

SEEKING WHOLENESS



IN AFRICAN-CARIBBEAN VOICE

BY ALTHEA PRINCE

THE ROAD-MAP OF ELDER VOICE

I search in this article to make a path — a road-map — to and through what I elect to call Caribbean Elder Voice Lineage. I do so by examining the voice of an Elder Caribbean man, Trinidadian social and political theorist, C.L.R. James and the voices of three Caribbean women writers, Antiguan writer, Jamaica Kincaid, Trinidadian writer, Merle Hodge, and my children's series which is set in Antigua during the nineteenth century. bell hooks provides a useful comparative theoretical framework for James. C.L.R. James discussed the search for writers and calypsonians whose work can be considered "authentic." The authentic voice is, in his view, liberating in that it speaks with the wholeness of a Caribbean world view. A search for Elder Voice Lineage is this same search for wholeness.

Creating the road-map of Elder Voice lineage is a dynamic process. There are no 'pat' prescriptions for doing so, for this road-map is in the doing and the harvesting of the doing is cumulative.

Elder Voice Lineage, by its very name, rejects the foolishness of starting anew. It presents its inheritors with a task — that being, to receive their inheritance. Having received it, what will they do with it? To whom do they owe it? On whose behalf do they receive it and what are the accompanying responsibilities?

Put simply, the basis of 'voice' lineage means that the whole is the basis of the people's 'Story,' their 'voice,' their worldview. Their perpetuation as a people is dependent on the wholeness of 'The Story' being passed on and being received.

It is this very wholeness that James claims to look for and attempts to rescue from among the work of Caribbean artists. In the Jamesian reading of Caribbean society, that wholeness lends 'The Story' authenticity. James posits that the work of Caribbean writers will show the difference between wholeness (authenticity) and the fractured self. He is confident that wholeness will come to be given more 'voice' in the literature from the area. He shows that the inculcation of British hegemony created the danger of losing the real self as it became submerged in favour of what he calls "the code" of British culture.

It is important and ironic to note that even as he makes a case for wholeness and authenticity, James presents a fractured view of the very people he seeks to rescue; he excludes from his discussion the 'voice' of women and the 'voice' of Caribbean people of East Indian descent. Even though he does discuss the work of two East Indian novelists, he does so without examining whether or not the fact that these two writers are East Indian has anything to do with their capacity to find their authentic voice. The question of authenticity then requires further clarification for wholeness.

The exclusion of women from James's discussion on authenticity is as serious as the exclusion of East Indians, for women are the overwhelming majority in Caribbean populations. In Trinidad, East Indians make up just under fifty percent of the population and in Guyana, just over fifty percent of the population.

It is interesting to note too, that there were at least two women calypsonians who had wide popular support at the time that James presented his discussion of *The Mighty Sparrow*. James can only be described as a product of his time. For his particular socialization meant the exclusion of women's voices. To be fair to him, it should be remembered that he operated in the Caribbean particular, within the political vision of the united forces of East Indian and African workers.

James shows, in an autobiographical work using cricket as a metaphor for the inculcation of hegemony, that his upbringing was identical to that of an English boy's, with the added dimension of African-Caribbean culture. Young James makes a choice to adopt the



British code, sublimating his African-Caribbeaness along the way. He writes retrospectively about his socialization and its juxtaposition with his authentic voice, stating that the things he did not notice and took for granted were "...the solid British middle class, Puritanism incarnate, of the middle of the nineteenth century." He points out that juxtaposed to this British Puritanism is the Caribbean creole culture which manifests behaviour that is quite the opposite of the imposed culture.

Wholeness clearly demands the inclusion of women writers in this discussion of authenticity. I will examine whether or not their work manifests the authenticity that James searches for so diligently in the work of male writers and male calypsonians.

The coming West Indies novelists will show the clash between the native temperament environment, and this doctrine from a sterner clime.

(*Beyond A Boundary*)

Applying the Jamesian notion of authenticity to the work of the three Caribbean women writers opens up the discussion of ways to read James as a theorist for Caribbean epistemology.

ELDER MAN AND ELDER WOMAN IN TROTMAN'S FICTION

In my series of children's stories, I seek to release the voice of the Elder woman and Elder man as major sources for survival in a system of plantation slavery in Antigua. Embodied in Mother Sillah, an Elder woman and Papa Biggis, an Elder man, Elder Voice Lineage is shared through the telling of 'The Story.' Mother Sillah teaches ways of birthing, healing, praying, planting,

growing, living, loving and learning. Creation and procreation are her special areas of knowledge and she takes great pains to impart them to the people on the estate and to the children in particular.

Mother Sillah's knowledge of 'The Story' enables her to know things others do not. She knows for instance, when the large-scale slave revolt has been betrayed and seeks to put her knowledge into the hands of the leaders of the revolt.

Finally, her pronouncement on life to a young inheritor of 'The Story' is:

Is just so it is wid life chile....what you put in, you going get back out. It don't matter how bad it seem; if you put in good tings, you get good tings out of it. Look and see how dis leaf perfect, perfect. All you put is one little seed in dat dutty ground an' you get big tree with perfect lead. Eh chile, you see how it go, you see how de earth is plentiful?

Mother Sillah makes sure that people understand the connection between the spirit world and the physical world as a 'living' connection. She cautions:

You not suppose to wear other people tings. Is not good for you spirit. Each person leave some of dey feelings in dey tings chile. Only use you own tings, or if somebody you close to offer you someting, or unless somebody you care 'bout dead and leave you someting. Den dey spirit an' yours link up between death an' life an' is all right, but only if is somebody you close to, who you love an' who love you. Otherwise it can have bad link-up between death an' life too.

In another story (*How The Mosquito Got Its Sting*), Mother Sillah speaks to two girls about the precious value of freedom. She says, commenting on the mosquito's desire for freedom, that "all living creatures like to be free, mosquito is no different". Mother Sillah is working to create authenticity for the African-Antiguan, a part of whose reality includes enslavement. "All living creatures" includes the children and the entire African population in Antigua at the time.

Whereas the Elder woman taught the children about woman power, the Elder man, Papa Biggis, speaks of perseverance, courage, discipline, metamorphosis and physical survival. This adequately complements the woman-focus of Mother Sillah.

Papa Biggis tells his portion of 'The Story,' teaching some of the physical tools of survival. He tells a fable to a group of children on a sugar estate about a star who decided to tumble down to the earth and do nothing but lie idly all day. Soon, he loses his shine and when the rainy season comes, is washed away - along with the debris on the footpath - to the sea.

Papa Biggis seeks in his fable to give the children

hope, even those who wish to avoid the work of the estate. For the star undergoes a metamorphosis and is able to survive in the sea by becoming a star-fish. The message is clear: to manage the environment in a way that enables one's survival is to triumph over any difficulty.

Like Mother Sillah, Papa Biggis adds to 'The Story' his own, individual act of rebellion. He gives the children more food than they are supposed to receive, allows them to take long rests and nurtures their spirit with Elder love and kindness. In him, the author gets an opportunity to make sense of the realities of the survival of the African in the Caribbean. The image of the obsequious 'male slave,' saying 'yassuh,' 'no suh,' 'thank you suh,' is transformed by the characterization of Papa Biggis. The old image of docility is contradicted by the realities of survival of Spirit and consciousness of the African.

The 'male slave' is further rescued in 'The Story' by the man who is detailed to whip Mother Sillah. He is reluctant to do so, but recognizes the need for survival. The author relieves him of the violence in the role:

Mother Sillah got lashes for sending the warning, but the man they put to beat her wouldn't hit her hard. He could not disobey the overseer or he would have received lashes himself, but he made sure that the old woman whom he so respected didn't suffer too much.

MERLE HODGE, MYSTICISM AND ELDER VOICE LINEAGE

In her novel of childhood, *Crick Crack Monkey*, Merle Hodge, demonstrates an Elder woman's voice working its teaching magic in the socialization of the young. She looks at the teachings that the Elder women impart to the children during food preparation. Sometimes they use a proliferation of proverbs to pass on 'The Story' to the children:

Who 'as
don't get
Who don't ask
don't want
Who don't want
don't get
Who don't get
don't care.

The fatalism in that maxim was not lost on the children. They found other proverbs and sayings more rational and useful as life lessons:

Them that walketh in the paths of
corruption will live to ketch dey
arse.

Teachings against gluttony were given simply: "Stuff yu guts today an' eat the stones of the wilderness tomorrow."

But not all tellings of 'The Story' were done through formal proverbs and maxims. Tee, the main character, experiences Ma's awakening each day. It brings her understanding of Ma's relationship with the physical world.

Ma awoke every morning with a groan quickly routed by a brief loud cheups [a sound made by sucking her teeth]...The cheups with which Ma greeted the day expressed her essential attitude before the whole experience - what yu mus' beat-up yourself for? In the face of the distasteful and unavoidable, the unexpected and irreversible... Ma sucked her teeth and turned her back.

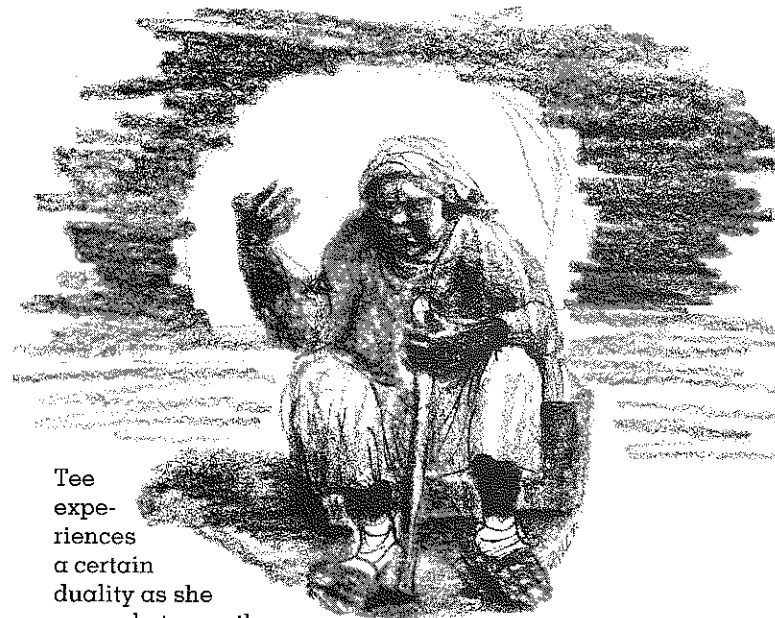
'The Story' includes the excitement caused by rain. It cleanses and purifies at the same time that it brings grief. For there are leaks in the house and there are clothes which had been hung out to dry just before the rain came. If the rain fell heavily enough, there would be joy at the sharing of a trip to observe how nature had swelled the river. Hodge's account of this experience shows Ma's role in the telling/sharing of 'The Story':

When the rain had stopped we dressed up in Grampa's old jackets and went out with Ma to look at the river. This was like a ritual following upon the rain - she had to go and see the river. We walked behind her squelching joyously in the new puddles and mud.....If the river came down every week Ma's rapture would be quite as new.

'Eh!' she exclaimed, and then fell back into her trance. Then a little later on 'Eh!' shaking her head from side to side, 'Well yes, well yes!' We stood around her in an unlikely silence like spattered acolytes in our jumble-sale clothes, in the bright air hanging out crisp and taut to dry, and the river ploughing off with the dirt and everything drenched and bowing and satisfied and resting before the world started up again from the beginning.

Clearly, Ma feels a communion with nature and she has found a way of sharing that connection with the children. She feels a connection with the spirit world.

Hodge continues throughout the novel to show the telling of 'The Story' by the Elder woman as a lineage that is complex and powerful. She moves the reader through the upbringing of Tee by three Elder women: Auntie Beatrice, Tantie and Ma. Each Elder woman's telling of 'The Story' is different, yet similar enough that a synthesis is possible, presenting the African-Trinidadian Elder woman's voice of a particular period of that island's social history: the late 1940's to 1960's.



Tee experiences a certain duality as she moves between the pretentiousness of the middle class and the vibrancy and realism of the working class. 'The Story' straddles both socio-economic spheres. With Ma, 'The Story' is spiritually nurturing, yet not limited to the private realm. She passes on important lessons of interrelationship, creation and transformation, embodiment and survival. 'The Story', does not indeed exist in a cultural vacuum; it is dynamic and reflects the environment in which its tellers live.

JAMAICA KINCAID ON HEGEMONY AND HER QUEST FOR AUTHENTICITY

For Antiguan novelist Jamaica Kincaid, 'The Story' was told to her in a way that a particular child (Kincaid), its receiver, finds oppressive only when her mother inexplicably withdraws her all-encompassing love from the child. The complexities and the tensions between the child and the teller of 'The Story', her mother, are unbearable to the child. Before the break in the bond of love between them, the child accepted the prescriptions for life which she inherits. For example, in *Annie John* the links between the spirit world and the physical world are clearly defined as they are in my children's series and in Hodge's novel:



**I WAS AFRAID OF THE DEAD, AS WAS EVERYONE I KNEW.
WE WERE AFRAID OF THE DEAD BECAUSE
WE NEVER COULD TELL WHEN THEY MIGHT SHOW UP
AGAIN. SOMETIMES THEY SHOWED UP IN A DREAM,
BECAUSE THEY USUALLY ONLY BROUGHT A WARNING,
AND IN ANY CASE, YOU WAKE UP FROM A DREAM.
BUT SOMETIMES THEY WOULD SHOW UP STANDING
UNDER A TREE JUST AS YOU WERE PASSING BY.
THEN THEY MIGHT FOLLOW YOU HOME, AND EVEN
THOUGH THEY MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO COME INTO
YOUR HOUSE, THEY MIGHT WAIT FOR YOU AND FOLLOW
YOU WHEREVER YOU WENT; IN THAT CASE, THEY WOULD
NEVER GIVE UP UNTIL YOU JOINED THEM. MY MOTHER
KNEW OF MANY PEOPLE WHO HAD DIED IN SUCH A WAY.**

In the mother's telling of 'The Story,' the malevolence of the spirit world can be combatted by several methods. Kincaid recounts one method which the child experienced with the mother and which utilizes both herbal and psycho-spiritual means.

Eventually, the girl leaves the island, Antigua, but takes with her the kernel of 'The Story' told her by her mother. She seeks to build on it, constructing for herself a more dynamic version of it, grounded in the physical realities she experiences. Her construction extends her mother's telling of 'The Story': As she prepares to leave Antigua, she starts to make conscious choices about those things that she will keep and those she will leave behind. She holds some things in a treasured place in her heart, but others, she consciously determines will be discarded. So begins for this one girl, the editing, the reshaping, the continuance of 'The Story':

I bathed quickly in some warm bark water that my mother had prepared for me. I put on my underclothes - all of them white and all of them smelling funny. Along with my earrings, my neck chain, and my bracelets, all made of gold from British Guiana, my underclothes had been sent to my mother's obeah woman, and whatever she had done to my jewelry and underclothes would help protect me from evil spirits and every kind of misfortune. The things I never wanted to see or hear or do again now made up at least three weeks' worth of grocery lists. I placed a mark against obeah women, jewelry and white underclothes.

In a later work of Kincaid's, *Lucy*, the main character seeks to construct a social reality in which she is comfortable. Kincaid moves beyond a rite of passage to the next step which Lorde refers to as "...the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom..."

For Kincaid, the step from receiving 'The Story' to charting the new language takes time. This is the process that is described by her as "the dream and vision...the skeleton architecture of our lives...the foundations for a future of change... a bridge across our fears of what has never been before...action in the now."

In *Lucy*, Kincaid demonstrates the need for reconstructing reality, the charting of the new road map. She takes the reader through her character's processing something as mundane and yet as important as a change in the weather, having moved from Antigua to New England. 'The Story' received in Antigua had not included differences in weather. 'The Story' had fit 'The Island' and had included a relationship with the physical environment as well as the metaphysical one.

Kincaid describes the charting of the new road map as Lucy comes to terms, not just with her new physical location, but also with a whole difference in hegemony and hence, reality. This new reality appears to be more

than just about weather. This new reality appears to be about knowing and not knowing, being and not being. As Kincaid concludes, "I...felt that I wanted to be back where I came from. I understood it, I knew where I stood there."

In *Lucy*, anger at the dominant British hegemony washes over the main character when she recalls a poem about daffodils, a flower that is foreign to the Caribbean:

I remembered an old poem I had been made to memorize:

when I was ten years old and a pupil at Queen Victoria Girls' School. I had been made to memorize it, verse after verse, and then had recited the whole poem to an auditorium full of parents, teachers, and my fellow pupils. After I was done, everybody stood up and applauded with an enthusiasm that surprised me, and later they told me how nicely I had pronounced every word, how I had placed just the right amount of special emphasis in places where that was needed, and how proud the poet, now long dead, would have been to hear his words ringing out of my mouth. I was then at the height of my two-facedness: that is, outside I seemed one way, inside I was another; outside false, inside true. And so I made pleasant little noises that showed both modesty and appreciation, but inside I was making a vow to erase from my mind, line by line, every word of that poem.

She tells her white American employer who has taken her to see a field of daffodils, "Mariah, do you realize that at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen?" Her strong resentment, rather than her continued acceptance of this imposition, is the character's step towards reclaiming the self.

RESCUING JAMES FROM INAUTHENTIC EXCLUSION OF WOMEN'S VOICES

bell hooks, an African-American critic, suggests in *Talking Back* like James, that the process of telling 'The Story' is the method by which an authenticating experience can take place.

...symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release.

bell hooks tells of the telling of the individual, personal story, but makes the connection between the personal and the collective and the importance of telling

'The [collective] Story.' She goes on to describe the act of telling 'The Story' as "liberating."

In the work of the three Caribbean women writers we have examined here, we see what could be considered individual, personal stories. They tell 'The Story' from varied perspectives - similar, yet not the same. Each writer has received 'The Story' and has undertaken the task of passing it on, adding her interpretation. All three are alike in that they provide both the storytellers and the receivers of 'The Story' with material for the construction of an authentic worldview.

C.L.R. James's description of what constitutes writing within an authentic framework seems adequately to fit the work of these three Caribbean women. Their use of language, the content, the undertaking itself, demonstrate that quality which James in *The Birth Of A Nation* describes as "...people...in charge of their own reality...." Perhaps he would have described them, as he did two male African-Caribbean writers, Michael Anthony and Earl Lovelace, as "...native and national in a sense that the previous generation is not."

James searched diligently among male Caribbean writers and calypsonians for what exists quite abundantly in the work of Caribbean women writers. It is useful to note here that the work of several other Caribbean women demonstrates the qualities which James suggests make a work "authentic." It would seem, then, that James, while suggesting that there is consciousness raising that needs to be done by Caribbean people, actually demonstrates, by his exclusion of Caribbean women writers, that he too needed to work at the same task. He did not identify the issue of sexism as something to which attention would have to be paid if wholeness is to be accomplished by all members of Caribbean society. His exclusion of Caribbean women writers demonstrates a problem for his discussion of authenticity and wholeness. It is difficult to conceive of wholeness without the voice of such large segments of Caribbean society.

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Illustrations by Grace Channer.

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