# THE ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA REVIEW OF BOOKS

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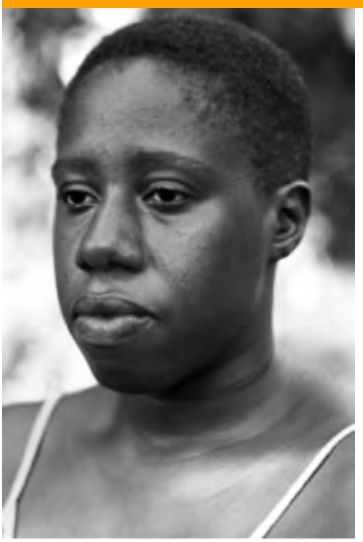

Joanne Hillhouse

# THE **ANTIGUA** AND **BARBUDA REVIEW** OF **BOOKS**

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The Antigua and Barbuda Studies Association was founded in 2006 with the goal of raising local intellectual awareness by creating a field of Antigua and Barbuda Studies as an integral part of the larger field of Caribbean Studies. The idea for such an interdisciplinary field grew out of earlier "island conferences" that had been organized by the University of the West Indies, School of Continuing Education, in conjunction with the Political Culture Society of Antigua and Barbuda. *The Antigua and Barbuda Review of Books* is an integral part of this effort to raise local and regional intellectual awareness by generating conversations about the neglected literary traditions of Antigua and Barbuda through reviews of its texts.

Manuscripts: the manuscripts of this publication must be in the form of short reviews of books or works of art dealing with Antigua and Barbuda. Thus reviews of works by writers and artists from Antigua and Barbuda such as Peregrine Pickle, Mary Prince, Tim Hector, Ashley Bryan, Novelle Richards, Gregson Davis, Jamaica Kincaid, Edgar Lake, Althea Prince, Keithlyn Smith, Adlai Murdoch and others will be particularly welcome. We will also welcome commentaries on reviews we have published. Reviews should be no longer than six double-spaced pages, with minimal if any footnotes. Submit reviews to Paget Henry, editor, as word documents at Paget_Henry@Brown.edu for consideration.



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**Table of Contents**

## Book Reviews Continued

## Editor's Note 2014

Welcome, Dear Reader, to this issue of the Antigua and Barbuda Review of Books. I must open this issue by noting here the passing of one our greatest musicians of Pan Arthur Louis Jardine. His playing made him a legend while he was still alive. His devotion to his craft really helped to make Pan the celebrated art form that is has become today. It is our good fortune that we have been able to draw on the poetic imagination of Edgar Lake to help us mark this moment in an aesthetically appropriate manner.

In the previous issue of *The Antigua and Barbuda Review of Books,* Volume 6, Number 1, we focused on various periods and aspects of earlier phases in the life of our intellectual and literary tradition. We engaged in a lot of historical reconstructions, interrogated the authorship of the long-standing work, *Antigua and the Antiguans,* we celebrated the 22nd anniversary of Kortright Davis' classic *Emancipation Still Comin',* and surveyed the poetry of Antiguan and Barbudan men with John Hewlett, Rowan Ricardo Phillips, Edgar Lake and Marcus Jeffers.

In contrast to the retrospective gaze of the last issue, the books reviewed in this issue focus our attention on the present period in the life of Antigua and Barbuda. The contemporary moment is indeed a special one, and it may have contributed to the unusual outpouring of books that have been written in the last two years. These books could be grouped together on account of how clearly they reflect back to us the present period that we are living through. Unfortunately, we could not review all of these books, and had to save some of them for the next issue of our *Review.*



In the past two years, we have seen the publication of books authored by Jamaica Kincaid *(See Now Then),* Joanne Hillhouse *(Oh Gad!),* Kortright Davis *(Compassionate Love and Ebony Grace),* Ivor Heath *(Antigua Through My Eyes),* Lionel Hurst *(Vere Cornwall Bird),* Cecil Wade *(UPP Government in Eclipse)* and two by Dorbrene O'Marde *(Send Out You Hand* and *King Short Shirt: Nobody Go Run Me).* From these titles, it should be clear that we have been busy writing about ourselves and our society in the fields of fiction, religion, politics and music. From the assessments of our distinguished reviewers, it is also clear that these are well-written works of a profound nature that reveal and reflect ourselves and our society back to us. The reviews also indicate just how closely focused on our present moment these books are, and why they have so much to say about what we are going through now, and what we will need in the years ahead. Further, the titles of these works also make it clear that love and politics have been very much on our minds.

In the works of Jamaica Kincaid and Joanne Hillhouse, the theme and focus is that of love – romantic love. In *See Now Then,* Kincaid chronicles the decline and decay of the interracial marriage of an Antiguan woman that is set in New England. The reviews of this work by Sachelle Ford and Lisa Pardini make clear Kincaid's continuing mastery of the craft of writing and also the depth of her insights into our emotions and her ability to dissect the more difficult ones with surgical skill. The particular emotion or set of emotions that Kincaid dissects and magnifies so well falls under the category of what Antiguans and Barbudans call bad mindedness. Kincaid is the authority on this particular set of emotions – a reputation that she earned from examining them in just about all of her earlier novels. Here she uses it to thematize the emotional responses of the husband toward his Antiguan wife as the marriage continues to decline and decay.

In *Oh Gad!*, Joanne Hillhouse tells the story of a young Antiguan woman, Nikki, who returns from New York to her roots in the Sea View Farm area, and also of her search for love and career amidst the politics and changing social norms of the present period. Nikki is not very successful in her search as she makes a number of blind choices on her way that do not turn out to be so good. That this work is a major artistic achievement on the part of Hillhouse is clear from the reviews of it by Althea Romeo-Mark, Valerie Knowles Combie, Mali Olatunji and Paget Henry. In her review of *Oh Gad!,* Romeo-Mark emphasizes the experiences of alienation, outersiderness, and abandonment that arise from the separation of family members produced by poverty-driven migration. She connects this powerful theme in *Oh Gad!* to its presence and function in Hillhouse's earlier novel, *The Boy from Willow Bend*. Thus, her focus is on the migration experiences of the main character Nikki and her father as they try to reconnect with family in Antigua after years of being in New York. In my review, I emphasized the continuities that I saw between the work of Hillhouse and Kincaid. In particular, I focused on the ways in which practices of bad mindedness are employed in the constructing of characters. Hillhouse is also a master at writing about this particular set of emotions. I tried to make this clear in my examination of her characters Nikki and Audrey. From the writings of both Kincaid and Hillhouse, the meaning and source of these practices of bad mindedness emerge as a major theme for discussion within the Antiguan and Barbudan intellectual and literary tradition.

In *Compassionate Love and Ebony Grace,* the distinguished theologian and minister, Rev. Dr. Kortright Davis takes up once again the theme of Divine love in the specific context of the slavery, racism and colonialism that people

of African descent have experienced over the past 500 years. This book, among his many others, connects most directly with the work undertaken in *Emancipation Still Comin'*. *Compassionate Love and Ebony Grace* continues to make use of and expand that powerful mix of theology, social science, Afro-Caribbean culture, and history that made *Emancipation Still Comin'* such an engaging text. However, in his detailed and hard hitting critique, the Vincentian scholar of religion, Leslie James, points to the aging of a particular element in this scholarly mix. This element or factor consists of the dogmatic contents of Davis' Christian theology. James points to a tension between them and the growing modern consciousness among people of African descent. The continued growth of this consciousness will require more spirituality and less dogma. This point echoes some of the ones that I made in the last issue of this *Review* regarding the aging of the sacred canopies of religions in the modern period. This tension between the receding powers of the dogmatic aspects of our Christian heritage and our increasing push into modernity is yet another powerful and persistent issue that has become one of the defining marks of our intellectual and literary tradition.

In *Vere Cornwall Bird: When Power Failed to Corrupt,* Lionel Hurst makes his contribution to the growing field of books on the important figure of V.C. Bird, Antigua and Barbuda's great labor leader and first Prime Minister. The distinct contribution of this book is the systematic case that it makes for a Christian reading of Bird's political life and style of leadership. This is a tall order as in earlier biographical works Bird had been portrayed as Garveyite, a socialist, a Fabian socialist, a black democratic socialist, a corrupt politician and a bad minded despot. Going against the grain of these secular and immoral interpretations, Hurst, through researching the early life of Bird, argues strongly for the persistent influence of Bird's training as a Salvation Army minister on his later life as a politician. However, in my review of this book, I took issue with Hurst regarding just how much can he stretch these early influences and minimize those of the middle and later years of Bird's life. In particular, I suggested that Hurst minimized the socialist influences on Bird's middle years and downplayed the significance of the documented cases of corruption that surrounded him in his later years. Without a doubt, the personal and political identity of V.C. Bird along with the legacy of proletarian politics he has left us has also emerged as another of the defining issues of our intellectual and literary tradition.



Although not clear from its title, Dorbrene O'Marde 's novel, *Send Out You Hand,* is all about love and politics in Antigua and the wider Caribbean, but primarily the politics. The work captures very well the changing attitudes to-

wards love and sex in the contemporary period that are also clearly reflected in Hillhouse's novel. That said, the most striking and engaging aspect of this novel is its envisioning of a new politics for the Caribbean region as whole. In sharp contrast to the proletarian tradition of politics established by Bird and seconded by our major opposition parties, O'Marde's novel represents a sharp break with this tradition, which has been dominant in Antigua and Barbuda, and other territories of our region, since the 1950s. *Send Out You Hand* calls for a new coalition of governing interests groups led by businessmen, well-trained technocrats and intellectuals, and supported by activist communities of artists and women. O'Marde is not just pulling these ideas of middle class rule out of thin air, but from growing sentiments and opinions expressed by sectors of the middle and upper classes in territories across our region.

Some societies have dominant traditions of aristocratic politics, others bourgeois capitalist traditions of politics. Still others have middle class social democratic traditions of politics. In Antigua and Barbuda, since the decline of the mercantile and racist politics of the planters, we have produced a proletarian tradition of politics that has made our political leaders primarily men of working class background. These political features alone make Antigua and Barbuda a modern society with one of the most proletarian of political traditions. It is one of our distinctive contributions to contemporary political theory and practice. O'Marde's novel dramatizes for us the crisis of this political tradition, and the rising politico-class tensions in our society that are likely to get stronger with the passage of time. It is an important marker of our present moment and of a major challenge to the political heritage of our intellectual and literary tradition. In his careful and subtle review of this novel and its political vision, Antiguan literary scholar, Adlai Murdoch, comments extensively on the artistic qualities and features of this novel, but also suggests that its vision might be an idealized creation.



Between these intense discussions of love and politics Antigua and Barbuda style, I have inserted our feature essay as a breather – a chance for you to catch your breath. This 2007 previously unpublished essay is the retrospective moment in this very present-oriented issue. It is a poetic masterpiece by our distinguished novelist, poet and playwright, Edgar Lake, in which he discusses the visit of the American poet James Dickey to the campus of the then College of the Virgin Islands, while he was a budding student there. Lake makes crystal clear the impact of this visit on him and on his own formation as a poet.

The images of us, Antiguans and Barbudans struggling to make our way in the world, which emerge from these reviews are indeed quite ambiguous and contradictory. They reveal our continuing strivings for the higher ideals of love, Caribbean unity, economic development and social equality at the same time that they demonstrate the crisis that has gripped our culture, postcolonial economy and our proletarian tradition of politics. Adding yet another layer to the complexity of the current moment was the election of June 12, 2014, which saw this proletarian tradition go through another significant transformation in its history. It not only produced a victory for the Antigua Labor Party, it also brought to the Office of the Prime Minister another political Leader of working class background – Mr. Gaston Browne. The importance of this election is that it has taken the practice of party politics another step beyond the receding shadow and charisma of its main founding figure, V.C. Bird. The years ahead will reveal how this tradition of politics will fare as it continues to loose the legitimacy and support that it has been drawing from its founding figures.

In terms of our ongoing project of reclaiming our hidden literary tradition and developing a field of Antigua and Barbuda Studies, the significance of this volume should be clear. Its contributions are not so much the recovery of lost or neglected figures as they are the specifying of the recurring or persistent themes that have defined our tradition of thought. Therefore they must necessarily be a central component of any future field of Antigua and Barbuda Studies.



Before I depart, I have two tasks remaining. The first is the extremely pleasant one of welcoming our newest PhD, Dr. Hazra Medica to the editorial board of *The Antigua and Barbuda Review of Books.* Dr. Medica received her degree from Oxford University in May 2014 with a dissertation on Antiguan and Barbudan literature, a first as far as I am aware. Congratulations Hazra, and welcome.

Finally, I must thank the department of Africana Studies at Brown University, and the Heimark Fund for their continuing financial support of *The Antigua and Barbuda Review of Books.* And, I must also say a very special word of thanks to my very able editorial assistant, Ms. Lisa Pardini.

Paget Henry
Editor

## REFLECTIONS ON 'ART' JARDINE

Edgar Lake

Sometime in1970, I first met Arthur L. Jardine on an island – Manhattan – in New York City. It was amidst a heady community of Antiguan artists collaborating with and supporting each other. We were making commercials, keeping studio appointments, attending mutual performances and screenings, and being welcomed in each other's homes.

It was a fine time to meet: Paget Henry, Mali Olatunji, Errol James, Roland Prince, Barry Harvey, Eric Burton…

What first struck me about Jardine was his nimble humor – self-deprecating, richly punning, - with an eye for pointing out 'absurdity'.

"Call me 'Art' – he would say – with a self-satisfying disarming giggle. He spent minimalism like a sailor on leave; he scattered scorn on any pronouncement he sensed was pretentious.



As an artist, 'Art' Jardine retained a jaundiced eye on any posting of restrictive orthodoxy. He was a cosmopolitan spirit who carried his sticks in his pocket; his whimsy unraveled his musical ear.

'Art' thirsted for encounters of innovation, musical and theatrical experimentation; he relished open-mindedness.

His musicianship, equally rich in epiphany or irony, would prompt him to instantly sketch a riff of The Brute Force Band's "Alec Betsa"; or, the Hell's Gate Band's rendition of the theme from "Exodus". But, with understated ease, 'Art' could play the nimble musical score of a Charlie Chaplain 'Silent movie' which he had seen at the Tanner Street Saturday matinee. 'Art' could also – with dimpled grin and acquired wine - riff a few notes from Stravinsky's "Firebird Suite"; or, deconstruct a Japanese car manufacturer's Commercial jingle: pioneering the 'Steel Drum' in their 1970s North American car-sales market.

I benefited from Jardine's musical confidence – playing the *Missa Luba* soundtrack, and on short notice - at a Central African traditional wedding ceremony; or, equally embellish Monty Alexander's rendition of Bob Marley's "No Woman No Cry".

From the trunk of his private eye Dodge, the travelling case of his twin tenor pans graced many Manhattan jazz nightclubs; a gig here, a substitute studio-recording track, across the river.

'Art' Jardine was among the first native Antiguan artists to begin documenting the rural landscape of Antigua, on film, as moving images. From his work as a private investigator in New York City, he was proficient with a 16mm Bolex. On his frequent visits back to his native Antigua, he always took several rolls of film – both, Black-and-White, and Color. He understood the sources of his inimitable lyricism, the overt spaces of his musical poetry – his soloist's *engage*. He was a steward of evidencing thrall, acknowledging the impermanency of witnessing beauty – and his style of play – lightly probing and intuitive – was Art, in motion. Jardine was a Realist, dispensing sly admonition in ballad and melodic performance texts.

His was also a complex Memory box: a kalaeidoscope instructing us past the tribal fragments and sentimental shards, urging us to see afresh – the re-assembled, flexible and transformational possibilities of our life-experiences.



For Arthur Jardine, the real stage had moved beyond the pavilion; the jousting of one musical house, Road March title, or tradition. 'Art' shifted to a deeper beckoning: probing complex genres and temporal explorations, ancient tonal currencies of the Orient, the Occident, the Maghreb…

And, yes - his laughter urged a finer notation and emotional charting.

Still, always responding to the quotidian request, 'Art' was available for the all-night deep counsel with the most prominent governmental minister; or, the childhood friend from his mom's bakery-yard.

In later years, during one of those infamous midnight telephone calls (he was an insufferable insomniac), 'Art' might give you his 5-year plan to open a Museum for Pan, in St. John's Town.

How pleased he was when I agreed on the early steel-bands' role in documenting the encounter of US Navy WWII bases in the Caribbean. No doubt, it warranted soliciting support from Andrew Hill, Artist-Jazz Composer and Fellow at The Smithsonian Institution. Perhaps, it was time to consider Max Roach's 1979 album, *M'Boom* with its 'Steel Drum' tracks in "Kujichagalia" and "Morning/Midday", as premise for a Steel Drum Composers Residence Lab at The Smithsonian Institution! He loved my audacious calculus.

Amidst many challenges, Jardine was writing his memoir – and he shared an excerpt for a catalog commemorating Antigua Carnival's first 50 years: Joanne Hillhouse's 2007 "Carnival is all we Know". I was honored to edit an early draft for that catalog. It was titled, "The Man, His Pan, and The Conflict: My Travels with Brute Force".

As a poet, Jardine wrote his last poem, ("The Man And His Pan"), which is included in the 2007 Carnival catalog. But, I had heard him recite another poem ("Pan Rhapsody") in 1975, and which he gave me to edit in 1981. In 2007, it was included in my critical essay, "Nascent Aspects of an Antiguan Literary Heritage", *(CLR James Journal,* 13:1, Spring 2007).

But, in 1975, when Arthur Louis Jardine visited my home at Sugar Hill, in Manhattan, I was studiously re-reading D.H. Lawrence's poem, "Tortoise Shout".

I offer it, finding it enduringly befitting of his style and memory:

> "the first wail of an infant/and my mother singing to herself/
> And the first tenor singing of the passionate/throat of a young collier,/…"

Adieu, Art.

VOLUME 7 NUMBER 1 FALL 2014

# JAMAICA KINCAID

# A BITTERSWEET SYMPHONY OF LIFE - LOVE AND COMPLICATIONS IN VERMONT: A REVIEW OF JAMAICA KINCAID'S *SEE NOW THEN*

Lisa Pardini

*See Now Then,* a novel
Jamaica Kincaid
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York) 2013, 182 pages

Jamaica Kincaid's new novel *See Now Then,* her first in ten years, is written in a stream of consciousness style and depicted as a slice of life. Kincaid's prose has a lyrical flow that resembles music in presentation and poetry in detail. However that may be, the story isn't pretty and it seems the author prefers it that way as she details the unhappy marriage of Mr. & Mrs. Sweet. *See Now Then* focuses in on the final days of the decaying interracial marriage between a Caribbean woman and an upper class Caucasian American man. Kincaid presents the story twofold, both tragic and humorous. Given this, I have chosen to review both perspectives of the piece.



## Sweet Sorrow

It is no secret that Jamaica Kincaid's writing is inspired, perhaps even driven, by her personal experiences. It appears to be cathartic for her. In an interview she gave to *Mother Jones* in 1997, Kincaid stated, "for me, writing isn't a way of being public or private; it's just a way of being. The process is always full of pain, but I like that. It's a reality, and I just accept it as something not to be avoided. This is the life I have. This is the life I write about". [1] *See Now Then* reflects this statement. It is also no secret that Kincaid went through a painful divorce some years back. While she has publically stated that the book is not directly linked to her personal experience, the story appears to be colored by it. For what author hasn't suffered deep heartache and not allowed it to pour out in prose or poetic form?

*See Now Then* opens with the myth of love emphasized by character names and classic mythological references throughout the book. The reader is greeted with vivid descriptions by Mrs. Sweet of her surroundings and her family: Mr. Sweet, son Heracles, daughter Persephone and their New England home in the Shirley Jackson House. From the very beginning of the story, Kincaid makes it clear that this is from the mind

of Mrs. Sweet. It is her perception, or her lack thereof, that is written out. We see that she views time in varying forms, looking at today while glancing towards tomorrow and reflecting upon yesterday seemingly at the exact same time. Considering it is written in a stream of consciousness style, I can understand how one can observe this view. To some, it can come across as a form of daydreaming. In Mrs. Sweet's case I believe it could be a defense mechanism. It is easier to escape the misery of today by getting lost in the thoughts of another time or the mundane activities of the moment.

I found myself asking, "what is love" as I read *See Now Then*. The author herself poses the question, "what is the essence of Love?" [2] early in the first chapter. The very essence of love is filled with complexity and not clearly defined in a linear pattern. Anyone who has ever been in love can attest to this. Kincaid goes as far as stating that hate is another form of love. She writes, "…for nothing yet known can or will benefit from her suffering, and all of her existence was suffering: love, love, and love in all its forms and configurations, hatred being one of them and yes, Mr. Sweet did love her, his hatred being a form of his love for her".[3] Kincaid's unique writing style touched upon my emotions. Words that tumble around like rolling water, waves both gentle and rough, made me *feel* Mrs. Sweet's experiences first-hand. And they sting.



The story continues in Mr. Sweet's voice for a small portion of the first chapter. We get a strong sense of who he is and the anger that absorbs him as he discusses his love of music as well as his hatred of other aspects of his life. Kincaid writes, "He loved Shostakovich and as he played the music written by this man…the grave sorrows and injustices visited on him flowed over Mr. Sweet and he was very moved by the man and the music that the man made and he wept as he played, pouring all of his feelings of despair into that music, imagining that his life, his precious life was being spent with that dreadful woman, his wife…(for) he was a man capable of understanding Wittgenstein and Einstein and any other name that ended in stein, Gertrude included, the intricacies of the universe itself, the intricacies of human existence itself, the seeing of Now being Then and how Then becomes Now; how well he knew everything but he could not express himself…"[4]

Mr. Sweet has all the classic characterizations of narcissistic personality disorder matching the DSM-5[5] description. He is arrogant while insecure, jealous of his wife's success and cruel in his manner towards her. In addition, he is envious of his son whom he believes is more like his wife. At

one point he even wishes the boy dead and fantasizes about chopping off his head. It's an ugly visual and disturbing to imagine. "Mr. Sweet did loathe all that the boy enjoyed…and he wanted that boy, the young Heracles, dead and he wanted another boy, who could sit still in the movie theater watching a cartoon, and not need Adderall or any kind of stimulant that made you still, to take his place." [6] This type of violent imagery is used throughout the book to reflect the ugliness of the father/son relationship within the father's mind. There is a lack of balance between them, as the father is not balanced at all.

As much as he hates his wife and son, Mr. Sweet loves his daughter Persephone whom he views as similar to himself. She is delicate, beautiful and full of promise in his eyes. Therefore, he hides her away and we don't hear from the character much until towards the end of the book.

Here Kincaid's use of character names produces the image of a reflected relationship. In Greek & Roman mythology, Pluto hides Persephone away from the world for half the year sequestering her in Hell.[7] In essence, this is what Mr. Sweet does as his daughter is not a full voice in the story throughout the majority of the tale. This isn't addressed until chapter 7 towards the very end of the book. Kincaid writes, "immediately after Persephone's birth, Mr. Sweet began to secrete her…Where is she? Mrs. Sweet would ask herself and Mr. Sweet too, if she managed to see him; from her own self came no answer, for she really did not know what happened to the beautiful Persephone, and when she turned to Mr. Sweet he would only smile and say to her "Hmmmmh!".[8] She continues on to describe a bittersweet disconnection to her daughter, blaming her husband for the lack of a bond between parent/child. Writing, "the beautiful Persephone grew and grew and grew, so much did she do so that she grew out of her mother's reach, for Mrs. Sweet often could not find her, even when she was sitting in front of her…for Mr. Sweet had taken her daughter and placed her in the jacket of his pocket". [9]



As a reader, I can see that Mr. Sweet takes away anything he would consider perfect and leaves his wife with what he considers less-than worthy of his attention. While his abandonment becomes clear at the end of the book, I find this aspect of the story a bit fragmented. Mrs. Sweet does not seem to have much to say about her daughter throughout the majority of the book except that she is her first child and is beautiful. She clearly favors her son Heracles whom she dotes on. Their relationship is a major focus of the story. Knowing Kincaid's previous work, it could be a reflection of her personal relationship with her mother, but I digress. This is an edu-

cated guess and not truly part of this piece.

Consider this: throughout the story, Mrs. Sweet is seemingly unaware of her husband's attitude towards her although his hatred is clearly projected through his inner dialogue. Her reactions, or lack of any reaction, to her husband's negative behavior and treatment could also be considered a defense mechanism. If one is absorbed in someone else it is easy to push feelings aside. It appears that Mrs. Sweet is an emotionally abused woman whose feelings have been discarded for years. Her behavior is broken, at times filled with emotion and other times void of them. Kincaid does not mince words when presenting Mrs. Sweet's vision of herself. In chapter six we read, "she grew fat and debauched-looking, like that actor Charles Laughton and also his wife, the actress Elsa Lanchester, she grew to look like them as they appeared in real life or their impersonations, it did not matter, to her or to anyone observing the situation." When one is treated so poorly, one questions their own value. This type of emotional cruelty has lasting effects and can make a person grow numb.

Mr. Sweet is a frustrated musician whose career has not flourished and he lays the blame for this at his wife's feet. He writes music with titles such as *This Marriage is Dead* and *Husband Left Her* as an inside joke. Haughty, elitist and arrogant, his inner dialog drips with disdain for Mrs. Sweet whom he often refers to as arriving on a "banana boat." In one diatribe, Mr. Sweet walks through his childhood memories recalling an upper class lifestyle of privileged youth. He reflects, "my dear mother, who warned me not to marry this horrible bitch, my dear mother who could see right away that we were not compatible, my dear, dear mother, who warned me against taking up with this woman of no proper upbringing…"[10] to justify his behavior. He continues on with, "while I am asleep the business of living persists; not her, she loves the life cycle, or so she says, though it is such an ugly way of presenting a beautiful idea: the life cycle but she is an ugly person, a bitch and an ugly person, her existence makes me sick… And in this Shirley Jackson house, nestled in the crotch of the prison of a village in New England, I now live with that passenger, questionable passenger, on a banana boat, for is she a passenger or is she a banana? If she was a banana was she inspected?"[11]



Indeed, it is a strong statement that Kincaid has her male lead dehumanize his wife in this manner. By all accounts, he comes across as a racist with his continuous comments about tropical fruit and colors in relation to his wife's cultural background as well as her socio-economic status. What turns it around is the clear reversal of fortune; Mrs. Sweet is the

breadwinner in the family. It is her work that bought the Shirley Jackson house, her work that pays for food, clothing, and basic living expenses. Her work is writing. Often, she locks herself away in a small room with a special desk hand made for her where she pens her masterpieces. This location is her private domain and a place that her husband and children dislike. It is clear from their points-of-view that Mom has no need for them while locked away. In many respects, the children take their mother for granted expecting her actions to always be done for their amusement and/or benefit. This can be stated of many children. Their behaviors are reflective of the time as well as their upbringing.

We, as the audience/reader of *See Now Then,* learn a lesson in love, a form of decoding its myth. We learn love can never be linear because it is nonsensical. Love in this story, as in many others, is pheromones, hormones, passion, and comfort laced with frustration, sorrow, confusion and control. Love was an embrace of the exotic that was ultimately rejected by the lost; for it is not the answer to fill a void, but an addition to the joy which should already be inside.



The most disturbing aspect of *See Now Then* is that Mrs. Sweet is truly unhappy and more than likely even clinically depressed. She does not find her answers or her joy at any point in the story. In 8 short-chapters, we see how she looks into the world and fantasizes when faced with the mundane chores of living, and views herself as unattractive yet is clearly successful. This doesn't fill her with joy or a sense of accomplishment. Her success comes across as a burden to her as it provides material goods, but contributes to her husband's hatred. She pours herself into her work, her hobbies and raising her children to escape. Her husband enjoys the company of his music students, as well as a young lady or two, and avoids his family as much as possible. He isn't living a life with them, but in spite of them. Kincaid writes, "See Now Then, See Then Now, just to see anything at all, especially the present, was to always be inside the great world of disaster, catastrophe, and also joy and happiness, but these two latter are not accounted for in history, they were and are relegated to personal memory."[12]

### Wit and Beauty

While the overall story of Mr. & Mrs. Sweet is tragic, Kincaid creates passages of whimsy throughout the book which prevent *See Now Then* from becoming oppressive and bleak. She shines a light on Mrs. Sweet's heritage with, "No morning arrived in all its freshness, its newness, bear-

ing no trace of all the billions of mornings that had come before, that Mrs. Sweet didn't think, first thing, of the turbulent waters of the Caribbean Seas and the Atlantic Ocean. She thought of that landscape before she opened her eyes and the thoughts surrounding that landscape made her open her eyes." [13] It should be apparent to the reader that Mrs. Sweet has not forgotten who she is in spite of her current circumstance.

There are other points within the story where Mrs. Sweet travels back in her mind to her Caribbean home and childhood that add mirth to *See Now Then.* At one point, Mrs. Sweet recalls, "I became familiar with the idea that knowing how to read could alter my circumstances, that then I came to know that the truth could be unstable while a lie is hard and dark, for it was not a lie to say that I was five when I was three and a half years old, for three and a half years old then was now, and my five-year-old self then would soon be in my now; that teacher's name was Mrs. Tanner and she was a very large woman, so large that she could not turn around quickly and we would take turns pinching her bottom, and by the time she looked to see which of us had done so we would assume a pose of innocence…"[14] Mrs. Sweet may have found herself in a different world with a wide variety of people, but her childhood experiences are woven into her inner monologue even if on a deep subconscious level. This inner voice is her strength that prevents the depression from swallowing her whole. She senses this when she works in her garden, touches the earth, dotes on the plants, or cooks exotic cuisine. Her foundation is in the Caribbean.



Mrs. Sweet's son Heracles presents yet another amusing, perhaps even a sarcastic twist to the story line. Once again, we see a foreshadowing of the character based on the name. Heracles was a Demi-God in Greek mythology. He was the son of Zeus, extremely strong, courageous and sexually desirable with extraordinary prowess. However, Heracles was known to have had a temper and as a youth he murdered his music teacher Linus for correcting his mistakes. [15] This appears to be a sarcastic nod to the fact that Mr. Sweet is also a music teacher. "That little jerk almost killed me again, said Mr. Sweet to himself, and it's not the last time, he said again to himself,"[16] the nod to this classical reference is quite clear.

Kincaid brings her son's voice to the foreground in chapter five where it is revealed that young Heracles understands his father's attitude towards his family and towards him. "He said, the young Heracles, in that voice that only his mother could hear, a voice that was so pleasing to her ears, well my dad is a complete asshole, he doesn't know anything, he hates throwing balls and he won't take me to the Basketball Hall of Fame in

Springfield, Massachusetts…"[17]

Heracles is the polar opposite of Mr. Sweet. Kincaid clearly contrasts the son with his father, Mr. Sweet whom she describes as old and "the size of a mole."[18] The imagery continues with, "he (Mr. Sweet) was coming down the stairs and Heracles was going up the same stairs and they met in the middle and by accident collided and by accident Heracles, to steady himself from this collision, grabbed Mr. Sweet's entire testicles and threw them away and he threw them with such force that they landed all the way in the Atlantic Ocean, which was Then and is so Now hundreds of miles away." [19] Peppering *See Now Then* with these witty segments brings a note of levity to the story.

Kincaid's emphasis on the Sweet's family home, the Shirley Jackson house, is ongoing throughout *See Now Them.* As a reader, I found it telling that the house Mrs. Sweet dwells in was once occupied by a famous female author who was prone to body weight issues and had a philandering husband. This mirror image is subtle and is reinforced throughout the piece with hints of the previous occupants past. Kincaid writes, "Mr. Sweet who was often found lying down on a couch in an old house that had once been occupied by a woman who wrote short stories and brought up her children and whose husband had betrayed her and had behaved as if he were nothing more than a louse to her, so recorded in a biography of her life."[20]



Should it escape the reader that Shirley Jackson, a well-known Gothic writer who enjoyed blending the "domestic and the macabre", was the previous owner?[21] Among her many publications, Jackson penned what became a classic short horror story "The Lottery" published by *The New Yorker* in the June 26, 1948 issue. The dark tale focuses on a small, unnamed New England village that annually gathers to choose a human sacrifice to be stoned to death in the town center by all the residents. It's dark and morbid, a throw back to a different time period without any explanation as to why the practice is still in place in the community. The rules of the ritual were lost in time, ceremony details long ago forgotten but, the "box" that holds tickets for the lottery was still in use. Throughout the story, characters in hushed tones mention that other villages have opted to stop the practice only to be scorned by the eldest resident. His mutterings are reminiscent of "young kids today, they don't know what they're doing".

*The New Yorker* readership was horrified by this story and more than

300 letters were sent to their office, mostly complaining about the piece or demanding to know it's purpose. Even today, these letters are noteworthy and were the focus of an article by Ruth Franklin published on *The New Yorker* website just this past June 2013.[22]

Could it be that Kincaid is using "The Lottery" as a metaphor for the current state of Mrs. Sweet's marriage? Could her marriage also be an old ritual that has long lost its ceremony only to die at the hand of one once sought in friendship and/or love? It is a clever layer to *See Now Then* and even echoes the title. For Mrs. Sweet is looking back at what was, seeing what is and thinking of what could be all at the same time just by repeating the "Shirley Jackson house". Perhaps, it is even tongue-in-cheek sarcasm.

## Conclusion

*See Now Then* is beautiful prose which showcases that love can indeed die. This can best be summarized by a quote from author Anaïs Nin who stated, "love never dies a natural death. It dies because we don't know how to replenish its source. It dies of blindness and errors and betrayals. It dies of illness and wounds; it dies of weariness, of witherings, of tarnishings." [23]



## Endnotes

1 Marilyn Berlin Snell, "Jamaica Kincaid Hates Happy Endings", *Mother Jones,* (San Francisco, CA), September/October 1997 issue
2 Jamaica Kincaid, *See Now Then,* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p.12
3 ibid, p.10
4 ibid, p.7
5 American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition* (DSM-5), (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013)
6 Jamaica Kincaid, *See Now Then,* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013) p. 26
7 Jeanie Lang, *A Book of Myths,* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 2012) p.99-103
8 Jamaica Kincaid, *See Now Then,* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013) p. 123
9 ibid, p.125
10 ibid, p.15
11 ibid, p.17
12 ibid, p.65
13 ibid, p.18
14 ibid, p.31
15 J. G. Frazer (translator), Apollodorus, *Library 2, Book 2*, Theoi, E-Texts Library http://www.theoi.com/Text/Apollodorus2.html
16 Jamaica Kincaid, *See Now Then,* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013) p. 46
17 ibid, p.98

18 ibid, p.34
19 ibid, p.46
20 ibid, p.33-34
21 "Shirley Jackson, Author of Horror Classic, Dies", *The New York Times,* (New York, NY: 1965) Obituary, August 10, 1965
22 Ruth Franklin, "The Lottery Letters", *The New Yorker* online, June 26, 2013 http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/06/the-lottery-letters.html
23 Anaïs Nin, Featured Quotes, Good Reads online, http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/777-love-never-dies-a-natural-death-it-dies-because-we

## JAMAICA KINCAID'S *SEE NOW THEN* A REVIEW

Sachelle M. Ford

*See Now Then:* A Novel by Jamaica Kincaid. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013. 182 pp.

*See Now Then* is the first novel in a decade from Antigua's most prominent literary daughter, Jamaica Kincaid. Known for its vitriolic tone, her prose produces highly resonant images that make palpable the ambivalent condition of belonging to families. One idea remains constant throughout her work: hate and love are not opposites, merely different sides of the same emotion. The anger etched into the structure of many of her earlier novels accentuates the intensity of love bonds that can never be severed. Her 1990 novel *Lucy* elucidates this point, demonstrating that a daughter who puts an ocean between herself and her mother will always be her mother's child because this relationship can never be wholly dissolved. The fragility of family ties and the inextricability of love and hate also pervade *See Now Then*, which is perhaps her most vulnerable literary endeavor to date. While the protagonists of her earlier works seek to assert their individuality against inherited legacies of familial and national history, the protagonist of this novel, Mrs. Sweet has established an almost picture-perfect family life that collapses despite her devotion to marriage and motherhood. Readers of the novel will be challenged and rewarded by its representation of the moment-by-moment sensation of a marriage ending.



The complex prose style of *See Now Then* resonates with the profound pain of its subject. Its page-long sentences that move backwards and forwards in time and often switch speakers attempt to understand when the marriage began to break down. The non-linear progression of the narrative demonstrates the sudden return of memories. Kincaid has suggested that this non-linear experience of time is where we would locate the novel's Antiguan sensibility.[1] I would also suggest that in a sense, love itself refuses linear representation. Somewhere in between the past where Mr. Sweet fell in love with the long legs of the woman who would eventually become Mrs. Sweet, and the present that finds him leaving her for a younger woman, there is a circuitousness to their falling in and out of love that is only broken at the end of the novel. Kincaid's prose works often focus on the affective as the register of the individual encounter with political systems, such as colonialism and neo-colonialism, but *See Now Then* almost resists this sort of politicization. It approaches the trappings of middle-class life with the same earnestness with which Mrs. Sweet em-

braces them. The cultural difference at the heart of the Sweets' separation is a very intimate rejection between two people.

This prosaic meditation is set in interior spaces. More precisely, it is set in the "Shirley Jackson house" where the Sweets reside. The opening image is lush, almost painterly in its description of the home sitting on a knoll with the Paran river flowing and the Green Mountain Range in the background. Its first words, "See now then" instruct us to look at "the dear Mrs. Sweet" and to share her perspective. The sense of sight dominates these opening pages. From a window in her house overlooking the man-made lake and the river flowing from it set against the backdrop of the ancient mountain range, Mrs. Sweet beholds the contrast between permanence and impermanence. Freshly renovated homes that once belonged to recently deceased neighbors stand on the other side of the window like ruins of memory calling past occurrences into the present. Gazing at the firemen maintaining their trucks reminds her of the way her son, "the young Heracles" used to play with his toy trucks. There is some sadness when she reflects that he "no longer did that" (4). Shifting her gaze from the landscape outside the window to her husband, a presence that should be closer than the mountains yet is actually more distant, Mrs. Sweet sees then now. Marital decline creates its own perspective. To see then now is to consider how the present moment might feel from the vantage of the future, and to reconsider past events in the present. Lovers are obsessed with the porosity of past, present, future; they try to understand the suddenness of tender words turned into cruel ones.



Kincaid has said that *See Now Then* is a novel about "the passage of time, what it creates and what it is indifferent to."[2] As it progresses, it shows how some bonds strengthen with time while others wither. Not beholden to a conventional plot with a beginning, middle, and end, it moves back and forth in time to show a mother's deepening love for her children and a husband's diminishing love for his wife. When it does conclude, it does so without resolution, as if to show that the utterance of the words "I never loved you" is the conclusion of a marriage and the creation of a different kind of relationship between former lovers. Exposing the inextricability of love and time, the novel resonates with other works, old and new. Its narrative structure and reliance on repetition recalls Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha," a story that shows that lovers never inhabit time at the same pace.[3] Its obsession with the past and present of love evokes the wisdom of Junot Diaz's *This Is How You Lose Her:* "as soon as you start to think about the beginning, it's the end" (24).[4]

Still, Kincaid's effort is more vulnerable than Stein's and more mature than Diaz's. The Sweets' marital suffering is a distinctly middle-aged one that comes only after a couple has had their children, established their careers, and settled in to their lives. Even though most of the novel is written in the voice of an omniscient third-person narrator, Mrs. Sweet dominates the narrative perspective and allows us to see her through the eyes of her husband and children, "the young Heracles" and "the beautiful Persephone." It is not a kind portrait. Mr. Sweet "hated her very much" and "often wished her dead," Mrs. Sweet frequently thinks to herself (6). In his eyes she's a "dreadful" "benighted woman" with endless flaws. He's a man often mistaken for a rodent, but in her eyes he's still a man "capable of understanding the intricacies of the universe itself" (7). She still loves him even as she knows that he is "least worthy" of her love (7). Her conflicted feelings are a testament to how difficult it is to stop loving the person who is abandoning you. Despite everything, "she loves him without binds," even while he thinks about all the ways he wants her dead (39).

The experience of reading *See Now Then* often has the discomfort of witnessing a ferocious argument and becoming aware of the private details of a couple's shared life. The argument isn't one of shouting and screaming but passive-aggressive actions meant to create deep wounds. One of the most difficult moments to read is Mr. Sweet's recurrent thought that his wife migrated to the U.S. from the West Indies on a banana boat. He constantly dehumanizes her, calling her a banana: "I now live with that passenger, questionable passenger, on a banana boat, for is she a passenger or is she a banana?" (17). Deriding Mrs. Sweet's cultural origins, Mr. Sweet's insult establishes a categorical difference between them that cannot be overcome by her shopping at the Brook's Brothers outlet for his pants or her cooking fine European food for their family. Suggesting that her own refinement can never match his sophisticated Manhattan upbringing, he erases her efforts with his words. Moreover, he heaps upon her the history that she sought to leave behind in emigrating. According to him, she should be an immigrant, an item of cargo, even a banana, but she should not be his wife. Unlike the critiques of exoticism found in Kincaid's earlier work, what happens in this moment is markedly different. The exotic is not found alluring as it is in *Lucy* or *Autobiography of My Mother,* rather it is marshaled to reject the West Indian subject. In his growing hatred of his wife, Mr. Sweet distances her from himself by refusing to recognize her as a subject at all.

Relentless in his harshness, Mr. Sweet continues to criticize the fundamental aspects of his wife's identity. In another moment, "out of the blue" Mr. Sweet viciously says to his wife, " you have said horrible things to me and to Heracles and to Persephone," leaving her crying, " not wanting to believe that she was the kind of Mrs. Sweet who could say things not kind and sweet" (39). Here, the novel demonstrates how marital strife often lacks a specific source and can make any of a partner's traits offensive. That she lacks the sweetness that her marital name should bestow upon her is only one of the ways Mrs. Sweet has disappointed Mr. Sweet. He is reserved and withholding; she feels and speaks her feelings aloud. But to see how her feelings look through her husband's eyes is a much more vulnerable experience than speaking them herself. With her words in the mouth of another, she has to confront how they make others feel. Because none of Kincaid's prior protagonists have cared so much about being loved or about the effect of her words, it is almost heartbreaking to watch Mrs. Sweet desire her family's love.

We never learn the "horrible things" Mr. Sweet accuses Mrs. Sweet of saying to him and their children. Even so, the very manner in which the novel is written is in a confrontational mode. As a reader confronted with Heracles's emasculation of Mr. Sweet and Persephone's indifference to Mrs. Sweet, I wonder that if she can say these things about her family to us, then what might she say to them? Mrs. Sweet is honest enough to admit that the hardness of her words come just as naturally as her love of cooking and gardening. Yet, hers are absent of the vindictiveness of her husband's words. Rather, they are honest and searching for the reasons she is alienated within the family to which she has devoted herself. We can only feel sympathy for Mrs. Sweet when the children applaud after Mr. Sweet announces that deer ate her tulips "just as they were all about to open in a glorious bloom" (143). We understand why he delights in her suffering, but it is less clear why the children she so loves approach her with such resentment.



In Kincaid's *oeuvre,* the maternal figure is a constant source of ambivalence. At once, she loves her children and hates them, and they return her hatred and her love. In this novel, Mrs. Sweet is both child and mother. When the narrative is told from her children's perspective, it complicates the novel's investment in her victimhood. One afternoon finds Heracles "beside himself" with "anger and grief" at being left at the bus stop by his mother. He knows exactly where she is and what she is doing, thinking to himself, "Oh, she just sits there in that room writing about her goddamn

mother, as if people had never had a mother who wanted to kill them before they were born in the history of the world…" (129). Heracles is spiteful of the time his mother dedicates to writing, deeming her work as petty and indulgent. Indeed it does make her neglectful of her children. The mentions of "Mr. Potter" and the "stupid little island" of Mrs. Sweet's birth call to mind to Kincaid's work, an act that is at once daring yet banal given the abundance of references to Kincaid's work and life that run through the novel.[5] What is most remarkable about this sequence is that Kincaid observes her life's work through the eyes of an unimpressed child and allows the reader to briefly do the same.

The children's perspective is the most captivating of the many narrative voices. The children's growing awareness that their father is leaving their mother most effectively articulates Mrs. Sweet's alienation. In one moment, young Heracles wonders,

> Is Mom an error, and if she is what should I do with her, rub her out when I'm in school and I make my letters not so good? Is Mom a mistake and can I correct her? Is Mom a disaster, like when the wind blows too hard, or when the rain comes too much, or the rain doesn't come for years and years? Is Mom a disaster? (100)



Echoing his father's harshness, Heracles considers the inconvenience of having Mrs. Sweet for a mother. In other moments when he thinks about how "ridiculous" his "sacred mother" is, he shares her emotional ambivalence (161). The fine affective gradations that children have for their parents have always been a subject that Kincaid represents compellingly, and this is no different in *See Now Then*.

Reading the novel, I often felt sympathy for the "dear Mrs. Sweet" as a recognizable subject. The acerbic tongue that earns her husband's ire belongs also to Lucy, Xuela, and even young Annie John.[6] Like them, Mrs. Sweet bears a vexed relationship to her own mother, which she works out while "thinking, thinking of a sentence and a way to end it" (130). Interviews with the author illuminate how growing up as a child of a domineering West Indian woman animates her work. I suggest that we read Mrs. Sweet as the maturation of Kincaid's earlier female characters. There is a strong sense of affective continuity between her first novel, *Annie John,* the later *Lucy,* and *See Now Then,* and it is possible to see how the young girl who alienated herself from her friends and family later fills that void by devoting herself to the family she created in adulthood.

Those familiar with Kincaid's biography may be tempted to approach this novel as *a roman à clef* for the writer's own marriage and divorce given the resemblances between Mrs. and Mr. Sweet and Kincaid and her former husband. Both Kincaid and Mrs. Sweet emigrated to the U.S. from small West Indian islands and worked first as domestic laborers, then became writers married to composers, and settled with their husbands and two children in quiet New England villages where they are ardent gardeners. Both Mr. Sweet and Allen Shawn were raised in affluent Manhattan families and teach music composition at nearby colleges. Even with these echoes between fact and fiction, to read this novel solely through the lens of autobiography is to neglect the powerful work Kincaid does in developing such complex characters.

Mrs. Sweet's domestic life fulfilled a desire shared by most of Kincaid's protagonists: to define the contours of their own lives. As we learn from Mr. Sweet's desperate thoughts, the Sweets lived in the Shirley Jackson House in a New England village, rather than a luxury building in Manhattan, because Mrs. Sweet wanted to live there. She wrote because she wanted to write. She traveled around the world collecting seeds for her garden because she wanted seeds. She shopped for her family, cooked for her family, knitted and darned socks for her family, and loved her family because she wanted to do these things for them. Now, her husband is leaving her and changing the nature of her family, all against her wishes. Mrs. Sweet can say or do nothing about this: "Mrs. Sweet wept, for she had loved her life so much; and this was a surprise to her, that she had loved her life so much…" (173).



To recognize that it is far more common for one of Kincaid's protagonists to either affectively or physically abandon her family than it is for her to be the one abandoned makes the novel that much sadder. But this, I think, speaks to the maturity of Kincaid's writing. Never before have we had a protagonist of hers so vulnerable in her imperfection. Mrs. Sweet's selfishness lacks Lucy's righteousness and her occasional cruelty lacks the force of Xuela's colonial indignation. What we get instead is a woman who is like those women in experience, but unlike them in intention. Mrs. Sweet is flawed because she is a wife and mother, and wives and mothers are sometimes selfish and mean spirited. At times, Mrs. Sweet is the victim of her husband's cruelty and her children's indifference; at other times, she is guilty of nastiness and neglect. It is to Kincaid's credit as a writer that as readers we sympathize with Mrs. Sweet while also understanding what Mr. Sweet means when he declares that he is dying in his life with

her. Breakups often require friends to choose sides, and while most of us would choose Mrs. Sweet's side, by the end of the novel we understand Mr. Sweet's side because Kincaid develops the character so thoroughly.

As the novel ends, it returns to the theme of time to meditate on the temporality of a relationship's end. On the affective level, breakups approximate the negation of the individual, which Mrs. Sweet expresses, To be abandoned is the worst kind of humiliation. It makes you feel like not even nothing (167). But the temporality of "see now then" resists this language of negation, placing the former lovers in a much more irresolute space. Mrs. Sweet first identifies this space as "an abyss," but finds this to be too "literary" an image. Then she thinks of the space as the "shallow depths," but deems this too "geological." She then finds a "true representation" of her life. The next stage cannot be depicted by a vertical structure with linear axes, only a temporal one that resists linearity: "the finality of it, the good-bye for now and see you later maybe of it, the end in the beginning of it" (173). With ends and beginnings interwoven, even the most devastating breakups end in the same manner as common lovers' quarrels—they don't end because a resolution has been found, but because one cannot stand inhabiting that space any longer. Breakups, like quarrels, are beginnings and ends, pasts and futures.



Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then* is an emotionally honest novel that requires much work from its reader. At times it dazzles, and at other it disheartens, but it always offers rare insight into a marriage that has stopped working. Its daring characterization and innovative narrative style makes this an aesthetically adventurous read, while its willingness to explore each character with generosity and candor makes it a novel I highly recommend.

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**Endnotes**

1 Jamaica Kincaid, Reading of *See Now Then*. Brown University. Granoff Center, Providence. 7 November 2013.
2 Ibid.
3 Gertrude Stein, *Three Lives* (1909). I am indebted to Stuart Burrows, whose class lectures on "Melanctha" helped me appreciate the radical nature of love in Stein's narrative. Stuart Burrows. Make It New. Brown University. Smith-Buonanno Hall, Providence. 13 Sept. 2013. Lecture.
4 Junot Diaz, *This is How You Lose Her.* New York: Penguin, 2012.
5 "Mr. Potter" is the title of Kincaid's 2002 novel. The "stupid little island" is mostly likely a reference to *A Small Place* (1988), Kincaid's non-fiction work about her birthplace, Antigua.
6 See Kincaid's novels, *Lucy* (1990), *Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), and *Annie John* (1985).

# JOANNE HILLHOUSE

## FITTING INTO ONE'S SKIN: A REVIEW OF JOANNE HILLHOUSE'S *OH GAD!*

Althea Romeo-Mark

*Oh Gad!* is Antiguan writer, Joanne Hillhouse's third novel. Published by Strebor books/Atria/Simon & Schuster, USA, in 2012, it consists of 414 pages. Previous novels include *The Boy from Willow Bend* (Hansib Publications Ltd. UK, 2009) and *Dancing Nude in the Moonlight* (MacMillan, 2004).

*Oh Gad!* explores themes of alienation, "outsiderness," and abandonment which are dramatized by central characters, Nikki Baltimore, her father, Professor Baltimore and lastly, Aeden Cameron. Secondary themes include (1) a volatile mix of Antiguan politics, local socio-cultural history and the expanding tourism sector: The clash of interests is played out by the characters Hensen J Stephens, a local politician, Kendrick (Cam) Cameron, a wealthy, white, Lebanese-Antiguan business man, and finally, Tanty and her daughter Sadie, who are agricultural workers and preservers of Antiguan history and customs; (2) there are the relationships of the Hughes family who preserve the pottery-making tradition on Sea View Farm and are conflicted by secrets and jealousy and; (3) the challenges of father/daughter/and father/son relationships are delved into.



The themes alienation, "outsiderness" and abandonment are particularly highlighted in the relationship between Nikki and her father. Their personal failings are linked to their isolation and separation from family.

The sacrifices made by parents, with good intentions, have burdened a generation of children who are lost and trying to get a foothold in a world that seems unaccepting. This is a theme which is carried over from Hillhouse's novel, *The Boy from Willow Bend.*

A recent report made by UNICEF/ Barbados effectively captures the extent to which migration continues to affect Caribbean children. "… These mobile societies places children at risk and jeopardize the safety and wellbeing of migrant children as well as children left behind by one or both parents who have migrated (*Impact of Migration on Children in the Caribbean,* p.2, UNICEF/Barbados)."[1]

The study on the impact of migration on children by UNICEF/Barbados finds:

> Children left behind as well as migrant children constitute a particular vulnerable group. The impact of parents' migration on children can be devastating as it threatens the long-term well-being and development of Caribbean adolescents into adulthood. Children affected by migration face several challenges in terms of education and health care as well as various psychosocial problems. Many children left behind suffer from depressions, low self-esteem which can lead to behavioural problems, and at increased risk of poor academic performance as well as interruption of schooling. (*The Impact of Migration on Children in the Caribbean,* p.2)[2]

Given the relevance of this subject for societies on the islands today *Oh Gad!* and *The Boy from Willow Bend,* places immigrant parents and children under the microscope. The desire for economic and social improvement has old roots. "A lot of us went over there back then, you know. Cutting cane and such" (2012, p.37). However, such choices left offspring in psychological limbo. "A lot of their people coming back now, though the truth be told, some of them that coming can't rightly claim any people here. That's just the passport" (2012, p.37). Their children's lives ebb and flow on the sea of abandonment and uncertainty. We learn at the end of each novel whether or not the central characters, Nikki and Vere, are rescued or left psychologically and culturally adrift.



### The Birthing of "Outsiderness"

While *The Boy from Willow Bend* is set only in Antigua, *Oh Gad!* takes place in Antigua and New York. Nikki Baltimore becomes an outsider when she, a child, is sent to New York by her mother, Violete Hughes (Mami Vi). Mami Vi has little or no education, but dreams that her child, Nikki, will be better off with her father, Professor Winston Baltimore, an unaffectionate, controlling academic with whom Nikki had little or no previous ties.

Vere Joseph Camino, the central character in *The Boy from Willow Bend,* is left with relatives by his mother who flees to USA to escape her abusive father, Franklin, and seek a better life. She remits money, but never visits. "She had said she was only going for a while, but that was years and years ago" (2009, p.14). Vere, too, becomes a victim of his grandfather's abuse, and longs to be reunited with his mother despite being looked after by a series of surrogate mothers.

Nikki Baltimore, the main character in *Oh Gad!,* flies to Antigua to attend her mother, Mami Vi's, funeral. Mami Vi remains a conundrum to Nikki, who only spent her childhood summers on the island. Nikki is accompanied by her well-adjusted, almost perfect, older sister, Jasmine (Jazz) Baltimore. Jazz is Professor Baltimore's oldest child, as well as Nikki's best friend and confidant.

Nicki felt she was incapable of enjoying herself and did not fit anywhere. She returns to visit her mother at the age of six already concerned that she was an outsider. She remembers being picked up at the airport by her brothers who were dusty and smelled of coal and who never spoke to her. Upon arriving at Sea View Farm, she meets her mother and changes her clothes. She then "goes back outside to hang around the periphery of their loud conversation" (2012, p.24). She is the summer visitor and siblings tiptoe around her. Special treatment by Mami Vi guarantees that everyone is jealous.

As an adult, her mother's death, suddenly throws her into their midst and the claws are out. She is prey to her older sister, Audrey, for whom she is family and fiend. She tells Audrey that she has "felt, [her] whole life, like [she] was seeing things from behind a pane of glass….didn't feel connected to her, to Mama Vi's, to my father. All I'm trying to do is get inside, get inside something" (2012, p.263).



Nikki, upon seeing Mami Vi again at the age of six describes her as "stately as the date palm under which they were huddled…and she felt she was in the shade of a huge tree…She wasn't a soft woman, given to endearment….a hard life and the burden of raising six children with no reliable support has seen to that" (2012,p.23-24).

To her brothers and sisters, she was the strange child that visited and was treated like a fragile object. Audrey did not spare Nikki her tongue-lashing, neither as a child nor an adult:

> "Hate you? Girl. I don't waste time thinking 'bout you. Comin' 'round here like some queen. Thought Mammy had sense 'til she start sniffing after that "Professor" and allow him to blow her mind with big talk. Better than everyone. That one raise you the same. Sendin' you back here when he wanted to be rid of you, with your little uptight ways, and with your "I don't eat this, don't do that ways." She treating you like some queen because you was his, and smadee laka he bother fu gi she the time of day" (2012, p.60).

Reacting to the tongue-lashing, Nikki defends herself and asserts her right to lay down her roots in her birthplace. "But I can't change the past… that Mami Vi sent me away, that was her choice…that maybe I don't belong here. Well, if that's what it is, that's what it is. But, I'm choosing to come back now, and that's still not good enough for you. Well then, to hell with it. I'm not asking your permission" (2012, p. 61).

Audrey appears to relish Nikki's misadventures:

> "Me nah fooly like Bell, know, fu get all excited because she now remember she have people; people she never pay nuh min 'til now. Besides, she go learn soon enough… But she just swell up enough in she own importance fu feel flattered at all de courting and all de bullshit. And is we supposed to be unsophisticated," (2012, p. 59).

Returning to Antigua as an adult:

> "…always twisted [Nikki] up, mostly because like New York, it didn't feel like home. Nowhere did. But while in New York she could lose herself in that alien feeling; here everything was so uncomfortably close. Everyone so 'familiar.' The disorientation wasn't helped by the vague sense of knowing coiled inside her; Antigua was a place she didn't quite remember, but hadn't really forgotten," (2012, p.7).



Nikki mentions that her ignorance of colloquialism "was in fact, one of the things that still kept her outside the community; the way people said without really saying, knowing that the meaning was clear, if you were truly part of things" (2012, p.367).

Her feelings about her father also "twisted her up." Nikki describes her father as "a big, bushy bear of a man who never hugged, in fact barely touched her, whose conversation was filled with lessons and verbal lacerations. A man who told her he was her father, but never taught her what family was" (2012, p.21). Sunday morning breakfast, which consisted of saltfish, antroba, Antigua- made bread with hot cocoa, was their ritual. She noted that it was the only bit of Antigua left in him (2012, p.63). A prisoner of his strictness and inflexibility, she was uncomfortable, stifled in his presence. She describes her limbs as "burning and her insides shak-

ing with effort…she wanted to run away from him and his razor sharp tongue [but was unable] to build suitable armour against it, much less fight back" (2012, p. 64).

In his journal, her father describes her mother as "everything I have never been: independent, artistic, curious and opinionated…she's not literate…or widely knowledgeable; she's ignorant of life beyond this village…She's a very political being…She intrigues me. She's one of the most remarkable women I've ever known, callused and muddied hands, bead tie, worn dress and all…" (2012, p.167-68).

Professor Baltimore, realizing his own alienation, opens the door to a true relationship with Nikki when he gives her his personal journals while attending Jazz's wedding in Antigua. It is the beginning of breaking down walls and Nikki gets the courage to ask him why he sent for her. He breaks the ice by telling her that she has her mother's eyes and the shape of her hands. "Your hands are soft," he tells her, "hers had lived a lifetime." This tenderness brings tears to Nikki's eyes. He goes on to explain that he was divorced from his wife, Bernadine (Jazz's mother) and thought he could make something of Nikki, give her a chance and that her mother who wasn't a sentimental woman had seen the wisdom in it (2012, p.148). "Professor Baltimore states that… in the end…I think maybe I just wanted a piece of her, and maybe she wanted to give me that. Between us, words were difficult" (2012, p. 148).



In addition to the journal and the relationship she builds with Marisol, the local church musician who befriends her, Nikki is able to get a better picture of her parents

## Play Mamas

Marisol, the village busybody, who Nikki shuns when they first meet, turns out to be a knowledgeable and comforting companion. She plays an important role in Nikki learning about her past, takes Nikki under her wing like a fairy Godmother and invites her for drinks and a chat. She watches over Nikki when she converses with Mami Vi during her frequent graveside visits. These visits allow Nikki to have conversations with her departed mother away from the scrutiny and scorn of her elder sister, Audrey.

Nikki and Marisol had first met at her mother's funeral reception. Marisol Adams (Ms. Mary) is introduced as "a persistent sixty-ish looking woman in a burgundy wig…whose rough contralto had led the choir as

her fingers abused the piano" (2012, p. 36). What caught Nikki's attention was Marisol's knowledge of her parents' relationship. Like a local griot, Marisol recorded all she heard and saw. Marisol introduced herself as the "village archivist [who] clipped stories of anything having to do with the local community" (2012, p. 39).

Marisol is not a surrogate mother, but she is a good listener and is genuinely concerned about Nikki's welfare. Nikki learns to appreciate the woman she had wanted to get rid of at her mother's funeral. Marisol had started "the habit of waiting for her up at the church while she visited her mother, inviting her down afterwards for a sip of whatever fruit juice [sour sap or guava] was on ice" (2012, p.123).

Unlike Nikki, who is surrounded by family, but alienated by those from whom she seeks acceptance, Vere, the main character of *The Boy from Willow Bend,* is watched over by a group of surrogate mothers. He is raised by Tanty, his grandfather Franklin's barren wife, who has had the burden of bringing up some of her husband's illegitimate children. Tanty insures that the money sent by Vere's mother is used for his education despite his grandfather's disapproval.



Hovering on the edge of his life is the neighbor, Mrs. Buckley, with whom he spends time during Tanty's absence. Described as "the busybody type you didn't need to send for" (2009, p. 36), she also becomes, a substitute mother since she was one not "to shirk her Christian duty" (2009, p. 36).

June, Vere's aunt and Franklin's illegitimate daughter, walks irregularly in and out of his life, he grows to depend on her. Until June's arrival, Vere's practically only constant companions were the Buckley children. June had been deserted by her mother who had left for Chicago as well. Unschooled and shucked from home to home, Tanty's door was her latest stop in a series of revolving doors.

After Vere's grandfather head-butts Mr. Buckley, Vere's bond to that family is severed. He develops a relationship with Makeba, a young Rastafarian woman, who lives in the nearby bush with her husband, Djimon and other "dreads." Makeba introduces him to "Jah music." She talks "to him as if he was an adult," and asks him questions like "What you want to do with your life?" Makeba urges him to study and "for her he kept up. Because he likes to fantasize that she was his mother, or his girlfriend, or his sister" (2009, p. 74).

Despite all of these "surrogate mothers," who have helped to guide Vere's path, there is still a hole in his life—his missing mother. That hole was filled with loneliness and inklings of abandonment until her return after her father's death.

### Finding Her Footing

Nikki left New York unhappy in her job and relationship with Terry, her boyfriend, who "did not understand all the insecurities that lived inside her" (2012, p. 42). She is sucked in by the island's charm, the sudden pull of family, Antiguan culture, politics and its power-play. The island offers her an opportunity to polish untried skills and pave a new career. Stern-faced when confronting her enemies, she quivers inside in regards to identity, self-worth, trust and happiness.

Her introduction to Antiguan politics and elite takes her into dangerous waters. She is offered a high position by politician, Hensen J. Stephens. This leads to in-office jealousy and distain. She first finds herself in social hot water when her appointment to the Department of Tourism is linked to an affair with married politician Hensen J. Stevens. At first, recklessly in love, she finds out she was being used and lied to and has a moral crisis. She "dumps the entire Henson chapter of her life in the garbage" (2012, p. 193). After living in shame-faced limbo, she is offered a way out and takes a job with Kendrik Cameron. Nikki becomes the spokesperson for a huge tourism development project which attracts nay-sayers and opposition from politicians as it deprives the ordinary people of the land they had worked on for generations, and interrupts their way of life. Her job, to convince them of its advantages, is a challenging one and a political hot potato. She is thrown to media wolves.



Although Nikki remains outside her family circle, Antiguan Culture and relationships in general, for a long time, she is accepted into the fold after breaking down family barriers and surviving Audrey's verbal fire and brimstone. During this struggle to acclimatize to Antiguan society, family, and cope with personal baggage, her interaction with others, positive and negative, gives her an opportunity to better understand herself and those important in her daily life.

In *Oh Gad!* Nikki is not alone in her feeling of alienation. Like Nikki, her father, Professor Winston Baltimore, and Aiden Cameron, are also cultural and social misfits, who are learning to fit into their skin.

On a visit to New York, her father presents her with an album. It is his first gift to her and is accompanied by his revelation of family history. Nikki learns that her white grandfather had abandoned Professor Baltimore and his mother and that she had raised him alone and isolated from other children. He tells Nikki that his "mother hated her life, hated herself, maybe hated me a little, hated Antigua, hated the man she never spoke of and whom I always believed had paid at least in part, for our exodus from the island. My mother, I believe, is what ignited my quest for learning, and my desire to unravel the mysteries of the ways we are…" (2012, p. 314). By speaking about his mother, her father reveals his own "outsiderness," why he is the way he is, and Nikki for the first time, sees a little of herself in him.

It is this characteristic "outsiderness" that attracts Nikki to Aeden. Nikki viewed him as a marijuana-smoking misfit when they first met. The son of a Kendrick Cameron, he is a minority among black Antiguans and "wan' be the kind of man [Nikki] not scared to love" (2012, p.336). Both bond over their "daddy issues." He detests people who show him respect because of his color, his father's money and luck of birth. He attempts to negate his father's wealth and wishes to be one of the people. However, Aeden stands out because of the very things he resents. He admits to Nikki that he "fought the conditioning…rebel without a cause. Move with the people who not no worse than me, just worse off, like it was a mission. But blood is blood and much as Daddy disappointed in me, much as he and Mammy all; me no wan' be them, you know" (2012, p.339). But with Nikki's support he is determined to break away, find his own niche in Antigua by starting his own business.



Nikki admits to Aeden that "she wasn't as perfect or secure in herself as she affected and maybe I wasn't as imperfect as I felt" (2012, p. 338). Like Aeden she comes to terms with life's contradictions. "I am thinking about how I invested so much time in not being my father's daughter, in feeling disconnected from my mother, and in trying to fix other people. And it's all bullshit. I am my father's daughter. My mother was always with me" (2012, p. 339). She finds at least that she can live with herself, her new life, family, new love and imperfect soul mate, Aeden Cameron.

## Conclusion

In the end, the characters, Nikki, her father, Professor Baltimore, and Aeden, who found themselves floundering in the river of "outsiderness," evolve. A better grasp of family history enables them to unearth the source of their doubts and overcome insecurity. They become confident, happy people, ready to challenge the world. Like them, Vere, who battled the same fears, is saved by his mother's arrival in Antigua. He also begins to fit into his skin.

I identify with Nikki, the central character, because I come from generations of immigrants and am still an immigrant. I was "the fish out of water," at the age of eight and literally "the alien." But I believe her experience was much more traumatic as she was separated from her family at a tender age, a critical time of life, when bonding with one's parent is essential to one's identity, feeling of security and self-worth. Many have walked in her shoes. It is the resulting feelings of alienation, loneliness and exclusion with which I particularly empathize. The need to belong somewhere, the need to fit in, is a haunting experience. Belonging comes with only acceptance and inclusion.



The story's pace is slow at the beginning. Perhaps it was impatience on my part. But once Nikki Baltimore arrives in Antigua the pace picks up and the "outsider" in me begins to wring my hands with each initiation into island life, with each personal and political foray and fiery, familial baptisms and sudden immersion in Antiguan dialect.

I felt the portrayal of Antiguan dialect was authentic except for some parts of Audrey's speech. For example, Audrey use of words like "flattered," and "unsophisticated," were out of character. "Besides, she go learn soon enough… But she just swell up enough in she own importance fu feel flattered at all de courting and all de bullshit. And is we supposed to be unsophisticated" (2012, p. 59). I am of the impression that Audrey was not well educated and would have chosen other words. On the other hand, the author might have had a much wider audience in mind and did not wish to alienate that readership.

There are more than enough Caribbean novels that delve into Caribbean history. *Oh Gad!* is about modern Antigua, the effect of separation of families on their children and the modern world of human relationships.

## Footnotes

1. Caroline Bakker, Martina Elings-Pels and Michele Reis, *The Impact of Migration on Children in the Caribbean,* UNICEF Office for Barbados and Eastern Caribbean, Paper No 4, August 2009. http://www.unicef.org/barbados/Impact_of_Migration_Paper.pdf
2. Ibid

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## BADMINDED NIKKI: A REVIEW OF JOANNE HILLHOUSE'S, *OH GAD!*

Paget Henry

Before I get into my close up on Nikki Baltimore, the main character of this novel, I must say up front that, *Oh Gad!* is a major artistic triumph of which all Antiguans and Barbudans can be justly proud. I certainly am delighted by the publication of this novel and I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. As a work of fiction, it is beautifully written and flows like a river on its way to the sea. The conversations between the characters are well-crafted dialogues, often very sharp, with verbal darts that pierce the thick armors of several of the characters.

Along with being very well written, this is a very Antiguan and Barbudan novel. Hillhouse's fiction bears and reflects the cultural marks and tensions of our society, its patterns of in and out migration and its dependence on metropolitan cities like New York. *Oh Gad!* very artfully encodes in its characters and plot lines rich slices of the culture of Antigua and Barbuda. As the novel unfolds and we meet the characters, we can see ourselves as clearly as if its dramas were projected onto a large screen. We encounter very directly the cultural values, proverbs, practices, and everyday crises that make up life in our twin-island state. Many of the difficulties that challenge her characters, Hillhouse links to slave past and the matri-focal family structure that it has left us. Thus, among the major achievements of this novel is the extent to which the social and cultural life of our society gets woven into its most basic fabric.



A good example of this rich cultural embedding is the title of this work. It is taken from a particular moment in the manufacturing of coal pots and other utensils from clay in the pottery industry of the village of Grays Farm. It is that delicate and fragile moment when something could go terribly wrong in the manufacturing of a clay coal pot. The moment in which it could crack, or worse, fall to the ground. Such were the moments that produced the "frantic exclamation of *Oh Gad!*", and which Hillhouse has made the title of her very Antiguan and Barbudan novel.

Other revealing examples of this rich cultural embedding of characters and actions in the novel are Hillhouse's extensive use of Antiguan and Barbudan proverbs and also of our notions of spirituality. A rather humorous, but significant incorporation of spirituality is in one of Nikki's conversations with her deceased mother, whose grave the daughter visits regularly after return to Antigua and Barbuda. Nikki talks to her mother as though

she was alive and able to hear her. Indeed her mother became her "confessor-confidante" (p.175). On this particular occasion, Carlene, the Jamaican girlfriend of Nikki's nephew Tones, joined her at the gravesite. Invoking the Jamaican notion of a duppie or the Antiguan image of a Jumbie or ghost, Carlene said to Nikki: "jus wondering what you goin' do the day she do answer back. New story! Me never know say that one from foreign can run so. She come down de hill, speed pass the car, pass bus stop everything, run clean ah St. Johns" (p.177). As a Jamaican, Carlene's presence here also reflects currents patterns of inter-regional migration that have been shaping the postcolonial period in Antigua and Barbuda. This use of the image of the jumbie and of our proverbs made me think of the photographs and aesthetics of Mali Olatunji, whose book of breathtaking images, *The Art of Mali Olatunji: Painterly Photography From Antigua and Barbuda* will soon be available.

However, the particular feature of our culture in this work that I will focus on is our notion of bad mindedness. It is an ethical and existential notion that we often use to read human motivations and distinguish good people from bad. Thus, we use it to identify or name social encounters in which we experienced the other person as acting out of spiteful, evasive, deceptive, exploitative or overtly hostile motives. These motivations are unethical because the other person is being used, stereotyped, or degraded in some way, and thus not being treated as an equal or as an end in him or herself. Such bad-minded actions often lead to destructive conflicts that only further complicate or defeat the aims of the individual employing them. My focus on the main character, Nikki, is an effort to explore this theme.



### A Character-driven Novel

In spite of its carefully embedded cultural riches, *Oh Gad!* is a character driven novel. Its characters are very well developed, clearly delineated, and very artfully kept alive by Hillhouse. There are also a lot of dramatic events – interpersonal conflicts, deaths, pregnancies, and births – that help to keep the novel going. But ultimately, it is the strong female characters – Nikki, Audrey, Mama Vi, and Jazz – that drive *Oh Gad!'s* powerful narrative. At the same time that these female characters are strong and assertive, they are very recognizable as being from Antigua and Barbuda. Indeed, this quality is true of all of Hillhouse's major characters, so much so that even when they try they are unable to escape from the lure and hold of their island home.

Of these strong, often tough and well-defended female characters that drive the novel, the most important is clearly Nikki Baltimore. When we first meet her, Nikki is living in New York. However, she is not doing very well. Nikki is working in the basement office of a less-than profitable non-profit organization doing various things from fundraising to dealing with tenant complaints. Her personal life is not faring much better. She is estranged and very emotionally removed from her father, who she calls "the professor". He too lives in New York**.** Nikki is even more disconnected from her mother, Mama Vi, who lives in Antigua and is a master of pottery making in the village of Grays Farm. Further, Nikki is living with her boyfriend, Terry, but he is having an affair with a new associate at his firm. Not surprisingly, Nikki is very unhappy. However, she is strikingly unable to understand why or figure a way out of her unhappiness.

This inability to figure a way out of her dilemma brings us to an important feature of several of the novel's female characters that Hillhouse sketches with great skill and sustains very effectively. This feature is the strong need in these characters to have their defenses up at all times. The armor provided by these defenses protect an emotional core, keeping it at a distance from others and thus making it extremely difficult for others to touch or get to know them. At the same time, these defenses also enable these women to evade or put aside issues from their past that they don't want to feel or are unable to deal with at the present time. Consequently, they are also out of touch with their real feelings about important things in their lives. In the case of Nikki, these include the problems in both her personal and professional lives. Because she is out of touch with how she is really feeling, Nikki is unable to formulate a clear response that would enable her to deal with them in more constructive ways. Her feelings about Terry, her father, her mother, and her work are all part of a larger complex of feelings that Nikki is driven to evade and disown. To disown, mask and evade these feelings, she, like several of the other major characters, had to develop this tough exterior, a virtually impenetrable wall that keeps others and herself at a definite distance from this emotional core of troubled feelings and relations. Thus, an opportunity to escape from herself and her social situation in New York would be a welcomed gift.



Such an opportunity to further escape her emotional core, Terry, her job and her father came with a phone call from her older sister in Antigua and Barbuda, Audrey. Without warning or preface, Audrey announces very abruptly, "Mama Dead" (p.1). Audrey is even more well defended, and hence a tougher, character than Nikki. Getting beyond Audrey's heav-

ily reinforced armor was just about impossible, and, as we will see, Nikki seldom succeeded in getting past, around or under it. After getting over shock and abruptness of Audrey's phone call, Nikki makes a phone call of her own. She calls her slightly older half sister, Jazz, who also lives in New York, and persuades Jazz to travel with her to Antigua and Barbuda to attend her mother's funeral. This persuading she does in a rather casual fashion suggesting that they also make the trip a fun getaway. Nikki and Jazz have the same father, the professor, but different mothers. Leaving Terry behind in New York, the two sisters travelled to Antigua and Barbuda, where the dramatic action of the novel will unfold as they meet long-separated relatives.

### Nikki's Compulsive Self-evasion

We have already seen that one of the unmistakable features of Nikki's personality is her defensiveness, her need to keep people at a distance and the related need to disown, evade and not experience how she really feels about a lot of things that are going on in her life. Closely related to this need to evade her emotional core is another very noticeable feature of Nikki as a person: she is unable to formulate, and thus lacks, a positive project of selfhood that would enable her to define more positive goals for herself and to be more proactive on behalf of their realization. In the absence of such a positive projection of self, Nikki's career choices and her involvements in personal relations are the results of external events that have somehow managed to penetrate her self-protective armor, to have gotten under her skin and to get some emotions flowing in spite of her need to keep others and the world at bay.



Being made to engage with others in spite of herself, is something that Nikki both resents and welcomes. Thus, it should come as no surprise that her responses in situations like these are very ambivalent ones. At the same time, she needs to both push the new person or situation away, and also to give in to the emotions that they have stirred in her. One the one hand, a part of Nikki must resist and put up defenses against such external intrusions and the blocked or denied feelings that they might awaken in her; on the other hand, once some of these emotions are aroused, Nikki is unable to control them. They overwhelm her defenses and surprise her as she had been out of touch with them. In short, Nikki's need to evade and conceal her emotional core from herself and others makes her into a young woman with strong inhibitions on her emotions and who is thus unable to be present in conversations, or to give herself fully to the personal and professional undertakings in which she is involved.

Nikki's self-evasiveness and how it affects her ability to relate honestly with others emerges quite clearly in his conversation with her sister, Jazz: "I wanted to be my own person", Nikki said. But I guess I never decided who that was" (p.291). She continues: "There were times when I fantasized about doing nothing, contributing nothing, just being, not any particular shape or color or texture, something impossible to hang on to or to pin down… "(p.291). These sentiments make clear Nikki's inability to formulate a positive project of selfhood, which follows quite naturally from her need to evade so much of her emotional core.

This desire to be "something impossible to pin down" shaped very profoundly Nikki's attitude towards marriage. To Aeden, her love interest towards the end of the novel, Nikki declares: "I dreaded it" (p.359). This intense dread was elicited by "the impossibility, it seemed, of fitting with someone else, your rhythm with theirs. Sitting down to breakfast with them every day, turning around and always finding them there, sharing a toilet, cleaning the toilet we shared" (p.359). Nikki's ideal of marriage was "separate lives, separate spaces, uncomplicated but accessible companionship to fill the inevitable loneliness. It was a selfish kind of loving. It was all I thought I was capable of giving. And it was easy, too easy to live with him (Terry) and yet keep myself locked away from him" (p.359). Here we can see clearly some of the ethical and psychological flaws in Nikki's character that followed directly from her self-evasive and other-excluding behavior. This behavior severely limited how much she could be present in her relationships, how much of herself she could give, and how honest and genuinely forthcoming she could be. These failings are among the first signs of Nikki's bad mindedness.



### Nikki's Self-evasive Conversations with Jazz

As her inability to fashion a definite identity and the related desire to be something that could not be pinned down had framed Nikki's attitudes towards relationships and marriage, it also shaped and determined the nature of her interactions and conversations with her family members in Antigua and Barbuda, who she had not seen in thirteen years. Because of this absence of a positive project of selfhood that would allow her to reach out to others and to be reached by them, Nikki can only converse with and relate to others negatively. That is she must often evade normally penetrating questions or reinforce existing defensive walls to repel these overtures from friends and family. This negative style of conversing with others is Nikki's stock and trade. Because they occupy such prominent places in the novel, I will focus here on her conversations with her sisters Jazz and Audrey.

The first extended conversation between Nikki and Jazz on which we can eavesdrop is the one that followed the call from Audrey announcing the death of Mama Vi. We have noted the rather matter of fact manner in which Nikki persuaded Jazz to travel with her to Antigua and Barbuda. She expressed no thought or feeling about the passing of her mother other than her decision to attend the funeral. Jazz, who is a much more open character, is not taken in by Nikki's removed, matter of fact attitude towards Mama Vi's passing. Jazz recognizes the inhibited and edited nature of Nikki's response. She knows that there has to be more that Nikki is actually feeling and therefore refuses to let her get away with this clear case of evading her feelings for her mother, and also for the decaying state of her relationship with her live-in boyfriend, Terry.

Reaching out to Nikki, Jazz asks in a soothing tone, "How are you doing?" On the defensive, Nikki blocks Jazz's attempt to reach her with the following reply: "God, Jazz, don't give me 'The Voice'" (p.4). The latter refers to the tone that Jazz often adopts when she wants to get past Nikki's strong defensive armor. Reinforcing her first evasive move, Nikki then attempts to change the subject by talking about the tickets to Antigua and Barbuda that Terry had already paid for. Jazz again sees through this defensive move and says to Nikki, "Don't do that". Still determined to remains unreached by her sister and good friend, Nikki shoots back with an even more pointed and evasive denial: "Do what?" Standing her ground, Jazz replied, "Don't bury your feelings like you always do". Still refusing to open to her sister and let her know what she is feeling, Nikki replies: "I don't always do anything" (p.4). This is Nikki at her defensive best, unable to share a substantial part of her emotional core, and therefore must shut out even her sister and best friend.



This negative style of conversing with Jazz is not peculiar to this specific dialogue. On the contrary, it is present in the conversations between these two throughout the novel. To see this, let us eavesdrop on another of their conversations – the one in which Jazz, just before returning New York, tries to get Nikki to talk to her about why she is staying in Antigua and taking a job as a tourist consultant, which she had been offered to her by Minister Hensen Stephens, who she had only recently met. A smooth, fast-talking politician, Hensen had somehow managed to get under Nikki's defenses and thus, in spite of her armor, was able to get her emotions flowing rather uncontrollably in his direction. The surprising eruption of this relationship revealed one significant way in which Nikki remained vulnerable to some types of individuals, in spite of her carefully mobilized defenses.

Concerned about Nikki's decision to stay in Antigua, Jazz opened the conversation with the following strong statement: "Nikki, this doesn't make any sense" (p.52). A little further on in the conversation, Nikki countered: "That is just the thing, Jazz. I have not felt much of a yearning for anything". She continued: "But when Hensen opened this door, I could see the possibilities. I mean, what have I done since college? Just rolling along. Maybe it is time I held onto something solid" (p.54). Jazz could not see what was solid about the job and remained convinced that Nikki was hiding even from herself the real motives behind her decision to stay in Antigua and Barbuda. "I am not getting it", she said to Nikki. Getting even more defensive, Nikki refused to budge. She went silent on Jazz and then closed the conversation: "I am on the fence, she said inadequately. This is the way I choose to jump" (p.55).

From the above, the similarity between the patterns of self-evasion and keeping Jazz at bay in this conversation and the previous one should be clear. A rather sharp contrast to Nikki, Jazz is clearly the more open of the two and is without the heavy armor guarding her emotional core that her sister wears. Jazz is the one who is always trying to reach out, to get Nikki to face herself and to share herself. But Nikki remains unable to be emotionally present and thus, unable to share. Her defenses are stronger than Jazz's gestures of reaching out, touching and engaging. Consequently, Nikki is unable to converse with Jazz in good faith. This need to be absent, to be unavailable and to conceal her emotional core is the source of Nikki's dishonesty, her bad mindedness in her relationship with Jazz.



### Nikki and Audrey

Abruptness, the firing of fast-moving verbal darts, and their instant repelling by strong defensive armors are the patterns that characterize the interactions and conversations between Nikki and Audrey. In contrast to her exchanges with Jazz, Nikki is consistently the one who is overpowered and pushed away in her conversations with Audrey. The latter sister is clearly the one with the stronger armor, and is significantly more bad minded than Nikki. In addition to being even more self-evasive than Nikki, Audrey often acts out of feelings of resentment and spite. She also projects much greater images of strength, toughness and aggressiveness. Hillhouse tells us that Audrey "was tall like Mama Vi, but also thick" (p.15). These features all help to make Audrey a powerful portrait of what Antiguans and Barbudans mean by bad mindedness. Indeed, Nikki is quite intimidated by Audrey's bad mindedness for which her own is no match. The evasive practices that worked so successfully with Jazz will fail miserably in Nikki's exchanges with Audrey.

We already caught a glimpse of the commanding image of dominance projected by Audrey in the terse and abrupt manner in which she told Nikki the news of Mama Vi's death. It left the very quick and capable Nikki without her usual counter punches. The first meeting between the two sisters occurs when Nikki and Jazz arrive at the family home in Grays Farm after settling in at their hotel. At this home they meet long-separated brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. Audrey arrived at the house shortly after the two sisters from New York. She has only two words for Nikki: "You reach" (p.15). Hillhouse tells us that Nikki's stomach tightened in response to the impulses behind those two words. Regaining a measure of composure, Nikki attempted to introduce Jazz and to explain to Audrey that she was just about to fix something to eat, as it was lunchtime. Audrey does not acknowledge Nikki's attempt to introduce Jazz, dismisses her attempts at lunch, and proceeds to take complete control of the kitchen. In making these moves, Audrey has very effectively out-maneuvered Nikki and put her in her place both emotionally and physically. In Audrey's emotional world Nikki belonged at a distance and physically she was to be out of what is clearly Audrey's kitchen. Bad mindedness pervades the very fabric of this conflicted relationship, which is driven by Audrey's resentment and sustained by the self-evasive needs of both women.



After the above initial encounter, Nikki avoided Audrey. The next time they met was at the Christening of Carlene's son, Toni. At the church, Hillhouse tells us, "No words were exchanged between Nikki and Audrey" (p.107). However, at the party that Audrey organized the older and bigger of the two sisters took it upon herself to announce her displeasure at Nikki's now romantic relationship with Minister Hensen Stephens, and to warn her about him. In her often terse and abrupt manner of speaking, Audrey noted: "So, is like that now" (p.108), referring to the fact that Nikki had arrived with Hensen Stevens. Feeling intimidated, Nikki could only say, "What?" To this Audrey replied very directly: "The boy Stevens, what he hanging 'round here for?… Is you he sniffing 'round? Is that you come back here for?" (p.108). This addition of acerbic distrust to disapproval left Nikki again with only one word, "What?" In short, as Hillhouse tells us, Nikki was speechless.

Even more telling is Nikki's next encounter with Audrey. It began with a voicemail from Audrey on Nikki's phone: "This is Audrey; give me a call" (p.157). Nikki was terrified by the message and did not call back right away. However, in the meantime, her brother, Fonso called to let her know that Tones was in the hospital, and that he had been in an accident. Fig-

uring that this was the reason for Audrey's call, Nikki got to the hospital as soon as she could. At the hospital, as at the church, no words were exchanged between Audrey and Nikki.

Just as revealing is a later encounter between the two when Nikki is visiting the family home with the hope of seeing Carlene, but encounters Audrey. "You can wait, if you want" (p.170), was Audrey's way of greeting Nikki. But not long after, Audrey spoke again: "So you working with Kendrick Cameron now, I hear"(p.170). Nikki did not want to speak, as she would have to get into her public and embarrassing breakup with Minister Hensen. It was a major part of the reason why she was now working for Kendrick. After all, Audrey had warned her about him. But the older sister had a very different concern on her mind that surprised Nikki: "That Blackman Valley project is trouble" (p.171). This was a tourist development project that would require the converting of agricultural land in the Grays Farm area that Nikki was now working on with Kendrick. Upstaged and forced once again on the defensive by Audrey's savvy aggressiveness, Nikki could only reply: "How do you know about that?" (p.171). Without missing a beat, Audrey counters: "Is Antigua this, new travels fast" (p.171). Able to muster only a weak response, Nikki replies: "my business is not your business". With more sting on her tongue, Audrey counters: "one thing I know 'bout life, though: picknee who na hear wha dem mooma say drink pepper water, lime and salt" (p.171).



This dart from Audrey had more pepper water, lime and salt in it than the saying itself. It took just about everything out of Nikki's counter punches, leaving her almost speechless once again. Audrey was not interested in getting Nikki to face her suppressed feelings, she was not giving her "The Voice" in the way Jazz would. Rather, she is interested in maintaining a position of dominance that she inherited with the passing of Mama Vi. In striving to maintain this sense of self, Audrey is more determined, ruthless and bad minded than Nikki in her efforts to be something that cannot be overthrown and pinned down. Audrey is female "macha" and female "bravada" all rolled into one bad minded character.

### Hillhouse and the Tradition of Ethical Bad Mindedness

From the foregoing sections, it should be clear that in Nikki Baltimore, Hillhouse has undoubtedly created a highly original character. Nikki will easily find her distinct place within the Antiguan/Caribbean cast of great literary characters. The greatness of Hillhouse's fictional achievement here is the authenticity, distinctness and depth of Nikki's bad mindedness while

at the same time making this lead character capable of reflecting a lot of the very real social issues impacting the lives of Antiguan and Barbudan women of working class origins.

Because of the significant ways in which Nikki reflects the broader social context of family and immigrant life, she calls to mind a number of other original and well-developed female characters in Antiguan and Caribbean literature. The intensity and persistence of her evasiveness made me think of female characters in in the novels of Jamaica Kincaid, Althea Prince, and Edwidge Danticat. For example, the character, Xuela in Kincaid's, *The Autobiography of My Mother* is a woman whose motivations for acting are overwhelming negative. Indeed, she is much more bad minded than Nikki, and is closer to Audrey. Kincaid also makes extensive use of the notion of bad mindedness in her latest (2012) novel, *See Now Then.* It is the lens through which the main character, Mrs. Sweet sees the hateful motivations of her husband as their marriage is breaking up.

Of course, all of Hillhouse's talk about Grays Farm and Mama made me think of Monica Matthew's moving memoir, *Journeycakes.* In Edgar Lakes, *The Devil's Bridge,* we can see the forms that bad mindedness has taken in the lives of Antiguan and Barbudan men of working class origin. Lake's main character, Harsh Ryder is particularly revealing with regard to actions motivated by feelings of resentment, and desires to deceive and exploit others. When we compare Nikki to these characters, and to Audrey, it should be clear that hers is a mild case of bad mindedness, driven primarily by her need to evade and hide from others large portions of what she is really feeling. This inability to be emotionally present forces her to 'lie', to be deceptive to those she is in relationships with, and thus to ethically compromise herself.



At the same time, much of the suspense and sense of drama that lifts from the pages of *Oh Gad!* turns on whether or not Nikki will be able to get past her defensiveness, open up to family, friends, and lovers, and thus find her way to a more fulfilling life. However, this dependence of the novel's dramatic tension on Nikki's fate raises important questions regarding the relationship between the art of fiction and the demands of surrounding social reality. From the perspective of creating and sustaining the dramatic tension of this novel it is clearly more engaging to have Nikki keep her defenses up and thus to continue creating their associated mini-dramas. On the other hand, if we look at Nikki as a social type, and thus a window into the lives of real Antiguan and Barbudan women of working class origin in our post-colonial period, then it should be most instructive to address the possible resolution of Nikki's bad mindedness. By exploring the possibilities of such

a resolution, she could become a light or a guide to other women struggling with similar issues of evasiveness or other forms of bad mindedness. On this dilemma of the right or appropriate balance between art and social reality, I think that Hillhouse's fictional or compositional strategy is one that falls between these two important positions, but with a definite lean towards the aesthetic and dramatic demands of her novel. As a sociologist, my interests lean in the opposite direction – towards the resolution of Nikki's bad mindedness and its significance for other men and women. So let us see what Hillhouse has to say about this sociological aspect of her novel.

If Nikki's bad mindedness means that she is not or cannot be emotionally present in conversations, relationships and work projects, then where is she? What is she doing? What is pre-occupying her and thus making it difficult for her to be available in the present moment? Artfully addressing this issue of Nikki's emotional absence as a living social issue, Hillhouse suggests that she is pre-occupied with and distracted by unresolved conflicts, fears, doubts and pains from fissures and breaks in her earlier relations with her family. In other words, Nikki is emotionally trapped in the past and thus is unable to fully participate in her present as a young adult. Her evasiveness, her need to conceal her emotional core – the sources of her bad mindedness – have their roots in unresolved conflicts from her childhood. The blocking effects of these unresolved conflicts compromise Nikki's relationships, her conversations and her professional performances.



Getting a little more specific, Hillhouse hints at and makes repeated references to severe economic pressures within the matri-focal families of the Antiguan and Barbudan working class. This is a family structure that the laboring men and women of Antigua and Barbuda inherited from the period of our enslavement by Europe. In particular, Hillhouse hints that this combination of economic poverty and a matri-focal family structure has produced the phenomenon of itinerant or absent fathers, and mothers who have to be strong because they also have to father the children. Referring to her own mother, Mama Vi says: "Mama bring us up hard, to make sure we have the mettle. Beat you like you name donkey so that when life fire it blows an' dem is like mosquito bite" (p.183). Reinforcing this image of the difficulties of life within working class families, Hillhouse has "the Professor" report the following observation in his field notes: "That was a constant of life in the former slave societies of the 'new' world, not only this little island in the Caribbean – the transient male, the stable female family head, generations of women, men with many families. A legacy of slavery, a twisted version of the polygamy practiced in parts of

Africa, a bastardized hybrid of the two" (p.183). Jazz, who is the furthest removed these poor economic conditions in matri-focal families, is the least bad minded of all, the most open, the most capable of being emotionally present, and of acting in good faith.

The above insights that we glean from these sociological aspects of the novel suggest that within these economically strapped families too often many of the children did not get the emotional support and sense of solidarity that they needed to have with both of their parents. These broken family ties often left their growing members with real feelings of incapability, inferiority, insecurity and resentment, which they must either conceal or act out. Both of these responses lead to practices of bad mindedness, which will make it difficult for them to be fully present in the adult phases of their lives.

Reinforcing this hint that bad mindedness is connected to family ties that were broken in childhood is the fact that in the second half of the novel, Hillhouse has Nikki attempting to repair the broken relations with her mother. This the latter does through regular visits to Mama Vi's grave, where she talks to her as though she were alive and letting some of those long-repressed feeling from her childhood flow. Similarly, Nikki also begins the process of reconciling with her father through the close reading of journals that he had given her from his years of doing ethnographic fieldwork in Antigua and also of knowing Mama Vi.



But, in spite of these very real efforts at reconciliation, of pulling together the broken pieces of her childhood family life, Hillhouse still does not allow for any major degree of change in Nikki's need for bad minded practices. Her evasiveness remains the most striking feature of her personality and a major source of dramatic tension right up to the end. Thus in the relationship with her new lover, Aeden, Nikki remains just as evasive and off-putting, Consequently, Hillhouse leaves it up to the reader to imagine Nikki's life in the years ahead. Besides the need to sustain the dramatic tension of the novel, this lack of change in Nikki could also be an indication of how difficult Hillhouse sees the challenge of uprooting these personality inheritances of bad mindedness. Which of these interpretations is the correct one is yet another question that Hillhouse leaves the reader of *Oh Gad!* to decide for him or herself.

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# CONCEPT OF HOME AND FAMILY: A REVIEW OF JOANNE HILLHOUSE'S *OH GAD!*

Valerie Knowles Combie

Joanne Hillhouse, *Oh Gad!* Strebor Books (2012) pp. 414

After my initial jarring reaction to the title of the book had passed, I discovered that Joanne Hillhouse's *Oh Gad!* skillfully captures the maneuverings of Antiguans and their intricate relationships as they portray images of home and family. Her novel is peopled with a cross section of Antiguans who live between Antigua and New York, which provides the perfect locus for Nikki, an Antiguan-born New Yorker who returns to Antigua for her mother's funeral and is caught up with familial and social ties that paradoxically force her into accepting a job that is the precursor to her discovery and ultimate maturity. Nikki is the product of an ill-matched relationship between an Antiguan intellectual and an unlettered potter. When discussing his relationship with Nikki's mother, Professor Baltimore admits that "between us words were difficult" (148). He continues by describing her more fully in his Antigua Journal: "She is everything I have never been: independent, artistic, curious, and opinionated. I mean, she's not literate or even widely knowledgeable; she's ignorant of life beyond this village—in a deep and meaningful sense. . . . She intrigues me. She's one of the most remarkable woman I've ever known, callused and muddied hands, head tie, worn dress and all" (167).



Thus is introduced the conflict, which is a dominant motif in this book. In Antigua, Nikki manages to extricate herself from her illicit relationship, and is thrown into another relationship where she finds contentment as she reciprocates Aeden's love and comes to terms with her past. *Oh Gad!* is an informative, entertaining novel that engages the reader in introspection and exploration of his/her roots while forcing the characters to confront their conflicts. Home and family suggest rootedness, a concept with which Nikki grapples. She is on a quest to establish her roots contrary to her father's earlier attempts at denying his roots.

Hillhouse divides her novel into six segments, each of which begins with an Antiguan proverb. A thorough examination of each proverb leads to a preview of the section. In introducing the first proverb: "Plantin'Sucker follow the Root," Hillhouse succinctly creates the platform for the unfold-

ing of her story. The selected proverb seems to border on predestination, a belief that the characters, and primarily Nikki, are destined to a fate over which they have no control. But Nikki is no victim of circumstances; she is a determined young woman who accepts the challenges thrown at her, makes mistakes, but emerges as the protagonist of the story.

The story begins with two simple words: "Mama dead" (1). Beginning the story in medias res, the author resorts to flashbacks as she updates the reader and introduces her characters. Those two words introduce Hillhouse's theme and, simultaneously, the conflicts embedded in the book. There is Nikki's internal conflict as well as her conflict with her maternal siblings and the hidden conflict with her paternal sibling. Then there's her professional conflict, which is a microcosm of the major conflict in the book, the overarching conflict of the development of the land against the opposition of the residents, which is supported by other less significant conflicts. This theme alludes to the destruction of home and ultimately family. It also prefigures the strength of a united family when confronted with opposing forces.



The dominant metaphor of the craft of pottery is deftly woven into the fabric of the novel, justifying the author's title and forcing her to describe the family's means of livelihood. Her frequent references to "muddy" are significant. "Muddy" is an Antiguan expression for mud, and it is used contextually as a noun and as an adjective. Consequently, Hillhouse's reference to clay as "muddy" authenticates its Antiguan element as it describes her family's tradition of pottery. This metaphor remains consistent throughout the novel. It is used to identify Sea View Farm as the pottery capital of Antigua and Barbuda.

Hillhouse's characters remain dominant throughout the novel. As the protagonist, Nikki experiences betrayal by the politician whose less than noble intent exposes her naiveté and dispels the belief that New Yorkers are more worldly wise and less gullible than islanders. Could it be Hillhouse's intent to play on Nikki's islandness, a quality she surreptitiously denies, but must acknowledge as a requirement for her maturity and acceptance of the duality that is so relevant to this novel?

Audrey's brief introduction: "Mama dead" (1) typifies the oldest sibling and prefigures a relationship that must be resolved through confrontation. Audrey's resentment of her youngest sibling is very real. Will Nikki and Audrey air their grievances in an attempt at resolving their issues? This question is relevant to Nikki's growth, which will re-

sult in her acceptance of both sides of her parentage. Hillhouse's crafting of scenes that throw the family together and force confrontation predicts a rugged path that will eventually lead to a wholesome resolution in the end. Nikki's relationship with other siblings and characters grows throughout the book as they engage in various activities. She is an asset to the family as is seen in her ability to help Fanso realize his dream of becoming an entrepreneur. Carlene, however, is a difficult character. She is introduced simply as a person who loves her man and readily embraces others. Uncharacteristically, though, when she misinterprets Nikki's concerns about her assuming the hostess's role at Fanso's restaurant, she goes ballistic. This relationship, along with other incidents in the novel, must be addressed and resolved because they threaten the stability of the home and family.

Jasmine (Jazz) remains the voice of reason for her sister. She helps Nikki explore her emotions relating to Nikki's fractured relationship with her boyfriend Terry. She also leads Nikki to an emotional exploration of her feelings regarding her mother's death. Additionally, Jazz's questions about Nikki's Antiguan job force Nikki to look beyond the job, but she's too naïve to accept the truth. Reality comes with a price. Jazz's unconditional love and unwavering support for her sister keep Nikki grounded. They are the forces that enable Nikki to explore her fractured relationship with her Antiguan family. Despite her love and support, however, or because of her love and support for her sister, Jazz discloses her jealousy about their father to Nikki: "You had him. I didn't. They split; no more Daddy. . . " (145). That alcohol-induced disclosure shows that Jazz, like Audrey, harbors resentment toward Nikki. This, too, must be explored and resolved.



The actions of the novel occur in New York and Antigua, which is quite appropriate because many Antiguans move literally between those two shores. Nikki's impulsive decision centers the action in Antigua, where the author covers landmarks that not only educate the reader, but add credibility to the work. This is an Antiguan novel. It identifies Antiguans through the local setting, the Antiguan dialect, and the actions set primarily in Antigua. Hillhouse's introduction of the proposed development at Blackman's Ridge (137) creates another conflict in the novel. This conflict is heightened when Nikki meets Tanty and Sadie, authentic characters who eke a livelihood from the soil they work. They are the descendants of Antiguans to whom the soil means home. Almost instantaneously, Tanty bonds with Nikki whom her "spirit tek" (239), a bond stronger than the land dispute, as is revealed as the story progresses.

Hillhouse's introduction of Professor Baltimore's Antiguan Journal adds credibility to the novel while, simultaneously, enlightening Nikki about her mother and her past. Baltimore's commentary adds an anthropological dimension of the island to the book. It also reveals much about the man. Marisol's narratives and impromptu visits also educate Nikki. Marisol's conversations, food, and music introduce an element of refinement to the novel, thus adding a measure of balance, where Nikki's family's earthiness is contrasted with Marisol's aesthetical inclination. Hillhouse uses words carefully and precisely as she crafts her descriptions. The first chapter introduces the reader to her word craft, which she maintains throughout the novel. On the first page, the author describes Nikki's dead-end job and her working conditions: "The rusty refrigerator hummed and dripped in the corner. The dusty desk fan whirred, blowing warm, stale air at her. Foxy Brown's 'Big Bad Mama' trumpeted, tinny, through her computer's tiny speakers" (1). Another example of her word craft is seen in Nikki's conversation with her father in Antigua, when she asks: "Why did you send for me?" (148). Hillhouse comments: "For a long time, the question lay on the table between them, untouched, like the books" (148). In that sentence, Hillhouse demonstrates her expert use of diction, as is manifested throughout the novel.



As the story unwinds and relationships are formed, Hillhouse warns the reader with yet another Antiguan proverb: "Come see me ah one ting, come lib wid me ah one 'nodder." This proverb encapsulates the tenor of the section. As a central part of the novel, conflict raises its ugly head periodically, being expressed through heated outbursts. Fanso gives vent to his pent-up feeling when Nikki accuses him of "defending" Audrey (161). His summary is so profound: "You were barely there, even when you were. I hated Audrey sometimes, but she was real" (161). Fanso forces Nikki to engage in introspection when he advises her "to throw off your touchiness once in a while and remember that. You too touches, jack, make every little thing wan issue," and he concludes succinctly, "family is family" (162).

Thus is introduced yet another essential facet to the resolution of the conflicts: forgiveness. To attain inner peace and her sense of home and family, Nikki—and others—must forgive each other, their parents, and all those who have wronged them. Fanso summarizes this belief in his profound words: "You don't get to pick and throw 'way family like sour dumms" (163). By implication, Fanso endorses the point that family is permanent.

"Cockroach no hah no right inna Fowl House" is another Antiguan proverb. That Hillhouse applies this proverb to the section that addresses the land dispute is no accident. As the proverb claims, there is a situation with a victim (cockroach) and a victor (fowl). The "top local businessman," Kendrick Cameron, "wielded a lot of influence due to the depth of his pockets" (94). He represents the diversity in the Antiguan populace. It is important to note Cameron's disenchantment with the Barbudans who are more confrontational. Sadie predicts God's judgment on Cameron for the "rape" of the land. It's not surprising that the development goes up in smoke with Tanty sacrificed in the process. The cockroach analogy also applies to Nikki as Stephens' "keep-woman. Outside woman. Mistress. Adulterer" (113). She becomes the victim, but through her determination, she extricates herself from the situation, not unscathed, but wiser and less naïve. Nikki then seeks refuge in the graveyard where she engages in her one-way communication with her mother. To embrace her family, Nikki must begin with her mother. As the titular head of the family, though dead, Mama Vi's approval, is essential.

"Wa Buk Cho 'Way" is a simplistic way of resolving a situation, but it's also a practical way. It forces the individual to move on and forget the past. Mama Vi expresses that view to the Professor: "That boy father don'even cross my thoughts" (182). The past is over; it remains only as an experience, but it is buried, thrown away. That may have been Mama Vi's experience, but it is not Nikki's; it is not Carlene's; nor is it Tanty's or Sadie's.



This proverb belies the family's situation. They must pick up the pieces, examine them, and attempt to remold them into a whole product. This is the story of their lives. There is much brokenness, but it does not require a psychologist. It's not surprising that the author introduces a psychologist into the story even though it's not clear that Carlene actually benefits from the services. This family, like most of Antigua, needs to be made whole. Its members need to rid themselves of resentments and jealousies. They need to realize that as a family, they can love each other while remaining vulnerable. To her credit, Hillhouse moves the family into that direction through the picnic at Long Bay and the visit to the caves at Blackman's Ridge. These episodes take them back to their roots and to their ancestors. It's during the outings that Fanso's spiel is restated: "Blood thicker than water." Because the blood of their ancestors flows through their veins, they possess the qualities to overcome all of life's vicissitudes and be connected as a family.

"Whey Laugh Day, Cry Dey." The scene changes from the gleeful abandonment of carnival to death, destruction, and dismay. The shift from St. John's and the revelry of carnival to the conflagration at Blackman's Ridge transforms the laughter into crying.

Hillhouse's *Oh Gad!* is a multifaceted novel that functions as an Antiguan travelogue, an account of Antigua's history, and a novel that all Antiguans and Barbudans should read. It addresses real concerns such as family conflicts, environmental developmental exploitation, and attempts to mobilize people in asserting themselves to end developers' rape of the land. This 414-page novel is a quick read because its actions are captivating and keep the readers riveted wanting to know how the characters resolve their issues. Her vivid descriptions leave clear pictures in the reader's mind, while engaging the reader in introspection.

I envision a greater reading audience beyond the borders of Antigua and Barbuda, alas, beyond the Caribbean. For that reason, I think the book would be more immediately appealing if the author had included a glossary of local terms and their meanings. The Antiguan Barbudan dialect identifies the novel as an Antiguan work, and in some cases it can be understood contextually; however, other readers may experience difficulty with some expressions such as "memelippe Negga" (34), "picknee" (211), and "smadee" (175). A glossary would certainly help readers progress more comprehensively through the novel, which would make the story more meaningful to them. *Oh Gad!* is a novel that uses many strategies, situations, conflicts, and characters to redefine the concept of home and family and remind us that home, indeed, is where the heart is.

## *OH GAD!* A PASTORAL PANORAMA OF FICTIONAL NARRATIVES

Mali Olatunji

After reading *Oh Gad!,* the third novel by author Joanne C. Hillhouse, I came away elated by the effectiveness of her creative and story-telling capabilities. And yet, I felt somewhat pitiable for feeling such elation. However, upon reflecting on Edgar Lake's art and vision, my sense of elation no longer seemed so pitiful. As it evaporated, I sensed that it was being burned by the realization that Hillhouse was not alone in the effectiveness of her story-telling capabilities. Antigua and Barbuda had other very capable writers and Lake was certainly one of them. As my feeling of pity departed and went on its way it was replaced by a comforting feeling of pride that was based on what I conceived to be an artsy-folktale about the socio-cultural patterns of the villagers of Sea View Farm on the island of Antigua.

This artsy rendering of the villager's lives and social routines immediately called to mind this splendid and rather comforting passage from Edgar O. Lake's novel: *The Devil's Bridge* (2004). "I saw them like through a wavering curtain, a piston-like spouting of hot water springing from a basin of clouded steam in a place where the fury of hell and the mystic beauty of heaven envelop each other". This poetic framing of a majestic concurrence that leads to contentment by Lake brings a lifetime of delightfulness to me.



In many ways, Hillhouse's fictional prose, her portrayal of organized sequencies of village life and indeed the complex characters in *Oh Gad!,* offer a series of seemingly mythological, esoteric and spiritual accounts of the socially expected. And to no lesser extent, the work is also endowed with a profound ability to arouse awe, while simultaneously encompassing qualities of originality, innovation, and pertinence, all constituents elements of a good literary work of art. And, like Lake's varied textual imageries, Hillhouse's representations bear diverse pictures of 'mystic truths' that are punctuated with social, cultural, political and religious signs and symbols of village life customs and ideas. The work's path-breaking assemblage of symbols is skillfully treated by Hillhouse and made to suggest allegories of complex tales that could be: the equivalent of a journey through a pastoral panorama of recoiling spiritual significances and rising economic hardships interspersed with proverbial gems and delicate cultural beauties.

*Oh Gad!* synthesizes socially representative narratives of daily life with

specific cultural practices and does so with great stylistic elegance. The novel gently brings to its readers welcomed intelligible perspectives in which they can wrap and cuddle the oft occurring circumstances of birth, death, and the afterlife; it provides the necessary composure that one often needs to face tragic moments in life, and it provides great support for the equanimity we need to manage the ups and downs, the richness and the diversity of life. This sweeping and engaging novel addresses a multitude of issues including the social, political, cultural, romantic, religious, economic and indeed ideological and psychological undertakings relating to the villagers of Sea View Farm. In short it looks at these men and women in both their personal and village-wide circumstances.

Speaking of men and women, *Oh Gad!* is populated with a brilliant and striking cast of characters. The most important of these is Nikki Baltimore, Hillhouse's lead character. When we meet Nikki, she is living in New York with her boyfriend Terry, but she is not very happy. Also in New York, is Nikki's sister, Jazz, and the two are always talking. Both will travel to Antigua and Barbuda when Nikki's mother passes in order to attend the funeral. The meat of the story will take place in Antigua when they meet their relatives whom they have not seen in 13 years. It is the up and downs of Nikki's experiences in Antigua – her loves and break-ups, her jobs, her fights with her sisters and her reconciliation with her deceased mother by visiting her grave – that will drive the action of the novel.



In the acknowledgement of this book Hillhouse reveals her intimate and ancestral ties to the village of Sea View Farm, as well as her aesthetic appreciation of the art of coal pot making for which the village is well known. Hillhouse notes: "The Hillhouse clan (especially Hyacinth) because their generations-old involvement in coal pot making surely inspired the book's main motif, the beautiful and breakable clay (coal) pots". Perhaps it is the author's complementary impulses, or funnier yet, mocking dignity in the term, *"beautiful and breakable"* why she entitled the novel *Oh Gad!*. Before leaving her acknowledgements, let me say, thank you, to the author for including me, and also that I was delighted with what she did with the slave dungeon to which I introduced her.

This exclamatory phrase, "Oh Gad!", is an immediate outburst of disapproval for, and a condemnation of an untimely fracturing or crumbling of an earthenware item due to dropping or any other form of carelessness or forgetfulness such as leaving it exposed to inclement weather. Antiguans have been making clay pots, *Muddy Pots* as we have been calling

them, for centuries. This was the case throughout the chattel enslavement epoch. And the manufacturing of a variety of clay household utensils: coal pots, flowerpots, vases and yabbas (parching vessels) continue to this day in Antigua. This cottage industry is specific to the village of Sea View Farm, the major setting for the novel.

The village of Sea View Farm is a relatively small, but a rapidly expanding community approximately situated in middle of Antigua in the Parish of Saint George. As noted above, Antigua is a part of the archipelago of islands, called West Indies. As noted above, Sea View Farm is well known for its excellence in manufacturing clay pottery and Hillhouse has worked this craft very artfully into her narrative. But that is not all that Hillhouse succeeds in weaving into the fabric of her novel. Popular music, both Caribbean and African American are all over her text. Thus the sounds of Barbados' Square One, Trinidad's Machel Montano and Antigua and Barbuda's Noel Browne set the mood for one evening's dinner at the famous resort, Sandals. On another occasion it was African American sounds like "Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing", and "Try a Little Tenderness".



But among all of these cultural weavings, the ones I liked the most is the way in which Hillhouse integrated the tradition of Antiguan and Barbudan proverbs into her text. *Oh Gad!* opens with one such proverb: "Plantain Sucker follow de Root". Chapter eight opens with another: "Come see me ah one ting, come lib with me a one nodder". Chapter thirty-six opens with yet another: "Wa Bruk Cho Way". As it opened with a proverb, *Oh Gad!* closes with one: "Whey Laugh Dey, Cry Dey". This is a proverb that I really like as it fits very nicely with my philosophy of life. But my greatest delight came with I encountered one of my favorite Antiguan and Barbudan expressions: "My spirit tek you". This is an expression I use all the time and I really like the way in which Hillhouse integrated it into the dramatic action and dialogues of her novel.

Hillhouse weaves this favorite expression of mine into a very moving conversation between Nikki and Tanty. The latter was an old woman who still planted and cultivated in the Grays Farm area. Aeden, Nikki's third boyfriend, introduced her to Tanty when she wanted to find the slave dungeon that she had heard about. After pointing them in the direction of the dungeon, Tanty said: "Bakkra would stick them (Black People) in there as punishment".

On a different occasion – that of a noisy demonstration by Grays Farm

residents against a tourist development project on which Nikki was a consultant – Tanty took Nikki to her home. Because of the angry nature of the demonstration, Nikki was unsure of how she would be received in the community. But Tanty already had some ground provisions her in a crocus bag. Still feeling a little unsure of her position, Nikki declined this generous offer, insisting that she could not take food away from Tanty. But when she realized how hurt Tanty was by this refusal, Nikki quickly reversed herself and accepted the ground provisions. After Nikki's acceptance, Tanty reassuringly said to her: "I done tell you my spirit tek you" (239). She continued: "That stronger than all this nonsense" (239), referring to the demonstration and the conflict over the development project. This is a good example of what I earlier referred to as effective and creative story-telling.

Hillhouse wrote her first novel in 2002 and entitled it: *The Boy from Willow Bend.* Two years later the author penned her second novel, *Dancing Nude in the Moonlight,* and now, another two years later, Hillhouse presents to us this considerable, 414-page work of great fiction, a full-length novel, undoubtedly her *magnum opus* for the time being.



After fully grown, professionally trained and sophisticated, Nikes "Nikki" Baltimore, the leading character of the novel, returns to her roots in Sea View Farm Village on the account of the death of her estranged mother. On this occasion, Nikki's long absence from her cradle did not sit well with her siblings. At first she encountered attitudes of distance and acrimoniousness from most of her siblings, and especially so from the eldest of them, Audrey. Family members and some villagers also greeted her with a spell of social and cultural alienation. But all this notwithstanding, "Nikki", as the author chose to call her throughout the novel, maneuvered through it all – fending off powerful challenges from Audrey and a romantic involvement with a crafty politician – to emerge with her sense of self in tact.

Yet, after winning over the affections most of the villagers for her beauty, compassion and professionalism, she encounters a terrible setback that immediately caused her to enter into a depression that could cause disaster for her and for the villager on a whole. As a result, Nikki's feelings catapulted her into behaving as though she had become stranger in a place where she was born and received her maternal care and early village nurturing before her mother sent off to New York City to live with her father.

I found it quite difficult, after my first reading, to determine whether

or not this work is an actual story about the life and times of villagers in Sea View Farm or an imagined novel. The success of the work seems to me to reside in the ability of the author to fashion the story in ways that will cause persistent bewilderment in the reader's mind. In the realm of aesthetics, many aestheticians have argued that art has something to do with beauty. But volitional beauty, that is, the mere exercise of the willingness to see beauty in all artistic representations, an automatic exercise, as in the World-wide case that all roses are intrinsic beautiful, is erroneous. All art is not, and certainly cannot be considered beautiful, charming or pleasing. After my first reading of *Oh Gad!,* it felt real in many parts. This did not sit right with me, as it raised a host of aesthetic questions that needed answers.

**Phenomenological Intersection**

In summary, I see *Oh Gad!* as an important existential phenomenological contribution. The novel's allegorical constructions, if you like, Hillhouse's representations of the abstract, spiritual and figurative aspects of the village life and the villager's personalities, though in narrative guise, vividly brings to mind a real sense of 'Life': the continuity of social perseverance, personal subsistence, covetousness and economic rapaciousness all brought together into an unimaginable interweaving of conceptual ideologies that typically pass alternately over, under and between each other like the intertwining of frequently used highway intersections.



This third novel is simply breathtaking. In it, Hillhouse has carved multilayered tales that penetrate the frailty of bits-and-pieces of the fictional narratives that in turn struggle with real life for a proper tangibility. These dance-like narratives establish oscillating rhythmic acquaintances with both worlds of tangibility and intangibility as though nesting in burgeoning beauty quite circumspectly.

In a nutshell, *Oh Gad!* is a neatly woven quilt of diverse forms of imagination, representation and beauty.

# FEATURE ESSAY

## JAMES DICKEY'S GIFT

Edgar Lake

I first heard the poet, James Dickey, at the College of the Virgin Islands in 1967. I was encouraged by the late Professor Steven D. Salinger to attend Dickey's poetry reading, after a particularly sumptuous offering at the now-venerable shrine, the campus cafeteria. It seemed a good idea, one that many of us relished: to legitimately escape Dean Phillips Ruopp's post-supper class, "Classical Architecture in Western Civilization," a course that pitted Dean Ruopp in discursive jousting with the college's most charismatic student, the late Valentine Pena.

President Lawrence C. Wanlass, a Mormon from Utah, who prized his early-morning walks to our soccer field practices, often seemed a ghostly figure drenched in the dew-laden ridges of the golf course campus grounds. Laurence Lieberman, a poet writing a critical essay, "The Achievement of James Dickey," had invited him, midway of two terms as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, (1966-68), to twice-visit with us - a fledgling college with ardent students, and non-resident faculty mostly living in campus bungalows. I believe our President Wanlass had agreed to Dickey's visit, in part, because of the proliferation of students subscribing to Civil Rights-era publications like *Jet, Black World,* and *Crisis;* but I suspect, it was also due to the primacy of our paradisiacal landscape, its poetic impulses so evident in our expressions. Though, in retrospect, Lieberman could well have invited Theodore Roethke to our campus, a poet Dickey points out in a letter to David Buzzard, who dealt "mainly in feelings and thoughts occasioned by, say, landscape, seascape, and so on."



Judson Jerome, who would later follow Dickey's short poetic tenure among us, then wrote "the longest publishing poetry column in a professional journal." It was routinely published in the Writer's Digest, a publication for which Head Librarian, Ernest Wagner, experienced little objection justifying its subscription on his modest budget.

When Dickey rose to speak that first evening, he had recently published *Poems: 1957-67*, his first "big book," as he described it. It was a collection of his published poems of a decade, steeped in incidents about his life.

He read his signature poem about adolescence, "Cherrylog Road," from the slim 1964 volume, *Helmets* (originally titled *Springer Mountain*), the title poem, "Drinking from a Helmet" which was dedicated to the ravages of war.

Dickey's voice grew stentorian, dripping in a rural Georgian accent as he described the blacksnake-infested junkyard, with its pleasure-cathode - a red-leathered '34 Chevy "down Cherrylog Road." As he read, Dickey's quizzical countenance changed in abrupt transformation: becoming alternately a smiling cherub; then, a glowering Baptist recitalist breathing brimstone fire.

I remember: Dickey kept his eyes closed through lilting passages of fine poetic phrasing, ("The glass panel in between/Lady and colored driver/Not all the way broken out"), snorting loudly on the intake of a pre-1990 *Driving Miss Daisy* détente, ("With the hooks of the seat springs/Working through to catch us red-handed/Amidst the gray, breathless batting/That burst from the seat at our backs"), denoting a nation's *Saturday Evening Post* innocence; periodically reaching for the itinerant glass of our "pure rain water" concealed behind the podium.

Dickey cherished our picturesque hillside water-catchments, still functioning; relishing their rich allusions to the Moravian term, "catechumens," flocks of converts who had flourished by the hundreds in our 18th century Moravian Friendship House(s). At times, his voice grew strong; then, shrank to tearful gasping. Dickey seemed to pluck metaphors from thin air, and relished all things Biblical and prophetic. We found familiar images erupting from his recitations, and awkward youthful acknowledgments sprung from our modest applause.



Once, he licked his fingers, slowly turned the pages of his small 1962 paperback volume, *Drowning with Others,* and muttered: "Yeah, you're going to just luv this!" Then, breaking into his wicked ladies-killing smile, he looked at us bleary-eyed, and slipped-on his Ben Franklins, reading in his notoriously mellifluous cadence.

After all, Dickey was a seasoned poet, who no longer flew by the seat of his pants. His World War II and Korean War experiences, including 100 combat bomber flying missions and three decorations for bravery, had been among his most evocative sources of poetry. After the war he had taken a sojourn in Paris, a stint in advertising and had a successful business career. That earlier stint turned out to be an essential skill for the vigorous self-promotion of an ambitious poet like Dickey.

When Dickey's voice rose on his second visit, it had to compete with – then acquiesce to – the growling fuselages of whirling propeller-driven three-wheeler aircrafts that still frequented the Charles Lindbergh Airport.

The airport building was a complex of veritable WWII hangers, with huge sliding doors that dwarfed the airmen in gray overalls, seemingly toy-tractors hauling the aircrafts, the storied-high platform stairs and jumping luggage. The entire scene had the electrifying air of a Howard Hughes hideaway port; a place where the Spruce Goose might be stored or rolled out at anytime on the withering black-pitch tarmac.

Often, Dickey had to pause; other times, he raced to his line-breaks like some swinging trapeze acrobat, perched and awaiting the next breathless cue. He caught his wheezing breath, listening to the mail-packet planes revving to full throttle reversals, reverberating and pivoting in place; their equally urgent recitals generated in propeller-driven dirges. Inside, we could hear the diesel-sputtering pistons cough, and growl, threateningly, as if restrained; then, purr in delicate runway taxiing to their respective postings. It seems now, a fair aural portrait of a poet's short life. Initially, a small jeep would emerge, signaling every landing craft's *fait accompli;* sometimes leading, sometimes trailing the aircraft with a blackboard-sized sign ("Follow Me"): an inadvertent exhortation shared by Dickey from the well-known sermon, "Fishers of Men."



Meanwhile, Dickey would patiently examine our inner-gazes, notwithstanding the noise, some pauses, waiting to continue his recital. And, it was our poetic inheritance of these small un-scheduled delays – mutually inhabiting numinous moments within Life's incontrovertible pauses - which was Dickey's splendorous gift. Dickey's inimitable poems, interrupted so surreptitiously, taught us how to anticipate deeper pauses, while traversing our own poetic landscape.

Once, Dickey read a poem about a majestic eagle disguised as a warbler, his mother. He read from the title poem of his 1965 volume, *Buckdancer's Choice*. We soared in innocent self-retrospection, gripped in Dickey's Prometheus-like "silica-sparks" text. Dickey spoke to my generation, perhaps, the last at the Humanist barricade, (For years, they have all been dying/Out, the classic buck-and-wing men"); we, Freshmen Class, would be last to care for - and keep - our parents on their homesteads, ("In the invalid's bed: my mother/warbling all day to herself").

I would see my first Buck dancer at the Shinnecock Native American Nation's Pow Wow, gathering on desolate "reservation" lands in Southampton, Long Island, one 1975 National Labor Day. That first week in September, the Native American Shinnecock Nation- gathering was noticeably peopled with kin descendants of African American nations congregating

from a wide region of the United States. Its Chief was accompanied by The Council, one of whom was Elizabeth Gumbs, native to St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. In feathered splendor, and together with the tireless drumming corps, they reigned over the nights-long fireside dance recitals. The shimmering image of young dark buckskin-clad dancers, circling the crackling embers, brought to life again Dickey's visionary poem, "Buck-dancer's Choice." Dickey's own shimmering line, now seems painfully personal: ("Freed black, with cymbals at heel/An ex-slave who *thrivingly* danced/to the ring of his own clashing light").

Dickey coupled Past and Present for us. His voice, salvaged between his own simpering nostril-clearing, soared to our puzzling inquisitiveness, ("For ill women, and for all slaves/Of death, and children enchanted at walls/With a brass-beating glow underfoot/Not dancing but nearly risen/Through barn-like, theatre-like houses/On the wings of the buck and wing").

As Dickey read us "working poems" that Fall, he paused to correct his metered lines, sometimes glancing ceremoniously at his Swissair watch as an impatient navigator. In a few years, Dickey's book of Criticism, *Sorties*, would be the source of richly prescient and insurgent meanings, chronicling his endless flying sorties in WWII. And, I would claim, poetically, that one particular poem, "The Magus," hinted of the 1929 anticipated visit of Charles Lindbergh's visit to our archipelago of islands. His summit to our shores still conjures up mythic debate of the characters, "VI," misread as Roman numerals, stenciled on the Spirit of St. Louis's wing. No doubt, then, Lindbergh Airport's frontier hangar traffic chock-full with sputtering propeller-driven drones had re-inspired him.



Written in couplet line, "The Magus," had an epic Sixties prophetic tone, ("It is time for the others to come/This child is no more than a god."). Even then, its landscape seemed ours, late-evening Freshmen Class worshippers of the Muse; our luck devoid of any public transportation generated from the campus; we jogged triumphantly to our modest homes, ("No cars are moving this night/The lights in the houses go out"). Dickey's poetic vernacular smote our appetite for slang acquisition, ("From his crib, the child begins"), jazz-talk already overheard seeping into our tourist nightclub life. But, despite the insidious Sixties legacy, Dickey's additionally sinister term, "Other," ("It is time for the others to come"), offered us both a remarkable territorial conjunction of the then-looming Vietnam War hunt ("Down into the trees, where two/Long-lost other men shall be drawn"); and, yet, it diaphanously pointed to that peculiar *Dickeysian* prophesy: witnessing the essential Kennedy/King messianic child of our Time.

Then, so suddenly, new battles faced us. The Civil Rights Struggle seemed quite far away. Naively, many of us on campus thought: a mere war of words between Bull Connor and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Bull Connor's threat to the promise of the Integrationists, was, brusquely uttered, ("Hell to pay"). It seemed, so lyrically contested by Dr. King's alternative song-cycle, "I Have a Dream, today."

Dickey, from the Deep South, spoke to us of both worlds. His poem, "Slave Quarters," echoed uncannily in our old World War II barrack, renamed the Administration Building. Indeed, it still does! Particularly sites such as St. Croix's Estate, Whim's Great House, and its adjoining lands domiciling the visible slave quarters. Dickey wrote with haunting posterity, "With the roof blowing off slave quarters/To let the moon in burning/the years away".

In this epic poem, Dickey's vision preached unapologetically of America's apocalyptical vision ("Let Africa rise upon me, like a man/Whose instincts are delivered from their chains/where they lay close-packed and wide-opened/in muslin sheets"), while advocating obligatory flights of dreamy soaring ("A gull also crabs slowly/tacks, jibes then turning the corner/ of wind, receives himself like brother/as he glides down upon his reflection"). Dickey glimpsed our congenital appetite for "flight," amidst a country's post-war bellicosity; and a nation's fragile pastoral traditions. Dickey saw this "poetic flight/poetic sowing," as a boundless license for the inscrutable poet ("I stoop to the soil working/Gathering moving to the rhythm of a music/that has crossed the ocean in chains.").



Later, after Dr. King's assassination, Dickey sent a letter (April 5, 1968) to Mrs. Martin Luther King Jr., from his post of Consultant for Poetry to The Library of Congress. It was a profoundly codified vision of Dr. King's mission in Memphis:

"I PRAY, WITH YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND, WHO IS STILL PRAYING, THAT THE GREAT WORK MAY NOT FALTER, BUT GO ON."

Before Dickey's arrival, we had previewed Dickey's fecund metaphors. Indeed, as he read to us, "The Heaven of Animals," we day-dreamed of Indian Head Cave, high above our campus, that it, "could not be the place/It is, without blood". In the ambience of a pre-Columbian landscape strewn around us, taunting our "the idyllic state" (Lieberman), we were well aware of the flight of the Taino Nation pursued by the Spanish Armada, in Dickey's term, "sovereign floating of joy"; pursued to the lagoons

of St. Thomas, and the catacomb-like bays of St. John. Dickey's line, depicting the hunter's game, had grown suspiciously contemporary. The poem, "The Heaven of Animals," seemed eerily truculent, and altogether foretelling of the impending war machine ("claws and teeth grown perfect"). Suddenly, Indian Head Cave's pre-Columbian war-legacy became General Hershey's Selective Service draft, a beckoning chattering mechanized cavalry of Huey helicopters; no longer merely an alluring arrow-shaped entrance, its poetic humus of conch-shell *middens* now tellingly strewn across Brewer's Bay.

Yet, in the following years after we last met him, Dickey illuminated our Indian Head Cave as metaphor for our era's champion, Cassius Clay-turned-Muhammad Ali. In a 1969 letter to Harold T. P. Hayes, Dickey wrote:

> "…for there is only one way of dethroning a man who can still (physically) fight, and that is in the ring, not in the courts. The part of us that goes back to the flickering of cave-fires knows this..."



Dickey thanked Hayes for notification to sign a statement along with 104 well-known persons:

> "We believe that Muhammad Ali, Heavyweight Champion of the World, should be allowed to defend his title."

It was published in the November 1969 *Esquire* under Hayes's editorship.

During the late Sixties, even from the then-modest library holdings on our College of the Virgin Islands campus, we learned Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was not just preaching - as his preacher-father and "slavery time great-grandfather preacher," Willis Williams, had earlier done. Indeed, Dr. King's books (*Why We Can't Wait* and *Stride Toward Freedom)*, were an urgent part of our campus reading fare. Head Librarian, Earnest Wagner, had been Dr. King's roommate at Morehouse College. A bearer of the same stentorian cadence, Mr. Wagner embodied the Negro College's venerable virtues: character, sacrifice and tradition. Along with Julian Bond's book, *A Time To Speak; A Time to Act,* already a beacon for the young Civil Rights cadres, these books were earnestly circulated among our campus's leading Civil Rights adherents (Ron Harrigan, Clement White, Glen Smith, among others; a young Dr. Kean's "Afro" hairstyle was notoriously popular, admired alongside his mathematical syllogisms).

Dickey read to his captive audience, though ostensibly not oblivious to our own dreaming. Our eyes averted his eyes; our ears were filled with our muted own poems. Two summers before his arrival, The Honorable Wayne Aspinal, the Secretary of the Interior, had encouraged the convening of a U.S. Governor's Convention on St. Thomas. It was to be a jewel showcase for the Kennedy-nominated Virgin Islands Governor, Ralph M. Paiewonsky. As pre-college school students, we too, bore the burden of a fervent paradisiacal welcome, strewn along their parade route, waiving at the caramel-colored convertibles carrying our bemused gubernatorial guests. Lester Maddox and George Wallace were rumored to be there, gazing past our small fluttering territorial flags. Between each sharply careening convertible, there were silences – theirs and ours – in which we hoped, dreamed and prosaically participated in the ardor of the Sixties.

None of Dickey's poems painted a subjective portrait of our Virgin Islands Freshman experience. Yet, two remain lustfully vivid in that Freshman Class's visit. In Dickey's poem, "The Fiend," we found slivers of ourselves and of our landscape. Dickey had smiled, knowingly, seductively, when he proposed reading this selection from his volume, *Buckdancer's Choice.* Dickey wiped his face, his under-throat, with slow generous swipes, and read an enduring line, ("He is gliding up the underside of leaves"). He looked up at us in tense, conspiratorial, Sunday-afternoon cinematic familiarity, ("He finds her at last, chewing gum talking on the telephone"). Like a requisite Film Noir matinee scene, Dickey's poem, "The Fiend," sneaked-up on our innocent gathering: we too, were a secondary victim, ("He brings from those depths the knife/And flicks it open it glints on the moon one time carries/Through the dead walls making a wormy static on the TV screen").



We were already curious gazers of our local station, WBNB-TV, familiar with its snow-tube unscrambled black-and-white horizontal signals, linking us to the cosmopolitan world. We were keen to Dickey's detailed sartorial measure, its veritable links to our flora, ("aqua terry cloth robe the wind quits in mid-tree the birds/Freeze to their perches round his head"). Dickey read, unapologetically, in tune to our uninformed adolescence, ("some all-seeing eye/Of God, some touch that enfolds her body some hand come up out of roots"), then just as slyly, he made us Witness to our darker Brother.

Dickey implicated our every aspiration, TV shows, laconic cowboys, bombing, gunshot, Building-fall—how to read lips: bank robbers, old and young doctors tense-faced: our vice-worn leaf-clothed voyeuristic world,

now helplessly prone. And then, Dickey slipped it to us, ("In his breast pocket full of pencils and ballpoint pens given by salesmen/His hat correctly placed to shade his eyes a natural gambler's tilt/And in summer wears an eyeshade a straw hat Caribbean style").

Even now, Dickey's last line, still hooks us in the gut, ("the light/of a hundred favored windows gone wrong somewhere in his glasses/where his knocked-off panama hat was in his painfully vanishing hair").

One other gut-wrenching line lurks in his poem, "The Shark's Parlor," set on Cumberland Island, where Dickey and his childhood friend, Payton Ford, "rowed straight out of the house/three hundred yards into the vast front yard if windless blue water". If its line form (18 syllables, then broken for 2 additional syllables) seemed as familiar to us as our grandmother's Sankey verse, Dickey tied a distant piratical cord, ("we cast our blood on the waters the land blood easily passing/ for sea blood"). Dickey ties the blood-knot, mid-current ("out from the boat sat in a new radiance in the pond of blood in the sea"), and moors our destinies and mutual fates to the "the blue-eye wink of the jug".



In retrospect, Dickey served our myopic trance with Public Beaches on a tethered set of spiked metaphors, ("All morning sat there with blood on our minds the red mark out/in the harbor slowly failing us then the house groaned the rope/sprang from the water splinters flew we leapt from our chains/and grabbed the rope hauled did nothing the house coming subtly/apart all around us underfoot boards beginning to sparkle like sand"). Dickey continued to remind us how fragile was our island shelter, a ("cottage stood on poles all night/with the sea sprawled under it"), deepening our illumined interior, ("I felt in blue blazing terror at the bottom of the stairs and scrambled/back up looking desperately into the human house as deeply as I could/stopping my gaze before it went out the wire screen of the back door/stopped it on the thistled rattan the rugs I lay on and read/on my mother's sewing basket with next winter's socks spilling from it").

Dickey looked up at us, instructively, abandoned by the world except for his buddy, Payton Ford. He gave us a hip-pocket portrait of himself, ("a bucktoothed picture of myself"), which later shark-destructs, ("knocked the buck teeth out of my picture"). Dickey paused for lasting effect; and gagged himself with that Southerner's handkerchief, wiping away the imaginary blood. Was he snake-oil charmer or fish-oil word-merchant? We weren't quite sure.

Dickey stood in a shoulder-width stance, shouting in Payton's imaginary voice up the stairs, ("Pass the word,"), and shifting gear into his own voice, (" 'Let up, good God, let up!' to no one there"). I am washed ashore, in memory of the 1920s – the beginning of the Jazz Age, when Virgin Islanders, still pondered non-U.S. citizenship as former Afro Danish West Indians Subjects. It was a time when the Virgin Islands, while advocating for their improved status – once misread the portent of a giant 200-pound shark-catch hours prior to Charles Lindbergh's landing at Mosquito Bay; yet our folk community societies in St. Croix and St. Thomas gave Lindbergh Magi-like gifts.

A band of poets, to include J. Antonio Jarvis, ("and bid you Welcome, see your face"), and Leon Marsan, ("and bards in sweet language their lyrics proclaim") gave fine salutes to Lindbergh's landings on St. Thomas and St. Croix. But, an anonymous poetic society also printed a remarkable piece of modern Jazz Age poetry in textured Masonic code, which appeared in the *Emancipator,* of January 18th, 1928:

> "…all, all, all, driven outward, driven inward driven forward, driven backward, driven spirally" driven circularly on their whirlwind mission, but with accuracy, the objective goal being the attainment of perfection…" (I wish I had known it then, to recite to Dickey, or share with Lawrence Lieberman).



Dickey strung up these primordial forces, as dark bruising legacies still lurking among us, ("pulling on his chained lips as the tide came"). He exhorted our painful heritage ("blood hard as iron on the wall black with time still bloodlike"), and reminded us of our inexorable citizenship transcending temporal worlds ("something like three-dimensional dancing in the limbs with age/feeling more in two worlds than one in all worlds the growing encounters").

Concurrent with Dickey's brief Virgin Islands tenure, was Robert Hayden's visit, although his poem "Islands" more finely sketched his visit among the Jamaican people. A poignant line ("alien Jamaican Cynthie,") seems, even now, more akin to Hayden's own sojourn in the B'Hai Faith; however cautionary it alludes to a now-endangered tolerance - once a prideful quality of Caribbean societies.

Langston Hughes, too, had been a frequent visitor to the Virgin Islands bringing young African Americans to participate in the Dr. Randall "Doc" James's Talented Teens festivals. On Sundays, while scouting

our church choirs and handheld fans-stoked sermons, Hughes scribbled sitting notes on the backbenches, recording our urgent greetings and testimonies. Edna St. Vincent Millay was also struck by the shadowed grace of our coals-bearing grandmothers, climbing and descending the steamers' 12- foot-high gangplanks, working for the elusive "Tally." Millay had corresponded with the late J. Antonio Jarvis, confirming her suspicions of our people's ascension that lie buried in her poem, "Epitaph for the Race of Man."

Five years after Dickey left the campus of the College of the Virgin Islands, he wrote his first novel, *Deliverance,* still among the most literally adapted novel-to-film projects in American cinema. It remains a metaphor of America's foray into the Wilderness; a curiously adventuring party swept down-river; stalked by insidious snipers muted by incestuous relationships. Rape and killing consumes the party; a pact of silence and shallow burials result on both sides. Dickey knew something of the prescient silence between our nation's uttering and its recurring pronouncements.



Before he left us, that routinely ordinary year, the rains came, washing away the hamlets of Polly Berg, a stubborn hamlet's cluster of modest dwellings clinging to the sweeping hillside of Charlotte Amalia. Precious small-stock, faithful guard dogs and a small child were washed away in the 1968 darkening torrents. The soil-rich waters filled the serpentine gut, snaking through the gnarled roots of the mangrove estuaries coursing to Long Bay. That weekend, the familiar trek of young men drawn to the Apollo Theater's feature films tracked through the debris; leaping the swamped manholes, clambering over the fallen boulders tumbled from the sweeping slopes. Prophetically, Jose Antonio Jarvis's walled homestead, "Tivoli", was besieged by gnarled wood resembling Burt Reynold's cinematically deformed hand in Dicky's forthcoming film, *Deliverance,* a bone-protruding limb that stirred Hollywood's Special Effects specialists and rescuer Jon Voight's inner courage.

Dickey had stopped reading to us. He was acting as the Sheriff, confronting a drenched Jon Voight as Ed Gentry, and his bedraggled party at the river's rippling journey's end. Dickey addressed the camera's lens in his most rural drawl, as familiarly as he had once addressed us, challenging us to speak a language of our own - Do the Great Work.

Departing, the poet Dickey, had sincerely wanted to know if we had had any questions about his work. The room had grown silent – until now. Dickey had grinned encouragingly. President Wanlass rose to his feet quickly thanking Dickey on our behalf while adjourning the college's fledgling Humanities session.

Once, while Dickey wrote among us, we were encouraged to submit our poems for inclusion in a University of South Carolina, Columbia campus publication. We feverishly submitted our best work, now lost to posterity, even if unknowingly published.

Yet, to this we can attest, following James Dickey's visit, having written and recited his poems among us, our poetic landscape has shone, bathed in the aurora of Freedom's incandescence and figurative clouds of harmattan seasons. Though pre-Civil War blood has been extracted from these once-anemic hamlets, our fields are sown with our most vigilant poetic cries, like Dickey's character, Payton, shouting: "Pass the word!" We whisper, consolably, hearing of the poet's last toast, writing his novel, *To the White Sea*.

And, of Dickey, so quickly cut down by the ever-circling dorsal fin. How well we knew him!

# BOOK REVIEWS CONTINUED

***Send Out You Hand.*** Dorbrene E. O'Marde. Hertford, Herts: Hansib, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-906190-56-9. 269 pp.

## NARRATING IN CARIBBEAN TEMPO
## DORBRENE O'MARDE'S REGIONAL VISION IN *SEND OUT YOU HAND*

Adlai Murdoch

Dorbrene O'Marde has long been one of the literary and cultural luminaries of the Caribbean. Since the 1970s, he has distinguished himself through his multiple efforts in the fields of drama – playwriting as well as dramatic production – calypso, and sports and cultural commentary, all of this in addition to whatever 'day job' he was actually holding at the time. *Send Out You Hand* is his first novel, a testament to the longstanding conviction among his many friends and colleagues that 'he always had it in him.' But the writing of a novel, in and of itself, is no small feat; beyond the standard definition, which approximates more or less to the following — a fictitious prose narrative of book length, depicting the social, political and personal realities of a place and period with clarity and detail, and typically representing character and action with some degree of realism, usually in the form of chronological events – the novel form often serves as a social or cultural prism, illuminating and interrogating key aspects of a place, a period, or a community, and, indeed, often all three together.



It remains something of an understatement to assert that the novel form has developed in a very diverse way, so that now the term "novel" applies to such diverse forms as gothic novels, adventure stories, historical novels, romance novels, mysteries, horror novels, legal thrillers, science fiction, and, of course Westerns. With specific reference to the Caribbean, the novel form has over time adopted a number of thematic, stylistic, and narratological approaches in its attempts to explore the complex field of individual and community identity in the Caribbean, within the context of a regional history framed by slavery, colonialism, and racism. Here, the work of George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, Erna Brodber, Margaret Cezair-Thompson and Caryl Phillips, among a host of others, has found international acclaim. The postcolonial contradictions of the post-independence period, particularly with reference to Antigua, have been effectively chronicled by Jamaica Kincaid, Maria-Elena John, Althea Prince, Edgar Lake, and Joanne C. Hillhouse.

This is the literary and cultural framework within which O'Marde's *Send Out You Hand* takes its place. In a key way, however, O'Marde's work overtly takes the intersection of business and politics in the Caribbean region as its primary focus, and indeed as its thematic foundation. In a nutshell, the plot proposes a new approach to Caribbean regionalism, one where business and businessmen bring their intellectual acumen and their presumably substantial financial resources to bear. This change from the traditional grassroots politics approach is directed in the novel not at supporting and extending politicians' pork barrel policies but at financing a new party with an inescapably regional vision. The novel is set in the semi-fictional Caribbean nation of Oualaldi, clearly a near homonym for and avatar of Antigua, whose original Arawak name was Wadadli. This impression is borne out by the sheer quantity of people and places familiar to any inhabitant of or visitor to Antigua that populate the plot, from Jolly Beach, Devil's Bridge and Long Bay to Bethesda, Liberta, Fig Tree Hill and Old Road. This is buttressed by a carefully considered cast of characters whose racial characteristics and social standing mirror a particular subset of the region's populace; an educated and accomplished middle class. Many of O'Marde's characters are graduates of the University of the West Indies – O'Marde's own *alma mater* – and several of them have put their education and expertise to work to form a forward-looking, laudably 'green' energy company, CleanEn.



Here, it must be said that while the somewhat unprepossessing names with which some of these characters are burdened – Bagley Gornsten, Ralf Tarver, Angela Plonk – tends to beg the question of what constitutes the category of the authentically Caribbean, this impression is of a piece with the lifestyles of several of these characters; if you drive a Lexus, wear a blazer and slacks to an upscale dinner, and listen to Betty Carter and Billie Holiday CD's, there are those will claim as forcefully as they can that you have elevated yourself out of the category of the 'authentic,' or the 'average,' Caribbean person. But by the same token, such assertions beg the very question of what constitutes the 'authentic,' or the 'average.' For many, these categories are purely subjective, formed wholly and solely in the eye of the beholder. In any event, it is clear that O'Marde's discursive goal here is to construct and depict a cohort that is indisputably elite in its training, tastes, and worldview; within the framework of the novel's plot, their political goals are aimed not only at improving the lot of the region's populace, but they are also, shall we say, not without self-interest. And any implicit elitism is offset by the myriad examples of Caribbean music, landscape, history and speech – including French creole — that populate the novel.

Much of the action, such as it is, in *Send Out You Hand,* takes place in boardrooms – and, to some extent, in bedrooms. As the ups and downs of the financial world intertwine with those of the political, there is a substantial amount of background information to be conveyed to the reader regarding the characters' personal history, their business and relationship choices, and, perhaps most importantly, the series of extended sessions of reflective introspection and soul-searching that undergird the decisions taken in the personal, business, and political worlds. Much of this material, then, is conveyed in a format known as free indirect discourse, which is most effectively defined as a conjoining of character and narrator. Neither direct nor indirect speech, it is interpreted most often as denoting a character whose subjectivity is split against itself, or one whose subjectivity is not developed enough to allow the character to refer to him- or herself as 'I.' In other words, while the strategic manipulation of free indirect discourse is a relatively common tool in the author's arsenal, and while, indeed, it has become an increasingly common presence in postcolonial narratives, it is its very ubiquity in this text that suggests, at the very least, something of a disconnect between many of the characters and the positions that they espouse. In a key way, for example, it marks the very opening of the novel, as the complex personal and business histories of Debra "Dee Dee" Gornsten, wife of Bagley Gornsten, Chairman and Managing Director of CleanEn, Ralf Tarver, the company's Operations Manager, and his New Yorker girl friend, Gitte Orsven, are presented through this narrative matrix. But more on this later.



The arc of the plot of *Send Out You Hand* is fairly straightforward; having given vent to their extended frustration with the locally-focused vote-getting strategies and blatant corruption of the current crop of Caribbean politicians, a group of Caribbean business people and economic and financial experts decides to form and finance their own political party. In the selected scenes that trace this idea from its germination to its ultimate fruition, a variety of meetings and conversations present multiple opportunities for the characters to lament the demise of Caribbean integration as they cite chapter and verse on the inability of regional politicians to accomplish this goal, obsessed as they are with keeping their voters satisfied as they bide their time until the next election. At a dinner of like-minded individuals where the possibility of forming "a new Caribbean wide party" is broached (34), attendees complain that "We haven't really moved anywhere. We still discussing CARICOM and issues of regional unity like if they are new to us … We change governments … and still the lives of Caribbean people don't seem to get better" (33). A history of the West In-

dies Federation, along with its leaders and its shortcomings, is articulated (34-5) in order to illustrate the pitfalls that "A New West Indies Federal Labour Party" would need to avoid (34). And indeed, it is by no means overstating the case to suggest that Caribbean politicians are an almost constant target, a group whose venal actions speak louder than words; "just this evening my Prime Minister indicated his readiness to receive a contribution towards his next election campaign" (32). So-called government policies are lambasted for their lack of vision, "St Lucian people and I think Caribbean people generally were reconditioned to think of politics as community or constituency based services delivery interventions (sic). More jobs, health centres, playing fields, schools, roads … Caribbean politicians had managed to refocus Caribbean politics away from national and regional concerns into narrow, insular community needs" (40).

In a similar vein, the local Rastafarian movement and, more specifically, its leader, Elder Olabode, are located in Oualaldi's sociocultural interstices, "Ralf and Olabode had known each other since kindergarten and had traversed the Oualaldi Grammar School, form by form together … Olabode, then John Joseph, joined … the growing North American Black Power movement … It was this constant reference to capital that caused Ralf to call him 'Capitalist' when he was not calling him 'Elder'" (45, 47). The presence of Sister Vanessa Chen – she of the "slightly slanted eyes" and "cowry shelled rust-brown locks" (48) – and the elaboration of her thesis on Rastafari allows her to adumbrate the need for a new vision for the movement, even as the chalice goes round, "We need to know more about its place in society, how it is perceived, does it have a role in the new Caribbean and if yes, what is that role?" (49). Later, at an intimate dinner between "Ralf with an eff" (11) and Vanessa, for which Ralf displays the rather rare masculine Caribbean talent of cooking, their conversation allows him to deliver himself of the somewhat cynical view that "There are dozens of Olabodes up and down this region now … late forties, early fifties … generally they seem more prepared to form alliances with 'baldheads' around issues like reparation and African liberation" (70). Conversations between characters, then, often serve a double role; they allow the narrative discourse to further its primary theme by expounding and expanding on a variety of political positions and perspectives, even as character development itself proceeds, although often at a reduced pace.

Still, time passes, as it is wont to do, and things begin to look bleak for CleanEn's new wind turbine project, setting the stage for a critique of current business and political practice whose unmistakable overtones take

aim at the real world of Caribbean politics, "The procurement of the lands through private purchase and Government long term lease was a nightmare of red tape and unbelievable greed that required Prime Ministerial intervention before deeds were finalized … The project was underfunded before it started … The negotiations were tedious and expensive, costing CleanEn a hidden five percent stock holding in the name of the Prime Minister's grandson and a massive increase in campaign financing in exchange for a Government investment of twenty million dollars and relief of applicable duty and taxes" (57-8). The unfortunate, though unsurprising conclusion to be drawn from this clash between the conflicting interests of business and politics is that such shenanigans are par for the course, so that this passage of narrative commentary takes its place alongside many other similar passages where overt critique of current political practice also serves as a fundamental armature of the plot.

It is one of the hallmarks of this novel that pride of place in terms of both plot and character are given to the regional cohort of university graduates. And indeed, if the author can be said to have a polemical intent, it would be located here; it is clear that the educated classes have a responsibility to do for the region – and its inhabitants – what its politicians cannot, or will not. This position is made ineluctably clear at a number of points in the novel, such as the meeting during which plans for the new party are brought close to the point of fruition: "We lead the movement … the movement does not lead us. If the grass roots had the solutions they would not be where they are, in the conditions they are in. All of these grass root theories ignore the need for advanced thinking; they ignore the need for internationally applicable scientific ideas and these ideas only come from those of us who study, those of us exposed to the wider world; they ignore and underestimate the power and value of leadership. We can no longer run these countries on seventh standard thinking – that crude evangelistic approach to politics that worked in the fifties" (66). The inescapable conclusion here is that those with the skills and expertise garnered through education owe a debt to society, and that they should pay it, allowing the society at large to reap the profits – material, figural, and political – that will redound from their actions.



For the fledgling Caribbean Peoples Party, then, "regional economic and political unity sat at the top of all considerations" (77). At the same time, despite the careful inscription of the majority of these characters into a convincing socioeconomic and sociocultural milieu, the text is by no means free of long speeches that serve to either trace key aspects of

Caribbean political history – the Federation, subsequent regional attempts at integration, or the post-independence Antiguan political landscape are favorites — or to explain the rationale behind the frustrated business class finally turning its activities to politics. From this perspective, these passages slow down the momentum of the plot somewhat, despite their understandable and, indeed, necessary role in providing context, background, and perspective for the furtherance of the action. A classic example of this occurs in Chapter 9, when the need for the Caribbean Peoples Party is outlined at a meeting in Trinidad. The meeting is addressed at length by Ernie McKie, "chairman of the St Lucian Employers Federation and managing director of St Lucia Affordable Homes … Like many before and after him, the movement for regional integration had slowed to a pace that he could not appreciate or comprehend" (31). Speaking uninterruptedly, without notes, and over the course of three pages (111-13), McKie "amazed the younger delegates especially with his review of the many and varied attempts at or calls for political unity in the region since the early sixties" (111), providing a detailed account of the protracted Caribbean struggle for integration, complete with its cast of characters, from Buzz Uriah Butler and Captain Cipriani, through the Federation, ECCM, CARIFTA, OECS, and CARICOM, Adams, Williams, Burnham, Barrow, Bird, Bradshaw, et al, Demas, Lewis, and McIntyre on the economic front, the activists Hector, Douglas, and Odlum, and not forgetting the documents; Lewis' *The Agony of the Eight,* Richards' *The Struggle and the Conquest,* Emmanuel's *Approaches to Political Integration in the Caribbean,* Robinson's *Caribbean Man,* and many more. The presentation of this summary in reported speech allows it to assume its double function as historical *apologia* and plot device, providing a rationale for the critical political decisions on the horizon. So while on the one hand one might argue that such a detailed background is necessary to frame the new party's launch, on the other it results in a stop-start effect with regard to the forward motion of the story itself. When Ralf Tarver restates this position, claiming that "I honestly do not think that sitting politicians in our nation states can lead us to a regional reality" (117), it is not going too far to say that polemics risk replacing plot.



Given the proposal "that efforts be concentrated on the establishment of a grass roots movement for regional unity in the first instance and then the formation of the political party" (176), the plan is put into motion, allowing the didacticism of the novel's principal theme to appear once again. In an ingenious narrative twist, the enigmatic content and implicit message of the novel's title appears at several key junctures in

the text. In a lengthy presentation in a meeting in St Lucia, held to "empanel groups of Caribbean thinkers and doers to complete the technical details and recommended approaches to governance – of the region, of the nations and of the party" (175), Ralf Tarver recounts a story attributed to the late Errol Barrow, former Prime Minister of Barbados, who countered tourists' frustration at buses not stopping for them by explaining that "you must put out your hand. 'Sen' out you hand – as some from St Vincent would say." This phrase then quickly becomes the motto, or mantra, for the project at hand, "Be proactive as I say now. It is time that the Caribbean sends out its hand" (175). The theme and overarching vision of the novel are summed up in this phrase, embodying the notion that if the task at hand is to be effectively completed, then those with the knowledge and capacity to initiate it should take it upon themselves to do so. Symbolically, the novel concludes in similar terms, as Randy Richards concludes the penultimate chapter by summing up the incipient party's vision for the future, "It is time that we see major changes in the way we govern and are governed and this is all so possible if we can get the masses of the region to send out its collective hand" (267). These instances of strategic inscription and repetition with difference leave no doubt that we are in the hands of a skilled writer, one who makes effective use of the gamut of styles and techniques to which the novel as genre gives rise.



The launch of the Movement for Caribbean Unity is steeped in modernity, making use of the Internet, radio and television, Caribbean puzzles and raffles, CD and DVD collections, and festival and concert tickets. Accompanying this is a panoply of related initiatives in regionally-centered music, theater, and film, with proposals ranging from seeking "to have Emancipation day, August 1st recognized as the birth of the Caribbean nation" through the staging of "a series of seminars … about the history and historical assessment of regional integration" (199), to calypso competitions themed around regional unity. But it is in Professor Beckley Hill's eloquent address to the communications training workshop that we find a veritable litany of the woes afflicting the common Caribbean man and woman; gangsterism, stolen remittances, cruise ship commercialism, the increasing prevalence of casino slot machines, the Carnival Committee's undelivered prizes and the internecine warfare of the 'born ya' versus the 'bang water come' for the ever-dwindling pool of available jobs (202), paint a doleful picture of the material realities of day-to-day life in the Caribbean that call out for a region-wide remedy.

The climax of these promotional activities is a "Women-vision in Calypso" show, one whose mantra can be summed up in the warning to the emcee "not to let people know they were being educated" (213). Through lengthy but select quotes from a series of calypsos whose central theme expresses sympathy for the abused woman or praises their unsung virtues, all while bringing onto the stage such real-life calypso luminaries as the Mighty Sparrow and David Rudder, allows "the correlation of 'rolling big bum bums' with 'class and pride' … Hopefully all would think about it later – the object of the concert" (220), the conjoining of this panorama of Caribbean culture with ongoing projections for a positive regional future allows another major theme – that of the strong Caribbean woman as the unrecognized bulwark of its historical and social structure – to be inscribed, so that politics and poetics enrich the novelistic discourse once again.

The novel concludes with "a sub-committee of the Directing Council meeting, planned to review the progress of the public education and awareness campaign; to assess its impact if any after nine months and three quarter million Eastern Caribbean dollars and to advise the Council on the feasibility of launching the Caribbean Peoples Party" (241). The resulting list of accomplishments, stretching across two pages and conveyed through a Power Point presentation, is presented in the text as a bulleted list, resulting in a key contradiction; while this format can convey to the reader in perhaps the clearest and most cogent manner possible the range and depth of the MCU's impact, as a list it does detract from the ongoing momentum of the narrative at a most crucial stage, in that the decision whether or not to launch the CPP hangs in the balance. In the event, however, the change in the regional outlook is both remarkable and palpable, as entities ranging from talk shows and Carnival troupes, through the Caribbean Examinations Council and the Caribbean Union of Teachers, to the regional airlines BWIA, LIAT and Air Jamaica, had launched initiatives aimed at deepening regional unity. While Bagley Gornsten, for one, is buoyed by "the energy of the life-giving forces they had unleashed across the region" (246), one cannot help but wonder if this paean to regionalism, the result of a judicious combination of prodding and publicity, is not something of an idealized vision.

The novel's didacticism persists through to its end, as the meeting to launch the Caribbean Peoples Party is marked by presentations by Ernie McKie, who is "damning of the present political leadership and the structures within which it operated, claiming that our politicians were unable

to address complex social and political challenges that presented themselves in the twenty-first century" (263), and by Ralf Tarver, who "called on Caribbean intelligentsia to unhinge itself from the ivory tower and the assumption that we were nothing but cogs in international capital" (265); this is followed by Randy Richards' assertion that "we will act as a catalyst for regional thinking … Our aim is to insist and ensure that regionalism climbs to the top of the agendas" (266, 267). By force of (self)-will, then, this cohort of educated Caribbean business people has circumvented the vagaries of local politics and politicians and has taken the region in a vibrant new direction, in a quest chronicled and described by a gifted writer, in a style that is at once elegant, poetic, and eloquent, but at the same time didactic, exhortative, and enlightening. And while the choice of the Caribbean's educated cohort to be the vanguard of this regional vision is by no means coincidental, the frequent and extended inscription of these characters through free indirect discourse and its implicit corollary of subjective splitting can at times leave the reader wondering about the ultimate effectiveness of such a group endeavor despite the careful plotting of the various stages of the project; after all, there are no guarantees, neither in life nor in politics. And while at bottom the foundation of this clarion call to action may well be an idealized vision of its eventual success, as Caribbean people it encourages us to recognize the potential benefits of one regional world for us all.

Davis, Kortright. *Compassionate Love and Ebony Grace: Christian Altruism and People of Color.* Hamilton Books. (Lanham, Boulder, New York, et al.: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2012), v-xi, pp.148.

## EBONY GRACE AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

Leslie R. James

According to the author, Kortright Davis, Howard University Theology Professor, "this study is about the meaning and measure of compassionate love among people of African descent; among those whom God has blessed with 'ebony grace'" (vi).

In addition to its Preface, Acknowledgments, and Introduction, the book's seven chapters elaborate on the author's primary theme, followed by an Epilogue, Bibliography, and suggestions for further readings. Though Davis argues that 'compassion' or 'empathy' becomes a norm or ethical value that transcends religious and cultural traditions, he sets out on a project that makes his study abstract and ambiguous from the onset. Davis admits that:



> It is an enigma insofar as it is often overlaid with emotions and attitudes that are not that easy to decipher or explain. Yet compassion radiates its own brand of contagious responses that can yield much positive and fertile fruit from the garden of the heart (x).

In the book's chapters, as Davis explores the 'enigma of compassion,' and reviews the 'enigma of love' and their conjoint concepts such as love, from the perspective of 'ebony grace,' it is evident that he sees love as an animating and transformative power with significant potential to promote the common good.

Chapter One of Davis' work fits his definition of the 'enigma of compassion.' The chapter attempts to look at some of these responses at the individual and collective levels, and to provide a lead into the variety of religious, theological, cultural, and historical linkages with those whom God has blessed with ebony grace. The term ebony grace, used throughout the study in reference to "people of color," affirms that God is not a despiser of Blackness. The resonance to James Cone's notion of God as Black is evident here. However, in the absence of a clearly stated methodology, amongst other things, Davis' theological project is different from

Cone's. It is doubtful that Davis would define his work as Black Liberation Theology. Furthermore, since ebony grace is "enigmatic" Davis would not dare to claim, as Cone does, that God is black.

Chapter Two, which further elaborates on "compassion" and its enigmatic nature, deals with the contours of compassion. The litany of questions with which the chapter begins contributes to a loss of focus on the question although Davis declared: "In all of these questions we are really seeking to discover the contours of compassion". Maybe in keeping with the actual argument of the book compassion is enigmatic in nature. To discover its contours, Davis divides the chapter into the historical, social, political, and religious contours of compassion. Despite those affirmations, Davis concludes "the practice of compassionate love as ebony grace is not simply to be understood as an historical or cultural phenomenon. It is best understood as a distinctive dispensation through which the compassionate God makes common cause with those who, through no fault of their own, are yet encumbered by the sufferings imposed by others, simply because of their ebony hue" (34). While the reader naturally expects a history of the compassionate God in answer to the question, the book's development does not revolve on that issue.



In Chapter Three, Davis explores the meanings, measures, and myths of altruism. Divided into two major subsections, the altruism debate, and altruistic love, this chapter is a reminder of the traditional conversation on whether human beings *per se* are capable of altruism. Davis, in a rather interesting fashion, brings together a cast of contrasting characters to address the altruism question. He gives the impression that he is more in conversation with secondary sources like Stanley Hauerwas, Pitirim Sorokin, and John Templeton, than Jesus, Buddha, St. Francis, Fr. Damien, Al Hallaj, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Louis Farrakhan, W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon and C.L.R. James. Theoretically, the choir chosen to elaborate on the subject of altruism or interrogate certain altruistic practices is an act of signification. Davis concludes the chapter by stating that "our study of compassionate love is mainly concerned with the use of agape, but we shall have occasion to explore how some of the other loves come into play when we focus particularly on the socio-cultural and moral/spiritual ways of those whom God has blessed with ebony grace" (50).

Chapter Four, "The Word and Work of Love," begins with Davis' familiar litany of questions on love. He argues that "the questions about love are legion, and so also is the literature and the language" (52). "They

provide us with a vast array of imaginative and illuminating spheres of feelings and fears, with far-reaching emotions and explorations" (52). From here, Davis invokes the thought of John Templeton to frame his discussion on "unlimited love." The lack of contextualization and the absence of a black historical narrative that interrogates notions of love are problematic in Davis' work. Recognition of the black emancipatory struggle in the Atlantic World should, by this juncture in his narrative, have led to the articulation or thesis that in colonial America love would have been primarily understood in kinship terms. The integral relationship between slavery, the material conditions and mode of production in American society, their connection to the development of the wider Atlantic economy, and the construction of black identity and culture, provides the major social framework for the history and interpretation of love in the development and evolution of American society and the Atlantic World.

Appropriately, Davis' divides the chapter into two sub-sections, the study of love, and compassionate love, that provide "a general overview of the study of love" (54). Despite the claim that the main focus of his study is "on the shape, character, and efficacy of compassionate love as it is experienced and expressed by people of African descent, especially the African Americans and the Afro-Caribbeans" (54), it misses the opportunity to mine the black subterranean consciousness that interrogated dominant interpretations of love in the history of the modern Atlantic World. To his credit, he mentions Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dr. Howard Thurman, one of Dr. King's mentors. Nevertheless, Davis' apparent abstraction of King and others from the wider Civil Rights Movement, and from the emancipatory struggle of blacks in the modern world, robs love of its transformative energy. Following King and Thurman, community and solidarity, love and compassion, were, according to Davis "placed at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of human value and virtues" (54). Apparently, Davis' focus excludes Malcolm X. His appropriation of American historiography, from the black perspective, limits the potential embedded in his work, and probably wider project, to materialize the construction and imagination of God as the power to sustain black bodies through the ordeal and crucible of slavery that threatened their existence. In other words, love or compassion is a verbal noun embodied in blacks. It empowered them to deal with their tragic plight in modernity, and to imagine and work toward the construction of a world in which love, community, and justice were more manifest.

The argument supports Davis' attempt to show how compassionate love is deployed as a common factor and ethical imperative in Black History is perhaps the best part of the book. "In search of a comprehensive understanding of a major characteristic in the life of a people," Davis identifies slavery, struggle, suffering, survival, solidarity, sinfulness, and sanctity as the seven motivational factors in the "character of compassionate love among people of ebony grace." However, on the basis of his own testimony, his juxtaposition of the sixth and seventh factors with the first five is flawed due to a failure to locate and redefine "sinfulness" and the "sanctity of life" as integral to the structure and economy of plantation slavery and its legacy in the modern world. Davis' strategy at this juncture to integrate the black experience of "sinfulness" within the context of the universal human condition, drawing on traditional Christian dogma removes black discourses on sin from critical engagements with their historical experience in America and the Black Atlantic. Davis probably trivializes black notions of sin and forgiveness in relationship to American history and its future with the adage "Today for me, tomorrow for you." The moral appeal for reform of consciousness, central to Pauline ethics defined in his epistle to the Romans, addressed to urbane Christian living at the center of the Roman Empire, is subsumed in Davis' handling of sinfulness through the black historical lens. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul universalizes the scope of love, and incorporates a marginal or peripheral religious vision into a globalized or cosmic framework. As microcosms of global history, Davis' utilization of both histories is significant in his vision of the black diaspora future.



Davis' alignment of sanctification with black protest against a history of human degradation implicitly defines the goal of religion as a process of sanctification. From the black perspective this means the history of black struggle against the historical dualisms that propped up the system of slavery, racial hierarchy, and its legacy in America. The development of Davis' interpretation of sanctification suffers due to his suppression of the black voice and praxis of sanctification and privileging of non-black sources or categories to illuminate the meaning of compassionate love and ebony grace. Since blacks can only see themselves through the "White Other," even in rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation in which their capacity for sanctification is doubtful or nullified. While the ability to see oneself in others might have redemptive or sanctifying power, it is questionable whether one has any sanctifying power without reciprocity on the part of others. The end of the chapter anticipates chapter five, "an examination of the meaning of Divine Love in the biblical, historical, and theological tra-

ditions of Afro-Christianity", and provides some clue on how Davis intends to solve the black existential dilemma with which his question confronts him. The absence of historical grounding in Davis' modality of love empties it of significant radical and revolutionary power or energy, and thus enigmatic. Evidentially, love, abstracted from its work in the history of black everyday life and struggle, in the black epic narrative from slavery to freedom, is expropriated and appropriated in a select white theological framework. It is appropriate to consider how black history has raised the status of love in negotiating black identity in America. Following Davis' taxonomy of the seven factors in the black experience that unveils the "heart of darkness" at the center of American history.

The basis of Chapter Five, "Love Divine—All Loves Excelling?" is Charles Wesley's famous hymn. It sets a doxological tone that reveals the book's implicit "systematic" theology in Davis' work. Its theological model and central question become clearer. Davis' choice of Wesley's hymn, despite its imperial and other appropriations plays a "subversive" role in the recovery of human subjectivity in the 19th century Evangelical Movement that coincided with the era of slavery and emancipation. It is apposite to recall that Caribbean Methodism began in Antigua, Davis' Caribbean homeland. In keeping with its Nonconformist character, Methodism was closely allied to the anti-slavery movement in the Caribbean through the narrative in which Nathaniel Gilbert, after hearing John Wesley preach, liberated the slaves on his Antigua plantation. Since slavery and religion played a part in the construction and legitimation of racial slavery, baptism of slaves was a threat to Caribbean plantation economy. Since some masters interpreted the baptism of a slave to mean that s/he was no longer under the regime of slavery but that of freedom. Planters opposed the evangelization and baptism of slaves. Since the Evangelical tradition interpreted Christianity as freedom, its practices and rituals threatened to rob them of their property, and to destroy the economic system on which they depended. Wesley's hymn and Gilbert's behavior imagined the possibility of a better world in which the measure of love was its capacity to reinvent the self and community.



Though the chapter apparently leaves the black religious experience behind, it opens the door to see how the members of particular religious traditions responded to their everyday life and struggles through expressive modes of culture that integrated their inner life and aspirations for freedom. Davis' location of the reader on the ritual, doxological ground of worship helps to define the primacy of experience in religion. It shows

how the space, conceived as one on which the sacred and human meet, became a context of emancipatory grace, self and collective re-invention. He is apposite when he wrote:

> It is the worship of God, whether private or public, personal or corporate, formal or spontaneous, that best expresses the highest value of our human existence and the deepest longings of the human heart. That worship is sustained by a constant experience of, and encounter with, the work of God in our world, and our recognition of all that bears witness to the sovereignty of God's love. This triadic sense of divine worship, divine work, and divine witness is the basis of the relationship that should exist between God, and us and it subsists through the love of God. It characterizes Christian life and thought. It energizes Christian action and service. It enobles the Christian sense of human worth and value (73).



Davis' text would have been considerably strengthened if he had identified examples of those emancipatory spaces in American and Caribbean history. Unfortunately, he leaves the doxological theme with which he began when he claims that "All of this is at the root of the Afro experience and expression of the Christian faith" to explore the theme of love in the biblical tradition under the following headings: (1) Salvation Story as Love in History, (2) Jesus Christ—The Saving Love of God, (3) God Is In Christ-Faith Through the Spirit. In other words, he moves away from hymn and doxology to elaborate on a Trinitarian theology of the divine triune nature explicated through love. By now, it is evident that Davis is not so much as developing a black Trinitarian theology, as he is about attempting to clear the space to integrate, on the basis of compassionate love, select representative black reflections on love within classic Trinitarian theology. His move from Wesleyan hymnody and doxology to the biblical tradition is hierarchical, or episcopal, rather than demotic. So, although Davis' theology fragments black existence through its marginalization of sports and other domains in black life, he finds the topic inescapable. According to Davis, Negro Spirituals are one of the major sources to explore what love-in-compassion means for people whom God has blessed with ebony grace" (92). This creates problems for one of the best chapters in Davis' work. Since theology is autobiographical, amongst other things, and religion poses the question how we live in the present, the specific question or

quest that "Ebony Grace" poses at the transition points in Davis' narrative need to be articulated to give the text a narrative or biographical arch. This absence creates a problem in one of the best chapters of the book. Davis' conversation on the role of the Spirit and the recovery of the black body is on the turf of African American religions, including Christianity, at its best. This is the point of transfiguration and transformation.

In Chapter Six, "Ebony Love: Spiritual and Sensual," Davis' exploration of the significance of the Negro Spirituals in black cultural history is welcome (92). It affirms that ebony love is both spiritual and sensual. While Davis' treatment of the Spirituals is a study in black pathos, his discussion of the relationship between the Ebony and the sensual is rather flat (111-115) in light of his failure to overturn the racial philosophies of de Gobineau, Carlyle, and Trollope (113). It is inadequate to assert that "as far as Afro-sensuality is concerned, its essential characteristic is marked by deep human feelings based on experience and expectations, and linked with the aspects of a spirituality that takes life's struggles seriously, while leaning heavily on the goodness and greatness of a loving God" (113). It is not enough to make a positive case on behalf of Afro-sensuality without seriously calling into question the Eurocentric philosophical, theological, and other modes of reasoning that legitimated blacks as inferior, and slavery. The nagging and disturbing question that lurks in the wings of Davis' work on ebony grace and love is whether the subaltern can really love. How do ebony grace and ebony love get past its subaltern or colonial status? Does ebony grace or love become alienated in Davis' conceptual framework? Does it help to reify the existing status quo? In its exploration of ebony sensuality, Davis tries to escape the dilemma through its recovery of fragments of black expressive culture and forms. "Afro-sensuality is the crucible out of which love-in-compassion is formed, explored, and expressed" (113). "Afro-sensuality is the matrix from which the realities of the human condition, with all its complexities and possibilities, are both acknowledged and embraced, or else recognized and challenged" (113). If so, then the black vernacular voice deserved a place of primacy, rather than apologetics, in Davis' work.



Chapter Seven, "Compassionate Love and Ebony Grace," is important to understand Davis' ebony grace theology. The chapter begins as a Jeremiad, and brings Davis' entire study together. From the exilic or displaced perspective, the chapter implicitly defines the shamanistic role of ebony grace, in response to a myriad of contemporary social challenges. This clears the space for Davis' Epilogue, and his reiteration of a Black Social Gospel theology in America.

Though he re-imagines American society, based on 'compassionate love,' Davis apparently contradicts his position on the role of dialogue in the construction of civil society. First, he suggests that traditions can only be passed on through an "unquestioned acceptance of the inescapable need to be compassionate" (141) is dogmatic, rhetorical, and polemical in its suggestion that the question excludes reason and critical reflection. Then he posits, "There should be little disagreement with the assertion that compassion is closely allied to matters and manners of courtesy and civility." But goes on to recognize "There is a curious wave of discourse and dissension in the public square that rudely resists every tendency to be civil or courteous in attributing criticism, or blame, to almost any sector of the public directorate." The cautionary note that Davis possibly issues here resonates his West Indian background and the role of manners or gestures in the construction and maintenance of its social space. Consequently, the following comment detracts from his emphasis on dialogue. He writes:

> My own experience living in the United States for nearly three decades now, and working and ministering among people of color, have left me in absolutely no doubt that African Americans, as a whole, have been the most compassionate and generous people that I have ever encountered… Having taught at Howard University for all this time, and having been the pastor in my own congregation at Holy Comforter Episcopal Church, in Washington, DC, for a quarter of a century, and having labored here and there among people of ebony grace at every level and sector (except in Sports and Entertainment), I yield to no one in the testimony of my experience among my people. But where do we go from here? (140).



It is not clear whether Davis' comment is an invitation to hospitality, dialogue, and conversation on compassionate love in the public sphere. Nevertheless, his concluding question recollects the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On reflection, the question warrants consideration where we stand in the shadow of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the era of decolonization and independence in the Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Consequently, Davis' reference to Eugene Robinson's book, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* (New York: Doubleday, 2010) is relevant. In particular, it raises the question of black leadership in the post-civil rights era.

The perennial question has always been who has been excluded from the conversations on freedom and community. Ebony people of all faith traditions or none, not just Christians, need to be included in the conversation. This consideration, the gateway to Davis' Epilogue, helps to clarify the goal of his study as a review of the history of love from a black perspective. It imagines and maps the possibility of another world from ebony grace's gaze. At this juncture, the narrative arc and organization of Davis' work deserved to be revised to give the book a structural coherence that foregrounded the historical, intellectual, and other contributions by African American and Afro-Caribbean to the interpretation of love and freedom and in the modern world. In other words, ebony grace would have been more visible than enigmatic in Davis' book. The relationship between black consciousness and love is at stake.

Though Davis has not written the definitive book on the subject, he has definitely made an important contribution to the subject. His book makes a useful contribution to the role of black altruism, whatever the expressive form, in negotiating the horrors of their lived existence, it raises a number of disturbing questions that will arise from close critical reading of the work. While his book raises very interesting issues that help to show correlations between black altruism and the construction or maintenance of the American space, it also raises the question of whether those practices perpetuate or reinvent the patterns they intend to end. The question makes the issue of Davis' central question pertinent. However, the notion of "enigma," central to Davis' book, makes it difficult to define its central question. Ultimately, the monotheistic framework to Davis' work controls the structure and narrative of his text. Monotheism determined what Davis included and excluded in his book. The problem is that what he excluded does no simply go away. On the contrary, its exclusion shows that there is nothing essential about Davis' theology. From the perspective of critical social theory, it is possible to explore how it has been constructed. In other words, since it has been constructed it has an ideological thrust. Since it should be evaluated on the basis of its ideological thrust, the notion of "enigma," at the heart of Davis' book, makes it difficult to pinpoint the book's actual central question and problem, and the role of black consciousness, as ebony grace, in its struggle for emancipation. Consequently, the reader needs to pay careful attention to what dimensions of black culture are incorporated into the structure of Davis' book, and what are left out. It is difficult to experience any black epistemological revolution in Davis' book. Such movements are incorporated into a monotheistic framework that limits, despite the author's reference, the contributions of

black and other religious traditions on the role of compassion in the project of re-humanization. In the realm of folklore, greater consideration could have been given to the function of characters like Brer Rabbit and Brer Anansi in their self-affirmations of 'ebony grace,' understanding of compassion, and the promotion of black emancipation that negates dominant notions of black intellectual and spiritual pathology.

Davis deserves high commendation for his attempt to integrate the black history of oppression, and the revolt against dehumanization it inspired, within a wider theological framework, and addressing the perennial question of love and compassion from the black perspective. However, his traditional alignment of theological sources, revelation, scripture, culture, and history/experience fails to give his work momentum. In today's global era, Davis' work is an attempt to rehabilitate love as socially meaningful and effective. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the resulting synthesis promotes the construction of black autonomy or reifies the traditional social hierarchies and institutions. His work adds to the body of Howard scholarship that has struggled with the problem of the 'curse.' In the shadow of Washington, DC, his book is a timely reminder of our shared humanity, and the important contribution of Caribbean artists, writers, thinkers, philosophers, and others to the reinvention of humanity in the modern world. While ours is definitely not the best of possible worlds, it is important to remember our ancestors whose struggles have brought us to where we are. Each generation, consciously or not, enters into their labors with the obligation to complete the work they started.

# THE SERAPHIC V.C.: A REVIEW OF LIONEL HURST'S *VERE CORNWALL BIRD: WHEN POWER FAILED TO CORRUPT*

Paget Henry

In my earlier review of Joanne Hillhouse's new novel, *Oh Gad!,* I explored her portrayal of some characters who, by no stretch of the imagination, we would described as heroic or seraphic. On the contrary, I tried to show that the development of these female characters were carefully executed studies by Hillhouse in what Antiguans and Barbudans call "bad mindedness". As such bad minded individuals, these characters were evasive, spiteful, deceptive, and in general not very forth coming or embracing of others. In Lionel (Max) Hurst's latest book, *Vere Cornwall Bird: When Power Failed to Corrupt,* we find a text in which every effort is made to write a portrait of an Antiguan and Barbudan hero. In contrast to Hillhouse's characters, Hurst's hero, former Prime Minister, V.C. Bird, is presented to us as being without a trace of bad mindedness. He is in power, but without the lust for power, the cunning, guile and craftiness that we usually associate with politicians. Indeed, it is Hurst's primary goal to demonstrate that his hero was angelic – and even more specifically – seraphic in nature. Given what we know of human nature, this is indeed a tall order for our author. But my good friend and interlocutor, Max, has never been stopped or inhibited by such heights.



The central question asked in this book is contained in its opening sentence: "who could commence leading an anti-colonial revolution when 34 years old, become head of government at age 48, retire at age 84, remain the head of a transformative movement for a cumulative period of fifty years, live to a ripe old age of 89 years, yet successfully resist the corrupting temptation to abuse power during that long lifetime of leadership?" (2012:3). Hurst's book is an attempt to show that V.C. Bird was indeed this seraphic political hero. Hurst is not the first to write about the Caribbean politician as a hero. We need only think of Archie Singham's classic work, *The Hero and the Crowd in a Colonial Polity.* However, I think that Hurst is the first to make the Caribbean political hero into a seraphic figure.

Hurst links this seraphic claim that he makes for Bird's political life to the direct challenging of Lord Acton's famous dictum that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Going against the Acton grain, Hurst will attempt to show that Bird was "a man in whom

near absolute power was vested", and yet he did "not yield to the corrupting temptations of power during five decades of continuous leadership" (3). In Hurst's view, the key to Bird's strength, his ability to resist the temptations of power was his Christian grounding: "Character fortified by religious principles, humility, knowledge and wisdom, insulated Vere Bird from the corrupting influences of power" (4).

This primarily Christian view of Bird is not the one that is often encountered in the literature or in popular talk about Bird. Yet, Hurst is not the first to present such a Christian view of our first Prime Minister. Historian and former ambassador, Patrick Lewis has argued for such a view. He suggested that, "V.C. Bird has to be seen from the perspective of the brilliant Antiguan and Barbudan scholar, the Reverend Dr. Kortright Davis". Lewis continues, "Bird, like Davis, was a product of religious ministerial training, and that perspective must have permeated his endeavors. Likewise, it was a generating force in his sustained leadership" (2011:114). But to date, Hurst's text contains the most sustained effort at a Christian reading Bird and his leadership.

This Christian view of Bird is quite different from Novelle Richards' democratic socialist portrait in his book, *The Struggle and the Conquest.* In this work, Richards noted: "From the outset, the union's [Antigua Trades & Labour Union, (ATLU)] policies and programmes have been developed along the lines of democratic socialism. While the labour movement in Britain has been closely watched and appreciated, it became obvious to the progressive trade union and the political leaders in Antigua that British socialism in all its aspects could not be imported into Antigua and that a pattern of socialism would have to be developed to meet local needs and to suit local conditions" (2004:114).

Even more different from Hurst's view is Tim Hector's of Bird as a radical socialist who betrayed and abandoned his socialist principles and commitments to the corrupting influences of power. Thus in his book, *The World and Us,* the former leader of the Antigua Caribbean Liberation Movement (ACLM) wrote: "Bird has become his opposite. The labor leader of times past, is now the employers defender in times present. The anti-colonial leader of yore, is now the pro-imperialist leader of the present. Bird, the socialist in his flaming red, singing the Red Flag, reading Garvey and Lenin, is now a flaming anti-communist waving a red flag as masquerade" (1989:258).

Not surprisingly, Keithlyn Smith's portrayal of Bird in his book, *No Easy Push-o-ver,* is also quite different from Hurst's good-minded seraphic portrait. In the text of former general secretary of the rival Antigua Workers Union, Bird is anything but heroic. On the contrary, he is presented to us as despotic and very bad minded. Smith's portrait of the early Bird is very much in the heroic tradition as he recounts many of Bird's victories over the white sugar planters. The crucial shift in Smith's account begins with the ATLU's fight to unionize workers in the new tourist industry during the period when George Walter was general secretary and Bird was Chief Minister and president of the union. Smith reports on repeated cases in which Bird maneuvered to contain the militancy of the workers – the same militancy that he had earlier employed against the sugar planters – in an effort to accommodate the interests of the new hoteliers. This contrast in Bird's attitudes towards the planters and the hoteliers is the beginning of Smith's images of Bird as anti-worker. These images only hardened as Walter negotiated the new contract with the sugar planters that led to the industry going into receivership, and to the major split within the ranks of the ATLU. By this time, Bird had become for Smith the "Chief Planter" (1994:145); and as the struggle for the recognition of the AWU took its course Bird became for Smith a practitioner of "despotic rule" (1994:247). Indeed so bad minded is the portrait that Smith's Bird could easily be made to join the characters in Hillhouse's novel.



Also in this growing field of works on V.C. Bird is my own book, *Shouldering Antigua and Barbuda: The life of V.C. Bird.* In this volume, I suggested that Bird was a black democratic socialist, who after encountering and struggling with the real difficulties of implementing socialism shifted to policies of state capitalism. Unlike Hector, I did not see this policy shift as resulting primarily from personal failures on Bird's part, but more from very real difficulties in executing his early socialist program. The nature and magnitude of these difficulties have now become a lot clearer as similar problems came to a head decades later in other socialist experiments, which also forced them to make similar turns in the direction of state capitalism. The latest example of this trend is Cuba.

Finally, the primary target of Hurst's seraphic portrayal of Bird is none of books mentioned so far. Rather, the portrait of Bird that Hurst's Christian portrayal is designed to counter is that of the American author, Robert Coram. In his book, *Caribbean Time Bomb,* Coram portrays Bird as a founding leader, a George Washington, who after coming to power

descended into a sea of corruption and autocratic rule. Coram's book is a highly sensationalized text directed at popular appetites for gossip and other people's bad mindedness. Thus it is quite understandable why Hurst, a leading member of the party founded by Bird, would want to correct this distorted image, and regain some control over how his party's founder is remembered.

These in brief are the major competing views of Bird that Hurst's book will continue to encounter. Let us go now to the work itself and get a better sense of what it really says.

## The Text

Hurst divides his book, *Vere Cornwall Bird,* into seven chapters. The first deals with the rule of the planters against whom Bird will struggle. The second deals with Bird's youthful formation and his transition from religious to political leader. The third is a close-up on *The Worker's Voice,* the newspaper of the ATLU. The fourth deals with the struggles of 1951, which Hurst refers to as "a watershed year". Chapter five has as its focus the years 1951-1971, the period that Hurst refers to as "the revolution" or "transformation" that ushered in modern post-colonial Antigua and Barbuda. In chapter six, Hurst gives us his take on the big split in the ATLU that led to the rise of George Walter and the Progressive Labour Movement (PLM). Finally in chapter seven, the concluding chapter, Hurst examines Bird's triumphant return to power in 1976, his demitting of office at age 84, and his passing at age 89.



These chapters all represent well recognized milestones in Bird's life. Thus in its broad contours, Hurst's biography is very much in line with those mentioned above. Consequently, in this look at the text, I will focus on the evidence and arguments that Hurst makes for his Christian view of Bird, and Christianity's role in fortifying him against corruption and other temptations of power.

Hurst begins his account of Bird's life by noting that he "was Christened an Anglican, yet found the Salvation Army more appealing, and would become a minister of religion in that Christian fold" (40). He goes on to point out that Bird's mother, Amanda Edghill, had earlier made this shift from the Anglicans to the Salvationists, and that it was she who brought a young Vere "into this Christian fold when still a boy of eight years" (45). In Hurst's view, the appeal of the Salvationists over the Anglicans was their openness, the music and simplicity of their services. Their "music-making,

especially the drums and the tambourine, elicited deep-felt pulses that were powerful enough to return the participants to their ancestral collective-unconscious, despite three hundred years of disconnect" (43). The Salvationists often worshipped outdoors "making God accessible to all and sundry regardless of dress or standing" (45). Their preaching and theology made members "feel God was near" (44), as they communicated "earthly as well as spiritual values" (45). In this spirit of openness, the Salvationists welcomed the poverty stricken, and those who had turned to crime, gambling, drinking or prostitution.

Hurst suggests that young Vere was captured by this more open ambience of the Salvationists. He also suggests that, "the more masculine appeal of the fighting Salvationists won the youthful Bird's heart, and that he never deserted them until death" (43). Indeed, the image of young Vere beating that Salvation Army drum as the faithful marched would remain in the minds of many for decades.

Bringing his own native spirituality and intelligence to his life among the Salvationists, Bird thrived within the fold of this church. So much so that in December of 1927, shortly after his 18th birthday, Bird was sent by the Salvationists to Trinidad for training to become a minister of their church. In Trinidad, Bird's faith deepened as he mastered the art of preaching and the duties of a minister of the Salvation Army Church. It was in Trinidad, through the figure of Captain Cipriani, that Bird first encountered the idea of a trade union bargaining for better wages, but he was not yet ready for it: "Religion was uppermost in his mind, and fairness was his bedrock" (49).



After two years of training in Trinidad, Hurst, following the path of other biographers, goes with minister Bird to Grenada. However, after only a year in Grenada, Bird returns to Antigua and Barbuda. But Hurst does not give us any more information on why Bird ended his time Grenada. He writes: "Three years away from Antigua produced a longing in Vere Bird to return. The absence also prepared him to imagine a better Antigua" (49).

In the years following his return home, Hurst focuses on Bird's attempts to establish himself on solid economic ground. Thus, he traces his various places of employment such as his work at Alexander Camacho's Store on Market Street, Stephen Mendes' Bakery, and his starting a taxi service. Hurst's primary purpose in these economic undertakings is to explore Bird's attitudes towards money and wealth accumulation. Hurst concludes that

although Bird was attempting to establish a good home for his growing family, the capitalist drive to acquire material wealth never became a primary impulse in his life. This ability to resist the trappings of wealth "may have come from his strong belief in the Christian promise of an eternal life and the prejudice condemnatory of wealth that is embedded in Christian belief" (57). Hurst goes on to suggest, "these factors influenced Vere Bird during his entire life and would impact his decision-making as he matured. He deliberately insulated himself against the corrupting influence which the craving for more wealth can generate" (57).

For Hurst, the big change in this religiously restrained businessman was precipitated by a very special event that occurred on the night of November 1, 1937. At 27 years of age, Bird sat in the St. John's Cathedral Schoolroom and listened to the already legendary Marcus Garvey speak on the relationship between Divine and human agency in determining the course of human history, and the destiny of specific civilizations such as ours in the Caribbean. Garvey's position on this important issue differed significantly from the one that Bird had inherited from his years in the Salvation Army. Garvey had always argued that God had claimed a definite place in the human heart, but history he left to the control of human beings. In the speech that evening at the St. John's Cathedral Schoolroom, Garvey hammered home that point, making it clear that we, the people of the Caribbean, hold the fate of our civilization in our hands; that in addition to cultivating the presence of God within us, we had to take the initiative and the responsibilities for liberating our race and reviving our African based civilization. In Hurst's view, Garvey exposed Bird "to a point of view on November 1, 1937 that had not before occurred to him. He was moved or converted, a common experience among religious believers" (68). In other words, Bird was on his way to becoming a Garveyite, the biggest transformation in his life since he became a Salvationist. Even more emphatically, Hurst refers to this encounter with Garvey as Bird's "road to Damascus conversion" (73).



Continuing his account of Bird's transformation from minister in the Salvation Army to political leader, Hurst notes that after hearing Garvey, "Bird grew restless and found religious teaching inadequate in achieving greater ends" (68). This Pan African turn in Bird's life was strongly reinforced two years later by another historic event at the St. John's Cathedral Schoolroom. This event was of course the January 1, 1939 address by Sir Walter Citrine of the Moyne Commission to a group of Antiguans and Barbudans that included many of the future founders of the ATLU. Citrine

spoke of the power of trade union organizing to transform the lives of working people and of the benefits that it had brought to his own life. This talk by Citrine reinforced Bird's earlier "conversion" to Garveyism but, in addition, gave these Pan African ideas a different organizational base than that of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). This new organizational base would of course be that of a trade union. Here I think it is both fair and important to note that Hurst underestimates or downplays the impact of Citrine's democratic socialist philosophy on Bird. From all accounts, it was as transformational as Garvey's Pan-Africanism.

For Hurst, Bird's membership in the ATLU completes the process of his political conversion. He writes: this "transformation of Vere Cornwall Bird from Pastor to political leader was essentially a five year experience" (73). Those years represented for Hurst the making of a Christian political leader. In other words, although a secular conversion to politics had occurred, the earlier Christian foundation remained and it would guide and insulate Bird through out the course of his long political career.

### A Short Critique



As noted in the introductory section of this review essay, the importance of the above Christian foundation of Bird's life for his later political career is the distinct contribution of Hurst's book. As a response to Robert Coram it is a sober and effective counterpoint. However, although better documented and closer to the home ground, Hurst replaces the excesses of Coram's muckraking skepticism with excesses of heroic praise. Thus even after allowing for the pressing political concern with countering Coram, we still have to ask: how does Hurst's Christian portrait of Bird stand up against the competing portrayals in other biographical accounts of our first Prime Minister? We have already seen that these competing accounts are basically of two types: V.C. Bird as a socialist and as a bad minded despotic ruler.

### Hurst and Bird's Socialist Heritage

The most intriguing gap between Hurst and the socialist portraits of Bird is that between our author's and Novelle Richards' portrayal. Both men have been leading members of the Antigua Labour Party (ALP), both had extensive access to Bird – Richards more so during earlier phases of Bird's political career. For Richards, Bird's political life in the period following his tenure as a minister in the Salvation Army was much more democratic socialist than Garveyist. He attributes much greater impor-

tance to Citrine's talk than Garvey's in his account of Bird's political "conversion". In broader terms, the relative importance of the international Garvey Movement and that of the international Labor Movement in Bird's political formation is the reverse of what it is in Hurst's text. Richards emphasized the influence of the Fabian or democratic socialism of the British Labour Party, the political philosophy upon which Citrine's talk and trade union suggestions were based. Further, the impact of this political philosophy on other regional leaders such as Norman Manley of Jamaica, Grantley Adams of Barbados, Robert Bradshaw of St. Kitts is well established in the historical record.

We can therefore conclude that in Hurst's account of Bird's political "conversion" the evidence and testimony supplied by Richards for strong democratic socialist influences are definitely overlooked or underplayed. Indeed, these socialist influences are not directly addressed at all. The gap opened by not addressing directly these influences leaves Hurst's portrait of Bird in trouble with the evidence. This is all the more surprising as it was in the declining years of the Garvey Movement and the rising years of the Labor Movement that both Garvey and Citrine spoke in Antigua and Barbuda.



Even more striking on this point of Bird's socialism are the differences between Hurst's and Hector's accounts. Hector's treatment pushed Bird's socialism beyond the Fabian framework within which Novelle Richards kept it. This radicalizing of Bird's socialism Hector did by emphasizing what he considered the two finest moments in Bird's thinking. The first was his minority report as a member of the Soulbury Commission, which he co-authored with colleague, McChesney George. The second was his support for the 1946 piece of legislation on tourism introduced by Hugh Pratt, the fourth elected member of the ALP. Both of these documents proposed a significant shift in the balance between private and state ownership of the economy that sounded more radical in tone than the more staid tradition of Fabian socialism. Both documents posed the question of proletarian rule in a manner that went beyond the assumption of middle class rule in the Fabian tradition. Hector was critical of Bird's rule for what he saw as Bird's subsequent abandonment of these socialist policies for the immediate benefits of a tourist industry organized on the basis of foreign private ownership. However, Hector did not address in full the many difficulties, practical, technical and political, that had to be solved for a project of proletarian rule in politics and economics to be realized in Antigua and Barbuda. In the words of Novelle Richards: "the pattern

of socialism [that] would have to be developed to meet local needs and to suit local conditions" remained an elusive goal for both the ALP and the ACLM. Such projects of proletarian rule still remain as major challenges to be solved if we are to imagine the peace of future human societies.

Finally, Hurst's Christian/Garveyite portrait of V.C. is at odds with my own portrayal on this particular issue of Bird's socialist heritage. In *Shouldering Antigua and Barbuda,* I portrayed the early Bird, in the period after his "conversion" to politics, as a black democratic socialist. I added the term "black" because I was not satisfied with Richards' account of the impact of the Garvey Movement on Bird's political development. I thought he underestimated its importance in Bird's life. I saw the newly converted Bird as a man whose developing political philosophy was an original and homegrown combination of Garvey's Pan Africanism and the democratic socialism of the British Labour Party.

Thus in my view, Hurst's two important contributions to the conversations on Bird's political formation are: 1) he reminds us just how important it is to keep in mind the pre-political Christian years of Bird's life; and 2) he corrects Richard's and Hector's undervaluing of Garvey's influence. However, he commits a major error of his own by grossly minimizing the influence of democratic socialist thought on Bird's political formation.



### Bad Mindedness and Hurst's Portrait of Bird

In his book, Hurst makes reference to the popular discourse of bad mindedness (245), which has turned out to be a strong theme in this issue of our *Review.* The reference to this discourse is made in the early phase of his discussion of the split in the ATLU that was led by George Walter. This was indeed a moment that tried Bird's soul and tested his mettle. He had many competing interests to reconcile if his administration was to succeed. There was rising militancy in the struggle to organize workers in the new tourist industry and Walter was emerging as the hero of that undertaking; the plantation sector of the economy was collapsing more rapidly that Bird was comfortable with; and there were secessionist rumblings coming from Barbuda. The nature of the local struggle for power was changing and Bird was now more vulnerable. It was a period of more intense behind the scenes maneuvering and sharper political and economic competition. It was in response to the politics of this shifting context that Hurst made use of the discourse of bad mindedness. In particular, he said it at work in George Moody Stuart's concession to the demand of George Walter for a 25% increase for sugar workers, which he knew would kill the industry.

With such bad mindedness all around – in the form of betrayals and desires to replace Bird – Hurst insists on portraying his party's leader as stoic, Christian and good minded beyond all human measure. In stark contrast to this seraphic portrait of Bird is Hurst's bad minded portrayal of Walter. In other words, the shoe of bad mindedness is now on Walter's foot and not on Bird's as in the case of Smith's *No Easy Push-o-ver.* Walter is everything bad that Bird is not. He is driven by an uncontrollable lust for power, and desires, to challenge, defeat and ultimately replace Bird. These desires have no good or fair motivations behind them. The crucial issue of whether or not Bird was conceding too much to the interests and demands of the new hoteliers is never really addresses head-on by Hurst. Rather, Walter motives are read as classic examples of Lord Acton's adage on the corrupting influences of power quoted earlier in this review. After describing an incident from Walter's youth, Hurst writes: "Power, George Walter learned that day, yielded only to a greater power. It was a lesson that he would never forget; he would maneuver and accumulate the greatest power in Antigua so that no-one could exercise authority over him" (236).



Continuing with this bad minded reading of Walter, Hurst then goes on to describe this strategic process of political accumulation by which Walter pursued his goal of overthrowing and humiliating Bird. His account of Walter's strategy of political accumulation begins with Bird's innocent and somewhat paternal appointing of Walter to the position of editor of *The Worker's Voice,* and later supporting his election to the office of general secretary of the ATLU, in spite of warnings from others about Walter's intentions and political ambitions. From this position of general secretary, Hurst describes the manner in which Walter skillfully but cynically proceeded to accumulate "people power" by always seeking wage increases for workers. With his growing power, Walter eventually organized and executed "a successful place coup" (241). In making use of this discourse of bad mindedness, Hurst's account of Walter is very similar to Novelle Richards'. In both cases, the narrating of the split becomes the story of a bad minded individual temporarily triumphing over a good minded one.

As we have already seen, in Keithlyn Smith's account of the split, the discourse of bad mindedness is deployed in exactly the opposite way. Walter is the hero, while Bird is the bad minded individual. These opposing accounts tell us a lot about the problems associated with using this popular discourse of ethical bad mindedness. They make it un- mistakably clear

how quick we are to attribute bad minded motives to others – particularly opponents – and how slow we are to recognize our own bad mindedness. These patterns of attribution and denial can only lead to a compounding of errors and distortions. With the many cries of victimization that were coming from members of both parties and the intense polarization between Red and Blue that followed the split, there are mountains of evidence in the historical record that challenge Hurst's overly restrained, stoic and Christian view of Bird during and after the split. To not let his political leader get ruffled and display his anger makes him superhuman, and thus undermines the credibility of the portrait.

### Corruption and Bird's Legacy

Finally in this short critique, we must ask the question: how convincing is Hurst's portrayal of Bird standing on his Christian ground and consistently resisting the corrupting temptations of power? By not addressing specifically some of the better documented cases of corruption that occurred on Bird's watch – such as the Space Research Corporation controversy, the Robert Vesco Affair, the airport resurfacing and the arms to the Medellin cartel scandals – Hurst leaves himself open to the charge of covering for his leader. Given the documentation on these incidents of corruption, Hurst should have addressed these head-on. He should have acknowledged these errors and proposed appropriate reforms or have provided evidence that while they may have been taking place around him, Bird was not directly involved. But this is precisely what we do not get from Hurst. Instead, we are given an unsatisfactory mix of not too subtle evasions and comforting reassurances. Thus, the gap between these offerings and the facts left this writer unconvinced by this aspect of Hurst's account. On this issue of corruption, I found Novelle Richards – in what he very strikingly called "the locust years" – to be more forthcoming and convincing.



From the foregoing exchanges between the above writers, it should now be clear that a significant and valuable body of literature has developed around the figure of V.C. Bird. For the most part, the exchanges between the various authors have contributed to a clearer picture of the man and what he stood for. Hurst has definitely made us think more carefully about the Christian foundations of Bird's life, and for this we owe him many thanks. There are still many other gaps in Bird's life that need to be filled. But this movement forward on the life and thought of our first Prime Minister that we are experiencing is vital for both a proper understanding of our distinct proletarian political tradition and the future of our young nation.

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