

Rewriting the Caribbean Female Body: A Conversation with Opal Palmer Adisa

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Opal Palmer Adisa is a familiar figure on the Caribbean-American literary scene with fourteen volumes of poetry and prose to her credit. She has been awarded the Caribbean-American Heritage Legacy Award (2008), the Pushcart Prize, the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award for *Tamarind and Mango Women* (1992) and the Distinguished Bay Area Woman Writer Award, amongst others. Her first novel, *It Begins with Tears* (1997) is included in Rick Ayers and Amy Crawford's *Great Books for High School Kids: A Teacher's Guide to Books that Can Change Teens' Lives* (2004).

Adisa was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1954 into a middle-class family where she grew up with a wide sense of family, and an awareness of the broader historical and spiritual significance of daily life, both of which inform much of her writing. At age sixteen Adisa migrated to New York where she finished her last year of high school and graduated from college. Then she moved to California, where she completed her PhD at the University of Berkeley. A distinguished professor of creative writing and literature at the California College of the Arts, Adisa is a literary critic and she has published widely about parenting, writing and poetry.

Dominant themes in Adisa's texts are family life and the search for the sacred in everyday Afro-Caribbean history; she is interested in exploring questions on sexual agency and women's self determination. In *Painting Away Regrets* (2011), for instance, she uses maternity as a love force to recreate the spiritual legacy of the African diaspora and challenge received ideas on family structure. As a migrant Caribbean woman writer, mother of three and an accomplished storyteller, Adisa employs her writing to mindfully recreate a Caribbean cultural imaginary that challenges the established geographical borders and gender limitations.

In a conversation we had in the summer of 2011 in Granada, Spain, Adisa, with a restless, yet still unyielding voice, unseated gender and race constrictions to reflect on the constraints that Caribbean writers encounter to reach a local readership. Adisa considers oral and bodily popular cultures, African-rooted spirituality and motherhood as the most capable institutions at promoting, in the Caribbean, self-critical and self-

respecting educational and parenting systems, which may place the experiential body at the center. The topics and poems discussed can be found in her collections *Until Judgement Comes* (2007), *I Name Me Name* (2008), *Caribbean Passion* (2004), *Traveling Women* ([1989] 2004) and *Eros Muse* (2006) mainly.

Elisa Serna Martínez: *When writing on race and gender, do you think in terms of double oppression?*

Opal Palmer Adisa: Twenty years ago, following the Black Power movement, I would say gender and race *were* double oppression. But I have moved from the paradigm of oppression which speaks of victims, because I don't feel like I am a victim. I understand that these other identities and post-identities present restriction for me. But I don't experience my race and female identity as being oppressive, and this is important, because one is supposed to come to them as being oppressive. I don't know if I'm being delusional, but I don't feel them as oppressive; I feel them as assets. For me this is a shift of the paradigm.

ESM: *Have women had difficulties in getting published in your environment?*

OPA: Absolutely. But there are a lot of women who are being published now. It's an interesting thing about the whole hierarchy and these paradigms, because Caribbean women writers have been pushing. If you look at Peepal Tree Press's list of writers, I don't think you will find less women than men. And whereas I still think the men are the ones who are getting the major prizes—Derek Walcott certainly deserves the Nobel Prize; he has written tremendously and prolifically—I still think I deserve a Nobel Prize and a Pulitzer Prize and all these kinds of prizes, and I'm not quite sure how those things get distributed or assigned. How does your work get to get that kind of attention? In that regard, women's works have not necessarily gotten that critical attention. I think people like you and other female scholars are partly responsible for the advent and the tremendous growth of women writers, because, you are looking at our work, thank goodness. I remember twenty five years ago, before Barbara Christian died, talking to her about how her writing about Toni Morrison and Alice Walker helped position them to get the Nobel Prize, and the Pulitzer Prize, because if she wasn't doing that critical work that wouldn't have happened. I think the more there are young scholars who are interested in Caribbean women writers, the more you see that shift. Right now, most of the strong writers I know are women. Thinking of *The Caribbean Writer*,¹ in both short stories and poetry, the majority of people who were sending work to us are women, so I don't think there is an imbalance at all. Certainly in the fifties and through the sixties, it was very much male emphasis. When you look at the exile writers, apart from Louise Bennet, of that era from the fifties, it was all men. But, since

¹ *The Caribbean Writer* is the University of The Virgin Islands' literary journal. Dr. Adisa signed on as editor of the journal for volume 24 in 2010. She also edited volume 25.

[Jamaica's] Independence and post-Independence, there is much more distribution of women writers. I think, partly, that has to do with all the formidable women scholars that are now present, inasmuch as there is often tension between writers and scholars.

ESM: *Miriam Makeba said that she learned singing from her mom. How do you understand that disclosure of the voice at the hand of mothers?*

OPA: When Alice Walker wrote "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens" (2005), she said she couldn't trace anyone in her family who was a writer. She basically is responding to the critics' questions about female lineage, and though there were no writers in her family, there were people who gardened and crocheted and who did many things which speak to the same tradition, not in a linear way of course. Walker's piece speaks eloquently to me about how we would relate to words. Now Paule Marshall in "The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen" (1983) does it much more effectively when she talks about sitting around the kitchen table. I come to story-telling through my grandmother who died eight years ago at the age of a hundred and two. That's my tradition. I come to story-telling through listening to my mother and the stories that she tells and she and her friends told. And that's where the connection is with the griot tradition, because I was hearing these stories that I knew people would never write down, stories that really give a different face to the landscape of what and who Jamaica is.² I've been trying to persuade my mother to write, because my mother is a good reader and a good writer, and she has done some formidable things. What speaks more to me in terms of the oral tradition is Paule Marshall's piece. I need to sit down and write my own piece about that: how do we come to language? Who are our forebears who gave us this language and how did we utilize it? That's partly what I was beginning to chart in my collection *I Name Me Name* (2008), the poem about Mary Seacole and Mary Prince, all of these African-Caribbean women who during slavery and post-slavery made a mark for themselves.

ESM: *What about Maroon Nanny?*³

OPA: Maroon Nanny, tremendous; I grew up as a child hearing stories about her. I don't have any lineage or trace as far as I know, but I certainly claim her as my matrilineal ancestor who gave me voice and courage to speak the voice. Because people have voice, but they don't necessarily have the courage to speak it, to speak it in the way that they should, so that it impacts and influences others. And certainly Maroon Nanny is that for me and I evoke her all the time.

² The traditional griots—or *griottes*—from West Africa are "oral artists known as guardians of the word" (Boyce Davies 2008, 478). As such, they are the repositories of history, literature and the arts. Thanks to their role in maintaining culture we are able to document today many historical passages of the African diaspora. Oral artistic forms of the African diaspora, from calypso to hip-hop poetry, are strongly influenced by the griot tradition.

³ Maroon Nanny is considered the "mythical original ancestress" of the Maroon societies in Jamaica, which were formed by fugitive slaves (Bylby and Steady 1981, 457).

ESM: *Could you tell me about your main influences in your writing?*

OPA: In terms of influence, Sonia Sanchez, the African-American writer and Leroy Clarke, the Trinidadian painter and poet are great influences. These people opened the door for me to go back home and really seek out Mervyn Morris and Kamau Brathwaite. Kamau Brathwaite has been my greatest influence in terms of Caribbean poetry, even more so than Louise Bennett. I think he is brilliant and he continues to be innovative; he always pushed and encouraged me, just by being who he is in terms of his African Caribbean sensibilities. He was, and still is, a tremendous influence on my work. Just looking at the way he uses his language, at the way he fuses African history, Caribbean history, folklore and popular culture in his books, amazes me. You can find all this in any one of his latest books where he is doing a lot of experimentation. I really love the man and am happy that I know him well, that he looked at my work, that he encouraged me and that he is so prolific now.

Personally, I think Kamau Brathwaite should have a Nobel Prize, or certainly a MacArthur Award. I think he is far more innovative than, dare I say, Derek Walcott, and certainly he is as prolific, if not more prolific. I am glad that he got the major prize in Canada, The Griffin Poetry Prize, a couple of years ago, but I certainly think that someone of his caliber—someone who has been doing the kind of work that he's been doing on Caribbean literature and its various motifs and elements—is worthy of the MacArthur or a Nobel Prize.

ESM: *Do you think that you have in common with Kamau Brathwaite the sense of being outspoken and talking about reality as it is without any fear, thus keeping the mainstream away?*

OPA: You are right. Kamau Brathwaite is very outspoken; he doesn't mince his word and he doesn't have different voices for different locations. His voice is consistent, so he is not subterfuge; I think that is a gift . . . as well as it could be a form of oppression because we know that these prizes, while they are awarded for your work, they also want someone who will be very thankful, be genuinely very thankful. It's not that I think Kamau wouldn't be, but I think he would be thankful and critical. He would say: "I am glad for this but why hasn't it happened before?" I think he would do that, so that makes it a little problematic.

ESM: *And how would you behave; would you smooth your behavior?*

OPA: I remember as a child my mother always would tell me that I had to learn to be diplomatic, and I think for the most part I've learnt to be as diplomatic as I can be. I believe in speaking my word and I believe in honesty, but I think I am not so brash anymore, so I am still speaking my word but I am not cursing you off. I think that's the shift that has happened for me, but I still think so many people are not speaking their word. It's important that I speak my word, and I don't want to be silent. I've seen enough people who were silent because of the position they find themselves in. And I

think that's sad. I think if we are losing an important voice, dissident or not, that is important for the equation, important for the intellectual engagement and examination that we all must be undergoing continuously.

ESM: *And this has a lot to do with identity.*

OPA: It has a lot to do with identity and being proactive. I had a big argument with a professor when I was doing my dissertation who was asking me why I was resisting Kant and not appropriating his voice. I said I was not appropriating a European voice or sensibility and I had some problems with what Kant and these other guys were saying about literature and literary criticism. For me it was really important that I didn't appropriate another person's voice because I think when you appropriate someone's voice yours doesn't get stronger, and I didn't want my voice to recede. Which I think is also why my work hasn't got the kind of critical attention in mainstream America or even in the Caribbean, where it could probably make me some money.

I insist I am writing in Jamaican nation language. Other writers whose work has gotten prominent write about the culture, but their use of the nation language is very subtle. I use nation language, as people say, with people who don't even speak nation language, but I still believe I have to be the voice of these people who are marginalized; I believe that position that I have so far insisted on has influenced some of the critical attention that my work deserves. I think, this probably sounds arrogant somewhat, but I'm one of the most innovative writers out there. I don't see any other writer in any other part of the Caribbean who has been as innovative as I have been in both form and content. It's not just the use of Jamaican language, or the dual stories and folklore in my novels or how I'm weaving storytelling. In the collection, *I Name Me Name* (2008), it has to do with how I'm putting stories and poetry together; in *It Begins with Tears* (1997) it's the double stories that I'm telling; it's evident in the new novel, *Painting Away Regrets* (2011) how I'm weaving in the Orishas and their presence in Jamaica. So I am doing stuff, consciously moving from the traditional, and even in the short story collection *Until Judgement Comes* (2007), I'm introducing voice and gender in a way that I have not seen other writers do. Why aren't people taking notes of that? I have no idea.

ESM: *What is your experience with the Orishas?*⁴

OPA: When I went to College in the US, for the first time I took a class on African religion and that opened up my world. Before that, I was raised in Jamaica in what I think is a very narrow Judeo-Christian belief, Anglican. By the time I was thirteen I knew there had to be something else because for me, the God I was supposed to be worshipping was such a mean bastard. Everything we did was sin. I just had enough. I told my mother at thirteen that I was through with church, because I didn't believe

⁴ The Orishas or Orixás are the mythological deities that exist in many religious cults across the African diaspora, such as Voodoo in Haiti, Santería in Cuba, Candomblé in Brazil, Shangoism in Trinidad and Tobago or Pocomania in Jamaica (Boyce Davies 2008, 119, 228, 824).

that a God could be so mean-spirited and if he was then I didn't want to have anything to do with him. I just feel religion is such an oppressive tool in the Caribbean, and I think the way it is taught is a form of oppression, not a form of liberation. It breeds a lot of hypocrisy and duplicity, stuff that I don't want to participate in. Even more importantly it keeps people as victims.

Within my Black Power African kick, I realized that the motherland is not England, but Africa; this kind of profound shift in sensibility. I took a class on African religion and for the first time my world began to make sense. I saw elements of things in Jamaica that people whispered about, and you shouldn't look at. Elements of the Yoruba tradition in Pocomania, and in other practices that people do and that they don't have the name for it because they lost the names. Nevertheless, scholars would say to me that Jamaicans don't have a strong Yoruba tradition like in Trinidad where they have Shangoism, because the dominant people who came to Jamaica were from Ghana, the Ashantis. In any case, it's there. I don't know how it got there but I know it's there. So I began to see these elements in the Jamaican culture. Having a pantheon of Orishas who are in charge of different aspects of nature makes sense to me. That's the most sensible thing for me. Look at the way in which African religion in the New World has been maligned, whether it's Voodoo or Macumba. Last year when I was teaching in the Virgin Islands, people talked about Obeah. They had not studied it and it was just a negative word for them, about people putting little spells on you. But that's just the surface; the entire concept has become corrupted. But, what is the etymology of it? Caribbean people, in spite of all their strong sense of Caribbeanness, have not spent the time to study their history and culture.

ESM: *Do you think there is a revival in Jamaica about this kind of spirituality?*

OPA: There have been Orisha conferences that have been happening and that have included Jamaica. And the last time I was there I found a small group of people who have been practicing their own version of the Yoruba religion. That development is happening in Jamaica; it's its own Yoruba culture but it's there, and it's growing. It's women centered and women led, like in Brazil. I think the young educated intellectuals are looking for an alternative paradigm to Christianity, are finding meaning and sense of connection there. It's not big nor does it have a strong group like in Brazil or even Trinidad. But there have always been elements of it there in Pocomania.

ESM: *Could you explain what Pocomania is?*⁵

OPA: Pocomania was very big when I was a child, and it's still very big, and it has elements of the Orishas in it. If you see their tents and altars, you would not be able

⁵ Also known as Pukumina, Pocomania is a religious movement practiced in Jamaica that combines elements of Christianity and African tradition. Its rituals include drumming, dancing and spirit possession (Black n.d.).

to distinguish them from altar preparations for the Orishas. They don't call it that, but that's what it is. I was blown away. Remnants of the tradition are still strong, vibrant. I'm hoping the next time I go I'll be able to visit them and make some other connections. They have been doing that for a long time. It's not new; it's not imported. It's been there, just been underground because of the way the dominant members of the society view them and their practices.

Now that some scholars are looking at these forms and presenting them in new ways, the establishment and the so-called middle-class are in awe. People are like "Oh! This is very interesting stuff but we don't want to be involved." Still it's getting its due, so more evidence of it is apparent.

ESM: *How do you position yourself with respect to Rastafarianism?*⁶

OPA: In *I Name Me Name* (2008), I use the Rastafarian lingo "I and I." I credit the Rastafarians because they were the first group, and they developed out of the Marcus Garvey Africanist movement, which promoted Africa in the Caribbean. They made us embrace Africa. We didn't have to be ashamed of being primitive, running around naked, beating drums. So the Rastafarians have always been heroes to me. Because they have elevated blackness; they worshipped the first black Christ I knew of. Now, it is true that many of their tenets are very chauvinistic, and I don't even know if I should use that word, because I think that word can add many different connotations. But certainly in terms of gender participation they are very much a male hierarchy. There are some formidable contemporary women who are Rastafarians, who embrace Rastafarianism; this is giving it a totally different face and a totally different feel, forcing some of the men to re-examine their role and women's role in the Rastafarian movement. It has become commercialized; everybody is now Rasta but everybody really isn't a Rasta. Most people think of Rastas as people who just smoke ganja and grow their hair. That is not what Rasta is; that is just the dressing. They do have a philosophy; look at Barry Chevannes, who unfortunately died, I think last year [2010], he was one of the leading scholars on Rastafarianism. Over the years I've been privileged to go to some of their binghi sessions.⁶

For me the Rastafarians are an important element for Jamaica and the Caribbean, because they have connected black people to Africa. They have influences in St. Croix, in Trinidad and all of the other islands, and they have allowed black people to throw off the clothes of colonialism, which made us feel bad about who we were, and embrace who we are. To me, you cannot talk about modern Caribbean society without talking about Rastafarianism and the influence they have had on cultural and historical life. Many of our leading artists in Jamaica come out of that tradition, both musicians as

⁶ The Nyahbinghi cult developed in Jamaica in the 1930s as an orthodox order of Rastafarianism (Turner 1994, 30). Today Nyahbinghi, also called binghi, is a Rastafarian cultural performance that "consists of a complex integration of chanting praises, drumming, reasoning, proper conduct, dancing, clothing, symbolism and devotional discourse" (Yawney 1994, 80).

well as visual artists. That culture comes to breed that kind of creativity. They have influenced all of Jamaican culture, and they have certainly influenced who I am as a human being and as a writer.

ESM: *I just can't avoid making a connection between reggae music and dancehall music.*

OPA: I love dancehall. Do you know Carolyn Cooper?⁷ Have you heard of her work? Carolyn Cooper has just proved the middle-class people wrong, because they want to condemn dancehall. Cooper looks very critically at dancehall, reflecting its continuum. Everything is a continuum and everything evolves. Dancehall is no different to me from how Jamaica started with the mento music; then we went to ska, then we went to reggae and now we are at dancehall, and after dancehall there will be something else.

Dancehall music speaks to what is happening in the society, the kind of baseness. There are no boundaries, there are very few sexual boundaries anymore. In a lot of early ska and calypso music we didn't talk about "let's have sex," but we talked about "salt fish," so it was euphemism. It was hidden, but it was there; you know it wasn't straight up. Now everybody is speaking straight up. This sexual explicitness in the music most likely will change again, so I accept and appreciate the continuum; there is no interruption or break in the development of the music.

I am very much against the homophobia in Jamaica among some musicians. When I hear those musicians being played on the radio I change the station; I don't dance to that music; I don't listen to those musicians.

ESM: *I see, like this "kill the batty boy."*⁸

OPA: Yes, you know, that is just wrong, I'm sorry. And in every era there are musicians who are wrong. And so to those musicians who have their homophobia, promoting hatred and killing, I say no. I don't listen to that, I don't buy them and I say to people that they shouldn't buy them. But they are not the entire group of reggae artists. Some important women artists are out there such as Tanya Stephens, Queen Ifrica and Etana, they are marvelous women, Rastafarian musicians who are talking about culture, sexism, child abuse. These Rastafarian women are right up there talking about important things. But I love dancehall, I love the nastiness of it.

⁷ Carolyn Cooper is a Jamaican-born author and literary scholar. She has notably contributed to the establishment of the Reggae Studies Unit at the University of the West Indies, Mona, which promotes reggae and dancehall artists nationally and internationally. Her work is concerned with the reevaluation of Jamaican popular culture. She is the author of the books *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (1995) and *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (2004).

⁸ This is the refrain of a controversial song by Jamaican reggae musician Sizzla. *Batty boy* is a derogative Jamaican English epithet for homosexual men. It should be noted that homosexuality is a criminal practice in Jamaica, probably because of Christian and Rastafarian conservative beliefs: "According to the law, consensual sex between two men in Jamaica will get you ten years of imprisonment and hard labour. Any 'act of gross indecency'—kissing for instance—will get you two years [. . .] The new Jamaican prime minister, Portia Simpson-Miller [. . .] promised to call for a parliamentary conscience vote on the law" (Tomlinson 2012, n.p.).

ESM: *I am always telling my friends who have not been to the Caribbean how impressed I was about the freedom of bodily expression I could feel there, specifically with wining, and how I ended up loving it.*⁹

OPA: Oh, I do too!

ESM: *And again, one of the commonest comments from female and male friends here in Europe would be they couldn't help seeing this dancing as a way to undermine women, to make them sexual objects.*

OPA: Yes, but do you know what? Dancehall queens have taken it to a whole other level. I haven't studied it in the way Carolyn Cooper has. She hasn't just studied it as an intellectual discourse, she has been there; she goes to the dancehall, she knows its people, they know her, and at first they looked at her with a pronounced question mark: "Is wha yu a do here?" Now Lady Saw is in my mind, the forerunner to dancehallness; do you know Lady Saw? First time I saw Lady Saw, about fifteen years ago, I was just blown away. I was like "Oh my God, this woman is so dreadful!" She is so slack—you know, we use that term in Jamaica to mean lacking morals. That was my initial response to her, my middle-class sensibilities were on overdrive. Anyway Lady Saw came to St. Croix I think last year, Christmas. And I thought to myself, for a woman to be like that, it is just audacious. Being brass gives women sexual freedom that men always take for granted; Lady Saw totally takes the power away from men. That's the only way I can explain it; the ball is in her court and she kneels and teases. The power reversal is dynamic and confusing for everyone.

I think what dancehall women have done is like saying "Do you want our bodies? Do you think of our ass or our tits or whatever? We will give it to you. But we are going to give it to you the way we want to give it to you; we are going to explore the foreground of our sexual selves and you are just going to be a voyeur: you can look, but you can't touch. We will tantalize you and tease you, but that's about it, 'coz we own it. This is fully our bodies," you see, it's a way of turning it around. What dancehall has done for women is to give them permission to have good sex, to truly enjoy their bodies, and understand that they have a right to be satisfied, not by a man who thinks just because he comes you are satisfied. That's the freedom that dancehall has given to women, especially because we have these double standards of sexuality and promiscuity. If you are middle-class, then you don't act this way, but if you are a common woman you act this way. I think dancehall, which is aligned to working-class women, has given all women, including middle-class women, a way to demand sexual satisfaction.

⁹ This is a hip-centered dancehall movement performed by men and women that requires a slight bending of the knees and the "S-shaped stance." Because of the rotation of the hips it is often considered to be "sexually charged." To learn more about dancehall see Stanley-Niaah (2010, 121).

ESM: *And even though they have this in common, there is still this social class division ...*

OPA: Yes. And again, the success of reggae music has blurred those lines a little bit. Jamaica is still very much a British model of class and culture. In fact, a really good story that I published in volume 24 [of *The Caribbean Writer*] was by a Jamaican woman writer, Ashley Rousseau, who explores just these issues. The story is entitled, “The DJ” (2010). It’s about this dancehall guy who moves into this uptown, middle-class neighborhood, and all the neighbors, even though he’s in the papers all of the time, don’t want to talk to him because they have this idea that he obviously must have come from the poor class, that he obviously must be doing drugs and all kind of stereotypes. The story looks at the class divide and how middle-class Jamaicans still snub their nose at dancehall and all such people whom they feel are below them.

ESM: *A recurrent topic in your work, especially in Eros Muse (2006), is that of being a working mother. In your case, it is revealing how you connect the act of writing with sexuality and hence with motherhood.*

OPA: When I was in graduate school and I had my first child it was kind of OK, but I remember when I got pregnant with my son, my second child, a professor looked at me and he said to me: “I’m so disappointed, I thought you were going to be a brilliant scholar, but obviously you are not thinking of your career.” Because in the academy, and I think this is particularly true of North America, if you are a scholar and you are a mother, then maybe you have one child, but you certainly don’t have three children; and certainly you are not going to be a great scholar, or artist, or poet or whatever if you have to devote time to children. Caribbean women who want motherhood run up against the academy, which again has been, until fairly recently, an all boys camp, and those boys always had children but they never lost office time, they never lost any time because the wife was responsible for all of that. As more women—black women, Caribbean women—are entering the academy and wanting to be mothers, the issue of motherhood becomes important, and many women defer motherhood because of that. I’ve always been rebellious. My mother would tell you “I’m gonna do what I wanna do, and I will do it.” And it might be difficult; I am not going to suggest that it isn’t. I think I’ve been productive, but it’s true if I wasn’t raising children, I probably could have been more productive, rather than just publishing two novels, I could have had six, who knows.

ESM: *Or maybe not.*

OPA: Exactly, maybe too, wanting to leave my children a body of literature serves as its own motivation. I really believe that motherhood has made me be a better human being, a much more understanding and compassionate human being, and that informs my writing. It is motherhood and not a husband or a lover that has made me understand unconditional love, which I have from my children and which I know I can apply to the world. Motherhood taught me that. You don’t learn that with a lover. Motherhood also forces you to prioritize in a way. I had children, I knew that I wanted to write and

I wasn't ready to give that up, and my children knew that. I would say to my children, "if you don't give me space to write, I am not going to be a good mother."

Motherhood has allowed me to sharpen my focus about what it is I'm going to write and how I want to write it. I write a lot about women who are mothers because that's the reality of the Caribbean; it still is. While I think more women are choosing not to be mothers the majority of Caribbean women do, because they, consciously or not, still believe having children is part of their identity as women. And motherhood impacts them. Single motherhood is a big issue in the Caribbean and I think it will remain like that for a long time until Caribbean men are forced to be more responsible. So for me it's really important that we look at both the positive as well as the negative sides of motherhood.

The short story collection *Until Judgment Comes* (2007) is looking primarily at the negative impact of motherhood. It's looking at those mothers who I see in the Caribbean, and who I see everywhere, as it's not just in the Caribbean obviously. Mothers whose boyfriends or husbands have left them and so they take out their hatred and their resentment on their children and they raise children in this kind of oppressive emotional and physical imbalance. This is to me alarming and frightful, and I think it adds to the widespread misogyny that we have been seeing in this society in the last twenty years. The kinds of incidence of crimes that men have been performing against women didn't exist before. I think part of that is that silent hatred, because we haven't had a chance to heal from the trauma. Many mothers don't have an opportunity to heal from the trauma of, "how do I deal with a man whom I love, whom I give my life and then he walks suddenly out on me and his children?" or "how do I deal with that and not pass it on to my son and my daughter?" A lot of them have no outlet for dealing with that, and so my work, I hope, begins to open up that dialogue, by saying "hey, what you are doing is wrong." I understand that this man was a dope, a no-good, but what do you do with your feelings and his poor behavior? Do you continue to pass it on by saying to your child, "you're worthless like your father, or do you say, this man was no good and I'm going to deal with raising my child with love and compassion so that as an adult, if he chooses a heterosexual relationship, he will make good choices as opposed to bad choices?" So I had to write about those things.

And there are lots of silences around motherhood that haven't been written about in Jamaica. I was very happy when Queen Ifrica did her song on sexual abuse, because growing up I heard about incest, but again it was whispered; nobody wanted to talk about it.¹⁰ That's something I have been wanting to write about, because it has been buried; it involves friends of friends, friends of my mother, we are talking about diving into the personal realm to extract the pus.

¹⁰ Queen Ifrica is a Jamaican reggae singer and DJ. In 2007 her condemning song on incest "Daddy" hit the Jamaican charts, causing some controversy (Unicef Jamaica, 2012).

ESM: *You have written extensively about how the experience of motherhood has made an impact on yourself, both as mother and daughter. Furthermore, you also connect that experience to other individuals and to society at large.*

OPA: Motherhood is about taking on the responsibility of the society for me, and I entered into motherhood very consciously. I wanted to be a mother, but I didn't want to be—and my mother is a good mother—that kind of a mother. There were things she did that I wanted to do differently, I wanted to raise socially responsible children inasmuch as it's possible. What you realize as you are raising children is that you are not raising them alone; that despite your best intention there are all of these other influences from school and the media that go against the grain. But still you have an opportunity to show them something different. I would like to think that I have shown my daughters and my son something different. In the Caribbean physical beating is allowed, but I didn't do that, I never did that so I think I have shown them that you can raise decent people and my children are decent. It's not that they don't have their flaws; I have mine too. But for the most part I think they are decent human beings, with a sense of responsibility for the community, with a sense of honesty and pride, and those are important values.

For me writing about motherhood is looking about how to grow a different society. The Caribbean society is in crisis, and it's not just because drugs have been brought in; that's an easy escape. Yes, that has had a tremendous influence. But we have to look at the way in which our social institutions such as motherhood and parenthood have not been guided or educated. There has been no training in that. If you want to produce a nation—and everywhere you go the violence in Jamaica is talked about—Jamaica has become a place where a lot of people don't want to go any more or won't live in because of the crime and the *leggoism*.¹¹ What concerns me is how do we raise a culture that is still dynamic and that is being promoted all over the world with our singers and athletes, a culture that is loving, a culture that is not violent, a culture where people can live with each other and work out differences without resorting to killing? That has to do with parenting. That's the most political issue, but the political issue starts with, how do we parent the culture? For me that's important. I am compiling some of my articles for a book on the topic. One of the pieces that I am working on is an essay which I sent for a book on Caribbean motherhood. In order for us to ameliorate the pain and the violence that is in this society, motherhood is necessary. It has to do with creating a society where women are loved, feel honored and respected and are therefore empowered to raise children who are loved and respected.

¹¹ A *leggo beast* is “Jamaican slang for an unruly wild person. Leggo just means to let go, to cut loose/go crazy or do something without care or caution [. . .] nuff leggo beast gal inna dance” (Urban Dictionary 2011). Adisa understands *leggoism* firstly as cultural resistance, as when someone is self-sufficient and runs his/her own business, but in this case the poet refers to the extreme situation, when people only look for their own interest and become disrespectful towards others and the law (Serna-Martínez 2015, n.p.).

ESM: *Derek Walcott once said that his countrymen are not interested in reading what you writers write. How do you get the information out to this important part of the society?*

OPA: Through theater. Do you know of Sistren Collective? Sistren was a collective that started around the eighties by Honor Ford-Smith, a Jamaican woman. It was a collective of primarily working-class women who wrote and performed, and they performed not just on stage; they performed in the market place, they performed in community centers. Jamaica for a small island has a vibrant theater, and always had. Sistren was phenomenal in terms of education. This group is responsible for bringing domestic violence [to public attention] and making it a crime in Jamaica. Because they explored domestic violence and explored how the police were not coming out and helping women; and they put it on the map, on the table, on the government's policies. So, Derek Walcott is right about those men who are in the country but not reading what we write, but they go to the theater. That is why Reggae is such a strong medium of change in Jamaica. Whether it is a performance on the radio, or by people in the countryside, it is still oral tradition. They won't buy my books but if my work is performed, they will absolutely more than likely attend the performance. Oral tradition is still alive in the Caribbean. Plus, books are so prohibitive. Books are a luxury in the Caribbean; it is not like in Europe or even America. My books sell for some outrageous hundreds of dollars, and an average person just can't afford it. They are barely affording school books for their kids; they can't afford books as it's still perceived as a middle-class thing, and the middle-class people want to read books from America. They support local writers, but books are still a commodity that is out of reach for the average person in Jamaica, because they are not printed in the Caribbean; they have to be imported, and importation taxes are costly. Having works converted into theater, movies or TV shows is the way to go. And Derek Walcott knows it, because that is how he became famous. He didn't become famous as a poet; he became famous as a playwright. His plays, like *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1992), are still classics, as far as I am concerned. His plays explore very important issues that have to do with the Caribbean and people came out to see them throughout the islands. The theater is still a viable medium, because of its orality and its immediacy. That's what I want my work to be; I want to be in touch with people in Jamaica. There is a very brilliant dramaturgist, his name is Eugene Williams, who teaches at the Jamaica School of Drama; I want him to turn my stories in *Until Judgment Comes* (2007) into plays and produce them, because it's the way to reach an audience.

ESM: *As a postcolonial writer you explore and create new meanings; your poem "Bumbu Clat" represents another turn of the screw in terms of hate speech.*

OPA: That's definitely transgression. The poem, "My Work Speaks to Those Other Women" in the collection *Traveling Women* (with Devorah Major 1989, 28-29) is a precursor to "Bumbu Clat" (Adisa 2004, 78-79).¹² It's this poem that I think

¹² "Bumbu clat" is a hybrid word composed by *bumbu*, which originates in West African languages and refers mainly to the female genitalia, and *clat*, which is Jamaican patois for "cloth." Accordingly, "*bumbu clat* makes allusion to sanitary napkins and, as an extension, to the menstruation, an essential part of women's sexuality"

allowed me to write “Bumbu Clat.” I see this poem and another in the collection entitled “We Bleed” as the building blocks that allowed me to do “Bumbu Clat.” And I have to say this: I really loved performing it with Bembé yesterday.¹³ I remember when *Caribbean Passion* (2004) came out I was invited to Calabash in Jamaica and someone said to me “you are not going to read that poem?” because, you know it is still a bad word.¹⁴

ESM: *But here in Spain we don't know much about it.*

OPA: Right, exactly! And I read it, but it was with great trepidation; it was like, “oh, my gosh!” How are the people going to hear what I am saying? Are they going to think that I’m cursing? So it is still a risky poem, but a necessary, essential poem. And again, this is what I mean: I don’t think Caribbean critics are looking at these poems in terms of the movement, the trajectory that I’m making, the way in which I’m taking on women’s issues that are very much public. Men say it all the time: “Why are you cursing us? Why are you cursing our blood, our life?” You know what I mean? Because that’s really what they’re doing: “You bomboclat” you know? “You bloodclat.” What does that mean in the psyche of Jamaicans? To be cursing and this is one of the worst curse words in Jamaica: to say “You bloodclat,” “your mother’s bloodclat,” “your wife’s bloodclat,” “your sister’s bloodclat.” Why hasn’t that been taken on? Why haven’t they taken on that? Caribbean women critics aren’t taking up the poem; they haven’t taken it up at all.

ESM: *Do women use the word just like men do?*

OPA: It’s mostly for men, but women use it. Everybody uses it. But that’s definitely a word that men hurl. It’s like the dagger; it’s like *bomboclat* plunges the dagger: “Rastaaa!” It’s just throwing daggers and then “Bomboclat!” It connects.

ESM: *With this poem, you came to say: “Look, this word became a curse word because it was unmentionable, forbidden, ignored, rejected by its speakers,” but also, you rescue a wide range of other possible, positive meanings.*

OPA: Yes. You know, in many of the secret societies that developed in West Africa, from which Jamaicans trace their roots, they develop around menses and things like that, and there were very powerful women, women who influenced, who got to be

(Serna-Martínez 2011, 27). The word “originally meant *sisterhood* and today has become one of the coarsest and misogynist expressions in Jamaican society” (Serna-Martínez 2011, 25). This swear word and its derivatives are equivalent to “son of a bitch” and can be written with different spellings; in the present interview the following are found: *bumbu clat*, *bomboclat* and *bloodclat*.

¹³ Adisa refers to her poetry performance at La Casa con Libros, in La Zubia, Granada, Spain, with the local percussion band Bembé Batucada on August 6, 2011. The band members, all women, chanted “Bumbu Clat” repeatedly as part of the performance.

¹⁴ Calabash International Literary Festival, held during May every two years in Jamaica since 2001. This festival provides a platform for Jamaican and international artists of the spoken word.

King, even in Ghana. The women counsel was very important in West Africa and even though it might seem like men had the power, it was the queen mother who decided who was going to sit on that stool.¹⁵ And it was her in conjunction with the other women, who decided many of those policies. So you could see, once we were transported from West Africa to the Caribbean, how this was a way of displacing our power. In Yoruba tradition it's this way; I have a mix of feelings about that. Why these women, when they are on their menses, there are certain things they can't do? Rastafarians would not have their women cook for them when they're on their menses. Which is kind of good, because so you get off being expected to cater to men (laughs). In Jamaica, I don't know if it has changed, but I doubt it. Strict Rastafarians would not have anything to do with women when they are on their period. It's a very powerful time for women. One of the ways to check that power is to curse it, to invert it, to make it wrong, to make it ashamed, to make it negative. And that's what *bomboclat* I think has done. It's a way of disempowering the female.

ESM: *How do you think this story of disempowering through language and beliefs started?*

OPA: I can't even begin to imagine. I don't even know how that came about, actually, and it would be interesting to investigate it, but I am not sufficiently curious anymore to investigate it. But it would be interesting, because, here is the thing: My paternal grandmother would tell me that men in Jamaica would say—one of our dishes is called stewed peas and rice; it's red beans stewed; traditionally it is done with salt beef and pig's tale and it's stewed and eaten with rice—well, men are always warned not to eat stewed peas from a woman who they think might want them, because it is believed that women would put some of their menses' blood in it and if they do, it would bind the man; in other words, the man would have to do what she says. I think part of it comes from men understanding how powerful a woman's blood could be and how much they could influence what they do or not do. So, in order to neutralize, or rather to deflate the power, then they turn it around. You don't even eat food from her because you don't know what she's going to do.

ESM: *They receive the same treatment as voodoo and all the African-rooted religions.*

OPA: Exactly.

ESM: *Tell me about your poem "Market Woman" (Adisa 1992, 81-84), when at the end the market woman tells the lady that she is sleeping with her husband.*

OPA: I love traditional market women, because market women, as far as I am concerned, and this is my feminist point, were the first feminists in Jamaica. I know

¹⁵ It refers to the Golden Stool, the throne of Asantehene, the king of the Asante, which represented "the people, the soul of the nation and the good fortune of the nation." The Asante people, a section of the Akan people, were settled in today's modern Ghana when thousands of them were taken as slaves across the Atlantic during the British colonial period (BBC n.d.).

a lot of people are down on them, because a lot of market women do not marry the man they live with, and they move through relationships, so they might have five children from three different men. This sense of sexuality was not navigated by middle-class women who practiced monogamous relationships. Market women had serial monogamy, because often they had a monogamous relationship but it was not a life-long relationship. They would have this man and if he doesn't do what they want him to do, they leave him and go to somebody else.

ESM: *Because they were economically...*

OPA: ...independent. Economy had a lot to do with it. Market women usually had their own plot of land; they grew their food, ground provisions and vegetables, and they went to the market and sold their produce. They were not dependent on a man for survival. And therefore their sexuality was not circumscribed by the restraints of middle-class women who were dependent on a single man. They could move from relationship to relationship to get their satisfaction and their fulfillment. So market women were like Maroon Nanny's daughters as far as I was concerned. They had that kind of fierce independence. Also, I was just amazed because a lot of them would stay in the market—now they don't because transportation is much easier—but they would go to the market Friday night or early Saturday morning and they would be there until Monday morning. So it was like these women were living two days a week in the street, in a market place; they basically were out there. To me that was phenomenal! They could sit out there all day, and they were a community that looked out for each other and oftentimes they brought their children and they still do. So, for me, they were just an amazing set of women. They were strong; they carried all their food, see it wasn't this delicate, whimsy, little... No! Market women for me totally defied all of the normality of what a woman was, all of the sensibilities of what a woman was. They set their own paradigm of what a woman was, and it was the antithesis of anything that the society was saying we were. So for me they were feminists. Men in Jamaica, when I was growing up, and it still exists today, they always had an outside family. So it's a man who was married to a middle-class woman, like my father, but he had children outside, and it's called outside family, very common in the Caribbean. These middle-class women would go to the market and buy from these women. But sometimes their husbands were sleeping with these market women, so that's what that last line is saying. So here is that middle-class woman acting as if she's above, and this market woman is saying "yuh not above me because yuh husband ah sleep wid me." You know, you can pretend all you want, but your husband is in my bed, so stop with your pretence. It's like a final: I'm not going to take you on, because I have your man kind of thing. In January I was in Haiti and I went to the market and I took pictures of these women; they are still formidable. And they support each other; you know: they really have a community. In fact, that's a project I probably need to do. All these projects I need to do.

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