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BALANCING ACTS: WRIGHTING, WRITING, RIGHTING TRAUMA IN CARIBBEAN FICTION



Barbara Lalla

The major imperative is to recover and clothe with flesh, blood and narrative the submerged histories of the slaughtered, the disembodied and the voiceless. (Paula Morgan, *The Terror and the Time*, The University of the West Indies Press. 2014, 20.)

There are so many dimensions of recovering – re-covering that which has been stripped and left bare to the elements, recovering the dead after disaster, recovering from past wounds, recovering what has been lost. In crafting Caribbean fiction, authors may seek to balance disparate challenges of recovery. One challenge is the need to reconstruct, through writing, past events so damaging as to have left wounds whose pain lingers on through traumatic recall. In these circumstances the author writes the trauma as well. Such acts of creativity comprise wrightings of atrocity and persistent woundedness. In evoking the unthinkable, Caribbean word-wrights render up through discourse the submerging and shattering of our selves. But another, complementary, focus may be on healing. Literary critics such as Paula Morgan have pointed out the need for restorative operations through which the self may be made right - although recovery, crucial as it is, less frequently attracts critical notice. Morgan’s interest in such discourse chimes with my own priorities as a creative writer and impels academic inquiry into strategies and choices for achieving palliative narrative.

WRIGHTING PAIN

Caribbean authors take up their tools for recovery in a context so inscribed by violence – historical, political, domestic, racialized, and gendered – as to defy most efforts the odd writer might make to avoid it as a topic or fade it to background. This circumstance in our authorial condition demands management of memory: the writer must both acknowledge and respond to trauma. Besides this, the writer must arrive at a conscious decision regarding verbal constructions of pain. How much do we dredge up in memory and for how long? How much of what we recover should we word and pass on? Under what circumstances may gaps remain?

In addressing traumatic pasts artists worldwide have represented in various ways historical injustices and violation of human rights through slavery, colonialism, apartheid and other institutionalized acts of inhumanity that have led to individual, collective and cultural trauma. These artists have drawn on a range of aesthetic forms, notably verbal, to represent memory in ways that perform social functions (compare Eril Astrid 1). “Globally,” Paula Morgan points out, “the imperative to represent a painful past so as to alleviate forgetting, adjust misrepresentation and admit subaltern perspectives has assumed great significance” (*The Terror and the Time*, 11).

In the process, sometimes almost obsessively, writers may dwell on and reenact past and present horrors. But does prolonged filling up of the written Caribbean with grim remembrance relieve trauma? Some readers may well ask how needful it is to perpetuate what Morgan has termed “belated hauntings” (11). Most critics might respond that such hauntings are inescapable. And many readers, writers and critics will point out that, after all, today’s writer must achieve realism. As an author, I too have found it essential to reflect

inherited pain even as I portray or refer to current behaviours ranging from subtle domestic and interpersonal cruelties, through corrupt ethics, to human trafficking and ecological delinquency. Moreover in such settings fictional characters, like real ones, tend to experience dislocation or encounter complications in close domestic relationships. Such experience particularly applies to those negatively affected by historically entrenched inequalities in power distribution. In story as in life, this context of physical and psychological violence skews wider societal frameworks to render not only individuals but whole communities dysfunctional.

In our literature we read, write and rewrite this broken body of memory into immediacy. Indeed, dislocation and inequity are themselves constructions that have been entrenched verbally in writing. For example, a sweeping nineteenth-century description of an area terms it *uninhabited*, thus evoking a sense of wasteland (*Marly* 14; and see Lalla and D'Costa, 149-52). This choice of wording precludes even today's reader envisioning a scene busy with black people coming and going between "negro huts". The area referred to is in fact uninhabited by white residents and the diction achieves erasure of all the rest. This is but one early example of the type of writing that *wrights* criminal injustice into the understandings and value systems of those reading the Caribbean over generations.

Crucial achievements in Caribbean letters have included a recapturing and reconstruction of suffering not with an intention of perpetuating it but so as to bare it to our eyes. Derek Walcott's "Laventille" stands witness to what Morgan terms an "unrecoverable traumatic loss" (*The Terror and the Time*, 83). On the other hand some verbal reconstructions by other writers can graphically project extreme violence in a way that represents Caribbean consciousness in terms of abjection under gross brutality or in terms of learned brutality. In the process, the reality of entrenched violence may overtake other realities, and seem to

epitomize the Caribbean. There is also the threat that numbing exposure to violence as entertainment might call forth intensified portrayals of vicious behavior. Recall of past pain, for the sake of recovery from trauma, cannot justify limitless and gratuitous violence. The written Caribbean is a construction in which all constituents can never appear. The reality we construct verbally is necessarily incomplete, necessarily fraught with gaps, and the writer who aims at *recovery* in the word's sense of "healing" has choices to make about what to include and what to let go.

There is a crucial difference between writing healing (on the one hand) and silencing truth (on the other). At the same time, survivors are so much more than their wounds, as Lawrence Scott demonstrates in *Dangerous Freedoms*, which portrays dislocation and loss that the main character suffers from childhood and through her adult years. Scott's fiction fills gaps between the scattered facts that have come down to us regarding the separation of Elizabeth D'Aviniere (commonly called Dido Belle) from her mother. Hers is an open and aching wound that can only be relieved verbally: "Elizabeth enjoyed making up her mother's voice. She wrote it as she heard her speak. To find her on her tongue was to keep her close, to try it on the page was to keep her even closer and not to lose her, ever" (Scott 3). Elizabeth's pain is as *real* as it ever was but she discovers as a writer that recapturing voices on a page can bring some measure of healing. Healing does not deny pain: it addresses it because that pain is real.

In eschewing idealistic circumstances and romantic sensibilities, the movement to realism in literary history veered early to middle class then working class lives. This movement set out to focus on the mundane, the familiar and the ordinary. Caribbean narrative has demonstrated a similar focus - on the day to day struggle of "ordinary" people to survive. But our narrative has dwelt less on our more fulfilling experiences. What Caribbean realism has circled almost

obsessively are the wounds we have in common. One might almost describe an underlying trope that propels some Caribbean literary discourse as an equation of realism with pain. Sonny Ladoo's *No Pain Like This Body*, for instance, portrays the grim struggle for survival through back-breaking poverty, drunken violence, and heart-rending loss of a child – a short novel, unforgettably harrowing. Such pain, although deeply embedded in both the Indian and the African diasporic psyche, is neither mundane to the reader nor necessarily familiar. It remains extraordinary.

Linked to this concern with the real is a focus on the lived experience of domestic suffering and of institutionalized cruelty that is deep laid and convincingly conveyed in Caribbean settings by authors from within and beyond the Caribbean. In Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black*, the central consciousness passes on memories of his childhood on a plantation in Barbados. A few phrases randomly pulled from Chapter 2 offer a sense of these: "then the maimings began", "had an overseer burn him alive", "whipped to shreds" (8).

First of all, much of our pain emanates from the deep past - flashing back between merciful ellipses, in traumatic recall. It comprises bodily and psychological pain of overwhelming and unrelenting horror: Seizure and forced march. Coffle, chain, whip. Slimy boards of a vessel pitching, rolling, yawing; diarrhea, dermatitis and forced dancing on deck. The market, the probing. The gyve, stocks, ankle shackle, branding iron and iron mask. The child torn from her mother and sold. Rape, mutilation and disfigurement. All tamped down and festering in collective, transgenerational memory. However different Haitian experience of trauma may be to other Caribbean islands, because of the unique aspects of Haitian history that Martin Munro points out, pain – shared and shared out - lies at the core of our collective Caribbean identity.

But by no means all our pain is of the past. In the Caribbean we find ourselves dealing with the aftermath of historical violence – including mind-breaking poverty – amidst escalating global crises (see Morgan, *The Terror and the Time*, 10). Devastating disasters rock individual countries. Edwidge Danticat relays the account of a man who has been dug out, barely alive from being trapped with his family under the rubble, after listening for them in the dark as their voices faded (“The Gift,” in *Everything Inside*, 93-94). The first role of narrative in the palliative process is to inscribe the pain so as to gain control of one’s life by gathering the fragments into order. The next stage and second role must be to empower the narrator to pursue the process of reassembly by moving forward in one’s own story. In *Writing Rage*, Paula Morgan writes of Danticat’s dedication to unearthing submerged memories (223). In “The Gift” Danticat’s characters unearth such memories and unearth themselves, and then move forward, however brokenly. Her characters grow, complicated by suffering into more deeply sensitive and richly human persons, but in this circumstance, it is a suffering that slams down on them in their immediate present rather than pressing up from inherited memory.

One challenge in Caribbean writing is that the more shocking pain gets in our fiction, the more realistic some readers assess it to be, and perhaps the more representative of us. In addition to regional disasters, current social crises of crushing want, banditry, kidnapping, wanton murder, trafficking, sexual exploitation and all the rest that fills our newspapers – all that pain barraging us now is not mundane either. Familiar as it is in the news, it is shocking to most of us although it makes up much of the news about us, and much of our current fiction. And it is real: the child abuse in Claire Adam’s *Golden Child* could hardly be more convincing however readers may question details of the local social setting.

Such preoccupation is all very well for the category of non-Caribbean reader that expects Caribbean reality to be one of savagery, but Caribbean readers may well regard pain of such proportions (however realistic) as anything but mundane, anything but “normal Caribbeanness”. Indeed, an author engaging with such realities may find that they actually present some challenge to realism: how to convincingly convey and evoke shock without exploiting it through melodrama. Maisie Card’s *These Ghosts are Family* grabs the reader with the opening teaser of a man who earlier faked his own death. Then the tale proceeds into a gripping saga of failed family relationships woven between considerations of how to deal with a journal that records horrors of plantation slavery. Then the narrative flitters away into a duppy story of blood sucking little girls who disguise themselves as kittens. The compulsion to shock can end in fiction that exoticizes rather than realistically projecting the Caribbean.

This is not to dismiss the applicability of the gothic in writing the Caribbean. *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* convincingly addresses real issues of the persistent unfreedom experienced by women of colour, as well as their sexual and intellectual repression and exploitation. With gothic focus on the strange, the extraordinary and shocking, Sara Collins, author of *Confessions*, plumbs extremes of cruelty (sometimes in grisly detail) but maintains a more even keel in steering close to the Caribbean past.

Whatever genre a writer adopts against a backdrop of past horror and of current violent crime operating in our societies, a number of subtle circumstances foster perceptions of the Caribbean as an incompletely known or knowable place, a dangerous space, as an area (an arena, even) of pain. In some writing of the Caribbean, the Caribbean itself is only partially known. For one thing, our cultural context in many ways privileges a diasporic writing back to and of the Caribbean. More publishing opportunities present themselves outside the region, and large foreign presses can better afford to market their

titles and to enter their authors for awards. As a result, at least up to recently, writers in the Caribbean diaspora have risen to prominence more readily than those who actually live in the region. This is not to question the hard work – often brilliant work – of major writers in the diaspora, nor to underplay their right to write from the outside. But one outcome has been that as writers in the diaspora become better known, they come to be seen (at least by readers outside the region – that is, by most of the world) as speaking for the region.

It is crucial to declare at this point that superb writing, deeply grounded in Caribbean reality emanates from our diaspora through long established artists like Derek Walcott and younger writers of today like Kei Miller. But there are also many writers anchored outside the Caribbean who display limited direct experience of Caribbean life. Many are outside because they or their parents left out of dissatisfaction or lack of opportunity. Some are second generation, and the Caribbean is their family past, experienced through the nostalgic recollection of their elders - old time stories. Or, in the case of many *baan ya*, who left young, the Caribbean is affectionately remembered but outgrown. Some return for a visit, in the knowledge that they will after an appointed period of refreshment and “grounding” get back to a stable existence elsewhere. One understands about transgenerational memory but sometimes readers ask themselves - *is* the pain in this particular work remembered, or relayed; is it a haunting or a conjuring?

At any rate, these circumstances converge to provide a context for enough Caribbean diasporic narrative to present (in a significant proportion of it) a Caribbean from outside, a Caribbean left behind, a Caribbean in which a real life is irrecoverable, a Caribbean made interesting by its pastness, its otherness - a Caribbean that will sell well globally because it fits the expectations of the metropolitan world and meets market demands. Sometimes a writer gets the pain wrong but – hey – it sells anyway, especially if seasoned by a good bit of

cooking, for atmosphere. There are pockets of the unreal - and I do not refer to Washington Black's travels in an air balloon, which I found refreshing, but to situations that are presented as real and do not fit in a picture of the Caribbean as we know it from inside. Graphic violence in Lisa Allen-Agostini's *The Bread the Devil Knead* fits precisely into the novel's social setting, and the author's observations from inside our world render the novel all the more convincing and, as a result, yet more grueling. Inevitably, perceptions of Caribbean reality vary according to whether the writer is located inside or outside the Caribbean. As in *The Bread the Devil Knead*, Barbara Jenkins's *De Rightest Place* convinces the reader because a sense of place is paramount. Moreover, the voices ring true, and the events are set off by circumstances grounded in downtown Port-of-Spain. Jenkins's restraint in conveying suffering is not denial. The characters shoulder their baggage of pain, individually experienced but also further burdened by that legacy of the past, and when more crushes down they try to dig themselves out.

RIGHTING SELF

Caribbean reality includes unstable and shifting ground between (on the one hand) the current pockets of corruption and violence that exist in most societies, developed and developing, and (on the other) our deep shafts of excruciating history. Yet there is firm ground too in its vibrant culture that calls forth everything from heedless revelry to meticulous intellectual enquiry. There is equilibrium to be found by those who tread with care and who watch and listen with respect. In Caribbean culture, subtle underpinnings of community enable ethical choices based on compassion. Persistent spirituality accommodates levels of religious tolerance not widely to be found; family commitment not only cherishes children but runs on functional grandparenting - the list goes on. However the older heads grumble about these and other values having

fallen off – *is not like longtime*, they say – many such values persist to an unusual degree.

I am old enough to believe that however important a place pain holds in our history, thinking that exploits or wallows in pain is diseased in that it denies or corrodes life-sustaining values. Writing a plague novel, I have found a setting in which the hoped-for outcome is healing, individual and widespread. There seems no need to replicate the physical horror because anyone who has read past history or who has been awake over the past few years can picture agonizing physical symptoms. One can maintain tension by dwelling on emotional, psychological and spiritual symptoms that tend to be widely overlooked. Further, an authorial commitment to realism need not preclude the writer from articulating avenues for hope or healing.

A similar inclination prompts me to write not only of dislocation and dismembering but of relocation and re-membling, and to write in search of balance with regard to ethnicity, class, age and gender. Paula Morgan's work had demonstrated an understanding that researchers in Gender Studies would not get far in resolving women's issues without addressing those of men, and studies such as "Consorting with Kali" have consistently engaged with issues that contribute to or undermine male worth. This attention in her critical writing speaks to an understanding that one cannot empower one side by disempowering the other. Approaches such as hers, involving a crossculturalism that has played into the formation of black female consciousness, have tempered my own writing. It is within this literary context that I created a central female consciousness in *Grounds for Tenure*. Here, the young academic negotiates higher education, rejecting both peripheralism and disempowering paternalism and forming, across genders, bonds that are emotionally, psychologically and intellectually supportive.

To my mind, writing the real Caribbean requires authors – against our background of collective trauma – to anchor ourselves psychologically in the Caribbean, but also to read and reread ourselves and others in order to write at all. We have to keep an eye on the pain, at least to decide whether or how much to engage with it, as we apply discursive tools for crafting inner and outer worlds – and sometimes otherworlds. These processes of engaging with Caribbean reality – processes both of breaking down and of building up – are grounded in, yet continually amend, a writer’s own philosophical thought and spirituality.

Following on what Walcott terms that “deep amnesiac blow”, with its legacy of multidimensional and enduring pain, we must analyze rupture so as address “the need to narrate new foundations” (Ron Eyerman 3, and see Morgan, *The Terror and the Time*, 12). A driving force in Morgan’s work has been the conviction that intellectual (critical) enquiry must feed into practical application to the circumstances of real people, to formation of policies and interventions so that scholars become *change-agents*. The creative author performs a similarly transformative role given the extent to which literary discourse can entrench or palliate (in the Caribbean imaginary) a culture of violence associated with the trauma embedded through intellectual memory.

I wish I had written the story that Olive Senior tracks from a bloody shootout in Kingston: “What endured in him was not the remembrance of noise. Not the shots ricocheting in the small room, not the sound of tearing and splintering, not the aftershocks. What remained was the sudden silence that sucked him in and shut the noise out (“Silent,” in *The Pain Tree* 17). The child sees his father’s blood “creeping ever so slowly towards him” on the ground and his mother with “the gun at her head, her mouth opening and closing” (18). But after the shock comes resilience, made possible by unlooked for compassion, and deep-

rooted in the natural world itself - the hills “closing ranks behind them like guards” (23).

In my own fiction I have engaged mainly with psychological violence, for example associated with elder abuse in *Cascade* where the central consciousness is already under siege from Alzheimer’s. The trauma associated with child exploitation through kidnapping and trafficking occupied me in *Uncle Brother*. Infliction of pain need not be blatant. What may seem non-violent in *Grounds for Tenure* nevertheless inflicts deep mental agony through gender abuse and student exploitation, and even in the professional injustice wrought by intellectual swindling that ranges from minor plagiarizing gift to massive academic fraud. More and more, though, in my fiction, writing – and particularly storytelling – has become a central trope for addressing deep-seated and persistent pain.

A palliative function of narrative discourse is well recognized in medical programmes that aim at supporting patients in coming to terms with their own realities so as to build back their lives. Discourse not only represents reality but perpetuates, interrogates, constructs and reconstructs it. This is also true of fictional discourse – writing is a means of recovery, however impossible it may be to arrive at full recovery. In a way this impulse towards recovery in writing fiction mirrors an academic impulse to address imbalances in literary criticism. The Caribbean has fought for the voice to critique itself and must also claim the right to critique those who have claimed the right to speak for us in the past. Righting the record involves significant re-writing towards Caribbean selfhood as well as some re-reading of the Other. The response to other writing, a form of intertextuality some call “literature’s memory”, is one path to canon formation, a way of defining cultural heritage, a mechanism for relating narrative to memory and thus to identity. Eril Astrid considers how the study of literary afterlives “opens up a diachronic perspective” in which stories “appear,

disappear, and reappear. Literary works are read, reread, and rewritten across decades and centuries. In the process they are constantly transformed and put to ever-new uses" (1). Intertextuality, rewriting, intermediality and remediation are key concepts which Astrid identifies as the "social life" of texts and other media in a mnemohistorical perspective.

The impetus to write back and to rewrite is closely tied to re-reading, the need for which has been less obvious to Caribbean critics in general. But re-reading other canons is based on the premise that privileged verbal cultures which have written themselves into power over us require our scrutiny and corrective analysis. Re-reading them must complement our rewriting of ourselves, and this re-writing is vital for coming to terms with old pain. Writing not only lays bare but may suture wounds, not only tracks dislocations but remaps identities so as to restore balance and to empower.

Even as I tried in my most recent publication (*One Thousand Eyes*) to convey traumatic dislocation and fragmented memory in a group of abandoned children, I was attempting in a novel currently in press (*By Such a Parting Light*) to deal with dislocations associated with aging - such as retirement, separation from children migrated abroad, upheavals in routine by circumstances such as the pandemic and mysterious demands of encroaching technological developments. In this book, such interruptions of the central character's "normal" life take place against the background of social violence and the stress of new encounters both welcome and unwanted, like grandchildren and those that seem to threaten them. The aging character is hypersensitive to the pressure of experience outside her comfort zone. Her inside out view of a planet in multidimensional turmoil shocks her more than it might shock the young - perhaps because it is a planet she has known so long. As she writes to make sense of experience, I am forced to engage with my situation of being an author whose narrator is an author.

How does one write that without rewriting oneself? And, if the writing process (hers or mine) runs parallel to a process of self-construction, how best may one observe strictures against literary moralism while testing and repairing one's own moral framework? Palliative writing that does not collapse into literary moralism is fraught with ambivalence and turns out to be structurally challenging, because transformation of a palliative sort proceeds more by discovery, by response to context, character and circumstance than by advance hammering together of a plot. Although focusing on creative nonfiction and on illness narrative in particular, recent research on palliative writing is relevant to fictional discourse in demonstrating the bearing of Caribbean creative writing on psychological issues such as mourning, loss and reconciliation. (These considerations are dealt with in studies by Meredith and Phillips, Meredith and Sharer, and Curtis Hart.)

For the fiction writer, palliative writing raises significant challenges – not only how to avoid literary moralism without evasion of moral issues, but how to find a voice that is neither preachy and patronizing nor timorously evasive of morality. Perhaps it is at points like these that Morgan's stance on palliative criticism and mine on palliative narrative most productively complement each other and go to the root of why (and how) one writes at all. A crucial creative challenge is to work out how writing facilitates one's ability to discover (or recover) what one thinks. In the author of fiction as in the patient, creative writing enhances awareness and prompts the writer to focus attention on what needs to be understood and cared about.

More and more, my creations have nudged me towards writing not so much the pain itself but, beyond it, the persistence of family, the urgency of forging new and revitalizing memories, the retrieval of children, the acceptance of responsibility for whatever has gone on in one's presence, an absolute refusal to reject the lessons of the past. My (admittedly shrinking) inspection of pain has

steered me towards writing the imperative to maintain a horror of cruelty – a horror of such intensity that cruelty cannot be made a game of or tossed carelessly in as passing spectacle. I have found that achieving these ends required verbal construction of restorative characters, and I could not disentangle this process from self-construction. Where there is no predetermined moral position, or where such positions are rooted out to be ruthlessly questioned and tested, narrative structure emerges parallel to authorial self-reworking. In the process, the moral incentive produces not conclusive statements so much as questions – usually, conflicting questions. Nevertheless, through my narrators I have found that writing turns out to be a vehicle for both revealing and resolving chaos, for laying bare and healing wounds – the writer’s pain as much as anyone else’s. But, above all, writing is a mechanism both for recovery and for writing off what lies beyond the bounds of recovery.

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