Irline François

Unchaining the Unconscious
An Interview with Patricia Powell

IF: Do you see yourself as part of a common Caribbean literature? Which Caribbean writers were you familiar with when you began to write?

PP: I grew up listening to Miss Lou on the radio and also to a radio play that came on in the evenings called Dulcemeena. My family also ran a shop which was the center of our little village and people would come, men mostly, and they would drink and smoke and burst open their wounds right there at the counter – they talked and argued vehemently about everything, about love, about politics, about God. Even before I could read and write, radio plays and these scenarios enacted by these men night after night were my first introduction to human drama. Later on I would see them written out as stories. We used a West Indian Reader in my English class at high school and I remember reading Naipaul and Salkey and Selvon and others. Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* which was also a favorite of mine, especially when I thought I wanted to be a preacher.

IF: Do you feel a tension between Jamaican Creole and Standard English when you write?

PP: It's a beautiful tension that I've had to negotiate in different ways with each book. *Me Dying Trial* for example poured out of me in Creole and could not be 'tamed' into Standard English, no matter how much I tried, the language remained stiff, the characters would not come alive and sing, the story was as flat as a board. With *A Small Gathering of Bones,* I was trying to find a hybrid language, one that was palatable to both my North American and Jamaican audiences. It was important to me that the book felt Jamaican, it was a gay Jamaican story after all and I wanted to capture that sense of place with the language. In the case of *The Pagoda*, Lowe's language would've been a Cantonese inflected nineteenth century Jamaican English. But I was already writing across race, trying to mimic language felt like an even more dangerous act of transgression. With that novel I used Standard English for the narration, but when the characters lapsed into dialogue, Lowe included, and all the Indian and Chinese immigrants as well, everyone spoke the contemporary Creole. In this most recent work, *The Fullness of Everything*, I switch back and forth, using Creole in the dialogue for the Jamaican speakers.

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IF: There is a Chinese woman as a stowaway in *The Pagoda*. Is this historically accurate? Chinese women were not recruited to go to the Caribbean? In the case of East Indians, the records show that quite a few women come to the Caribbean.

PP: While I was doing the research in Kingston for *The Pagoda*, I did not find records of women who had come to Jamaica as stowaways. In fact what I found was an official notice saying that Chinese laws did not permit women to leave China, only men could leave. Maxine Hong Kingston's, *China Men,* has a woman who is a stowaway so that was very helpful to me. It meant that it wasn't impossible. And there are some films too that I found. What was interesting, though, is that as I traveled with the novel, people would tell me that their female ancestors had come to Jamaica as stowaways. I don't think it was very common, but it certainly happened. And then a few weeks ago I received a note from Professor Belinda Edmonson that said she'd found actual evidence in her own research that some Chinese women did come to Jamaica as stowaways. I was happy about that – Lowe wasn't alone in her adventures.

IF: Did you feel that it was important that cross-dressing be addressed in Caribbean literature? Have there been other West Indian writers who have treated the subject?

PP: Michele Cliff's Harry/Harriet in *No Telephone to Heaven* is a bit of a cross-dresser I suppose. But no, when I initially conceived of *The Pagoda* I had no intention of writing about a cross-dresser. I stumbled into that decision by accident. I had been for several days doing research in Kingston and had pretty much mapped out the book in a vague kind of way, it would be a story about a woman who leaves China and goes to Jamaica to live. But then when I discovered that Chinese women weren't allowed to leave China, I was pretty disappointed because I'd just written a novel peopled by men *(A Small Gathering of Bones)* and I wanted to work with a female protagonist this time. After thinking long and hard about this I decided that the only way to get around this problem was to have her cross-dress. And after I made that decision I had to go and do further reading because I really didn't know anything about cross-dressing or passing. But that decision really was the best decision because it not only opened up the novel in new and fascinating ways for me as a writer – the novel for example became a kind of a mystery – but it also gave me this really great way of thinking about how we negotiate shifting identities and how we are always changing ourselves to fit into different situations and how after a while whatever sense we'd had of an authentic self simply dissolves.

IF: Michelle Cliff has denounced the homophobia of Jamaican society and has declared that she does not go back to the island. Do you visit Jamaica?

PP: From time to time I would go back to Jamaica, but it wasn't often – maybe every five or seven years. I think I was a little anxious about how people would respond to my work. But then last year I went back for a month and I fell in love with her all over again. It was very strange. I used to think it was because of the violence and homophobia why I didn't return. And then I used to think it was because of my family who I felt didn't understand me. During all this time of course, I dreamt about Jamaica just about every night and story after story was set there as if I'd never left. And in a way it feels as if I reside there still, well, my unconscious resides there still, and sometimes I feel as if my unconscious rules my life with great tyranny which is not a very good thing. But then last year I went back for a month, and I fell in love completely with the place and I can't even say what it was exactly – I mean what is it that you really fall in love with when you fall in love with a place or with a person? And so it's hard for me to say what it was about Jamaica. And maybe it wasn't even one thing, but an entire host. Maybe it wasn't even Jamaica itself I'd fallen in love with, but with young, small pieces of myself I'd left there that were just now returning to me and attaching themselves. Whatever that was inside this love made everything glow. The place was beautiful to me in a way I'd never seen it before. It was a trip perfect in every way. And now that I've had that experience, I'm hoping my unconscious will unchain me.

IF: How were your novels received in Jamaica? Especially *A Small Gathering of Bones* with its explicit sex scenes between two men, two men dreaming of having a family, the strong mother-son scene etc.

PP: I don't really know how the novels are received in Jamaica. I think they are read and studied at the University. I've read some of the essays written by scholars there. They've all been pretty positive and I learn a lot when I read them.

IF: In *A Small Gathering of Bones*, you describe a homosexual man teaching the Bible study class. This juxtaposition works well in the novel, but does this also mean that homophobia in Jamaica depends on the religious culture of the country?

PP: When I was growing up in Jamaica all the gay people I knew were deep in the church. We attended young people's meetings on Friday evenings, Sunday school Sunday mornings, and stayed on for mid-day

service which lasted until 2 p.m. We sang in the choir, we took up collection, we preached at the pulpit and led bible study, we visited the sick and prayed at the bedside of the dying, we offered communion. The more worried we became of our budding desires the more staunchly religious we'd become. I don't think it was God we feared so much; it was our very own church people who would persecute us. After I came out, the first fight I had with my mother wasn't about being a lesbian; it was because I no longer wanted to go to church. I was sixteen. And I did not return to church for twenty years. There was so much untangling to do, especially the self-hate, and the belief I had that I was bad and that God had no use for me. I think homophobia strives because people are afraid to speak up, gay and straight alike; I think we are afraid of the violence. The pressure to conform is great. I wonder why that is. Sometimes I think if we started talking about homosexuality, we'd have to start talking about heterosexuality as well. And if we started talking about heterosexuality we have to talk honestly about how we treat each other in the name of love, and how we violate each other sexually and physically, we would have to talk about the way we feel about our bodies and how our bodies are treated by men and women alike, and we would have to talk about love. I think we'd have a lot of talking to do.

IF: The theme of violence is ever present in your novels, and permeates your latest novel, *The Fullness of Everything*. Do you view violence as an inescapable aspect of Caribbean history and society at large?

PP: I think often of how that land has been ravished by pain and violence, starting with the Spaniards who slaughtered the natives, and then all those years of slavery and indentureship. I think often of that land and whether it has ever healed, that land that has held so much suffering, and I wonder if we, its inhabitants, are immune to that suffering or if we are tainted too. In this novel I tried to envision what it might look like if one person in a family that is plagued by violence tries to stop that violence. And then I even went one step further. I tried to imagine what was the source of violence for the characters, what was it in them, in the environment, that made them want to lash out? What is it we are truly, desperately seeking but can't seem to find? What is the source of our unfulfillment, our frustration, and if we can locate it, and fill ourselves, will that stop us from lashing out at ourselves and each other?

IF: With the exception of your semi-autobiographical novel, *Me Dying Trial,* the main characters of your novels thus far are men, is there a connection between men and violence, do you find male characters more compelling to write?

PP: Sometimes I need the distance to be able to see things a little bit more clearly, and writing from the point of view of a man has given me that distance. Women are too close to me, and I often feel as if I can see them as clearly or as critically. I experience a similar dilemma with non-fiction. I find that I can be more honest, more truthful in fiction, I can expose more, but with non-fiction all I feel is a great inhibition. In the case of *The Fullness of Everything*, I definitely wanted to write about men dealing with sexual abuse. Often times I hear men say, about sexual abuse, Oh, that is woman things! And then they stop talking about it, which doesn't necessarily mean they're not troubled by it, but nothing gets done. It's the women who have to speak up. So I wanted to look at how it affects men, especially given the fact that they are so often the perpetrators. I wanted to look at how they experience and deal with it in their own lives, in their own families. Finally, I just want to add that when I write a male character, or a female character for that matter, I'm not necessarily thinking of them as either male or female. At a certain point in the writing, gender falls away, and only the essence of the character comes through, and it is from that pure place that the information comes.

IF: What is your emotional attachment to the Caribbean at the same time your physical distance from it, especially since you moved to the San Francisco Bay area a few years ago?

PP: I lived in Boston for 26 years and during the last seven I tried desperately to leave and somehow couldn't. I think it has to do with how difficult leaving Jamaica was for me. When I moved to Boston from Jamaica it was to live with my birth mother for the very first time in my life. And within a year after I left Jamaica my great aunt who had raised me from the time I was three months old died. I think once I landed in Boston, a part of me couldn't bear the thought of uprooting again to go anywhere. I love the Bay. I have to say that outside of Jamaica it's the most beautiful place ever. I live near the sea in a village of only 7,000 people. There are mountains and forests around, and there are these slender, elegant eucalyptus trees which I love and also these great mammoth grandfather trees called the red woods which are incredible. But even though I'm even farther away, Jamaica is still very present, in my stories of course, in my dreams, in my longings for certain foods, certain sounds, light at a particular time of day.