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X Press Publications: Pop Culture, “Pop Lit” and Caribbean Literary Criticism: An Essay of Provocation.

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Despite Caribbean writers' insistence on an organic connection between their work and folk/popular culture, Anglophone Caribbean literary criticism like literary criticism in general has continued to be quite highbrow, in that the audience as well as the criteria of criticism separates the enterprise from the cultural agents whose products the critics themselves agree have a major impact on Caribbean literary art. Even so, the breaking down of disciplinary barriers heralded by the advent of cultural studies has seen popular culture become more than merely a 'legitimate' field of academic inquiry in which the academy studies the popular (and its precursor "the folk")¹ to frame resulting theoretical narratives by which the academy refracts the popular (and the folk) back to its own gaze. More so we see the emergence of a form of exchange in which the practical exponents of popular culture—pop musicians, performing artists, oral storytellers, stand up comics and the like—have become conversants and potential equals in a mutually constituted dialogue between what I refer to as "the street and the outside"² on the one hand, and the academy on the other. Significantly, the exchange involves financial negotiations that undermine traditional perceptions of power relations between the street/outside and the academy, as university departments increasingly pay high compensation to attract visiting lectures and performances from pop artists and oral tellers.

In literary discourse, the shifts have been marked by a variety of indicators ranging from the performance criticism of dub poetry in the 1980s to the critique of cultural texts such as dancehall lyrics, films and even the bodies showcased in beauty contests. Such critiques highlight the issues that are shared by academia and the street/outside, but also begin to reinvent the concept of the literary text as they utilize the same or similar strategies that are used to critique scribal texts. The relationship is symbiotic, as new aesthetic criteria³ developed from the critique of oral and cultural texts also now inform the critique of scribal texts.

The expansion of the implicit criteria for "true/serious— literature" is also signaled in the critical attention given to the work of pop-middlebrow writers in the 1990s-2000s. This is seen for example in the academy's critical reception of Colin Channer's *Waiting in Vain* (1998), which merges mass market and Hollywood style pop appeal (sex, romance) with traditional Caribbean referents to produce a performance text that could be described as halfway between jamette⁴ and mainstream "play." This of course parallels developments on the global literary scene: for example, the interest in science fiction as a genre worth literary enquiry (much of the interest in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* published in 1997 stems from its placement in that genre), and new developments in the type of tourist travel narrative that is geared to the leisure tastes of the liberal educated classes. Examples of this latter type of narrative, which performs a crossover between traditional concepts of "art" and "entertainment," include *The Island: Martinique* (2003) and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996), by African American writers John Edgar Wideman and Terry McMillan respectively.⁵

But despite all of this, a fixed gap remains in the fluid spaces of play between what is considered literary and what is not: "pop" literature in its scribed form (as opposed to performance genres) has hardly been paid attention. The barrier against pop literature is

particularly apparent in the criticism of prose fiction, and so it is this genre that I want to discuss in the essay. On the surface, it seems that the barrier has to do with the fact that the academy's bottom line criteria for "literature" are rooted in the concept of "literary aesthetics" in a traditional sense, but this is questioned by other issues that begin to emerge as we probe the realities of the literary marketplace.

Black versions of the Harlequin/Mills and Boon romance began to appear in Caribbean bookshops in the 1980s; academic discourse ignored them in a taken-for-granted mode. In the early 1990s Heinemann, a long time publisher of mainstream Caribbean books geared towards the "respectable" and particularly the high school market, began issuing a line called Caribbean Caresses, aimed at "filling a gap" perceived in the romance market. The publishers felt that the voracious readership for Harlequin/Mills and Boon romances signaled a need for similar books about Caribbean subjects in a Caribbean setting; these, it was felt, would be much more appealing, (because more relevant) than their transatlantic counterparts. Despite the problematic, orientalist type of issues raised by Heinemann's project and the fact that this was a "respectable" publisher seeking to intersect pop and mainstream (Heinemann hoped Caribbean Caresses would attract high schoolers), the series did not attract many academic reviews—Jane Bryce's "A World of Caribbean Romance" (1996) stood out as an isolated response.

An interesting exception to academia's general silence on the advent of Caribbean pop romance was seen in the case of Valerie Belgrave's *Ti Marie*, published (also by Heinemann) in 1988; this exception had to do with Belgrave's status as a serious artist in another mode, the setting of the book in the days of slavery—its insertion therefore into the established Caribbean discourse of history—and the provocative statements Belgrave made about what she set out to do in the book.⁶ *Ti Marie* featured prominently in Bryce's essay referred to above, and garnered discussion by Carolyn Cooper (1989), Steve Harney (1990), Selwyn Cudjoe (1989), Paula Morgan (1996) and Faith Smith (1999).

Heinemann's short-lived foray aside (the series petered out after fewer than a dozen issues), publishers and critics of Caribbean literature have for the most part been uncompromisingly, self consciously "serious," concerned with the grand themes of race, nation, exile, diaspora, class, color, childhood/bildungsroman, language, power, etc. They have focused on texts that are implicitly or explicitly invested with a West Indian ethos of "respectability" (which might be variously described as middle class, Victorian, folk, or nationalist, depending on one's perspective). However, black pop lit is a major industry in the United States and, since the 1990s, with the emergence of presses such as Black Amber and X Press, the industry has also been growing in the UK, where a large percentage of the black population is of Caribbean and particularly Jamaican origin.

I am interested in examining the ways in which the barrier between "literature" and "pop lit," which ultimately dictates what scribed texts get put on university course lists, problematizes the connection between literary and cultural studies. I am also interested in what the implications

and consequences might be if we should begin to pay more attention to these "pop" texts. I approach this by commenting on the products of one publisher's attempt to bridge the perceived gaps between the highbrow and the popular in the process of creating an expanded consumer market for their goods. This paper looks at the output of the black British X Press, which in its heyday enjoyed runaway popularity—to the extent that it attracted not only extensive newspaper and magazine-type review but even some academic attention (cf. Farred, Collins, Small cited in Farred, Petithomme cited in Farred).⁷ It seeks to show how X Press attempts first, to create a publishing field that blurs distinctions between one kind of literature and another; and second, to create a new readership that participates in a "classless," "borderless" society across the African diaspora.

Although X Press has female as well as male authors, for the purposes of this discussion I will focus on the male authored texts.⁸ I comment on these texts in a general way but draw specific instances from two texts that reference the Caribbean: *Baby Father* (1997), the first publication in Patrick Augustus' hugely popular *Baby Father* series (omnibus edition 2003) and Michael Maynard's *Games Men Play* (1996, 2nd edition 2003). In the first part of this paper I look at what these texts may be said to contribute to a cultural understanding of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain, and I then go on to examine them with regard to concerns about literary aesthetics. In this second section of the argument I look at the issue of form, and raise a few questions about the perceived similarities and differences between mainstream and pop. In the final analysis I show how X Press publications are not only an important barometer of what is happening in the Caribbean diaspora,⁹ but also an important site of dialogue about the role, direction and definition of West Indian literary criticism in the 21st century.

X Press was established in 1992 with the aim of making available the type of literature that the black person in the street (people outside of academia) would want to read—literature that addressed black issues, was contemporary in its appeal, and accessible to and in touch with the lives of black people at the grassroots in Britain. X Press's first publication line was its "pop" line, but a classics line was quickly added and the press now also boasts a children's line, a more "literary line," and 20/20 described as an avant-garde expansion of the pop line.¹⁰

The classics line is didactically invested in a valoristic and revisionary view of black history. It reissues well-known black classics (the works of Mary Seacole, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt included) and showcases little known writing by obscure black male and female authors. The pop line portray the lives of young black men and women in the African and Caribbean diaspora, and covers a range of genres that intersect within individual works: romance inflected "dramas," detective fiction, "yardie" novels, science fiction, feminist texts, "pop sex" novels, thrillers. The protagonists range from up-and-coming buppies to deejays to street toughs to yardies, and their milieu is typically marked by portrayures of crime, racial injustice, the sports and music industries. But sports and music (particularly Jamaican dancehall, African American jazz, ragga and hip hop) are more than contextual settings; they are sometimes also the formal tropes of the texts,¹¹ and in this way they

signal both the reality of how these industries have become the means by which many of the Caribbean's disadvantaged are able to make successful diasporic crossings, and the dark underside, the horrific struggle, that striates such crossings.

The X Press pop line has other distinctive characteristics. Foremost among these is a preordinate attention to male-female relationships and the attempt to work through the misunderstandings, endemic deceptions and conflicting value systems that characterize such relationships. In this sense X Press fictions are very romance oriented, and this in the most idealized terms (romance as dreamworld, as yearning), despite their graphic, earthy, even pornographic treatments of sex. In this combination of stylized romance and raw sex, X Press books are of course very much within the frame of modern pop romance. Male sexual and gender attitudes in these portrayals are marked by swashbuckling appropriations—sometimes subversive, sometimes collusive—of Euro-American romantic traditions. Female-authored texts are concerned with the issue prevalent in romances and women's magazines, of finding men who are both eligible and sexually proficient; additionally, they are concerned with the ways in which the search for partners is complicated for black women.

In the aspect of its focus that has to do with the everyday personal realities of people from the urban grassroots and fringes, X Press's pop line fills gaps left since Samuel Selvon's London novels, gaps not taken up in mainstream fiction except perhaps in a few works such as Michael Thelwell's *The Harder They Come* (though Thelwell's book portrays not the diaspora but Jamaican inner city urban space). The mention of Selvon's work here is of particular significance not only because Selvon's West Indian London "boys" represent what could be termed the 1950s equivalent of the current black British "underworld" of "unrespectable" men, but also because Selvon's use of the man-in-the street's vernacular as the language of narration (*The Lonely Londoners*) has crucial resonances with the narrative language of texts such as Maynard's and Augustus', and this, I will argue in my final section, has problematic implications for the purportedly aesthetic separation between pop and mainstream (in which Selvon is well canonized).

X Press pop authors hail from different parts of the African diaspora, as reflected in the ethnic identities of the characters they portray: Africans, African Americans, and persons of Caribbean origin or descent in Britain and the USA—though a preponderance is Caribbean, and more particularly Jamaican. The emphasis on personal issues in these narratives points to the fact already signaled in mainstream literature, as well as criticism and theory, that the existence of the Caribbean diaspora has made nationalism, creolization, class, color and other traditional discourses of Caribbean literary criticism obsolete or inadequate to embrace all the literature of the Caribbean.

More germane to this discussion is the fact that no matter how personal the focus, the narratives remain emblematic of black issues and very often black issues in a Caribbean—diasporic or "transnational" mode. In other words, the pop lit never achieves the anonymous

individuation that we associate with Euro-American pop—the traditional spy thriller or Harlequin/Mills and Boon romance, for example. A major question that concerns this essay of course is this: does this literature's inevitable participation of communal, group, race and ethnic realities constitute sufficient criteria for the academy to take it seriously and if so, should this be within the ambit of cultural studies or are there grounds for engaging this pop literature in literary-aesthetic terms?

X Press and Cultural Studies

Concerning the first question, there can hardly be doubt that what the Press is doing is of major cultural importance. One of its most interesting features in this regard is the manner in which it seeks to bring about various types of "crossovers." By "crossover" I mean both the creation of alliances and interest fields across diverse communities, and the merging of entities traditionally seen as distinct. First, when taken together, both the Press's output and its stated objectives point to an attempt not only to produce various types of publications attracting different kinds of readership, but also to build up a reading constituency that links the black diaspora across the Caribbean, the UK and North America, across classes and genders, and across levels of education, in a common "transnational family" (Lamming 1996) that is black and recognizes itself as family with a vested interest in reading about what is happening to each other and listening to each other's voices across the divides. The extent to which the Press achieves this through its various lines is a matter of debate, which might involve some kind of survey to ascertain whether and to what extent either its pop lit or its classics line attracts readers across divides of class and education, for example.

More recently the publishers have also spoken of a desire to create a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic authorship and readership reflecting the diversity within which black people in Britain are situated,¹² and have begun to sign on white authors. Reading then is being offered as a political tool of integration akin to migration and travel: and here I mean not just literature, the production of texts that represent and theorize diasporic and transnational crossing and connection, but the act of reading itself, which links physical and thinking persons hermeneutically in a conversation with persons and situations they might not otherwise have come in contact with or seen as important to themselves.

It is significant that in specializing in popular literature that will afford inclusion to a more diverse, young black audience, X Press is reputed to have succeeded in turning non-academic black men (that is to say, the man in the street, apocryphally famous for being a "non-reader") into an active reading constituency. A line from Patrick Augustus' *Baby Father* is emblematic of the diasporic relationships X Press hopes to achieve within this constituency:

I remember this Ku Klux Klan guy on TV, saying, "If you wanna hide anything from a nigga, put it in a book." From that moment I started reading the books in

the store voraciously. African history books especially, to learn bout those old ancient ... civilizations and how we lived before we were brought out here to Babylon. (21)

The role reading is expected to achieve in creating these diasporic bridges which are obviously also bridges between highbrow texts and inner city readers is highlighted time and again in X Press fictions (cf. Augustus 86, 106, Maynard 151) in explicitly didactic terms, to the extent that one wonders if the authors are instructed to insert such statements as a kind of advertising manifesto. In a 2001 article in the *New Nation*, X Press publisher Dotun Adebayo is quoted as using almost the exact words used by the character in the quotation above.¹³

The attempt to bridge the gap between the popular and the highbrow—another form of crossover—is seen also in X Press’s packaging. The reissue of Claude McKay’s *Banana Bottom* is typical. It retains the back cover blurb used by its 1961 publishers but the front cover features a picture of the heroine, Bitá Plant, as a very eye catching, very sexy, very contemporary black beauty. The picture immediately locates *Banana Bottom* as popular, contemporary fiction even while highlighting an important aspect of Bitá and indeed of *Banana Bottom* that is not often treated in mainstream criticism: the major part played by sexuality in the makeup of both Bitá and book. At the same time, the back cover assures the highbrow reader that it is the same *Banana Bottom*, the same Bitá we have met between the depressingly dead covers of earlier editions. The two types of reader—the reader of “pop” and the reader of “literature” (who may of course inhere in the same person)—meet around the same text. Two observations may be made here. First, the possible conjunction of the reader of “pop” and the reader of “literature” in the same person already questions the boundaries of “pop” and “highbrow.” Second, the linkage achieved by the cover is of literary as well as cultural interest, in that it marks an important moment in the literary history of *Banana Bottom*.

The issue of “crossover” is seen in several ways in the pop texts themselves; for example, in the ways in which they display new forms of discursively constructed Caribbean. The diasporic image of Caribbean shown in these texts is a means of negotiating identity between a home space (Britain) in which the subject is alienated, and an imagined cultural source (the Caribbean) that enables the alien-at-home to feel empowered. Perhaps the most striking factor about the Caribbean of these novels is how often it appears *as a vague, receding category that is purely imagined*. This is because the characters, born and/or bred on British soil, have little or no direct experience of the Caribbean, yet for them the place has major psychological importance as a means of crossing over debilitating boundaries of location, or as a sign of the inability to make such crossings.

Various, the Caribbean is invoked as background context explaining the characters’ resistance to British attempts at erasure as in Maynard’s *Games Men Play*; or as a way of contrasting the younger and older generations—the latter usually more immersed in a “back to the Caribbean” ethos that the younger generation can only admire while being unable to share in

it (as in *Baby Father*); or as nostalgia for an exoticized rural paradise of tourism or hope bearing little resemblance to actuality, but more in keeping with colonialist travel narrative or contemporary tourism posters (as in the romanticized view of Gus's parents in *Baby Father*). In another configuration present in X Press fictions, the Caribbean may be a place, which through rejection and corruption has ejected the struggler from the ghetto fringe and made him an international commuter on the run (as in the flagship *Yardie* by Victor Headley, and Anton Marks' *Dancehall*).

In *Games Men Play*, the character Marcus, who narrates his own story in Jamaican, is reprimanded (208) for adopting Jamaican as his idiolect although he is British born. Marcus's adoption of a Jamaican linguistic persona references a common practice among second generation black British youth who have never been to the Caribbean and indeed have no connections to the Caribbean except a discursive one based on the need for empowering centers of identity. The character Calvin who is the author's mouthpiece for black solidarity, invokes Marcus Garvey in ways that also bring to mind a continuing black British deployment of 1970s Jamaican ideological rhetoric, and one prospective bride, Chantelle (135-6), chooses her husband based on his political savvy, which includes his ability to locate Garvey properly in a list of black political heavyweights of the African diaspora. Neither Chantelle nor Calvin is Jamaican born: the yearning for Caribbean as an *idea* is therefore strongly highlighted.

The four main characters in Augustus' *Baby Father* are all black British with some form of connection to Jamaica. The extent to which aspects of contemporary Jamaican culture and subculture characterize their way of life is quite striking (Gus and his girlfriend Caroline watch Oliver Samuels' videos, Linnall smokes spliffs with his white British agent cum girlfriend; the protagonists' way of speaking/narrating English is infused with Jamaican language, filtered quite often through a particular male Jamaican ethos of sexuality (dialogue around "grinding," "slackness," "[h]ood," "hardness and stiffness" abounds). But the distance from the cultural space of the geographical Caribbean is signaled in a number of interesting ways. One small but telling example is the "slippage" in which Gus speaks of enjoying a good "sex video" with Oliver Samuels (53). This is not only grossly inaccurate since Oliver Samuels' videos are not sex videos, but also the idea would be quite offensive in the Jamaican cultural context, given the make-up of Oliver's typical at-home audience.¹⁴ It is hardly likely that anyone familiar with Jamaican home (as opposed to diasporic) culture as more than a concept would make such a statement.

But the extent to which black British invocation of Caribbean represents attempts to cross over the boundaries of a British identity that is simultaneously the ground of a radical alienation from itself, is more graphically portrayed in the words of the character Johnny, who asserts that contemporary "youths" no longer embrace Rasta, which had promised an African identity to earlier generations. Instead, they "... are saying they're Black British Jamaicans, Black British Nigerians whatever. They're dealing with the things that are important to them out there" (74). Here Johnny refers to the ways in which the younger generation not only holds on to a dream of

Caribbean as an empowering center of black British identity, but also ways in which they seek to revise that dream based on their changing realities.

The Caribbean, then, plays a distinctly political role in these fictions, but what I want to highlight is how it appears not as a geographical space in the characters' direct experience or imagination, but rather as a symbolic concept that helps to refigure the meaning of place and space in diaspora. It may be that these portrayals raise the issue of privilege in terms of how desire for the Caribbean is at odds with the economic inability to go back to the Caribbean on a regular basis. Gus' parents in *Baby Father* are Jamaican born but did not/were unable to go back for forty years, and it is instructive how their image of Jamaica is constructed around touristy visions of "tropical paradise" and "powerfully seductive sandy beaches" (49-50) that have replaced their memory of the place, and which ironically they adopt as a means of countering white British savagery. The issue of whether in some future time Caribbean may exist merely as a trope, like Arcadia or El Dorado, for those who never or cannot easily return, or for those several generations removed from the present time, is an intriguing one as we think about how history and location mediate "crossovers" between literature, experience and social "text."

We are struck by the geography that the lives of the young men portrayed in these texts traverse: the pub, the street, the games court, the office, the domestic space in which the physical setting is hardly described—in other words, something of the faceless, placeless cityscape inhabited by Brathwaite's "land/less, harbour/less spade." This puts an interesting spin on postmodernist celebrations of blackness in diaspora:¹⁵ when coupled with the horrendous problems of crime, racism, marginalization, unfathered families and male-female conflict with which the characters in X Press fictions struggle (with often negative results despite the resistance that is often displayed), the diasporic picture being presented in these raw portrayals shows little cause for celebration.

In several instances, directly and indirectly (cf. also *Yardie*; Peter Kalu's *Lick Shot*), the plight of black youths growing up in England is highlighted in ways that remind us of frequent newspaper headlines that British Caribbean parents are sending their boy children to the Caribbean for schooling, and that the British are visiting Jamaican schools and recruiting Caribbean teachers in an effort to find ways of "saving" black youth in the UK.¹⁶ The problematic nature of these interventions is apparent even by looking at the characters in these pop texts—their personas may be attempts to negotiate crossovers between Caribbean and British, but their Britishness is very apparent, and their lived reality, against which all interventions must be tested, is a diasporic one based on relationships within Britain, albeit also they have linkages across the USA and the Caribbean.

At this point I want to make a comparison between the portrayals of Caribbean in male-authored X Press fictions and those we generally find in mainstream fiction. Mainstream writers may deploy a vivid folk memory of the Caribbean—as in Austin Clarke's fictions, or David Dabydeen's *The Intended*, or Cyril Dabydeen's "crossover" short story collections (*North of the*

Equator; *Berbice Crossing*). All three are writers who were born in and lived substantial parts of their lives in the Caribbean. Alternatively, mainstream writers may take a self-conscious approach to the writing of home and its connections with diaspora (and here home is both the object of critique and a dynamic source of empowerment) as in the work of many women writers who are domiciled in the USA but move physically or by communication between the Caribbean and the USA (for example, Jamaica Kincaid, Paule Marshall, Michelle Cliff, Edwidge Danticat). A third alternative avoids dealing with the current Caribbean by locating the narrative in the distant Caribbean of the slave past (as in David Dabydeen's *The Counting House*, Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge* and Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*). The latter type of deployment may in some cases stem from the authors' long disconnections from the geographical Caribbean and their desire to avoid the accusation of "cultural fraudulence" or inauthenticity.

The major difference in ideas of Caribbean between mainstream and the pop literature I am discussing is not that the vague, amorphous type of portrayal found in the pop texts discussed above, is absent from mainstream fiction, but rather that in the latter, the Caribbean very frequently appears as a focused, clearly delineated space but almost never seems to do so in X Press portrayals (except in the negative guise cited above in reference to Headley's and Marks' texts). This "absence-presence," as noted before, reflects the consequences for the characters of being unable to go/return to the geographical Caribbean, but obviously it may also reflect the authors' own inability in this regard.

Of course, one could easily say that the differences reflect differences in the writers' level of responsibility or the quality of the writing, or both. But the fact that there is no necessary connection between whether the work is pop or "serious" on the one hand, and whether its portrayals of the Caribbean are "vague" or "focused" on the other, is well illustrated by *Dancehall*, which gives a very vivid portrayal of inner city Jamaica as a physical and cultural space. But an important variable is that Marks's protagonist grew up and actually lives in Jamaica—at least some of the time. Set between Jamaica and the USA, *Dancehall* presents an interesting variation on the theme of dislocation endemic to these novels. The book chronicles the troubles and travels of Simba Ranking, a Kingston "ghetto youth" who has an affair with a middle class woman. Her politician husband seeks to murder Simba, forcing his flight across the island and finally to the urban centers of the USA.

The Jamaica that is presented is limned in stark, graphic terms not as a space of empowerment but as the agent of violence, violation and misrepresentation of the ghetto youth on the fringes. *Dancehall* is not only a revisionary reply to the stereotype of the inner city dweller as the atavistic instigator of violence, nor is it only a portrayal of proletarian desire for the middle class. It is also a portrayal of dancehall as romance (the dreamwork of yearning) and of ways in which Caribbean recedes as a possibility of home even for persons who live there. The alienation is not the alienation of education or ethnicity such as that experienced by V. S. Naipaul or even by the nationalist Caribbean writer in his guise as exile. Rather, it is the alienation of an underclass of young men who are not the subject of our mainstream fiction and

who recreate their identities not as transnationals but as unanchored itinerants whose location is the resources they carry within themselves—in this case, their music. If they have a cultural home, it is the imaginations of those in whom their music finds resonance, and there is a major shift away from accepted ontological categories. The protagonist's unmooring and alienation are such that home does not physically exist; in other words, home has nothing to do with physical geographies. This is a very extreme crossing that transcends the vocabulary of border, nation, transnation and diaspora.

Another interesting element in X Press's pop line is what I refer to as the popular-didactic text. There is a strong moralistic quotient in X Press pop fictions; Victor Headley, author of *Yardie*, the runaway bestseller that first brought X Press to public attention, states:

Behind the story line, plot, the efforts of the characters to live up to their dreams or nightmares, there is one thing which I know to be true: the lack of alternatives brings out the worst in anyone. That really is the moral of my stories (quoted in *Sunday Telegraph*, 11 July, 1993).

The "Baby Father" series (serialized by BBC TV) and Maynard's book are major examples of a particular form taken by the popular-didactic X Press novel. These revise moral positions in a kind of forked tongue, deliberately ambiguous glide reminiscent of the parodic carnival masks of Caribbean popular culture. Promiscuous sex is simultaneously bemoaned and orgasmically celebrated; irresponsible fatherhood and objectification of women are lambasted and made the occasion of complicit laughter, the signifiers of material success: Porsches, bling bling, and "female flesh" ("poom poom an ting") are valorized, and the materialistic ethos simultaneously warned against.

In this regard the X Press male author is the Moll Flanders of his day, the self acknowledged stand-in for the populace, performing the crossover between cloaked (unsanctioned) desire and declared (Christian-Puritanical) moral stance. Here of course the text as economic enterprise appears: nothing sells books more than poom poom, car an ting—but at the same time the packaging in moral censure fulfills the readership's requirement of guilt and the exorcism of guilt by its acknowledgement. Female author Sheri Campbell's unapologetically erotic, even pornographic scenarios (cf. *Wicked in Bed*; *Down and Nasty*; *Rude Gal*) partake of this crossover in another sense: her books are at once a feminist manifesto (assertion of women's right to sexual enjoyment and expression) and an exploitation of male attitudes to women and sex.

From the discussion so far, the pop lit is obviously a major source of socio-cultural information about the Caribbean diaspora, and particularly aspects of it that may not be so readily available in the existing mainstream literature.¹⁷ While it is true that the mainstream fictions portray their own major images of struggle and deracination,¹⁸ it is the pop fiction that brings to our attention the experience of the young urban, non-academic, non-folk, "on the

fringes" male, and the ways in which his ability to crossover borders are circumscribed by class, status and economics. Of course, this is not to say either that X Press fictions focus only on one group or class, since even within texts that deal with "fringe" characters, middle class characters also play protagonists' roles.

In *Games Men Play*, for example, Andre, one of the four protagonists, is a lawyer—but it is noteworthy that Andre is portrayed in the milieu he unselfconsciously shares with his mates on a struggling football team; thus, what is highlighted is not middle class-ness but the condition of being on the fringe. In *Baby Father*, all four protagonists are either well heeled or have at some time been well heeled or move among people who have status in various ways (Beres is middle class, Linvall photographs models and catches the attention of a white film agent). But again, it is the men's life together as "guys" that is highlighted. There is a level of "inclusiveness" in the constituencies from which these fictions draw and which they bring together, as well as in the fact that it is the "lower space" (Mikhail Bakhtin's material bodily stratum, perhaps?) that the fictions privilege.

David Dabydeen's mainstream novel, *The Intended*, also set in Britain and telling the story of a Caribbean diasporic person forms an interesting comparison: the Cambridge student protagonist and his schoolmates form a close relationship with an illiterate "street" person, essentially an outcast and debatably a madman, called Joseph. Joseph is a major subversive figure in the novel, but Joseph's presence in the group never "sifts down" the middle class (by education) protagonist's stance of superiority as narrator nor erases the fact that Joseph is ultimately an anomaly and his class a mere feature in the discourse on the middle class in which the book is framed. Dabydeen's book in this regard is no different from many West Indian (Anglophone Caribbean) texts in which the ultimate evaluative gaze is the educated narrator-protagonist's, even when the folk are highlighted (George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, C L R James' *Minty Alley*, Sylvia Wynter's *Hills of Hebron*, for example).

Often the groups and generation highlighted in the X Press pop fictions are those highlighted in the popular music, and interestingly publisher Dotun Adebayo argues for a merging of "the elements of black writing" to include the idiom of rappers, whom he sees as "the poets of our generation" (quoted in *New Nation* October 2002). If one distinction between pop and mainstream is that the pop fiction makes available to us the lives of "unprivileged" groups of young men in the Caribbean diaspora, then clearly there is a case to be made in political terms for the admission of pop literature to literary discourse, particularly if there is a class element that discriminates against the voices of the fringe.

X Press and the Literary Question

If, on the other hand, the distinction has to do with literary quality, as we have understood it in traditional terms, then a number of other important issues are raised. Bringing pop literature

into literary discourse may indeed work to devalue the literary enterprise, but it may equally work to improve the standard of the pop literature, especially given that popular literature has its own distinctive genres and each genre produces excellent examples of its kind. There is also something to be said for the idea of expanding creative writing programs to include offerings in these genres.

The style and technique of the novels I have discussed are of note both in light of this aspect of the discussion and in terms of implications for what we perceive as literary values. In practice, we tend to assume the concept of “good literature:” we may dispute the merits of a particular piece of writing, but we do so within a certain taken-for-granted frame, that is, we do not usually doubt that literature published within the mainstream is worth our critical attention. If pushed to define our criteria, most practitioners of criticism might cite “seriousness” of treatment and a certain sophistication in the use of language *as an art form*. Conversely, popular literature is considered as not so serious in theme, more invested in entertainment and escape, and its language more utilitarian, geared towards getting the story told rather than creating itself as art; there is a tendency to feel that if there is interest in language beyond this, it is only as language fulfills the entertainment quotient required by pop literature’s shallow/er aims. We might also say that the formulaic requirements of pop genres work to stifle creative explorations of language or theme.

With regard to the first criterion cited above for “good literature,” many might find it difficult to fault *Games Men Play* and *Baby Father*. With regard to the second criterion, part of my initial interest in Maynard’s and Augustus’s texts lay in their attempts to utilize a variety of strategies and formal features that are typical of Caribbean and postmodernist literature; these include the use of multiple narrators, first person vernacular voices, musical rhythms and tropes, parody, rewriting and carnival laughter. I was struck by this conscious attempt to modify the traditional pop approach to literature, in which the direction of the text is towards story telling/exciting event rather than towards “artistic” manipulations of form as aesthetic.

In both texts, the inner city and colloquial modes of speech of the protagonists/narrators are privileged; so too is the ear of the reader as listener, and moreover the reader who is interested in the entertainment quotient of language beyond formulaic prescription—both books are rife with puns, ripostes and witticisms which appear in narrative expression, chapter titles and the rewriting of popular and normative idioms as a form of structure. An example of the latter is the use of chapter titles such as “Best Dressed Chicken in Town,” “Hard and Stiff” and “No Woman No Cry” (Augustus), “Free at Last?” “Life is a Bitch,” “Home Alone” (Maynard) running the gamut from proverb to idiom to allusive deployment of the language of civil rights, popular music, performance poetry and movies. These allusions are often used in subversive ways that set up and then overturn expectations of what they might mean.

Augustus also humorously engages in intertextual "equalizing" of himself with literary heavyweights—as for example when he has the disreputable womanizer Johnny refer to the failings of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison in the face of man/woman problem:

In between my family duties, I spent a lot of time reading books, looking for a way out hidden between the pages of Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston. I couldn't find anything, not for men anyway. While women had their voices to fight for their rights, nobody was speaking up for the humble black man. Woman is a ... king size problem, that needs a king to solve it (86).

The passage is hilariously reminiscent of Selvon's carnival style in the London novels, and Linton Kwesi Johnson's tongue in cheek "If I Was a Tap-Natch Poet."

Maynard's chapter titles speak topically to an audience that is contemporary and "in the know." Adebayo's idea of the "hip hop book" (*New Nation*, 2001) that brings together elements of black writing seems to find resonance here and the question of when this kind of engagement with the fluid orality of the street and the popular moves from being "mere entertainment" to being a scribal form of art is raised. This is particularly important as we bear in mind first, that in the street, language is a consciously constructed art form (see Cooper 1995, 2004) that comes to the scribal artist ready to hand; and second, that entertainment as a linguistic value is a major part of the work of accepted writers such as William Shakespeare, Earl Lovelace, Merle Hodge, Olive Senior, V. S. Naipaul, Anthony Winkler (who is himself arguably "pop" albeit in a folk/countrified mode), to name a few. Entertainment as (serious) laughter in these writers stems directly from folk idiom, found also in calypso, soca, dancehall and dub poetry.

As already noted, *Games Men Play* and the *Baby Father* series invest heavily in the erotic. By virtue of their location in the mass market, these fictions are often frowned upon by "respectable" people, and their eroticism seen as part of their lack of respectability. But, as Rosamund King (2002) has pointed out, sexuality and the erotic have long been concerns of Anglophone Caribbean literature though traditionally ignored and strenuously "unread." Far from being taken up with pornography, Maynard and Augustus deploy sex scenes as part of a concern to show male attitudes in an honest light and to engage with the issue of what makes for successful/unsuccessful male-female relationships—in several instances this issue is a cause of great anguish to the same protagonists who also find a double-sided pleasure and carnival laughter in violations of their own codes of conduct (as for example the incorrigible and intermittently repentant womanizer Johnny in *Baby Father*).

The fact that Maynard and Augustus seem to push the envelope between what is considered "literary" form and pop formulae, raises the important question of how far our response to texts is framed by a meta-discourse located in their biographies and other contexts of reception. That is, how much does our response—or lack of response—to texts have to do with who the author is, who publishes them, who reads them, and who reviews them? The question is

an important one: Either these books that have been ignored are refiguring the concept of "pop" as formulaic and narrow or are shifting the boundaries between "pop" and "lit" or are superior examples of the pop genre. But they become "drowned" in our wholesale dismissal of the mass market. Indeed, suspicion of the mass market is somewhat anomalous, given our tacit acceptance of the advertising campaigns—often prepublication—by which the largest publishers create the phenomenon of the mainstream text as national bestseller.

The questions raised also confront us with the contradictions in much of contemporary literary critique rooted in a cultural studies approach: often oral and non-literary pop texts are given valoristic attention simply because they happen to fit into the current taste for the popular and the movement towards a greater "cultural democracy" that admits the legitimacy of previously denigrated classes and expressions. In many cases these texts either have no real artistic merit or their artistic merit is not made evident. This works both to trivialize (by patronage) the popular and to highlight the need for the academy to decide on the terms of its engagement with the popular—are acceptance and recognition incompatible with discrimination, and if discrimination is necessary, what and whose are the terms on which it should be established—the academy's, or "the street and the outside's" (and bearing in mind that values on the street and the outside are as diverse as those within academia), or some negotiation between the two? Whatever the answer, it becomes clear that any engagement with the popular makes the literary enterprise extremely fluid not merely in terms of the *types* of form and expression that are considered literary or the purview of literary critique, but also the terms on which *quality* is assessed within these types and forms.

Anglophone Caribbean literary criticism has not yet arrived at this space of "opening out" that its engagement with the popular has implied. There seems to be a reluctance in which critics are torn between a desire to preserve literary "purity" that demarcates "serious" literature while giving lip service to the popular ("unserious"). Lip service in its turn may indicate a desire to be "with it" combined with a fear of finding fault (with bad examples of the popular) in case one is seen as being colonialist, classist, imperialist or otherwise unacceptably "highbrow." But the academy can't have its cake and eat it too. It is of great interest that, faced with criticism of its early output as being too much invested in violence and "slackness,"¹⁹ X Press has responded in part by seeking to publish writing that remains true to the pop ethos while reaching towards greater aesthetic merit—this is in effect what the 20/20 line seeks to achieve. This move speaks to the Press' awareness of the gap between the highbrow and the popular but it also shows an unfortunate confusion between the issues of genre and quality—which leads back to my point that it is quite possible find a place within academic course offerings, for the study and encouragement of the best type of writing in different pop genres.

It is instructive that by the mid 1990s the runaway success of X Press led to highbrow publishers issuing and seeking to reissue their books, including those most lambasted for lacking "respectability," and that mainstream booksellers soon became eager to stock X Press books.²⁰ So X Press has created crossovers within the mainstream as well. The imprint has also

been seen as providing the climate for the emergence of more upmarket black presses such as *The Write Thing*, and as one of the catalysts not only for a growing proliferation of black writing and readings in popular clubs in England, but also for the significantly increased presence of black people at readings of mainstream black writers.²¹

It is interesting as well that, unlike mainstream publishers who incorporate massmarket fiction, X Press did not begin from the top down but from the bottom up, and in that regard can be seen as standing in the same place as the 19th century West Indian jamette carnival. Farred (2001) says X Press yardie fictions became prescribed reading for Scotland Yard officers as the police force saw these fictions providing major insights into the (criminal) black underworld and psychology. This, of course, reinforces common stereotypes. This bears remarkable parallels with the almost Foucauldian surveillance interest that the 19th century colonial establishment took in jamette carnival (eventually moving to suppress and "imprison" the carnival). Attention is directed to the fact that X Press is considered dangerous and important business, worthy of study. In 20th century terms, as Loretta Collins (2001) has noted, X Press was "ragamuffin;" its capacity to traverse and challenge borders is emblemized in one of its publications *The Ragga and the Royal*, which imagines a hot romance between the Princess of Wales and a street smart "yout." Emblemized too in its first, controversial and bestselling publication *Yardie*, which, despite the outcry against its style and "ethics," by 2001 had sold nearly a million copies and had moved beyond Britain's borders in new editions to the USA, France, Germany and Czechoslovakia.

In the 21st century, where we are increasingly engaging the products of the jamette, the ragamuffin and the popular in academic studies, we might consider that within their own arenas, the voice and value of these predate any attention from academia—a fact that academic narratives about the silencing of women and subalterns have often quite arrogantly overlooked (I am saying that the popular does not need academia in order to speak or subsist, so we cannot do it any favors by giving it our attention). At the same time, as we recognize the value of the popular to the enriching of academic discourses and careers, we are opening up spaces of redefinition, the implications of which we have yet to sort through.

In the end, though, the history of literary struggles for inclusion and the history of how the excluded eventually becomes part of the exclusive establishment, both in the Caribbean and elsewhere, shows that the challenge the academy confronts is in principle not a new one, neither is the academy's cagey response, although the specifics of the situation may differ in different historical moments. It may be that prose fiction remains the genre most resistant to an open engagement because it is the genre in which we in the Caribbean have most fully invested the imagination of ourselves as nation/s; the genre in which we have most struggled to establish our respectability; and of course, the literary form which is least affiliated to the performative, which is also the space of the popular.

Notes

¹I refer to “the folk” as precursor of “the popular” for two reasons: one, because demographic changes such as rural-urban migration and fluid class divides in urban centers have redeployed and reconfigured folkways into the more generalized concept of popular culture and because academic focus, following these changes—which are also reflected in diasporic settings where the concept of folk is anachronistic—has shifted from folk to popular.

²I use “the street and the outside” to convey two things: “popular” spaces and spaces outside of academia—which then configures academia as “the inside” in order to highlight the illogic of its exclusivism.

³By “new aesthetic criteria” I refer to factors such as the performance criteria that have been brought into the discussion of poetry by the advent of dub poetry and the increasingly performative spaces in which poets and other literary artists read their work. The focus on orality, delivery, body memory, the liminal space between these and the scribal, first suggested by writers such as Kamau Brathwaite in his various early essays on Caribbean literary criticism and Mervyn Morris on dub poetry, has become increasingly commonplace, appearing in the work of writers as diverse as Marlene NourbeSe Philip (*Genealogy of Resistance*), Carolyn Cooper (cf *Noises in the Blood* and *Sound Clash*) and Édouard Glissant (*Caribbean Discourse*). The concept of the performing body as “texted/scripted upon,” read as metaphor and metonym of culture is of course another way in which the vocabulary of literature redeployed indicates that the epistemology of literature is being brought to bear on the non literary.

⁴“Jamette” was the term used in Trinidad and St Lucia to refer to one form of the people’s (popular) carnival as opposed to the officially sanctioned carnival that suited the 19th century colonial authorities. See Gordon Rohlehr. *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad* (1990): 37, 93. Tellingly, it is now used to refer to a woman of dubious respectability—generally, a “sluttish” female. Anthony Winkler is another “accepted” writer whose novels arguably fit more into pop than “serious” literature; the question of the extent to which an author’s placement as an academic—or para-academic—colors the reception of the work is raised both in his case and Channer’s.

⁵In the case of McMillan’s text and Wideman’s, which give an extremely offensive take on the Caribbean, what is also signaled is an emerging African American middle class investment in non-American blackness as a form of consumer goods. See my essay “Selling That Caribbean Woman Down the River: Travel Narratives and the Global Economy” in *Journal of West Indian Literature* 13. 1 (April 2005): 1-27.

⁶Belgrave is a Trinidadian batik artist. In a number of essays and interviews (cited comprehensively in Faith Smith’s essay noted above), Belgrave declared her intention in *Ti Marie* of writing a historical romance that showed not only that West Indians could write (for) pleasure, but also that even from the days of slavery blacks (which ultimately translated into

brown-skinned "beauty") and whites could and did live together in harmony, even harmonious romantic love. The class-color contradictions and ironically Orientalist/colonialist attitudes in Belgrave's pronouncements were variously lambasted in the essays cited.

⁷All four essays were inspired by or focused primarily on X Press's first publication, *Yardie*, which was also the publication that propelled the Press to fame. Collin's essay additionally featured Donald Gorgon's *Cop Killer*, perhaps X Press's most controversial publication to date. Farred's and Collin's essays also, like mine, in different ways highlighted X Press pop as a crucial arena for the deconstruction of received wisdoms about value and acceptability, and Collins noted X Press's role in the development of the literary version of the "raggamuffin" music culture.

⁸My discussion of female-authored texts is part of a larger work in progress.

⁹Caribbean diaspora in this context means primarily West Indians (Anglophone Caribbean persons) in Britain. Here persons of Jamaican descent are a majority.

¹⁰"Tearing down the Ghetto," *Bookseller* 16 March, 2001, 27.

¹¹Examples of texts based around the music industry and using musical tropes include *Dancehall* and *Prince of Darkness*; *Dead by Popular Demand* too is based on the pop music industry. *Yardie* and *Cop Killer*, as Collins notes, may be considered "raga" novels—in the same way that *The Harder They Come* is seen as a reggae novel; even children's titles such as *Boyz to Men* and *The Glemma Kids* highlight the pop music ethos and lingo that frame several of these fictions. *Games Men Play*, as its punning title suggests, exploits sports as trope; sports is also important in *Baby Father*.

¹²Part of this complexity of course is that "black" in Britain signifies all racial categories except white. X Press has also signaled its interest in wooing British-Asian writers. See quotations from interview with Steve Pope in "Tearing Down the Ghetto". In "Here Comes the X Press: A Black British Publisher Takes London's New Urban Voices of Commercial Fiction on a Transatlantic Journey to Seek American Gold" quotations from interviews with Pope and co-publisher Dotun Adebayo highlight the X Press thrust towards North American and European markets—a thrust that includes attracting authors from these areas and indicates the Press's sense of connections between the local and the global.

¹³In Richard Wilson's "Black History's X-Rated Start: Britain's Most Innovative Book Publishers Embark on a Nationwide Tour," Dotun Adebayo is quoted as follows: "When we started The X Press ... white booksellers told us time and again: 'If you want to hide something from a black man, put it in a book.' But they don't say that any more" (4).

¹⁴Oliver is very much part of established theater/entertainment fare in Jamaica, seen as "acceptable viewing for the entire family."

¹⁵As seen, for example, in treatments during the 1990s by theorists such as Paul Gilroy (*Black Atlantic*) and Carole Boyce Davies (*Black Women Writing and Identity*). More recent discussions are more cautious and more engaged with the “terrified consciousness,” recompllicated racisms and post-September 11th anti-terror boundaries that make diaspora a place of terror for many.

¹⁶ See Mike Baker, “British Pupils Sent to Jamaican School” at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/features/1867513.stm>; and Mike Baker, “London Teachers’ Jamaican Lessons” at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/features/1863104.stm>

¹⁷I am saying this despite possible suggestions that fiction written for a popular market may not be as reliable a source of socio-cultural information as mainstream fiction. Fiction, of whatever kind, is by definition not “factually reliable,” but it is also true that what people choose to read tells a great deal about what they identify with and what they see as their concerns. Moreover, the groundedness of these pop fictions in recognizably black issues in contemporary Britain resonates with a sense of their authenticity.

¹⁸Collins gives a good overview of the kind of opprobrium X Press garnered especially in its early days. See also “Tearing Down the Ghetto” and “The Way Ahead for Black Writing.”

¹⁹Clarke’s *Origin of Waves* is itself a study in the kind of heartbreaking anomie and loss that often results from the exilic/diasporic experience. Clarke’s protagonists however are two old Barbadian men of “respectable” background and status, who draw on a vivid memory of folk experience in their home country, as a means of dealing (albeit with dubious success) with their present condition. Similarly, Dabydeen’s protagonist, a teenage boy of Indo-Guyanese descent attending a prestigious boy’s school in Britain, suffers displacement and racial-cultural confusion. But he too is recognizable as belonging to the West Indian mainstream of respectable immigrants who will by virtue of his education—and already by virtue of his background and origins—become distanced from the urban “fringe” as understood in contemporary terms.

²⁰Simon Prosser writing in *The Sunday Telegraph* in 1993, one year after Yardie made its spectacular debut in London, noted that PanMacMillan was re-releasing the book, and that WH Smith, moved by the upsurge of publishing in black fiction (inspired by the advent of X Press and another (more upscale) black publisher, The Write Thing, was planning to introduce a special black section in its inner city shops. When I visited Birmingham in 2002, I noticed that Waterstone’s had followed suit. Prosser noted too that HarperCollins and Flamingo were buying rights to black fictions that had emerged—at least one self-published—in the wake of *Yardie*. *Bookseller* (“Book News” March 1996) also noted imitations by large publishers such as Boxtree. White authors also cashed in, disguising themselves as black to write and publish “black fiction” (see “Reflecting Black Experience” in *Bookseller*, 16 June 1995, 29).

²¹Cf “The Way Ahead for Black British Writing,” “Tearing Down the Ghetto,” and “X Press Route to Success” in *Bookseller* March 1996.

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