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### **Abstract**

Lionheart Gal: Life Stones of Jamaican Women is an experiment in narrative form that exemplifies the dialogic nature of oral/scribal and Creole/English discourse in Jamaican literature. For Lionheart Gal is dialogic in the old-fashioned, literal sense of that word: the text, with three notable exceptions, is the product of a dialogue in Creole and English between each woman of Sistren and Honor Ford Smith, the sister confessor, who herself confesses all in solitary script, immaculate in English.

## Writing Oral History: SISTREN Theatre Collective's *Lionheart Gal*

*Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women* is an experiment in narrative form that exemplifies the dialogic nature of oral/scribal and Creole/English discourse in Jamaican literature. For *Lionheart Gal* is dialogic in the old-fashioned, literal sense of that word: the text, with three notable exceptions, is the product of a dialogue in Creole and English between each woman of Sistren and Honor Ford Smith, the sister confessor, who herself confesses all in solitary script, immaculate in English.

In the fashionably modern, Bakhtinian sense of the word dialogic, *Lionheart Gal* is impeccably subversive. For it engenders an oral, Creole subversion of the authority of the English literary canon. Further, its autobiographical form – the lucid verbal flash – articulates a feminist subversion of the authority of the literary text as fiction – as transformative rewriting of the self in the *persona* of distanced, divine omniscience. *Lionheart Gal*, like much contemporary feminist discourse, does not pretend to be authoritative. Indeed, the preferred narrative mode of many feminist writers is the guise of intimate, understated domestic writing by women: letters, diaries or what Sistren, in an oral/Creole context, simply calls testimony. The simultaneously secular and religious resonances of ‘testimony’ intimate the potential for ideological development from the purely personal to the political that is the usual consequence of this process of communal disclosure.

It is important to distinguish between actual letters and diaries written by women, and the literary use of this sub-genre as fictional frame. For the artifice of these feminist narrative forms is that they are artless, the author having receded in Joycean detachment to pare, and perhaps paint her fingernails, leaving the tape-recorder or word-processor on automatic. For example, Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* describes herself as ‘A.W., author and medium’, and courteously ‘thank[s] everybody in this book for coming’.<sup>1</sup> She presumably ghost writes the text.

With *Lionheart Gal* this feminist illusion of narrative artlessness is complicated by the mediating consciousness of Honor Ford Smith, the editorial persona who performs a dual function in the making of the text.

As testifier, Honor records her own story in 'Grandma's Estate'. As amanuensis, she transcribes the testimonies of the other Sistren (except for 'Ava's Diary' and 'Red Ibo'), shaping the women's responses to her three leading questions: 'How did you first become aware of the fact that you were oppressed as a woman? How did that experience affect your life? How have you tried to change it?'<sup>2</sup>

The full weight of that unprepossessing 'with' on the title page – 'SISTREN with Honor Ford Smith, editor' – is revealed in the polemical 'Introduction', particularly in the section 'How This Book Was Made'. The editorial explanation of the collaborative process is an illuminating sub-text, as interesting as the stories themselves. For the 'Introduction' offers an ideological frame for the stories that defines the boundaries of their meaning: the stories assume a sociological authority that the improvisational authorial process cannot readily support. The sociologist, Herman McKenzie, in his review of the text, issues an instructive caveat:

There are methodological doubts, however, which make me feel that perhaps it is wiser to view these stories as illustrative of generalizations previously arrived at by other means, rather than as providing an independent basis for such generalizations about women in Jamaica.<sup>3</sup>

Editorial intervention in the making of the text is clearly an important issue in *Lionheart Gal*. Evelyn O'Callaghan argues that 'the life stories related in *Lionheart Gal* stand somewhere *between* fiction and research data. These stories have been so shaped by selection, editing, rewriting and publication that they have become to a large extent ... "fictionalized"'.<sup>4</sup> As editor, Honor seems to doctor the text – less in the pejorative sense of that word and more in the sense of obstetrician. This metaphor signifies both the active creativity of the labouring woman telling her story, and the somewhat more passive efficiency of the enabling mid-wife dilating the passage of the text. This distinction between text and story, between ideological necessity and narrative autonomy, is central to the problem of authorship and authority in *Lionheart Gal*.

In her 'Introduction' Honor acknowledges a methodological uncertainty in the making of *Lionheart Gal*: a tension between illustration and testimony – what I call text and story:

This book started life as a documentation of the work of the theatre collective. The first section was to put the work in the context of Jamaican society and focus on the conditions of life of Jamaican women. It was to include testimonies from Sistren as illustrations of pre-determined themes and then discuss how we work on our plays. Soon it was clear that the testimonies would not sit neatly into an introductory section.

They refused to become supporting evidence of predetermined factors. They threatened to take over the entire project and they would not behave.

So, in the end we gave up trying to trim them and silence them and we decided to change the nature of the entire project. (pp. xxvi-xxvii)

*Lionheart Gal* does not entirely transcend its ambiguous origins in social history; but perhaps it oughtn't to. For as Herman McKenzie concedes in his lively critique, the hybrid nature of the text is a major source of its appeal:

The collection, therefore, while its mode of presentation (and appeal) places it firmly within the arts, suggests conclusions that challenge social scientists to consider both the problems as well as potential contributions, not to say advantages, of this approach.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the ideological frame does not totally circumscribe the range of meanings of the stories. For *Lionheart Gal* is literary less by intent than intuition. Somewhat like *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (whose author Erna Brodber once artlessly described herself as 'innocent of literature'),<sup>6</sup> *Lionheart Gal* subverts the conventional generic boundaries between literature and social document, between autobiography and fiction, between the oral and the scribal traditions.

As story, *Lionheart Gal* is for the most part clearly oral. The language of narration is Creole, employing proverb, earthy metaphors and folk tale structures, particularly repetition and apparent digression. In addition, the rural setting of many of the stories reinforces the sense of a 'folk' perspective. The life stories illustrate what Derek Walcott calls the 'symmetry' of the folk tale: 'The true folk tale concealed a structure as universal as the skeleton, the one armature from Br'er Anancy to King Lear. It kept the same digital rhythm of three movements, three acts, three moral revelations'.<sup>7</sup> In the case of *Lionheart Gal*, narrative structure is shaped by Honor's three informing questions which compress female experience into riddle. Decoding the riddle is the key to identity and the moral of the fable.

As text, *Lionheart Gal* somewhat ironically affirms the authority of the written word. Documenting the ideological development of the women of the Sistren Theatre Collective cannot, apparently, be fully accomplished in the medium of theatre. The plays do not adequately speak for themselves: thus the scribal intention of the original project. Further, the search for what Honor calls a 'throughline for each story' (p. xxviii) superimposes on these misbehaving oral accounts a decidedly scribal narrative necessity. The circular line of oral narration becomes diametrically opposed to the ideological, scribal throughline.

This oral/scribal contradiction is quintessentially Creole/English. For, as Honor observes somewhat evangelically in her 'Introduction':

Those who speak standard English easily are usually middle class. They usually write in English, but a few also write in Patwah (usually poetry or drama only). Those who are working-class and speak Patwah, write English too – or at least very few write Patwah (usually poetry or drama). This means that Patwah is written for performance, which is excellent, but what is not excellent is that it is not written for silent reflection or for purposes other than entertainment. Yet we all know that Jamaican people reflect all the time in their heads or in conversations in Patwah, and we also know that reflection is part of the process of gaining control over one's own life. So, why are certain kinds of written language still dominated totally by English? (pp. xxviii- ix)

This is the seminal/ovular question. But Honor's own written performance, both in 'Grandma's Estate'<sup>8</sup> and the elaborate 'Introduction' serves to confirm not the appropriateness of the Creole mother tongue, but the imperial authority of the English father tongue – more often phallic pen – as the instrument of serious, written reflection. But perhaps it is indelicate to notice: the subversive subverted.

In an unpublished 1986 conference paper, entitled 'Creole and the Jamaican Novelist: Redcam, DeLisser and V.S. Reid', Victor Chang, more sceptical than Honor, poses a series of challenging questions to our writers, which *Lionheart Gal* as story, if not as text, eloquently answers:

We have been increasingly told that the resources for expression in Creole are no more limited than in Standard English. If this is so, why then is it not used for internal musing and reflection? Could it be that there is still a persistent belief that Creole just will not serve in certain situations, that certain registers require Standard English, or that our writers still have yet to learn to manipulate the Creole with total freedom? Perhaps it could be argued that the very spoken nature of the Creole, its very physicality, militates against its use for inner reflection and introspection.<sup>9</sup>

Recognising the dialogic nature of oral/scribal and Creole/English discourse in the story/text *Lionheart Gal* and seeking to narrow the social distance between the language of the stories and the language of textual analysis, I wish to engage in an experimental Creole subversion of the authority of English as our exclusive voice of scholarship. My analysis of the testimonies of the women of Sistren – their verbal acts of introspective self-disclosure – will now proceed in Creole.

'We come together and talk our life story and put it in a lickle scene'. (p. 72) A so Ava seh Sistren start off: a tell one anodder story. So yu tell, me tell, so tell di whole a we find out seh a di one story we a tell. Oman story. Di

same ting over an over. But it no easy fi get up tell people yu business ma!  
It tek plenty heart. So Foxy seh eena fi her story. She seh:

Plenty women used to talk bout di children dat we have and di baby-faada problem. At first me was shy to talk about myself. Di impression women always give me is dat dem is a set of people who always lap dem tail, tek yuh name spread table cloth. Me did feel sort a funny at di time, having children fi two different man, especially since me never like Archie. Me never discuss it wid nobody. When me come meet Didi and hear she talk bout her baby faada and how she hate him after she get pregnant, me say, 'Well if yuh can say your own me can say mine, for we actually deh pon di same ting.' Me and she start talk bout it. (p. 253)

An a di same Foxy she come find out seh dat di tings dem dat happen to we jus because we a oman, dem deh tings supposin fi call 'politics', jus like any a di odder big tings deh, weh a gwan eena 'politricks' as di one Tosh him seh. Den wat a way dem kill him off ee! Me no know if a big Politics dat, or a lickle politics, but someting mus eena someting. But dat is anodder story. An di ile dat fry sprat cyaan fry jack, so small fry all like me no suppose fi business eena dem deh tings.

So hear how Foxy seh she start fi find out bout dis oman politics:

Tings develop so-till we start meet more people and talk bout woman and work and woman and politics. We discuss what is politics and how it affect woman. After we done talk ah get to feel dat di little day-to-day tings dat happen to we as women, is politics too. For instance, if yuh tek yuh pickney to hospital and it die in yuh hand – dat is politics. If yuh do someting to yuh own child dat damage him or her fi di future, dat is politics. If yuh man box yuh down, dat is politics. But plenty politicians don't tink dose tings have anything to do wid politics. (p. 253)

A true. For yu cyaan understan 'di little day-to-day tings dat happen to we as women' if yu no understan seh dat di whole ting set up gainst plenty oman from di day dem born. Tek for instance how so much a di oman dem weh a tell dem story eena *Lionheart Gal* jus find out seh dem pregnant. Yes! It come een like a big surprise. Grab bag. A no nuttin dem plan for. A no like how yu hear dem people pon radio and t.v. a tell yu seh 'Two is better than too many' – like seh pickney is sums: add an multiply an divide an subtract! Wear yu down to nuttin. Nought. Dat a weh pregnant do plenty oman. Not even oman good. Young gal. Force ripe an blighted.

But even though life hard, di oman dem still a try. Hear how Barbara put it:

Di pregnancy a never someting me plan or choose. It just happen. Nadine born '71. After she born, me did just love her. Me always feel a tenderness inside me dat me no waan do notten fi hurt her. At di same time me no pet her till she spoil. (p. 138)

But oman an pickney cyaan live pon so-so love. An a when di oman dem start fi try fi find lickle work dat story come to bump. For a den di politics beat dem down. Ongle certain kind a people fi do certain kind a work. An dawg nyam yu supper if *yu* no one a dem. All yu fi do a fi look after odder people business. Yu no have no business fi look after. Dat a weh happen to Doreen. Never even get a chance fi go a day school. Pure evening school, an nah learn nuttin:

Me did waan learn, for me did waan be nurse, or a teacher, but me couldn't gras notten. Me know definitely seh if me no pass di exam, me nah go get di job me did want. As di months pass by and me see seh me couldn't manage di work in di evening school, me know dere and den seh me nah go noweh in life. After school, ah used to walk past di residential areas and wish it was in deh me live. Sometime me used to pretend seh me live deh and dat me get fi go a school like dem pickney. (p. 92)

So now when pickney problem jine aan pon no-get-fi-go-a-no-good-school, cyaan get no work, haffi a siddown wait pon man fi set yu up, dat a when de politics get hot. Dat a Didi story. Hear her:

Sometime when yuh no have notten and yuh have di pickney dem and dem a look to yuh fi food and fi shelter, yuh haffi do sometings weh yuh no really waan fi do, just fi survive. Sometimes a better yuh cyaan do, mek yuh tek certain man. Sometime yuh really in need. A man might use dat fi ketch yuh. Yuh might know a so it go, but yuh in need. Yuh want it, so yuh haffi tek it. (p. 201)

But a no all di time yu cyan tek it. For might-as-well turn eena livin hell. For now man all waan beat yu if yu no mek up yu mind fi do weh *him* seh. An if yu married to him, dat no mek no difference. It could a all worse, for now him directly feel dat him own yu. Dat a di prekkah Yvonne get herself een. She seh:

Ah say ah have me three pickney now and ah married. Dem time deh when yuh married, dem say yuh married fi life. Ah never expect fi me and him separate. Me depress and unhappy. Everyting just get confuse inna me brain. Me feel seh me life mash up tru me never understand bout sex and man. Me never know what me could a do bout di problem. Me say is everyday problem. It cyaan change. Me grow in it. A so life hard. Me no chat to nobody more dan so. Me no know no odder woman fi talk to. Me never have no consideration. Me, like me unconscious. (p. 151)

Dem deh blow good fi kill yu. Lick yu down flat. Di ongle ting fi bring yu back from grave-side a fi find out seh a no yu one. Odder oman eena di ring wid yu a go help yu pen up di bull. So yu talk, act out yu lickle scene, an nex ting – yu eena book.

So how dem mek di book? Accorden to di ring-leader, Honor, di whole ting start off wid she a ask di Sistren dem question bout how dem grow up,

an di different different tings dat happen to dem fi mek dem find out seh life hard. An dem go roun and roun, an talk an talk, like dem a play 'Show me yu Motion'. All dis time dem a tape everyting dem seh. Den Honor she listen back to di tape an fix-up fix-up wat she tink di Sistren dem a seh, an dem gwan talk an talk so tell dem en up wid las version. An den dem write it down.

Plenty a di story dem soun like a so di oman dem talk. But some a dem mek me wonder. Dem no soun so caseer. Tek for instance 'Ava's Diary'. It kind a mix-up mix-up. It come een like seh how she talk a her yard eena war wid how dem did want her fi talk an write a school; an di school nah win! See't ya now:

Since me and the children are alone, if a man come to me other than him, I would have to leave them and go out with him. Therefore I have decided not to have any relationship with another man for the time being.

Bertie know seh me no have no man friend, so him come if him want to come, till me and him start to talk good and him start come intensively. (p. 271)

Den now, 'Grandma's Estate' an 'Red Ibo'. Me never like how di two a dem jus prims up demself eena so-so English. An dem no inna no talkin business me dear; a pure write dem a write. School definitely win out yasso. An it look like seh Honor did know seh people a go ask her bout it, for she try fi clear up herself. She seh:

With the two middle-strata members of the group, the oral interviews did not work well. Accustomed to standard English and the conventions of academic expression, their stories sounded stilted when spoken, full of jargon, and hollow. Both 'Red Ibo' and 'Grandma's Estate' were written responses to the interview questions. (p. xxviii)

An yu know, me think me understan: Parson christen dem pickney first. But me still seh, supposin dem did gi we di chance fi hear wat dem did *seh*? Maybe notten never did wrong wid it. Den nex ting: It no soun like seh dem a seh seh dem cyaan *talk* good, dem cyan ongle *write* good? Me no know; me just a wonder.

Den again, yu no see seh fi dem story no personally deal wid no man an oman business to dat; no lickle rudeness. But me nah seh dem faint-a-heart because dem nah tell people di whole a fi dem personal an private business – like di odder lionheart gal dem! Is jus dat fi dem story come een like seh yu a try fi explain yu self, yu know seh people a listen, so yu haffi fix it up. 'Red Ibo' story all soun like seh she a preach. But no testimony meeting! Everybody a testify inna dem owna way. But me dear mek me lef it. For puss

an dawg no have di same luck, an me no waan nobody seh a bad mind me bad mind mek me a ask dem ya lickle question.

An still for all, yu haffi gi it to dem. A true seh Ella an Red Ibo story soun like book. But wat is fi yu cyaan be un fi yu. An more time dem still ketch a nice lickle roots vibe inna di English. Hear how Red Ibo she start off fi her story cultural: 'When I think of childhood, I think of a village squatting on hillslopes with a river running through it and a bridge and a fording midway along the road which ran by the river'. (p. 221) An a Ella granny nearly spoil up di poor lickle pickney. No want her fi ask no question bout her people dem. She fi go read book. Not even play di lickle pickney cyaan play. Poor ting. She seh:

I packed leaves of croton and pimento into a basket I found in the kitchen. I twisted a piece of cloth into a cotta and put it on my head. I placed the basket on top of it and practised walking while balancing it on my head. Then I stepped off down the pathway arriving with my produce under Grandma's window. 'Lady, Lady, yuh want anything to buy, maam?' I readjusted the basket, which proved difficult to control.

At first there was no answer, so I repeated 'Lady, Lady, yuh want anything to buy, maam?'

My grandmother pushed her head through the window.

'Ella! Come inside at once and put down that basket!'

I obeyed.

'What do you think you are doing, Miss?'

'Playing market woman, Grandma,' I said, not sure what I had done wrong.

'Never let me see you doing that again.'

'Why grandma?' I asked. 'What is wrong with market ladies?'

'Ladies? They are not ladies. They are women. Go and take a seat in your room.'

[pp. 180-81]

A so it go. *Lionheart Gal* is a serious book. An oonu better read it. It might a lickle hard fi ketch di spellin fi di first, but after yu gwan gwan, it not so bad. Den one ting sweet me: Yu know how some a fi we people simple; from dem see sinting set down eena book dem tink it important. So now plenty a dem who never go a none a Sistren play, dem same one a go read Sistren book, because book high. Dem a go get ketch. For a six a one, half a dozen a di odder: oman problem, man problem, pickney problem. Plenty politics. An whole heap a joke! For yu know how we know how fi tek bad tings mek joke. Stop yu from mad go off yu head. Doreen know how it go. Hear her nuh:

All my life, me did haffi act in order to survive. Di fantasies and ginnalship were ways of coping wid di frustration. Now me can put dat pain on stage and mek fun a di people who cause it.

Go deh, Sistren! Last lick sweet.

## NOTES

1. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982; New York: Washington Square Press, 1983), p. 253.
2. SISTREN with Honor Ford Smith, editor, *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1986), p. xxvii. Subsequent references cited parenthetically in text.
3. Herman McKenzie, Review of *Lionheart Gal*, *Jamaica Journal*, 20, 4 (Nov. 1987-Jan.1988), p. 64.
4. Evelyn O'Callaghan, Review of *Lionheart Gal*, *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 2, 1 (Dec. 1987), p. 93.
5. McKenzie, op. cit., p. 63.
6. In an unpublished talk to students in the West Indian Literature class, Department of English, U.W.I., Mona, 1984.
7. Derek Walcott, 'What the Twilight Says: An Overture' in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 24.
8. Ella *does* use Creole when she role plays as the market lady: ' "Lady, Lady, yuh want anything to buy, maam?" I readjusted the basket, which proved difficult to control.' (p. 180). A Freudian slip?
9. Victor Chang, 'Creole and the Jamaican Novelist: Redcam, Delisser and V.S. Reid', Sixth Annual Conference on West Indian Literature, U.W.I., St. Augustine, 1986, p. 5.