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A Search for Caribbean Masculinities

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This is a topic of immense interest and importance to me as my novels are primarily peopled by men - gay men who in the face of AIDS are searching for community and spiritual meaning; straight men who are struggling with love and with intimacy in their relationships with women who want more than just a strong and powerful man, straight men who feel restricted by the legacies of masculinity handed down to them from their fathers; and a Chinese woman who has lived her whole life as a man.

Why this interest in the masculine? It began early. In the Jamaica where I grew up, men had all the power. Or so it seemed to me at the time. They didn't always deserve it or use it well, but by virtue of being male, they were the heads of state, they were the doctors and preachers and farmers and teachers. To me, they were the ones with money, the ones who had access, and the ones with final say. In my family, it was no different. Sometimes in a family dispute, the elder of the clan, if she were female would be consulted, but she would not necessarily have the final word on the decision. My male cousins, my uncles, my brothers, could do anything they wanted. They could make independent decisions about their lives. They could travel abroad to make money and stay there if they wished. They could step out on their wives; they could lie and cheat; they reported to no one.

Did I have penis envy? I not only wanted the master's tools, I wanted his house. I wanted to be powerful. I wanted to have money jiggling in my pocket. I wanted to have the final say over my life. I wanted to be big and loud and powerful in the world, like they were. But I was a girl. There would not be that kind of power and privilege for me in that hot small place. Or so it seemed at the time.

The women around me gave everything to their men, they gave their bodies, their love, their support, their loyalty, and oh how they suffered in love. Women were the ones raped, beaten, violated, betrayed, left, left, and often with their brood of children they raised single-handedly. That's what I saw around me. They were the ones mired in poverty because of their children, they were the ones trying to make ends meet, they were the ones caring for their children, they were the ones working like dogs to hold their families together. They were the ones silenced in church. Silenced in their marriages, silenced in what seemed to me like every important moment of their lives. Who would want that kind of life? I did not want it.

My great aunt who raised me was an old woman by the time I arrived; both her husbands were dead. Every day of my childhood I heard the stories of how she woke early to load the donkey with the produce she had grown on that land which was just a scratch of red dirt then, and how both she and the donkey walked in that predawn dark the five miles to the market where she had a stall. Little by little she saved, she acquired more land, which she farmed and

eventually she built a house and a shop and a church so she could praise her God. Still she was lonely. She missed the second husband who had died early. But she could not imagine marrying again. She would lose everything, she said, everything she had worked for would go to husband. And she was not willing to give away all she had acquired.

I tended both the shop and the church. At the bar, where I worked after school and all day on Saturday and for a few hours on Sundays, I saw it all. The women came early in the morning and left quickly. It was mostly the men who stayed; they drank and talked passionately about politics. Some played dominoes all day. On Sundays I listened to those sermons in our church, and I wanted to be the minister at that pulpit feeding messages of transformation to those people, mostly older women, all of them with hats on and scarves because they had to cover up themselves before the Lord. I wanted to be the one telling them that they could change their lives right here, right now; they didn't have to wait for heaven. Heaven was not going to help them. I wanted to tell them that this poison these ministers are feeding you about being meek, being passive, turning the other cheek, SPIT IT OUT NOW! Maybe my desire to be a preacher/teacher/writer began then. That shop is certainly a major character in all my novels. And after decades of wrestling with that vicious old testament God, I've developed a relationship with him/her now that seems more healthy and responsible and balanced and co-creative.

When I started to write, it was difficult for me to imagine women as heroes of their own lives. And this was probably further complicated by the fact that I had been adopted, so I also couldn't imagine myself as a hero when I was also the found or rescued thing. So I chose men to be in those starring roles. I lived vicariously through them, through what I perceived to be their power, their strength, their greatness in the world. But the thing about writing, the thing about engaging the unconscious, the thing about tapping into the creative source, is that your little ego striving for power can never win, the ego can never get its way. Because as writers, as artists, we are tapping into a source wiser, more balanced, and with a longer memory than we could ever imagine. We are tapping into a source that has a lot more compassion and a greater vision of what we are and can become. If, of course, we are willing to listen. Much of writing is listening, with your ears bent close to the page, and if we are willing to be smashed open by the work. Nadine Gordimer says we don't choose our books, they choose us. We are invited, she says. And once we accept that invitation, anything goes.

Unbeknownst to me, all along, through all those novels peopled by men and through that memoir, the unconscious was slowly, quietly, deliberately leading me back to the self. It was teaching me that I did not have to hanker after the spoils of patriarchy to find power. Penis envy wasn't necessary. There was plenty of power in being female, plenty of power in the feminine. All I had to do

was re-member the missing parts of myself, they would help to bring the balance to my life.

But how could we do that when we live in cultures that not only systematically demonize everything that is feminine but sanctions what is considered appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors which are then upheld by so-called traditions and conventions and the family and the state. Men could be strong and independent and courageous and powerful and intellectual and scientific and rational and smart. But they were not allowed to be sensitive and loving and nurturing and intuitive and soft. Only women were allowed to do that. Similarly women were not allowed to be independent and courageous and powerful. If they were, they were killed. They were burned. They were raped. They were ostracized. They were called bitches and whores and man royals and sodomites. And the men too, if they showed any evidence of possessing these qualities that were considered feminine, they were beaten and shamed and dishonored. In fact from childhood we start training them. We tell them: don't cry; man up. Button up your feelings. Play with guns and not will dolls. Don't wear those colors; don't sit like that; don't walk like that. Don't do anything that vaguely hints at the feminine! This is the kind of environment that breeds men and boys who can't talk about their feelings, who can't hold hands, who can so easily pull out his gun and shoot another man for looking at him seductively, for looking at him as if he were a bitch. This is what it means to be masculine in our world, to deny everything inside that is remotely feminine. Both men and women patrol these behaviors in men and in women.

Patriarchy has not only eclipsed the feminine from the masculine, leaving men severely imbalanced, but it has also deprived women of their unique voice and strength and courage and power. I often think about the plight of women world leader - how few there are. And some so male oriented and conservative in their values, they often seem clones of men, partly because the idea of women in a position of world leadership is unheard of, there are no models; women are often mimicking what they see. Thanks to women's movements all over the world and our shifting evolutionary consciousness, much of that is changing. But we see the gender imbalance everywhere, in all aspects of our social, legal, political and economic institutions. We see it in our relationships with each other. We see it in our relationships with the earth and the environment. We see who is in charge and we see what is valued. And what is not valued has everything to do with the feminine. But the truth of the matter is that the masculine is never truly free until the feminine is also free. And if we want to live in a just and equitable world we have to free ourselves by bringing balance into our lives.

In Chinese philosophy there is the model of the yin and the yang, seemingly contrary forces that are not only interconnected and interdependent in the natural world but also give rise to each other in turn. We know that the

presence of too much yin (feminine) or yang (masculine) in any system can only lead to imbalance and illness. Yin and Yang are complimentary opposites, parts of a whole. So the fact that we live in a world so heavily favored toward the yang speaks volumes about the level of our imbalance. Both the yin and the yang must be adjusted for homeostasis to occur. Therefore our existing patriarchal model must be reconfigured for new and multiple forms/models of masculine and feminine to express themselves. Without that balance in the masculine, there will be excess, there will be pillage and overpowering and greed and destruction. Without balance everything goes awry. This is true for the feminine as well. Without balance she too is prone to the worst aspects of the human self. She too must bring in her masculine. These are archetypes of course. These are principles. But they serve us still today and especially now as we strive for balance.

What is an authentic feminine? This is a question I've been exploring my entire writing life, and paradoxically enough, through my male characters. But another layer of my understanding unfolded while writing my most recent work, a memoir.

The memoir for me was a search for my mother and a way too, I think, of understanding what it means to be my mother's daughter, what it means to be female in the Caribbean and in the world. My mother gave me up for adoption when I was three months old. And even though I knew who she was while growing up, I didn't really know her, anymore than I knew myself, or the man who fathered me. What I found most peculiar about the memoir was the interior odyssey it invited, as if to find the feminine, or to find any authentic aspect of the self, I had to retreat inward, to the world of the unconscious or a foreign country. I also had to engage the "I" more directly, more honestly; putting myself through the eye of the needle so to speak. The self could not be projected outward onto another character, whether masculine or feminine, as I had always done in my novels, the investigation resided with me and me only; I was the center of the investigation. Another thing I found curious was that the memoir turned out to be the most spiritual of all of my books and this observation led me to conclude that perhaps at the heart of an authentic feminine is the sacred – life giving energy.

This search for the feminine (by way of the masculine) is evidenced in all my novels. Very briefly here, I want to trace its trajectory, highlight some of the major conclusions I found and think about the implications of an authentic feminine and masculine for nation building, for adding new perspectives and stories to the collective consciousness of the nation.

I completed my first novel at twenty-two, but even then I was beginning to question the alternatives to conventional womanhood available to Caribbean women. Gwennie, the main character, married and with children, not only has an

affair and child by another man with whom she falls in love, but later on eventually leaves the marriage and migrates to the United States.

Me Dying Trial is by no means a romantic tale. Gwennie's life is not easy. She is not a teenager starting out in a new country with endless possibilities ahead of her. She is older and single and female and black. Her Jamaican education is worth nothing, and she literally has to start over as a live-in domestic saving and saving until she can bring her children to America. Admittedly, my ideas for what was possible for the feminine were limited at twenty-two. I could imagine Gwennie leaving a trapped marriage in search of happiness, but I could only imagine that the happiness would include an affair that would end in further complications - pregnancy. I could imagine her eventually leaving her husband and her country in search of another kind of life, a certain kind of freedom and self-expression, but I couldn't imagine her happy in this other place so far away and foreign from everything familiar. She works a million jobs to make ends meet; the new man she meets is chased away by her children; her religion creates big rifts between her and her gay son.

Still, in my initial search for the feminine, some things became clear. The feminine did not exist outside the self and therefore could not be found in a loveless marriage. Nor could it be found in the restrictive teachings of her religion. And also it could not be found in her close-knit extended family environment, where all the traditional ways of being masculine and feminine were policed and maintained by the family and state. It had to be an internal odyssey. She had to leave everything that was familiar. She had to move to the foreign country inside herself. But I did not understand that yet.

Continuing my search for the feminine, I turned my gaze next to the gay men who peopled *A Small Gathering of Bones*. Gay men, the world over, have been portrayed as betrayers of the patriarchal order. Jamaica is no exception. Gay men love men and as a result are often considered women and in many ways subjected to policing and harassment and sexual and physical violation and victimization the ways in which women everywhere in the world often are. That novel showed me the many ways men could be feminine. Here were men who were lovers and wives and mistresses and homemakers and caretakers and everything imaginable in between. They could be cruel in love and vulnerable too; they were trying to find balance between the fundamental tenets of the religion they held so dear, and their basic human right to love. In the face of AIDS they were creating intentional families and communities that would heal and comfort and support them. In fact it seemed as if it was only in these gay relationships that the feminine aspects of the male self could thrive. There was little room for male femininity to express itself safely in the conventional heterosexual model.

In *The Pagoda*, I unpacked this theme more thoroughly through the figure of Lowe the Chinese woman passing as a male shopkeeper to bypass immigration laws but who comes to live the disguise she has put on. By the end of the novel though, Lowe wants freedom, she no longer wants to live a disguise; she wants to find an authentic self. But what is an authentic self? Who are we without our disguises, our various consciousnesses, who are we outside of our masculine and feminine gender roles? When we remove the clothing and the trappings of race and class, who are we? In fact it's because of Lowe's decision to no longer live as a "man" and the subsequent exposure and vulnerability and unraveling that unfold as a result of that decision, that Lowe becomes a more accessible figure, to the reader and to the other characters in the novel.

In my search for the feminine, it was clear that neither men nor women were free, that the conventional male and female identities as we know them are repressive to us, to an authentic masculine and feminine inside women and an authentic masculine and feminine inside men. And though Lowe may have found at first a certain level of freedom in her male disguise and ability to pass and to have access and perform masculinity, eventually that guise, that mimicry turned oppressive - not because of the fear of being found out, but because to be "masculine" as she understood it and lived it and the society expected, certain parts of her had to be locked down, particularly her emotional life, her emotional intelligence. Lowe wanted something else. And in that search, she becomes more active in the village; she no longer binds her breasts but allows them to fall free; she discards the fake moustache, grows out her hair, wears less restrictive clothing, becomes interested in color, in fabric, in texture; she grows more sociable, begins collecting friends and deepening her intimacy with them; she starts to laugh, life opens up inside her, she allows herself to dream. Feelings that had long been hidden away rush to the surface, filling her and fleshing her out as a more full and embodied person.

The search for the feminine took an even more radical approach in *The Fullness of Everything*. It proposed dismantling altogether that archaic mode of masculinity that no longer serves men nor women. Winston, the history professor who has been estranged from his Jamaican family for thirty years returns home after receiving news that his father is dying. But the minute he arrives, he recognizes again all the reasons why he had left and never looked back. There was a certain kind of ultra masculinity his father espoused, a violence against women passing as power that Winston abhorred. True, his father was a solid provider and protector, he worked hard, they never hungered, they always had a roof over their heads. Still, he ruled and controlled his household with an iron fist, behaving as he pleased, with little regard for their feelings, stifling as best he could any sparks of creativity or independence. He answered only to himself and the woman and children in his care, he violated again and again.

During the years he'd been away, Winston had been developing an internal strength and power of his own brought on by his interest in various alternative forms of spirituality that he practiced with his European girlfriend. This gives him courage to challenge his father, and to challenge this outdated model of masculinity and to put something else in place.

The little girl that the father made elsewhere with another woman and brings home to his wife for her to raise becomes a symbol of the vulnerable feminine self that Winston felt he'd lost back when he was a boy, the effeminate self he'd had to hide in order for his father to respect him. He befriends the little girl, his former self. He falls in love with her all over again. He wants to adopt her and take her back with him to the United States. He wants to raise her so she'll grow; he wants that aspect of himself to flourish. He cannot imagine his life as a complete man without this female aspect of himself also thriving.

At the end of the novel he doesn't exactly kill the father, but he brings about a swift death, and the death of the father's brand of masculinity, one that sees women and girls as objects of his desire only, brings healing to the women and men in the family.

The yearning for balance is a yearning for both the feminine and the masculine within us. It is a yearning for an order, a world order even that is based on equilibrium. A world order in which all of life, not just some, is valued and appreciated and respected. A world order where not just men are in power, but women, too, and where both the masculine and the feminine inside ourselves are empowered and balanced.

Growing up in the church, it was clear that Christianity could tolerate only one vision of the feminine, and that is of the sweet compassionate virgin mother of Jesus. To me though, the stories of Nanny, ferocious woman warrior, were definitely more compelling. I relished the tales of her bravery and might - this African woman who had been sold into slavery but who escaped into the hills upon arrival, joined the maroons, and carried out a bloody campaign against the British. Nowadays when I consider these images of Nanny as courageous warrior skilled at guerilla tactics, brandishing weapons as she fights against the British slavers, they always bring to mind, pictures of Kali and Durga, fierce looking Hindu goddesses, who, armed and ready for battle, fight against inner demons of desire, anger, greed, pride, delusion, jealousy among others and are always victorious. It is said that Nanny possessed "powers", and that these enabled her to catch bullets in her genitals and kill her attackers with them. Perhaps Nanny, like Kali and Durga was filled with what the Hindus call Kundalini, the primal power of the universe, and that she was using hers to fight against the outer demons of slavery. There is considerable disagreement in the Caribbean about what the term obeah really means, partly because it is considered witchcraft by some and by others it is employed for healing and other positive ends. I like to think of obeah

as an essential part of our African/Caribbean cosmology, a fundamental way of knowing ourselves in the world. Hindus refer to inner spiritual power and strength as Kundalini or Shakti, the Chinese call it Chi, in Mexico it's called Quetzalcoatl, in Cuban Santaria it's known as ashe, and I agree with Bob Marley that it is indeed our very own natural mystic flowing.

An authentic feminine then, as I understand it, cannot be something that is outside of ourselves; she is not external to us, in our garb or our performance or our possessions. She is not lipstick and high heels for example and all the outer trappings that we refer to as "feminine". An authentic feminine is not about the biology of being female, real or constructed. It is not about the physical body though feminine energy can move through the body and needs the body for its expression. In my mind, authentic feminine is something more intrinsic, an immense power source that is innate to both men and women and waiting to be tapped. Audre Lorde, in her essay on the Erotic, refers to this power as Eros. It is a power one must acknowledge, activate, cultivate and direct, she says. It is a power that thrives on love, balance and harmony in ourselves and in the world.

The masculine too, like the feminine, is not a look, it's not trousers and boots, and a commanding presence, it is not power, or a loud voice, or virility. It is not strength and bravery, it is not your money; it is not wealth. Though those can be aspects of masculinity as they can be of femininity. Think Nanny. Eva Perriakos in the *Pathwork Lectures*, says that the masculine energy can be considered an outward energy, one that is active, it activates, it sets in motion, it determines, it is a doing energy. Similarly the feminine energy is receptive, inward; it holds and nurtures. But an action/outward energy can only be destructive or exaggerated if it doesn't also use the receptive qualities of stillness, of quiet, of harmony to give it balance. The same is true for receptive qualities. They can have a deadening effect if they are not balanced by the active masculine principles of alertness, wakefulness, etc, that would make those qualities alive and in harmony.

The masculine is energy. A current. It is available to men and women. We can all tap into it, men and women alike, giving us precisely what we need at the moment. True masculine energy is also balanced energy, without the distortions of patriarchy. It is not unlike the current of love. We open ourselves to love - not masculine love or feminine love - we open ourselves to love.

Masculine energy isn't any more the domain of men than feminine energy the domain of women. We need both. Men do not embody it in greater ways, in greater forms and women in lesser ways. Men and women have different body forms, different purposes that engender this energy differently and complementarily. And always in balance. Similarly, the energy of the feminine is for both men and women in a balanced way. For men to get closer to a more

balanced masculine they must remove all fears of the feminine and welcome them. A true masculine requires returning the feminine to itself.

We must actively begin to cultivate this balance in ourselves. Only then can we heal the split between feminine and masculine, only then can we remember that we are indeed both. We must start the courtship now between these archetypes within ourselves. And as the feminine develops, takes up more room in our psyche and in our physical bodies, reconfigures our internal and external workings, the prevailing masculine energy must also reconfigure itself. It has no choice. Change only brings more change. There cannot be an authentic feminine for women, if the prevailing feminine model comes out of the prevailing masculine model. The old masculine as we know it, patriarchy, must transform, so new and multiple forms/models of masculinity and femininity can express themselves.

What then does this imply for nation building and for self-rule in the Caribbean and in the Caribbean imagination? It means turning to the feminine as a way of moving forward. So many of our societies are heavily patriarchal. But by turning to the feminine, which will then reconfigure both the masculine and feminine inside us, we are turning to balance, we are turning to harmony, we are turning to a mindset that values life, that sees all life as valuable and sacred. Not just the lives of those who are white or light-skinned or wealthy or heterosexual or powerful or male or two legged, but all life and all life forms.

As writers we can begin this process with the way we know best, through stories. Stories as we know carry energy. And old stories that carry the template of the old values we still hold dear, those old values that uphold one race over another, one gender over another, people of a particular class over others, those old stories can keep us stuck in primitive and destructive patterns, they can make us ill, they can keep us comfortable and complacent and myopic.

We can infuse the feminine into our stories to create change. We can infuse this marriage of the feminine and masculine into our stories to create balance. A new story can help bring about a shift in consciousness. A new story can restore balance and harmony in our lives. A new story can reconfigure the psyche, can heal us, transform us, and create social change in our societies. New stories can be salve. They can be the antidote to the ills we know and face daily. They can affect our states of mind. They can help us thrive. Through pet scans scientists are finding out the brain shows different patterns of blood flow when we are happy and when we are depressed. Since the brain can regulate everything in the body, when the brain changes, so does the body. What new stories can we tell to ignite joy in the brain, to change perceptions of the world, to change how we perceive our experiences?

Here is an example of a new riff on an old story of the middle passage and slavery. It was narrated to me during an ancestral healing at a shamanic workshop

and has stayed with me ever since. This new riff seeks to infuse into the old story of greed and disregard for human life a new template that heals, nurtures, celebrates life and human dignity, and respects freedom. If slavery is a direct by-product of patriarchy or the distorted masculine's outward need to conquer without regard for human life, then this new riff is an example of the authentic feminine's need to bring healing and balance.

What if on those ships leaving the gold coast of Africa there was no one shackled on board - no one raped, or beaten, or killed, or tossed overboard? No diseases. The only thing propelling those Africans across the Atlantic was curiosity, a desire for change, for starting life anew in different world. In fact the only things filling the ships next to those people sitting and talking stories and singing were the wild flowers they had brought, sodden still with mounds of soil at their roots. What if on those ships were nuts and seeds of the fruits and vegetables they intended to plant so they could a little of themselves in this new world? What if the people weren't naked at all, the flesh torn up already from lashes, but they were covered instead in printed fabrics so colorful and bright they filled the ship with cheer? What if babies dawdling at their feet and sleeping in their laps and crawling along the floors cried only because they were happy? What if every hour or so people could go on deck to contemplate the widening expanse of the sea, to hose down when it got too hot, to fetch a drink of water when they got thirsty? What if on deck they could play cards or dominoes or ring games?

And what if when they arrived on shore in the Americas, there were no auction blocks greeting them - no slaveholders waiting to buy and sell them, no plantations ready to kill them with work? Instead, upon arrival, the Africans found tribes and tribes of Arawaks dressed in ceremonial garb happy to meet them. What if the Europeans that were there, weren't armed, didn't have weapons, instead they were helping the Africans off the ships, they were welcoming them to the Caribbean? Along with the Arawaks they had food waiting, food they'd been preparing all week, pigs and jack rabbits roasting on spits; goats they had been stewing for hours; what if they had crude little houses set up and there was plenty of land for everybody to farm and live on? What if?

What if we could put this story alongside the old one that we know so well? What if this story was also in our soil, in our bones, in our cells, in our DNA strands? We wouldn't necessarily want to destroy the old one, in fact we would want to remember so it never happens again, and we would want to enjoy as well the gifts of that old story, the lessons we learned, lessons of strength and perseverance and rebellion and survival and ancestry and bravery.

But who would we also be with the gifts from the new story? What would our relationships look like, those with ourselves and with each other? What else could we add to our arrival story? We could add joy, we could add health, we

could add zest for life, harmony, we could add laughter, we could add pleasure, we could add love; we could add love.

In his book *Coyote Wisdom*, Lewis Madrona argues that stories contain the hidden secrets of our own transformation. If we hear and read enough stories about change, he says, we will find ourselves changing, even in spite of ourselves. The right story heard at the right time can shift consciousness, include where once there had been exclusion, rewrite history, say what has never been said, sooth where once there had only been wounding. This is the balanced integration of the masculine and feminine. This is how we begin to restore balance to our lives, or to use Helen Klonaris' term from the Gaulin project, this is how we re-story change.