipaul takes time to read his the following morning, agonize over it further, and sometimes to destroy it if he isn’t absolutely happy. A letter which is traditionally a space where we are allowed to be sentimental isn’t one such space for Naipaul.

Regarding his first published short story ‘This is Home’ written around this time, Naipaul’s biographer Patrick French describes it as ‘ponderous and laden with uneasy symbolism. It carries a teenager’s idea of how people a little older than himself might behave.’ (French 2008: 86) The distance and ease that he is able to accomplish in his letters is not immediately present in his fiction, though very tellingly it is this very distance and lack of sentimentality that his fiction will eventually be celebrated for.

Naipaul also uses his letters as drafts for future letters. On December 1, 1950, he writes to his sister Kamla in India and describes for her the first snow he witnessed. ‘You may be interested to know that about a week ago I had my first snow. It came down in little cotton-ball fluffs and after two hours, the earth was covered, but not the streets.’ (Naipaul 1999: 42)

Ten days later he describes the same event in a letter to his family in Trinidad. ‘Last week I had my first snow’ (Naipaul 44). We note that the event has now moved into a space between fact and fiction. The letter is sent ten days after his letter to Kamla, but it is still just a week ago since he had his first snowfall. The description of the snowfall has also grown.

It came down in little white fluffs; you felt that a gigantic hand had punched a gigantic cotton wool sack open, letting down flurries of cotton shreds. The camera doesn’t lie in this respect. Snow is just as you see it in films and in photographs. It snowed for about two hours. The streets were not covered, but the tops of the naked branches of trees were white with it – a white that showed more beautiful because the limbs of the trees were in comparison stark black. (Naipaul 44-45)

These letters then are time-consuming and carefully crafted. By defying the spontaneity usually associated with the letter Naipaul indeed becomes more than just a letter-writer; he begins to self-fashion himself as an author.

Assuming the Author-ity of the Author

In one exchange, Naipaul praises his father as a man who “reads a book for its style, and the man behind that style.” In another he gives advice to his younger sister, Satti, who is about to sit her GCSE exams in English literature. Naipaul literally underlines the point, “[y]ou must realize in the first place, what the writer set out to do.” (208) Not only does Naipaul acknowledge the natural authority of the author in textual production but he seems to insist that such authority carries over to textual meaning. In short, the meaning of a text resides in the person of the author. Perhaps this wasn’t an exceptionably contestable position at the time. While two decades in the future Barthes would famously pronounce the death of the author (1967), at this moment in time Naipaul would have no inclination to liberate texts from the virtual dictatorship that creators could assume over their meanings. Though the contemporary reader will usually acknowledge her own subjectivity as one of the lenses through which textual meaning is formed, Naipaul is invested in the author, and this is indeed an investment in himself. My argument is that Naipaul is interested

in his own ego and authority and in order to assume this comfortably he must create himself as an author.

His growing precocity leads to some amusing interactions. He is only seventeen years old when he meets some of the older and published West Indian writers in the London scene. He is, however contemptuous of them, and writes back home to describe the meeting:

Selvon was there, with his wife, and Gloria Escoffery. Gloria is a girl who, Harrison tells me, will be somebody one day. From the look of her, I doubt it. She passed around a manuscript of a short story she had written about the race problem. She didn't want me to see it. Then she began talking some rubbish about writing being an exploration. 'I write because I don't understand. I write to explore, to understand.' Me: 'Surely you're starting from the wrong end. I always thought people understood before they wrote. And further. I always believed that writers wrote because they wanted to write and because there was the prospect of cash at the end of the task, if it were well done.' (Naipaul 1999: 45-46)

Later on Naipaul describes Samuel Selvon trying to defend Gloria's positions. 'Selvon thought that writers had to instruct. I told him he exalted the members of the fiction-manufacturing class. Fiction, I told him, is the imitation of an action meant to entertain.' (Naipaul 1999: 46)

Not only does Naipaul insist that the reader ought to figure out what it is the author had set out to do, he then moves on to instruct authors in what they ought to set out to do! He becomes the author of authors – the ultimate authority. It is this growing sense of himself as author that allows him to extract a promise from his sister Kamla when she sets off to India. 'I want you to promise me one thing. I want you to promise that you will write a book in diary form about your stay in India... Try to be humorous. Send your manuscript in instalments to me. I will work on them.' (Naipaul, 8)

Perhaps what we might find alarming in this particular exchange is how fully formed VS Naipaul's cynicism already is. He goes to India later on in his life, and

then Africa, **in order** to find a primitive culture; these things have been predetermined. In the abovementioned letter to Kamla, he tells her:

There is one point that I want you to help me to stress. My thesis is that the world is dying – Asia today is only a primitive manifestation of a long-dead culture; Europe is battered into a primitivism by material circumstances; America is an abortion. Look at Indian music. It is being influenced by Western music to an amusing extent. Indian painting and culture have ceased to exist. That is the picture I want you to look for – a dead country still running with the momentum of its heyday. (Naipaul 1999: 9)

The Letter as a Creative Writing Workshop

In one especially important respect, Naipaul's letters are different from the ones that Bustamante wrote: Naipaul's letters are initially private correspondences. Yet, both Vido and his father were keenly conscious of a potentially wide audience in the future, the probability that their letters would be 're-addressed'. The letters often perform for the future readers they imagine having. Vido addresses some of his letters to 'Everybody'. In one of them he writes, 'I should have written to Savi. But what news can I tell her or anybody else for that matter? All I have to say, I say. These letters are for general reading.' The very title of the book is in fact a suggestion by Pa. 'Your letters are charming in their spontaneity. If you could write me letters about things and people – especially people – at Oxford, I could compile them in a book: LETTERS BETWEEN A FATHER AND SON.' (Naipaul 1999: 29)

The exchange between Vido and his father becomes a virtual Creative Writing workshop in which they both encourage and instruct each other on matters of craft. Naipaul's father very explicitly wants to give Vido the space in which he can become VS, the author:

I feel so darned cocksure that I can produce a novel within six months – if only I had nothing else to do. This is impossible. But I want to give you just this chance. When your university studies are over, if you do get a job, all well and good; if you do not, you have not got to worry one little bit. You will come home – and do what I am longing to do now: just write ... This is where

I want to be of use to you. I want you to have that chance I have never had: somebody to support me and mine while I write ... I know nothing else will make you happy ... I mean nothing but literary success will make you happy. (Naipaul 1999: 175)

He tells Vido numerous times to 'keep your centre'. Interestingly, Naipaul's first book length essay on his journey to becoming an author is called 'Finding Your Centre'. The younger Naipaul has his own opinions on how often his father should write, what he should write about and how he should go about the process. 'I hope Pa does write, even five hundred words a day. He should begin a novel. He should realize that the society of the West Indies is a very interesting one – one of phony sophistication ... describe the society just as it is – do not explain or excuse or laugh.'

Further on he advises his father to write the story of the diver and a fictionalized biography. Some readers will recognize these as the seeds of what VS would eventually write himself – *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Vido would never see his father alive again but within this epistolary exchange they manage to help create each other as authors. This virtual workshop isn't one in which opinions aren't challenged. Naipaul shares with his father his belief that 'I think a man is doing his reporting well only when people start to hate him.' Already we can see Naipaul's strange delight in provocation and offense. In his earlier exchange between Selvon and Gloria Escoffery he writes proudly that '[t]hey held a post-mortem on me after I left. ... How I enjoyed that evening!' (Naipaul 1999: 46). But Pa doesn't agree with this view of authorship:

And as to a writer being hated or liked – I think it's the other way around to what you think: a man is doing his work well when people begin liking him. I have never forgotten what Gault MacGowan told me years ago: 'Write sympathetically'; and this, I suppose, in no way prevents us from writing truthfully, even brightly. (Naipaul 1999: 78)

In one sense the letter is merely documenting Naipaul's thought processes, but in another important sense they become a vehicle for the practice and actualization of these philosophies.

Authorship and Monstership

History seems to have proven that Naipaul ultimately did not take his father's counter-opinion onboard. In fact, as self-fashioning goes, Naipaul would eventually create himself not only as an author, but also a kind of monster, the two being strangely synonymous in his own mind. He, after all, wanted to be hated. Consider many of the stories of the caricature of Naipaul we have come to know – stories which unfortunately are not as apocryphal as those which have been circulated about Bustamante. Naipaul's famous answer to the question – *what does the dot on an Indian Women's forehead mean?* was – '[it] means my head is empty.' This from an interview with novelist and critic Elizabeth Hardwick in 1980¹⁸. Or consider Naipaul's initial remarks upon being told that he had won the Nobel Prize: 'It is a great tribute to England, my home, and to India, home of my ancestors'¹⁹. Trinidadians waiting for a brief mention would leave disappointed and Naipaul himself admitted with glee how purposeful that omission was. Such mean-spiritedness seems at times a thing of fiction rather than fact, a trait belonging to caricature rather than an actual human being. Naipaul once famously declared that 'nothing was created in the West Indies'²⁰, and once proposed that all University English Departments should be closed and that faculty members should find more useful employment such as driving buses. (Appleyard 2007)

For Naipaul the creation of this grotesque monster-self is parallel and even equivalent to the creation of himself as an author. The very 'take-no-prisoners' style that becomes the 'signature' of his fiction and indeed the vehicle for his hateful utterances is developed through his epistolary practice. His father realizes this quite early and tells him in a reply, 'Your letters are charming in their spontaneity...If you can bring the same quality of spontaneity to whatever you write, everything you write will have a sparkle.' (Naipaul 1999: 29) There is indeed a candour that Naipaul doesn't immediately achieve in his fiction, a willingness to be politically incorrect, an impulse which is very much present in his letters to his family. His biographer Patrick

¹⁸ Hardwick 1997: 47

¹⁹ Quoted in Patrick French's *The World is What It Is* (2008: xii)

²⁰ VS Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 1962: 20

French comments on the freedom Vido took in writing to his sister, Kamla, in particular.

He knew that Kamla would be entertained and interested by what he thought, and that he could write freely. The result was a vigorous, contentious prose that streaked ahead of the prissy writing in 'How They Made a Queen'²¹. ... The force and vigour of their conversations by letter reflected the way they spoke at home, and Vido could talk to Kamla with greater honesty than anyone else. (French 2006: 63)

What is perhaps most interesting is the complex levels of masking and unmasking that may be happening with Naipaul. On one hand his forthright style seems to grow (at least partly) out of his ability to be himself with his sister in his letters, and this is the exact kind of forthrightness that will later see him hated as a person. Of course, we already know from an early letter that Naipaul views this as ultimate success and so we imagine he continues to wear his outrageous face and make his outrageous remarks. Does this itself then represent an honest face of Naipaul, or has he become his own caricature? Has Naipaul's skill as a novelist proven so great that he has become his own character? Is his face really the mask of a monster, held in place so long, that it has melded with the person behind it? Has the mask of V S become the face of Vido? The poet, Derek Walcott, would seem to think so. In an unpublished poem 'The Mongoose' read at the Calabash Literary Festival in Jamaica in 2008, another Caribbean Nobel laureate joked that Naipaul wore a 'bushy beard | to cover features that have always sneered'.

In his introduction to *The World Is What It Is*, French ponders Naipaul's self-creation.

Naipaul's dismissal of his homeland became part of his persona, a persona he invented in order to realize his early ambition to escape the periphery for the centre, to leave the powerless for the powerful, and to make himself a great writer. I sometimes thought of him as a man running up a beach with the advancing tide behind him, managing to stay a bare step ahead of the water. In

²¹ A review Naipaul had written of a Beauty Pageant he had attended in Trinidad

order to become what he wanted to be, he had to make himself someone else....Repeatedly he had to re-create or mask himself. (French 2006: xv)

As Stephen Greenblatt tells us, the act of self-fashioning involves a complicated process of constant rituals, of consolidations, of masking and constant performance. Almost certainly in Naipaul's case, his letters were part of such a process. There is much traffic that seems to move between his early letters and his fictions. In these letters he works out theories of fiction-writing, proposes plots for subsequent novels, hones a style that will become uniquely his, and ultimately invents himself as an author – a writer of fiction. If, as Rhonda Frederick (2005) suggests in her work on the epistolary narratives of Panama Canal workers, letters shed new light on the other popular narratives, in the case of Naipaul it is simply to remind us that behind the unsympathetic and grotesque figure of VS lies the precocious and sympathetic figure of Vido, a boy desperate to write well and make his own way in the world.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at two archives of 'non-fictional' epistolary narratives but in fact one of my aims has been to question such a category and to suggest that the letter is not as 'true' a genre as it often purports itself to be. It often accommodates and even encourages the processes of invention, but the main invention that happens in these epistolary correspondences is one of self.

Having lived such distinguished lives it is inevitable that people will be interested in the lives of VS Naipaul and Alexander Bustamante and will come to their letters searching for information about, and insight into, their lives. Such researchers should be cautious however as the letters of these two men move comfortably between fact and fiction. Their letters are entertaining and indeed revelatory, especially as it concerns how these men understood themselves. The actual accounts, however, are not always factual. Both Sir Busta and Sir Vidia willingly distorted the truth in their correspondences, all in an effort to invent themselves.

VS Naipual grew up being called 'Vido' and Alexander Bustamante grew up being called 'William', but through their letters they became the public figures we now know them as.

'My sister, being the good Jamaican, went to Western Union and sent me £100': Cultures of Remittance as represented in West Indian Epistolary Fictions

At the time of my first sojourn to the United Kingdom, my sister was living in Boston and as an act of support, she sent me £100 via Western Union. I recalled this act of generosity in the tenth *Cold Onion Chronicle* and I see that I linked her remittance to an aspect of national identity, as if the act of sending me money was an authentic performance of her Jamaican diasporic culture. Indeed it is a fact that the Jamaican economy is largely buoyed up by remittances and so long queues are often to be found in front of Western Union outlets on the island. In this chapter I want to think about the act of sending money as part and parcel (so to speak) of the epistolary exchange, and to see how this culture is represented in some examples of West Indian Epistolary fiction.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note here that Western Union began its life as a telegraph company. It was first in the business of facilitating epistolary correspondences before it branched out and then streamlined its services into its current business of facilitating remittances. This move from an exchange of letters to an exchange of money, this marrying of postal communication to remittance, is a natural one, especially in the West Indian context.

For the obvious and understandable reason of preponderance, scholars of epistolary fiction have tended to be interested in eighteenth century examples of the genre. Those who have shown interest in more contemporary examples have still taken a historical approach. I would argue that critics have been so keen to locate new works of epistolary fiction within a genealogy that stretches back to the eighteenth century that they have often times failed to locate and understand these newer works within their contemporary epistolary cultures. Beginning with a quote from Frederic Jameson, William Merrill Decker makes a simple but profoundly important point:

“Genres,” Frederic Jameson writes “are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural object.” Emphasizing the conventions that govern rhetorical relations, and contextualizing those conventions within the dynamics of a society’s system of exchange, such a definition is valuable because it posits the genre-object as the vehicle of a genre-practice; it encourages us to recognize that a genre-practice assimilates to a contemporary culture while preserving certain structures and themes historically associated with the genre. (Decker 1998: 21)

In other words, as the genre-object of the letter moves between different centuries, between different landscapes, and even between different economic classes, its practice inevitably changes as well, sometimes significantly. The letter written by a twentieth century Caribbean citizen is a very different object or specie than the letter as written in eighteenth century England, and similarly, the Caribbean epistolary novel is a very different example of the genre from the eighteenth century English variety, warranting a new kind of criticism that locates it within its present culture.

The Case of the Color Purple

I would like first to consider one problematic attempt to place a contemporary epistolary novel within an 18th century genealogy by revisiting the disagreement between critics Marjorie Pryse and Linda Kauffman in relation to Alice Walker’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple*. *The Color Purple* is an example of Black Atlantic writing (to use Paul Gilroy’s term for what he sees as an African diaspora that is profoundly linked) but admittedly, it is not Caribbean fiction. My brief focus on it here is for two reasons: if we are to believe Henry Louis Gates, it is the first example of a black epistolary novel and certainly it has been the most discussed; more importantly, Pryse’s discomfort with placing it squarely within an eighteenth century genealogy is bound up in issues of racial, cultural and literary heritages, and thus the debate between herself and Kauffman is instructive if we begin

to think of Caribbean examples of the genre and what I propose is the need to develop a culturally relevant framework in which to discuss these texts.

Kauffman, as I have been suggesting, is fan of the eighteenth century roots of the epistolary fiction genre. In her work, Samuel Richardson's novels *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) are often invoked as the obvious forbears of the contemporary epistolary novel. The influence of *Pamela* was in fact prophesied by the 'editor's' note²² which accompanied the first edition. The note read, "This little book will infallibly be looked upon as the hither-to much-wanted Standard or Pattern for this kind of Writing".

With this statement Richardson effectively trumps a previous claim made 1700 years earlier by Ovid. After writing the *Heroides* Ovid made the simple and authoritative declaration, "I have invented a genre"²³. *Pamela* the novel is thus more successful than its eponymous character who finds herself unable to escape anything or anywhere. The book manages to escape its family tree while simultaneously planting a new one. *Pamela* the novel thus becomes a standard, and Pamela the character sits at the top of this new family tree becoming a virtual matriarch whose DNA can supposedly be traced in all subsequent epistolary heroines.

But Marjorie Pryse is uncomfortable with this and tries to unsettle *The Color Purple* from its tenuous perch on a low branch of this eighteenth century tree. For Pryse the 'eighteenth century' becomes not only a signifier of period but also of race. In her introduction to *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*, she discusses *The Color Purple* in the following way: 'beginning with letters to God and continuing in epistolary form, the book pays lip service to the 18th Century roots of the genre'. (Pryse 1985: 1) She goes on to suggest a more complicated genealogy for black writers and black writing,²⁴ one which extends beyond the literary:

²² Of course it is the author Samuel Richardson who writes as the supposed 'editor'. The fiction then was that the letters were only gathered, rather than composed, by Richardson. His specific note that the letters should represent a 'Standard' perhaps had as much to do with the genesis of the book, for Richardson had originally set out to and eventually did in fact write a manual for writing letters.

²³ Michael Cunningham writes in 'The Novelty of Ovid's *Heroides*' (1949): 'In the third book of the *Ars amatoria*, Ovid asserts that his *Heroides* constituted a new literary type or genre. His words are (Ars iii, 346): *ignotum hoc aliis ille novavit opus*.'

²⁴ For a more recent and fuller discussion on this kind of genealogical troubling in black women's fiction, see Cheryl Wall's *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage and Literary Tradition* (2005)

In the 1970s and 1980s, black women novelists have become metaphorical conjure women, “mediums” like Alice Walker who make it possible for their readers and for each other to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, rootworkers, and women who wrote autobiographies) and to name each other as a community of inheritors. By their combined recognition and mutual naming, based on magic, oral inheritance and the need to struggle against oppression, black women writers enlarge our conventional assumptions about the nature and function of literary tradition. (Pryse 1985: 5)

It is worth pointing out that in Henry Louis Gates’s discussion of *The Color Purple*, he does try (even if tentatively) to locate it within a literary tradition and offers examples extending as far back as the 18th Century:

While I am not aware of another epistolary novel in the Afro-American tradition, there is ample precedent in the tradition for the publication of letters. Ignatius Sancho’s Letters were published in London in 1782 [...] Phyllis Wheatley’s letters to Arbour Tanner were so well known by 1830 that they could be parodied in a broadside. Even the device of locating Celie’s sister in Africa, writing letters home to her troubled sister, has a precedent in the tradition of Amanda Berry Smith’s diarylike entries about her African missionary work, published in her Autobiography (1893). But we do not have, before *The Color Purple*, an example of the epistolary novel in the black tradition of which I am aware. (Gates, 1988: 244)

What is instructive here is that while Gates points to a possible line of antecedents he stops short of suggesting, let alone insisting, that Walker is indebted to them, as we will soon see that Linda Kauffman does. Gates is right however to point the reader towards the specific culture out of which the letters in *The Color Purple* would have naturally arisen.

Of course it would be an impossible and an unnecessary project to set out to prove that traces of the eighteenth century European epistolary novel cannot be found in contemporary, black examples of the genre such as *The Color Purple*. That is not my intention here, and indeed traces can be found. For example, Kauffman is right when she points out that ‘the genre traditionally associated with women’s voices,

feelings and textual production' is the novel in letters. The pervasive idea that letter-writers are traditionally female is not at all true. It is a fictional construct in every sense of that phrase. It is rooted in epistolary fiction rather than in the reality of epistolary correspondence. The expectation that any sample of letters will naturally include a large portion of women's voices has even put social historians in a bind as they struggle to find such representation. David Gerber tells us directly in his introduction to *Letters Across Borders* that '[w]omen, illiterates, children and those who wish for whatever reason not to maintain contact with their homelands are underrepresented in the corpus of letters.' (Gerber 2006: 4) The typical letter writer according to Gerber is not at all a poor, young woman but rather, a mature, middle-class man. The letter-writer we encounter in *The Color Purple* however is a poor and barely-literate young woman, and what's more – this does not surprise us. She conforms to a convention, not of epistolary practice, but of epistolary fiction, and thus one could say that Walker's novel does carry traces of the eighteenth century genre.

Nonetheless, I wonder if insisting on such a lineage stages a particularly useful conversation. The stridency of Kauffman's insistence becomes troubling even when what she is establishing is a moot point.

Celie's letters are nevertheless firmly rooted in epistolary tradition, for like Heloise, the Portugese Nun, and Clarissa, she appeals to God for succor and solace. An addressee who is absent, silent, or incapable of replying is one of the distinguishing characteristics of epistolarity. If God were present, Celie would not need to write. (Kauffman 1992: 186)

Surely 'an addressee who is absent' is a distinguishing feature of most epistolary discourse; not just the letter in fiction. While Kauffman does use the broader term, 'epistolary tradition', what she clearly means to suggest is a rather specific tradition of epistolary fiction. Such a suggestion is disingenuous. The letter is always a discourse of separation; it always stages a conversation between people who have to negotiate a distance (often times both physical and emotional) that has been wedged between them. All that Kauffman demonstrates is that both *The Color Purple* and *Clarissa* are indebted to the form of the letter, but that much is so obvious it hardly needs explication; they are, after all, novels composed of letters.

Kauffman then goes on to point out some thematic overlaps, but this effort as well strikes me as strained and rife with problems. To establish a literary genealogy by thematic overlap is probably the equivalent of establishing paternity through the shapes of noses; it is unconvincing guesswork. Kauffman's conclusion however is triumphant: 'Marjorie Pryse is thus wrong when she maintains that Walker merely "pays lips service to the eighteenth century roots of the [epistolary] genre," for Walker's indebtedness is pervasive.' (Kauffman 1992: 188)

It is this final statement that I am calling 'troubling' – that Alice Walker's novel is indisputably **indebted** to novels like *Clarissa*. Kauffman moves beyond the construction of a metaphoric genealogy to one that is as inflexible and literal as a biological family tree. The suggestion here is that the very existence of *The Color Purple* fundamentally relies on the prior existence of Richardson's novels. This ought to be contested on at least three grounds: Kauffman's lack of solid evidence; the patronizing and potentially racist tone that is underneath such a claim (however unwitting it may be) for implicit in most genealogic constructions is a project of validation, but *The Color Purple* does not need to find its worth or advertise its pedigree by establishing a direct kinship to *Clarissa*; the third and most important objection, however, ought to be that the insistence of 'indebtedness' blinds us to the far more plausible roots of contemporary epistolary fictions within their own specific and vastly different cultures of epistolography. By rooting *The Color Purple* in a genealogy of epistolary fiction (rather than in its own particular culture of letter-writing) Kauffman effectively bypasses some of the more illuminating conversations that could be had about the text.

Kauffman's argument, one should acknowledge, is not without nuance or perceptiveness. She confesses that *The Color Purple*'s contribution to epistolary fiction is 'distinctive' and that in comparing Walker's novel to its supposed eighteenth century predecessor, Walker's 'reaccentuation points up differences that are even more dramatic than the similarities'. Indeed, the majority of Kauffman's argument tries to demonstrate how Alice Walker has fused within epistolarity the genre of the Slave Narrative, thus acknowledging the novel's complicated and 'mixed-race' heritage. But after acknowledging its multiple influences, Kauffman still locates *The Color Purple* squarely within an eighteenth century epistolary tradition.

The letter that Samuel Richardson would have drawn upon in the rural landscape of an eighteenth Century England is worlds apart from the letter that Walker would have mimicked for an early twentieth century American South and this is itself different from the letter as used and understood by late twentieth Century West Indian writers. Any discussion of contemporary epistolary fiction which limits itself to a discussion of literary genealogies will miss the ways in which issues such as migration, diaspora, and the rise of transnational families etc significantly reconstitute what letters mean and how they are used.

In a recent essay, 'Epistolary Traditions in Caribbean Diasporic Writing', Isabel Suarez has wondered if 'the overdetermined European genre of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel, whose context differed so radically from that of the Caribbean diasporas, has acted as a deterrent.' (Suarez 2007: 179) There is a great irony here, for while Suarez recognizes that a contemporary story about Caribbean people could be effectively told through letters, such a template would be less useful if the Caribbean writer were to try to relate this fiction to the 18th century. She sees such a genealogy as a deterrent. Indeed, the Caribbean writers who have successfully written epistolary fiction have been those who have gone back to the drawing board as it were – inventing an epistolary novel for the West Indies. Such an epistolary novel is unique in a number of ways. It is usually a transnational narrative, and the tension at the heart of the story is one that is both native and natal, a longing for the Motherland and for the Mother, rather than the lover. It is the story of families who have been separated across entire countries. And also, West Indian epistolary fiction almost always depicts a culture of remittance.

West Indian Culture and its Epistolary Spaces

Black Atlantic societies have extended themselves quite naturally into what James How has called 'epistolary spaces'. How's useful concept bears relevance here, but I should flag up that it will also bear relevance in a later chapter when I consider how the letter (as email) has been completely remediated from print into digital, from actual space into virtual space. How's concept of 'epistolary space' could usefully be read as an earlier incarnation of 'virtual space' or 'cyberspace' as we now understand and term the alternate lives that many of us today live on the internet. Epistolary and Virtual Space then move beyond physical constraints into a metaphysical arena where

human interaction, relationships, and various activities are allowed to continue. It is not a strictly 'imagined' world as the things that are effected in epistolary space have very real consequences on real people. But if we consider the movement of the letter from print to digital as a remediation of genre, it is possible to consider the ways that humans move in these new spaces as a remediation of selves, and it is a remediation that happens quite naturally in West Indian cultures.

Caribbean society has been one in which the separation of families is both a historical legacy and a present tense reality. The formation of Caribbean societies is itself synonymous with traumatic acts of separation, and such acts are not relegated to the past.

The narrative of Paulette Ramsay's *Aunt Jen* is conducted in an epistolary space and the reasons for this are cultural, and seemingly inevitable. Some statistics will be illuminating: Jamaica presently has a population upward of 2.5 million people living on the island. It is estimated that at least another one million Jamaicans are resident in other countries. The Caribbean then has naturally extended itself beyond geographic and into epistolary spaces. Indeed, it was the English traveler Robert Poole who, while travelling through the Caribbean, felt compelled to write:

The Art of Writing is a very happy invention, inasmuch as thereby we are able to freely converse together, tho' at great distances from each other; yea, and to spread Correspondence from one End of the Globe to the other. (Poole 1753: 299) quoted in Roberts 1997: 119

The main protagonist of *Aunt Jen* is a 12 year old girl, Sunshine who lives on another 'end of the globe' from her mother. She is, to use a Jamaican terminology, a 'barrel-child'²⁵ – a member of the swelling population of children abandoned by parents who migrated. Left in the care of her grandmother, Sunshine's only significant

²⁵ The term 'barrel-child' which has since slipped into popular usage, was first introduced by Claudette Crawford-Brown in her monograph, *Who Will Save Our Children? The Plight of the Jamaican child in the Nineties*. The 'barrel child' is one whose main interaction with his or her parents is in the 'barrels' or remittances that are shipped down from the United States or England.

A recent Unicef report notes the negative impact this causes: "Migration of parents who seek more lucrative employment abroad has had a negative impact on Jamaican children. Some children are left in the care of strangers, neighbours or even older siblings who are still children. These so-called "barrel children" are left without parental guidance or adult supervision and with access to significant material resources in the form of cash remittances and barrels of clothing and toys sent by absentee parents." (Unicef 2011)

contact with her mother is in the remittances or barrels occasionally sent from abroad. Desperate to establish a relationship with a mother she can barely remember (she continually begs Aunt Jen for a photograph) but living in a time before the advent of the internet or cheap international telephone rates, she finds this difficult. In one of her letters, Sunshine writes, “Sometimes I wish I could see you face to face to talk to you.” Unable then to do it in a present geographic space, Sunshine, quite naturally, tries to advance the relationship she wants with her mother in an epistolary space. It is therefore a very specific cultural reality then that most obviously pushes the narrative of ‘Aunt Jen’ into an epistolary space. Sunshine and her mother typify what Lamming has argued is a common structure in the Caribbean – that of the ‘transnational family’ (Lamming 1995: 32). For Sunshine to see her mother would be a Herculean task requiring embassy visits, money, planes and perhaps more difficult to obtain than all of these – her mother’s own willingness.

West Indian society and West Indian epistolary fiction therefore frequently move beyond the geographic limits of the nation-state and into a wider transnational world – a diaspora. Curdella Forbes points out in the opening of *From Nation to Diaspora* that while ‘the discourse of nationalism [was] the primary mode in which the West Indies thought about itself in the early decades of the twentieth centurythe discourses of diaspora and postmodernism...have begun to shift nationalism from its central place as the shaping force by which West Indianness is imagined.’ (Forbes 2005: 1) On his part, Kamau Brathwaite has written, ‘the emigrants and the islanders... seem to me to be the two main types that make up the present West Indian sensibility...the Emigrant has become a significant factor on the literary scene and is in fact a product of our social and cultural circumstances. I want to submit that the desire (even the need) to migrate is at the heart of West Indian sensibility.’ (Brathwaite 1998: 19)

Elaine Bauer notes in her own studies of transnational Caribbean families that ‘for [those] whom we interviewed, transnationalism is not a figment of the researcher’s imagination but a reality both in the mind and in practice.’ (Bauer 2006: 2) Some of these practices have included frequent return trips home in cases where it can be afforded, and also an active exchange of letters. Over and over in the testimonies of emigrants and returnees interviewees identify the letter as a way they

kept in touch with their families²⁶. Hyacinth, a St. Lucian domestic worker in Canada recounts, '[m]any nights I cry, because even when I write home to my grandmother and little boy, I had to write like everything was fine.' (Silvera 1995: 56) while Savitri, a Guyanese woman also working as a domestic worker in Canada recounts, 'I have a husband back in Guyana and four children. I have not seen them since I came up here in 1979. We write to each other though, and two times a year we talk on the phone.' (Silvera 1995: 46)

Given these cultural realities – the trans-nationality of the Caribbean, the migratory patterns of its citizens, indeed, the diasporic nature of West Indian society – oftentimes within the literature. *The Lonely Londoners* (Selvon, 1956), *Louisiana* (Brodber, 1994) and *Aelred's Sin* (Scott, 1998) for instance are novels which either open with letters or with scenes whose actions have been prompted because of a recently received letter. The letter often appears in a variety of Caribbean narratives to give voice to characters who have migrated. In Lorna Goodison's short story, 'Bella Makes Life', we follow most closely the narrative of the husband Joe-Joe who has stayed in Jamaica to raise the children and is patiently waiting on his wife's return. The situation is an interesting reversal as it is often the father-figure who migrates while the mother stays with the children. Bella, though the eponymous character, is generally absent from the story as she is indeed absent from their lives, but she occasionally finds a way into the story via her letters which become increasingly distant, and even callous. Her first letter though is full of assurances of her return.

Dear Joe-Joe,

Down in Brooklyn here where I'm living, I see a lot of Jamaicans but I don't mix up with them. The lady who sponsor me say that a lot of the Jamaicans up here is doing wrongs and I don't want to mix up with those things as you can imagine. You know that I am only here to work some dollars to help you and me to make life when I come home.' (Goodison 1990: 76)

²⁶ See for instance Celia Sorhaindo's *Home Again: Stories of Migration and Return* (2009) Jacqueline Bishop's *My Mother Who is Me: Life Stories from Immigrant Jamaican Women* (2005) and Makeda Silvera's *Silenced* (1995)

Bella goes to New York in order to ‘make life’ for her family back home, but eventually she is only interested in making life for herself; she has slowly been sucked into the glamour of America and the selfish materialism of that culture. There is even the devastating hint in her final letter that she has found a new man. However, it is her very first letter to Joe-Joe that I find interesting, for Bella makes an interesting link: the act of migration for her and even the act of sending letters back home is tied to a culture of remittance.

Writing and Remitting

At times, even when the migrant has gone away for studies and therefore lives in an economically precarious situation, the act of writing home is still seen as synonymous to the act of sending money. Naipaul for instance was often sending money back to Trinidad, or consider a scene in Trevor Rhone’s play, *Old Story Time*, when Miss Aggy gets a letter from her son, Len, a postgraduate student in England.

Pa Ben: A letter come

Mama: From foreign?

Pa Ben: Air mail, an’ the king picture ‘pon the stamp.

Mama: [coming out with great speed and in much flutter] Mass Len! Holy fathers in heaven! Thank you Jesus! [she kisses the letter] You answer mi prayer.

(Rhone 1981: 20)

When Pa Ben opens the letter for Miss Aggy, British pound notes fall out from it, and Pa Ben exclaims, ‘Money!’

Mama: Money?

Pa Ben: Him send money.

Mama: Where him get money sen’ for me an’ him not working?

(Rhone 1981: 20)

Just as even students will feel compelled to send home money to their parents, the inability to send money home is sometimes also signaled by the decision to not send letters at all. In Olive Senior's 'Hurricane Story 1951' Margaret finds out that England is not the land of easy opportunities she had imagined it was going to be. She is depressed that she can't send home money for her young son.

She wanted so much
for the boy – she decided though
she would continue striving
she wouldn't write again
until she could send him
what amounted to
something.

(Senior 1994: 35)

The letter then when enlisted by the West Indian writer bears witness not only to the fact of migration but to concurrent cultures of remittance. Kezia Page has been the first critic to theorize certain examples of West Indian literature as being what she calls 'Remittance Texts'. Page lays the foundations for her arguments by painting a picture of Caribbean societies whose economies are significantly bolstered, if not kept precariously alive, by remittances. She points out, for instance, that in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic remittances account for almost 20% of GDP, representing yearly inflows of billions of US dollars. Page argues, 'of course remittances are more than staggering statistics; they are evidence of the imbricated interactions between home and diaspora communities.' (Page 2006: 38) and further on, 'remittances not only represent pure economic activity but complicated social and cultural networks that have helped define migrant and home communities in the wake of mass migrations out of the Caribbean.' (Page 2006: 40) I am personally attracted to this idea that remittances are only one form of exchange in a very complicated 'economy' which extends beyond the purely economic. While the sender sends money, what he gains

(indeed, pays for) is continued involvement and 'say' in a community and language he left behind. Nevertheless, Page is right to point out as she does that for most purposes, remittance is seen as a 'unilateral' exchange in which the receiver benefits.

It is out of this that Page's theory of the 'remittance text' emerges. For Page, a 'remittance text' is necessarily written by an emigrant – someone who has left – and is then sent back from the new host country to the old home space. Page again troubles the idea of remittance being 'unilateral' for she suggests that just as monetary remittance might be a virtual membership fee paid to preserve one's place in a community, so too 'remittance texts' could be seen as a way in which immigrant writers, by recalling home onto the page, preserve the idea of and a connection with the countries they have left behind. More provocatively, Page draws our attention to the growing criticism of remittance cultures that have raised doubts as to the long-term benefits of this exchange. Studies reveal that receivers are more likely to 'consume' the monies sent rather than invest it. What remittances then do is to create the 'sender' as a savior-figure and the receiver as a figure that needs to be saved; the culture deeply inscribes notions of first world and third world, better-off and worse-off, enlightened and trapped in darkness. Page's analysis shows how the remittance text does exactly this.

Kezia Page offers Jamaica Kincaid's non-fictional account, *My Brother*, which tells the story of the author's brother who dies from AIDS, as an example of a remittance text. Kincaid – healthy, prosperous and living in America not only remits medicine and money to her 'diseased' brother in Antigua, but she writes her own account of the ordeal. The text then becomes a form of remittance as well. The problem with this form of literary remitting is that it suggests that elegance, poeticism and even the ability to account for oneself are things that the native still living in his own country cannot do for himself. It must be remitted to him. Page's arguments especially when reading Kincaid's text are compelling and shine a brutal but perhaps necessary spotlight on some of the problematic ways in which diasporic citizens relate to their former homes and the distorted narratives they produce and circulate. Perhaps very tellingly, an online reviewer who gives high praise to Kincaid's AIDS narrative, writes, 'Ms Kincaid contrasts her own **escape** from a difficult and sometimes brutal

family life in Antigua (**clearly compounded by poverty and ignorance**), with that of her younger brother who remained living there.’²⁷ [emphasis my own]

Perhaps one problem with Page’s arguments is that it requires a specific kind of text to work within her proposed framework. She is, for good reasons, critical of the Caribbean’s deeply-entrenched cultures of remittances but because of this critique she has to go out of her way to find an unsympathetic text written by a migrant writer to his or her home country that mirrors the economic relationship. Lorna Goodison’s *From Harvey River* for instance, a memoir of her mother’s village – though non-fictional, written in a foreign land and clearly with the intention to preserve a certain kind of relationship with her home country – would not fit very comfortably in the paradigm that Page suggests.

More astonishingly – at least for me – is that Page does not consider in her analysis the genre of the letter. I would argue that this is a strange omission because the text that remittances have always been intrinsically and quite literally bound up in is indeed the letter. Caribbean epistolary narratives do not require heavy-duty theorizing to be rendered as ‘remittance texts’. They simply are. And they would not fit very easily into Page’s thesis, for far from excluding other voices they often become a potential demonstrative answer to Spivak’s long standing question²⁸ by giving the chance for the natives still living in the native-land to speak. These letters are remittance texts not because they have originated from ‘abroad’, but by virtue of the simple fact that they have been written in the midst of remittance cultures and whether by request or bequest they oftentimes become the direct vehicles for said remittances. Sometimes these letters are composed at home, and at other times they come from abroad, but either way they narrate the complexities of a world that has been shaped by remittance exchanges. These letters don’t merely move between the Caribbean and its diasporas; they are shaped by and also negotiate the differences between the two landscapes.

It should be noted that although the letter makes frequent appearances in West Indian fiction, the dedicated epistolary novel or epistolary short story is relatively

²⁷ From an online Amazon review by ‘M. T. Norfield’.
<http://www.amazon.co.uk/review/RVUIYP6OPUV11>

²⁸ I am referring of course to Spivak’s seminal essay ‘Can the Sub-Altern Speak?’ (1999) in which she suggests the profound lack of agency and voice that the subject who is both economically oppressed and historically colonized might face.

rare. Concerning the examples which I focus attention on now, the novel *Aunt Jen* and the short story 'Full Stop' are exclusively told in epistolary exchanges while the novel *Gather the Faces* and the short story 'Absentee Ownership of Cows' move in and out of the epistolary mode – they are largely comprised of letters but these are framed within a broader narrative.

Remitting a relationship

Both Paulette Ramsay's epistolary novel, *Aunt Jen*, and Alecia McKenzie's epistolary short story 'Full Stop', tell the stories of young women who have been abandoned by mothers that migrated to England. Both Sunshine and Carmen are raised, instead, by their grandmothers. They are barrel children. The abandoned child is a common phenomenon within the literature, so much so that Barbara Lalla identifies it as one of the tropes of Jamaican Literature, and in fact she writes in her analysis of Elean Thomas's *The Last Room*, '[t]he growing distance between mother and daughter is nowhere more poignantly demonstrated than in IcyLane's letters.' (Lalla 1996: 88)

The narrative of *Aunt Jen* is monologic – these are the unanswered letters of Sunshine to her mother, while the narrative of 'Full Stop' is dialogic – letters between a granddaughter, Carmen (who has since migrated to the United States) and her grandmother who raised her but who still lives in Jamaica. Both narratives bear witness to cultures of remittance.

Sunshine does not remember her mother. Though the name 'Aunt Jen' displaces the mother from her matriarchal place, it is in fact the most affectionate term that Sunshine feels comfortable using. At first when she gets no response to her letters she even worries about this term. 'I am thinking that maybe you didn't reply because you are upset that I called you Aunt Jen in my letter. Maybe you think that is too familiar.' (Ramsay 2002: 2). It is this emotional distance wedged between mother and daughter that Sunshine is trying to bridge with her letters. She is more keen that her mother remit a relationship rather than money. Her desperate requests for a photograph (a symbol perhaps of getting to know who her mother is) become

heartbreaking. 'Ma says I must never ask anyone for anything, but it's just a picture, so maybe that is not so bad.' (Ramsay 2002: 2)

All that Aunt Jen sends however is money, and even this is sent to the grandmother, Ma, instead of to Sunshine. 'Ma always says to me, "You Aunt Jen sen some money for you or you Aunt Jen say she sendin a parcel for you."' (Ramsay 2002: 3) Sunshine however is unimpressed by these remittances, and is absolutely angry when her mother does finally reply to her letters, only to send a card with money enclosed.

I must be honest and tell you though that I was very disappointed too that you didn't include a letter. I would have preferred a letter, even the five-pound note that you included does not mean as much to me as a letter would mean... I don't want to sound selfish, but the more I think about it the more I think that after I wrote you several letters, nine to be exact, you could have written me a letter – even six lines – and the least you could do was to send me one of your photographs. I think you are a hard person. (Ramsay 2002: 19-20)

The novel *Aunt Jen* is a remittance text but one that is absolutely critical of the culture out of which it emerges. By giving voice to Sunshine, a receiver of remittances, it does not focus on the economic repercussions but rather on the personal and emotional devastation that is wrought by parents who have migrated and send back money instead of love.

Sunshine is doubly abandoned because her father has also migrated to England. He does come back to visit and offers to take Sunshine with him, but what he offers is not a relationship. He tells Ma, 'That is why I am here to talk to you about taking Sunshine to England with me. That way she will be able to enjoy my money.' Her account of the things her father brings from England to her is comic. 'Well Aunt Jen, my father brought a few things for me and I'm telling you that I never knew such ugly things could come from England... He must have searched hard to find these ugly things.' (Ramsay 2002: 33) She goes on to describe a hat that looks like a pudding pan, a fire red dress with three layers of 'barb wire crinoline' which she is afraid will cut her, and a pair of uncomfortable shoes whose only advantage was that

they caused Sunshine's grandfather to laugh for the first time since his son's death. The inappropriateness of these remittances makes the grandmother angry. 'Well Ma was so upset she said she would tell that father of mine a piece of her mind. She says she may be poor but she's not begging anybody anything for me.' (Ramsay 2002: 33) What Ma doesn't appreciate is that what Sunshine wants from her parents is not a typical remittance.

Sunshine imagines England as a place that is cold in multiple ways. It is the place where her parents have been lost to her and she can't imagine living there by the end of the novel. When her grandparents abandon her by dying her mother finally writes but it is too late. Sunshine responds, 'do not expect me to be your little Sunshine as you said in your letter. I will not be coming to England to live with you. I want to stay right here. I don't want to play hopscotch with my life.' (Ramsay 2002: 97)

Though the narrative seems to congratulate Sunshine for making the right decision and to heap praises onto the grandmother, Ma, for having been a loving and nurturing figure, the reader ought to be suspicious of the grandmother who is deeply implicated in the separation of child from parents. In a section already quoted, we will recall that the very name which introduces an emotional distance is learnt from the grandmother – 'Ma always says to me, 'You Aunt Jen sen some money for you or you Aunt Jen say she sendin a parcel for you' [so] I always call you Aunt Jen in my mind.' (Ramsay 2002: 3). It seems suspicious that the grandmother would not have said instead, 'You mother sen some money for you' etc. It is partly her language that prevents Sunshine from being able to imagine another mother figure besides her aging grandmother. Though the father isn't presented as a sympathetic character and it is revealed later that he has an abusive streak, Ma from quite early is adamant that Sunshine will not go to live with him in England. When he makes the suggestion, her response is angry.

Well, at that point Ma jumped up from where she was sitting and her mouth started to tremble the way it trembles when she's angry. I could see that she was trying hard hard to control her temper because the muscles in her neck and jaw were stiffening. She didn't raise her voice though, she spoke to him very quietly but the way she emphasised each word we all knew that Ma was

serious serious. She looked him straight in the eyes and said, 'If and when Sunshine leave dis house it will be to go to har madda. No one else. So if yuh want har to enjoy some of yuh money, find another way to do it but yuh not teking her out of dis house.' (Ramsay 2002: 32)

The father is ridiculed for having a phony accent and having bad taste, but is never congratulated for at least attempting to have a relationship with his daughter. Ma is happy to receive remittances from him but is unwilling that the child should be restored to his parental care. Indeed, considering the legality of the matter, this could be read as a virtual kidnapping made possible by emotional manipulation and also the remittance culture in which parents hardly ever send what their children really need from them. It is the fierce allegiance to her grandmother even in death that makes Sunshine unable to move to England at the end of the novel.

I took a long time to make up my mind because I wanted to be sure I was making the right decision. I am sure now. You are my mother but Ma was my ma – my real real ma and there will never be another ma for me. (Ramsay 2002: 97)

In her short story, 'Full Stop', Alecia McKenzie is more ruthless in exposing the grandmother's manipulation. The story is composed as a set of letters passed between the grandmother, Grand Ma Scottie, who lives in Jamaica, and her granddaughter Carmen who is a medical doctor in America. Grand Ma Scottie notoriously writes without full stops or punctuation, hence the title of the story. Of course, in robbing Grand Ma Scottie's letters of their punctuation, McKenzie is very skillfully suggesting something about this character's actual voice which is less sophisticated than her highly educated granddaughter's. This way in which the letter manages to be tensed between the scribal and the oral is in fact the focus of the next chapter. But the lack of punctuation also speaks to a kind of relentlessness in Grand Ma Scottie's personality. By the end we can feel her desperation when she tries to pacify Carmen who has only just realized that her grandmother played a big role in making sure she was kept away from her mother.

My Dear Carmen Your mother was always a snake in the grass Dont believe a word she says She and your father were not fit to raise you so The Good Lord

appointed me guardian He did not want you to be raised in England so he gave you onto my care And look how fine youve turned out (McKenzie 1992: 8)

Incidentally, we could also see the Pentecostal and evangelical modes in the grandmothers from McKenzie's short story and Ramsay's novel. Grand Ma Scottie in particular is always invoking 'The Good Lord' in her letters. As I have already flagged up in the introduction, this religious mode is often adopted in West Indian epistlography and this will be looked at fully in a later chapter. Grand Ma Scottie's letters can be read as close relatives of the church testimony, and together, the sequence of letters between herself and her granddaughter are another kind of testimony to the strong relationship between the two. But theirs is not a completely healthy relationship. The reader will recognize how Grand Ma Scottie relentlessly extorts more remittances out of her granddaughter. In almost every letter that Carmen sends there is money included. Her first letter ends, 'Enclosed is \$75 Take care of yourself and I hope to be home one of these days'. The grandmother replies 'Thanks for the money It came just in time to buy some paint for the old shack here but its not enough to pay for a painter so Im going to do the job myself with Gods help I pray for you every night that you stay healthy and good'. These letters are not just exchanges of pleasantries but a complicated economic relationship where guilt is often used to secure more money. Grand Ma Scottie's depiction of her home as 'an old shack' and her suggestion that she will do the job of painting it herself, even in her old age, are cunning requests for more money. Carmen of course is able to read the subtext. She caves in to the request, 'Please don't go painting at your age. Enclosed is £100 to pay a painter.' But Grand Ma Scottie replies, 'Dear Carmen God bless you for the money I put it in the bank You think Im too old to paint my own house' (McKenzie, 1992: 2)

Over and over this pattern is repeated – Carmen sends remittances; Grand Ma Scottie piously thanks her for it but hints that more money is needed for something else though she never asks directly; Carmen sends the extra money; Grandma Scottie piously thanks her for it, uses it for her own purposes, and then hints that more money is needed for something else.

When it is finally revealed that Grandma Scottie played a direct role in keeping Carmen separated from her mother, Carmen does not know how to react.

Like Sunshine whose father had come down from England to take her, Carmen's mother also comes down to fetch her children. But instead of a flat out refusal such as Ma gives to Sunshine's father, Grand Ma Scottie hides her grandchildren with relatives in another parish. They do not even know that their mother had come for them. It could well be that this is not just emotional selfishness on the part of the grandmother, a way to keep her grandchildren close to her – but also a form of economic savvy. With the children kept away from their mother, the grandmother has forced a situation where letters and remittances will keep flowing in from England.

Carmen, like Sunshine, is deeply scarred by what she perceives as her mother's abandonment. In an early letter, she writes to her grandmother, '[a]s far as I'm concerned the person who raised me is my mother, and that's you' which mirrors very closely Sunshine's own declaration at the end of *Aunt Jen*. Also, like Sunshine, in the end it is the mother who ends up sending letters to her daughter and the daughter who now finds it difficult to reply. Indeed, these are complex matrices of exchanges where letters, money and hurts are passed between the three generations of women.

The letters of Sunshine and Carmen expose the deep trauma of abandonment that lies at the heart of cultures of remittances, indeed a deep wound at the heart of Jamaican culture. The money sent by parents is only a small token or bribe to make up for the fact that they are not present in their children's lives. What both Carmen and Sunshine need is not the remittance of money, but the remittance of a relationship with their mothers.

Remittance and Return

Remittance generally refers to the sending of money back to the homeland, but the Mexican sociologist Fernando Lozano Ascencio points out that remittances actually need not be monetary. He proposes three additional categories: 'consumer goods, such as clothing, appliances, televisions, gifts, etc; [] capital goods, such as, tools, light machinery, vehicles...[and thirdly,] the skills and technological knowledge acquired during [the immigrant's] stay' abroad. (Ascencio 1993: 8) It is this third category of non-monetary remittances that concerns this final section of my argument.

The ultimate remittance I propose is a remittance of self. In other words, some returns can be read as acts of remittance – and these specifically would be those returns which are economically beneficial to the receiving country.

While the idea of return is a recurring theme in the letters of migrants, actual return is more unusual. In examining the letters of English emigrants to Australia, Eric Richards points out '[t]he idea of possible return often began even before departure for the colonies and was played out in a series of variations on the psychology of departure, the earnest of return, the game of reassurance, the annual declaration of intent, the prevarications and the apologies. In the outcome most emigrants did not return home [but] the discourse on return was a central function of many emigrant letters.' (Richards, 2006: 68) The narratives of Gilroy's *Gather the Faces* and Winkler's 'Absentee Ownership of Cows' are examples of such a discourse of return, and specifically where the act of return can be read as an act of remittance.

I should confess that Gilroy's novel, more than the other narrative we have considered so far, fits into the particular genealogy that Kauffman champions, for at one point Kauffman proposes that eighteenth century epistolary fiction grows out of the love-letter, and this is exactly the seed of *Gather the Faces*. Gilroy explains the genesis of her novel in an afterword. 'My aunt Ella, who was a brilliant teacher and a really good-natured woman, able to put every one at ease, received love letters which she read aloud to her sisters. I can still hear them laughing. This memory, with all its ambiguities and circumlocutions of the letters she read, has formed the basis for this story...' (Gilroy 1996: 115) *Gather the Faces* then is rooted in the love-letter; it documents the courtship between Marvella and an amorous penpal, Ansel, who later becomes her fiancée.

But links to an eighteenth century epistolary genealogy ends almost as quickly as it begins. *Gather the Faces* has none of the tensions or the particular pathos associated with Samuel Richardson's novels. When Marvella receives her first letter from Ansel, she quickly replies 'I like getting airmail, but please don't seal them so tightly. There are no 'letter-peepers' in the P.O. here.' From the very outset the reader is not allowed the satisfying nervousness of wondering what might happen if the letters were to be intercepted and read by an unintended recipient, or even what might happen if they were lost. The love between Marvella and Ansel progresses without

incident, hurdles, or indeed one could argue, plausibility. *Gather the Faces*' ultimate refusal to fit into Kauffman's paradigm is not only due to the West Indian diasporic context being so different from eighteenth century England, but also with Gilroy's own failure to fully exploit the particular strain of the genre she has chosen to inhabit. Gilroy as novelist falls short of the brilliance, good-nature and wit she ascribes to her Aunt Ella.

Gather the Faces is not only a collection of love letters between a young man and woman; as a whole it is itself a love letter to Guyana. Indeed the patriotic love is developed in a far more complicated way than the erotic love between the two correspondents. At the beginning of the novel Guyana is a place Marvella and her family must escape from. When her parents realize they are going to have a child, Marvella's father makes the decision to leave. It is an economic decision.

'No' said my father. 'This will never do. I am a competent carpenter.' He wrote letters and to cut a long story short, he left mother to the mercy of the Church of the Holy Spirit and her sisters, and took the boat to England....I was three when we joined him in St. Pancras. (Gilroy 1996: 8)

Later in the story when Marvella's aunt decides to go back for a visit and offers to take Marvella, she declines, exclaiming, 'To Guyana! Things were bad there. Poverty, no foreign exchange. Many of the hopes of independence had collapsed. I declined.' (Gilroy 1996: 12) Going back to Guyana would be a sacrificial act that would more benefit the country than this particular citizen. Return for Marvella would be a form of remittance.

The process of return is complicated and Marvella has to first be able to imagine herself in Guyana. She begins to do this through her correspondence with Ansel. She writes, '[h]aving you as a penfriend would let me imagine the life I would live if I had remained in Guyana.' When they finally meet Marvella recognizes in Ansel the things she lacks.

I was in a cultural no-man's land. A limbo of identity. The Queen, the Flag. The Lord Mayor's Show – I could relate to them but never own them. Deep down in my heart I knew they were not really mine...Ansel had no such

problems. He knew his identity whether of self or place, or race, or religion. I understood more of what I lacked every time Ansel and I talked. (Gilroy 1996: 45)

Ansel's letters connect Marvella to the country she had lost as a child and when he finally proposes to her she is able to return. More than just a love story, the novel is about how an immigrant finds the courage to remit herself back home.

Many more returns take place in this short narrative. Ansel also comes to England to do a short course though there is never any doubt in his mind that he will return at the end of it. His is exactly the kind of remittance that Ascencio describes – 'of skills and technological knowledge acquired' in another country. In England he is described as a man 'grasping the chance to learn what would be useful to his country.' When he walks through the streets of Oxford, instead of being impressed by the surplus of goods, it disturbs him. He writes, 'So much of everything, Marvella, is not right for one nation to have. So much eggs. Eggs everywhere and cheap. So much shoes and jeans, clothes and everything. I like to have only as much as I need.' (Gilroy 1996: 48) When he does go back to Guyana he writes hopefully 'the work will change here. Plenty of scope to introduce some new thinking in production and marketing. We want to package rice in an attractive way so people can see it and want it.' (Gilroy 1996: 54)

Ansel lives in a village called 'La Repentance' – the very name suggestive of the act of turning around and moving away from a former life. Indeed it becomes a place where many of the characters [re]turn to when they decide to leave England. Marvella follows Ansel to La Repentance, wanting to contribute to the building of Guyana, and perhaps more spectacularly, Marvella's parents do as well. It helps that the father has been laid off from his job and has received both a lump-sum payout and also a pension. With his newfound economic independence he is able to move back to Guyana and build a shop. As Marvella explains, 'Dad had always hankered after going home and decided that's what he would do.' (Gilroy 1996: 58)

But if we choose to read the act of return as a possible form of remittance then it is arguable that the return of Marvella's parents, close to retirement age, is a smaller

remittance than the return of Ansel and Marvella. The return of the retiree is not as valued as the return of more youthful members.

A long overdue self-remittance that hardly benefits the receiving country is the theme that Winkler explores in his comic short story 'Absentee Ownership of Cows'. The story begins with an unbelievable premise:

One Saturday morning Mr Alfred Hutchins, an elderly Jamaican living abroad in Georgia, received a mystifying letter from a cow. The envelope it came in bore the return address of "Bamoo PO, St Ann," the parish in Jamaica from which Mr Hutchins and his family had migrated twenty-four years before and in which he had always dreamed of living out his last days. (Winkler 2004: 34)

Unbelievable though the premise may be, upon reading the letter Alfred acknowledges, with a wonderful pun, 'dis letter sounds like it really come from de pen of a cow.' (35). The scene then is set. Alfred Hutchins is one of the immigrants who would have talked on and off about returning but would have failed to actually do it. 'the day never came.' (34) The cow's letter accuses him, in essence, of failing to remit anything substantial.

Dear Mr Hutchins,

Nineteen years ago you left me tied to a tree and traipsed away to live in America. In all that livelong time of absentee ownership, you have scarcely visited me. Even when you did visit, each time you complained that I was failing to get fat enough to satisfy. I hereby deplore such shabby treatment. Slavery days are well past, and although the world views me as a humble cow, I still have ambition. I am therefore asking you to return to Jamaica for the purpose of releasing me from despicable absentee ownership and correcting unsatisfactory past treatment.

Yours faithfully,

A. Cow

Alfred's first response is both angry and defensive, but this outburst soon releases him into a sort of introspectiveness. He begins to think about the long time he has spent living in the United States. He realizes he might have escaped certain hardships in Jamaica, but he was welcomed by a whole other set of hardships in America. 'He asked the cow who had worked and slaved for umpteen tough years in America; who had suffered hardship, winter, privation, and been driven nearly mad by an ugly nasal twanging in his ears for those said umpteen years; who had endured the scorn heaped on the new immigrant, the evangelical poppy-show of citizenship; who had had to put up with being sneered at by the statue of a battleaxe, armed with a five-ton concrete torch that threatened to bust open the heads of incoming immigrants crawling ashore looking for honest work.' (Winkler 2004: 36)

It is the second letter of the cow however that makes Alfred determined to go home for the supposed purpose of kicking the animal. Despite the sarcastic taunts of his dead wife with whom he has ongoing conversations ('You travelling to Jamaica to kick a letter-writing cow?') Alfred will not be dissuaded. His anger masks a deeper emotion, for even while he packs 'furiously' he begins to feel 'the light-heartedness of one who has just made a difficult decision.' (39) Alfred wants to go home and he had even been remitting money to build a house.

He had been slowly building a squat concrete-block cottage on a hillside of St. Ann's, and eventually, he told himself repeatedly, he would leave America and settle down in it while he still had good years left.' (Winkler 2004: 34)

The cow's letters allow him finally to do this. But his return is bittersweet. When Alfred stumbles into this half-built house he is fully released into the introspectiveness that his previous anger had allowed him to only partially access. He says to his dead wife, 'don't it feel nice to be home, Thelma... even if it took a cow to bring us back?' And then minutes later he carries on, 'You know, Thelma ... de cow was right. Jamaica give us life. We give our strength, our children to America. And what we give to Jamaica? Our old bones.' (Winkler 2004: 41) The morning proves this statement to be prophetic as he is found dead. Alfred has only returned to Jamaica for the purpose of dying. His is a remittance of bones, the receiving country an ossuary.

Conclusion

Unless there is a revival in the form, epistolary fiction will remain largely an eighteenth century phenomenon. It is understandable that when confronted with contemporary examples of the genre scholars are naturally curious to see if these will fit into a particular genealogy that has included or even begins with novels such as *Clarissa* and *Pamela*. However, when Kauffman attempts to do this for the African-American novel, *The Color Purple*, it is a largely unconvincing project. The examples of West Indian epistolary fiction that I have looked at I hope demonstrate that they too would not participate easily or volubly in such a forced conversation with an eighteenth century predecessor. Perhaps at best, *Aunt Jen*, *Gather the Faces*, 'Full Stop' and 'Absentee Ownership of Cows' are comfortable to sit side by side with Richardson's novels, the parallel line of genre linking them and even potentially acknowledging influence, rather than being forced to sit below, the vertical line of genealogy insisting that these narratives have sprung from and are indebted to Richardson.

West Indian epistolary fiction seems to spring from and owes a debt (if there be any) to a particular world and culture; they are transnational narratives and narrate diasporic movements, a keen longing for homeland, and the complicated economic relationship that spring from that. In his 1996 song, 'Things Change' the Jamaican dancehall artist Buju Banton sings about a deportee who is facing hard times now that he is back in Jamaica. The chorus accuses him of not having sent remittances while he was abroad: 'T'ings change, now unoo si seh life hard | Yuh neva used to sen nuh money come a yard' (Things have changed, and now you see that life is hard | You never used to send any money back to Jamaica). The ultimate insult however is that this migrant had turned his back on his own mother and father, sending them neither gifts nor letters:

Mama dung inna di hole

an' 'im nuh buy her a lamp

Not a line, not a letter

nor a fifty cent stamp.

Him father want a shoes

but cannot go to remittance.

When mi hear di bwoy get dip

yu know mi voice strang!

(Buju Banton: 1998)

The Caribbean here is portrayed as a hole, a virtual grave in which the mother is stuck; the son is not kind enough send her the gift a lamp – a remittance of light to shine onto the darkness that surrounds her, but even more tragically, he doesn't send her letters. The father too is in need of shoes but these are not remitted to him. When the boy 'gets dipped' – as in, deported, the singer's voice is strong in support of this comeuppance. Once again, the Caribbean culture of epistolary exchange is linked intrinsically to a culture of remittance. This indeed is the culture that West Indian epistolary fiction tends to speak from, and also speaks to; it is the most relevant conversation critics could stage about the West Indian strain of epistolary fiction. *Aunt Jen*, *Gather the Faces*, 'Absentee Ownership of Cows' and 'Fullstop' are in fact much more closely related to Buju Banton's song, and the world he describes, than with the dubious great-grandmother, *Pamela*.

'I became the 'Manchester Slam Poetry Champion' which doesn't thrill me ': Scribal/Oral tensions in Jamaican Verse Epistles

In one of Linton Kwesi Johnson's best-known poems, 'Sonny's Lettah' (Johnson 2006), an inmate of Brixton Prison writes home to his mother in Jamaica to give an account of how he ended up in Her Majesty's prison. He has been arrested for murder and is serving a life sentence. Sonny tells his mother exactly what happened to him and also to her other son, Jimmy, who Sonny was supposed to look after and help protect as he (Jimmy) navigated his way through the new physical and cultural geography of Britain – geographies which could be brutal to new West Indian immigrants. Sonny's account is a tragic tale of racism and police brutality in an England of the early 1980s on the brink of the Race Riots.

Sonny's letter is more than just an update however; it is Sonny's attempt to make his 'voice' heard in a place where it can be heard – to transmit a sound from the United Kingdom where it had been muted, to the Caribbean where it can take on a new resonance and be properly discerned. In the Pauline epistles that Sonny seems to borrow from²⁹ in his own letter ("Dear Mama, Good day. I hope that when these few lines reach you, they may find you in the best of health; Mama don't get depressed or downhearted; be of good courage") the apostle talks about language that makes little sense to its immediate audience: 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.' (1 Corinthians 13:1 KJV) In the situation described in Sonny's letter, the charity or love is being withheld, not by the speaker, but by the British listener who perhaps at the time only hears in the Caribbean accent, a 'tinkling cymbal'. A voice, one could argue, loses its meaning, its urgency and much of its music when it lands on unsympathetic ears. The reader may imagine that this is largely why Sonny has ended up in prison – because his voice was not properly heard by the police or by the English judicial system. The letter in this context recovers a testimony that had been

²⁹ I will expand on this point in a later chapter – how West Indian letters often seem to draw on religious idioms and motifs.

lost or wasted; though a scribal form, it is used to deliver an oral message. This seeming contradiction is not unique to Sonny's letter. Indeed, a mode of address that exists somewhere between a scribal and an oral register is one of the distinguishing features of 'epistolarity'. Rather than being an oddity, it is the texture of this voice that is able to draw on two modes of discourse that helps to convince us that we are indeed reading a letter from Sonny.

Verse epistles face a particular challenge as they try to imitate the form of the letter. That they are lineated means there is a constant visual reminder that the texts are not what they pretend to be. Unable to look the part, verse epistles (more so than other fictive epistolary genres) must invoke other aspects of the letter in order to suspend the reader's disbelief.

A discursive mode that, while written, has the texture of actual speech is another feature of epistolarity and the focus of this essay. The best examples of verse epistle seem to capture a voice that is caught somewhere between the scribal and the oral, and indeed it is this voice that helps to create the general atmosphere of epistolary exchange. Gurkin describes it like this:

As written dialogue, epistolary discourse is obsessed with its oral model. No sooner is the writer aware of the gap that separates him from his reader than he tries to bridge that gap.... Thus although the epistolary situation involves a wider hiatus between thought and expression than the oral one, we can note a self-conscious tendency among letter novelists [and poets] to close this gap. (Gurkin 1982: 135-136)

A synergy between 'epistolarity' and the practice of Caribbean Literature becomes immediately apparent, for the point hardly needs repeating that Caribbean Literature as a whole is often seen as existing at this particular crossroad where the counter-forces of the scribal and the oral meet, collide and produce interesting results.³⁰ West Indian writers are often asked to, or even feel compelled to, comment on how their written works have incorporated aspects of orality. Such discussions and interventions would include Kamau Brathwaite's seminal essay, *History of the Voice* (1984) and more recently Olive Senior's essay, 'The Poem as Gardening, The Story

³⁰ See for instance the important anthology *VoicePrint* (1989) edited by Stewart Brown, Mervyn Morris and Gordon Rohlehr which announces itself as 'An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry from the Caribbean'

as Su-Su: Finding a Literary Voice' (2005). The Caribbean's preeminent poet, Derek Walcott, sums it up best when he writes:

Today, still in many islands, the West Indian poet is faced with a language he hears but cannot write because there are no symbols for such a language and because the closer he brings hand and word to the precise inflections of the inner language and to the subtlest accuracies of his ear the more chaotic his symbols will appear on the page, the smaller the regional dialect, the more eccentric his representation of it will become, so his function remains the old one of being filter and purifier, never losing the tone and strength of the common speech as he uses the hieroglyphs, symbols or alphabet of the official one. (Walcott 2006: 58)

Here Walcott gives the project of 'orality' a certain nuance and makes it into a literary project. At other times critics and poetry enthusiasts aren't so careful to give it this nuance and the insistence on orality becomes, indeed, too insistent. Dub Poetry for instance which is as rooted in England as it is in Jamaica, has become for many the easy and even lazy idea of what Jamaican and Caribbean poetry ought to sound. The poet in England with Caribbean roots will find that there is a space carved out for him or her, but might also find that space limiting. In all kinds of ways, the poet finds himself experiencing that scribal/oral tension. *The Cold Onion Chronicles* narrate my own experiences – that of an unpublished Caribbean writer making his way in and around the United Kingdom for the first time. One story I tell is of having come to Manchester and within two weeks winning the city's 'slam poetry' competition. The victory, you might imagine, left me conflicted.³¹ While I was happy for the money and the opportunities I was nervous about being boxed into the easy designation of the 'performance poet' – that my work might be seen as more oral than it was literary when it had always been my own feeling that I belonged to a tradition that embraced both. It was this fear that my literary project was being undermined that made me write in a cold onion chronicle that this title of the city's 'slam poet champion' didn't thrill me.

³¹ I have in fact explored this conflict in later essays 'Literature From Where I Stand' appeared in the University of Iowa's online journal *Meridian*, and another essay 'A Smaller Sound, A Lesser Fury: A Eulogy for Dub Poetry' is forthcoming in *Small Axe*.

At least one anthologist, Paula Burnett, has been so conscious of this tension between the scribal and the oral that when putting together *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, she does in fact organize and place the poets in these two separate categories – ‘The Literary Tradition’ and ‘The Oral Tradition’. The Jamaican poet and critic, Mervyn Morris, takes issue with the separation:

Since most of the published West Indian poets have written some “performance poems” (not always in Creole), and many of the mainly oral poets have printed poems they do not need to perform, it strikes me as unhelpful that a major anthology...should organise its contributors into sections entitled ‘The Oral Tradition’ and ‘The Literary Tradition’ – Us and Them.

[...]

[There are] compelling reasons against categorising the poets (whose individual poems, untidily, keep hailing friends and relations in the other class).

(Morris 1999: 50-51)

While Morris is willing to concede that it is ‘convenient, indeed helpful, that Paula Burnett’s scholarly introduction has sections on “The Oral Tradition” and “The Literary Tradition” ’ he maintains that ‘separating the poets into these two classes, separate but equal, the editor has chosen not to keep (and to show) us truly together.’ (Morris 1999: 51)

Nowhere is this marriage between the scribal and the oral more obvious than in the form of the West Indian verse epistle. The ordinary letter is often a discourse hyper-conscious and self-reflexive of its own discursive modes; it not only has things to say but wrestles with the way to say these things. The verse-epistle then could be said to almost ‘ramp up’ this meta-discursivity, providing a platform in which Caribbean writers have contemplated and worked out this tension between the scribal and the oral. Verse epistles naturally highlight a tension that exists within every word of itself as inscribed or itself as intoned; the letter-as-poem is often concerned with both its transcription and its performance, the page and the stage, the scribal and the oral.

‘Sonny’s Lettah’ is convincing as both poem and letter because it lives these two lives – it is both scribal and oral, and it exists in a tradition of Caribbean verse epistle that has negotiated a voice between these two modes. In this chapter I would like to consider how three other Jamaican poets have, to different degrees, negotiated between the (obviously) scribal and the (ironically) oral aspects of the letter. I could say, quite sonically, that this chapter will look at the verse epistles of Miss Lou, Miss Lucy, and Miss Lorna.

Louise Bennett, James Berry and Lorna Goodison have all written verse epistles but each poet’s approach to the genre has been distinct and when considered collectively the three poets can be plotted along a spectrum that finds in Louise Bennett, a balance that seems to privilege orality, and in Lorna Goodison a balance that seems to privilege the scribal.

Louise Bennett (more affectionately called Miss Lou) is generally acknowledged as the Caribbean’s most accomplished dialect poet. The label of ‘poet’ was in fact hard-won by Bennett. Mervyn Morris recounts that she was continually left out of the important Focus anthologies between 1943 and 1960 and although she was included in the *Independence Anthology of Jamaican Literature* in 1962, it was not within the category of ‘poets’; she was instead condemned to being merely ‘miscellaneous’ (Bennett 1982: xv). Bennett’s use of a language that the middle-class thought should not be put into print made them accept her as a kind of entertainment, but less willing to acknowledge her mettle as a poet. Beginning with Morris’s important essay, ‘On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously’ many Caribbean critics have successfully challenged the elitism that did not at first embrace Bennett’s craft as both writer and performer. Still, it would be impossible to not acknowledge that Bennett was a great champion of dialect, orality and Jamaican Speech and so in the present analysis she stands on that side of the spectrum.

James Berry has also declared himself a writer of ‘Caribbean dialect speech’. Perhaps at the time that Berry writes this, his proud insistence of being a dialect poet is too earnest. In a recent collection, *Windrush Songs* (2007), he offers in his introduction a defence of his use of Caribbean creole. ‘It is a language with a folk strength that I trace back to Africa. And it is concrete, full of images, a good language for poetry.’ (Berry 2007: 2) But this defence is arguably unnecessary in 2007. Berry is restaging a fight that Louise Bennett has already won on his behalf, clearing ground

that the forerunner has already unweeded and ploughed. Berry's acceptance as a 'serious poet' is achieved much more easily than Bennett's. In 1981 he won the National Poetry Prize in the UK and indeed, one could argue that his acceptance into such an elite group was not despite his use of dialect, but because of it. Now that Berry approaches the end of his career one can acknowledge that although he stands as an important figure at the point when Caribbean and British poetry met again at an intersection, he never became a particularly important poet. Berry wrote at a time when Britain found it thankfully important to include other voices within its landscape. In this essay I am particularly interested in Berry's 1982 sequence 'Lucy's Letters' in which the persona Lucy, a Jamaican immigrant to the UK, writes back home to her friend, Leela. I see Berry as writing somewhat in the shadow of Bennett, writing dramatic monologues that masquerade as letters. Significantly however, though Berry is drawing on the same tradition as Bennett, he is not writing in the same cultural or indeed literary space, and I contend that in his verse epistles he finds a new balance that moves more towards the scribal.

In quite a literal way, Goodison has also written in the shadow of Louise Bennett. Though now a distinguished Professor at the University of Michigan, Goodison began her career in Jamaica where for ten years she rented a cottage that belonged to Miss Lou. Within the present argument however I want to place Goodison on the opposite end of the spectrum, as a poet who has always been celebrated for her literariness. Amongst the three, and within the tradition of Caribbean verse epistle, I contend that Goodison finds an entirely new balance between the oral and the scribal – one that privileges the scribal.

Miss Lou

At the point of writing this project, Louise Bennett's death is fairly recent – 2006. It is yet to be seen to what extent her legacy survives her death, for it had been the case that those who encountered her on the page would have either had the benefit of watching her on stage or of hearing her on radio. It is hardly hyperbolic to say that Bennett's performances were legendary. Her ability to combine a sharp social critique, one that took great pleasure in exposing any sort of pretension, with a good humour that seemed oddly non-judgmental, endeared her to her audiences to the extent that she became the standard against which subsequent generations of

performers would judge themselves. A basic, if even subjective, understanding of the dynamics of a Miss Lou poem on stage will be helpful in this discussion of her work.

The Independence Festivals are put on each August by the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission (JCDC) and held at the Ranny Williams Amphitheatre in Kingston. They have become a kind of national pageantry – an occasion for patriotic performances of indigenously Jamaican songs, poems and dances. The recital of Miss Lou poems has become a staple at these events. Schoolchildren especially often take to the stage to perform some of Bennett's most popular poems such as 'Uriah Preach', 'South Street Peddler' or 'Earthquake Night'. What is particularly fascinating about these performances is the insistence of the children to address the audience in two distinct voices. The first, an acrolect, is used to greet the audience and also to name the poem – in other words, to frame the presentation. Such an affected salutation could itself be seen as a performance (even if not acknowledged or done consciously by the performer). It is interesting none-the-less that the child (or perhaps the child's teacher) feels that it is necessary to do this – an effort, it would seem, to distinguish the voice of the performer from the voice of the performance, or the voice of education (school) from the voice of entertainment (Miss Lou's poetry). What is obvious is that despite Miss Lou's popularity, the language which she championed is not similarly embraced. It is always surprising, if not slightly schizophrenic, the moment of transition when the child moves from the tight and restricted body language of his or her introduction to the more sprawling body language of the 'performance' and the change in body language is of course attended by a dramatic jump from acrolect to basilect.

I am using these terms 'acrolect' and 'basilect' from Post-Creole Continuum Theory as I believe it offers us the most useful, if not highly technical, way to understand the language situation in Jamaica. Unlike Haiti, Jamaica's close neighbour, in which the language of the folk is so vastly different from the language of the elite as to denote an entirely separate language (Kweyol as opposed to French), in Jamaica language exists along a continuum. It is possible to shift in subtle degrees from a creole register that might seem very different from English all the way to something that is extremely close if not the same as English. In an effort to resist value-laden terms such as 'dialect', 'bad English' or 'corrupted English', William Stewart introduced the terms basilect and acrolect to describe the two most extreme points along a Post-Creole Continuum – the basilect representing the least prestigious

form of the language, the acrolect representing the most prestigious form, something close to the Queen's English. The term mesolect was latterly coined to describe language in the middle of the spectrum. The basilect then is considered a mostly spoken language while the acrolect can more easily transition itself from the spoken word into the written one.

Louise Bennett's poetry very firmly and consciously leans towards and privileges the basilect. The title of her most important collection of poems, *Jamaica Labrish*, is instructive here. *Allsop's Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* guesses at the etymology of this distinctly Jamaican word, Labrish. 'Labber-mouth' it tells us, is slang for someone who talks too much and indiscreetly, and this most likely comes from 'blabber-mouth'. From 'labber' then comes the word 'labrish' – both a noun and a verb, 'idle chatter' or 'wicked gossip' and the act of engaging in such discourse. This then is what Bennett announces her poems to be – labrish, and her poems quite naturally are often performed as dramatic monologues. Already some of the tensions I want to explore can be seen, because to perform a poem as a dramatic monologue means that on a certain level there is the fiction that no script is involved, that the poem does not exist as the written word. This problem is heightened when we consider Bennett's verse epistles for the poem itself keeps pointing to its impossible transcription. To recite one of Louise Bennett's dialect verse epistles ought to present a strange problematic. Nadia Nurhussein looks at a very similar situation when considering the dialect verse epistles of the African-American poet Paul Dunbar.

The reading experience Dunbar directs his readers to have, then, is a conflicted one: readers cannot recite the epistolary dialect poem as a dramatic monologue because, simply put, no one can be speaking. Letters, as private communication, are usually written and read silently, in the absence of the addressee and writer respectively. Dunbar's choice of the letter as a model for these poems highlights a tension between a traditional dialect poetry that is performatory and an emerging dialect poetry of silent literacy. His epistolary dialect poem forces its readers to experience an admittedly inauthentic performance, to sense the resistance between the inclination to read dialect aloud and the inclination to read letters silently. In other words, Dunbar effectively makes recitation of these pieces problematic. (Nurhussein 2007: 234)

Performances of Miss Lou's verse-epistles seem strangely oblivious to this problematic however and so poems such as 'Yu Nephew Sue' or 'Love Letter' are not treated any differently from her other dramatic monologues; the performer does not usually (if ever) try to suggest the artifice of the letter or the act of letter writing. What is obvious is that although the poem itself incorporates many of the conventions of a letter – the salutation, the acknowledgment of distance and pronouncements of missing and longing, etc – the voice that emerges is a distinctly oral one. I should hasten to clarify that the improbability to which I am drawing our attention, that a basilect speaker should write a letter also in basilect, is not to suggest that he would necessarily be illiterate, but rather that he would have, of course, learnt to write in the acrolect. While it is probable that in the writing of English the basilect speaker might, through various mistakes, unwittingly betray his own greater comfort in another register, what Miss Lou gifts to her letter writers is a rather fluent and eloquent use of the basilect. This is where the improbability lies. The decision to write in a discredited language which unfortunately has not enjoyed its own history of transcription, and with such facility and flair with the language, would be a decidedly thoughtful and political act rather than a casual one as in the casual/domestic situations from which Miss Lou's verse epistles ostensibly arise. Nurhussein's reading of this is generous, suggesting that the poet, trying to represent dialect on the page, cleverly introduces the letter writer to invent a convention of transcription.

In Dunbar's case, the incompatibility of using a literate form to express speech in a dialect letter invokes the parallel larger-scale incompatibility of using a literate form to express speech in dialect poetry generally. The letter-writer stands in for the poet and makes decisions that mirror the dialect poet's. What Dunbar is doing, in essence, is making the speakers of his epistolary dialect poems into dialect poets themselves. (Nurhussein 2007: 234)

Of course Nurhussein seems to argue that Dunbar was very conscious of the contradictions in a dialect verse epistle and worked to exploit these. I am not as convinced that the same is true for Louise Bennett. I believe in the case of Miss Lou the frame of the letter was always a thin but useful artifice from which an oral, rather than a scribal, voice could speak. Nothing, after all, is taken away from the quality of Miss Lou's poetry if we acknowledge that these are not really letters at all, but

‘occasions for speaking’. And what is more, Bennett is in excellent company. Michael Cunningham has noted about Ovid’s *Heroides*, one of the earliest verse epistles, that ‘[c]onsidered as a letter the form of the poem is unsatisfactory; but the very elements which make it unsatisfactory as a letter would make it more appropriate for stage presentation and more effective on stage.’ (Cunningham 1949: 102-103) Bennett was undoubtedly aware that she was in fact writing scripts for performances – and not just her own. By the 1950s the culture of schoolchildren reading her poems had already been firmly established. Some of her verse epistles thus include gestures. The poems themselves acknowledge their subsequent performances. In ‘Writing Home’ for instance the letter writer says, “Him jus hole-up him han **like dis** an genkly halla Peace” (Bennett 2005: 154) (He just held up his hand **like this**, and gently called out Peace.) (emphasis mine). This inclusion of a virtual stage direction is a very telling way in which the poem had a consciousness of its place on the stage.

Rex Nettleford points out in his useful introduction to *Jamaica Labrish* that even when her poems appeared in print, they were still performance scripts. He writes, ‘it must not be forgotten that Bennett wrote many of her poems for performance and even those published weekly in the Sunday Gleaner throughout the forties were read in tenement yards all over the country – probably by the one literate person in each yard.’ (Bennett 2005:11-12)

Nettleford in fact also gives us an important insight into the kind of epistolary culture which Bennett might have been trying to represent. While we might remain suspicious of her letter writers’ eloquent and considered creole, we perhaps should be more forgiving about the concept of the letter being sent as a script to be performed. In other words, the letter as a genre that is read silently imposes a biased cultural understanding onto it. Letters, in fact, were often sent to families where some of the intended recipients could not themselves read or write. Letters then had to be read, or I would argue, performed, by a literate member of the household, often a school-child, to the other members. The reception and performance of the letter or any written material then became a kind of domestic theatre. Nettleford makes references to this communal act of reading:

[I]t was and still is the custom for one person to read the newspaper aloud to small groups of friends gathered in a country yard or by a village grocery or in a barber shop. This custom will disappear with increasing literacy but it has

been a factor in how people learn about goings on in their society. (Bennett 2005 (1966): 5)

In *The Culture of Epistolarity* Gary Schneider invites us to think more expansively of the letter – that is, not only of the material document but also the culture that surrounded its composition, its transmission and its reception. Looking at the early modern period, Schneider points out that letters had not yet slipped into the dyadic mode they have become more commonly known for – private communications between a single sender and a single recipient. Instead, letters at the time were often written communally and also read communally. The sender of a letter would, in addition, often give the bearer further instructions, an oral message to go alongside the written message. Schneider describing early modern England and Nettleford describing rural Jamaican life of the early twentieth century are in fact both describing similar communities, both making the transition from oral societies to cultures of the written word.

Bennett herself makes reference to the custom Nettleford described – the communal reading of a newspaper article, in her poem ‘Big Tings’.

Miss Mum son dah read newspapa
Him can read nice yuh see!
Mi kotch me aise a one li-hole
An hear de whole story.
(Bennett 2005 (1966): 201)

[Miss Mum’s son was reading the newspaper,
And he read it so nicely!
I put my ears at a little hole
And heard the whole story]

The persona in Bennett’s poem ‘Overflow’ is also audience to the performance of a newspaper article. In this narrative, the persona is surprised that the National Water Commission (which in the 1940s suffered from chronic water shortage in its dams) was actually giving advice to Jamaicans to water their gardens.

At the time this advice seemed all the more ridiculous as it was in the middle of a rainy season. It is the persona's friend, Dinah, who reads the article to her.

Gal yu sure yu read de sinting right
Read more, wha dat! Aho!
So dem gi we dat advize because
De dam dah-overflow
(Bennett 2005 (1966): 51)

(Girl, are you sure you've read it right?
Read more. What's that? Aho!
So they've given that advice because
The dam has overflown)

As seen, the persona here doesn't actually read the article; rather, it is read to her. She receives it via oral transmission. The interaction thus exists in a place between the oral and the scribal. What is interesting in this fictional situation is that the persona is so angered by the article that she feels the need to respond to it. Thus, Dinah becomes not only performer of the article but transcriber of her friend's response to it.

Dinah, teck yu pen in han, an
Write newspaper, meck dem know!
Tell dem sey I sey fe sey is not
De dam one overflow!
(Bennett 2005: 51)

(Dinah, take your pen in hand, and
Write the papers, let them know;
Tell them that I said to say it's not
The dam alone that's overflown.)

It is not unreasonable to suppose that the persona of 'Overflow' is unable to read or write as both these actions are done by her friend; she receives the article

orally and also responds to it orally. It is Dinah who has the job of capturing the narrator's voice within the scribal form of a letter. The letter is seen as an appropriate vehicle in which to 'say' things. In fact, in the dialect version of the poem we get the delightful triple emphasis of that particular verb 'to say' in the line 'tell dem sey I sey fe sey...'. Indeed, this is what the letter is trying to do – to deliver an oral message.

Similar to Linton Kwesi Johnson's 'Sonny's Lettah', in the poem 'Yu Nephew Sue', Sue writes to her Aunt after her voice has not been properly heard by the relevant authorities. Even the title of the poem shows Sue's discomfort with written discourse as she has unwittingly regendered herself as 'nephew' rather than 'niece'. The very humorous poem chronicles Sue's attempts to get the authorities to compensate Aunt Tama for a coconut tree she had lost during a hurricane.

Aunt Tama dear, me sad fe hear
How storm wreck Jackass Tung
But wus of all yu one deggeh
Coaknat tree tumble dung

Las' week dem had meeting fe all
De coaknat growers wat
Lose coaknat tree eena de storm
So me was eena dat

Bans o big-shot money-man was deh
Some o dem get out cross
An start fe talk bout omuch hundred
Tousen tree dem loss.
(Bennett 2005: 33)

(Aunt Tama, dear, I was sad to hear
How the storm wrecked Jackass Town
And worst of all, your only
Coconut tree tumbled down

Last week there was a meeting for

All the coconut growers that
Lost trees inside the hurricane –
So I was into that!

Lots of big-shot money men were there
And many of them were cross
When they talked about how many
Hundred thousand trees they lost.)

It is here that Sue realizes just how much out of her depth she is, and the oral message which she had intended to bring to the committee seems suddenly out of place.

Me did meck up me mine Aunt Tama
Fe get up an talk free
Fe touch dem pon dem consciance
Mek dem gi yu back yu tree

But wen me hear de man dem mout
Dah gwaan like districk bell,
Me heng me head, fole up me wing
And draw eena me shell
(Bennett 2005: 33)

(I had made up my mind, Aunt Tama
To get up and talk free
To touch them on their conscience
And let them give you back your tree

But when I heard those big-men's mouth
Ringing like district bells
I hung my head, folded my wings
And drew into my shell)

Though partly an admission of failure on her part, we could also view this letter as an attempt to re-stage the stout oral defence she had been meaning to make. The letter thus facilitates and recovers a voice that had been previously ‘turned down’ if not completely muted. In the meeting, when the chairman had pointed at Sue she doesn’t give the bold defence she had planned.

De chairman pint pon me and seh
“How much yuh lose Miss Sue?”
Me did feel shame fi seh “one”, so
Me softly whispa “two”.

Him frowns and seh “two hundred, or
Two tousen tree, Miss Sue?”
Hear me, “percent is hundred
But per tree is so-so two.”
(Bennett 2005: 33-34)

(The chair pointed to me and said
“How much you lose Miss Sue?”
I felt ashamed to say just one,
So I softly whispered, “two”.

He frowned and said, “Two hundred, or
Two thousand trees, Miss Sue?”
I said, “percent is hundred,
But per tree it’s only two.”)

In poems such as ‘Dear Departed Federation’ and ‘Deares Chief’, Bennett uses the form of the letter to bring the voice of the ‘unlettered’ citizen into conversation with political institutions and people. In the contemporary Jamaican situation this is now perhaps most easily done via the multitude of ever popular call-in radio programmes during the day in which Jamaicans call in different hosts to vent, to muse on or to regale the host about the everyday situations and problems they face. However, in the mid twentieth century period in which Bennett writes a great deal of

her poetry, the voice of the common man is not so easily ‘aired’ and so it is through the form of the letter that she includes these voices within a national discourse.

I have noted before that the letter is always a product of distance, but it should be pointed out that in the case of Miss Lou’s verse epistles, the distance and separation that she is chronicling tends not to be the kind produced by transnational migrations, but rather rural to urban migrations within the national space. Also she chronicles the distance that exists between the common people and the larger institutions like government and the Water Commission that in fact affect their daily lives. Within these letters Miss Lou gives her characters the **permission** and means to do what Sue had always wanted to do but was afraid to – to get up and talk free; within the supposedly inaudible written form, Miss Lou has given her characters the ability to orate.

James Berry

Lucy’s Letters are a sequence of ten poems published in James Berry’s 1982 collection *Lucy’s Letters & Loving*³². Lucy (much like her creator Berry) has migrated to England and is now engaged in correspondence with a long-lost friend, Leela, who still lives in Jamaica. In the first correspondence she tells her friend, ‘Things harness me here | I long for we labrish bad.’ Again we get that word ‘labrish’. Though she would prefer to actually speak to Leela, the letter must suffice. Isabel Carrera Suarez (2007) has suggested that the invocation of this word makes it consciously intertextual with Miss Lou’s poetry, but such a link seems specious to me, even if an understandable reading from a critic not completely familiar with Jamaican culture and for whom the word would not seem as commonplace as it actually is.³³ What we do know however by its use is that it is not a polite conversation Lucy is wishing to have with Leela, but something rather more expressive, performative and distinctly Jamaican. Here again we come to an epistolary discourse that is caught between two impulses – the scribal and the oral.

If Miss Lou’s verse epistles, though delightful, are not always completely convincing as scribal rather than oral exchanges, James Berry’s sequence, *Lucy’s*

³² Berry continued to write letters from Lucy and these were published as single poems in subsequent collections.

³³ ‘Labrish’ is one of the few word that Berry chooses to gloss in the entire sequence which may indeed make it seem as if the word might not be so commonplace after all. But he also glosses it in a recording of the poem where he explains “There is a word here, Labrish, which became a very popular word in my time.” (Berry, 2006)

Letters, are perhaps more so. For when Miss Lou does indeed remind us that her exchanges are carefully scribed, what the reader becomes aware of is the form of the 'verse' rather than the form of the 'epistle'. Miss Lou employs the structure of the ballad – a rhyme scheme (usually ABCB) and iambic tetrameters followed by iambic trimeters. James Berry on the other hand writes *Lucy's Letters* in free-verse which means that both rhythmically and visually these poems move closer to the prose form they draw inspiration from. This is not to suggest that Berry doesn't try to give these letters an oral texture. He explains his project in a short introduction, 'I try to let Lucy be herself. I try to let her be as I sense her, **hear her** and know her. I try not to impose my own ideals and points of view on her.' (Berry 1982: 9) Berry tries to situate these letters perfectly between the scribal and the oral, but unfortunately he doesn't quite succeed at either.

The most obvious way in which *Lucy's Letters* try to accommodate orality is in its orthography. Like Bennett, Berry writes his letters in dialect which means the reader must once again wrestle with the implausibility of such an artifice. The question must arise: would the dialect speaker actually compose letters in dialect? Apostrophes are a major feature of Lucy's transcription, and faced with them the reader is forced to think of dialect as scribed rather than spoken. The apostrophes are always signalling 'missing' letters: Lan' rather than Land, mount'n rather than mountain, not'n' instead of nothing. The g is lost from most participles and replaced also with an apostrophe. This scribal system is of course trying to suggest the exact nuances of Lucy's accent.

But if the persona-writer (Lucy) were truly conscious of missing letters, would she not have simply written them in? Is it then the persona-writer, rather than the actual writer (Berry), who is consciously trying to scribe an oral voice, and why? As George Orwell rightly insisted in a 1944 essay, 'spoken English and written English are two different things. This variation exists in all languages, but is probably greater in English than in most.' (Orwell 1968) Especially curious in Berry's sequence is a moment when Lucy is ostensibly quoting directly from a British newspaper. The poem prepares us to hear another voice – it uses a colon and then an open-quotation mark to signal the beginning of a voice that is not Lucy's. Berry, however, has become so besotted by that voice that he ends up transcribing the British newspaper article into its rhythms and patterns. Thus an article written by a male British

journalists is bizarrely ‘re-accented’ and translated into the voice of a rural, Jamaican woman.

Listen one male chauvinist-pig
writer, in newspaper other
day: ‘It psychological
how women wear more trousers
now, an’ show real size
of they bum; it make them
feel secure, as equal competitor
pushin’ theyself more at the top.’
(Berry 1982: 55)

Even Gary Schneider while pointing to a larger and more complicated culture of epistolarity – one that incorporates both scribal and oral modes – warns us against viewing the physical letter as oral transmission or even a reliable representation of it:

Essentially then, although some letters might capture early modern speech patterns, it is both safer and wiser to consider letter writing not as an oral performance or as a direct mirror of speech, but as a self-conscious premeditated mode of communication amenable to drafts, to second and third thoughts, and to understand that communication by letter, based as the letter is on distance and physical absence, was not the same as immediate face-to-face conversation.(Schneider 2005: 32)

Berry doesn’t seem to grasp this and in his attempt to let ‘Lucy be as [he] hears her’ he doesn’t seem to stop to think about how she might have represented herself on paper and therefore the subtle differences in how he might have read her. The result is a flawed artifice.

Berry isn’t only earnest in his attempt to capture Lucy’s sound, but her whole essence. It is apparent the he tries not to impose his male subjectivity onto her. Noble as the attempt is, it isn’t always successful. Berry offers us a catalogue of Lucy’s many opinions which are all distinctly (if not stereotypically) female and Caribbean.

Lucy emerges not so much as a character but as an imagined Other. In the first poem for instance we know that she wishes desperately to have the space to gossip; we know that she misses the tropical Jamaican mornings and the pageant of peasants who would make their way through the village selling exotic fruits or freshly caught fish; we know that she misses the raucous way in which Caribbean people supposedly laugh in the Caribbean, but in the end she tell us she is willing to give it all up because in England she is earning good money, has gone back to school, and has found out that health services are free. What we lack in this portrait are the details. We never learn what subject it is Lucy is in fact studying; we have no idea why she might have been to the doctor; we are not told what exactly it is she has decided to spend her money on in England which she could not have afforded back in Jamaica. Such details would have gone some way in helping the reader to believe in Lucy. Lucy, much like the archaeological find of the same name, becomes an archetypal woman; she is made to stand in for female Caribbean subjectivity as imagined by a man. Hers is a catalogue of issues and talking points which come across as a bit clumsy and unfocused. Perhaps, one could argue, the haphazard nature of this kind of list does in fact mirror the rambling narrative of typical epistolary correspondence, but taken as a whole it seems in his very attempt to invent a believable character Berry only succeeds in ticking boxes.

Another way in which Berry tries to include oral elements in Lucy's discourse is through the inclusion of proverbs. In fact almost all the letters (the only exception being the very first) end with proverbs. Berry explains, 'Lucy surprised me with a strong demand to have the next letter ending with a Jamaican folk proverb. Since then Lucy's Letters have ended with a proverb.' (Berry 1982: 3) Not all of the proverbs are recognisably (or indigenously) Jamaican as would naturally be the case with any postcolonial nation with several language and cultural influences, but perhaps all would be recognized by a Jamaican of Berry's generation³⁴. The proverbs he uses are: 'bird sing sweet for its nest'; 'you get the person out of the country but you can't get the country out of the person'; 'length of time gets length of rope buried'; 'a clever man who drives 'way hunger jus' workin' up his jaws'; 'walk good keeps good spirit'; 'when fire an' water keep good company, everybody can live'; 'when you hear

³⁴ Disclaimer aside, it is still worth noting that when Louise Bennett uses proverbs they are almost always indigenously Jamaican.

family row, play deaf; but when you see family food, nyam it'; 'what man don't know is good to know'; and 'one han' washes the other'.

The use of these proverbs again echoes the tradition of Miss Lou, and the logic of including them is perhaps the same as what Carolyn Cooper articulates in her discussion of Miss Lou's own usage:

Thematically, the proverb provides conclusive evidence of the socially recognized truth of the argument that a particular Bennett persona articulates; structurally, the metaphorical proverb employs graphic imagery derived from everyday Jamaican life as the vehicle for social commentary. In both subject and structure the proverb affirms Bennett's umbilical connection to that matrix of oral Jamaican folklore. (Cooper 1996: 37)

Berry is indeed trying to illustrate Lucy's 'umbilical connection' to a land and culture she has left behind. Like Linton Kwesi Johnson's 'Sonny', Lucy is dispatching her voice to a place where it can be heard and made sense of. As Cooper goes on to argue, 'the essence of a proverb is its immediacy of access to members of the community in which it has currency.' Though Lucy prefaces most of these proverbs with an injunction to Leela to 'remember' it is probably her own self that she is reminding. And this perhaps is also part of Berry's project for which the form of the letter is absolutely appropriate – and that is, to document a kind of nostalgia that immigrants might feel towards their former homes, and to show how these subjects can both reach out to that former home while simultaneously trying to justify their places in the new landscapes in which they have found themselves. While Lucy points out that she is earning good money in England, and feels more liberated as a woman, the use of these proverbs are evidence of her deep longing for Jamaica. The proverbs at once affirm both Lucy's separation from, and her connection to Jamaica. Of course, the fact that the endings of these poems have been predetermined means that they don't always feel inevitable. The critical reader will understand and even sympathise at Berry's attempt to create a particular form, and to accommodate aspects of orality within the letter, but very often the form is ill-fitted.

It is perhaps appropriate to think of *Lucy's Letters* as a kind of sepia-toned poetry. Together the proverbs offer up a soft and a gentle image of Jamaica, as they work alongside and compliment Berry's imagery of roosters crowing at day break, of

Caribbean sunsets, and of goats and pigs and kindly old women. These idyllic images of Jamaica become, not only a part of Lucy's longing, but I would argue the crucial content of Berry's address to what he knows is a primarily white British readership. If on one hand he uses the oral form of the proverbs, on the other hand we could say Berry draws on the scribal form of the brochure.

In a sense, this genre crossover, from letter to brochure is quite common, though the direction of the address is usually quite different. In diasporic communities letters have had a huge social impact. When letters are sent back to families, they often replicate the stories of America, Britain or Canada being proverbial lands of 'milk and honey', places of an easily attained prosperity. This in turn encourages family members to move to these promised-lands. In Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), for instance, we see this situation clearly. The growing population of immigrants pouring into Britain are coming largely because they had received letters that minimized the experiences of racism while highlighting (disproportionately) the stories of success. Again, in Joan Cambridge's novel, *Clarice Cumberbatch Want To Go Home* (1987), Clarice gets a letter and included in it is a picture that has perhaps become an iconic kind of post-card of the immigrant; the picture is of her friend posed before a large and expensive car. The point of posing before the car is, of course, to suggest ownership of it, and therefore to further suggest that life in the Diaspora is much more prosperous than life back in the Caribbean.

Lucy's Letters however, don't fit neatly into this kind of discourse, for though they chronicle the differences between Jamaica and England, both countries end up being equally idealized and narrated in 'brochure-speak'. Both countries are being 'sold'. It seems clear that James Berry is conscious not only of Leela, the fictional reader of the letter, but also of the actual readership of his poetry which would be predominantly non-Jamaican, and thus he perhaps slips into a kind of auto-exoticism. The letter though is again caught in an interesting place between the scribal and the oral, the written culture of Britain and the oral culture of Jamaica. Lucy would like to labrish with Leela, but perhaps Berry would like to discourse with Britain. Lucy then, much like Miss Lou's 'Nephew Sue', cannot just get up and 'talk free' as she would like. Aware of an English readership eavesdropping on the conversation, Berry is careful not to appear to be a traitor to the virtues of Jamaica, but ends up painting a strangely upbeat picture of the island.

In the letter-poem 'Holiday Reflections', Lucy has just returned from a trip back to the island. She tells Leela, 'O I glad to see hard times/ ease off some faces a little'. Even the poverty then is doctored in this epistle and made to seem less than the British tourist might imagine it. Populated with mangos, soursop and pawpaw, the poem paints a literally brilliant picture – 'I glad how the sun still ripen/ evenin', so strong in colour'. What she confesses sadness about are hardly things that would make tourists worry – the capitalistic expansion and the impact of modernity on the island. Lucy doesn't only reflect on her holidays but encourages the British reader to follow her example.

Perhaps if Berry is proof of anything it is that ambition doesn't always reap dividends. He is almost certainly more ambitious with his verse-epistles than Bennett was with hers. He understands that letters are naturally tensed between the scribal and the oral, while Bennett shamelessly privileges their orality as if the letter were a script. In the end however, Bennett is a more talented poet and despite the implausibility of her poems, they seem more successful than Berry's. James Berry nobly tries to accommodate two modes, but it is his inability to balance the two convincingly that makes Miss Lucy's letters less successful than Miss Lou's.

Lorna Goodison

Lorna Goodison's poetry tends to borrow from, and mimic other scribal forms. Her poems have variously declared themselves to be letters, wills, excerpts torn out of books, songs, hymns, lullabies, benedictions etc. Sometimes these forms can be viewed as epistolary as in the case of 'Recommendation for Amber'. As the title suggests, this poem borrows from a very specific kind of letter; it addresses Amber's potential employers. It begins, 'With her, you would have a guide | to the small Nubians in the garden.' and continues to build a case as to why Amber would be an ideal employee.

Unlike Bennett who I have argued only uses the form of the letter as a thin artifice for her orality, or Berry who tries unsuccessfully to balance Lucy's Letter between the scribal and the oral, Goodison is much more convincing in the scribal form she is affecting. This is not to say that her poems written as letters do not accommodate orality. They in fact do, but Goodison doesn't strain to make this happen. Perhaps the fact that letters often do this naturally frees Goodison to commit

to the scribal artifice and allow orality to creep in, as it does even in the supposedly formal ‘Recommendation for Amber’.

No Matter how she tries she loses
things (she is not orderly).
But she will summon them back again
by invoking their names over and over.

So if you pass outside her window
and hear her repeating insistently
“keys” or “comb”, just know
that this is her strange ceremony
(Goodison 1992: 132)

Here, I mean to highlight not only the inclusion of Amber’s voice, but the parenthetical remark ‘(she is not orderly)’. Words in parentheses often take on another tone – a conspiratorial whisper (Lennard 1991). This kind of punctuation then not only alerts us to a shift in voice, but makes us conscious of the very presence of voice.

The poem ‘My Will’ is another that we could argue is epistolary in nature. While by title it purports to be a generic final will and testament, a document of bequeathing, it becomes more specifically an address to the poet-persona’s son.

May you like me earn good
friends
but just to be sure,
love books.
When bindings fall apart
they can be fixed
you will find
that is not always so
with friendships.
(Goodison 1992: 46)

Taking my cue from Janet Altman Gurkin, I do not mean to contend that all poetry with specific addressees should be regarded as epistolary – that would include a rather larger number. But Goodison’s poetry often incorporates several aspects of epistolarity at once – the fact of a ‘you’ being addressed; the poem being conscious of itself as scribed and then posted to a receiver; the multiple present tenses. Some of Goodison’s poems which we can profitably look at as examples of verse epistles do not even advertise themselves as such. Consider for instance, the poem ‘Farewell Our Trilogy’. There is neither in the title nor in the actual poem any obvious reference to letter writing. Yet, structurally and thematically it is almost certainly a letter. The poem begins with a standard address, ‘No, love, there are no new poems.’ It is not only the endearing ‘Love’ that makes the address feel epistolary in nature, but in fact the word ‘No’. This we read as the continuation of a conversation; it responds to a previous (though absent missive) and thus invokes a larger epistolary world.

Because of the imposed distance between the persona-writer and her ‘love’, she reports on what has happened in the intervening time. The point of the letter, it seems, is to report the death of their cat.

...the only news
is that sometime on Sunday
a boy from the village above here
said he saw Sheba-cat in the dry river bed
her throat stained, her long legs stiffened
in death...

(Goodison 1992: 51)

What may be of particular interest is the seemingly simple line that comes soon after: ‘And I’m writing this finally to say...’ It is here, I would like to suggest, that we find one of the most comfortable accommodations of both the scribal and the oral. Though an admittedly common pronouncement in letters, it is essentially an acknowledgment of two conflicting impulses within the genre – the scribal discourse is really trying to orate, to physically **say** something.

Goodison’s most accomplished epistolary poem however is ‘To Mr William Wordsworth, Distributor of Stamps for Westmoreland’. The poem is a response to multiple addressees; it tries to negotiate various kinds of distances, both physical and

metaphysical, and it also wrestles with the impulses to both 'write' and 'to say'. On the one hand, Goodison is addressing a poetic role-model, someone who has had an impact on her scribal practice. On the other, she is chronicling the ways in which teacher and pupil have in fact been separated by their practices. Like all letters, this verse-epistle acknowledges a distance (in fact, many distances) between the sender and the recipient. Not only is one dead and one alive, but the Westmoreland of rural Jamaica that Goodison is more familiar with is worlds apart from the Westmoreland in which Wordsworth was appointed Distributor of Stamps.

The host of golden flowers at my feet
Were common buttercups not daffodils
They danced and swayed so in the breeze
Though overseer thorns were planted among them
(Goodison 2000: 104)

There might be a similarity in the landscape, but Goodison highlights the 'overseer thorns' – a reminder of the thorny relationship Jamaica once had with her colonizers in which both the white administration of the island and its enslaved black population had to be 'overseen'. With just the one word 'overseer' Goodison has invoked the terrible history of plantation life and colonialism, and the numerous effects that that has had on the production of West Indian poetry, its reception and its validation. Wordsworth, the proverbial dead, white, male from England is worlds apart from Goodison, a living, black woman from Jamaica. But it is not only death and landscape that separates the two poets, but a history of thorns.

The poem of course is also being intertextual. It invokes one of Wordsworth's most famous poems:

I wander'd lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
(Wordsworth 1977: 619)

In this intertextuality, Goodison's poem is engaged in an indisputably scribal discourse. While Goodison is in conversation with Wordsworth, almost independent of their authors, the poems begin to talk to each other. The list of addressees begins to multiply, and it isn't long before Goodison complicates this even more by invoking another addressee and indeed, another one of her poetic role-models.

Sir, did you pass my great-grandmother?
Like you she lived in Westmoreland,
she rode upon a great gray mule,
she could not read or write, she did not buy stamps.

But great-grandmother was a poet
who wrote her lyrical ballads on air
scripted them with her tongue
then summoned them to return to her book of memory

She never did arrange them
the exact same way twice
but they were her powerful overflow
recollected in tranquillity, sir, what she chanted was poetry.
(Goodison 2000: 104)

The differences between William Wordsworth and Goodison's great-grandmother 'Miss Leana' are stark. While they are both from villages called Westmoreland, these villages are located in different countries. Wordsworth is involved in a scribal art, but Miss Leana's art is oral; she writes her ballads on an invisible medium, on air rather than on paper. Though Miss Leana's art does not have the fixity of Wordsworth's poetry, Goodison insists on making them equal. In this letter, she brings the oral and the scribal into a comfortable conversation. Of course Wordsworth himself would have welcomed this having been a champion of common speech. In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* we find his famous manifesto that privileges common speech. 'The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or

describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men.’ (Wordsworth 1992: 56) Of course Goodison might point out that the ‘language really used by [white] men’ of 19th Century England is not the language really used by black women of 20th Century Jamaica. The complicated history of thorns that separates them means that one language has been canonized (has indeed moved from orality to the concreteness of inscription) while the other remains uncaptured, unpublished and uncelebrated.

The purpose of the letter soon becomes apparent and it is beautifully imagined. Goodison wants a message to be delivered to her great-grandmother but of course this is not possible as Miss Leana cannot read or write. Her letter is sent via William Wordsworth then, who hopefully will see Miss Leana in the metaphysical afterlife in which they both now ‘live’. Remembering that many Jamaicans historically had to receive their letters via oral transmission, Wordsworth is being called on to read out a scribed message to Miss Leana. He has been appointed by Goodison to act as both post-man and performer.

The message is important as well, for Goodison wants Miss Leana to know that her own poetry, previously ephemeral because of its orality, has finally been written down.

Mr Wordsworth, I am not buying any stamp
to post a letter to my great-grandmother.
She is a denizen of the spirit world like you
so I am asking you when you pass her there, to tell her

that I collected up all her songs and poems
from where they fell on banana trash.
The binding ones of the star apple tree,
the ones hidden like pound notes under her coir mattress.

I rescued them, rat-cut Blue Mountain coffee,
the ratoon and dunder ones, refuse and trash
of the sugarcane, the ones they call broken
and indecent, patois, bungo, words for bondage and shame.

And I’ve written them down for her,

summoned them to stand, black-face type
against a light background, Mr Wordsworth.
Please tell Miss Leana her poems are now written down.
(Goodison 2000: 105)

Unlike Bennett or Berry, Goodison manages to write a form of verse-epistle that has an uncompromising allegiance to both poetic and epistolary practice. She doesn't seem to try unduly hard to include either oral or scribal aspects to her letters, understanding perhaps that by remaining true to the letter it will naturally accommodate both voices.

Conclusion

The debate and contestation about how and to what extent are certain Caribbean poets influenced by and trying to extend an oral tradition can be a vexing and prolonged one without any clear conclusions. Considering the examples of verse-epistles within this chapter, I find myself sympathetic to Mervyn Morris's discomfort in viewing orality as something separate from a distinctly literary project. The poems we have looked at are, at their best, perfectly tensed between the scribal and the oral, but one would have to conclude that these are primarily literary projects.

Because of the basilectal register she chooses to write in, Miss Lou's verse epistles are the ones that seem most rooted in an oral tradition. Her poems privilege the voices of the traditionally dis-privileged, and her verse epistles literally 'letter' the traditionally unlettered and illiterate. But perhaps Nurhussein is right to suggest that what the implausible artifice of the dialect letter does is to offer an example of how an oral language can be transcribed. Bennett's poems effectively establish an orthographical convention for the Jamaican language. It is quite clearly a literary project. To lock her in the ghetto of the 'oral' would be a great disservice that would only acknowledge her mastery of the stage and not the page. Her verse epistles are not just political articulations of language rights issues however; they work as poems by themselves. Despite their unconvincing conceits, they are humorous, well-realized and they deploy effective use of various meters and rhyme schemes. On the other end of the spectrum we have Lorna Goodison who facilitates an extraordinary conversation between her black great grandmother and the white English canonical poet.

Though the Caribbean poet has often been the one to point out his or her own commitment to an ‘oral tradition’, these examples of verse epistle point to a more nuanced project – to writers who invent and participate in a distinctly literary tradition that is simply conscious of its oral model, much like Gurkin has always described the letter.

'PrayformeasIprayformyselfinJesusNameAmen': Church Testimony as discourse in a Jamaican diasporic Public Sphere

My penultimate chapter is the only one that does not explicitly highlight an aspect of epistolography or a specific epistolary genre in its title; I would argue however that an epistolary mechanism is implicit in the idea of a 'Public Sphere'. A culture of letter-writing underpinned Jürgen Habermas's original theory of the space and how it developed and operated. In my introductory chapter I outlined some of Habermas's idea of the eighteenth century European public sphere – that it was an open, discursive space which allowed for the mutual or shared concerns of private citizens to be articulated and forwarded to a sphere of Authority (Habermas 1962; Mendieta, 2011). It was, then, a mediating space between a collection of selves (a public, as it were) and the State.³⁵

What I did not point out in my introductory chapter was that Habermas argued that some of this articulation was epistolary in nature, what he calls 'the world of letters' including political journalism and commentary and also open letters:

The process in which the state-governed public sphere was appropriated by the public of private people making use of their reason and was established as a sphere of criticism of public authority was one of functionally converting the public sphere in the world of letters already equipped with institutions of the public and with forums for discussion.

(Habermas 1989: 51)

In other words public discussions had to take place in the already established institution of the press. Habermas goes on to argue that in the early part of the eighteenth century, 'the press was for the first time established as a genuinely critical

³⁵ It is this primacy of 'the State' within Public Sphere theory that not only problematizes, but makes interesting and provocative recent ideas of transnational or international public spheres. As Nancy Fraser asks in 'Transnationalizing the Public Sphere' (2005), 'Where are the sovereign powers that public opinion today should constrain? Which publics are relevant to which powers? Who are the relevant members of a given public? In what language(s) and through what media should they communicate? And via what communicative infrastructure?' Such ideas do not necessarily problematize the ideas of a 'diasporic' public sphere however as one would imagine that such a sphere mediates between diasporic citizens and the sphere of authority in the State they emigrated from.

organ of a public engaged in critical political debate: as the fourth estate.’ (Habermas 1989 (1962): 60)

Fundamental to any theory of a public sphere is its ‘communicative infrastructure’ as Fraser (2005) puts it. Habermas imagined publics gathering together, first of all, in coffee shops, but as the intense conversation that took place in those small spaces could no longer be contained by them, it spilled over and into letters that were sent in and published more widely in newspapers. Therefore, as I think of a possible West Indian/Jamaican diasporic public sphere, I am thinking of letters that originated overseas but have been sent in and published in local newspapers. In particular this chapter will consider the most popular epistolary column in Jamaica, ‘Dear Pastor’ and to a lesser extent another popular though irregular epistolary column, ‘Dear Jamaica’.

The suggestion, however, that the entertaining (oftentimes titillating and oftentimes parochially religious) narratives that constitute the ‘Dear Pastor’ columns could also constitute a West Indian Public Sphere is not a straightforward one. In his original monograph, Habermas imagined the discourse of any public sphere as being secular and rigorously intellectual. But Habermas himself has had to recant from this kind of Eurocentric idealism and has had to reconsider his previous position of discounting the place of the religious within the Public Sphere³⁶.

In this chapter I would like to first offer a somewhat thorough foregrounding of the ‘Dear Pastor’ column and then move on to suggest some of the ways in which these letters, however religiously textured, could constitute a West Indian, and in particular, a Jamaican diasporic public sphere. But first I want to establish more generally the ‘church testimony’ as a part of West Indian discourse, or to put it more plainly, a feature of West Indian talk.

Church Testimony as West Indian Discourse

Critics have, for a long time, been aware of how the speech of Anglophone black communities has been textured by oral performances as learnt and practiced in church spaces – especially protestant evangelical churches. The sermon and the testimony are the two significant oral performances that take place in these church

³⁶ Most recently, and notably, this took the form of a public discussion on October 22, 2009 between Habermas, Judith Butler, Cornel West, and Charles Taylor. This extraordinary conversation was published by Columbia University Press in 2011 as *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*

cultures. The sermon is usually performed by a pastor or another designated spiritual leader of the church, whereas the testimony can be performed by a wider cross-section of congregants. Stephen Kroll-Smith has described the testimony as ‘a ritual event to celebrate the active participation of Christ or God in the testifier's personal life.’ (Kroll-Smith 1980: 18) One of the seminal studies that has considered the impact of the church testimony on black speech is Geneva Smitherman’s *Talkin and Testifyin*. Smitherman notes that in African-American communities, the particular vernacular as learnt in church ‘allowed blacks to create a culture of survival in an alien land’ (Smitherman 1977: 3). If this is true, that the language of the Pentecostal church is linked to the fact of alterity, then it is little wonder that Jamaicans who have migrated draw for a similar register in their letters. Smitherman goes on to suggest that much of black speech is rooted in a discourse of ‘testifyin what the Lord done did for me’ or more evocatively, of ‘gitting ovuh’ [getting over]; She explains, ‘the religious use of the phrase speaks to spiritual survival in a sinister world of sin, [while] its secular usage speaks to material survival in a white world of oppression.’ (Smitherman 1977: 73)

Stephen Kroll-Smith’s essay, ‘Testimony as Performance’ suggests ways in which the testimony can be performed in different ways and indeed can travel across genres. He notes that with younger converts ‘[t]he means of testimony transmission is limited to the spoken word.’ (Kroll-Smith 1980: 22) However, with the older members of the congregation, Kroll-Smith observes something more dynamic.

The channel of transmission is never limited to the spoken-word. Inevitably saints will intone key words or phrases. Often they will break into song toward the end of testifying, or use song to introduce the theme of their testimony. Developed through the years, a saint's opening and closing is usually personal. Whether reciting bible passages verbatim, paraphrasing, or drawing on folk proverbs, a saint uses traditional communicative genres; her use of space and body movement is always elaborate, having spiritual proxemic-kinesic license, and her duty as a saint is to exercise that license. (Kroll-Smith 1980: 22)

Another study worth mentioning is Thomas Cottle’s 1978 *Black Testimony: the Voices of Britain’s West Indians* in which we can observe the testimony moving from the oral and into a scribal mode. Cottle is an interesting social scientist who

almost gleefully announces the potential problems of his project – he being an affluent white American scholar speaking with poorer and less educated black West Indian immigrants in London. Significantly, in the course of his extensive interviews, Cottle chooses not to use an audio recorder which he insists would have gotten in the way of the friendships he was trying to initiate or the trust he was trying to build. His methods then differ from anthropologists such as Jack Goody (2010) who have privileged the use of recording technology as an essential tool in anthropological research. Cottle's book, it turns out, is a collection of approved testimonies from a cross-section of West Indian migrants who allowed him to transcribe the narratives in which they describe their lives in the hostile environment of Britain. Cottle's specific methodology was to have numerous interviews with his 'friends', to listen keenly, and then to write down what he had remembered. These scripts (or creative 'transcripts') were then given back to the interviewees who could either correct the manuscript, or approve it as their own words.

As a project in 'transcription' Cottle moves testimony from the oral and into the scribal. When reading the accounts it becomes obvious why Cottle collected them under the banner of 'testimonies'. Several of them are indeed partly addressed to God.

I say to God some nights when I'm lying in my bed, I say "God, let me know sometime when you got a minute, you think I did good coming here?" He don't answer. But I think of him up there looking down and wanting to tell me, Peterson, you did what you had to do, maybe wasn't a choice in all of this to be made at all. Then I think, if He does think I did the right thing, then how come when I talk to Him he don't say the simplest word to me? But I got the answer to that one too. What He's trying to do, see, is get the ear of all the white folks in this country, trying to tell them to let us arrive, now that we're here. He's listening to me, I try to convince myself, but on this matter He's spending his talking energy on the white man. (Cottle 1978: 18)

Much like Sunshine's letters to her mother in the novel *Aunt Jen*, Peterson's prayers become another form of monologic discourse, a one sided conversation in which an answer from the parental figure is unlikely to ever come.

It is perhaps understandable that so many immigrants, in addition to their nightly prayers, write actual letters to ‘Dear Pastor’ – for at least then they can hope to get a reply.

The King James Bible includes 32 uses of the word ‘testify’. In the Old Testament it is mainly used in the legal/judicial sense, but in the New Testament it begins to take on the nuance and meaning which it still has in church circles.

And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead. To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins. (KJV Acts 10: 42-43)

Or again in the letters of John,

Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. **And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.** Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God (KJV 1 John 4: 10-15)

The letters in the ‘Dear Pastor’ column are often examples of this kind of testimony. They are the accounts of people who have been put in difficult situations, between a rock and a hard place so to speak, and their letters either plead with God to help them ‘get over’ or they give an account of the process of doing this.

Letters circulated within Christian communities have a significant cultural and historical relevance. Considering the Welsh situation, William Jones(2006) notes that the culture of Wales’ emigrants sending letters home to be published and circulated actually began with church members sending letters to their church newsletters. These then were members of a religious community reporting back to the publics they had left behind. I propose that many West Indian migrants have similarly found it difficult to cope with the absence of the kind of strident religious culture which they had grown to rely on and find comfort in. This experience is not particular to Caribbean

people; migrants very often have had to deal with new societies in which they cannot practice belief systems as easily as they once had.

But the epistolary has even more deeply fundamental roots in Christian culture than these contemporary examples. The majority of the biblical books that make up the New Testament are in fact letters (22 of 27). Thirteen of these are the Pauline Epistles written, of course, by the apostle Paul, while the other nine are the Catholic or General epistles written by a variety of authors. In writing these letters the early Christians had also found themselves in difficult situations (Paul writes some of his epistles from a prison cell), and in turn, the persons or congregations that they dispatched their letters to were similarly facing hard times and in need of encouragement. Thus, the use of the letter as an appropriate discourse to narrate various hardships and to solicit help and comfort from God is firmly established within the church. One of the most popular biblical Psalms in fact seems to encourage migrants in various parts of the world to seek solace and comfort in their God:

Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock *that* is higher than I.
(Psalm 61:1-2 KJV)

The letters to Dear Pastor can be seen as answers to such an injunction. They are narratives in which Caribbean citizens in various corners or ‘ends’ of the earth have felt themselves estranged and overwhelmed by their new cultural surroundings, and so have called out for comfort and help. The letters represent not only a longing for home, but also a deep longing for God.

Dear Pastor

‘Dear Pastor’ has been appearing in Jamaican newspapers for the past 33 years. The Reverend Dr. Aaron Dumas is the eponymous ‘pastor’ and advice-giver. The first column appeared in 1977 in the *Daily News* Sunday tabloid, and then in 1983 it moved to the *Jamaica Star* where it is still housed. Dr Aaron Dumas lives in Jamaica where he has been pastor of the First Baptist Church on Sandringham Avenue in Kingston 10. What has been an interesting feature of Dumas’s advice column is the increasing number of correspondents who seek advice from outside

Jamaica. The *Jamaica Star* has quite helpfully kept much of Aaron Dumas's column archived online at www.jamaica-star.com and this is indeed where I have accessed them.

As popular as the *Dear Pastor* column is in Jamaica and its diasporas, it is obviously less known outside of these circles. In order to properly acquaint the reader with the kinds of narratives that are published in this column I would like to risk a slightly lengthy exercise and, on a month by month basis, look at the letters that were sent in and published in the year 2009. An analysis of each letter – some of them wonderfully interesting in their own right – is of course unfeasible, but I hope to give a general sense of how many letters were published each month, where they originated from and what some of the common issues addressed were.

In January, 79 letters were published. 31 originated from Jamaica while 48 originated from outside (29 from the USA, 9 from Canada, 5 from the UK, 4 from other territories in the Caribbean and one from France). This spread represents, almost proportionately, the places that Jamaicans have tended to migrate to. The 47 letters received from abroad in January addressed or sought advice on a range of issues, the most common being long-distance relationships, the trials of gaining citizenship abroad, relationships in which one partner (sometimes the letter writer) was cheating, unsatisfying sexual relationships, or finally letters of people who felt somewhat estranged from God.

In February 73 letters were published of which 36 were sent in from overseas (20 from the USA; 9 from Canada; 4 from the Caribbean; 2 from England and 1 from Holland). I want to briefly highlight four of these letters – received on the 11th, 12th, 16th and 26th – as examples of what we could call a 'polylogic'³⁷ form of discourse – that is to say, they initiate a multicultural conversation much wider than a simple dialogic discourse between the Pastor and the person writing in. The letter on the 16th begins, 'Dear Pastor, I know that this column is for people seeking advice, but would you allow me some space within your column to offer a bit of advice especially to a

³⁷ The earliest usage of this word 'polylogue' was in 1967 but its definition still seems somewhat unstable. Arne Haselback of the Vienna Think Tank has outlined some of them, first a kind of super-dialogue – 'the discourse of the many amongst the many' but she points out that it specifically invokes an aspect of multiculturalism, that it is a discourse amongst many in which various participants have different cultural experiences.

young man who wrote to you that his lover seems to be contemplating taking him to the UK. Son, think very hard before you take that trip...' (Dumas, 2009) The other three letters perform similar interventions, offering their own input and advice to previously published letters. This in fact becomes a feature of the column. 'Dear Pastor' is not only a space where the main respondent, the Reverend Aaron Dumas, gives his own advice, but where others can write in to add their own opinions and many times to even challenge the pastor's.

In March 83 letters were published. An odd phenomenon happens in this month that deserves mention: whereas in January and February all the points of origin of all the letters are clearly marked, in March a total of twelve letters are of undeterminable origins. Neither does the letter declare its own origins, nor can it be ascertained from the content of the letter. I have decided it is safer to highlight them but not to include them as letters that definitely originated from abroad, but we can safely assume however that the percentage of overseas participation in the 'Dear Pastor' column will be greater than this chapter can positively ascertain. I want to draw attention to a letter published on March 5th by a 'WC' from the United Kingdom who shares her story of disillusionment. While thankful to God for the experience, hers is yet another warning to Jamaicans at home not to be in such a hurry to migrate:

I thank God for the experience, because it opened my eyes to things I never knew... [But] I feel isolated in this country. Jamaicans do not get a fair deal. We have to work twice as hard to be recognised here. Whenever bad things happen, Jamaicans are the first ones blamed. But, thank God for the likes of Bob Marley, Marcus Garvey, Jimmy Cliff, Usain Bolt and Veronica Campbell just to name a few. God help us.

(Dumas: 2009, March 5)

There are more of these testimonial type letters. On the 11th of March a woman from New York offers practical advice to a previous writer about how she was able to study and pass her exams with the help of God, and on the 10th another woman tells her story of living with a man who only wanted her for a Green Card, but how with God's help she got through the ordeal. But the most strident testimonial letter comes from Massachusetts on the 12th and begins:

Let me start by saying that I am a child of God, Holy Ghost-filled and extremely active in church. The problem is that I am afraid of dating because I don't trust myself and I really don't want to sin against God.

(Dumas: 2009, March 12)

The letter continues in this vein and references a number of scriptures as well contemporary Pentecostal theology – for this woman, though conflicted, is ‘sure that God has a unique calling on [her] life.’ Distracted by the discourse of testimony, she is unable or unwilling to admit to her own loneliness in America.

Of the 83 letters received in March, 32 originate from overseas (18 from the USA, 10 from the UK, 3 from the Caribbean and only 1 from Canada).

75 letters are published in April. 16 are of undeterminable origins. 34 come from abroad. 17 of these have been sent in from the United States, 8 from the UK, 5 from Canada, 3 from Europe and one from the Caribbean. One letter received on the 29th of this month shows that this diasporic conversation does not happen without tension and without some contestation about who has the right to speak to local situations in Jamaica. In a letter published on the 29th ‘LL’ from the United States responds to a previous plight related by a woman in Jamaica who had complained about how difficult it was to begin to repay her student loans. ‘LL’ finds this whole predicament inexcusable and rants that the system of student loans in Jamaica is ‘just wrong, wrong, wrong!’ (Dumas 2009 April 29). In the pastor’s mind, she has overstepped a line, for though he usually simply thanks his overseas correspondents for their input, he reprimands this one.

‘It is always easy for people who are living abroad to attack systems and policies in Jamaica. You don't know how the Student Loan Bureau operates, so you should be very careful how you condemn.’

(Dumas 2009, April 29)

Again in May there are 75 letters published. 17 are from the USA, 7 from the UK, 4 from Canada, 1 from Italy, and 3 from the Caribbean. 8 are of undetermined origins.

79 letters were received in June. 24 from the USA, 5 from the UK, 2 from the Caribbean and 1 from Canada. 2 letters were definitely not from Jamaica but did not specify where they originated from. 11 are of undeterminable origins.

In July 77 letters were published – 18 from the USA, 6 from the UK, 2 from Canada, and 1 from the Caribbean. 13 were of indeterminate origins.

In August 60 letters were published, with a much a lower percentage coming from the USA – only 6. In fact, one more letter had been published from UK (7), 2 published from Canada and 1 from the wider Caribbean. 1 letter came in from Africa, and 8 were of undeterminable origins. The letter from Africa is interesting. The writer isn't from Jamaica but while studying in the UK had entered into a relationship with a Jamaican man and had a child by him. The UK was not a land of opportunity for her however. There she became an unwed mother and a college dropout. She has returned to Malawi to have a better life. This kind of story of course complicates the simple idea of England or America being places of economic refuge for poor people from the 'Third World'. It is a major cause for migration but not the only one. Her life back in Malawi she also sees as one that is perhaps closer to God and she wants her Jamaican man, still in the UK, to arrive at a similar spiritual place. She appeals then to the Jamaican pastor for his prayerful support.

Some-times, I think that's why the Lord separated us. God wanted me to follow my dreams.

Can you pray for this young man? I pray the Lord gives him strength and that He shines the Holy Spirit upon him. He needs to know that the Lord has a reason for everything. I pray that he will change and be a better man. I pray too that I can really fulfil my true dream of being a singer. I know, in my heart, it's always what I wanted to do.

Today, I am a single mother, deeply missing her man, hoping we will have a fulfilling life together. I don't want any other man. I want him. I see myself on tour with him and our daughter. That is my dream. For now, all I can do is pray. I ask for your words of advice. Thank you.

S.N., Malawi, Africa

(Dumas: 2009, August 28)

In September 73 letters were published - 13 from the USA, 7 from the UK, 2 from Canada and 10 of undeterminable origins. As usual, some of these letters are

from people who are struggling with living the Christian life. A teenager from London who has recently converted to Christianity asks the pastor's advice on how to abstain from sex now that she has become a Christian (Dumas: 2009, September 8), but even a letter that asks for very practical advice on how to get a criminal record in Jamaica expunged now that she is married to a US citizen and applying for a green card, begins quite sanctimoniously, 'Dear Pastor, Greetings to you in the name of Jesus' (Dumas:2009, September 2). And one extremely angry letter from London insinuates that a particularly dislikeable woman has been involved in witchcraft.

I am writing you to let Jamaica know about this nasty, wicked, black woman who I believe meddles in witchcraft. She is a nasty person who goes around spreading serious and dangerous lies, even in public.

....I cannot begin to tell you how ugly this woman is. That is why I am convinced that she is into witchcraft. Because that is the only thing she could use to get these guys to sleep with her. It is obvious that she used witchcraft on their foolish brains.

....God is a good God and He will deal with these people in time. I know that I am to stay far from such a person and I will. They are all a set of dirty scoundrels and are the lowest of the low. May God help them all. Pastor, how does one deal with a person such as this?

(Dumas: 2009, September 14)

Though the letter-writer and all the people involved in his narrative live in London, he feels compelled to report these behaviours to Jamaica. Of course his concept of Jamaica may well extend beyond the nation-state and include the diasporic community. Either way, the letter reveals a profound connection to the island where sanctions from that community are specifically sought and are supposedly effective. It is unfortunate however that much of this letter-writer's fervent dislike becomes both spiritualized and racialized. By his description, his adversary is notably a 'wicked black woman' and inhumanly 'ugly'.

In October, 61 letters were published -16 from the USA, 2 from the UK, 1 each from Canada and the wider Caribbean and 22 of undeterminable origins. In November 75 letters were published – 24 of undeterminable origins, 14 from the USA, 3 from the wider Caribbean, 2 from the UK and 2 from Canada. Two of the more hilarious letters published in November seem to be part of wider conversation

on the moral implications of a woman deciding not to wear underwear. The pastor is silent on this topic but many other letters weigh in on the matter. This again seems to be a form of polylogic discourse. On November 13 two letters are published on the topic, one completely against the practice, but a woman from Canada explains why she doesn't tend to wear any herself.

Dear Pastor,

I personally don't like underwear. I can remember as a child my dad would always chase me and say "go and put your panty on." I never liked underwear as a child. Now that I am an adult, I only wear underwear when I am having 'my time of the month'. When I come to Jamaica, and as soon as the plane lands, if I have on underwear, I just have to find a place to take them off. If I don't take them off, yeast infection would kill me. If I don't bring money with me to Jamaica, I have to carry cream with me for the itching. It does not matter what kind of material my underwear is made of, that does not stop me from getting yeast infection.

(Dumas: 2009 November 13)

Finally, in December, 73 were published – 8 from the USA, 4 from the UK, 2 from Canada, 2 from the wider Caribbean, 17 of undetermined origins and the rest from Jamaica.

In all 883 letters were published in 2009. At least 338 of these letters came from overseas, but this figure could in fact be as high as 479 if we were to include the 141 letters of undeterminable origins.

Once again, the recurring topics were that of cheating partners; the legalities of acquiring citizenship in new countries; the trials of carrying on long distance relationships; the desire to seek after God; and the always titillating topic of homosexuality. We could say that almost all of these letters fit into a broader category. To use a phrase that has particular currency in the Caribbean these are 'man and woman stories'. They are concerned mostly with the intimate relationships of men and women and the various trials they go through as couples. Even those epistles that broach the topic of homosexual attraction are often set within the framework of a larger 'man and woman' story – a happily married man or woman for instance who has recently found himself or herself attracted to the same sex. And always the pastor

encourages such people to return to a heteronormative and pious lifestyle. Of the five most popular narratives, I want to focus a little more closely on the three that are perhaps particularly relevant to the diasporic experience: ‘the green card story’, ‘the long-distance relationship story’ and ‘the seeking God story’.

*The Green Card Story*³⁸

A letter published on May 13 is typical of what I am calling the green-card story:

Dear Pastor,

I have been married for the last five years. Since my husband got his green card, he wants to divorce me. He got his green card and took his two children with him. He has moved out and lives with another woman.

(Dumas: 2009, May 13)

This letter received from ‘MB’ in Brooklyn, highlights (in a tragic way) the tensions that define this particular narrative. When the immigration statuses of partners differ, the fact becomes an important and complicated negotiation in the relationships that the two forge. For partners whose statuses are not secure, the difference might mean that they will consider staying in unloving or even unhealthy relationships simply to secure their own citizenships; conversely, for partners who have already secured their own statuses, the difference might mean they will remain suspicious of the motives of their partners, or hold it over their heads in a manipulative way. The final acquisition of a green card by the other partner can then symbolize not only a final escape from Jamaica but also an escape from a relationship that had been endured for too long – liberation for one partner, but possible heartbreak for the other.

A letter published on the 21st of January seems to suggest that naturalized citizens in countries such as Canada are taught to be suspicious of people from their own homelands. PJ’ from Toronto asks if all Jamaican women are gold-diggers – the ‘gold’ here being citizenship for Canada.

³⁸ Though I am using the term ‘green-card’ – the American form of documentation that allows foreign nationals to reside there permanently, I mean to also suggest similar processes that allow immigrants to settle in Canada or Britain

Dear Pastor,

I was born in Jamaica but moved to Canada when I was five years old. I like Jamaican women, but I can't date them because my family says they are no good.

I have been to Montego Bay about four times without my family knowing. All the not so good things I have heard about Jamaican women, are they true?

Things like, 'all they care about is money, and if I take one over here she is going to leave and take her thug man from Jamaica.'

(Dumas: 2009, Jan 21)

The letter opens a window to a fierce hierarchy of marginalized identities; for although PJ is born in Jamaica he is taught to be suspicious of women from there. We might wonder then about PJ's clear fetishizing of the forbidden Jamaican woman. He has been on, not one, but four secret missions to the island and has obviously been romantically involved with the women – so much so that he is now conflicted. It isn't an unreasonable hypothesis to suggest that the strength of PJ's attraction is at least in part a reflection of his own status in Canada as immigrant/outcast/undesirable. Writers and critics such as Dionne Brand (1996) and Makeda Silvera (1995) have written about the black Caribbean body being profoundly othered in the Canadian landscape. Thus, while naturalized citizens such as PJ are being rejected by North Americans for not being 'truly' Canadian, PJ simultaneously rejects Jamaican women because of his superior position as being more than just 'Jamaican'. In fact, his frequent trips to the island seem to initiate an uncomfortable politics of power. PJ's prejudice has obviously been so encouraged and nurtured in him that even if he were to defy his family and enter into a relationship with a Jamaican woman, we imagine such a relationship would have to continually negotiate his assumptions of superiority and power.

Though PJ seems to be seeking reassurance from 'Dear Pastor' he is unlikely to get it if he is a regular reader of the column. Over and over again the story emerges of Naturalized American, Canadian or English citizens who have been used because

of their passports.³⁹ TM from New York describes a complicated love triangle. She goes back to Jamaica to meet a former friend from high school and ends up falling in love with him. While he explicitly wants to get married in order to get a green card, it is not to her. She explains:

I went to Jamaica in December, 2008 to see him. We hooked up and I fell in love with him. I had planned to spend two months, but ended up spending six months, because of him. While I was in Jamaica, he told me he would be coming to live in America soon. I asked him how he planned to live there if his family is filing for him; he told me that his family was not really filing for him, so he would tell me the truth. He worked at a famous hotel in Negril where he met a lady who really loved him and wanted to get married to him and take him to America. He said that he thought about it and accepted her offer because it would be a great opportunity for him. She is 33 years old and he is 23. He said that he didn't want her; he is just doing so to get his green card. I believed him because I have a lot of family members who have done that.

(Dumas: 2009, Jul 27)

In the remainder of TM's letter she explains that the relationship has indeed continued in secret since her lover has moved to the States with his new wife. TM's matter-of-fact complicity in the fraudulent marriage is interesting especially with her explanation that she has had '**a lot** of family members' who did the same. Problematic and xenophobic as his position might be, PJ from Toronto has reason to be cautious; it would be naïve to completely ignore that a culture of exploitation does exist where the native affects rather than feels love towards the foreigner in order to procure citizenship.

But this exploitation might be mutual. From TM's letter, it seems unlikely that the 33 year old tourist who has married the 23 year old Jamaican would have been completely unaware of the disingenuousness of her fiancé's affections. As a tourist her relationship with Jamaica is defined by consumerism and her proposal is the

³⁹ It ought to be noted once again that these narratives are probably not proportionately representative. 'Dear Pastor' is, after all, an advice column and those who live comparatively happy and fulfilled lives are less likely to write in. What recurs then are stories of 'gold-diggers' rather than stories of happy life-partners; what is published tend to be stories of deception rather than stories of love.

ultimate example of this. It seems likely that what she has knowingly invested in is five to ten years of affection, attentiveness and love from a man while awaiting his own green card. This story is not a unique one. The Black-American author, Terry McMillan, fictionalized such a situation in her novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996). In the novel, Stella a 42 year old American divorcee goes to Jamaica and falls in love with a man half her age. This fiction in fact replicates Terry McMillan's own life as she had indeed married Jonathan Plummer, a Jamaican who worked at a hotel she was staying at, and who was then only 23. The enormous success of McMillan's novel⁴⁰ means that she profited from the relationship – both financially and, one assumes, sexually. The end of McMillan's own story is not, however, the happily-ever-after of the book or film. After Plummer secured his own green card he then came out as gay and filed for divorce. Through his marriage to the American author Plummer was able to escape a much less affluent life in Jamaica and also the sexual discrimination on the island. Certainly he has exploited McMillan, but perhaps such exploitation is mutual.

On the other end of the spectrum of the green card story are partners (often women) who find themselves trapped in abusive relationships. So if on one hand the 'green card story' is often one of virtual prostitution, on the other it can also be one of virtual human trafficking. Consider the following missive from 'SL' in New York.

Dear Pastor,

I had written you about my immigration papers and that my husband was deliberately treating me badly so I would have to leave him and not get the papers. Well, thank God, I am on my way to getting everything.

My problem is that he has always been very abusive and still is. I am planning to leave him as soon as I get my Green Card. He spits in my face, head butts me in my forehead, punches me, and even threw urine on me. I am tired of living like this. It's not that I don't want to fight back but I do not want to do anything that will jeopardise me getting the green card. I fought him back before and he ended up in the hospital twice. When he came out, he had me arrested on both occasions. So, now I am playing it safe. But I am leaving him early next year.

⁴⁰ It also became an Oscar nominated movie starring Whoopi Goldberg and Taye Diggs

While I am planning my escape from this abuser, I am having second thoughts about the situation and now see why it is so hard for women to leave their abusive men. We tend to think that maybe they will change. I know that leaving him would be the best thing to do. He no longer goes to church and greatly disrespects God. Even though he does this, he has asked me to pray for him.

I am not asking you if I should stay or not. What I am asking is that you pray that God will keep me until I get myself together to leave him and pray, too, that God gives me a good plan to escape from him without him knowing what I am doing. Thank you for your prayers.

(Dumas: 2009, January 7)

SL is not the typical victim of abuse. While we must not minimize her trauma it is noteworthy that when someone has ended up in the hospital it has not been her. SL, it seems, can give as good as she gets, and then even better. What keeps her docile is not the size of her husband's muscles, but his immigration status. SL's husband has declawed her, tamed her by the power of his citizenship in America. She is now victimized in multiple ways, being black, woman, immigrant, and more importantly, an immigrant without the correct papers. The agency she must have assumed in coming to America in order to make a better life for herself seems not to have paid rich dividends.

The Long-Distance Relationship Story

The long-distance relationship story is oftentimes synonymous with the green-card story. Many of the relationships described in the Dear Pastor letters are transnational ones. KS's letter below is typical:

Dear Pastor,

I am a 24 years old female living in the United States. I am in love with a guy who lives in Jamaica. We met six months ago and I really like him a lot.

Whenever I speak to my mom about him, it seems as if she doesn't care.

We spoke about getting married someday, so he can come to the United States to live, which was my idea. He tells me that he loves me and wants to spend the rest of his life with me. I believe him because I have never met a guy that

makes me laugh like he does. My mom feels as though he only wants to use me for a green card. I want you to know that when I suggest that he comes here to live, he says he does not want to, he would prefer to stay in Jamaica. He says that he does not want me to believe that he is using me to get into the United States. Do you think that this long distance relationship can work? Or do you think I should care what my mom thinks? I am 24 years old and it is my life. Keep up the good work.

K.S. St. Albans, New York

(Dumas: 2009, March 13)

Perhaps while the earlier letter from MB in Brooklyn shows us the possible and quite common tragic end to one of these green card stories, KS's letter allows us to see the possible beginnings of it through a long-distance relationship. KS's letter is characterized by naïveté. She professes love for a man whom she admits to having met fairly recently – only six months ago, and more than that, during this period they haven't lived in the same country. She believes in this man's sincerity for the seemingly flippant reason that he makes her laugh, and she is also willing to accept his story that he is not 'using [her] to get into the United States' simply because he says so.

Despite its naïveté, KS's letter points to a distinguishing feature of Caribbean society – the ease with which romantic partners are able to imagine a relationship in which the two people do not always live or interact in the same physical place. Merle Hodge for instance has argued that it is only the modern phenomena of increased divorces and single-parent households that has forced Western sociologists to not dismiss or label as 'broken' or 'dysfunctional' a family structure that has been quite common in the Caribbean. In an interview in *Callaloo* in 1989, Hodge eloquently summed up her stance as a Caribbean family activist in response to a question about her fiction.

Once again you see that the whole point there is my concern about this business of family. For example, you use the terminology of Tantie being a substitute for a mother and Tantie being a mother-figure; but all this business about mother-figure and father-figure, all that is based on a conception of family which is quite narrow. I think that if we begin to be serious - as we have begun to be - about Caribbean family forms, we have to realize that

almost all of us are socialized-almost all of us, even those who had a mother and a father as I did - in a family framework which has nothing to do with the traditional nuclear family. For example, a child losing its mother in our context is not such a drama as it is in the Western context. This thing about single-parent families almost doesn't have any application here because even a woman who has children without having a husband won't, by and large, stand alone with her children. So with all of that, I think we have to change glasses to look at these issues.' (Balutansky 1989: 655)

Indeed, the 2008 U.N. Demographic Yearbook (United Nations 2008) showed that at 86% Jamaica has the highest Illegitimacy Ratio in the world. We might recall from an earlier chapter Bustamante's discomfort with the word 'bastard' and how he found it insensitive to the reality of how most children are born in Jamaica. Caribbean families as a whole have historically been structured and arranged differently than the European norm⁴¹, and it seems Jamaicans might therefore be particularly willing to initiate long-distance and even transnational relationships. The Caribbean man and woman story thus has to often negotiate and even attempt to conquer the long distance that partners have to endure, and thus the Dear Pastor advice column can then become a place where couples seek clarification on immigration rules. On July 27th for instance, CS from England entreats the Reverend Dumas to help her solve a problem, though curiously she begins by stating she does not have one.

Dear Pastor,

I don't have a problem, but I am wondering if you could help me with something. I live in England and my husband is a Jamaican. We just got married, in April, 2009. We got married in Jamaica, but the only thing is that he's still in Jamaica, while I'm back in England.

⁴¹ A legacy of slavery was the breaking up and separation of families on the plantation which could have happened for a number of reasons – either out of malice, punishment, or because the men had simply been used as breeders and so a family structure had never been encouraged. This has become one of the ironies of colonialism – that though enslaved people were forced to find alternative family structures, these structures have subsequently been frowned upon because of their literal illegitimacy.

I was wondering if I could file⁴² for him from England and if so, how do I go about doing that. My husband and I really love each other and we are longing to be together. It hurts so much to be apart.

(Dumas, 2009 July 27)

Though, as said, the long-distance relationship and the green card stories are often synonymous in many ways, perhaps one useful way to differentiate them is that the green card story is characterized by anxiety while the long-distance relationship is characterized by hope.

On October 13, D from Toronto writes a particularly enthusiastic endorsement of such relationships.

Dear Pastor,

I want to speak to you about long-distance relationships. Yes, man! Long-distance relationships can work. Absence does make the heart grow fonder but only if you have the right kind of love in your heart to begin with. It all depends on the parties involved and their intentions. Take my situation, for instance. I met my wife in 2005 while on a visit to Jamaica and we enjoyed four long years of long-distance relationship until last December when she joined me here in Canada.

(Dumas 2009, October 13)

D admits in his letter that the relationship was not an easy one, that it required both an emotional and a financial investment – frequent plane trips were made to Jamaica and daily phone calls at international rates. D clearly thinks that this investment eventually paid off. What D does in his letter is what I have argued epistolary narratives are often doing – offering a counter-discourse – for if the more common narrative is of the difficulties and heart-ache of a long-distance relationship, ‘D’ instead offers a take on its potential rewards. As an advice column it is hardly surprising that the ‘Dear Pastor’ column attracts letters from those in problematic relationships. Letters from people in well-adjusted and healthy relationships are less

⁴² ‘to file for’ – to initiate the process of getting citizenship for a relative or spouse who currently lives abroad

likely. D however sends in his letter to provide a narrative that is often silenced – ‘Yes man! Long distance relationships can work.’

Occasionally the long-distance relationships described in the Dear Pastor column are not romantic ones. On July 2 GS from New York writes Rev Dumas for advice. GS’s situation is that as a result of the recession he and his wife have found themselves out of work and unable to provide for their two sons. They have instead sent the two boys to Jamaica to live with their grandmother in a rural part of the island. On returning to the island to check up on his boys he is perturbed by what he sees as their primitive socialization.

In January of this year I decided to go there to see how they were doing. I noticed that when they were coming from school they were barefooted like the neighbour's boys. Before I could ask them where their shoes were, my mother-in-law begged me not to say anything to them.

Well, when it was time for bed my nine-year-old took off all his clothes and get[sic] in the bed totally naked. His brother went half naked. He only had on an old uniform shirt which had no buttons on it. In the morning, both of my sons and the lady's sons walk about the yard totally naked until it was time for them to go to school. I had a talk with my mother-in-law and she said that they are boys, just leave them alone. They are happy she said, which is true and they are doing well in school.

(Dumas, 2009 July 2)

Unlike the silent mothers in the fictional narratives of *Aunt Jen* and ‘Full Stop’, this is a parent who actively tries to keep in contact with his children who are growing up in Jamaica, away from him. Further on in the letter he laments, ‘It is still hard for us to have them now. If it wasn't, I would have taken them back.’ (Dumas, 2009 July 2) But while his children are doing well academically, and although the grandmother is able to support them financially, the father cannot quite bring himself to relinquish a deep-seated bias that the culture of urban America is superior and more civilized than that of Rural Jamaica. It is not merely the physical distance that the father has to cope with, but the cultural divide that begins to stretch between himself and his offspring. Such are the cultural and emotional issues that are inevitably highlighted in a discourse between the diaspora and the homeland.

The Seeking-God story

If GS from New York believes that his two sons, suddenly barefooted and naked, represents a sort of reverse process of civilization, a descent into the heart of darkness as it were, so too the Jamaican who has recently migrated to a secular culture often has to contend with a new society that views him through similarly patronizing or even contemptuous lenses. Having come from a country where not just nominal religious belief but rather strident religious conviction is the norm, the Jamaican may often be viewed as one who has come from a quaint, superstitious and parochial country still holding on to out-of-date beliefs. It is a great irony indeed that now that many of the un-Christian and therefore previously demonized non-white Others have finally embraced the Christian religion of their former colonizers, these colonizers have in turn abandoned the same religion and in so doing have continued to affirm the Other's status as primitive.

Jamaicans who migrate to more secular countries might variously deal with the hostility towards religion by letting go of it completely, or conversely, by holding on to it more tightly. In their extensive interviews with Jamaican immigrants Bauer and Thompson (2006) note that 'all but two of our migrants were brought up in Jamaica as churchgoers: most of them either as Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals, Catholics or Seventh Day Adventists. But through their lifetimes this almost universal religious practice has been challenged in many different ways. In some cases the challenge has come through education itself, but most often it has been through encountering the much wider cultural tide of secularism, strongest in Britain and least in Jamaica itself.' (Bauer & Thompson 2006: 169 – 171). On the other side of the coin, Annemarie Dupré notes:

...religion can become an important part of the identity of a migrant, even if he had rather little interest in religious matters until leaving his home country. In the new situation, having left behind family and social links and feeling the need to defend his identity, religion becomes an important factor.

(Dupré: 2005)

In 2003 Jacqueline Hagan and Helen Ebaugh from the University of Houston published the paper, 'Calling upon the Sacred: Migrants' Use of Religion in the

Migration Process' which proposes that religion is often a fundamental part of what they identify as the six stages in the process of migration: 1) the decision-making, 2) the preparation, 3) the journey 4) the arrival, 5) the process of settling and 6) the developing of transnational links. (Hagan, Ebaugh 2003). Also in 2003, Paul Brodwin published 'Pentecostalism in Translation: Religion and the production of community in the Hatian Diaspora.' Though Brodwin's work is concerned with a specific group of Caribbean migrants, his observations are relevant to a wider group. Brodwin examines the marginalization and stigmatization suffered by Hatian immigrants who are often seen by their host society as 'uncivilized, chaotic, and even a threat to the public order.' The discriminated Hatian thus retreats from this image and embraces instead a counter image, that of the 'morally self-righteous Pentecostal church member' (Brodwin 2003: 85). Brodwin suggests that in the space of religion and its language Caribbean migrants find a discourse of persecution and eventual redemption that helps them to make sense of and survive the many hardships they have to endure.

Many of the letter writers corresponding with Dear Pastor are persons set adrift in a secular world and who are seeking audience with a figure of authority who can validate their world-views. Excluded from the publics in the places they now live, they engage in a discourse with the public of the space they left and in which they can speak of matters that they deem important, such as the pressures of a surrounding secular culture, the dangers of backsliding, the temptations of sexual transgressions, witchcraft, etc.

It is significant that in SL's letter (quoted earlier), included in the litany of woes that she must endure to secure a green-card is the fact that her husband 'no longer goes to church and greatly disrespects God' and also, '[e]ven though he does this, he has asked me to pray for him.' Though the husband seems to have abandoned religion in New York he still wants his wife to connect him to that past, perhaps to reconnect him to a Jamaican morality and indeed to a Jamaican public.

Migrant couples seem to deal with this particular dilemma often – one partner who has strayed from religion and subsequently from the relationship. One husband writes:

My wife and I are separated. She was living with a man for over two years. She is also a Christian and holds a position in the church. All her sisters in the

church know about her living. I chose to live by myself and all this time I have been keeping God's light bright.

Recently, she showed a desire to be with me so we started to see each other again. She has never mentioned anything about all she has done and I have not pressure[sic] her to say.

However, her ways and demeanour are still not with God even though all through this she has been going to church and pretending to be holy.

(Dumas 2009, January 14)

After setting out in more detail the narrative of his wife's adultery, he continues in the tone of a martyr, 'All this I have taken with forgiveness and love because she is my wife and God has blessed me so much that His will is my will and therefore I try to live for Him.' (Dumas 2009, January 14) The wife's infidelity has almost certainly caused emotional damage to this letter writer, but his religious beliefs require him to extend forgiveness and love. America has then thrown up its own set of hardships for him to deal with and now he has to turn to Jamaica and God for help. He pleads for advice from Revd Dumas. 'We have been married for 10 years and have one child. What do you think, pastor?'

Other immigrant letter writers do not come from this position of seeking approval from the Pastor. A common letter to 'Dear Pastor' is that of the recently migrated Jamaican who has begun to explore more adventurous expressions of his or her sexuality and who feels simultaneously guilty about such behaviour while unable to express this discomfort to those around them who might not share or understand such moral convictions. The 'Dear Pastor' column then becomes a public diasporic confessional booth – a place where the letter writer might receive absolution and encouragement to live a more moral life.

But perhaps the most disturbing of the letters in 2009 which could be categorized as a 'Seeking-God Story' comes from a woman who signs her name as 'Sad Mom'. Sad Mom confesses at the beginning of her missive that her daughter has recently been gang-raped by four boys. Yet, it is not so much the rape that concerns her as it what was revealed in its aftermath. "My daughter, age 15, was gang-raped by four boys her age group, a few months ago. To my sad surprise, she wasn't a virgin." (Dumas 2009, January 15). Sad Mom continues in a nostalgic rant about life in Jamaica in the 70s, a time when she wouldn't have thought to 'disrespect' her own

mother by going out and having sex. She concludes, thinking about her own recently raped daughter, “This child must be the devil’s work!”(Dumas, 2009)

In her long letter she shows no sympathy or love for her daughter who becomes the embodiment of the secular and immoral place of Europe. Now, at her wit’s end, so to speak like so many other letter-writers, she turns to Jamaica hoping that a metaphoric light will beam from that island, across the Atlantic, and onto her specific situation.

Pastor, everyone that knows her, knows what I'm going through and said they don't know how I manage because they would have put her in a foster home. I get the feeling that she won't make it in life without my guidance and, on the other hand, she doesn't care and she doesn't listen to me. I can't beat her anymore. I can't throw her out. I can't punish her. So, what should I do?
Please, shine some light on us.

Sad Mom

(Dumas, 2009, January 15)

France and its morality have failed ‘Sad Mom’. Her daughter has grown up in a different country, in a different time and one would imagine, speaking a different language. ‘Sad Mom’ is unable to understand or connect with her child or to even reach out to her at a time when the young girl probably needs her the most. In her description of her daughter as being ‘the devil’s work’ she creates a paradigm that equates her life in Jamaica as being somewhere closer to God and godliness while her daughter is a living representation of all that is evil and secular in Europe.

Dear Pastor’s Response

I have perhaps made too little of the responses that come in from Aaron Dumas; the column, after all, is one of people seeking advice and the Pastor does always oblige. But while the column represents at least a dialogic exchange of letters (and as I’ve argued, at times polylogic as well) Dumas’s responses are both predictable and minimal – sometimes only a sentence long, a mere thanks for writing in. His stance when offered is, of course, unflinchingly conservative and that of a man whose morality has been formed and informed by Pentecostal Christian dogma, but it would be unfair to suggest that he trumpets these ideologies. In fact, it has been popularly said in Jamaica that Dear Pastor’s responses have gotten softer over the

years, and perhaps there is some truth to this. Of note is that in the 30 years of running the column Aaron Dumas has gone on to do a doctorate in counselling. It is not unreasonable to assume that such training has encouraged him to offer his personal opinions but not to insist on them too stridently. What Dumas seems to offer, like many counsellors, is space for troubled people to speak and indeed to hear themselves – the column then a virtual couch, the letter-writers speaking directly to a wide open space, addressing the pastor even while their backs are turned to him.

One also might wonder if Aaron Dumas has the time for more involved responses. Not only is he a full-time pastor and full-time columnist but also a full-time radio journalist, hosting a 3-hour call-in programme every week night. The programme is much like his column – a space in which voices other than Dumas's tend to dominate. And whether this minimal input is a professional stance, or a result of him being over-stretched and fatigued, or of a genuine generosity to other voices and opinions (or perhaps a combination of all three) is perhaps irrelevant. The point is the Dear Pastor columns do offer a tremendous space in which local and diasporic voices can engage in public discourse about various matters that are important to them. The letters sent in to Dear Pastor clearly represent a form of public discourse, but do they also constitute a public sphere?

The Jamaican Diasporic Public Sphere

It was the feminist critic, Nancy Fraser, who even while acknowledging Habermas's conception of the Public Sphere as 'an indispensable resource' (Fraser 1990: 52) simultaneously launches one of the most incisive critiques of this theory. As mentioned earlier in my introduction, Fraser points out that the European public sphere of the eighteenth century did not invite or include the concerns of women and other minorities and that it dismissed as trivial or insubstantial what were legitimate concerns of private citizens. It is for this reason that we ought not to dismiss the kinds of narratives that are constantly rehearsed in the 'Dear Pastor' column as similarly trivial or not worthy to be called 'public sphere' discourse.

But of course it is not just the supposed worthiness of the discourse content that constitutes a 'public sphere' but the extent to which it mediates between a collection of private individuals and the State. This admittedly is a much harder thing to prove, or perhaps to quantify – the extent to which (if any) the ear of the Jamaican State is tuned in and turned to the diasporic voices which speak from the pages of the

‘Dear Pastor’ column. A few facts are worth keeping in mind here. The Jamaican diaspora is by no means a powerless public. As established in an earlier chapter, the Jamaican economy is, to a large extent, buoyed up by remittances sent in by its diasporic citizens. The state then can ill-afford to ignore their voices. Indeed the government’s recent convening of a ‘Jamaican Diaspora’ convention and website which invites participation from overseas citizens, the presence of diplomatic envoys in America, Canada and Britain which seem to interface as much with Jamaican citizens in those locales as with the Governments of these countries, and indeed the appointment to the Jamaican government’s cabinet of a Minister with specific responsibility for the diaspora, all seem to be evidence of a Jamaican State very keen to know what its diasporic citizens are thinking. The fact also that the ‘Dear Pastor’ column is now the most widely read newspaper column in Jamaica, and that it attracts such a large following, means that it necessarily amplifies the various concerns of Jamaican publics who write to an in it, even those publics that are living overseas. William Jones asserts that ‘the publication of immigrant letters in the press represents a significant public manifestation of the phenomenon of transnationality’ (Jones 2006: 190) – that is to say, the insistence of diasporic subjects to include their voices within the discourse of their native countries.

Further anecdotal evidence also tells us that the ear of the Jamaican State might be particularly attuned to the religious: the present Head of State, Governor General Sir Patrick Allen, is a self-professed ‘full-time Pastor’. Before his appointment as Governor General in 2009, Allen’s most significant appointment was a clerical one – President of the West Indies Union of Seventh Day Adventists. Jamaica’s present Political Ombudsman whose job (much like the Public Sphere) is to mediate between the Public and the State is arguably the island’s most famous pastor and televangelist, Bishop Herro Blair. Dr Aaron Dumas himself – Dear Pastor – recently boasts the title of Jamaica’s first government appointed Marriage Counsellor. Indeed, the Jamaican State often appoints members of the clergy, and when it has taken a moral stance on issues (eg, its refusal to repeal the controversial Buggery Laws) it has turned to the overly familiar national rhetoric, declaring itself unambiguously ‘a Christian nation’.

Worthy of note as well is another interesting letter to the editor which appeared in the Jamaican newspaper in 2009:

All atheists want is just to be left alone. We are not interested in being converted; so stop preaching to us. Please, just respect that. We have made our decision, if there is a hell and we find out later, fine, we are prepared to live with the consequences.

We are not preaching hate to Christians, so all we ask is for the same to be reciprocated. Atheists are very tolerant of other beliefs and as such, accept every different religion, not for ourselves but for everyone who wishes to believe in them. We are no different from Christians; only our beliefs are different and we are respectful of that, so, please, do not let it be a bother to you, allow us to exercise our democratic freedom. I have never seen atheists trying to convert Christians, but rather we will passionately defend our 'faith' if confronted.

I am, etc.,

DWAYNE POWELL

(Powell, 2009 May 24)

The rhetoric of this letter is reminiscent of language one might expect from Civil Rights or LGBT activism; it is the language of the downtrodden and oppressed. The marginalized periphery here is a secular and agnostic one. It is the voice of the atheist which seems more easily excluded from discourse in the Jamaican Public Sphere. The picture that emerges is of a Christian nation whose pastors often move between church pulpit and political podium. Naturally then the State is attuned to a language that comes from Church spaces. Oral performances from church – sermons, prophecies, warnings and indeed church testimonies which infect West Indian talk generally (even secular West Indian talk) naturally also infect discourse in the diasporic public sphere.

‘Dear Jamaica’ as a final case in point

Jennifer Keane-Dawes’s own irregular column ‘Dear Jamaica’ provides an interesting counterpoint as well, for these are not letters being sent to or coming from an ‘ecclesiastic’ space and yet these too are infected with the same language.

Jennifer Keane-Dawes who was a journalist in Jamaica migrated to the United States in 1991 to pursue post-graduate studies. Her migration was not only an act of leaving her island, but also of leaving an abusive husband. In America, not only did

she have to fend for herself; she had also taken her son with her. She confesses to sleeping on various floors and occasionally going without food. Despite these adversities, Keane-Dawes excelled academically, completed a doctorate, and from the beginning began to write letters back home to Jamaica.

Her letters are addressed to a fictional old woman – ‘me dear mam’ – but are clearly public letters meant for the broad population of Jamaica and so the letters easily and often slip into ‘church testimony’. When in one letter Keane-Dawes is remembering the shortages that happened in Jamaica in the late 70s and how there was no longer corned beef or cornflakes on the supermarket shelves, she writes, ‘Yu nuh memba de heap a **wailing an gnashing a teet** when people begin fe holler how tings bad.’[emphasis mine] (Keane-Dawes 2011: 13-14) invoking the popular apocalyptic image from the Gospel of Matthew. Another epistle which tells the story of a car-crash in America begins with the prophetic sounding sentence, ‘A ting happen a foreign de other day, **sinner weep an mourn!**’[emphasis mine] (Keane-Dawes 2011: 23).

With Keane-Dawes, little observations naturally segue into moments of prayer. In one letter she talks about sitting in traffic waiting on a long line of ducks to cross the road. Rather than being annoyed by this, she takes it as an opportunity to talk with God. ‘...me dear mam, when me done tenk Masa God inna me heart fe how Him powerful fe mek all these kine a tings...’ [my dear ma’am, when I was done thanking Master God in my heart, for how powerful he was that he could make all these kinds of things] (Keane-Dawes 2011: 25). Or again, when she talks about her decision to start exercising, she explains, ‘me dear mam, while Masa God mek it clear seh we cyan add one day to we life, Him naw stop we fe try help weself wid de quality.’ [my dear ma’am, while God has made it clear that we can’t add one day to our lives, He doesn’t stop us from trying ourselves to help with the quality.](Keane-Dawes 2011: 33). One wonders if these easy digressions into the religious would be as welcome even in the fundamentally Christian society of America and in particular in the academic environment in which Keane-Dawes works⁴³. These letters home perhaps offer a space not only to switch registers from academic discourse to a Jamaican creole, but from secular to religious. This same letter about her new exercise regime ends with an exhortation – a clear church testimony. She writes.

⁴³ Dr Keane-Dawes is Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Maryland

Suh yu know weh me realize? Life shawt. An talking to meself is a muss. But through de grace of God, me mek a choice fe choose weh drap eena mi mind an wah come outa me mout. An it nuh easy. Das why me use de wud Grace. Suh mek we do as Massa God seh, encourage yuself. When yu cyan find de money, instead a fret, seh: “My God will supply all my needs.” Instead a cuss God inna yu heart when yu cyan fine Him, seh “I will bless the Lord at all times.” When people lie an wicked to you, seh: “No weapon formed against me shall prosper.” An when yu sick, tek yu medicine an memba weh him seh “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” Missis mam, happiness is a choice. We only haffi believe an memba Massa God wud.

(Keane-Dawes 2011: 34)

[So, do you know what I realized? Life is short. And talking to myself is a must. But through the grace of God, I’ve made a choice to choose what is dropped into my mind and what comes out of my mouth. And it’s not easy. That’s why I’ve used the word ‘grace’. So let us do as God says, and encourage ourselves. When we can’t find the money, instead of fretting, let us say ‘My God will supply all my needs.’ Instead of cursing God in your heart when you can’t find him, just say, ‘I will bless the Lord at all times.’ When people lie about you and are wicked to you, just say, ‘No Weapon formed against me shall prosper’. And when you are sick, take your medicine and remember what he says. ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ My dears, happiness is a choice. We only have to believe and remember God’s word.]

Keane-Dawes’s letters often use religious idioms, repeat sermons recently heard in church, recast everyday experiences into a moral or religious context, and often evolve into actual testimonies. The fact that Dr. Keane-Dawes has subsequently been sought after to sit on various national committees in Jamaica means that her very churchy letters to Jamaica have in fact been received by the State. The church testimony, I thus argue, is a legitimate form of discourse within the Jamaican and the Jamaican diasporic public spheres.

Conclusion

In re-reading my own *Cold Onion Chronicles* I have come to realize the extent to which they too are letters addressed to a largely Christian audience. Sometimes this is done consciously and at other times it seems to be done subconsciously. As missives sent from the comparatively secular world of England, my letters attempted to translate the experience to a sometimes worried readership who had devoted themselves to supporting me through prayer. On my part, there is a constant apology for not attending church or else an attempt to convince my readers that I was in fact experiencing a sort of church community even if not in the traditional space of a Sunday morning service. Also, some experiences are censored. For instance, the chronicle that describes an adventure on Canal Street – Manchester’s main gay quarter – is carefully worded to make myself only an observer. Aware of a conservative and even pious audience, there is certainly no mention of sexual encounters for instance. Many of my emails draw on church idioms and engage in a kind of church testimony. One chronicle narrates the event of taking in a homeless girl, but the act of kindness becomes a transaction in a Christian economy; it is response to a guilt felt for not being appreciative enough of the many ‘blessings’ and support I had received and experienced in England. Another chronicle ends ‘prayformeasIprayformyselfinJesusnameamen’ which of course has provided the title for this chapter. In my chronicles it was meant as an inside joke, mimicking the ending of a traditional testimony in a Jamaican evangelical church. I am not at all proposing that my own chronicles were trying to engage with, or in fact were engaged with a Jamaican public sphere, but it is interesting to me how the language of the religious becomes a feature of West Indian epistolography and so when those letters become public, the church testimony becomes a part of the discourse of the West Indian or the Jamaican public sphere.

Caribbean society, and perhaps Jamaica’s in particular, is still a deeply religious one – from Vodou to Obeah, from Santeria to Rastafari and especially to Christianity⁴⁴. And this religiosity, this attraction or commitment to the sacred as it were, is as a distinguishing feature of these societies. As a result, those who migrate often find themselves unable to fully express their worldviews. They find themselves profoundly on the peripheries of their new homes as they cannot participate in its

⁴⁴ See Barry Chevannes(1994), Dianne Stewart(2005), Maureen Warner Lewis(1997), Ennis Edmonds(2010) and Dale Bisnauth(1989)

public sphere as they do not know the language of that sphere. Many West Indians then who communicate most comfortably in and with religious rhetoric end up writing letters home – both to their families and to the newspapers. Perhaps one would not go so far as to say the use of the religious is a **defining** feature of West Indian epistolography (not only in letters to editors, but in epistolary fiction and poetry as we have seen) but it certainly is a recurring and a prevalent one.

‘The genre I’ve apparently settled into writing is the ignoble Email Forward’: The letter remediated and re-addressed in the Post-Postal Present

The first four chapters of this thesis have taken us on a journey through various forms of epistolography: from Sir Busta’s and Sir Vidia’s individual corpuses of non-fictional letters, to Gilroy, Mackenzie, Ramsay and Winkler’s epistolary fictions, from the verse epistles of Goodison, Berry and Bennet , to the epistolary columns of Aaron Dumas and Jennifer Keane-Dawes. In addition, we have followed a roughly chronological itinerary: from the 1930s to the present day; from the colonial Caribbean in which Bustamante lived and in which a national project was in full swing, to the post-colonial Caribbean in which I grew up, and in which trans-nationality has become a more important, if not essential, way of understanding Caribbean identity; and in terms of epistolography, we have moved out of the postal era into what I would now call alliteratively, the ‘Post-postal’ present.

The Project of Remediation

In this last substantive portion of the Ph.D. I would like to consider some of what has happened to epistolary practice as the letter has been both preserved and radically transformed by technological innovations. The Barbadian poet, Kamau Brathwaite predicted this seismic shift in a 1987 poem. The persona of the poem is writing to his mother; we might imagine her, an older Caribbean woman still living in a village and reading her son’s letter by lamplight:

Dear mumma,
uh writin yu dis letter
wha?
guess what! Pun a computer O
kay?
(Brathwaite 2001 [1987]: 444)

This indeed is the most profound change that has happened to epistolary practice – that letters are now composed and dispatched via computers and on the ‘information superhighway’ (an already outdated term) rather than on actual highways and dusty roads. The Post Office and postal services themselves have not become obsolete and there are no signs that they will do any time soon; official correspondences from the State and other institutional mail are still dispatched through the post. But perhaps more significantly, the post functions as an essential way for people to receive various parcels, including (and perhaps particularly) things which have been bought online. In this way it has remained, almost accidentally relevant and even essential to today’s world by mediating between the virtual and the actual – by quite literally trafficking items from online shelves and catalogues into people’s homes.

It is the letter itself – what was once synonymous with the word ‘post’ –that has moved out of the physical letterbox, its postal home, and onto our computer screens and virtual inboxes instead. It is the letter which has become ‘post-postal’.

Bolter and Grusin’s theory of remediation as a way of understanding New Media is relevant here. They propose that ‘[t]he goal of remediation is to refashion or rehabilitate older media.’ (Bolter & Grusin 1999: 56) By digitizing epistolary text, removing it from sheaves of paper and ‘reloading’ it onto the computer, email technology refashions the letter but it does not efface it.

‘...the new medium can remediate by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized. The very act of remediation, however, ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways.’

(Bolter & Grusin 1999: 47)

The ways in which the e-mail references and consciously acknowledges the largely discontinued letter are numerous. We may consider, for instance, the language that surrounds the technology: mail, inbox, virtual stamps, addresses, delivery, or to CC or BCC as in ‘Carbon Copy’ or ‘Blind Carbon Copy’. These latter acronyms imagine processes which are irrelevant to the new technology – that of laboriously writing letters with a sheet of carbon paper between two blank pages. The language of email thus remembers and references its antecedent. But of course we might also

consider the verb ‘to post’ which has acquired a new meaning – to publish text on the internet. In this way I would argue that the very act of posting blogs, or Facebook messages and updates, or tweets, constantly reminds us of its epistolary conceit. We may also consider the visual element, that is to say, the icons of envelopes and mailboxes that have become representative of this new kind of communication.

Bolter and Grusin argue that all New Media are driven by two contradictory impulses; they strive both for immediacy (the medium is always trying to disappear in order to give its users the impression that their experience is not being mediated and that they are interacting with the real) and hypermediacy (the medium makes constant references not only to its past but also to the surrounding contemporary media and gives access to these). Emails are both immediate and hypermediate. The email’s impulse towards immediacy comes, tautologically perhaps, from the effect of its very immediacy. Several emails can be sent in the space of few minutes and can therefore give users the feeling that an actual conversation is taking place. It refashions epistolary communication radically by eliminating the long gap in time it takes to write, send and receive letters. If, as we have stated before, the letter is always obsessed with its oral model, the email makes a tremendous step in replicating this model. Indeed, many people today will casually say, ‘we were talking by email’. Imbedded links and the ability to click on to other websites, the ability to copy and paste text in and out of an email, and the ability to attach files, are all examples of hypermediacy, as these all exploit new technologies.

In one of the ‘Dear Pastor’ letters received from Canada, a writer bemoans the rising crime level on the island but then ends with an interesting warning: ‘It is sad, really sad and they need to know that people around the world know what is happening in Jamaica. The Internet is a powerful tool!’ (Dumas, 2009 April 14) Changes in technology not only affect the ways Jamaicans write about themselves, but also gives these new ‘letters’ access to a much wider readership, and this has much to do with the mechanics of forwarding and readdressing which I will discuss below.

Those given to nostalgia have predictably tended towards despondency about the radical changes in epistolary practice and have mourned the end of letter-writing. AR Gurney’s Pulitzer Prize nominated play, *Love Letters*, is one of the more eloquent examples of this sort of elegizing. One of the characters/letter-writers in this two-

handler, Andrew Makepeace Ladd III, extols the value of hand-written correspondence:

This letter, which I'm writing with my own hand, with my own pen, in my own penmanship, comes from me and no one else, and is a present of myself to you. It's not typewritten, though I've learned how to type. There's no copy of it, though I suppose I could use a carbon. And it's not a telephone call, which is dead as soon as it is over. No, this is just me, me the way I write, the way my writing is, the way I want to be to you, giving myself to you across a distance, not keeping or retaining any part of it for myself, giving this piece of myself to you totally, and you can tear me up and throw me out, or keep me, and read me today, tomorrow, any time you want until you die. (Gurney 1990: 29-30)

Another example of this kind of nostalgia was prompted by a noteworthy event that occurred on January 27, 2006. On that day the last official telegram was sent. The IT blogger Russell Shaw despaired, "Sad, in a way, that although we know who sent the first telegram and what message it contained"⁴⁵, we have no knowledge of who sent the last telegram ever, and the words therein." (Shaw 2006) The world became momentarily united in its grief over the end of this practice of epistolography, tethering its specific extinction to the supposedly wider endangerment of the entire specie of the letter. Obituaries appeared in many broadsheets across the globe⁴⁶. What is ironic is that the telegram was of course itself a technological innovation which profoundly changed the ways people sent and received messages. Tom Standages's book, *The Victorian Internet* (1998) is an insightful and moving biography of the telegraph but also points out how similar its impact was on Victorian society as the internet has been in contemporary society. As Standage writes in his introduction 'today the internet is often described as an information superhighway; its nineteenth century precursor, the electric telegraph, was dubbed the 'highway of thought' [...] The

⁴⁵ The first telegram was sent by Samuel Morse and comically announced a cataclysmic change that the then-new technology would unleash. Morse's four word message was simply: What hath God Wrought.

⁴⁶ On Feb 3, 2006 Kate Thomas wrote in the Independent, UK 'The Last Post. The Telegram is dead. STOP.'; on the same day, Julian Borger wrote in the Guardian, UK, 'Telegram service ended stop Regrets stop'; Sam Roberts wrote in the New York Times on Feb 12, 2006, 'Dot-Dot-Dot, Dash-Dash-Dash, No More'

equipment may have been different, but the telegraph's impact on the lives of its users was strikingly similar.' (Standage 1998: VIII) He goes on to point out the kinds of technological crimes that were facilitated by the 'Victorian internet', the romances that blossomed over the wires, the ways people felt inundated by a sudden surplus of information, and the increase in efficiency prompted by this much faster way of sending and receiving messages.

The actual technology that allows for the sending and receiving of messages, and the wide culture of epistolography may go through changes, but the more simple fact of separated people sending and receiving written communications over great distance has not changed. The letter, refashioned/remediated/and perhaps reincarnated, as email has managed to survive and thrive. Email technology as well as other Social media platforms such as Facebook, the blogosphere and Twitter, ought to be considered as the new places in which West Indian epistolography lives and is practiced. It is for this reason that this final chapter also turns its attention most fully to my own emails – *The Cold Onion Chronicles*. For that they were missives written by myself, a Jamaican student living in the UK, qualifies them as examples of West Indian letters. And that they were written and sent on the computer means we can think of them as examples of the letter in the Post-Postal present – the Jamaican/West-Indian letter remediated.

Bernard Jankee is one of the first scholars to have tried to come to grips with the new technology in a Caribbean context. Jankee's research is specifically interested in the implications that increased use of internet technologies might have for the construction of Jamaican identities and how Jamaicans have begun to 'insert themselves in transnational, transborder realms of existence' (Jankee 2007: 422). He tells us quite rightly about the internet:

Far from being merely the technology of bandwidth, keyboards and screens, fibre-optic cables and satellite transponders, the Internet is a means of providing opportunities for, among other things, social engagement. Internet use has become a way of life, extending the boundaries of human interaction, and for many who connect to it, the Internet is a means of transcending previously constructed borders of state and nation. (Jankee 2007: 424)

Bernard's theorizing of internet usage here echoes James How's own theories of the use of epistolary discourse in 18th Century England – that it too became an everyday way of life that extended human interaction beyond the boundaries of the physical. You will recall from an earlier chapter that this is what How termed 'Epistolary Space' and indeed is almost synonymous with what we now know as Cyberspace. Cyberspace is a much wider and more dynamic sphere, but the social interaction in this space is oftentimes epistolary in nature.

Annie Paul is another Caribbean scholar who has begun to write about these emerging modes of communication. Paul's contribution to the recent *Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (2011) proposes a timeline in which Caribbean writers have slowly moved from a deep suspicion of and reticence to use New Media technologies to a slow acceptance of and even the incorporation of these modes in their work. As two points of contrast, the Guyanese writer Mark McWatt's 2002 Commonwealth Prize winning short story collection, *Suspended Sentences*, includes a story in which an apocalypse is hastened through use of the internet. In its aftermath the world goes back to a supposedly more productive and healthier way of living in which the internet is outlawed. On the other end of the spectrum, and more recently, the Jamaican writer Geoffrey Philp has a forthcoming epistolary novel called *Virtual Yardies* composed entirely of blogs and emails, not necessarily extolling, but at least acknowledging these as ways in which Caribbean citizens interact with each other and speak amongst themselves and to the world. The very title of the novel is an oxymoron: the word 'Yardie' has become a popular signifier for 'Jamaican' and is rooted in the word 'yard', very much a physical space⁴⁷. The title *Virtual Yardies* then gestures toward the ways Jamaicans have begun to transcend geographic but not necessarily national spaces. Their lives move beyond the physical boundaries of Jamaica even as they invent new ways of affirming and performing a national identity. Philp explains his project in a recent interview with Nicholas Laughlin.

The idea was a spin-off from another recently completed novel, "Zone of Uncertainty", which is being shopped around. I realised that the "lost daughter" character lived in the world of blogs, so I wanted to carry that idea a bit further. I also asked myself, what would an epistolary novel look like in 2007? (Laughlin 2008)

⁴⁷ See for instance Erna Brodber's important research, *A Study of Yards in the City of Kingston* (1975)

Just as Caribbean writers like Paulette Ramsay and Alecia McKenzie understood that an epistolary novel representing Jamaica in the 1970s and 1980s had to be very different from the Eighteenth Century epistolary novel, so too an epistolary novel for the Post-Postal Present has to be different again, acknowledging the ways the Caribbean has extended itself, and now partly resides within the ‘virtual’.

I had sent all of my *Cold Onion Chronicles* from the email address ‘keimiller@gmail.com’, the relative stability of this virtual address allowing for an otherwise unstable and peripatetic life – the Chronicles having been written and sent from various places in Manchester, Jamaica, Iowa, the British Virgin Islands and Scotland. I was not fully conscious of myself suddenly floating in a newly amorphous, deterritorialized Caribbean, but indeed every email is testimony to that fact.

The Project of Re-addressing

I have mentioned before Janet Gurkin Altman’s warning about a letter taken out of its original context, and her suggestion that we ought to consider such missives as essentially ‘re-addressed’. All of the epistolary narratives we have considered so far in this project have been, to some extent, ‘re-addressed’ but most obviously in the case of Bustamante’s and Naipaul’s letters – written in one context, then collected and read in an entirely new one with helpful glosses from editors to illuminate obscure bits of both narratives. But fictional letters as well (epistolary novels and verse epistles) partly depend on this act, or perhaps the fiction, of re-addressing. The fictional letter cannot usually acknowledge the actual reader who it is intended for. Though the reader is reading it in its intended context, there is a fictional re-addressing taking place.

Emails have made the process of ‘re-addressing’ simpler. The technology has an inbuilt means of circulating letters beyond their original audiences. This, of course, is known as ‘forwarding’. The act of forwarding requires the sender to insert new addresses where the mail can be dispatched to. The ‘forwarded’ email is essentially a readdressed letter. It is such a project of re-addressing or forwarding that I would like finally to attempt as part of this Ph.D. project.

As mentioned, what the last section of this dissertation will do is to present (or perhaps to re-present, or even to ‘forward’) a significant portion of *The Cold Onion*

Chronicles to you⁴⁸. I have moved then from the broader world of Caribbean epistolary practice back to my own personal practice of the form.

This project then begs me to address the contentious issue about including elements of the creative within a traditionally critical Ph.D. In fact, my own supervisor suggested that it would be appropriate for me to speak to the ways in which I have, within this project, subverted the conventions of the typical Creative Writing Ph.D. This was a troubling request since I had never understood myself as doing a ‘Creative Writing Ph.D.’. This is not to say I was naïve. It is understandable that as poet and novelist working in the academy it could be widely assumed by some that if I were to pursue a doctorate it would be for a creative project. But these terms and notions are vexing – this supposed diametric opposition between the ‘creative’ and the ‘critical’. One assumes that at their best all Ph.D.s are in fact ‘creative’, by virtue of the fact that they are extensive new works created by individual Ph.D. candidates. Traditionally however, the ‘Creative Writing Ph.D.’ is meant to be a significant work of art – a novel perhaps, or a volume of poetry – with a relatively brief critical reflection on the process of creating that work. It is in this sense that I have never understood the present Ph.D. to be a ‘Creative Writing’ one, nor do I offer it as a suitable model for that degree. I would even confess to a personal hesitation about the concept of the Creative Writing Ph.D. if only because it seems to invite suspicions from the two categories its holders want to belong to: those with traditionally critical Ph.D.s are likely to think that a Ph.D. in Creative Writing is not academic enough, while successful writers (few of whom have Ph.D.s in Creative Writing) are likely to think that those with doctorates in an area that already has its own rigorous systems of gatekeeping and for acknowledging accomplishment, are not especially licensed. The critical pursuit of the creative can leave one, then, being neither fish nor fowl; the attempt to be accepted by both categories can mean one is ultimately (and ironically) rejected by both.

Why then include a creative portion at the end? On the one hand, I hope the strictly critical reflections which I have engaged in thus far are of a sufficient extent to stand on their own; on the other hand, the creative portion which follows is intended

⁴⁸ I know that this is risky business – the audacity of actually identifying a ‘you’ within academic prose, and the supposed informality that it introduces to the tone of the narrative. I thought however that as this final section moves towards an actual selection of epistolary correspondence where ‘You’s and ‘I’s are necessarily and clearly identified, that I should risk this reduction of the critical distance of the language, and bring ‘you’ more fully into the picture.

to be a critical exercise as well. I am not merely interested in ‘presenting’ the chronicles, but rather in the more nuanced project of ‘re-addressing’ them. I am interested then in the role of the epistolary editor and archivist rather than the role of the original writer. Towards this end, I have provided several footnotes – inserted another narrative beneath the narrative of the original letters, explaining things that would have been more immediately obvious to the original recipients but which might be opaque for you, a previously unintended audience.

The Cold Onion Chronicles are different in kind to all the other epistolary narratives we have looked at thus far, and not only because they are all emails but also because of their texture – the degree of their impersonality. If I made the distinction in the first chapter between the private and the public letter, another distinction can usefully be made between the personal letter (which is oftentimes but not always synonymous with the private letter) and the impersonal letter (which is oftentimes synonymous with a kind of letter we haven’t yet considered – the newsletter). *The Cold Onion Chronicles* may have been consciously personable, but they were never personal. Though not addressed to the general public, the narratives seemed always so conscious of a diverse readership that they were always fit for public or general consumption. We might recall Naipaul’s repeated address to ‘Dear Everyone’ or his insistence, ‘These letters are for general readings – and I hope no one wants carbon copies!’ (Naipaul 1999: 97)

Of the many various forms of epistolography, I would argue it is the newsletter that stands on the very edge of the genre ready and willing to be transformed into something else – a travelogue, an essay, or a journalistic article. Some newsletters indeed have made the transition and cannot be called letters at all⁴⁹. It is the inability to be precise or even to name a ‘you’ which greatly diminishes the newsletter’s epistolarity.

The Cold Onion Chronicles as virtual newsletters standing on the very edge of the epistolary genre have subsequently made even further steps away and have transitioned into other kinds of narratives. The specific epistolary sequence is now discontinued, but perhaps what I had been initially writing as emails have moved into other digital spaces. The progression was simple: after *The Cold Onion Chronicles* I

⁴⁹ In fact, the first newsletter – the *Boston Newsletter*, began as a one page reprint of stories coming out of Europe. The newsletter then, despite its name, begins outside of the epistolary genre, though as it has become more and more popular with personal users it seems to occasionally slip back into the genre it is named for.

began writing ‘notes’ on a Facebook ‘author page’ and more recently I’ve begun writing a blog - ‘Under the Saltire Flag’⁵⁰ located at <http://keimiller.com>. Both Facebook notes and blog posts are rooted in the experiment that was *The Cold Onion Chronicles* but the ‘you’ continues to break down and even to disintegrate. Still, the Facebook page and blog could be seen as the chronicles remediated even further; the you might be less present, but it still haunts the narratives. I have become increasingly conscious of myself not so much writing to friends any more, but writing missives from ‘Jamaica’⁵¹ addressed to the world. Two anecdotal moments help to illustrate this point: a Facebook post on June 24, 2010 which comically reflected on the capture of the Jamaican drug lord Christopher ‘Dudus’ Coke, who happened at the time of his capture to be disguised in a woman’s wig, was picked up in less than 24 hours by the *New York Times* under the heading, ‘Jamaicans Ponder Cross-Dressing Gangster’(Mackey 2010). And then, as recently as September 2011, the international blog site ‘Global Voices’ solicited me for comments on the controversial refusal of Jamaican media houses to air a Public Service Announcement which called on Jamaicans to show tolerance to their homosexual family members.

The Cold Onion Chronicles as a set of letters (or newsletters) can then be seen as a sort of bridge between older and newer forms of West Indian epistolography, connecting the letters of Bustamante and Naipaul to the current Post-Postal present of tweets and blogs and Facebook messages. Jamaicans are increasingly aware of their ability to contribute to what is arguably an international public sphere and so have begun posting more and more of these new forms of ‘letters’ to that world.

The project of re-addressing *The Cold Onion Chronicles* has brought into focus questions which have undoubtedly plagued compilers of epistolary sequences before me. Such questions include: what is the role of the editor? Is it ethical to change or correct the script at all, even when it is obvious that the writer made a mistake? To what extent should the potentially obscure information found within letters be explained by footnotes?

⁵⁰ Only two countries in the world have saltire flags –the diagonal cross on which ~St. Andrew was apparently crucified. Those countries are Jamaica and Scotland. The blog is largely narratives about living between these two spaces.

⁵¹ Obviously by this I mean from the subjective place of being Jamaican, rather than the physical geographic place of Jamaica

The emails have been edited, but not heavily. Where spotted, spelling errors have been fixed, and very occasionally an extraneous sentence or two have been deleted. There is of course a strange overlap between my historicized role as writer of the chronicles and my present role of ‘editor’. Significantly, unlike most editors of epistolary sequences, I have enjoyed the greater freedom to manipulate the text slightly (or even more than slightly) if compelled to, having naturally received the permission and approval of the historicized writer. However, because the entire sequence of *The Cold Onion Chronicles* is in fact such a large sequence (what follows is only a sample) wherever I believed a section needed serious editing I simply opted not to include it. Each chronicle was originally quite long and was composed of multiple sections and it wasn’t difficult to delete many of these. What follows then is an abridged version of the entire sequence.

You will notice that there are two additional emails/chronicles even after what claims to be ‘The Last Cold Onion Chronicle’. The first is indeed titled ‘Another Cold Onion Chronicle’ which recounts the experience of applying for a job at the University of Glasgow, while the second is titled ‘A Corn Chronicle’ and was written while I was at the University of Iowa and preparing to come to Scotland.

Entering upon this project (and now I speak of the entire dissertation) I had the suspicion, even the conviction, that the culture of West Indian epistolography was an interesting but under-studied one; otherwise I would not have attempted to write a Ph.D. on the subject. Now, as I come to the close, I am persuaded that it is quite an important one as well, and crucial to the understanding of the transnational Caribbean of today that has moved well outside of the region’s strictly terrestrial spaces. Letters have provided alternate locations in which Caribbean citizens have fortified their regional and local identities even while navigating their ways through and finding their places within a globalized and increasingly borderless world. Their letters, emails, tweets and blogs connect them profoundly to the places where they are originally from.

Their letters have not only been addressed to ‘home’ but also to a wider world. Many narratives have been circulated (some of them inherently, even if not maliciously, racist) that have tried to define what it means to be from the Caribbean. Such narratives have been at once historical and contemporary, ranging from Columbus’s first letter which we have looked at previously describing people with

tails, to various caricature sketches on television programmes today. West Indians, and Jamaicans, specifically have probably felt the need to post their own achievements, their own concerns, and their own testimonies to a broad audience in order to say, “this is who we are, in our own words”. Indeed, many of these epistolary narratives could be captured under the title of this Ph.D., that popular expression, Jamaica to di Werl!

In the introductory chapter, I chose the metaphor of a man going into an overgrown field with a raised machete. Now, wiping the sweat from my brow, I take a deep breath and observe the work I have done, the field cleared in what I predicted would be a somewhat ad-hoc way, with many patches and indeed many acres still overgrown. While satisfied that I have made significant inroads into a previously undisturbed field, I acknowledge the need for much more work to be done, though it will require labour from other kinds of scholars as well. This project has not only moved through time, but through disciplines – from strictly literary studies to cultural studies and perhaps finally to the exciting and burgeoning field of the digital humanities. It is this final field which I find myself more interested in moving into, but new critical tools are required – virtual lassos which can catch and hold on to text that is forever moving, scrolling off of our screens each time we update them. How do we approach and speak intelligently about texts which seem so ephemeral and that are no longer contained by a stable medium – texts which are however developing every day and saying things with profundity, grace and literary poise? This is a question that needs answering soon, but in a future project.

For now, I present a set of letters which also could have been lost, but were more easily lassooed. They have been recovered from outboxes on Gmail, or as emails sent back to me on request – my own letters readdressed to their original dispatcher, and now readdressed to you. Here then are *The Cold Onion Chronicles*.

The Cold Onion Chronicles

Cold Onion Chronicles #1

[sent on 25th September 2004]

(with a nod to Nadz and Steve)⁵²

Part1: “I can’t take the way you West Indians Speak”⁵³ said the West Indian woman.

Dear friends, I arrived in London, and it was a cold day as if there is no other way to arrive in this city; as if there has never been anyone so lucky as to step off the plane straight into a warm English morning. Aunt Audrey and Uncle John⁵⁴ picked me up from the airport which was a relief. They had said they couldn’t do it (work and all) which confused me a little as I had been under the impression that they were retired. They had told me I’d have to take the train to a point near them, but the burning sensation of guilt must have finally lodged somewhere in their cold English hearts and so they decided at last to come get me. This act of kindness, however reluctantly given, trumped the vindictive plan I had already hatched to tell them when next they visited Jamaica, to take one of those crowded mini-buses to a convenient point from which I could pick them up.

⁵² My friends Nadia Ellis and Steven Russell (now both teaching at UC Berkley) had gone to study at Oxford a couple of years before. The emails which they sent home to friends were titled ‘The Colonial Chronicles’. ‘The Cold Onion Chronicles’ is then a spoof; it admits to an even more complicated intertextuality than the one that all letters are already distinguished by.

⁵³ Reference to the famous scene from Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*. When the character, Sir Galahad, is courting a white English woman, Daisy, she is confused by his accent and asks, ‘What did you say? You know it will take me some time to understand everything you say. The way you West Indians speak!’ to which Galahad famously replies, ‘What wrong with it? Is English we speaking.’ (Selvon 1956: 93) ‘Is English We Speaking’ becomes the title for Mervyn Morris’s seminal collection of essays (1999).

⁵⁴ Audrey (my father’s sister) and John Dehaney (her husband) had migrated to England over 40 years ago. In his retirement John rose to the position of ‘Deputy Mayor’ and subsequently ‘Mayor’ of Mitcham, a borough in London. This was understandably a source of great pride for the couple, but I am suggesting that in their many affectations to be English they had wilfully become like the character ‘Daisy’ from *The Lonely Londoners*, not understanding West Indian culture, or even the ways West Indians speak. Indeed, not understanding their own original culture soon became its own source of pride.

The point is, they came. But I find that they are strange creatures – these Jamaicans living abroad, the kind who have slowly come to despise and pity the island where they come from. On the drive home Aunt Audrey could barely hide her glee as she interrogated me: ‘Were you questioned thoroughly?’ ‘Were you searched?’ ‘Did customs give you a hard time – you being Jamaican and... you know.... having those dreadlocks!’ ‘And were there dogs out sniffing you as you got off the plane? Oh you can hardly blame them for that. You know how it is with you Jamaicans⁵⁵!’ She actually said that – ‘You Jamaicans’ and followed it with, ‘you can be so awful!’ Now is that not the pot calling the kettle....well...black?

Aunt Audrey and Uncle John. Bless them. The next morning at breakfast they tried to get even more information out of me: specifically, they wanted to know how exactly had the country gone down further? They told me how wonderful Jamaica had been back in the day, but everything had degenerated. But thank god they were now in jolly old England, they seemed to congratulate each other for this.

I took the train⁵⁶ in and explored London. I didn’t like it at all. Too big. Too overwhelming and pompous. The first big city I think I’ve gone to and not liked.

The next day my cousin⁵⁷ picked me up to take me to the coach station. She was very nice and kind—in a Jamaican way. I think the English way to be nice and kind is simply called polite. But she was more than that. It was really good company. We managed to miss the first coach (bus for you locals back home) which disturbed the cousin greatly, but it was because we were chatting and I think the chat was good.

I arrived in Manchester, got my room settled in quick enough time. I lugged my luggage up three flights of stairs and fell asleep on the bare mattress of my new room, my hand luggage as a pillow. It was one of the worst nights I’ve ever spent. I tossed,

⁵⁵ A rejection of their Jamaican-ness of course, but perhaps also a claim on ‘Englishness’. The Jamaican concept of the ‘roast breadfruit’ or the American concept of the ‘oreo’ – black on the outside, but white on the inside, is relevant here. For a larger discussion see Mervyn Alleyne’s *Construction of Race and Ethnicity in the Caribbean and the World*, UWI Press, 2002, or of course the seminal text by Franz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952)

⁵⁶ It strikes me, upon re-reading, that I would have called it the ‘train’ and not the ‘underground’ or the ‘tube’. ‘Train’ of course is technically, but perhaps not idiomatically, correct. Tiny details such as these seem to reveal most profoundly my ‘foreignness’ and the ways in which I was naturally translating the experience into my own language.

⁵⁷ Her name is Dionne Hamilton. Though English by birth, Dionne had migrated to Jamaica as a child and grew up there. At the time that I first moved to the UK, she had only recently moved back herself.

turned, and woke up so rhaatid⁵⁸ cold I was ready to head back to Jamaica. The next day I went out and bought the first bed set I found with comforter⁵⁹ and all. It was when I reached back and took out each piece (realizing at that moment that it included curtains) that saw it in all its purple and lavender glory, not a colour I would have chosen⁶⁰ if I was taking my own time. But lavender or not, my nights have been comfy and warm since.

Did you know that if temperature is increased gradually a human can boil to death without realizing it?

It's true, and I have to bare this in mind when showering. The shower doesn't seem to have a mixer; you can put it on either 'hot' or 'cold'. There is no in between, and they really are extreme at both ends. The trick is to put it from cold to hot, and jump under the pouring water about ¼ way on its rise to scorching temperature and you hope that by time it reaches boiling level, you won't feel it. I'm sure this is unhealthy, but heck.

Anyway, will write you all in another month or so.

Yours,

Kei (It's what I'm introducing myself as up here)⁶¹

Cold Onion Chronicles #2

[sent on 8th October 2004]

Part 1: The story of the chineyman, the indianman and the whiteman.

People have asked me to tell them more about my living arrangements – an odd request. What more can I say than I live on the third floor of an apartment that I choose to describe simply as “elevator-less”. The cruelty of this adjective felt regularly – for instance the day of arrival when I walked in with two legitimate

⁵⁸ A Jamaican expletive

⁵⁹ The word 'duvet' certainly does not exist in Jamaican English. I translated it then to 'comforter'

⁶⁰ Again, a not very subtle denial of sexuality

⁶¹ As noted in my chapter on Bustamante, this was one of the first times I had begun to consciously reinvent myself as 'Kei'. Though some people had called me 'Andrew Kei Miller' in Jamaica (especially my mother when she was upset) no one would call me 'Kei' by itself. This would have been especially confusing as my father was and is also called 'Kei', though his name is actually 'Keith'.

suitcases and one supposed piece of ‘hand luggage’ (quite large in the way of ‘hand luggage’ but which I had lugged onto my back while in the airport, smiling to the British Airways agent as if it was the lightest thing in the world in order that I would not have to pay for an extra piece of luggage). Then there are the times when you’ve made the long walk from the supermarket, bags in your hand and you look up at all the stairs ahead of you.

In my flat, I seem to be always reliving a joke from high school, for we are a chineyman, an indianman, a whiteman, and a dread!⁶² Each flat-mate is interesting in his own way. The Indian man who is actually from Dubai is the youngest but looks the oldest. I am convinced the first words he learnt in English were “my course is very, very difficult”, a phrase he repeats ad-nauseum as if to impress us and to explain his anti-social ways. He is actually a refugee from another flat where the people apparently made too much noise and wouldn’t afford him the space to study which he needs to do around the clock he assures us, because his course “is very, very difficult.” I’m tempted at times to ask him, just to be sure, if this is his really his first year of an undergraduate course?

The first day he arrived he talked to me and the Spanish guy, just to ensure that we were not rowdy people. This effectively sent poor party-loving Javier (the whiteman/Spanish guy) into shock. One night he even knocked on my door, his poor eyes still stunned, asking “what we do? What we do now? This..this... how do you say?...quiet? si! Quiet not good for Spanish or Jamaican boy no?” That is Javier – always looking for a party, a lyme⁶³ of any sort.

Joshua is the last guy (the chineyman from Hong Kong) whose major fault happens to be the fact that he is a great cook. One might not understand why I would count such a thing as a fault, but you try going into the kitchen to prepare your five minute meal of ‘microwave garlic chicken’ from a box, with two slices of bread and butter, while

⁶² This of course is a variant of the ‘three nationalities’ joke format which in Britain would most commonly be, ‘An Englishman, an Irishman and a Scot...’ Curiously, in Jamaica, this format is usually racialized which gives rise to interesting questions about what the more pertinent divisions in Jamaican society are. But perhaps more disturbingly, in the Jamaican variety of this popular joke template, it is the blackman or the rastaman who is always the butt of the joke. For a wider discussion on the ‘Three Nationalities’ Joke see Delia Chiaro’s *The Language of Jokes* (1992).

⁶³ Originally a Trinidadian word, ‘lime’ meaning a social gathering. For some reason, when written by most Jamaicans this word acquired a new spelling ‘lyme’ but means the same.

Chinese ute⁶⁴ is behind you using every piece of his eight pot set, broth brewing in one pot, mushrooms simmering in another, slices of salmon marinating in some wine in the oven, the rice steaming... and all these smells wafting over the kitchen, while you eat your lickle fool-fool dinner, always looking over your shoulder at his preparations and licking your lips in vain. Tsssst⁶⁵.

Part 2: England can be a heart rending experience

I didn't tell you all how in my first week in this country, walking back to my flat in the student village, I passed one hall where there was suddenly much screaming. That's always such a frightening moment... to be walking in virtual silence and then to hear screams. I was ready to pick up the pace and jog home when out of the hall came a frightened Indian guy screaming "Who knows CPR? Does anyone know CPR?" I didn't... but since I was the only one in the streets it kind of forced me to stop and offer any help I could. While he ran down the street calling for help he asked me to go upstairs and see if I could be of any assistance. I know there are doctors on this list, but for me that was an awful moment... to walk up those stairs to where a Hispanic woman was crying, "somebody help him!" knowing I could do nothing really. Also I realize, to walk into a room where some unknown calamity is waiting, is as much (or more) an act of facing your own mortality as it is for this other stranger in the throes of death, as it turned out, experiencing a heart attack. Perhaps mine is a selfish way to look at it... I dunno⁶⁶.

Part 3: Me, mi love? When mi deya yard mi dash this weh!⁶⁷

Alternative title: Me chat bad! Very bad!

In England you suddenly keep on the look out for black people and keep listening for the Jamaican accent, something you thankfully will manage to hear at least once per

⁶⁴ Phonetic Jamaican spelling of the English word 'youth'.

⁶⁵ This is the most common orthographic representation of the oral gesture of the 'kiss-teeth' otherwise known as the 'suck-teeth' or the 'chuuups'. See Peter Patrick's and Esther Figueroa's paper 'The Meaning of Kiss-Teeth' in *American Speech*, 2004.

⁶⁶ I have never found out what happened to this man - or indeed who he was.

⁶⁷ Translation: As for me, my dear, when I go back home, I throw this away!

week. There is actually a Jamaican restaurant just down the road from here – rather expensive – but I’ve decided I’ll save my visit for the depth of winter when I’m really depressed and want to go home.

Anyhow, the other day taking the bus home, an old woman lumbered on to the bus, and somehow I just knew, maybe from the way she stood, arms akimbo in the aisle, looking round for a seat, that she was Jamaican. She eventually sat beside me and after exchanging a few words with people around her, I introduced myself as a Jamaican and said how good it was to hear the accent.

It was actually fun talking to her on the short drive. She made me to know⁶⁸, that although mi hear her talking with an English accent now (WHAT ENGLISH ACCENT!??) that whenever she reach Jamaica... whaaaa!!?...she dash dat weh and pick up back her Jamaican talk – not like how she talking cockney now, she assured me with a laugh, for “in Jamaica, me talk bad! Very bad!!” I don’t think I’ve ever had the pleasure of hearing a Jamaican so proud of ‘talking bad’. It was refreshing.

She also explained that I was a ‘yardie’ – due to the fact that I had been in England for less than five years – and how horrible yardies generally were. “Is like dem come ya fi mash up de poor Brits! Especial de women! Oh lawd! Dem yardie woman is turble⁶⁹! So loud. Mmm.” All I could think about were the ‘yardie’ women I know – Jeanette, Anika, Camille Higgins, and poor Aunty Kay⁷⁰ who had hitherto put up a convincing show of her demureness. But now I know. Hooligans, all of them.

When miss lady made to exit the bus, everyone stepping off and saying “cheers!” in the usual British way, this old lady said (and I must admit it might have been the most

⁶⁸ Clearly, as I begin to affect her own speech, my own epistolary voice begins to take on the texture of the oral here. Using that creole construction ‘she made me to know’, I begin to transcribe the oral. What strikes me also is how many voices along the ‘creole continuum’ are being accommodated in this short passage, for the parenthetical remarks that comment on the interaction are much closer to an acrolect than a basilect.

⁶⁹ ‘turble’ – Jamaican creole for ‘terrible’.

⁷⁰ Jeanette Bain and Anika Marcelle had both come to England to pursue postgraduate training as dancers. Jeanette, as of 2011, is presently Director of the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora, and also teaches dance histories and cultures at Middlesex University in London. Anika Marcelle has gone back to the Caribbean – to Trinidad, and dances with the national company there. Camille Higgins had come to the UK to study actuarial sciences and still works in this field in London. Kay Bailey, a paediatrician, had gone to the University of Nottingham to do more research in Asthma treatment. All four women I had known from my church in Jamaica – Mona Heights Chapel. In a word, they were ‘good Christian woman’. All four would also have been on my mailing list.

englishy thing she said if she didn't say it at a volume as if she meant it for the whole bus and not just the driver), "AWRITE DEN DAWLING! BA-BYE!".

Hey.. I made mention of the Jamaican restaurant, and must say the good thing about Manchester is that there is something for everyone. Italian restaurants, literally hundreds of Indian restaurants on the 'curry mile', Chinese restaurants in China Town. There is the Opera house, there are cinemas and alternative movie houses. Karaoke bars. Lots of cafes. And then what can I say about Canal Street, except to tell you how last summer apparently, prangsters deleted the 'C' from 'Canal' and the 'S' from street, thereby giving it a truer reflection of what it is popular for.

Part 4: I'm not a worrier, I'm just dumb.

For those of you worried that a year in England would see the last traces of any religion in me evaporate, you will be glad to know that last Sunday I went to church⁷¹. It's not going to work out though. I knew it was all going to go downhill when the woman who introduced the morning's speaker commented that she hoped he wasn't worrying. He shouted in response, "I'm not a worrier, I'm a warrior!" This bit of word play went over well with the group. I looked for the nearest exit.

Anyhow all, I'm gone for now.

Till next time,

Kei

Cold Onion Chronicles #3

[sent on 24th October 2004]

⁷¹ I am now intrigued by the sequence of things narrated in this chronicle. For first I invoke four Christian friends who had come to England around the same time as me, and with whom I met occasionally. Then, in the most offhand way, I had mentioned the fact of 'Canal Street' – the major gay hub of Manchester, but my mention of it was careful not to necessarily include myself in that space, though not to exclude myself from it either. And finally here I notice what could be read as a defensive posture – an insistence that I did at least try to go to church, even if I wouldn't keep it up. But also what is intriguing here is that it is clear that this movement towards an agnosticism had already begun before moving to England.

Part 1: Mack D's gone crazy! Mack D's gone mad!⁷²

I have found the most wonderful place to shop at. A supermarket called Asda. It really is quite shameless the things I buy at this supermarket franchise – but really, why would one waste money to buy brand name ketchup for all of one pound, when you can buy Asda ketchup for 30 pence!? Everything I buy is Asda's. Asda eggs, Asda mayonnaise, Asda Ketchup, Asda orange juice, Asda milk, Asda dandruff shampoo, Asda soap and toilet tissue, Asda razor and shaving cream, Asda pocket tissue. Even Asda keyring, boxers, scarf and gloves! It's awful. The last time I went to the supermarket I spent £14, and the food last mi two weeks! (I've been told that when people are living on a tight budget here, they may spend £20 a week on food. Amateurs.)

Part 2: Lost in Translation

In England, sometimes you feel that English is your first language so you will get by. But other times you are hopelessly lost. I won't even tell you of my experience at the comedy club where the man speaking, in the deepest Manchester accent, had everyone rolling on the floor in stitches while I understood not a single word! There are so many things you must learn to translate. 'Bus' is now 'Coach'. 'Fries' are now 'Chips', and 'Chips' are now 'crisps'. And you must not fight with the woman who insists she has no eggplant in her stall, despite you clearly seeing it there only the day before. She doesn't mean to slight you, but they are called aubergine here. 'Bad man' is instead a 'scally'. Hanky Panky is now Rumpy Pumpy (which sounds uncomfortably anal to my ear). And perhaps most crude to our sensibilities is how there are signs for 'toilets' everywhere. People go to the 'toilet' and not the more demure 'bathroom'. I must confess that in my first two weeks I was disturbed at the sheer number of signs announcing toilets here, there and everywhere. Even on the top

⁷² Reference to a popular TV and radio Ad in Jamaica the time. The over-acted line 'Mack D's gone crazy! Mack D's gone mad!' was in reference to the supposedly unbelievable bargains you could get in store.

of sky scrapers. Finally I realized my mind was often filling in an extra ‘i’ to signs which actually read ‘TO LET’⁷³, as in “available for rent”, yet another translation.

Of course the curse words are not our local collection of clawt this and clawt that. They do however adhere to international standards. Here, however, pronunciation is key. Make sure, for instance, that when you step into the shower and you are greeted with jets of cold water that what comes out of your mouth sounds something like “fooking-eill!”

Living in a metropole you will often find two or three people speaking a strange language to your ear, with no one else around (it would seem) understanding them at all. Ethiopian, punjabi, chinese, Malaysian.. it’s quite international. But today at the pool, into the crowded locker room walks two black men. One of them is saying quite loudly, “eeeh star? Yu feel seh dem white bwoy wainda feel nuh way when we’da reas’n bout slavery an’ dem sinting deh? M’naah watch nuh face yu nuh, but mi si seh one a dem face a screw when de chute eena reach ‘im.”⁷⁴ It was wonderful. I looked around the room, and everyone’s face was blank. A foreign language, completely strange to their ears.

Part 3: The black body relaxes when it is identified as ‘nigger’

At last I have been called ‘nigger’. I may have been called other things but I didn’t hear. I was walking home two nights ago and the two drunk white men who called me this had been shouting something else – some offence which was again lost in translation. But I knew they were shouting at me and in the context of the night and their drunkenness I knew it was meant to be something bad, but I couldn’t be bothered.

I continued walking. So because the first undecipherable word was having no effect, they made another effort with “HEY NIGGER!” and the word fit itself into my back with a kind of relief. I thought – so that’s it. It’s not so bad after all. Is that a strange

⁷³ It is surprising to see this observation here, and as my own. It made its way into my first novel, *The Same Earth* (2008), and of course was ascribed to one of my characters, also walking through Manchester on her first trip to England.

⁷⁴ Translation: Hey do you feel that those white boys might have been feeling in any way peculiar while we were reasoning about slavery and all those kinds of things? You know I’m not one to care for other people’s opinions, but I did notice one of them scowling when the truth began to hit home.

reaction? I don't think so. I think whether we know it or not, we are always tense waiting for this pronouncement. Every bloody time the black Caribbean person visits America or Canada, or now England, we are told to expect it. That there be some racist mofos there. It's been drilled into you so often that this is supposed to be 'white-man's land' and that they don't want you here, and that many of them see you and think 'nigger' so when you finally hear it, when you don't have to imagine them silently thinking it, you feel, 'oh. So that's it. I can move on now.'

And surprisingly, having heard it at last, I didn't slip into any kind of depression. I didn't get angry thinking, 'Lord, I really am living in a racist country.' I just thought, what assholes.

And racism seems to me just the other side of the coin of what can be a racial fetish, and though I feel strange being fetishized at times, I think I've probably needed it to boost my self-esteem here. I know it sounds a shallow thing to say, but when you feel so invisible or ugly you just live for the moment when you go out and are called 'beautiful' by some white woman. 'Oh my god! You are sooo be-yoo-ti-ful' by which she means: exotic, new, I've-never-had-sex-with-a-black-man-before.

At the Student Union I work at on Tuesdays, my co-worker Kathy (really nice woman) came in the other day singing how she went to Copacabana, the club, with her new Brrrrrazillian boyfriend! She was careful to roll the 'r' and do a little cha-cha shake of the butt.

And I think, whatever you call it, Nigger/be-yoo-ti-ful/brrrrazillian... it's all kind of the same. Some days it sucks to be here.

Lots of love to everyone,

Kei

Cold Onion Chronicles #4

[sent on 9th November 2004]

Part 1: An Inventory of how long things last

Living on your own⁷⁵ you automatically start keeping an inventory of how long it is that things last.

My inventory:

Roll of toilet tissue: 2 weeks (always to the day! What consistent bowel movements I have)

Cheese: a little over 2 weeks (the trouble is it always gets stale on me, and den me have to dash de whole of it into de pot to make some pasta. But wait -- You tink me'd a dash weh de good stale cheese? Tsssst.)

500ml bottle of oil: still going... might have 3 more weeks use.

Bottle of ketchup (at Asda for only 20p!!): 4 weeks

Bottle of mayonnaise: also, 4 weeks

Lotion: the 200ml expensive bottle of Vaseline almost lasted three weeks. We've since upgraded to a cheaper 500ml bottle of Asda lotion. Will watch it and see.

Dishwashing liquid: I think it will last the whole year. Three of us in the flat bought bottles, all perched on the kitchen sink. They hardly look like they have budged up to now. I sometimes use mine as toilet cleaner as well but the bottle is still almost full.

Salt: Also looks like it will last the year.

Socks: An old office mate told me of her nasty sister who would wear socks till dem dutty cyaa done and den dash dem weh⁷⁶. But socks are so ridiculously cheap – so, one 2 pound pack every two weeks.

Part 2: Tank God fi wi lickle bit o' dat⁷⁷!

I went to Oxford last week to visit the Jamaican posse and in one conversation Camille Higgins praised that bit of Jamaican-ness in us that would make us survive England. "Tank god," she said, "fi wi lickle bit o' dat!"

⁷⁵ The unique experience of Manchester was not just the first time living in a new country, but the first time living on my own. Though I was 25, it was the first time I had done this. This fact seems strange to many people in Britain but did not seem strange to me coming from Jamaica. Indeed, Jamaica's economic situation means it's very normal that young people will live in their parent's house until they get married. The college years as a period of living on one's own is not a Jamaican reality which could account for the conservative nature of the society.

⁷⁶ ...'until they were very dirty and had to be thrown away'

⁷⁷ Thank God for our little bit of that

It felt as if our presence transformed Oxford. Imagine that – this particular portion of England, home no less to the Oxford dictionary whose authority some have used to suppress our Caribbean ways and sounds (yes, our lickle bit o’ dat) became for us a little refuge. And what choice did poor Oxford have when 6 Jamaicans decided to descend upon it like bombs. We were sitting in Jeanette’s lounge and I remember Kay suddenly looking around the room with a kind of urgency and curiosity. She asked us why the place looked so familiar? What was it reminding her of? And Camille responded, “Jamaica. Don’t it look like a house in Jamaica?”

It is impossible to recount, to recreate what the weekend meant – every joke, every smile, every connection. The little kindnesses that sustained you even then – Kay following me back to the bus just for a few last minutes of being together for instance. The weekend was patois and it was plantain (literally). It was gratercake and tamerind (Fed-exed from Jamaica). It was milo. My sister has tried to convince me that milo is made from Nestle, and is therefore an international drink. She, having met a Japanese girl and another from Mexico who pronounced it meelo. I am not convinced. Meelo is Meelo. Milo is Milo. The package is green and gold. Milo took me straight back home to Papine (I am advised this sounds more cultural than Hope Pastures⁷⁸). While everyone was mixing tea or coffee, I asked for three teaspoons of dry milo. And as I tasted it, the song from the ad became true: and now I’m on top of the world, I plan to stay here forever.

I’m romanticizing it all – I know. And I know most everyone must have their own ‘dat’. But that weekend was our ‘dat’ and it was good.

Part 3: I feel like bombing a parliament⁷⁹

So the past weekend was one never-ending display of fireworks and sparklers and gunpowder in the air. The British were celebrating Guy Fawkes Day – an unsuccessful attempt to bomb their parliament to bits. Why a country would celebrate such a thing is a little beyond me – but it does open up wonderful possibilities.

⁷⁸ While Papine and Hope Pastures are both in the Kingston 6 area of Jamaica – Hope Pastures is generally an affluent neighbourhood while Papine is characterized by many more signs of poverty. Caribbean Literature and culture and intellectual thought has often privileged the ‘folk’ (See the Savacou debate between Kamau Brathwaite and Eric Roach) and as a result middle-class Caribbean migrants often obscure their affluent backgrounds in order to appear more authentically ‘Caribbean’.

⁷⁹ I was trying to reference Bob Marley’s line ‘I feel like bombing a church’

Jamaica has been searching for moment of national pride and achievement to celebrate. What a glory if we could celebrate political foibles and mishaps! We would have parties every day. One weekend there could be an airshow out at Palisadoes to celebrate Five-Flights-A-Day⁸⁰ Weekend. There could be a Seaga ‘Legs Wide Open’ day on Ruthven Road⁸¹. And since it doesn’t look like there’ll be a Gay March in Jamaica, we can have instead a heterosexual march, under the banner of PJ’s stupid remark “I am a longstanding heterosexual”⁸² as if it were a club you joined and validated membership each year. We would need of course to have a ‘Light A Candle/Sing A Sankey Day’ where political outcasts are freely welcomed back into the fold⁸³. On Woman’s Pride day we need to play Portia’s ‘Dis gyal nuh fraid ah no man’ speech⁸⁴ with as much pride and frequency as Americans play Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a Dream’. And then there was that alleged incident where a JLP activist through her green drawers into the crowd. What a bachannal that would be...all around the island, women disrobing and flinging orange drawers and green drawers, or maybe even white drawers to represent peace. It would certainly boost productivity in the Garment Factories.

Anyway all, till next time, Cheers⁸⁵.

Kei

⁸⁰ In the 70s, the then Prime Minister, Michael Manley, was unsympathetic to the concern of middle-class and upper-class Jamaicans who thought he would take the country down the road towards communism. To their complaints he famously responded ‘There are five flights a day which leave Jamaica. Take your pick. Many unfortunately took him up on this offer. White flight in the 1970s represented not only a mass exodus of people, but also of capital.

⁸¹ Perhaps one of the greatest political gaffes, former Prime-Minister and Leader of the Opposition, Edward Seaga, once critiqued the government’s liberal policies and compared Jamaica to ‘a woman with her legs wide open’. Ruthven Road is a popular spot for prostitutes.

⁸² What PJ Patterson, then Prime-Minister of Jamaica had actually said was "My credentials as a life-long heterosexual person are impeccable." (Jamaica Gleaner, June 14, 2001). Rumours of Patterson’s homosexuality had followed his political career and he saw the need, on radio, to make this public declaration.

⁸³ In the 1986 five members of the Jamaica Labour Party attempted a coup to dispose the then leader ‘Edward Seaga’. It failed spectacularly and they were then cast out in a political wilderness. At the same time the Jamaican Artist Lovindeer had a hit song which pretended to be in the mode of a Christian Revival hymn where backsliders were persuaded to repent and return to the flock. The instructive chorus of that song was ‘Light a Candle, Sing a Sankey, And find your way back home.’ Seaga famously used this song to invite the ‘Gang of Five’ back to the Jamaica Labour Party.

⁸⁴ Portia Simpson-Miller became Prime-Minister after Patterson retired, fighting off popular images of her as being too uncouth. Portia’s chest-thumping speech in Jamaican creole that she was not afraid of any man or any woman did not help this image.

⁸⁵ Re-reading these epistles I was intrigued by this first instance of the very British word ‘cheers’ creeping into the letter, and how it is used very regularly thereafter. I wasn’t conscious at the time of these Britishisms which had begun to change the way I both spoke and wrote. This first instance seems

particularly interesting because of how it is attached to another register – ‘till next time’ married with ‘Cheers’ represents perhaps a kind of multicultural discourse.

Alternative title: Cold Onion Forward

Part 1: On the back cover of the present volume

I have to admit that when I was paid perhaps the biggest compliment for these emails I've been sending to you all, I waivered between feeling annoyed and feeling honoured. You see, apparently while I send this out to my own little private list, there are those of you who then redistribute it to your own lists.

Annoyed?

Honoured?

Annoyed?

Honoured?

Finally, I realized that what I should feel was neither emotion, but instead, I should have felt ashamed. Here I am, in a big Creative Writing programme at a foreign university to boot, and the genre I've apparently settled into writing is the ignoble Email Forward⁸⁶.

Well, what to do? If a suh, a suh⁸⁷! Embrace it I say. Please forward this to 10 people and good luck will come yr way! Do not delete if you love Jesus.

Part 2: Finally, the story of the cold onion

So far I have avoided all requests as to 'what the hell does the 'cold onion' in the title mean?' I could lie and say it had to do with the cold. I could tell you it had something to do with my almost buying daffodils at Asda, because the way they pack the buds, it can fool you for onions. But the actual truth now seems so lame – that when my good friends Steven and Nadia were in England they too wrote chronicles to us back home, and those were titled 'ColonialChronicles' and I was just playing on the sound of that. Besides, titles are always unpacking themselves for me. You choose a title to a story, and halfway through writing it, you realize it has 2 more layers to dig into – I guess much like an onion. Perhaps each chronicle is another layer revealed – for I am convinced of this now, even in fiction. Maybe especially in fiction, that though the writer is always hiding, always putting on masks, the writing is always revealing

⁸⁶ This, of course, is where the title of the last chapter of my PhD comes from

⁸⁷ If it is so, it is so.

things about him that he is not even aware he is revealing. Maybe by time I am done, I will know what the title meant.

Part 3: In the land of glitter, lime light and rejections.

The fame of the literary agent is a slightly vicarious one, isn't it. His fame is not his own, but the author he represents – who he indeed helped to make famous. So this is how he would in fact want things to be. So this is the story I know of a literary agent – David Godwin. I read this story in Jamaica, because I was looking up more information on one of my favourite writers – Arundhati Roy.

So when Arundhati Roy, an unknown and unemployed architect in India was done writing *The God of Small Things*, she sent it off to three agents in London. The first two were extremely excited about the manuscript and made immediate offers to sign her. But she ended up choosing the third agent, David Godwin, because when he started reading her novel, he booked a flight to India and met with her there. *The God of Small Things* is of course one of the most phenomenally successful books in recent times. It won the Booker Prize, and before all of that, David Godwin managed to get a £1 million advance for Roy.

You will understand then, my excitement when this same David Godwin upon reading the first (and only) chapter of my novel, writes back to say “Kei, I like your novel. In fact, I like it quite a lot! We need to talk soon, I'd love to represent you.” So I've signed with an agent. It still feels strange and a little pretentious to say the words: My Agent. And surely the life of the unknown author is even more vicarious than the life of the agent. My claim to fame is now: My agent is Arundhati Roy's agent! I don't care if I never write anything else, or anything good. Because, my agent is Arundhati Roy's agent. So there! Have your people call my people, and we'll do lunch or something.

But early in this game someone wise told me I would have to amass about 50 – 100 rejections before I even started getting published. After that, the figures begin to even out, and for every one acceptance you must go through about 5 rejections. I suspect these statistics are accurate. So to balance my recent getting of an agent, these are my most recent rejections:

- 1)The New Yorker
- 2)Kenyon Review
- 3)Stickman Review
- 4) Stirring

(this last rejection was particularly stinging. See, since my short story book is coming out soon, I just thought I'd send the last 2 or three stories that haven't been individually published out to different journals. Stirring was kind of the bottom of the barrel – an online journal edited by two girls fresh out of college. Well my dears, when mi find out mi story apparently never reach to dem “high standards”, done know who had to shut up and nyam⁸⁸ humble pie. My fada! De higher monkey climb de more him batty expose⁸⁹.)

Till next time, everyone. Cheers.

Kei

Cold Onion Chronicles #6

[sent on 21 December 2004]

It's been a while...

Part 1: It's running over, it's running over, my cup is full and running over...⁹⁰

Here's a strange incident I recall – it happened maybe just a year ago. I am on Slipe Pen Road at the Government medical labs trying to pick up some test results for my mother. As I sit in the waiting room, I notice the irate woman who is screaming about some inefficiency on the part of this government agency (how surprising!) and how they were wasting her whole day. In her hand was a little pudding pan, and as she shouted, she flailed it about and I swore if she let it go it was going to go flying, hit

⁸⁸ Jamaican creole word for ‘eat’

⁸⁹ Popular Jamaican proverb that warns those especially ambitious that their fall might be all the more spectacular

⁹⁰ Reference to a Sunday School Song: ‘It’s running over/It’s running over/My cup is full and running over/ Since the Lord save me/ I’m as happy as can be/ My cup is full and running over’

someone and give them a serious concussion. Then I zeroed into what she was actually saying:

"For doctor tell mi, mi muss come wid a sample of mi stool, and see it here (emphasizing the pudding pan), mi bring it. And now yu tell mi, dis is not de place for me to bring it. But where else mi fi guh?"

I'm not sure what surprised me more – that there were faeces in the pan that seemed set to be hurled across the waiting room at any second; that the woman who the faeces belonged to felt comfortable enough to announce this at a decibel so that the whole room could hear; that the doctor had subjected her to that indignity – to go to the bathroom and make aim for a pan? Truly shocking and surreal all around.

Anyway, I am writing this final epistle of this first semester in a somewhat lower state than usual. The truth is, I've been sick, and yesterday I was even in the hospital. I've been having diahrea for two weeks running (so to speak).. I am dehydrated, my cheeks are gaunt, and forgive my french, my bluntness and my incurable habit for wordplay if I admit that right now I feel like shit. (In fact, excuse me for a minute...)

(Ok...I'm back)

Surprisingly enough, while I am someone who avoids doctors, because I've always been paranoid and I now realize I suffer a strange kind of hypochondria – I am generally convinced that there are all these illnesses harboured in my body, and to go to the doctor would simply confirm them all. So I don't go. But whenever I do go, they are baffled. All my blood tests came back ok. I suffered through my first anal probe, only to hear that yes, my bowels are inflamed, but that's to be expected. An X-ray of my abdomen showed everything was where it should be – and so finally, what was I given, but a little flask, told to go home and come back with a sample of my stool! Oh the cursed circularity of life! I realized then how much more dignity there was in a broad pudding pan that couldn't possibly miss anything as opposed to a small flask: how does one aim from behind? And then to suffer through the doctor's instructions: "you don't have to fill it all the way up, and make sure it's sealed tightly –

the lab people won't handle it if it's leaking." After sealing the flask tightly, it had to be then dropped in a special plastic envelope that had it's own intricate sealing, and a big label across the top: BIOHAZARD. As if my defecation could be used as some sort of chemical warfare. Sigh.

It is strange though – the cold gets more and more bitter, but I've made my peace with it. Yet, it is sickness that makes you finally want to go home desperately. To be sick in a foreign country – that is what brings you to tears – that is what makes you say, that's it, I've had enough of this shit – so to speak.

Part 2: A quick Christmas wish list

- * To Go Home
- * An electric shaver. Mine burnt out quickly when it discovered the 220 voltage as opposed to jamaica's 110. I've been buying normal razors and am being reacquainted with awful awful razor bumps.
- * Grater Cake
- * Solid doo-doo
- * My loan to come through finally
- * A bath in a tub (I do prefer showers—but every now and again you want to soak)

That's all for now

Cheers and love and Merry Christmas and See you all next year ..both in these chronicles, and then for real.

Kei

PS. I am of course behind in responding to most all my emails. Please be forgiving.

Cold Onion Chronicles #8

[sent on 26th January 2005]

Part 1: What an awful time is winter (with apologies to Selvon)⁹¹

What an awful awful time is winter when de place so cold and dreary and de trees is all bare but de grass green as ever and shining through like some sick rebellion what an awful awful time it is when ain't nothing to do outside and you stop swimming cause even though they claim the pool warm you would still have to go outside in the cold to reach there and the worstest thing in the world is to go outside so you avoid it but of course it have a time when man must go to supermarket or go to class and whenever you do this you have to put on the layers oh the layers and layers and layers of clothes you have to put on it would weigh more than you except you also busy putting on what they call winter pounds and god bless yu madda in jamaica who send you a whole christmas cake to aid in this waist expansion enterprise and don't it had somebody famous who said a waist was a terrible thing to mind well anyway nobody in your flat did even know the cake come cause is you one by your lonesome self who eat it off in 4 days it need no calculator to tell you that is quarter cake per day you eat and bumbaat you don't even feel guilty but what an awful time is winter when you go outside bulked up with all this clothes and winter pounds but it still have a kind of wind that when it blow is like it out to pick you up off the ground and the wind is like it never want to stop blowing and first you feel you teeth get numb and then you life and you realize you in de middle of this god-forsaken place and in the middle of all this blowing and cold you asking yourself but is how I really reach here eh what an awful awful time is winter when english people don't see the need to bathe everyday and you can't understand this reasoning because bathing more important now than it ever was because is the onliest time of day dat you can be truly warm can be completely surrounded by warmness by heat pouring over your whole body and de worst ting is to come in and strip off you clothes and jump in the shower cause you want to feel warm and the water that come out of the pipe only luke warm like the boiler not working and you already out of you clothes so you start to shiver and is then you want to cry again what an awful time is winter when you taking the bus back home from nottingham one weekend and you not even too too paying attention to the pretty black woman with one helluva gold weave and matching gold ring on every finger who choose to siddung beside you on the journey even though it have a big black man outside with a mustache who looking at you as if to say don't trouble my

⁹¹ Stylistically this section references what some critics call the 'prose poem' in the middle of Selvon's *Lonely Londoners* – an unpunctuated gush celebrating 'what a wonderful time is spring'

woman for me is a man who know man who use gun fi pick food outa dem teeth and so you not even paying her too much mind and you doing like you granny say and keeping your own council not until the woman mobile ring and she say something that sound to you like ‘yeah man’ and in you mind you say ‘yeah man!’ so you politely ask her when she put down de phone where she from and de bitch tell you dat she is from sheffield like she don’t know what you did really mean so you have to say before sheffield and finally she tell you spanish town and all de time she answering you she crossing her eye dem like to say she cyaa bodder wid dem yardie man a look har and all you was being was friendly and imagine dis woman who come from your own country who come straight from out of de warm acting just as cold as the weather outside de bus as if to say in truth she really did come from sheffield and what an awful awful ting is winter to turn good good jamaican woman into this awful kind of english bitch.

Part 3: Fire, Fire, Fire! Fire fall pon me

The thing about living on your own is that you experiment with the strangest dishes. In Nottingham, Kay Bailey offered me Pork spiced with salt fish and I must say it wasn’t at all bad. My own mix-up-mix-ups are equally odd. But still I don’t remember what it was I made the other night – only that I took the pot off the red hot hob, shared out my food, ate it and went to bed – the stove still on, the temperature rising.

Strange how the crackling of fire can sound just like a softly cascading waterfall and lull you into deeper sleep. Thankfully I was not awakened by sirens, screams, or the smell of England burning. I was awakened, if truth be told, because I felt peckish again. Well, to be more accurate, I felt thirsty. So I stumbled towards the kitchen for some juice and clouds of smoke billowed out on me when I pushed open the door.

The stove is now slightly melted, two of the hobs don’t work – or rather they work too well as they are now on constantly. In the process of my arson, I also managed to destroy two of my Chinese flat-mate’s pots and slightly disfigured a spatula. The wall behind the stove is now grey. Still, I have been indignant with the hall management, arguing that since we reported our smoke alarm on the 27th of September as being faulty, and they haven’t fixed it despite giving us several promises, it is essentially

their fault. It is simply that my budget cannot afford it being my fault.

Part 4: Thunderclap in memorandum

I received a distressing letter recently from some anonymous person DA with the ominous title ‘Bad News’. I thought at first, these spam people are getting more innovative, for they’ve finally realized how cynical the world is and that most people are going to automatically delete anything that comes into their inbox titled ‘Congratulations!’ or ‘Good News!’⁹²

But bad news – this was new. And sure enough while I really wanted to delete it, I couldn’t. What a horrible crossroads to be at, to know that this will either be spam, or the real deal. It was in fact, the real deal.

The anonymous DA turned out to be my friend Danah Astwood and the bad news was that an old Moorlands⁹³ friend, Muppet (Joanne Dobson), had died in one of those really senseless car accidents.

And what do I remember of Muppet? Two things stand out: we once happened to be in the same workshop studying something like group dynamics. Secretly, Muppet had been given an instruction to play the role of the constant disrupter. So when our small group discussion had gotten well underway and was becoming terribly interesting, Muppet interjected, “Lord, I am so afraid of these flimsy white plastic chairs. You know...” she blushed “with my weight and all, I’m always breaking them and I can’t bother to embarrass myself today.” The chair was indeed flimsy, and Muppet was indeed, less so. So she got the whole group to relocate – a 10 minute exercise, before we could finally be settled and try to have our discussion again. But every time it got underway, Muppet made another interruption. The problem of course was that no one could get annoyed at her. We never felt interrupted.

And the other thing I remember is being at Moorlands just passing time at the house and Muppet starting to pseudo-dance ballet – and being so ridiculous and funny, and admitting it was a kind of sketch she loved to do – just to get people to laugh. She, plump as she was, in full ballet gear – leotards and all, doing her mini extensions and pliés. And it is this image, one I never actually saw, that stays with me. Muppet dancing. Girl – de dance cyaa done now!

⁹² In 2002, ‘Good News’ was the name of a massive virus hoax which prompted unsuspecting victims to delete an important Microsoft file from their systems thinking it was a virus.

⁹³ Moorlands, a Christian camp site in Spur Tree Hill, Mandeville.

In this cold you realize for once, how important dancing is. How even the most riddim-less person in Jamaica (ie – me) have more riddim than most any other place. And it occurs to you that if you go to a club this month people are dancing one way – and two months, three months, four months, a year later, them dancing the same tired way. And you wonder if the dancing never changes, like how it changes every two months in Jamaica. And it is from this space, I then get the further bad news, dem kill Bogle⁹⁴! And yes, I too wanted to repeat what I’ve heard at least three people say instinctively: “A mussi Nanny dat! After a nuh suh Bogle stay?”⁹⁵ But no. De dancing cyaa done now. Long live Sadique, Peter, John Hype and Keva⁹⁶.

Dance Muppet. Dance Mr. Bo(jan)gle, Dance!

Nuff love all,

Kei

Cold Onion Chronicles #9

[sent 16th February 2005]

Part 1: A Baptist Priestess preaches to the sidewalk in this city⁹⁷...

What a thing it is to wake up on a cold English morning and forget completely which country you are in, for though disoriented for a moment, you soon realize what woke you up was one piece of excitement and shouting coming from outside. The shouting goes something like this: "Hell and damnation! Hell and damnation mi seh!! Cause oonoo living too bad wid oonoo one enedda! Oonoo living like Satan control yu! And one day soon, oonoo house gwine mash up!"

⁹⁴ Popular Jamaican dancer, Gerald Levy, ‘Bogle’ who extended the vocabulary of Jamaican reggae dance with the Bogle with the ‘Wacky Dip’, the ‘Pelper’, the ‘Willie Bounce’ and even the ‘Bogle’ was murdered on the 20th of January 2005.

⁹⁵ A reference to the song ‘Bogle Dance’ by Jamaican artiste, ‘Beenie Man’. The song was a basic set of instructions as to how to do the ‘Bogle’. Paul Bogle is also a national hero in Jamaica as is ‘Nanny of the Maroons’ – hence the humorous line when the singer notices someone not doing the dance properly – ‘A mussi Nanny dat, after a nuh suh Bogle stay’ [That must be the ‘Nanny’, because that certainly isn’t how the Bogle is danced.]

⁹⁶ A list of other popular Jamaican dancers whose fame sometimes rivals those of the singers.

⁹⁷ The title of the section is also the title of a Dionne Brand Poem.

And what a thing to have this warner woman shouting⁹⁸ greeted by the barking of dogs! Dogs barking? In England!? For it seems to me, in this country, the canine specie are as subdued, docile and well mannered as the people. Besides, dogs are mostly kept in doors, so you don't come across them unless they are on their evening walks. But alas, this morning, someone had left the mongrel out so it could respond to the prophecy...perhaps it was even repenting of its sins... but this combination of preaching and barking, made me think happy thoughts of home.

Part 2: A short defense of miracles

For some reason, I am reflecting today on miracles. I am thinking how I came to England in the way that most students come – poor. Here is a story I haven't told you in these letters: in that first fortnight I saw the posters up some 'Manchester Poetry Festival' and specifically a £100 prize that was going to be given out one Wednesday night to a lucky poet who went up on stage and won the judges hearts. Being poor, of course I was rather keen. I called to try and book a spot and found out that several people had my idea. All the spots were gone. I could however give them my name and they would put it in a drum and would randomly call a few of these names on the night. So if I was lucky...

There was another complication however. The event started at 7:00 pm. My class on Wednesday started at the same time. I'd have to rush from school, reach late, and see if I was STILL lucky. At best, I thought, I would get to check out the Manchester poetry scene. So that Wednesday I came out of class at 8:30, took a bus into the city centre, consulted a map and found my way finally to the event which was indeed wrapping up. Three of the four finalists had already been chosen. The drum was empty but for one name, and they were pulling out this last name as I entered. The name was mine, 'Kei Miller'. My scribbled name had waited for the body which it identified.

⁹⁸ I was surprised, in re-reading the chronicles, to find the mention of this scene here. It clearly affected me more than I thought and the image of this woman shouting prophecies to an English audience who might think her crazy kept on growing until it finally became the novel, *The Last Warner Woman* 2010.

And I won! Two weeks after arriving in this country and this city, I apparently became the 'Manchester Slam Poetry Champion' which of course doesn't thrill me as a title. Slam poets are notoriously bad. But it did mean money on that night and also it has meant other reading opportunities for the occasional wallet top-up.

Some days after the slam poetry victory, I was walking out of my faculty building, and was greeted by a guy who saw me win on the night. "Hey, you got a good student here." The man bellowed at my professor who was just then walking out. "He's just won that slam competition couple days ago."

I tried to explain: "It was just for the money!" knowing how the literati view performance poetry. "Are you really in need of money?" my professor asked quite concerned and quickly arranged that I should receive a small scholarship (every little bit helps) – so I got the Neila McPherson Writers of the Commonwealth Grant for £2000.

You see, it is strange and wonderful to me how one miracle ripples into another and then another.

To everyone,
Cheers
Kei

Cold Onion Chronicles #(who knows by now?)

[sent on 30th June 2005]

Actually, I do know, but there are some installments you haven't gotten. For some reason I just never got around to sending them, and now I feel the news or events are too stale and too behind me: like the drama of large stones in my salivary duct, my trip to Jamaica, the Virgin Islands trip, the new york trip, the apology for showing up

and looking different⁹⁹.

Anyway... here we are again. In the now.

Oh, I also have a new phone number. For those calling from Jamaica, the number would be 011447939585664.

Part 1: This City like a movie with soundtrack

It is a strange thing I find myself liking about big cities – about New York and Boston and London and Manchester. It is the open guitar cases set out to collect coins, the musician sat behind them, their little amplifiers set up, strumming away and singing to the city. They are always so talented, these buskers – a word I’ve only learnt up here. People don’t ‘busk’ in Jamaica. I always half expect/ half hope that a big record executive will walk by any moment, stop these street musicians, and offer them the world. So in this moment, as I step off the train or the bus or whatever and I walk into the small swell of their music, I feel a little blessed; I throw a few coins in the guitar case, because for this little moment I have happened to pass them when they were down on their luck and could be impressed by my measly red coins and they nod and continue singing as if just for me.

It is summer now and the parks are so crowded you would not believe – hundreds of people, toe-to-toe and without shirts. Sun bathing. Reading books. Taking pictures. They sit in the fountains. Children and adults alike are running straight into the froth of the water. Again this is not like Jamaica – not like Independence Park where de guardie wouldan kick you out quick quick¹⁰⁰.

So all this sun, all these people, all this laughter, and above it all a singer who hasn’t had his break, playing a guitar, singing a song, and the song just rising above

⁹⁹ In the midst of this period I had returned to Jamaica, enroute to the Virgin Islands, to lead a workshop. My trip was a surprise to everyone who didn’t expect to see me, and didn’t expect to see me looking as I did. I had gone to England weighing 17 ½ stone. On this trip to Jamaica I was 4 stones lighter.

¹⁰⁰ I credit much of the ways I think about public spaces not only to my different experiences of public spaces being utilized in Britain as opposed to them being restricted and to some extent militarized in Jamaica, but also to the study, *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity* (Low et al, 2005) that forcefully makes the point that open public spaces are crucial to any well-functioning democracy

everything. It can make you feel as if you are in a movie, but on a plane in which you can actually hear the soundtrack playing.

Part 2: Foxes have holes and birds have nests (again)

It shames me sometimes, in fact many times, how slow it is for me to extend kindness... how hard it is for my hands to open.... how I actually hesitated to put up the homeless dreadlocked white woman who as I type this is stretched out on the bed behind me, sleeping.

This was only yesterday – a friend messaged me on msn. I was on my bed, not sleeping, but looking up to nowhere and pitying myself for having little money, and being kicked out soon, and nowhere to go, and the whole etcetera of my present situation. And in comes this ‘ping’. From a close friend in Canada who knows someone here in England, someone close to her, who right now is desperate. This desperate someone apparently ran to Manchester from Birmingham where some psycho girl had tried to kill her and has been living virtually on the streets the past couple nights. So the question -- could I help?

And doesn’t it make me the most awful person in the world that a part of me wished I wasn’t there to receive that ping – wished that I would have been on the road walking looking for jobs, or in London, and could have said an insincere Oh deary me! Would have loved to help, but see, I’m not even in Manchester. O well.

See...here is the list of what is making me dislike myself tonight. It is not just my hesitation. Specifically, it is my hesitation in the light of the kindnesses I have received this year.

- 1) Before I left for England, my friend Richard¹⁰¹ calls me over to his office and gives me an envelope with £30 in it
- 2) That same evening, a friend from UWI¹⁰² comes up to my house and he and his

¹⁰¹ Richard Graham

¹⁰² UWI – an acronym for the University of the West Indies. The friend there was Dr. Michael Bucknor who the first novel, *The Same Earth*, was partly dedicated to.

wife give me a gift of \$200US plus a green scarf which did indeed keep me warm throughout the winter.

3) A fellow worker gave me \$3000JA¹⁰³

4) When I reached to England not only did my Cousin Dionne put me on a bus going to Manchester, but she gave me £90¹⁰⁴

5) In the middle of my stay, another friend Judith¹⁰⁵ from JA sends me a card with 4 whole crumbs of grater cake (the bitch...I know) and £15

6) My sister, being the good Jamaican that she is, went to Western Union no less and sent £100 to me.¹⁰⁶

7) When my father visited¹⁰⁷, he gave me the same amount.

8) I went back to Jamaica and the Strathmore crew¹⁰⁸ gave me \$100US as a parting gift.

9) Who can count the times my aunt or some cousin or some friend has offered me shelter on short notice. Or the professor who would not have it that I be alone on Christmas Day or New Years.

In none of these cases, not one, had I ever asked for help. You know, sometimes is like I'm between a rock and a hard place, but surviving still. Always surviving. People up here wonder how I've managed to make it without my grant working out or the loan or anything. I shrug and tell them it's all a miracle. But I say it as if each miracle does not find its embodiment and enactment in a specific person who decides to open his or her hands and be generous, and give you ground to stand on.

Would all this not shame you too – to realize after receiving so much, that it's still hard for you to give – to be the miracle for someone else? And I wonder if I've ever said thank you enough. To everyone. To each miracle. Thank you so so much.

¹⁰³ Before leaving for England I had been working in Jamaica as a copywriter at an advertising agency, AMK Communications. The financial manager, Rose Wallace, had been very supportive of my decision to pursue a Creative Writing Masters abroad.

¹⁰⁴ This incident has already been mentioned in the first *Cold Onion Chronicle*.

¹⁰⁵ Judith Dixon

¹⁰⁶ This of course is where the title from my chapter on Remittance culture comes.

¹⁰⁷ My father who works with the Jamaican government as a consultant, visited in the Spring semester. He had been to Aberdeen for a conference and took the time to come to Manchester accompanied by my aunt, Audrey Dehaney.

¹⁰⁸ The 'Strathmore crew' was a weekly bible study group based at the house of Carl and Gail Nehemiah who lived in the Kingston 8 are, on Strathmore Drive. Almost all the members of this group were on the Cold Onion Chronicles mailing list.

Yours

Kei

A Post Script

An Ian Tomas from this part of the world contacted me recently because Faber and Faber commissioned him to go write a non-fiction book on Jamaica and he's on his way to the island now¹⁰⁹. He actually thought I was there. Anyway, him say him looking on the last 300 years of British-Jamaican relationships. I wanted to tell him is a real pity Morris Cargill¹¹⁰ dead none too long ago, cause him was bout 300 years old and probably embodied everything about British-Jamaican relationships. Anyway... he's also looking at the Syrian/Lebanese, Jewish, Indian and Chinese communities in Jamaica. If any of oonoo¹¹¹ can think of contacts that might be good for him to use while he's in JA pass it on to me so I can give him. I'm sure he'd be grateful. He'll be in JA for two months.

Cold Onion Chronicles #11

[sent on 25th March 2005]

Part 1: It is broken. It bruk up. It done.

What I remember from Jamaica is how the summer would break. I remember there would always be that horrible week in August when Kingston is all dust and the air is so thick you feel you're forcing yourself through it. I know that period well because the week before I'd be in Mandeville at Moorlands where the air is a little cooler and the sun softer. But then to return to Kingston and step out of that bus, it was like instantly you would sweat a week's worth of sweat. Instantly you would feel dirty and hot and miserable. But just at that point when the sun becomes its most merciless self, things begin to cool down. The heat gets so hot it breaks. And so I kind of look forward to that horrible August week, because I think, it will soon be cool again!

¹⁰⁹ Ian Thomas's book 'The Dead Yard' was published in 2009 and went on to win the Ondaatje Prize.

¹¹⁰ Morris Cargill had been one of the most forthright and talented, if not the most conservative, columnist in the Jamaica Gleaner. A white Jamaican, he often bemoaned the state of affairs since independence from Britain.

¹¹¹ Oonoo: Jamaican creole for the plural 'you'. *The Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* explains that it is a survival of the Igbo word 'unu' that means the same.

Winter is just like that. And maybe, just maybe, the abominations called cold and ice and snow are worth it just because one day it gets so cold that the cold is broken. Spring, my dears, has sprung at last. What a wonderful, wonderful time is Spring! How it is that trees that seemed so dead can all of a sudden erupt in flower, and how you can spread blanket on grass and throw frisbee to your friends! Oh what a blessed, blessed time is Spring.

Something worries me though. The temperature these days is between 55 and 60. I'm sure those are Blue Mountain Peak temperatures¹¹². But at one point I considered blue mountain cold nuh bumpy juice! What is going to happen when I return to the land of 80s? Oh dear me.

Part 2: The accumulation of signs and omens

I confess to having bizarre conversations with wind and birds and busses and page numbers and anything that I can read as a sign or omen.

Do you all want to know how in the days of Salmonella I found out I was sick?

First you should know that Oxford Rd, where all the universities here are on, is the busiest bus route in all of Europe. There are at least 6 bus companies that have busses plying up and down. Now and again you might see two busses from the same company, one right behind the other, but not generally.

So there I was, standing by the bus stop feeling a little out of sorts and wondering if I was actually sick. Then came one Finglands bus. Right behind it another, then another, then another, and then another. Five Finglands busses back to back. Odd, I thought to myself. And then I said to fate – if the next bus that comes is again, a Finglands, then I should go see a doctor. If not, then I'm ok. You realize of course I only said this because with 5 of them back to back, it would be absolutely impossible

¹¹² The highest mountain range in Jamaica, the temperature at the top of the peak can be quite low. Many tourists and locals however who only read what the actual temperature is, often underestimate how cold it *feels*.

for the next bus to be a Finglands bus again. Well, the next three were Finglands.

Am I the only one who does this kind of thing – have conversations with the elements around as if to try and understand your life and your future. It's almost like personal voodoo. Now, at the sight of every Finglands bus, I shudder, and I am secretly glad they seem to be doing bad business and several of them have been pulled off the road.

I won't bother telling you why I now think Hondas are a good sign. But sometimes you come across something which you are sure is a sign or an omen. It unsettles you greatly, even though you can't decide what is the meaning of it. In London recently for instance, I was taking the subway/tube/underground/whatever you want to call it. Such a strange thing, huge populations of people travelling under the earth. But I was taken aback when I reached the bottom platform finally and there were pigeons flying about. Surely that must mean something bad. To have birds flying inside the earth instead of above it! One day I will find the meaning.

That's all for now

Be good

Kei

PS. I just sent off three chapters of the novel to the agent so he can sell it.

PrayformeasIprayformyselfinJesusnameamen¹¹³.

The Last Cold Onion Chronicle

[sent on 9th August 2005]

I feel this is needed – what with the fact that I haven't written in a while, and the curtain-man now positioning himself by the side all set to close the show for good. Toni Morrison wouldn't agree with my impulse. She says the best stories are like jazz – that is to say, without a final note. The music must always linger. Perhaps, Toni.

¹¹³ This, of course, is where I take the title of the previous section from. The phrase 'Pray for me as I pray for myself in Jesus name. Amen.' is a popular ending of a testimony in a Jamaican church. Here I borrow it as the end of a letter.

Perhaps. But methinks every Genesis should have its Revelation. It must start with nothing and the word, and then it must end with apocalypse.

Part 1: What don't happen in a year...

...happen in a day. And what never happen in Jamaica, happen to you in England. By now most of you must have heard how me come to Mrs. Queen country, of all the places, and get rob. Good and proper rob. All the essential and most dear things to me – like my passport, my money, and my favourite pair of jeans.

The Jamaican High Commission here have proved to be, if nothing else, Jamaican. Of this we can be sure, though perhaps not proud. Having no money left, I decided I would try to email them first of all. Of course I should have suspected something not altogether professional when their email turned out to be JamHigh@hotmail.com with all its innuendo of ganja. But I was hopeful. They, of course, did not respond. After a few days had elapsed I called them. It was three o'clock one evening. The very nice voice on the recording informed me that the consular office was only open between the hours of 10 and 2 but if I left a name and number they would get back to me in the morning. My dears, up to now! And mi leave bout three bitter/desperate messages after that. Well, finally I catch them – which must be pure luck. My sister's theory, which I think is dead on the money, is that them obviously wouldn't open at 10. Caribbean time you understand. So they probably only pulling up the shutters nearer to 11, but then by 11:30 is time for lunch. They stroll back in at 12:30, but then with niggeritis¹¹⁴, them not really getting to work until 1, and in another 15 minutes, is time to start the process of closing down after a long hectic work day. So anyway, the point is that I finally get them, and a woman who distinctly sounded like she was chewing gum, told me absolutely nothing useful except that I needed a birth certificate, and if I came in and my flight was the next day, dem would try fi help out de situation.

The stolen passport means I can't explore Europe, and it also means I can't work in

¹¹⁴ The natural drowsiness that occurs after eating a meal. The term 'niggeritis' would of course have been used offensively at one point to suggested that it as a condition that only affected the slaves and more to do with their inherent laziness. In Trinidad the more polite term is 'macajuel syndrome' referring to the snake that can often be seen lying out in the sun after eating. The medical term however is 'postprandial somnolence'

England. I'm stuck here with little money and no hope of the kitty being replenished. And thus the apocalypse begins.

Part 2: I'm the oooooonly black in the village¹¹⁵

I've been living in a village called Hadfield. Hadfield is beside another village called Padfield. Someone recently asked me, what is the difference between Hadfield and Padfield? I told him, 'The P'. This is English country side. The real deal. Weather is told to you by cows – if they're sitting, it means it's going to rain. The cows sit too often. This is English country where old men in bowler hats or trilbies nod 'good evening lad' every time you pass them or they pass you. There is only the one post-office here, which is sign enough of a world beyond these pastures, and there is the local pub which is sign that as far away from everything as you are, you are still in England where we will get drunk on the weekend, and stumble back home, and sometimes when we can't find our way back, we will just sleep on the sidewalk. There are so many sheep here, sometimes at night I stand at the window with a flashlight and try to count them, not realizing that this might not be what the inventor of that famous cure for insomnia had in mind. And there are wild berries everywhere for the picking. And you can crawl in the garden, smelling each bush for which one is thyme, and having found it, make your first successful pot of rice and peas.

I have come to the village in exciting times. The whole place has been abuzz with the news. Guess what's coming to town? Guess what we will soon be having for dinner? The Franchise which has become Jamaica's national dish will soon be Hadfield's local dish. Nobody does it better¹¹⁶. KFC. The people are positively excited. Even the sheep seem frisky. The chicken alone seem depressed. But what an act of modernization. What a step into the future! Some people dare to breathe the word 'internet'. But they say it quietly. For now I will sometimes walk four miles across to Glossop (that already has KFC) and it has occurred to me more than once that a carrier pigeon would actually be a more efficient mode of communication for me in this place and time.

¹¹⁵ Of course a reference to the character Davith from 'Little Britain' – the Welsh boys whose famous line is the insistent, 'I'm the only gay in the village!' despite all the evidence that says otherwise.

¹¹⁶ In Jamaica, the refrain of the Carly Simon song 'Nobody Does it Better' was used, for years, in a KFC campaign. In fact, most Jamaicans would probably associate the song more with the brand Kentucky Fried Chicken, than with James Bond.

Part 3: Dark days for dark men

How could I not mention the bombs. Though it was of course nothing like 9/11, neither in scale of casualty or sale of reaction. The British, in truth, have been expecting, even waiting on this bomb. Now that it has happened, you can almost feel the country sigh and more than one commentator has said, "well that wasn't so bad as it might have been, was it?" There is of course the issue of what it means to be British, and in this they are proud to be calm, and civilized and unruffled. Their collectedness is as much a national stance as Americans and their big sappy speeches and warmongering for the sake of their 'dream'.

Still, these are not good days to be dark. You all know of the Brazilian man who was shot and killed by the police for trying to run down a train. I thought there would have been riots. But no. British civility again. His family up here have said something to the effect and tone of: while we do very much support the police in these very trying times as a country, it is all rather unfortunate that innocent people have had to die, and so we do urge them to be a little more vigilant next time. !!!!! Can you imagine? No one has yet cried racism, despite a recent statement by parliament that they would of course be targeting certain people and it would be rather stupid for them to randomly search harass people in these times since they're obviously not the terrorists. No. These are not good days. For you can be shot for being dark and carrying a rucksack – in other words, for being a typical international student.

A few more interesting items in the news over the past week or so: A seventeen year old black boy was walking his girlfriend home and some white teenagers attacked him verbally – the usual, nigger and all that. Then they lodged an axe in his skull. Killed him.

Then, near to me in Manchester, almost a hundred strong gang of white school boys attacked 2 little Indian girls. Telling them to go back home and all the usual.

Then a robber broke into a black woman's house. She confronted him. He stabbed her in the eye. Calling her nigger and all the usual. Go back home, etc.

In all of this, no one's calling it a race problem. Just a slight misunderstanding. I think it all might really be my cue to leave. Go back home. Etc.

Part 4: Where to now?

I've decided the problem with the world is that there is too much of it. We should outlaw most countries – boil it down to just 5 or so. Ten at the most. This would make it easier for people like me who want to travel. I am returning to Jamaica now, but I'm not sure if I want to be back for very long. It seems to me that being young(ish) and poor is a perfect opportunity to see more of the world. Maybe in the next three months I will go on to Trinidad, if it's at all possible. After that, India, or South Africa. Who knows where? And I would really like to live in a Spanish Speaking country for at least six months. My next chronicles should therefore be of heat. And some other kind of food. And some other kind of life completely.

Here, in England, the cold time is coming again. Summer was only two weeks. The most beautiful two weeks imaginable. In Manchester, there was a pathetic carnival marching through the streets. Fat black women waving their various Caribbean flags, swinging de ningine¹¹⁷ up Oxford Road. Then gathering at the park where jerk chicken and roti were on sale. Under one tent was calypso, and under another was reggae. And under a third we could listen to a character called 'reggae clown' telling old time story.

Draw long bench...

Crick...Crack!¹¹⁸

But for now, my dears,

Wire bend,

¹¹⁷ 'Swing de Engine' was a popular soca song by the Antiguan group 'Burning Flames'

¹¹⁸ 'Draw long bench' or 'crick...crack' are both traditionally prescribed ways for stories to start in Jamaica. Though these would usually be oral stories, the convention does have parallels with the literary convention 'Once upon a time...'

Story End.

Jack Mandora, me nuh choose none¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁹ This a prescribed folk story ending in Jamaica, perhaps a West Indian equivalent of 'happily ever after'. Jack Mandora is supposedly keeper of the Key to heaven.

Cold Onion Chronicles: The Sad Stories of Job Hunting edition [sent on 28 May 2007]

I recently lost out on a fellowship I had hoped to win. I had applied for it last year as well – a grant for a Caribbean or African writer to go this 10-day writing conference in Vermont. I have a friend there – in Vermont – (it used to be three! Jamaicans have this knack of ending up all over the world) and so it seemed then and now a perfect excuse to go visit him. Besides, the conference itself, Breadloaf, is not a bad addition to anyone's resume. But last year I got the standard rejection letter: "thanks for your application but we regret to inform you... blaah di blaah." They also included the bio of the lucky writer who did win. It began, "So-and-So was orphaned at the tender age of 5." How do you compete with that?

I didn't get through this year either, though I think I engineered my story to sound a little more sappy despite the disadvantage of two living parents and a properly middle-class upbringing. I came second though. I'm not sure that can go on the resume, and it doesn't bring me any closer to visiting my friend. And this thing of being the alternate (that's the term the new non-standard rejection letter used), this runner up beauty queen who shall reign should anything happen, I'm not sure I like it. It's the kind of position that might incite us to something ugly.

I've been coming second a lot. A couple of weeks ago I was at University of London for an interview. You see, I've grown a little tired of my poverty. 30 looms, and me without a real job or place of my own and all of a sudden these things seem important – the house in Jamaica suddenly too crowded. So I went off to seek my fortune at the University of London. I never thought I could live in that city – too big, too expensive. But heck. But the specific college actually wasn't in London. It was in the "sticks" as they call it here... or there... (I'm not sure where I am.. according to my handy flight map, I'm presently writing this somewhere above the Atlantic Ocean with no land anywhere near). Royal Holloway was a good hour's train ride away from the city and while I'm not sure how to describe my first impression of the campus, I know it was attended by the thought, "Oh dear lord, I hope I don't get this job."

Yes. Be careful what you wish for. I didn't get the job. Once again, I was second.

Well – no prob. I had applied to three places. So it was off to Manchester after to seek my fortunesthere, and at last, I struck gold. I was offered a job almost immediately and at the top of the salary scale, and I'd be teaching with Martin Amis. And also I was back in Manchester where these chronicles started, and I remembered suddenly just how much I loved the city – how much I knew it. It felt like home and all the people who interviewed me were lovely. So why did I have them waiting a week before I gave an answer? And why was that answer 'no'?

It's a long story, but to everyone I explained it to they left feeling sure that I had made the right decision. To put a long story short I felt that it would be absolutely unethical of me not to go to the final interview at University of Glasgow, and somehow I felt sure they'd offer me a job as well. I said as much to Manchester, but they pressured me to make a decision immediately. Now! I told them I wasn't going to Scotland for another 2 ½ weeks. They didn't care. I tried to brook for more time. They said it was unacceptable to the other candidate – I guess the one who had come second! – waiting in the wing. So I declined. How joyous for him/her, I thought.

I hedged all my bets on Glasgow. I know.... I let go of the bird in hand. And I didn't listen to something my granny didn't actually say, but it is the kind of thing you pretend she did: Hog wash at de fuss wata 'im come to¹²⁰!

I had felt very positive about my interview at London. And at Manchester we had gotten on like a house on fire. I felt no buzz from the Glasgow presentation (That was yesterday). I listened at the door as the other presenter went in. I heard the audience laughing, applauding throughout. He came out grinning from ear to ear. We even went out to dinner that evening, all 4 candidates, and I had to admit I liked guy #2. And then my old supervisor, the one it was who was actually trying to get me this job and had encouraged me to/insisted that I apply – he told me point blank – 'Yes, Dr. Jones gave an amazing presentation. You weren't your usual self.'

¹²⁰ 'The hog washes at the first water he comes to.'

I did my interview. And I'm supposed to hear back from them soon -- officially. But the truth is, I've already been informed of the decision. Apparently it was unanimous after the interview, from the principal of the school, to the dean, to the head of the English department, to the external examiner for the post, to even my old supervisor himself who had encouraged me to/ insisted that I apply. All were agreed.

It is with the greatest pleasure that I sign out from this email,

Kei Miller
Lecturer in Creative Writing
University of Glasgow
5 University Gardens
Office Room 104
Scotland

Corn Chronicle #2¹²¹

[sent 8th November 2007]

Part 1: The Unfortunate Traveler, or – How A Shoe Can Become Filled With Vomit

I am on my way to Chicago to buy a new pair of shoes. I am on my way to buy a new pair of shoes because the previous pair – brown, suede, casual and funky at the same time, Clarks at that! – they were destroyed. They were destroyed because of a previous trip to Pittsburgh. That trip went well. Not every part of it, but if you count everything, if you weigh it all in the balance – it went well: the planes were small but the ride was smooth - from Cedar Rapids to Chicago, from Chicago to Philadelphia;

¹²¹ This is the second of two 'corn chronicles' I wrote while an International Writing fellow at the University of Iowa. I never thought then how it represented an ending of sorts. On my first excursion to the UK I had gone to become a writer. Now I was returning because I had become one. My first trip to the UK was to be taught in a Creative Writing programme and now I would be teaching in one. But the letters would end as well. I would no longer go back to writing the Cold Onion Chronicles though I would begin my own blog which, as I have said, I do see as having its beginning in those first emails. Perhaps though I did not continue to write the chronicles I did begin to write ABOUT them, in this present context, and this indeed is another kind of ending.

we landed and were picked up immediately and whisked off to The Mexican War Streets. Such a wonderful name for a neighbourhood. If I were to choose the name of the place I lived in, I couldn't do any better than The Mexican War Streets.

I walked up and down the War Streets in my brown Clarkes. They are comfortable shoes for walking, and they work with almost every pair of trousers I have. It is hard to find such shoes. Later that day, I stepped up to a podium for my first reading in those same shoes. It was a small college in Downtown Pittsburgh, and the reading went well enough. People were nice. They clapped and asked questions. I went from there to another reading at another small college, and that reading went even better. I read from my new novel, and of course I was standing in my comfortable, brown Clarkes. Afterwards, a woman asked me for my email address and the next morning in my inbox was a query from a major publishing house wanting to know about US rights for the novel. I told my British publishers – imagine that! We didn't even have to look. They found us. The US publishers came to us. After the reading, even before the email had come, I was celebrating – because sometimes a reading can feel like that – as if it unlocked something in the universe, and you're only waiting to find out what. So I drank red wine, and ate chicken, and pork, and spinach, and spicy rice, and lemon cake, and strawberries and whipped cream some of which splashed onto the soft, brown Clarkes and which I had to wipe off with a napkin.

That night I felt the beginnings of sickness and the next morning I walked around Pittsburgh woozily. My brown Clarkes couldn't steady me. I was taken on a tour of downtown. I looked desperately for a place to sit. I was taken to the Andy Warhol museum. I slept on a couch in the foyer. I was taken out to eat. I didn't have anything. The sickness came and went in waves. At times I could smile, at other times I closed my eyes tightly. In the night I was taken out to a dinner and rehearsal for yet another reading. I was so hungry, I finally ate – even if just to put something in my stomach. It was a table of yellow. Yellow peppers. Yellow butternut squash. Macaroni and cheese. I wolfed it down and the waves of nausea came crashing again, Violently. I escaped in my pair of brown Clarkes, through The Mexican War Streets, back to the house where I was staying.

I managed to stumble up the stairs, to drop into the bed, before it came – a finally climatic crash of that wave of nausea; I leaned over the bed as I felt my stomach open

and everything rush out of it, beautifully, a fury of glopping, splashing, yellow, chunky sounds – glop glop glop glloooooouuuuup! And this is how your favourite pair of brown, suede Clarkes, sitting innocently by the side of the bed where they were just tossed off, can become filled to the brim with vomit, overflowing even onto the limp laces.

Part 2: Could you please say something in creole?

Here in Iowa, I hardly speak to my "brother and sister of skin." They are from Kenya and Haiti respectively. I avoid them because it is they that have promoted this phrase: "brother and sister of skin", and I just don't want to play that game. Sometimes I want to say – but we all have skin! The one from Haiti (bless her) talks incessantly and emotionally about her wonderful country. I don't doubt her sincerity – but maybe that's just it. She is so sincere. And after subjecting us, panel after panel, to these boring and earnest and confusingly tearful talks about her country, she has had the nerve to complain that she just hasn't had enough time to tell us all that she wanted to tell us. That's why she is here – to fly the Haitian red, blue and white far above the other red, blue and white. And I guess she expects that's why I should be here – to walk around with my yellow, green and black flag shouting, 'Jamaica to di werl!!'

Let me explain something about this experience in Iowa: for sanity's sake and for the sake of getting some of our own writing done, the writers here have eventually learned to avoid panels – to say NO whenever anyone from any department asks to us present. We also protect each other from requests. But not my sister of skin who asked me the other day to please be a co-presenter with her – to speak briefly about Jamaican creole on 'International Creole Day', because the Caribbean department was putting it on and it was already set in gear and I'd only have to speak for ten minutes. She assured me that she'd take the other hour – but pleeeaaase – just to give variety – just to go up there with me yellow, green and black, and shout 'Jamaica to di flipping werl!'

I discovered later that the whole shi-bang was actually my 'sister of skin's' idea – she was the one who pestered the Caribbean department until they caved in – *yes, sure love, we'll give you yet another podium to talk about Haiti and your creole.*

You have to give it to her – this unquenchable enthusiasm. She even managed to find in Iowa some other Haitians who helped to cook plantains for everybody. She got a big Haitian flag, and all kinds of artifacts to set up a display. There were carvings, and dolls that thankfully had no pins in them. She emailed me over and over to do the same and set up a Jamaica display, but I said, No – Sorry. I'm giving my ten minutes and coming down; that's it! She wanted us to meet together for lunch and organize I-can't-even-imagine-what. I said, No – Sorry. I'm just giving my ten minutes and coming down; that's it!

On the day of the panel my sister of skin predictably went on at great length about Haiti. No surprise there. Our brother of skin went up and read a poem in his Kenyan language. She had someone beating a drum as he read, she smiling placidly by the side, and then she translated the poem into Hatian creole – again with the drums, and she doing a little dance. (Please tell me why it is that some of my siblings of skin insist on giving their most exotic and clichéd selves back to an applauding Western World?)

When it was my turn I went up and said something different. We were supposed to be celebrating 'Creole' but I admitted that I don't think in such terms. It again seemed exotic and made for Western consumption. And why is it, I asked, that in a country like America that also has a postcolonial relationship with England – that when, in their speech the word "Little" begins to sound like "Liddle" it becomes simply a fact of accent. It isn't creole. It isn't another word. But when in Jamaica, the same word, by similar processes, becomes "Likkle" it is suddenly a strange, wonderful musical creole word that those cute black people speak? So I said, to hell with that! In the words of Selvon (and Morris) – Is English We Speaking! It just isn't English as you know it. It is English as we have reinvented and owned it. And then I basically said, screw this panel and all of its exotification. I am not Mr. Bojangles. I am not going to dance for you.

There was a strange silence when I walked off the podium, and then applause that built and built, and then my sister of skin put up a trembling hand in the air, but she was grinning. She was grinning from ear to ear – proud, blissful, happy that her event had gone well. And she said to me – "Oh Kei! That was wonderful. Now, could you

please say something in creole?"¹²²

Part 3: What We Miss

In a conversation in Iowa that could be described as 'red' – because it happened in a pub with redbrick walls and the light reflecting off of it and onto the circle of writers gathered there was as red and as sad as evening – in that conversation, most of us downing a pint of beer, we traded stories of what it was we missed most about 'home'. We suffer a curious strain of homesickness here. It is much more a longing to leave than it is a longing to return. Iowa caught me in transit – preparing to move from Jamaica to Scotland. It's not Jamaica that I'm longing to return to. Rather it is my life, the process that began before this interruption of America – this country that I think I could never live in. I long for a different cold, a different loneliness, a different strangeness of landscape and accents, a different unbelonging – but an unbelonging that I can try to belong to – to find my place in. Iowa is temporary. It is an unsettling that would be a waste of energy to try and settle into.

Of course only sad answers surfaced in that red-tinted conversation. One writer missed cobble stone roads and a beautiful bridge in Prague lined with saints. Another writer missed her cupboard of spices and cooking her own meals, the joy of occasionally cutting herself in the kitchen so that, on the sight of a drop of blood blossoming from her finger, she could remember that she was alive. Some writers missed friends. Some missed their own beds. But saddest of all was one writer who spoke for everyone when he said, "I miss writing. That's what is killing me here. I miss writing."

At a recent dinner where we (the writers) were asked to do our usual song-and-dance routine whenever we are displayed to the public: we have to stand and say our names and where we are from and what it is we write. Some admitted to being novelists,

¹²² It seems to me now that my own annoyance about this panel came from a sort of mutual ignorance. At the time I clearly didn't understand that the language situation in Haiti (as opposed to Jamaica) was a diglossic, ie, there was such a distinct difference between French and Haitian Creole that one had to effectively close the door on one language and re-enter the other when switching modes. In Jamaica, the language exists on what some of have theorised as a Post Creole Continuum, and so one can move up and down the language scale, and in and out of different registers by gradation rather than by ever leaving the language.

and others poets and others playwrights. On my turn I said that though I wrote a little bit of everything, I mainly wrote emails. But see – not even that was true. One so-so corn chronicle at the beginning – then kaput! It all vanished. It's not that it hasn't been eventful in its own way – but that the soulless hotel room where we are stashed is no place where writing can take place. I'm forcing myself now. I'm ignoring the dull grey carpet. I'm ignoring the walls that seem too close. I'm ignoring the dark. I'm focusing only on the light beaming from the computer – and I am writing.

Part 4, the epilogue: We Stand Up On The Lava Ground

I am also packing. Finally. I am getting ready to leave here. Of course there are things I've appreciated in Iowa. The few times I got to hang out with a friend from Jamaica, Yewande, were really pleasant – and it is always, always good to have someone from the place and time where we grew up in the place that we are. And the writers I met from all around the world – from South Africa and Israel and the Czech Republic and India and Bulgaria and Burma and Argentina and South Korea and China – when next will I ever experience that and arrange so many beds all around this planet where I know I am welcome. And almost every reading I gave became one of the best readings I had ever given, and so when I went to the bank the other day the teller said, "Oh...you're Kei Miller, yes? I've heard about you. They say they've had many great writers here, but they've never seen anyone the likes of you." And I almost cried right then and there – so moved that I almost spilled tears over the money I was depositing.

But there are jealousies as well. I will not miss that. And I think finally, I've had enough of it. Enough of it in my life. I have always learnt to say that I am only a young writer – and this is true. I have learnt to say that I am only at the beginning of my career, and this (I hope) is true. I have learnt to say that I have so much yet to learn – which is true. But I've also learnt a lot already. There are things that I just don't find very difficult. Things that come easily to me now. I haven't learnt to own up to that. I fear that that might come across as arrogant. Here especially, I've fallen into this habit of almost apologizing for doing well. 30 writers. 30 talents that range. 30 egos. You walk on eggshells. You have to explain why it is you were invited to have a piece in this journal, or invited to give a reading next year at such and such a festival,

or to give a reading at such and such a college. I was even asked by one writer to please not prepare for a panel that we were on together – because he didn't want to be outshone again. And I'm tired now of playing into other's insecurities. Perhaps it is that I'm finally growing up. When I was in highschool I used to slouch because I hated being taller than my friends. But enough of that.

Every morning now I'm playing an I-Wayne song on my computer:

We deya pon de lava ground
And nuff a dem a look fi see I mawga down....
But tell dem seh de warriors naah guh run!
We naah guh run!
We deya pon de lava ground¹²³

(I-Wayne 2005)

¹²³ A song of resilience, the lyrics would translate to: We stand up on the lava ground/Lots of them would love to see we starve/ But tell them, as a warrior, I will not run/ I will not run!/We stand up on the lava ground.

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