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RECLAIMING ROOTS THROUGH PERFORMANCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH EINTOU PEARL SPRINGER



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INTRODUCTION

Eintou Pearl Springer is an influential elder who has pioneered the merger of African derived Caribbean cultural and performance traditions with contemporary performance. As a playwright, poet, storyteller, and activist from Trinidad and Tobago, she has shown considerable wisdom in the synthesis of cultural history and performance. Springer founded the National Heritage arm of the National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS). The impact of her work is felt in the way she inspires others to reclaim and preserve remnants of cultural customs and spiritualities. Her work explores Yoruba traditions of West Africa to create communities of performers, artists, and writers. As a result of her legacy, Springer received the Humming Bird Silver Medal in 1996. She served as Poet Laureate of Port of Spain from 2002-2009, and was awarded the Vanguard Award of the National Drama Association of Trinidad and Tobago (NDATT) in 2004. In 2018, her achievements were further recognised with the award of an honorary doctorate by the University of Trinidad and Tobago.

Springer acknowledges her cultural roots from Indigenous people from Venezuela and African peoples in St. Vincent. Embracing her multicultural roots allows her to celebrate the unique origins of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. However, Springer is known for establishing an anchor in African practices in the Caribbean. Springer continues to fight against the attempts to erase or minimise the importance of the presence and influence of African cultural elements in Trinidad's and Tobago's performance spaces. Thus, she continues to spearhead the recovery, retention, and re-visioning of African cultural roots in Caribbean performances. Through her books of poetry, *Godchild: Stories and Poems for Children* (1988), *Moving Into the Light* (2000), and collected plays titled *Survivor: A Collection of Plays for Children and Young Adults* (2016).

This interview began as a mediated conversation on Facebook messenger with Attillah Springer. Then, Eintou Springer communicated through email agreed to be interviewed over WhatsApp. The conversation was recorded and transcribed. Springer exemplifies a griot who has played a major role in the development of Afro-Caribbean performers.

STORYTELLING

ECD: In your interview with Carole Boyce Davie, you discuss your ability to transform cultural forms into performance.¹ Describe the importance of identity and your creative practice.

EPS: For me, it all starts with storytelling because my mother was a great storyteller. My uncles were great storytellers, and I really feel the ancestors chose me to do what I do. We moved away early from my village in Santa Cruz, but my paternal grandfather was Garifuna and lived until he was 106. I remember him, putting me on his lap when I was three or four and singing to me a plantation song, “none to wipe my eyes, none to dry my tears. I alone in sorrow. I must go, I alone in sorrow. I must go.” He would put his pipe in my mouth and sing this song for me. I feel like that song really *obeahed* me into being who I am, to send me to look for the lost songs and stories and all of that. My mother used to quarrel a lot. She’d say, “take the pipe out of that child mouth!” But I think he knew exactly what he was doing as I grew up. I did well in school and although we were poor in certain circumstances, the richness of the culture was there.

I got into a whole lot of stuff, which explained to me why I had been regarded as black, ugly, and poor since I went to a predominantly Presbyterian school and experienced a lot of racism from the Indian teachers. In secondary school, there was this teacher who was the daughter of the great Learie Constantine, a cricketer who fought racism. In that atmosphere, I learned about Africanness, racism, and all of that from his books. His daughter, Gloria Valère introduced me to his books. At my secondary school, it was like a revelation. It confirmed why people regard you as this and so, but my cultural roots were very strong.

I lived for a short while in an abandoned coco estate house with my mother and brother and never felt poor. I’ve written a poem about my mother’s skirt and how it was an all-powerful, protective matrix. You know, you always felt safe. You always had food, fruits, the village, the stories. You had the coal pot and whatever was cooked like bake and cocoa tea. My maternal grandfather came from Venezuela. He was an overseer of cocoa and citrus plantation, so there was a richness of the land and the stories. I never knew I was poor until I went to primary school. Up to today, I remember things my mother did and said. She always hitting your back,

¹ See <http://idakedagroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IC-2017-pt-2.pdf> for more information on their interview.

talking about, “walk straight! Don’t put your head down!” You know, just instilled that sense of pride.

ECD: What other experiences opened your mind to African consciousness?

EPS: I remember when I left school, I went to England in 1969, and I was involved for a while in the Black Panther organisation in London. When I came back to Trinidad and Tobago, I went straight into the Black Power Movement². I remember my mother being so disappointed. At that time in Trinidad, there were only a hundred and something scholarships to secondary schools, because there was no universal secondary school education then. I had gotten an exhibition, so I was the first person in my family to go to secondary school. It was a big, big thing. My mother in her pragmatic way when the results came said, “now I have to find you uniform to wear.” I mean that lady was something else.

When I began to show an interest in African culture and history, she said to me, “after all I do to bring you out of his thing, you’re going back into the slavery thing.” She couldn’t understand the value of that education. Poor thing, she paid a terrible price for it—sometimes I’d feel guilty. But I mean I came to do what I have to do. When I started getting involved with the Black Power Movement her home was raided many times. Once a police cracked a gun in my face and said to my mother, “I keeping one of these bullets for her.” My mother had a nervous breakdown; she had a very rough time for the path I decided to follow.

ECD: Your work promotes transforming misconceptions of African culture. Why do you want to raise awareness about Anansi? You argue that he is not a trickster but a strategist and a cultural warrior.³

EPS: Anansi stories survived more than any other West African stories that were told in the Caribbean. That cultural survival was linked to the fact that they revolted more than any other people; that their resistance was linked to their spirituality. Their spirituality was also *Obia*, also known as Obeah, is perhaps the most hated word in the Caribbean. Anansi emerges from that, worthy to be seen and elevated as such in our consciousness as a strategist. Somebody who could say, “yes massa” and when master turn around the woman would put poison in his food; or together in the bush, they would plan revolution. As Jamaicans say, “play fool to catch wise.” That ability to play stupid has remained as symbolic of Anansi, an African male. However, his role as strategist and obeah were stripped away. I do a lot of research and then I condense it into the plays and the poetry to make the knowledge accessible.

² See https://trinidadexpress.com/opinion/editorials/black-power-50-years-later/article_057b2ac8-5834-11ea-9847-2706ad837078.html for more on how the Black Power Revolution started.

³ See <https://www.facebook.com/watch/mseintou/225233405348731/> to watch videos from the International Ananse Movement Storytelling Series.

ECD: That is important because everyone does not have access to those documents, libraries and information. You are a strategist.

EPS: Well, if I'm a teller of Anansi tales, what else must I be.



Portrait of Eintou Pearl Springer. Photograph by Merten Kaatz.

SPIRITUALITY

ECD: How do people in Trinidad and Tobago view the integration of variations of spiritual practices in their everyday lives?

EPS: We have a great degree of interest in Ifá Orisa spirituality. When I work with young people like in my play *Kambule*, and so, I talk to them a lot about the spirituality and make them understand that it's not just cutting a gig, but that it has serious implications. In fact, it is a ritual of reverence to the ancestors. Some of those who are very Christian, I tell them that I don't think they should be involved in the production because I don't want them to go through any crisis of consciousness. Some of them, in fact, have come out of the production because they were very conflicted. We had a very interesting incident where we had a rehearsal going on for *Kambule*. I always consult the Babalawo to make sure we do the proper offerings and rituals before the production. We use the ancient African martial arts called stick-fighting. One of the actors swung the weapon which we call *bois* and one of the principal actors got hit. There was blood all over the place. We took him to the hospital and somebody went into possession and started to say, "WE DON'T WANT THEM HERE! WE DON'T WANT THEM HERE!" It was awful. So the next day I went to the Babalawo and I said, "why is this happening? I've done all my *ebo*, I've done everything." After he consulted Ifa, he said to me that the person who got hit was very conflicted because he was an Adventist or something. He kept facing a lot of problems at home with his family. He wanted to be an actor in the play but he was conflicted spiritually. Now, before I add new people to the cast, I have to clear them because the Babalawo reminded me that what I am doing is ancestral work. It has gone beyond theater, and if you are performing a ritual in honor of the ancestors, if there is somebody there who does not recognise them, they will intervene.

ECD: I have respect for African traditions and practices but I am aware of the difficulties caused by misconceptions. What are your thoughts?

EP: There are many misconceptions about our spirituality. Now, in this time of COVID-19, I think it's a time for a lot of returning to know who we are. People have a worldview in which their traditions, their beliefs, their sense of self are embedded. Once you move away from the worldview of your people, in my mind, you cannot be a whole person. You cannot claim the wholeness of who you are.

ECD: Discuss the link between your African consciousness and activism.

EPS: I felt that a lot of what we set out to achieve in the 1970s with the Black Power revolution, we didn't really achieve, and you know, it was bothering me. I went back to one of my mentors, CLR James. I went back to *The Black Jacobins*. James talked about Boukman making the blood

offering and praying, saying the god of the white man commits crime and that famous speech. It became very clear to me what was missing. What we had done wasn't linked with our ancient spirituality.

I went in search of the elders and I've written a lot about my findings. I always remember the unmitigated terror that I felt when I went to be initiated in 1986. After all these years of rejecting Christianity, I wondered if I was doing the right thing or if I was losing my immortal soul in this process. It taught me a huge lesson, and made me very humble. I had an intellectual understanding of the spirituality and had been talking and writing about it, but when it came to actually being initiated, I really felt the terror of the damned. It helped me understand, more fully, and at first hand, what a terrible hold Christianity had on people and how germane Christianity had been to the process of colonisation.

PERFORMANCE

ECD: We often acknowledge male Caribbean writers and their accomplishments. Have there been any Caribbean women who have been influential to your journey?

EPS: The woman? As mentioned, my teacher Gloria Valère was critical in primary school. The teacher who rescued me from all the racism and recognised my propensity in theatre was Una Roach. She was very critical to my survival in the Presbyterian school I attended, and in which, I got all the racism. I used to get in a lot of fights. I would fight anybody who would try to do anything to me. Also, there was a little old lady called Miss Mercy. I must say something about her. I would run by her for rescue when others ganged up on me; that old lady, I could see her now. She wrote poems on cards and sold them. They were little poems about the flowers, you know, nice looking poems. She used to read them for me. I'm saying that was my first meeting with a poet. This old lady living in this little house rescuing me from children who wanted to fight me. There was also a teacher in that primary school, Mr. Rampersad who knew all the most wonderful poems.

ECD: Did you start writing poetry and performing at that young age?

EPS: In secondary school, I started to write poetry, but of course I was steeped in English literature. I was reading Blake and Shakespeare, Longfellow etc. I would say to myself, "girl what you writing here is stupidity" and rip it up. My teachers at St. George's College were so wonderful. Through Gloria Valère I developed my love for and command of English. I also met my theatre guru, Slade Hopkinson. He brought me into the world of theatre. He was my mentor not only in theatre, but life. He taught me a lot about how to live, how to be, and he was committed to an ideology of Caribbean theatre as a powerful force for transformation. At that time he was the lead actor in Derek Walcott's Trinidad Theatre Workshop of which I became a

member once I finished secondary school. I was mentored by Slade ⁴and to a much lesser extent, Derek.

ECD: I love how your mentors were able to protect you and shape your future by introducing you to the arts. What was life like after secondary school?

EPS: Of course at that time I wanted to do law because I had passes in history and all the right subjects. I got accepted at a prestigious law school in England, but there was no money. My teachers consulted and sent me to library services. I tell you, I was so wonderfully mentored and I'm so grateful for that. In the library, I didn't have desk presence. I was black. Here in Trinidad, it was a very browning profession. So, they stuck me in this little Caribbean collection, which was of course where I was destined to be—from that I took off.

I used to steal all the books and take them to read and return them. I did not think that the elder in charge knew what I was doing. One day she had an invitation to go on the television show and talk about Caribbean literature. She said, “since you been reading so much, I think you should be ready to go on the programme.” She just threw me into it. She recently passed, God bless her. Because of her, I wrote a long piece for the newspapers about the importance of mentoring for young people. You know, I have been blessed by many mentors. I have been mentored by CLR James, George Lamming, Slade Hopkinson, Derek Walcott, Gloria Valère, Una Roach, Irene Campbell, and many others in big and small ways.

ECD: How did performance shape your understanding of your voice?

EPS: I had a voice that my teachers recognised. To me, I was just reading, but I was able to do all the nuances of the work. We started going into the Trinidad Theatre Workshop with Derek, but for my sixth form graduation, I did my first piece of theatre. We turned the great Latin poet, Virgil into a play. After translating it, I played the role of chorus. When I came back to Trinidad and Tobago in the 1970s, I became part of The National Joint Action Committee (NJAC).⁵ My first job was to convince the leaders of the movement that theatre and the arts were valuable and legitimate means of fighting oppression and developing consciousness. My writing and my understanding of the roles that theatre and arts play in conscientisation came out of Slade, and came out of Fanon, and came out of Freire. During that period, I met Paolo Freire who wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).

ECD: What was your experience like organizing during the Black Revolution Movement?

⁴ Refer to Bowen (1977) to read more about Slade Hopkinson.

⁵ Political party in Trinidad and Tobago, established by Makandal Daaga in February 1969.

EPS: Inside the Black Power Revolution, we used to have *harambees* all over the country. We were a radical organisation. This was armed struggle, let's make no mistake about it. It took a while for leaders to recognise that this theatre thing could be a powerful and important part of armed struggle. But I was able to convince them because I did a particular piece of street theatre and once again my house was raided after in that performance. We had various bits of poetry and dance, but the piece that provoked the police was a poem by Eric Roach on Uriah Butler, a great warrior who brought about the transformation of conditions for workers and the establishment of our first trade union. We recreated 1937, when they were trying to arrest Butler, and the police who came to arrest him, one policeman was burned to death. After that reenactment, the police were at my house the following night. It was written up in the press and all of that. Later, we set up something called the Black Traditions in Art for which I was the convener and it was the most miraculous series of concerts where all the voices of liberation in dance, music, and Calypso came together to perform for free for huge crowds. Valentino, Stalin, Astor Johnson, Andre Tanker, you know, all of the greatest and best came together.



Eintou Pearl Springer facilitates children's workshop with Keshav Chandradathsingh.

Photography by Attillah Springer

ECD: In the development of performance practices and politics of theatre, you invoke African traditions and First People's stories. How were these pieces received?

EPS: Well, all these performances were very well received. I think the First People's community is very steeped in Catholicism. They have a little problem with *I Hyarima*, because it portrays Hyarima as he was an unrepentant traditionalist who hated the Spaniards and whose aim was to kill his oppressors. I think they have a little problem with that, so for the past two years, I haven't performed it. But all the plays have been published, in my book called *Survivor* (2016).

ECD: In addition to your plays, you were the Poet Laureate of Trinidad and Tobago. How would you describe your tenure?

EPS: Well, yes, I was very honoured and pleased, and so on. But you know, I have never been about the honours. I take them in my stride. I do my work because I feel that my ancestors have sent me. Yes, I'm grateful when there's recognition. I was given many awards in Trinidad and Tobago. They have also given me an honorary doctorate for my work, so the honors have come. But I told them when I walked down the road in my community long before there was any doctorate, my people called me doctor—the respect. So that for me is very important, especially from the young people. As you know, I have been telling stories on my Facebook page, you see the kind of responses and we love that.

ECD: Do you think that the creative arts can bring about social change?

EPS: I think *Kambule* has been the greatest expression of that. It brought back to the consciousness and the memory all that is Trinidad and Tobago's carnival. The African fought for it in 1881, with their sticks, stones, and bottles to defy and defeat the might of the British constabulary. They fought for the right to cultural expression, their *Kambule*. This was the beginning of our Carnival. A couple of years ago, I was asked to be a mentor by the Ministry of Culture. I was able to work with about twenty young persons. I rooted them, not the only in African culture, but I took them to a Hindu temple, and also the headquarters of our First People community.

I have seen them and the work that these young people are doing. I have trained a lot of young people and watched them coming into their own. It is a source of great pride to me. As I said, my work in NJAC and the Black Power Movement was to bring African culture to the fore. Rooting people in their culture is important as revolution.

CONCLUSION

Springer's commitment to reclaim African practices in her work has developed other actors, musicians, and poets in Trinidad and Tobago and beyond. Through her reflections, she shows the value of understanding one's cultural beliefs and the power that is presented through performance. This interview celebrates Springer's invaluable contributions to establishing a solid foundation for emergence, growth, and acceptance of the African and First people's cultures in Trinidad and Tobago. Navigating our social context requires historical knowledge. Springer's story shows us the power of embracing culture and voice for social change.

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