

*Michela A. Calderaro*

## **“I AM THE LINE BREAK OF DESIRE” A CONVERSATION WITH SHARA McCALLUM**

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Shara McCallum's sensual first collection of poems, *The Water Between Us* (1999; winner of the 1998 Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize), introduced to us the exhilarating beat of her verses. Her second collection, *Song of Thieves* (2003), continues to pulsate to the rhythm of distant Caribbean music, leaving the reader dizzy and breathless and asking for more.

The daughter of a multicultural family – born in Jamaica to Afro-Jamaican and Venezuelan parents – she fuses on the page different languages and experiences, transmuting words into a synesthetic whole, brimming with colors and music. Both collections deal with issues of identity, tearful separations and abandonment, but also with the wonder of self-discovery. Emotions and feelings are shaped with such craft that the reader, any reader of any country or continent, is made to share and feel the pain, the loss, the happy moments that are brought so vibrantly to the fore.

Long before the publication of her dazzling debut collection, her talent had brought her to the attention of critics and scholars, and in 1996, still in college and very young, she was awarded The Academy of American Poets Prize. Nominated for several Pushcart Prizes, she is the recipient of a Tennessee Individual Artist Grant in Literature and a grant from the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund.

Her poems and essays have been published in several journals, among them *The Antioch Review*, *Callaloo*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Ploughshares*, *Witness*, *Chelsea*, *The Iowa Review*, and *Verse*; and appeared in various anthologies, such as *The New American Poets: A Bread Loaf Anthology* and *Beyond the Frontier: African American Poetry for the Twenty-First Century*.

Currently, she is the Director of the Stadler Center for Poetry at Bucknell University, where she also teaches.

**Q.** Your first collection's epigraph is a quote from Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*; while in the second collection you quote from a Bob Marley song and John Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*. These are, if you'll excuse my scholarly analysis, a quote from a Caribbean icon, another from a British poet, and one from a writer who is considered caught between these two cultures – a white Creole woman who is still the subject of heated debates about whether she “belongs” to one or the other. Is this combined choice of motto a conscious decision to bring together your many “skins” or am I totally wrong here?

**A.** This is an interesting series of questions. I wouldn't say that your analysis is “wrong” – I could certainly see that reading of the epigraphs; but it's easier for me to talk about how I came to use the epigraphs than to say that I was making a conscious statement regarding hybridity, which seems to be at the heart of your reading of them. My decisions regarding the use of these quotes as epigraphs were more capricious and less carefully constructed than your reading of them gives me credit for.

In terms of my connection to the epigraph for the first book, I read *Wide Sargasso Sea* in my second year of graduate school and was struck by the language more than the narrative of the novel. I wrote down the quote, which later became the epigraph for *The Water Between Us*, in my journal. This was a couple of years before I'd envisioned the poems I was writing as a book. Later, after I'd assembled the collection, the quote came back to me and seemed very apt for speaking to one of the main concerns of the book as I saw it at the time – the desire to interrogate where truth lies. I knew a bit about Jean Rhys's life, enough then to know that others might see the quote as a reference to my sense of a shared heritage; ironically, though, while I do see echoes of her insider/outsider status in my own life and work in a general sense, I don't feel a connection to her background (she's from a different moment in Caribbean history, a different island, and a different social & racial background than I am) so much as I do to her work as a writer. I love the language of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and think there's something very *Caribbean* about the reality it creates and how Rhys does that – regardless of her origins. Again, I'm not terribly familiar with the criticism on Rhys but my understanding is that when she's questioned as a Caribbean writer it's due to her belonging to the white aristocracy at that time, is that right? Did she also live abroad a good bit of her life? If living in the Caribbean is one of the criteria for being a Caribbean writer then not only Rhys but any number of us are in trouble.

With the quotes for *Song of Thieves*, I can say that pairing them was a conscious decision on my part, though for somewhat different reasons than you've noticed. I have long been interested, and remain so, in exploring different sources of poetic language (the “literary” and the “vernacular” and everything in between). Marley and Keats were two of the poets who were influential in my earliest formation as a writer (I mean earliest as in before I knew I wanted to be or could be a writer). Taken together, as well as individually, for me they embody poetry's ability to speak to the personal and historical in a voice that is both highly “poetic” and intensely idiomatic.

The other reason I paired these two very different works in the epigraph is that I like the paradox created by the juxtaposition of the two lines. In writing elegies, I think you are essentially writing a paradox. By invoking the person or thing which is lost, you are trying to free yourself of the loss while acknowledging that you are bound to something which is irretrievable. In one regard (a not too-morbid one, I hope), the main impulse for my work is elegiac. Yehuda Amichai says something in a poem, which speaks to this idea even more directly than do my pairing of Marley & Keats' lines: "What I will never see again, I must love forever." There's a (perhaps related) statement by Marina Tsvetaeva that's been in my head since I read it: "One's homeland is not a geographical convention but an insistence of memory and blood." The Tsvetaeva quote is off the topic of writing elegies (in a way), but my point – if I can try to connect this back to your question of my investment in the personal history of the writers I read & quote – is that I'm more often moved by writing (and the world and ideas a poem conjures) than by writers themselves. In fact, I know little of Tsvetaeva's life, other than the fact that she was Russian.

**Q.** Going back to Keats's *Ode*, the poem expresses the poet's concern with creativity and the process of creating a work of art; an "immortal Bird" with its song becomes a symbol for the figure of the poet and for art and poetry in general. The process of creating a work of art – often described as painful – is also, in many ways, at the center of your poems. I am thinking now of two poems in your second collection, "The Spiders Speak" and "Six Ways of Envisioning Loss." In the former, spider's webs come to represent the threads, the lines that a poet has to write (and here I hear an echo of Robert Browning, correct me if I am wrong), a poet who, like a spider, has "no choice but to spin," and "give" her/his own "form," that is to create and give immortality through poetry. In the latter, the third stanza is a reflection on the creation of poetry, on the way "words" are gathered by the poet, who transforms them into poetry. Can you elaborate on the way you succeed in bringing together the artistic reflection, the foundation of creation, and the actual writing of a poem?

**A.** Can I answer "no" to this one (smile)? In all seriousness, I don't know how to answer this question exactly. When I'm in the process of writing a poem, I'm trying to find out what the poem's objective is and to communicate that as clearly as I can. This objective may or may not be the same as what I started out imagining I wanted to say and often involves my using all kinds of devices and approaches to get to the heart of the poem, many of which I'd be hard pressed to describe or account for after the fact of writing. The poem succeeds for me, more or less, depending on how much I feel I am articulating its objective. When I'm finished writing a poem, generally I don't think about the process of writing it anymore. In fact, when I can no longer bear to think about this, that's often the sign to me that a poem is "finished" – whether to my liking or not. I'm going off on a tangent here, though, and don't think I'm really answering your question, which seems to be more about how I include the act of writing within a poem. I don't know, other than to say that individual poems dictate when such self-conscious attention to the act of writing would be useful for communicating the larger objective of the poem.

**Q.** Often in your poems, the act of artistic creation, of giving birth to a poem, is combined with the act of giving birth to a living creature. Can you share with us your view on these two acts of giving birth?

**A.** Sure, giving birth means you don't write anymore (as a mother of an almost-one-year old who is only now finding slivers of time to return to writing, I had to get that in there.) It's really enlightening to read your questions, Michela, because I'm seeing many connections in my own poems that I honestly hadn't seen prior. This question brings up one such link. I haven't thought long enough about the act of giving birth to have a strong impression of its relationship to creating art, outside of the practical matter of time and energy being required for both, as I alluded to in light-hearted fashion above. I'm a pretty slow learner when it comes to understanding my own experiences, so I think it will be some time before I can speak with authority to this matter in my own life. Still, I'll hazard an opinion and say that both acts come from the same place. The desire to progenerate, whether achieved by having a child or giving birth to a work of art, represents the urge to save oneself or some part of oneself from extinction.

It's only in the last two weeks that I've written a poem about Rachel, my daughter, and it's an odd mother-daughter poem for me in that it doesn't have much of the specifics of either the mother or the daughter in the poem. The only image that describes either one of us is rather disembodied (I describe my daughter's voice at one point as "unfurl[ing] bright wings,/alighting in each corner of this house"). I imagine I'll write more poems about my relationship to her at some point; but, for at least right now, I haven't written enough about the experience to understand how it has shaped me.

**Q.** Fathers, mothers, siblings, are conspicuously present in both collections. How much of your actual family is "present" in your poems? Or, better, how do you transform family members through poetry? [I understand this is a delicate question, and the answer may be none of my business – you can tell me so, and I'll understand you perfectly.]

**A.** My family members populate my work, as you notice. They do so, to my mind, both actually and in transformed fashion, hopefully in one and the same moment. The facts of their lives (my own life and them in relation to it, might be a more accurate way to put this) are often very close to "true" and I am not compelled to make up information, particularly if it is a central concern within the poem. Still, for me, the literal truths are less important than the emotional or psychological ones with which a poem is concerned; and, in many cases, my family members (particularly my father and my grandmother) have become larger-than-life figures in the poems.

I think it's important to say, as well, that so much of the information of my family's history has been obscured or is disputed; so that it has been difficult to reach a consensus on some of the "facts" of our lives. As I've said before in other contexts, I think I began to write in part to sort out my family's history, which doesn't seem as stable to me as it might to others. For example, my grandparents for years told my sisters and I that we were "white" while simultaneously telling me that my "hair could give me away" and while my mother was telling us that our father considered himself "black." My

grandparents later explained that we are “coloured” or “Jamaica white,” a category meaning something quite different than “white” in American contexts. There are many reasons I think this slipperiness of truth occurred, including the fact that notions of race in Jamaica and the US are quite different and that immigrant identity is often built on shifting sands. Nevertheless, I am one body, no matter where I may be located geographically, and have had to reconcile my identity in a way that makes sense to me. Another example, which might be more appropo, or at least less politically contentious, is of my father’s life. As I write about in *Song of Thieves*, he suffered from schizophrenia and committed suicide. I didn’t find this out until I was 20-years old. My father died when I was 9. For the years in between, I lived believing that he had died in a car accident; I had been told (or imagined, I’m not sure which) that it was due to a person driving drunk. I lived with this “truth” while also remembering my father and his schizophrenic behaviours (though I didn’t have that word to attach to him as a child nor was it one I ever heard in my house).

**Q.** Colors, sounds, perfumes, are brought together on the page and your poems stir all senses at once. Would you define your poems as synesthetic? Is there a painter, a composer, a poet or a writer who influenced you most, and in what way?

**A.** I mentioned Keats and Marley before and Amichai and Tsvetaeva – all writers I admire. I could list many other names and have in the past when asked this question; but today I’m in the mood to answer it slant, as I have been doing with some of these already. The question of influences is always hard to answer if you’re someone, like me, who doesn’t like to be pinned down. It reminds me too of when, as a child, my grandmother – who is Catholic – would have me pray and at the end of the prayers, bless people, and I would worry, and I mean really worry (as I imagine many a child does) about leaving someone out and therefore being responsible for them not being blessed, or worse, their dying. I’m being hyperbolic of course – no one will die if I don’t answer this and I don’t anymore think that my blessing anyone could save his or her life.

To return to your question more directly, though, I don’t know that influences for an artist (meaning what inspires or teaches) are always apparent in the finished work or that we are fully conscious of them.

**Q.** In your essay "Writing the Self, the Self that Writes" (*Calabash*, I, 2) you touch upon themes that are central to your poetry, such as exile, isolation, belonging. How do you metamorphose your personal experience into the creation of poetry?

**A.** I write in order to understand what I think about a given subject, incident, idea, etc. This naturally lends itself for me to writing about experiences that are personal. It’s not a given, though, that because an experience I’m recounting deals with a painful reality that it necessarily creates pain for me to write about it. In fact, it’s sometimes the opposite.

Still, acknowledging that some of what I write confronts knowledge (of myself and others) that is difficult, I’m glad you use the word metamorphosis – as you used the word

“transformed” earlier in regard to the question of my use of familial figures. If I didn’t in some way transform the experience, I don’t think that the work would have much value for me or for a reader. If I didn’t end up somewhere different from where I began in a poem, I wouldn’t experience the kind of knowledge I hope to glean from writing poetry.

**Q.** Your two collections are connected in many ways, but are also very different. On the one hand they seem to form a whole, on the other they represent different perspectives. The book-covers, for instance, are two parts of a single painting, where the part you chose for the first collection projects what appears to me as a happier scene, highlighting the female figures and introducing the collection’s “content”, echoed in the title: the relationship between mothers and daughters. The other, darker, painting detail, chosen for the second collection, depicts a male figure and seems to reflect the darker side of humanity. Would you say that the content of your collections is reflected in the choice of book covers, that is that the form and the content are “one”? How would you describe the differences and the similarities between the two collections?

**A.** I’d agree with you that form and content are ideally two parts of the same moment of expression in a given work of art. The two books are united in my mind, though how so is hard to articulate precisely. While different in approach and tone, both books are moments in the same process of becoming for the narrator, who is a persona of myself. Both books seem connected, then, if not by a sensibility of form or tone then by an actual sensibility. Most of the poems chronicle a search for an understanding of the self (in relation to family figures, historical pressures connected with immigration, and God even, this latter being more overt in the 2<sup>nd</sup> book).

My choice of the single painting, split in two, reflects the fact that these books are twinned endeavours in this process of becoming. This choice of covers wasn’t one that I made at the outset of the writing of either book, though. When I chose the painting for the first book, it was after the book was completed. I loved the painting as a whole but felt that it was necessary to crop it because only the women in the painting seemed relevant to the poems I had written then. Perhaps the other half of the painting was already prompting the second book, though if so, in much less conscious fashion. After finishing the second book, I was trying to think of an image for the cover and only then remember thinking about the other half of the painting. I think my husband is the one who actually suggested it.

On the level of content or subject matter, the first book deals primarily with women’s lives (my mother and my relationship to her), the second is centered more on my father, or at least the first section and poem sequence is. The halves of the painting uncannily seemed to capture that. As well, the man – if you look at the painting as the artist Carl Abrahams intended it to be received, as all of a piece – is set off from the women. While he’s playing to them, the colours that surround him in contrast to those around the women are much more somber. While they are in motion, he is still. It’s unclear, in my reading of the painting, whether the girls/women hear his playing since their reality seems so divorced from his; yet, it could be read as if he is playing to them. The archer, in the upper right-hand corner, is also an interesting figure – being perhaps the one outside of

the relationship between the man and women who processes or directs the scene. In a dramatic sense, he is the narrator of the unfolding scene.

I think the difference in tone you note (light vs. dark) between the two halves of the image also very much correlates to the two books. This isn't something that I saw, though, until I finished the second book. The poems in the second book were harder to write for me – emotionally/intellectually. They didn't come as easily, which is to say that I struggled more to find out what the poems wanted to say.

**Q.** Could you tell us about the genesis of the titles of the two collections? While the first might seem clear, it is not immediately so for the second.

**A.** The title for the first book, as you note, is clearer as it comes up in a poem in the collection as the last line of that poem (“Jamaica, October 18, 1972”). The second book also takes its title from a poem in the collection, though the poem didn't keep the title: “The Story So Far” was initially called “The Song of the Thief.” While I didn't think the title fit for the poem, ultimately, I liked the idea contained in it. The notion of theft or thievery as something beautiful (as a song) appeals to me. It speaks a paradox contained, for example, in the idea of the sirens – that something dangerous, even deadly, is enticing and seductive. When I was looking for a title for the collection, the title seemed to work in metaphoric fashion, as so many of the poems deal with different kinds of theft (suicide, exile). As the thefts were multiple in the collection, I pluralized the title so it became “Song of Thieves.” Two other, more personal, connections, prompted the title. One, I like the idea and history of the poet as singer. My name, Shara, in Hebrew actually means “she sings,” its root being Shira, which means both poem & song, as the ancient poets were singers. This is how, of course, the notion of the lyric comes about – a lyric poem originally being a “little song.” The second connection for me was that I liked the echo to “Song of Songs,” the most beautiful writing in the Hebrew Bible I think. Anyway, all these ideas (for me at least) were in the title. I'm not sure how many of them come across for a reader, though.

**Q.** One may observe that men are often portrayed in less the favorable light in your poems: They are figures in the wings who, when stepping on stage are, more often than not, bearers of unutterable violence and abuse. Reading the work of other writers of Caribbean background, I can't but notice the similarities in the depiction of males. Would you say that these presumed similarities are just a coincidence?

**A.** Well, this is indeed a tough one. I can see that men are portrayed less favourably at times in my work. They are often absent, as you note; or, when present, they are frequently the agents of violence. It is the case that my experiences early on, at the hands of men, were sometimes violent and that I witnessed such violence done to other women as well, including my mother. I know that I draw on that.

On the other hand, I don't think that I exempt women from their participation in that violence (poems like “Mother Love” for example, indict the mother for knowing that her daughter is being abused and turning away from the child; that act is as violent to my

mind as the act of the boyfriend molesting the child). As well, in terms of my depiction of men, I think with the sequence on my father that I was trying to give voice to & offer the perspective of the male figure. In the first book, even when invoked, my father is notably at a remove (“jack mandoora”; “Sunset on the Wharf” for example); so in the second book I was consciously trying to make of his absence a presence. I don’t know how well I achieved that goal. The only male in my life who has been a constant and positive presence (before my husband – so I mean more as I was a child and young woman) is my grandfather. He is the “Papa” of the poem “Wolves” (from the second book) and also the voice of explanation of a fractured world for the child in “jack mandoora,” though not an altogether hopeful one as his explanation often is “tings just mek that way,” which translates to things just happen without explanation. My husband has only furthered my sense of the possibilities for men and women, who live in a patriarchal world where violence against women is so prevalent, to overcome that pattern of interaction.

Ultimately, though, you are right to note the bias in my work. Most often, the voices I hear are those of women and the lives and perspectives I am interested in representing are those of women. This is still true in the new poems I’ve been writing where, for example, my grandmother, the “Miss Sally” character in one of the poems from *Song of Thieves*, makes more appearances. I don’t know that I’ll ever get away from – nor do I want to get away from – offering up the truths I know, as a woman.

**Q.** In your first collection, the interplay of different languages (as in “jack mandoora”) and *magic realism*, used in the rewriting of Western folktales and stories of Afro-Caribbean tradition, were more conspicuous. Does your second book mark a conscious transition in style? And if so, in what direction?

**A.** If there is a transition in style, it certainly wasn’t a conscious one. I’m noticing a theme to my answers here – which isn’t an intentional coyness on my part but rather an expression of my desire not to think too much about where I’m going, in an overall sense, as a writer. I’m more interested in discovering piece by piece what individual poems and sequences of poems (as I do tend to work on larger projects at a time) require. I’d like to think that all of the different “styles” and influences to which I have access will ultimately be useful for me in expressing the concerns of various poems. You never know what you’ll be doing tomorrow as a writer or what you’ll need to get you there (in terms of language, style, and other tools of expression). In my new work I am again writing more poems in patwa. I don’t know what that means, though I suspect this is coming about because of subject matter. I don’t write a poem in Standard English and then translate it to creole. It either comes in one form or to the other, in terms of how I hear it.

With “jack mandoora,” my decision to go back and forth between patwa and Standard English (and blur the languages in some sections) was deliberate and my only really conscious use of the interplay of language I can think of. I wanted to dramatize the feeling of being between both cultures and worlds (which language denotes) and trying to bridge those.



As to the presence of *magic realism*, it's interesting that this seems more prevalent in the first book – I guess it really is – though “The Story of the Madwoman by the Sea” is, for me, the poem most consciously inflected by that literary heritage I feel as a person from the part of the world where magic and reality are often blurred.

**Q.** The issue of belonging has been, and still is, at the core of many studies, debates, books and essays, and it is also central to your writing. Different languages and diverse cultures coexist in you and in your poems. Do you feel you embody that same “Creoleness” that Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant have proudly described in their *Éloge de la Créolité. In Praise of Creoleness*? How difficult is it today – if at all – being the daughter of many cultures; and how does the awareness of such a heritage inform your writing?

**A.** Well, it seems to me it affects my writing profoundly. Were I not of these different cultures, I'm not sure I would have become a writer. I know it is a pretty self-serving motive but I do think I became a writer to first and foremost figure things out for myself.

Not being the daughter of a single culture, I yet know many writers who are of one place and one heritage. Many of these writers are still concerned with analogous feelings of exile (from God, from other people, from the self, just to name a few of the “big” themes in literature). So, perhaps my connecting my identity as a writer to my biography is an oversimplification. Perhaps I would still be obsessed with issues of identity and belonging and would just express those in a different way.

I've read the piece you're citing, by the way – I used it in an article I wrote on a novel by Julia Alvarez precisely because I think it's one of the best articulations of Caribbean identity I've ever come across. Given my love of Keats, I can't help but connect this notion of being an identity in-flux (“creoleness”) with Keats' idea of “negative capability,” which so appealed to me as a young woman and student of literature before I could articulate its relevance to my own life or self.

**Q.** I must admit I'm fascinated by the mermaid metaphor of a creature that is neither woman nor fish, forced to choose between her two natural selves. In *The Water Between Us*, the mermaid was a central figure; while in *Song of Thieves*, she has practically vanished. Is it because the mermaid has already made her choice and there is no return? And if so, what has she discovered in her land or sea of choice?

**A.** It's so funny you should mention this. I've returned to working on a prose poem in the past couple weeks (one I began years ago) called, “The Mermaid.” In trying to finish the poem, I've been wondering why I keep coming back to it and if I have anything new to say about the paradox and conundrum which defines the mermaid's existence. This mermaid is a mother. Her choice to return to the sea is made in the face of what might seem to be compelling reasons to stay: her children who are bound to the land. I

don't know if I've fully figured out my attraction to this character, who is almost an archetype in the poem (when I do, she'll probably go away forever then); but I do think that the choice for this mermaid isn't one of discovery so much as a resignation to her fate.