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Voicing Desire in Caribbean Literature

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Panel: Literature of Desire

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VOICING DESIRE IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

“The classic love story, the sonnet to the beloved, the tale of erotic desire, airport romance, on-line-sex at the fingertips, sexting.”

This is my second encounter with the word ‘sexting’, and apart from the strange gleeful-guilt it conjures, I wondered who would give such a thing a name! I found it reaching to think of its impact on literature or how it might change writing everyday things.

Considered the great persuader of human action, desire is often famed in romanticism and eroticism. That hankering for someone, something, someday; I first found the voicing of my desire in Shakespeare, Sonnet 57:

Being your slave what should I do but tend
Upon the hours, and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend;
Nor services to do, till you require.
Nor dare I chide the world without end hour,
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour,
When you have bid your servant once adieu;

It was easier to own this two toned rhetoric; faulting love for my feelings of wanting; the sarcastic allusions to the subject’s desires and rebutting one’s pandering to convey an urgency felt! I recall tracing these words with a deliberate finger, closing my eyes at each line-break to funnel myself into sweet vicarious pain, to hang from the final couplet like a wrung rag on a nail; there was ecstasy in its denial!

I learned to write desire as a child does, learning letters from a grownups large script. Perhaps you also started in this way. With Roethke, “I remember the neck curls, limp and damp as tendrils; And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile”; or Lowell’s dark swallows. We begin as witnesses to another’s world and through their words, pretend at desire. But, as we adapt the images and triggers to our own, and dig towards its heart, we come, not to the catharsis of desires expulsion, but instead, to the place where we linger in its Potential. It is here, submerged in the rhetoric of the emotion, that we seek our native tongue to write the agony of our internal conversation.

It is not enough to trace another's language or symbols; the dignified restraint of Shakespeare's polished desire, does not resonate with a Caribbean culture where desire is infectious moving quickly from the mind into the belly. One that is ripening in all seasons, where there is always the loud friction of the word on the genitalia. Desire must be braved-through in the everyday, confronted within those nuances that lie under the skin.

As a Caribbean poet, I write of a 'brazen, hiss-teeth, hurry-up' desire, it is guileless, accusing and bitter, accustomed to hurt and unfulfilment. We allow it to lend itself to an eclectic language and form. Assonance, image and metaphor become instrumental in fostering a fastidious aesthetic that dissects emotions and pits words against each other, committing these Moreauian creations to page. It is no wonder that in the work of many Caribbean poets; and certainly in my own work, there is the impulse to register the multiplicity of a words meaning. How else to transcribe desire, but, to rely on the potential of a word to be sensational, visible, audible and bendable all at once, uploading a mélange of textured experiences that a word pronounces, to find a meaning that befits wanting.

In Tony McNeil's *The Catherine Letter* 1, economy, improvisation and the visual form make a raw and fluid internal monologue:

Strange my writing to you

Can I say a cliché

Never thought I would see the day when you would cut me glimpsed you in should have said at
should have said near a bank one day; smiled; waved; and you cut me

Catherine name from the north

Well there's a mystery to women of frost the young men stride to the woods and snip them dark
lilacs a wren wheels in the distance the sun shells east of the lake

Couples kiss in the field across the wild cherries

In the dream the woman is sitting under a cotton a man kneels on the slope the pair meet in the
mist, stuttering prayers

Have you seen lilies tilt in the wind

Do banks stretch shadows on people so that when they see the familiar they turn away

But body and aesthetics also take on representations that are spiritual and existential. Desire needs no moral right; it simply is and nature admits to it in its living, pining unkempt design. In *Voyages*, Wayne Brown writes:

no mater how the hawk's head hang in the sunset,
the dawn reiterate all our offerings,
the same sea beats on the seawall

The poem dies,
the cry in the wake of the slaveship under waves
dies and resurfaces
in a hundred house-and-land simplicities

in the gaze of that old man, quiet as a stone,
the simile of a child from a shack near Boscobel,
in one bronze girl's awakening –

As if a flower should open in a waste

To write desire is to recognise its ubiquity. As the complexity of desire, though universally felt is so inaudibly and insufficiently explained, as poets we set about what Walcott calls 'Adam's task of giving things there names,' and in so doing we are continually drawing our thumb against the blade to test how well our meanings cut.

This was the word inherited, but new ones emerge. Technology ushers desire into another Eden, without language or form. We surface in a cyber void as new-lings, where human vulnerabilities go unperceived and feelings are expressed with a truncated speak; our vowels annulled, our words and our emotions represented by emoticons or ascii hieroglyphics. Again, the challenge is in naming desire, in making words and meaning native.