

Opal Palmer Adisa



A Writer in the Caribbean

I, the writer, sit in my office shut off from the outside world, determined to seal out all noise, even my children.

I need silence to hear my thoughts. I do not want anything or anyone to intrude on this time or in this space. I make sure to turn off the telephone. I close the door to my office. I must be alone. I need space and quiet to think, to write. I am a writer and I work in solitude. Any and all interruptions are met with vexation.

why must there always be a carnival
of noise and soiree
that's why there is so much confusion
in this space
everyday bacchanal
and feting up and down the place

oonuh shut up
don't oonuh know
what me is
me is writer
me writing oonuh life stories
and all oonuh can do is chat up de place
and make noise from rooster crow
until owl open its eyes
oonuh shut up, man
me is a writer
writing big stories

As a Caribbean writer, I know all too well the challenges of creating a secure, tranquil space to write in a community where privacy is viewed with suspicion and one is expected to be social, liming with friends, and almost always be in clique with others. To want to be by oneself, to go walking alone in the company of one's mind, to seclude oneself from people just so you can hear the voices

Calabash

that mumble and grumble in your head is to raise the cry of:

Is mad, she mad!

Wha do her mek she always want to be alone?

Duppy must a talk to her!

Is foolishness pack up she head! She tink she betta than we!

How then to continue to create in such a space, to write about a people who scoff you at every move, who view you as an insane person, or condemn you as a pariah. Yet this is often the condition under which the Caribbean writer, and perhaps even the African writer creates, writing on behalf and in support of her or his people who often do not regard what the writer does as work.

I have come to accept this condition, knowing that when I emerge, ready to fête again, ready to hang out again, that I will be welcomed, patted on the back and even gain grudging admiration for insisting on this time to myself in order to create and speak on behalf of fi me people. Paradoxically, although I need the space and time alone, I am never alone when writing. Most times my full attention and subjects are of the very people who begrudge me the space. As a Caribbean writer my material are the people, the neo-colonial condition of our existence and trying to fashion for us, but mostly for myself, another reality, another way of being in the world.

she just neva
satisfy
always ahfi question
everything
often mekin we look
like we bad-minded
or fool-fool
but sometimes
she does talk de truth
we nuh always see de three sides
of things

but is worry we does worry
when she shut sheself up
cause we does love strong

besides
how she can tell we story
if she nuh among us
dis mad woman writer

As a Caribbean woman writer who came of age just prior to independence in 1962, I was raised

with a strong sense of and responsibility to community. Mine was never the luxury of selfish pursuit. My mother drummed into my head, and by her own example, made clear that whatever path I took, whatever career I chose, I had an inextricable responsibility to my Caribbean community, and that I had to give something back, no matter how small. I was told, if not implicitly, that I was expected to work in service of this community and to do less would be to earn the shameful label of being *wuklis*! Perhaps because this was so much a part of my upbringing, I don't even think about presenting a community voice in my work, but it is always present because I am always connected to the circle. Yet, I vehemently oppose prescribing to a writer, (any artist for that matter) or dictating that an artist's work support the cause or revolution, whatever that might look like. However, because of the precarious position of the Caribbean and Africa, because of the insidious nature of the hegemony, cultural imperialism and capitalist greed, as a writer with deep spiritual and ancestral ties to these geographic locations, I would be remiss if I do not in some way address these issues in my work. I would indeed be "wuklis" if my writing does not tackle or interrogate these issues which have devastated our economies, are rapidly altering our way of life and are creating environmental warfare that will ruin our ecological system and destroy the intrinsic beauty of our region.

As a Caribbean woman writer and mother of three children, I must address these issues in my work. I must write in service or in behalf of the community for the simple fact that I have access and I can, whereas many others can't. But I will not write in support of any one party or engage in myopic party politics. I will not use my writing to promote an opportunist or glorify anyone or any condition that attempts to swindle or cheat my people out of their inheritance. I will use my writing to severely criticize those, including my fellow countrywoman and man, who are not working in our best interest. I will use my writing to revive cultural vehicles that I believe to be sustaining and nurturing. I will use my writing to point out our provincialism, our homophobia, our Christian biases, our self-hatred, our colorism, our classism, our many prejudices and divisive ideologies that keep us from progressing as a people and as a world community. I will write to shame us into honoring all of us. I will write to expose those things that we have done to each other to keep each other down. I will use my writing to disclose the tremendous child abuse, misogyny, and wanton unruliness and decline in basic humanity that are destroying our society. I will write to celebrate our tenacity, our generosity of spirit, our marvelous laughter, our bodacious style, our pious grace, quiet humility and our magnanimous humanity. I will write to appeal to my sisters and brothers in South America, Latin America, North America, and Africa to come together and work cooperatively. I will write to call on my people throughout the diaspora to become a united force. I will write and let us revisit the idea of Federation. Let's revisit the Pan-African conference. Let's examine the words that we speak and make sure we are in agreement with the meaning of the words that we utter. Let's listen to each other and learn from each other my sisters and brothers throughout the diaspora. Come and let's sit down and break bread in space, with compassion, with the goal of implementing

changes that will benefit all of us, or at least the majority of us. Yes! I will use my writing in service of my community because that is how I was reared and because my group needs me and others like me to speak for them, to create spaces to bring our voices and concerns to the world at large. My community needs to remind the world that we exist, not as a paradise, a place to escape, bask in the sun and forget about daily concerns, but a place that came into existence struggling, fighting for sovereignty and a right to fashion its own identity.

I am a Caribbean writer and mother of three who wants to ensure that long after I have passed into another life there will still be an independent place known as the Caribbean that my children and their children to the tenth generation can call home and will be safe, free and nourished by this place. This should also be the goal of all writers and artists, but especially those writers of Caribbean and African ancestry. The community, I have discovered, is not there to thwart the writer's goals, but rather, to ensure that we do not speak a language that obfuscates, demeans, or shrouds our children in victimization. The community is not unwilling to grant us space to acknowledge our work. Often they are generous and congratulatory of us as we are to them.

is you we clappin fah
is you we want fi big-up
because yuh show we
de best of weself
yuh mek we ave big talk
and big ideas
and yuh sey it likē how
we sey it but nicer
and yuh write it so
we can understand it
so is yuh we clappin fah
yuh is our writer and poet and artist
is all ah oonuh who show we
de best and worse of weself
nuff respect

I, the writer, am still writing, not always isolated or locked away from the noise and the drama of Caribbean life. Sometimes I am there in the midst, whether sitting at a bus stop, eating at a restaurant, driving down the street, or shopping in the market. I am arrested by an action, a gesture, a smile, a tone of voice that demands that I capture and interpret what I see. I, the writer, remove myself from the community at times, but it always welcomes me back because it knows I write out of love, respect and urgency to share our stories.

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Calabash

is writer she is me dear
can tell a story can't done
yuh neva hear anything suh
she seh is we same one
she get it from
but how she tell it
mek it sound brand new
is boss writer dat

