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## Daphne Grace in Conversation with Keith A. Russell

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Daphne Grace  
in Conversation with Keith A. Russell  
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DG: You have written several short stories and three published novels that are full of social realism, brutality, violence, and the harsh realities of life. Is that a sense of anger coming out?

KR: Well, I think you are certainly correct that there is brutality in the novels and a great amount of social realism, there's no question about it. Whether or not the anger is something in the author himself, I'm not sure; maybe it's unconscious if it's coming across. But I'm sure the language and the tone sometimes could be interpreted as anger. It's more me trying to be very forceful and clear about some of the situations of life and those we encounter. Even if I think I'm writing a love story, love doesn't happen in a vacuum, sometimes love situations can be brutal. So I guess anger is something that comes out of that type of brutality.

DG: I'd like to come back to your ideas about love later. But based on what you have just said, do you see yourself as part of the tradition of social protest in the works of Caribbean writers?

KR: There is a sense of that; although I see myself not so much as a writer engaged in social protest. Rather, I see myself as a writer engaged with social *accuracy*, and as a writer engaged with trying to provide an alternative vision of what the world could be like. If that is protest, then I am very much in the line of writers who are writing protest, as I am looking at our society from a particular angle and asking questions. How did we get here and how do we move from this place? Is this the best we can do? This is a slice of life, this is our experience. Can we do better?

DG: There is definitely a great sense of Bahamian history—both national and local—in all your novels and what I would call a bitter nostalgia for the past: a sense of pride and loss, as well as horror. There are references, for example, to the logging industry on Grand Bahama, and to men going away on the contract to Florida. In *J.D. Sinclair* we have the evocative image of the wife obsessively looking down the road for her husband returning (which of course he never does) and in *Hezekiah's Independence* you make the situation even clearer by calling the contract “a prison”, like latter-day slavery. Especially in this latest novel, you portray three or four

generations of Bahamian men, and the novel's opening sentence, "Sponging died", sets it firmly within this framework of concern of how socio-historical events continue to impact, if not to haunt life. Why is this history so important to you?

KR: I think our history is always with us, and it's important that the younger generations don't forget the often perilous or difficult journey the older folks have taken. In my novel *Hezekiah's Independence*, the younger man learns more of the truth about his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, a runaway slave—and only then he can understand himself.

DG: In your earlier novels, in *J.D. Sinclair* especially, much of the tension and many of the problems arise from the colonial past and the lingering aftermath of colonization. Do you see yourself also as a postcolonial writer in terms of dealing with this past?

KR: In a sense. Postcolonialism is an interesting term, especially for those of us who live in these colonial aftermaths, so to speak. Whether or not postcolonialism is a reality is another matter, and I don't know how we get beyond the colonial idea. Especially for us living in The Bahamas, and our relationship with Britain, it is to extricate ourselves from that to say that we are 'post-colonial' in any sense. The British are no longer here ruling on land, but our encounter with them is deeply engrained and we are also British. We are British and Bahamians and also Africans, however that hybrid comes together. So we cannot extricate ourselves from being British and become postcolonial, because it is engrained in our psyche that we are also British—and that encounter with the British has sometimes been harsh.

DG: And how does that inform or impact your novels?

KR: To date in my novels, I have been writing more or less about the harsh encounter and the aftermath of that, but the encounter has not always been harsh. Even in my moments when I am quite clear in depicting the harshness of the encounter, I hope that there is no bitterness in that regard. It is just a matter of: this is who we are, we have encountered the British and this is how it has affected us, and this is what it has done to our abilities, and so on. But beyond that, how do we accept our British selves? How do we recognize both the good and the bad, but yet move on

from that without having to dismantle our British identity, but also carry that with us in a positive way and appreciate the good encounter of it?

DG: You mention hybridity and the concept of asking are we British, are we African, or some hybrid mix. In *Hezekiah's Independence* (where both the father and the son are given the same name) the younger of the Hezekiah's is half white, and is called a 'pale nigger' at one point. Is it intentional that the protagonist of the novel is a result of the colonial encounter?

KR: Yes, very much so.

DG: And in this case, that encounter has disastrous consequences for the white woman, his mother.

KR: I think they are a forward looking couple, in that they are able to rise above that whole conflict between the British and African Bahamians, and the distinction of "are we British, are we African?" – and find love. And even that is fraught with all sorts of dangers, because even though they have moved on, their society hasn't moved on yet. The society isn't ready to see this as something legitimate that ought to happen in the world. So the whole concept of colour that happens in our society, that long spectrum of colours we have, is beyond that black/white issue, because in the long journey of our encounter with Britain we have produced individuals of all shades of skin. So how do we determine who is black and who is white in this mix? Really? In our society, very often the more pale your skin the more privileges you have, so how do we reconcile this problem? How do we deal with the long spectrum of colour that has come out of this union, this encounter, of the Europeans and the Africans? And that mix is the exploration that is going on here. So I think the younger of the Hezekiah's is wrestling with the notion of 'how and where do I fit in?'

DG: And for many people, this is really one of the key questions of the new millennium.

KR: In America there is the long tradition of the tragic mulatto, this individual who doesn't fit in anywhere. She doesn't fit in with the traditionally white folks, or the traditionally black folks.

Here is a lost individual sitting in limbo someplace trying to find her identity; and finding out that identity involves not only working out how do I accept my black self, but how do I accept my white self also. This is part of Hezekiah's dilemma: how do I come to a sense of myself? By endorsing, legitimizing, accepting all of who I am, both my father's side and my mother's side. So how do we as Bahamians come to a place where we accept both our African heritage and our European heritage? How do we put that all together and find a whole sense of self?

DG: I think that's true of anyone who is not just racially mixed but culturally mixed in any way, as the whole concept of identity and belongingness takes on a new dimension. Also, with the massive migrancy today, it's also the situation that dislocated or diasporic peoples feel they no longer have a place in either world: they don't fit in anymore in the homeland and they don't feel at home in the new place either. It's a sense of what's been called living in "nowhere-ville". So I think it's larger than just a color question.

KR: That's right.

DG: Also I was thinking as you were talking of your whole stance on the legacy of British education in your novels. In *J.D. Sinclair* there is a very forceful, very vivid episode where the young J.D. stands up in class and rejects the whole system of education, the totally irrelevant information they are receiving in the Bahamian school from their colonial English teachers. Whereas, most of Hezekiah's framework as our narrator is very much within the paradigm of the British education he received in England—his understanding and ultimate acceptance of his father is ultimately based on that experience—so again we have the dichotomy of that education that could be either negative or positive.

KR: Yes, very much so. In relation to *J.D.* and the episode you mention, just today I was reading an article by Geneva Rutherford in a recent newspaper, which says we still need to Bahamianise our school curriculum. Therefore the whole notion of the British part of our education system has always been there and there is no reason for us to disavow that, or to throw that out, because it does have relevancy. But even today we have never really got the other part of our own history

fully into the curriculum, so we are still working on that. Again in education, it's a question of how do we embrace this hybrid situation, where we recognize the importance of both?

DG: Yes, and it needs to be a blend rather than a rejection, to avoid the danger of cultural myopia in either direction.

KR: J.D. asks, how is all this relevant to me. He says, you are teaching me all of this stuff without teaching me about this local place that I'm in, and to do one without the other is damaging to my well-being and to my future.

DG: That brings us onto another instance in your novel, *When Doves Cry*, where the boy (J.J.) confronts his psychiatrist with the question: how can you possibly know me or anything about me if you haven't been where I live, you haven't even visited where I come from. In this case, of course, he's talking of Eight Mile Rock.

KR: On Grand Bahama.

DG: There is a very strong sense of place in your novels. The specificity of locations seems strongly linked with the depiction and development of the characters. Why is this sense of place that permeates your novels so important to you?

KR: Before we can be anything to anyone else, we can't really connect with anyone else before we have a sense of ourselves, and *place* plays a very important role in who we are. The place, the smells, the people around us, the history, the foods we eat, the way in which we see the world: all these are determined by the sense of place and unless we know that first, we go into the world as strangers to ourselves, and therefore we really can't make connections to other individuals without that sense of place which informs that sense of self.

DG: And in terms of place, how far do you see yourself as being a writer who is trying to—or who *is*—putting The Bahamas on the literary map?

KR: Well, The Bahamas is not very clearly on the literary map at all! I don't know how far I'm putting it on the map, but I will continue to write out of this space. The classic advice I have heard is that a writer writes what a writer knows, so I think I'm more effective as a writer when I'm trying to deal with this space out of which I'm operating. Just as writers such as Steinbeck, who always writes of one area of California, and Faulkner writes of the South, I think that for me as a writer I have a responsibility to write about this place because it's more than just characters or a nation, it's a way to make our mark in the world from a literary standpoint: to say here we are, and we have a particular perspective, and it comes out of this particular place. But how far we are along this journey, I don't know. I think we're not above the radar yet in terms of writing in The Bahamas; no one really knows we're here. The whole business of being one of the trailblazers, one of the first persons to write novels in The Bahamas—I feel very privileged because we don't have many people writing novels in The Bahamas and unfortunately I'm one of the few. But we have to break into the world market, because writing is one thing, but breaking into the world market is a whole different ball game.

DG: There's one aspect of your novels that they may be criticized for, and that is the minimal role of female characters, the marginalizing or even silencing of women. It's not exactly the disappearance of the female voice, but it does seem that all the main characters are male. Men definitely are—

KR: The main characters!

DG: Even though they may be strongly influenced by female characters, mothers, wives, girlfriends, or sisters, for example.

KR: But I think although they are influenced by the females, there are some strong women. I think that the grandmother in *J.D. Sinclair* is a very powerful character, and in a minor way his sister is a significant female character.

DG: But they all stay firmly on the periphery of the stories.

KR: That's true. But I am working on that! In fact my upcoming novel has a female protagonist. The working title is *In Memory of Agnes*; at one time it was called *The Deflowering of Agnes*, but it's all about the main character, Agnes. The original idea was inspired through a comment when I was talking with Marjorie Brooks-Jones in Nassau and she asked whether there ever was going to be a novel with a female lead character. At the time, I didn't know if I was up to the task. Since then I have been toying with that idea, with a female lead character, and the sense of what it means for a female character to have experienced this or this. So that novel is forthcoming, and I hope I can capture the female consciousness in some way.

DG: So you don't feel that your novels have been written to counteract the "male marginalization" of men in the Caribbean and in particular The Bahamas. Are you reacting to ideas such as those of Keith Nurse who writes in his article, "Masculinities in Transition: Gender and the Global Problematique," that men are constructed "either as victims of the women's movement or pathologized as underachievers and deviants"<sup>i</sup> I wondered if you are writing in response to something like that. Your characters could be all seen as deviants, but not, perhaps underachievers!

KR: I don't think it was consciously that! In writing *J.D. Sinclair* I was really troubled about the fact we don't have any novels, and I think the thing I knew best at the time was the whole notion of being a young man in The Bahamas. I think I was influenced by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and the whole notion of invisibility within a society, so I wrote about disappearing. I used that theme to talk about disappearing culture, disappearing self, disappearing place, and so on. So at the time I thought for me it was best to write that from the standpoint of a character I knew best, I did not feel equipped to explore beyond the periphery of my own consciousness.

DG: I know that the book has been taught now in many schools and at The College of The Bahamas in courses of 'children's literature'. Were you hoping to influence young people?

KR: In one sense It wanted to foreground the positive side of male consciousness; I wanted to influence other young males and say that there are young males who want to achieve, albeit that

there are times that life is going to catch up with them, and they are not always successful. The vicissitudes of life are going to get to them. I don't know that I was consciously trying to give another picture of men, but it's good that it's there.

DG: You have also previously spoken about the significance of the names of your characters, J.D. (whose names are based on the Biblical characters and represent two aspects of his character), J.J. (indicating his split Bahamian-Haitian identity) and you also have other characters – for example, the Voodoo priest Toussaint in *Doves*, a name that obviously has associations with the famous freedom fighter in Haiti.

KR: In that particular case I was dealing with the whole notion of religion in society and the way it is configured, so that in that novel he represents a protest against religion, Christianity and especially Catholicism—against the people who are so arrogant and believe there is no other kind of truth. It's writing to this Christian nation in the sense of saying, "Hey, the possibility is that there are some other truths out there." So if voodoo is seen as ridiculous, then in that sense why is Christianity not ridiculous? The voodoo priest Toussaint certainly conjures up a freedom fighter; he's a religious fighter for his freedom in a society where we have Christian imperialism.

DG: It seems relevant at this point to ask you how your work as a minister informs your novels, or do you keep the two hats of your roles very separate?

KR: That's an interesting question. You know, I think that in my writing of novels the tone is certainly far more belligerent towards religion. It goes to the other side, to the extent of showing how sometimes religious notions may be ridiculous. That belief may be important to a lot of people, it may be useful to guide people through their dark moments, to walk through this maze with some sense of certainty. But at the same time, we ought not to be so fanatical that we don't stand back and look at our religious beliefs from a critical standpoint. Based on what I know about life, those beliefs and that religion may have been a great idea 2000 years ago when it was produced in that particular society and in that milieu, but stepping back now and looking critically at it, it might not be something that I want to frame my life around, so I might have to

disregard it. So my position in novel writing is far more antagonistic towards religion. You don't see much of the minister in there!

DG: What you say reminds me of the wonderful episode at the end of *JD Sinclair*, where he is literally and metaphorically turning his back on paradise, and opting for a third reality which is undefined and uncertain. And it's definitely a choice. He rejects heaven and hell, and says: let's see what else there is.

KR: I appreciate your reading, because not a whole lot of folks pick that up, unfortunately! That's very true; he's turning his back on paradise. He says, I'm going to go into the dark unknown and whatever comes along, I'm going to fight this. So, my stance in my writing has mainly been called anti-religious.

DG: That brings us back to talk about your attitude to violence. As we've said, there is a lot of violence of different sorts in your novels. It's mainly physical, although there is emotional violence and social violence—as we've already spoken about in terms of the post-colonial. But what about the individual violence? My reading of *J.D.* and also *Doves Cry* sees the violence as always being an informed choice. When J.J. resorts to violence in *Doves*, it is a choice; it's premeditated and planned. Even though it goes badly wrong.

KR: Yes.

DG: They are not so much random acts of violence; it's a moral choice, an ethical decision. So again, in some of these predicaments, is there really no alternative to violence? Moreover, the religious characters never win out, they are never able to persuade the characters to do otherwise, and not to be violent. They fail—totally—for example in *When Doves Cry*. Individuals fail and the Christian society as a whole fails. Again in *Hezekiah*, we have the definitive act of patricide. And this is presented as morally ambivalent, as he is our hero, he is not brought to account for having done this crime, and yet it is the supreme violation against the first commandment—Thou shalt not kill. It's the ultimate sin.

KR: A lot of my religious background comes into my writing. In my novels, a lot of my characters are wrestling with the idea of murder. What does it mean to commit a murder, and who defines what murder is? For instance, in the commandment it says, ‘Thou shalt not kill’. Period. What does that mean? In the context, for example, of a book where God tells Saul to go down into the Amalekites to go in and kill everything he can find, all the women and children and everything, and then he comes back with some things; he was rejected because he didn’t kill everything. So the notion of what murder is sometimes is in the interpretation of the privileged, the interpretation of someone outside the situation who is not going through the emotional trauma. As Hezekiah says at the end of the book: courage is not determined when one makes a decision when everything is wonderful or is going well, it is in those horrendous situations where there is moral ambiguity, when you are not sure what you are going to do, when these acts become courageous. So for me, even where my characters are forced by circumstances to commit murder, seemingly for them it is the only alternative. It is the only thing that will get them attention.

DG: That is almost a frightening concept. Could you give us an example?

KR: In *Doves*, for example, when his brother is trying to persuade him just to burn up his victim, Mr. Fowler...but no, that won’t do, he wants something that will capture people’s attention, the rapid firing of the gun. So in that sense it’s wrestling with defining words, “what does it mean to kill?” Whose hand is that in, who determines how that is defined?

DG: I know a lot of students find the ending of *Doves* very difficult to take. Of course many people reading a novel want a happy ending.

KR: Of course.

DG: Whereas in fact *none* of your novels have a happy ending.

KR: No!

DG: Although I suppose *Hezekiah* has a kind of happy ending: peace.

KR: Well, I guess I come into the Theatre of the Absurd in that regard. At one point someone asked Harold Pinter, how come your plays don't have any happy endings? And he answered, "Life doesn't have any happy endings."

DG: You probably remember that someone accused Thomas Hardy of always being so gloomy, and they asked why his novels were all so pessimistic. His reply was that his stories were not pessimistic, they were amelioristic: life could only get better.

KR: It's far more important to think in terms of the journey you are making in life. That seems to me to be more significant than how we end life, whether or not it's ending in a pessimistic way. We spend all our time wondering about how we will end life and so miss the opportunity of enjoying the journey along the way. It's more important to think of the type of decisions we make, and if they bring us peace and happiness. How we end up: very often that can be beyond our control.

DG: That really brings us back to your latest novel, *Hezekiah's Independence*, in which we have two characters, both called Hezekiah. So whose independence are you talking about? The father, the son—or both?

KR: Yes, *both* in a number of ways. In many ways, Hezekiah the would-be poet is trying to follow his internal instincts and be a ridiculous thing: a poet in society. His father is more practical: "you can't eat by writing stuff, have a career that will make you some money, come with me into the farm." But in a sense they are all very independent. The independence of the youngest of the three men is that he must try to connect with his father and then determine how to forge his own future, how to become himself.

DG: Again, there is the idea prevalent in postcolonial theory of gaining freedom by reclaiming the past: you cannot move forward without knowing where you have been. That is obviously

there with the father and grandfather: once you know where you come from then you can heal the past and step forward.

KR: Yes.

DG: But you have also talked to me previously about *Hezekiah's Independence* as a love story. In that case: exactly where is the love? And what is your definition of love?

KR: It's a love story because at the heart of the novel in a number of ways is that yearning by Hezekiah, the would-be poet, for his dead wife. At the end of his life, he's missing her tremendously to the point where he is wandering off to the shrine he has made for her, even though she was not actually buried there. So it is that sense of love that is driving the novel, the notion that she was murdered because she was a white woman married to a black man in a place where this is anathema. So I think that is where the love is.

DG: That is quite a morbid kind of love. Not the way perhaps most readers would recognize it for what you say it is.

KR: And then there is the whole business of trying to find love. He feels he has been discarded by his father because his father does not care for him, whereas his father is in fact trying to save him because he loves him. The story concerns how as a grown man, he comes to recognize that his father loves him, and therefore releases the barriers he has. Then there is also the whole notion of Hezekiah, who has hated his father all his life, in the final moments before he strangles him, having this conversation in which he learns—if not to love him—at least to understand what his motivation has been.

DG: So what is coming next in your writing? Are there still various issues in Bahamian society that need mentioning? Problems and what you see as social issues or hypocrisies that could be made the subject of a novel?

KR: Oh yes! I'm dealing with some things in *Agnes*. But I hope I won't be alone too long. I hope some other writers are coming along to explore these things. We need some more novelists out there, and some more people writing short stories. Because it's very important, actually not only for the world but also for ourselves, to voice our journey. So yes, there are a lot of things. And I'm also thinking of writing a memoir, but that is always quite scary, having to expose oneself in print, although of course memoirs are also fiction to some extent.

DG: Is there any element of autobiography in your existing novels?

KR: The most autobiographical of the three is *Hezekiah*.

DG: Really?

KR: Yes, but only to the extent that when I came back from university my father was bed-ridden and I had to take care of him and all his daily needs. So during his final days, I was the one with him. The dedication of the book is to Alton: Alton was my father. The autobiographical part of the novel is the love that we shared. We had a very good relationship. In the novel, they say that most men don't know their father. This wrestling with the unknown part of a character is there. But the historical setting of the novel is quite different to that of my father.

DG: That's interesting! Because actually some of the most vivid parts of the novel are all those telling details of daily care of the bedridden father.

KR: But I don't set out to write any autobiographical novels in that sense. In *JD* and in *Doves* there may be some emotions that are the author's, but the whole tale itself is totally imaginary.

DG: Of course an important part of *Hezekiah* is the poetry written by the father that documents his emotional journey through time. Do you also see yourself as a poet? And how difficult was it to write the poems in the novel, which are written in the voice of the character as he matures through life events?

KR: No, I don't regard myself as a poet, and in fact when I have been asked to read some of the poems from the novel, I have declined, as they are an intrinsic part of the story, and as you say, not in my own voice at all, as I tried to illuminate that character and the revelation his son has of him through the medium of the poetry.

DG: Do you have a last word to young writers in the Bahamas?

KR: It can be difficult to get published, but I want to encourage all writers wherever they are in the Bahamas to get going. Write, please write! Get the thing going and get writing!

DG: Dr Russell, thank you very much.

KR: It's been my pleasure.

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