

*Michela A Calderaro*

**“A SPACE OCCUPIED BY SWIRLING  
CARIBBEAN WATERS”  
AN INTERVIEW WITH OPAL PALMER ADISA**



OPAL PALMER ADISA embodies what many of us would like to achieve, but only few do: She is a world-renowned poet and writer, a professor of creative writing and literature, *and* a loving mother. Born in Kinston, Jamaica, she lives in the United States and frequently visits Jamaica, whose presence is felt throughout her stunning stage performances as well as her body of work – poetry, stories and non-fiction publications.

An important aspect of her poetry is the use of Creole, which she views as means to assert an identity – the Caribbean identity; indeed, the use of Creole allows her “to infuse the poem with all of the smells and colors of home.” The issue of *language* – of which language to use in her poetry – is directly influenced by the notion that a free people cannot fully express itself in the language of its oppressor. Moreover, since language reflects a certain set of values and a defined culture, Opal employs it, with all its thrilling sensuality, to challenge the colonial haughty righteousness and asserts the carnality of smells, colors, rhythms and tradition – the whole Caribbean world.

But not only is Opal Palmer Adisa one of the most accomplished artists of her generation, she is also a *committed* artist: she is the co-founder of Watoto Wa Kuumba, a children’s theatre group which she directed from 1979 to 1991; she is the parenting editor and host of KPFA Radio

Parenting show in Berkley, California; she conducted workshops in elementary and high schools, museums, churches, community and juvenile centers; and she even moved to West Oakland for seven years to be part of the “Tales of a Forgotten Glory: West Oakland Senior Citizen Oral History Project.”

The list of her publications is quite long, including such notable works as *I Name Me Name* (poetry collection), Peepal Tree Press, October 2007; *Until Judgement Comes* (short story collection), Peepal Tree Press, March 2007; *Eros Muse* (poetry and essays), Africa World Press, March 2006; *Caribbean Passion* (poetry collection) Peepal Tree Press, 2004; *The Tongue Is a Drum* (poetry/jazz CD with Devorah Major), 2002; *Leaf-of-Life* (poetry collection) Jukebox Press, 2000; *It Begins With Tears* (novel) Heinemann, 1997; *Tamarind and Mango Women* (poetry collection) 1992; *Fierce Love* (poetry/jazz recording with Devorah Major), 1992; *Traveling Women* (short story collection), 1989; *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories* (short story collection), 1986; *Pina, The Many-Eyed Fruit* (children’s book) 1985.

**MICHELA:** Opal, this interview is long overdue, and with so much time passing it’s only natural that the list of questions I would like to ask you has grown very long. I would like to begin with the physical urge a reader experiences reading your poetry to stand up and sing and dance. Your words seem to sing, or one might say they should be sung rather than merely read. Would you agree with this interpretation?

**PALMER ADISA:** I wish I were a singer then I would sing my poems; I think they would sound very moving as songs, but I speak them, with passion and lots of rhythm. I am glad that you hear them as songs and dance; they have lots of movement, and I suspect that is what you hear. I try and hope that non-Caribbean readers will hear the beat of the Caribbean as they read them, the waves, the swaying of the palm trees, the gusto of the people.

**MICHELA:** The music and rhythm that inform your work take us into a whole new world of sensuous colors, sounds and smells, reflecting local identity, culture, landscape and history. Could you tell us more about the use of Creole, or Nation Language, in your writing? I’m thinking of “Where I Come From,” but also “Fi Me People,” among many other poems.

**PALMER ADISA:** I have just returned, last month, from a conference at The University of the West Indies honoring Louise Bennett. Bennett as you may know, for many years was not recognized as the talented poet that she is because of her insistence on using Nation Language or Creole. I have to credit Bennett for granting me permission, so to speak, to write in Nation Language, because it was her usage that allowed me to see the beauty of our language. Moreover, there are just some things that don't have the same sense of intimacy or color if not said in Nation language. So for example, the two poems you cite are rooted in the culture that to say or write them in standard English, it seems to me, would be to eradicate the very people I am celebrating. I use nation language when it is the only way and the best way to get my point across, to say what I mean from the center of my navel. But I also use it, to interrupt and disrupt standard English as a reminder to myself that I have another tongue, but also to jolt readers to listen and read more carefully, to glean from the language the Caribbean sensibilities that I am always pushing, sometimes subtly, other times more forcefully. Nation language allows me to infuse the poem with all of the smells and colors of home.

**MICHELA:** In your opinion, is there such a thing as a Caribbean aesthetics? If there is, what is it that makes it Caribbean?

**PALMER ADISA:** I will readily say yes, there is a Caribbean aesthetic, but of course defining it requires careful thought. The question is partly rhetorical because if there is a region called the Caribbean, then it follows that such a place, populated with people, would have a specific culture and therefore that culture, as long as it is not stagnant, then would have its own cosmology and aesthetics. Now to try and define, rather theorize, what that is without citing icons such as Bob Marley, Rastafarianism, ackee and salt-fish, requires intellectual engagement. Caribbean aesthetic involves a feeling of ownership, of defiance, of belong; it's the symbiotic relationship between the people and the entire environment, which is often personified and is an active agent that participant in the people's lives. The aesthetic's motto can be said to be: The ability "fi tek bad things mek laugh." In other words, the people's refusal to lay down and die, or to allow hard times and sadness to determine the range of their lives. Instead, the people use these challenges to laugh at themselves as well as life, thereby being able to recoup their losses and go forth. Caribbean aesthetics involves physical gestures as well, which speak volumes... I love to observe the interaction, the bodily communication; it is simply marvelous in its innuendos and inferences.

**MICHELA:** Your poetry has a gender, and it is distinctly ‘female,’ how can we define the female Caribbean aesthetics of your poetry? Is there a difference between female and male aesthetics?

**PALMER ADISA:** Absolutely! While women and men in the Caribbean share a common landscape and even language (but here again there are decidedly female and male words and phrases), they occupy separate arenas. Although my last collection, *Until Judgment Comes*, 2007, is about seven different Jamaican men, for the most part I write about women, the world I am most familiar with. And even in that collection, it is through the elderly woman, the “Teachment” section which connects those stories, that I am really able to fully access those men – I come to know them by the information she shares that piques my interest. But to respond to your question about the female aesthetic of my poetry, I have to say I always see Jamaican women as “big women,” not in terms of physical size, but in terms of their heart, their desire, their independence and defiance – the way they take on life, determined to win at all cost. They are philosophical, keen observers, always have something to say about everything – their words as sweet as neaseberry or as piercing as a red ant bite. Mostly, what I tune into is their zeal; their interplay with their men and children, their friendships with each other and their single-mindedness to achieve their goals – they will not be turned back.

**MICHELA:** Motherhood, in relation to both ‘creatures’ of flesh and blood and ‘creatures’ of the mind, is a recurrent theme in your work. You are a mother, a poet, a performer: How do you combine all these roles and how hard is it to be a good writer *and* a good mother?

**PALMER ADISA:** It is a challenge to be good at both, and I hope my children, to some degree, would concur that I have been a good mother. These two ventures are so closely connected to who I am and I think, now that I reflect back, I came to both as a similar age. I believe it was between my eight and ninth birthday that I knew I wanted to be a writer, and it was also at that time that I began dreaming of being a mother, and knew with certainty that I would do both. The essay in *Eros Muse*, “The Swelling of a Womb/The Forging of a Writer,” is really a blueprint for how I have accomplished both. My desire to share all these stories/ideas with my children, to leave them a true legacy of who I am/was, also fuels the work. It is not easy, but it is possible. I have been more prolific since I have been a single mother (for the last thirteen years) than when I

was married. It also means I have or have trained very wonderful children to support me in my work. But the truth is I have to write; if I don't it's like fever burning me up from inside out. So between motherhood and writing, you have my total life, very little room for much else. I love my children, and I am proud of each of them, but I am also happy that two are out of the house; well my son who just began college still has one foot home, so to speak, but my older daughter is done with undergraduate, lives in another city and is doing her own thing; my youngest daughter has only one more year in high school, then I am truly free to focus almost all of my attention on my work.

**MICHELA:** Writers bring diverse experiences into their work, at times borrowing from their own life, at others creating characters whose perceptions and points of view are far from their own, still rendering their story real and believable.

How does a writer achieve the necessary distance while at the same time bringing together, in the act of writing, the historical, the biological, the social, the personal?

**PALMER ADISA:** While I have written a number of creative non-fiction essays, I have not really culled from my personal life experience, (well expect as reference point for much of my poetry), for the body of my work. While a personal memory may jolt or prompt an idea, I am always seeking multiple perspectives, to find another way to come at the event/situation. I eavesdrop. I keenly, even unconsciously listen to people wherever I go, I watch them, I make up stories about them, I weave them into things I am writing, I rework them to be who I want them to be, to say what I think the moment or situation demands. I don't really have any problems distancing my life from what I write, because in many ways they are parallel stories that never intersect. However, very often, readers/the public, assumes that I write about my life, and I am getting closer to being able to do that either in fiction or as a memoir or even an autobiographical novel. Yet because of the way my mind works, my penchant for making up things, I suspect that even in such work I will invent myself and my life the way I want to portray myself, which I think is a writer's prerogative. Of course, what I am about to say next might seem contradictory to the above, but I don't think there are these clean lines of demarcation between the historical, the biological, the social, or the personal. In truth they always intersect, some places more closely than others. In my work, I am very conscious of this craft, and how I can use it to manipulate and even skew a specific point of view. I am at heart and at labor a seducer, seducing the reader to believe or identify with a certain character,

based on the truth that I have set forth. I am able to achieve this seduction by peeping into many windows then compressing all I have seen and have learnt into a language that gives the reader a sense of fair-play, but all along, I, the writer, control the field. All that aside, I would like to think of myself as a fairly open-minded person, predisposed to justice and truth, an advocate for the underdog – I credit my colonial experience for this bias—and an eternally optimist, who is not only able to see the good in any and every situation, but is also able to salvage and hold up the good as beacon of hope to others. Believe it or not, a writer is always at the center of every work she produces, but she must get out of her own way, and the way of the characters and stories in order for the work to really live and have impact on readers. She must create a distance, and exercise judgment so that the necessary historical, social, political and personal data that belongs and feeds the works can be woven in flawlessly.

**MICHELA:** Poets and writers, many argue, are passive observers of society who shy away from direct active roles. We've seen, though, a number of writers who have enrolled their art in the service of their communities. Would you share your thoughts about the role of an artist in society?

**PALMER ADISA:** My work is closely aligned with my community and the hopes I have for it, and for the future of the world. I believe those of us from certain geographic regions and who emerged out of a of a specific era, and who understand that without community we are nothing, so our writing serves and helps to promote and offer viable alternatives for our respective communities. I don't have or certainly don't want to have the luxury to be disengaged, to only be concerned with my own personal narcissistic issues. While I insist on autonomy, and that writers/artists' themes/forms should not be prescribed or dictated either by community or political governments, I will assert that it is irresponsible for a writer/artist not to be connected to and feel some kind of affinity with a community, and therefore, whose work in some way interfaces and connects with said community.

**MICHELA:** Talking about the poet's role in society, I cannot but bring forth your involvement with the "Tales of a Forgotten Glory: West Oakland Senior Citizen Oral History Project." Can you tell us more about this experience?

**PALMER ADISA:** I learned a great deal about Oakland, and the African American community

there: where the people came from, and why they came – the personal stories, not just the historical events, WWII and the desire for a better life that prompted such migration-- doing that project. It was a real eye-opener for me to sit with these seniors, many for two to four hours and just listen to them talk. I wished some youths were with me so they could hear how their fore-parents dealt with obstacles, how they believed in themselves, how they worked together, how they daily and yearly believed in their dream and worked assiduously to make their dreams a reality. I learned things about racism and just the triumph of the spirit that I never knew existed in Oakland. I interviewed about fifty seniors, but I focused on twenty-three, and had their stories weaved into a coherent whole. I would like to do similar projects like this in Jamaica. Erna Brodber has done that kind of oral/historical narrative of her community, Woodside, St Mary. I have always wanted and hope I will have the opportunity to do it with the Fishing Community at Hellshire, in St. Catherine, with what remains of Caymans Estate where I spent many formative years and with my mother's village, Johnshall, St. James and my father's birthplace, Aboukir, St. Ann.

**MICHELA:** The act of naming, as in “Indigenous,” from the *Caribbean Passion* collection, plays an important role in your poetry. Could you explain why it is vital to take on this task?

**PALMER ADISA:** We were robbed of so much, not just our lineage, our family names, but the very place where we now live; most of us don't know the real names, and are still unlearning the erroneous history of enslavement and colonization. as you know, much of Caribbean literature is about reclaiming , excavating and retrieving. “Indigenous,” is important as part of that project of standing on what we know, and deciding who we want to be from now on, from a place of knowledge, rather than ignorance or mis-information.

**MICHELA:** Writing is often defined as a private act, performed preferably in isolation. Would you agree with such a definition?

**PALMER ADISA:** Yes, for the most part it is private, and as I get older and my children are almost grown I need solitude more. When they are away I go for weeks without ever turning on the TV or even the radio. There is enough noise inside my head; it is always busy turning over one idea or the other, I don't need or want outside intrusion. Sometimes I think I could be a recluse most of the times, happy with my own thoughts. But I do enjoy social engage, to *lime*

and just enjoy good laughs with friends. However, I find I don't produce a lot when my house is jumping with activities and there are too many distractions. I used to be able to work with lots of interruptions and distractions when my children were young, but now I require and demand solitude. It's not so much that writing is private, but rather that the writer needs to be able to listen and to hear her characters, and if necessary to talk to them, to interrogate them, and to try out stuff that the characters are doing so she can best describe their actions. If one were to put a camera and observe me when I am working for long stretches of time, on a story or novel, then one might think me mad, as I get up and walk about and seemingly talk to myself and engage in various gestures as I try to visualize the room the character is in within the story and how they occupy the space. That is what requires privacy, the transporting of yourself into those various spaces as you try to write about them, when you have never really inhabit such a space. The title story, "Until Judgment Comes," presented me with such challenges, Jeremiah in all those enclosed spaces. I would not have been able to really feel him, and feel myself into his space if I did not have privacy...

**MICHELA:** *Until Judgement Comes: Stories About Jamaican Men*, is a celebration of love; love for men, love for their frailty and their strength, and of the importance of hearty, fruitful relationships.

I cannot but notice how differently men are portrayed in this collection compared to male personae in other Caribbean women's poetry, where men, fathers, brothers are often the agents of violence and abuse, men who hurt rather than care. Can you elaborate on this?

**PALMER ADISA:** Men as perpetrators and abuser is well chronicled in the Caribbean, but we all know there are men who are soft and caring, and supportive. All too often, what is omitted is that many of the men who are abusers were deeply abused as children, by both mothers and fathers, but many by mothers left alone to make do. How does the emotional, psychological and physical abuse of a boy child impacts his sense of self, his ability to love and trust women once he becomes an adult, his ability to care for children, to respond to other crises in his life in a non-violent way? My collection examines these questions, and looks at and portrays men as victims just like women, as human beings trying to forge an identity separate and apart from their painful childhood, and through love, all are able to do this – to risk being alienated from society in order that each might carve out a niche for himself, of his own making. Ebenezer does, as does Devon aka Bad-Boy, as does Jeremiah. Each of these men allow themselves to be



vulnerable, they get in touch with their hurt. I worked so hard, and for a long time to give these men the space to find this light that they each do, to not succumb to the try-and-proven, to branch out on their own, to accept and live their own truth without fear or contrition. Yes, it is love that has amplified this work, and my inherent belief that men can and will change, and be sources of inspiration and compassion. It also helps that I know a number of Jamaican men like this who after divorce, single-handedly, cared for their children, who because they were flogged senselessly as a children, refused to spank their children, who don't womanize, who live meaningful lives in which they support each other and their community. I would like to think I have raised a son who fits this mold, and equally important, I believe there is a man out there, who wants to partner with me in love and compassion who fits this mold, and that daily we will see more men such emerge if we stop "bad mouthing" them, if we give them a chance, encourage them in their growth and transformation. Writing is very powerful, and especially in these times, we have to be conscious of what we are writing into being. These men are from a deep and abiding consciousness of fashioning important links and harmonious connections between men and women, regardless of our sexual preferences.

**MICHELA:** Talking about violence and abuse, it is impossible not to think of the violence brought to the Caribbean islands by colonization, a theme that is recurrent, though in different ways, in the works of most Caribbean writers. The stripping of culture and language, the rape of land, bodies and minds, the attempt at depriving a whole people of its dignity – how can poetry helps coming to terms with this terrible history.

**PALMER ADISA:** I am wrestling with that now in my still to complete collection, *Crossing*, which is the story of my great, great maternal grandmother and how she came to be enslaved, and how she survived the middle passage. It is mostly imaginative, although I have been doing historical research. What poetry and literature written by Caribbean people do is make the violence palatable, remind us that we are not mad and didn't imagine or exaggerate it, that it was worse than we could have every imagined yet we survived. The poetry reinforces our strength, our resilience, our right to be present in the New World as this time, but it also forces us to be conscious of what we underwent to come out on this side. Those of us who understand evolution are not surprised or amazed by this new wave of violence that is occurring all over the Caribbean and the Black Diaspora, as it is inevitable given how we were introduced into the new world, and the tremendous silencing that was imposed on us about our horrific experience.

More is being written now about enslavement and more will be written, and each new work will add to the healing. I truly believe it is the poetry and fiction that will allow us to heal the wounds of enslavement and write a new and more holistic future that is free of violence.

**MICHELA:** In *Eros Muse*, the whole sequence of poems dedicated to “Muse,” offers us an example of meta-poetry. Was this a conscious decision that came prior to putting pen to paper or did the poems “dictate” their own *form* while you were writing?

**PALMER ADISA:** I truly did mediate and reflect on who or what my muse is, and it came to me very clearly, perhaps because sex is an important aspect of who I am, that my muse was a lover, not just any lover, but an ardent, faithful, adventurous lover, a combination of some of the men in life, but also having qualities of my ideal man, that I have not yet met, but have certainly imagined. After that it was easy, all of the poems then explored an aspect of our relationship as it relates to writing and sex, as here again, both go together in some profound and sensual ways. However, the form the poems took was more organic and each emerged raw, without prior decision before my fingers touched the keyboard.

**MICHELA:** How would you define your own journey from *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories* to *Until Judgement Comes*?

**PALMER ADISA:** LAUGHTER....Not sure I can...well although there is a twenty plus year difference between these collections, once I completed *Bake-face* I knew I wanted to write the companion stories about the men, but it took me that long to figure out the men, or rather to be willing to let them tell their stories without my feminist interjection and interpretation. Sometime in the future I would like both of these books to be printed as one collection...They are really meant to be read together as companion pieces. They are the same story, just different side of the coin, so to speak. In both instances, the women and the men, equally, are begging to be listened to without interruptions.

**MICHELA:** Can you name a person or persons who have influenced your work, be they writers, artists or ordinary people?

**PALMER ADISA:** I can name writers and other important people, but the profound truth is that my greatest influence has been Catherine, my mother and the Jamaican people. In *Eros Muse*, the essay, “Lying in the Tall Grasses Eating Cane,” mentions my literary influences.

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The discussion of literary heritage and influence is of vital importance in the writing of Opal Palmer Adisa, since, as we’ve mentioned before, it is associated with that of language, which is at the root of Caribbean identity.

Being raised, as she recounts it, “in a colonial society with a British education” she thought that writers were dead white people or people who lived elsewhere and “talked about sleet... and watched daffodils.”

Only while attending a New York high-school did she come across works by such writers as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks and, above all Jean Toomer. It was indeed Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) that led young Opal to become a writer. Turning the last page of that book, she knew what she wanted to do with her life. She would become a writer, she “wanted to write, not in the surreptitious manner that [she] had been engaged in all along, but openly, to share with others.” Later on, her writing and performing career would be strongly influenced by other pivotal encounters. The first was with painter and poet LeRoy Clarke who read her poems and told her she was indeed “a poet”; later came the mesmerizing performance of Sonia Sanchez reading her own poems, which dispelled Opal’s fears about sharing her works with others, reading them aloud, in front of an audience. In fact, it helped Opal Palmer Adisa find her own voice.

Meanwhile the whole of the Caribbean was undergoing radical changes . Works by Caribbean artists had become part of school programs; poets such as Mervyn Morris and Kamau Brathwaite were teaching at the University of West Indies; the atmosphere was inspirational and full of possibilities. Now more attention was being paid to the issue of language. The new poetry needed its own language and Creole language, the dialect of Louise Bennet, was the only means to communicate not only the rhythm and pulse of Caribbean life, the sensuality and beauty of its landscape, but also the strength of its identity, the depth of its soul. In it, Opal Palmer Adisa, the poet, found her own language.

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*Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters* is an international literary journal dedicated to publishing works encompassing, but not limited to, the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. The Journal is especially dedicated to presenting the arts and letters of those communities that have long been under-represented within the creative discourse of the region, among them: Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, Maroon societies, and the Asian and Amerindian societies of the region. Calabash has a strong visual arts component.

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