

# *Tout Moun*

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*Beyond the Crisis-Generation and the Dread  
Instilled: Special Issue in Honour of  
Professor Paula Eleanor Morgan*

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## MI DAWTA, MI DAWTA



*Patricia Mohammed*

In her Professorial lecture delivered in 2017, Paula Morgan argues that “fiction can lend a plausible sense of the lived reality of traumatic histories and their contemporary outworking”. She continues, “Indeed, when dealing with trauma, the half that has never yet been told - the submerged, the silenced, the erased, the vestiges, the fragments, the phantom limbs - is arguably more significant than the half that finds its way into uneasy articulation”<sup>i</sup>. One of Morgan’s major contributions as a Caribbean scholar is her consistent interlocutions of gender with Caribbean literature. Central in her repertoire is the theme of violence. She refers both to gender based violence, as well as the violence colonized peoples have suffered in societies that have been deformed through the processes of uprooting and unceremonious resettlement.

Morgan explains: “I have evolved into a literary and cultural scholar with a deep conviction in the power of the creative imagination to unearth and diagnose enduring social issues”. She sees this unearthing and diagnosis as a healing one, not only or even primarily for the individual, but as the collective regional post-colonial voice – acting as a cathartic power to “negotiate crises of being and belonging”. She places the Caribbean as central in this global existential process of negotiating crises because it was admittedly at “the forefront of the early experiment in current global capitalism”.

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While the latter is true of the Caribbean region, one can argue that every region, if not every society, has had its traumas, its invasions, its indigenous populations overtaken by stronger marauders who took over – as for instance from the twelfth century those in the east who underwent total acculturation due to the strategies of colonization used by Genghis Khan, or here in the west the sixteenth century conquest of the Incas and Aztecs whose civilizations were virtually decimated. Caribbean historical evolution as scripted begins similarly around the fifteenth century with the eradication and diminishment of indigenous populations, leaving societies and peoples who have inherited discourses of disempowerment and victimhood. The underpinnings of Morgan’s philosophy that traumatic histories have left their mark on people in ways that are submerged, silenced, even erased, has relevance to a wide range of global societies.

Caribbean societies have contended with this ontology of becoming through discourses of resistance, victimhood, post-colonial rewritings of history, and creative ways to reimagine a past and rewrite an unfolding future. Paula Morgan provokes us to confront the legacies that past violations have left for current generations in the Caribbean. She asks: “How are violent and violating histories manifesting themselves in contemporary social orders? How are we to plumb the mysteries of individual and collective bodies, visceral ways of digesting and regurgitating trauma? And above all how do we trace and alleviate the intergenerational, interconnected, and insidious nature of the out workings of psychic pain?”

While Caribbean history has largely focussed on the expropriations and denigrations of the major ethnic and cultural groups who now inhabit these societies, creole historiography also presented examples of heroism that defies the typical trajectory of victimhood or underdevelopment. Similarly scholars

who have worked in the field of gender and cultural studies employed gender theory that viewed gender relations through the lens of a dominant heterosexual patriarchal system of power. This generated a one-dimensional analysis of individuals or groups. Lives interpreted through power imbalances between and among women and men naturally led to a finding of victimhood and ways in which people are oppressed rather than how they find liberation. Feminist epistemology, however, also draws on standpoint theory that allowed for a critique of objectivity. Its mantra “the personal in the political”, challenged the tendency to favour the abstract over the concrete, to follow an objectivist epistemology that puts distance between what people experience as their everyday reality and what they know to be true. It validates situated knowledge or knowledge that reflects the particular involvement or perspective of the knower. Thus feminism and gender studies have liberally used narratives and life stories to depict the complexities that exist in the interstices, the parts that are never told, “the vestiges, fragments and phantom limbs” that individuals or groups have experienced from years of abuse or from a history of poverty and servitude.

I agree with Professor Morgan that personal narratives and fiction are some of the best tools with which to empathize with others. I think as scholars or writers we must never reduce people to victimhood, overlooking their agency. Instead, we must see the indomitable spirit of courage and optimism that keeps them going and perhaps signifies the meaning they make of their lives. We are the spokespersons for others who do not tell their stories. For intellectuals there is a responsibility inherent in the telling and in the interpretation of their experiences.

I worked in Jamaica as a Gender Studies scholar for nearly a decade during which I began to appreciate the different and longer history of colonization that this society had had, compared to Trinidad where I was born and grew up. I

got to know many individuals from different classes or colour groupings very well, learning about their family situations, economic conditions, and the challenges that they faced, or not, on a daily basis.

The rendering of Gwen in *Mi Dawta, Mi Dawta*, and her hope to free her daughter from the kind of life she had experienced, depicts trauma that has resulted from abuse and violence that she has endured for years. While embodied in a one-person account and presented as fictional, it was culled from real experiences learnt especially from two strong and courageous women who worked with me as “helpers” in Jamaica. I could not do my job without them and took for granted, at first, that they had their “lesser” role to play to support mine as a professional woman. In hindsight and with age, I view this perspective very differently, with less arrogance perhaps, and I wrote this as a memory to both and perhaps to add to the new gender equation we must make between women and their household helpers.

I heard some years after I had left Jamaica that one of them had died. I have always felt guilty that I could not and did not do more for them then, given my relatively privileged circumstances. It is presented in this format in recognition of Professor Morgan’s reminder to us of the power of fiction in revealing these fragments back to us. Perhaps what I confront here is my own reflection in a past mirror of self. And in doing so, I am attempting as Morgan has suggested to use fiction as a cathartic power to salve my own conscience, many years after the fact, by empathising and finally understanding Gwen’s mental breakdown. Fiction and the literary should also speak for itself, so I leave the rest to the individual reader’s imagination. The illustration is carried out by the British born artist, my husband, who also knew both of these helpers, had lived longer in Jamaica than I had, and was, in retrospect, always more in tune than I was at the time with their predicaments.



**Untitled ink and gouache on paper Rex Dixon, 1995  
Reproduced with permission of the artist**

As Jessica drove into the pebbled driveway of her single-story house in Harringdale Crescent, Gwen was standing as still as a lamppost on the front porch. Jessica stepped past her helper anxiously. This was not behaviour usual for Gwen, who would normally be hovering over a steaming pot or mopping out some corner of the house at this time.

There was a haphazard pattern of red hibiscus petals and butchered purple bougainvillea colouring her cream tiled floor. It only then registered to Jessica that something had gone sadly wrong. Gwen had the kitchen knife in her hand, the one she used to cut up goat meat and clean the red snapper that Jessica bought from the market in Papine every Saturday morning. Gwen's soft cow

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eyes were dull, like burnt out coals without the slightest hint of ember glowing. Her lips hung around her mouth like a Salvador Dali clock rim.

“What happened here, Gwen, did someone come in, did somebody try to attack you?” Jessica stood there, looking around at her house now in tatters, furnishings in shreds, curtains that hung like loose bandages on their twisted rails, green pools of Squeezy running rings on the cedar floor and a lethal trail of broken glass, ceramic and crockery that led to the kitchen.

Gwen had been hired as a household helper two years ago, recommended highly to Jessica by a neighbour called Ida with whom Gwen had worked for some time. Ida had now taken on a family member from the country to assist her with the house and children, so Gwen could now work for another client. Jessica soon found out that Gwen was a good worker, reliable, honest and a wonderful cook as well. She began to look forward to coming home from work to find the house clean, the floors nice to walk on with bare feet, the furniture polished, the clothes washed, sometimes still waving on the clothesline as she drove in. She looked forward to the Jamaican dishes that she herself just could not get the hang of yet, like steamed fish stuffed with callaloo, and red peas soup.

When Jessica had to get to work early she would sometimes leave notes for Gwen to do the chores. She realized soon after she had hired her, having found half the meal unprepared and an apologetic scrawl, *Mis Jes de bean am bad*, that Gwen could barely read or write.

But that didn't matter as Gwen was an honest and hardworking woman of forty-two, who to Jessica's dismay, looked closer to fifty-nine. Jessica liked how Gwen would sometimes make her a hot cup of cocoa tea with fresh mint picked from the garden. She found a great kindness in Gwen, a sympathetic soul with a heart that was capable of embracing others. She massaged Jessica's head

with olive oil and *vetivier* for a half hour one morning, and the headache Jessica woke up with miraculously went away. Gwen was a treasure she had discovered, and she in turn treated her well, buying her little extras, taking her home sometimes to ease the burden of transport up that long trek to her house, and ensuring that she was not underpaid.

Gwen liked working for people who appreciated her. She had learnt to stay clear of the kind of women who shoveled work on her back like she was still some slave in a cane field. She preferred people “from foreign” who in her view had manners and brought-upsy. Jessica was from one of those other small islands - Gwen did not know which one. Gwen could not read a map, but she knew Jessica was not from Jamaica from the way she spoke. She found that *Miss Jes treat her real good.*

For two years since she began to work for Miss Jes, Monday to Friday, Gwen crossed a bumpy track from her rough galvanized covered hut to the nearest bus stop on Irish Town hill. Then she took the maxi-van down to Papine, standing room only this hour of the morning, the pusher shouting “*smaal up yuhself, smaal up yuhself*” as he shoved another body into the back of the bus. Then she took a next overcrowded ‘*smaal up yuhself*’ bus up to Jessica’s house. The bus didn’t even pass in front of Miss Jes’s house. Gwen still had to get out at Liguanea and then take a five-minute walk in the morning sun before she reached the front door. She had raised three children this way, working in other people’s houses since she turned thirteen. In some of them she had had to work from morning to late evening without a break.

Gwen had never had help from the children’s father to bring up the young ones. The first baby father stayed around long enough to see his *pickney* born, two boys Jojo and Tobias. She was glad to see the back of number one. He used to beat her when he was drunk and thief the little extra cash she had hidden away to gamble and drink with his friends. She managed to get the two sons



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away from trouble when they turned young men by sending them to live with a far relation in the Bronx. She had never stepped foot outside of Jamaica herself, although she thought perhaps one day she might go and visit them. She had not even heard from them lately, but as far as she knew they were still living, and she felt she had done her duty by them. At least she had made sure they never got gunned down by Babylon bullets in Jamaica.

The second child father had religion, but that didn't stop him from leaving her with a little daughter on her hands. His name was Bobsieboy Petersfield. They say he was good looking, but that did her no favours other than giving her a good looking girl child. He stayed longer than the first man though. Maybe that is why Mavis came out so special. She made Mavis go to school every day to get an education and taught her to stay far away from boys.

Gwen talked to herself proudly as she scrubbed another pot to cook the rice and peas for Jessica and Cyrus's dinner, thinking aloud happily while turning the pot. *Mavis Petersfield, maybe school mistress in Campion college. Mavis, her dawta who would keep her company in old age.* Mavis visited her every other Sunday with cake and sometimes chicken and chips from KFC. Gwen had managed to get Mavis away from the Don in the village two years ago, the day after he had cut up Mavis's hand with a penknife because she wouldn't go out with him. Gwen then decided to take in extra washing and sent Mavis to live uptown. *Mavis Petersfield, learning to be a primary school pupil teacher now, boarding by respectable Missis Kent in Newtown, wearing white blouse and bright blue pleated skirt and black close up shoes every day, not like Gwen who still wearing washout ganzi and slippers.*

The two policemen came very early that morning. It was dusk outside. Gwen was still asleep, dreaming of reading the Bible one day when Mavis found the time to teach her to read. She didn't cry when they showed her Mavis's blouse and skirt and asked if she could recognize them. She took the bundle from them quietly. *"Like somebody crack a bottle of Red Label wine all over the chile clothes"*, she

said, as if talking to herself. She looked over the clothes as if Mavis was still inside them, the white blouse dirty red and the blue skirt having turned purple in parts. *“Mavis uniform need washing”* she mumbled quietly to them. *She tell them they must leave it with her. She will see to it.*

She pushed the still soggy clothes into the bag she took with her to work as she roused herself up after the policemen had gone. She had to get to Miss Jes house to finish the scrubbing she had left half done yesterday. She took the two buses as usual and found her way to the house in Harringdale Crescent. She walked into the kitchen. Then she picked up the knife and went to work.

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<sup>i</sup> Paula Morgan, “Healing the Hurts of My People Slightly: Societal Violence and Trauma in Caribbean Discourse.” Professorial Lecture, University of the West Indies, 2017. All text in quotations in this essay are taken from Morgan’s written version of her Professorial lecture.