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**SOUL-JAHS:
AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY
CARIBBEAN POETRY IN ENGLISH**



The Trinbagonian poet E.M. Roach was nagged by a feeling that if poetry was really important then there should be an audience for it. He believed poetry belonged not to the individual but to the community. When he published and read his work he thought he heard only a soft reverberation. He doubted if there was an audience at all. Roach lamented his own sense of disconnection from Caribbean poetry and Caribbean poets so deeply that he abandoned writing and eventually killed himself.

What is it about poetry; a gathering of words onto a page, this thing attempting to be a sculpture and a song at once; that might cause us to invest our lives in it? A poem is only an effort of a thing. How can that save? “If the poem could open itself out and be wide” begins Edward Baugh in his hope for fearless love even for the unworthy. “If”...but he does not tell us what. “If the poem could be patient and wide as this evening”...then would we all be saved? Would we all know love? How might poetry do the work Roach needed?

Rachel Mordecai in her “Ages of Innocence” (published in the Caribbean Review of Books, August 2006) argues that the poet’s task is this: “to bear meticulous witness.” The language here is important. Certainly we have heard the term, but pay attention: ‘bear’ suggests carrying, suggests a heavy weight. Not only seeing or recording but taking it with you. The word meticulous is a vital addition. One must be careful. One must be thorough. One must do it well. A friend once said learning to write should be

like learning to be a surgeon—it should be taken seriously as a practice. Yes. You have to observe first. You have to study under the more experienced. You have to practice on dead things. You have to be blessed with good hands. Go even further: You have to be very careful—you can kill people or you can save people. Opal Palmer Adisa’s “Both Sides” says that “Only a woman bent on suicide would fall in love. The/ very description—fall in—signals a fatal act.” We have to be willing to face the fatality to be saved by the love. The poem has to be brave.

Alwin A.D. Jones quotes Mary Blake saying poets are “soul-jahs.”

Jones shows in his “Rock City’s *Rock Lounge: The Poetics and Aesthetics of Community*” that there is an audience for Caribbean poetry. In quoting David Sawissa, Jones says “What brings together a seven-year old, a college student, a custodial worker, a radio personality, a published writer and a university professor? Poetry.”

Some of the poems in this special issue tend towards nature. The Caribbean has its Emersons. We know ourselves through the land: Delores Gauntlett’s “Doctorbird,” Hyacinth Hall’s “Dry Season,” Ralph Thompson’s “Seasons,” Earl McKenzie’s “A Discovery of Mangoes,” and others.

Music is in abundance. Kei Miller offers the “Book of Songs.” There’s reggae from Althea Romeo-Mark, jazz and the blues from Adziko Simba, parang from Lelawatee Manoo-Rahming, a St. Kitts song of remembrance from another Roach—this time Tregenza. The musician is present as poet: rapso with Paula Obe, dub poetry with Everton Sylvester. This, perhaps, is how the Caribbean poet is most experienced—through a rhythmic reverberation. To be heard at Rock Lounge in the Virgin Islands or Izahvibe in Trinidad or Calabash in Jamaica. The West Indian is constantly building more communities by being living in various world communities: England, the US, Canada, Africa and the West Indies, publishing and reading in even more places.

The Caribbean is still a space of transience and change, a place that is still the amazing thing of a culture being born, right here in modern times (gem for anthropologists and writers). We are a region of migrants and immigrants. Puerto Ricans live in the air, goes one saying. We move. From Barbados to St. Maartin. From St. Kitts to Santo Domingo. And the most radical move both in body and spirit has always been the move to the cold, colonial countries. This period of Caribbean history, the migration,

is not over. Perhaps it is now part of what it means to be Caribbean. Brooklyn or Miami might vie just as convincingly for “Capital of the Caribbean” as Kingston or Port-of-Spain. There are two poems in this gathering entitled “Exile” one by Basil Warner, the other by Raymond Mair.

Contemporary Caribbean poets, like good surgeons, study under the more experienced: George Lamming, Louise Bennett, Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire and even Joseph Brodsky are paid respect in these poems. Walcott is mentioned in more than one poem and Mark McMorris offers an essay on “Encountering Walcott after the 1970s.” In this collection there are teachers present alongside students. Many of the younger poets can count Eddie Baugh, Mervyn Morris or Kwame Dawes among their mentors. Baugh and Morris both appear in the collection. This means something: That not only is there an audience, a community, of Caribbean poetry, but there might also be something of a family.

Here is the quiet fearful truth.

In the community fire everything gets blazed: “straw dolls, *Hey Mon*/T-shirts, African statues made in Japan...the cries or *Prettygirl*/and Walcott poems.” This is Christian Campbell’s “A Dream of Fire.” A dream where poetry is hawked on the street besides “knock-off Louis Vitton bags.” There is something very beautiful and very radical about this. Dear E.M. Roach, this is the thing that was so soft you couldn’t hear. This is the thing that is saving us.