Let It Be Told

Jackie Kay
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Abstract
Precise beginnings are always hard to find. I could say I started taking my writing seriously when I was twelve years old and had my first poem published in The Morning Star. That was certainly a starting-point: I remember my sheer excitement at the seriousness of the printed word. It looked so proper! But, I can’t really say that I took my writing very seriously then. Even now, I’m struggling with, 'But who wants to hear about why you write anyway? How many "epics" have you written?'
Jackie Kay was born in 1961 and brought up in Scotland. Her poetry has appeared in various anthologies including: *A Dangerous Knowing* (Sheba), *Beautiful Barbarians* (Onlywomen Press), *Black Woman Talk Poetry* (Blackwoman Talk), and *Dancing the Tightrope* (The Women's Press). She has written a couple of plays. *Chiaroscuro* is published by Methuen in Lesbian Plays, and *Twice Over*. At the moment she is living and writing in London. She has written three collections of poems, *The Adoption Papers*, *Two's Company*, and *Other Lovers*, all from Bloodaxe. The poems reprinted here from *The Adoption Papers* were read at a conference in Aachen/Liege in 1988.
Precise beginnings are always hard to find. I could say I started taking my writing seriously when I was twelve years old and had my first poem published in *The Morning Star*. That was certainly a starting-point: I remember my sheer excitement at the seriousness of the printed word. It looked so proper! But, I can’t really say that I took my writing very seriously then. Even now, I’m struggling with, ‘But who wants to hear about why you write anyway? How many “epics” have you written?’

So, I pick up my pen, after picking it up and putting it down for ages now. I am well behind my deadline. (The impact of ‘deadlines’ on my life has been one thing that’s forced me to take something seriously – somebody wants/needs it, fast.) What finally motivates me, apart from my promise, is all the pieces I’ve read in various books by women writers telling of their inspiration, reason, and motive for writing. I’ve chewed over such articles endlessly, commenting to myself, ‘Oh, that’s interesting’, or ‘That explains such and such...’. It adds another dimension to what you have already observed.

Another starting-point: I remember, at sixteen or so, my English teacher telling me I should go and see the then writer in residence of Glasgow University, Alasdair Gray. I took her advice, and she sent him some of my poems. I remember his flat vividly; it fascinated me. Strewn with paints, canvas, books, papers, it looked as if a war of creativity was going on there. He had a hard job finding me a coffee mug. As he let me in, he said: ‘Well, there’s no doubt about it at all, in my mind, you are a writer.’ I repeated that sentence of his. But I didn’t properly believe him, or rather I didn’t really believe in myself. I was appreciative of the encouragement though. Chuffed. And I told my parents.

‘A Writer.’ There was something about the word that just didn’t fit me. Writers were eccentric white men who could be as crazy as they wanted and get away with it; writers were not within my reach. I used to imagine them walking among the daffodils until they happened upon an inspiration. Later I saw that they need not necessarily be in the countryside, or roaming the clifftops, but they were still usually white and mostly male. The ones we were taught at school – that lot, they were the ‘Writers’. ‘Poet’ had the same kind of not-me ring to it. Poets didn’t ever seem to me like ordinary people. Even Rabbie Burns, who surely was as ordinary as they came and poor with it, was made extraordinary by immortality. Im-
mortality isn’t after all an everyday occurrence. It’s hard to trace back where all these ideas came from.

On reflection, I think they came from an absence rather than what was actually there. I never knew of many black writers at school. In fact the first time that I can remember actually reading something by a black person was when I was fifteen years old. It was a poem called ‘Telephone Conversation’ by Wole Soyinka. Not surprisingly, being the only black kid in my class, I was the only one who understood what the poem was actually about. It made a huge impact on me; and I think it was one of the first things I ever read that taught me you can laugh and feel extreme pain at the same time.

But Wole was a drop in the ocean; one poem, however powerful, was not enough for me to conjure up even several black writers, let alone a whole community. I didn’t even know then that Wole Soyinka was a poet, novelist and playwright. These things have to change. You can teach an awful lot by not teaching. In other words, you can say that Frances Harper, Alice Walker, Tony Morrison, Audre Lorde, Flora Nwapa, Gwendolyn Brooks, and the work of countless others does not matter, that it is not significant by not teaching it. You can go one step further; you can deny their existence. And that is what I believed: ‘serious black women writers’ did not exist. So how on earth could I call myself one?

It is a struggle to say the words and actually believe in them. I still cannot say ‘I am a writer,’ without my tongue being right inside my cheek or my cheeks flushing. It takes time. Time to come to terms with memories like this one. Nine years old in primary school. One of the two black kids in the school – the other was my brother. A woman is carrying out some kind of pronunciation test. Big words. At the end of it, she says, ‘My, my, you can pronounce some of those words better than me!’ Shock horror – she didn’t expect me, evidently. Other people’s assumptions of you, whether you want them to or not, do interfere with your own image of yourself. At least until you get older and can put certain assumptions into a context. As Audre Lorde says in Zami, you don’t have words for racism when you are a child, but you experience it.

Another problem I had with the idea of being a ‘writer’ was my own fear that writers were selfish, self-indulgent depressives who sat up through the night sacrificing sleep in order to create morbid images that would frighten sleep away from their readers! I’m exaggerating, but you must be familiar with the image. The poems that I wrote in my early teens always concerned broad political issues such as apartheid and poverty and inequality and starvation. I never thought it was important to write about me particularly. Then one day I got a very nice rejection letter from this Scottish Arts magazine which told me to write less about world struggle and more about myself, because ‘I’ wasn’t in my poems.

The slogan ‘the personal is political’ had not yet made an impact on my life. I still couldn’t write about me, or write obviously from my own point
of view without feeling somehow that it was not worthy. My writing was more ‘real’ when it was as far away from my own experience as possible. That seems ironic, but I don’t think I was alone in that. And, it is not really all that surprising considering we live in a society that continues to devalue the opinions of young black girls.

When I was thirteen I started to write a novel called ‘One person: Two Names’ about a ‘black’ (I said ‘brown’ then) girl and a white girl who were on the run in Los Angeles. (I even had to have the location as far away as possible to emphasize that it had nothing to do with me; it was purely creative.) I sat in my bedroom poring over the atlas. It didn’t seem to matter that I had never been there. I watched the telly, didn’t I? I filled eighty jotter pages in my neatest handwriting and kept ‘my book’ under my bed in a tiny black suitcase. Occasionally, I brought it out and read it to my school pals in lunch hours. I even got my pal Gillian to design a cover for it. So we covered it in brown wrapping paper and she drew on top of it. It gave me a huge kick, that cover. But it was also like one great joke, as if there was something supremely funny in being able to take myself seriously enough to get my friend to design my jotter cover! Big ideas!

Joke or not, I must have really needed to write to spend so much of my time manically scribbling away. It was not until I was about nineteen or so that I recognized the urgency of my need. I was down in London in the summer of 1981 – a memorable summer of SWAMP 81 and resistance in Brixton. I was staying in a squat in Vauxhall, not far from Brixton, where the police were relentless in their breaking in to black people’s homes and smashing up their belongings. I was working in Westminster Hospital as a porter, the only woman porter in the entire hospital. One of my jobs was to sell the newspapers in the mornings. It was dreadful. Pushing the power of the media on a hospital trolley from ward to ward. Selling it! I felt like a traitor. All those headlines. The white patients would buy their papers, read the headlines, shake their heads and talk among themselves about how the country was going to the dogs; suppressing the urge to say ‘Send Them All Back Home’ in the presence of any black nurse or hospital worker. Because they were after all lying sick in bed, and that is a pretty vulnerable position! You could feel the place bubbling with resentment. And the way in which the papers reported the ‘RIOTS’ endorsed every white person’s racism and gave them a right to it.

That was the summer that I joined my first writing group, a black women’s writing group. It gave me so much validation being around other black women who wrote, and getting feedback on my stuff and giving opinions on the writing of the others. I think this kind of support is crucial because writing is a very isolating activity. I read a lot that summer too. I discovered Tony Morrison and devoured The Bluest Eye. I read Audre Lorde’s The Black Unicorn. Both of these books had a momentous effect on me. They reiterated the feeling that I got from the group, that I was not alone. I totally identified with Pecola’s desire to have
blue eyes, though I can't say I ever wanted blue eyes exactly, I just wanted to be white; a pair of brown or hazel eyes would have been all right as long as my skin wasn't the colour it was! But her belief in her own ugliness, the sad intensity of the need to be something she wasn't, all recalled the girl I used to be. The knowledge that the desire to negate yourself was not unique to me came as such a relief. Sometimes I feel ashamed of ever having wanted to be white, now that I am very happy to be black. But being brought up in a very white society, by white parents, and never knowing that the words positive and black could come together made it very difficult to be delighted about it. This is something that I consistently want to bring out in my writing: that when you literally do not know, because you have not seen, any positive black images, then in isolation it is virtually impossible to conjure them up on your own.

Reading The Black Unicorn filled me with such joy and relief. I was amazed at how much company these poems could keep. Here at last was a woman who wrote, without shrinking, about her love of other women. I had never ever read anything by a black woman who was also a lesbian. I was so excited by Audre Lorde's poems, her images, the clarity of her vision. They were so, so different from anything I was reading at university. She gave me a name. In print. She told me I was not alone. Her poems taught me to acknowledge fear and get on with life; and not to be terrified of need. I could feel the need in her poems:

I am
the sun and moon and forever hungry
the sharpened edge
where day and night shall meet
and not be
one

('From the House of Yemanja', The Black Unicorn, Audre Lorde.)

After that hot summer, I returned to Stirling where I was doing a degree in English. I felt so isolated - all the support and validation I'd felt from being around other black lesbians was not in my day-to-day life any more. As far as I knew I was the only black lesbian in the whole of Scotland. I didn't meet any others. So I put my head down and worked. I wrote loads of essays about other people's work, few of whom were black and rarely women. The writing didn't seem relevant any more although I could get something from it intellectually. I felt I could not afford to forgo a degree, so I stayed on, writing letters to the women I'd met and made friends with, and waiting eagerly for the replies. I continued writing my own poems whose main theme was isolation. It struck me then how important it is to be in an environment where you do not feel an outsider, where you have so few reflections of yourself. Conversely, it is often exactly this feeling of intense isolation that produces writing. There is nowhere else to take these feelings except on to paper. So much of the writing that means
something to me has been born of a sense of aloneness, a feeling of being marginalized.

Our dreams were never meant to be mapped. White people did not even want us to read and write, didn’t want our stories passed down, tried to wipe out our history. Published feminist writers, who in the seventies were mostly white apart from one or two exceptions, perpetuated the exclusion of black women in their discussions of how men had wiped out women’s history. Nobody seemed to want to even note our existence. I remember just how disappointed I was as I read one book after another without a single mention of a black woman. We just weren’t in the picture. All of this – what surrounded me and what I read – made me realize the absolute necessity of writing, of creating definitions, of breaking that dangerous silence. I wanted to read what black British women had to say, so maybe some other woman would get something from what I had to say.

Whatever form of writing you choose, day-to-day realities of where we can go, where we live, who has insulted us that day, who has held us that day, must in some way, however obscure, feed into what we write. To this extent, I see writing as a sort of up-to-date history - a writing of the present that in the future will stand as a document for the past. Presumably, as Britain’s black population grows, the black Scottish population will increase so there might not be the reaction of this woman in my poem, ‘So you think I’m a Mule?’

‘Where do you come from?’
‘I’m from Glasgow.’
‘Glasgow?’
‘Uh huh. Glasgow.’
The white face hesitates
the eyebrows raise
the mouth opens
then snaps shut
incredulous
yet too polite to say outright
liar
she tries another manoeuvre
‘And your parents?’
(‘So you think I’m a Mule?’, A Dangerous Knowing: Four Black Women poets)

Perhaps in another fifty years’ time, black Scottish people might not be considered a contradiction. This, to me, is another thing that writing is all about, being able to embrace contradictions, acknowledge them. I think we have to acknowledge them because they have destroyed so many people. At first when I really began to acknowledge my blackness, I wanted to deny my Scottishness, because I felt ashamed at being so old without knowing any kind of black culture. Now I feel I can do both. I wrote a
poem recently about acknowledging all that I am called, 'Kail and Callalou':

what is an Afro-Scot anyway
Mibbe she dan dance a reel and a salsa
remember Fannie Lou Hamer and Robert Burns
and still see Tam O'Shanter peeking into that barn
– what did you think of pair Meg's tail coming off like that?

mibbe they wear kilts and wraps
and know that Ymoja
offered yams and fowls
and Corra could prophesize

I am a firm believer in recording our contradictions. I think that we learn from the past in the stories that are passed down, the pieces that we read. Even fables have contradictions; many of them are held together by their contradictions – the poor girl in a castle; the rich girl in a cottage. Passing down stories is tradition, is history, is learning, is experience. The power of the story is in the handing down. Something that could have died is still living. Struggle itself is immortal.

Robert Burns's poetry is still powerfully relevant – we still live in a world where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, for 'a' that. And I've been influenced by all that. I was brought up on Burns Suppers and kailies. I was steeped in Scottish tradition which is rich with myth and imagery. I am glad I was brought up in a culture, a strong one. From an early age, I was conscious of the value of creative work – poems, plays, novels, paintings, and how creativity could tell history. In the work of every black writer I've ever read, I've found the theme of the past, the importance of it; and, alongside that, the terror of no past, of the past being wiped out. Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, Barbara Burford and countless others all acknowledge the ancestors, both the ones we know of and the ones we don't.

For me writing is a constant challenge – to write to satisfy myself and hopefully to satisfy readers or listeners, to give something so that people can relate to what you are saying. When someone, particularly another black woman, reads, or listens to a poem or story of mine and says that she can identify with it, that she's felt the same, the validation that gives me is enormous. It enables me to keep challenging, to feel that there is some point in what I'm doing.

It is important for me to challenge structures and stereotypes not just in the content of what I'm saying but in the style. The discovery that poems need not rhyme, that stories need not have a definite beginning, middle and end, that plays do not need to be all dialogue, was like a liberation in itself. I think that writing with a political motive must also include a challenge to traditional styles. That is also part of the politics. Finding a new language to complement radical ideas.
In 1985 *Theatre of Black Women* asked me to write them a play. I would never have thought about writing a play because I thought you had to have special technical skills to write plays. Just as I used to think I couldn’t be a poet, I felt I couldn’t be a playwright. I feel extremely pleased that *Theatre of Black Women* provided me with an opportunity to do something that I might not otherwise have done, certainly not for a good few years. Writing *Chiaroscuro* was a whole new experience for me. I never wanted to write an ordinary naturalistic drama. I wanted to combine poetry dialogue and stories in the one piece. I wrote an initial first draft which did not have enough dramatic conflict nor solid enough characters. The company organized a period of four-week workshops to assist me with the rewrite. Joan-Ann Maynard directed these workshops. For me this was an exciting experience. Other women were creating on top of my foundation, improvising, building backgrounds, interacting. Joan-Ann understood precisely what I was trying to say in the play. It was so different to writing on your own in your bedroom, working with all these women. I kept feeling like it was a dream come true. It took the lonely feeling of writing away and gave me inspiration and ideas to feed back into the writing. The play could never have been the same without all of these women. I find the idea of people working on a project collaboratively really satisfying. In the rehearsal period, I had to let go and let the director bring it to life. Joan-Ann worked with Pamela Lofton, who choreographed, and Gail Ann Dorsey, who wrote music to my lyrics. All of this was so exhilarating to have people using their own particular skill and inspiration on the one piece of work.

The whole process taught me a lot. I learnt how to let go. Never before had I even had anyone else perform my work. I’ve always read my own poems. It was amazing how much the meaning could change depending on the emphasis and the interpretation. I learnt how to create in a complementary way with other women.

Now that I’ve seen *Chiaroscuro* several times, I feel that there is much room for improvement, and if I were to write another play, or rewrite this one, I would change things. But you can only learn through making mistakes. Part of being a public writer is being able to take the risk of making mistakes. That’s often very frightening; at least in some other types of work you can make mistakes in private! I think it is this that stops many women from publishing or performing their work. The fear of criticism, the fear that it really is not good enough and somebody, maybe everybody, is going to tell you how far from good it is. Writing is risking. It is making yourself publicly vulnerable and you have to learn to deal with that if you choose to be public. You have to learn to be accountable and responsible for your own words. And that is not easy.

Every writer who looks over work she has done a while before would want to change something about it. Every writer can, after publication or performance, see flaws. It is the ability to see flaws and not lie down and
die that keeps you on your toes, keeps you changing and challenging. Even although being 'public' is frightening, it also has a huge number of benefits. You can hear directly what people think, you can respond to suggestions, you can see that people are actually getting something, and that in itself is thrilling. I remember the first poetry reading I ever gave at Southall. I was bowled over by the appreciation. It gave me strength to go on and write some more. It made writing seem less isolating. Writing is after all about communication, but you can often feel as if you are communicating with nobody except yourself! So, seeing attentive faces, hearing laughter, seeing tears even, all give you something back. It is a relationship. You see just how much of a relationship it is in the theatre where the audience can literally change a play by the way they respond to it. Writing is all about developing relationships both within the work itself and outside of it.

*Chiaroscuro* is about four different black women and their relationship to themselves, each other, their colour, their sexuality. It is about communication, the ways they find to relate to each other, the ways they don’t find. One of the themes that runs through the play is naming and namelessness. The play opens with each woman – Aisha, Beth, Opal and Yomi – telling the audience how she came to get her name. It is also about how you can invent names if you have no tales of generation after generation. How you can make your own definitions, invent your own past. How to name the nameless.

It is of paramount importance to name ourselves, to put ourselves on the map so that we cannot be lost. To make a record of our existence and our struggle. The chorus of the last song is:

If we should die in the wilderness
let the child that finds us
know our name and story
know our name and story

We rarely see any positive black characters on television or in the theatre. Only in the last couple of years have publishers wanted to publish black writers’ work, have theatre companies wished to commission black playwrights, have television researchers hunted for black scriptwriters. Despite this recent interest, there is still a huge absence. A play from a black British point of view is still too much of a rarity. The creation out of this void, this absence, is in itself a political activity: it says, ‘I refuse to have my sisters’ and brothers’ existence denied. Here we are.’ Of course it is not enough simply to create what you see as being positive black characters; we can often stereotype ourselves, or believe certain lies that we were fed in our childhood. The fact that we live in a racist and sexist society can often inadvertently be reflected in what we write. And society can attempt to tokenize black writers just as they can anybody else, to set
up a hero or two to assuage the complexities of racist guilt. Black writers have to be alert to the current search to find, for example, a British version of Alice Walker. We must keep our own vigilant standards. That’s why I think constructive criticism is so crucial. I know I have an awful lot to learn from other people and I appreciate it when people take time to tell me what they think of my work, what criticism they have of it, but of course I cannot take the ‘let me rip you apart’ kind of criticism.

Strangely enough, I find criticism hard to take for another reason. It sometimes embarrasses me because people are treating my work seriously enough to criticize it. There is something very positive about that.

Everything I write is influenced by all of my contradictions and all of my experience. It cannot be otherwise now. I am a woman. I write as a woman. I am black. I write from a black point of view, even if I’m creating a white character, I’m still creating her from a black point of view. I am a lesbian. I write from a lesbian’s perspective. I believe somewhere that I have something to say and I will say it.

SO YOU THINK I ’M A MULE?

‘Where do you come from?’
‘I’m from Glasgow.’
‘Glasgow?’
‘Uh huh. Glasgow.’
The white face hesitates
the eyebrows raise
the mouth opens
then snaps shut
incredulous
yet too polite to say outright liar
she tries another manoeuvre
‘And your parents?’
‘Glasgow and Fife.’
‘Oh?’
‘Yes. Oh.’
Snookered she wonders where she should go
from here –
‘Ah, but you’re not pure?’
‘Pure? Pure what
Pure white? Ugh. What a plight
Pure, Sure I’m pure
I’m rare...’
‘Well, that’s not exactly what I mean,
I mean ... you’re a mulatto, just look at...’
‘Listen. My original father was Nigerian
to help with your confusion
But hold on right there
If you Dare mutter mulatto
hover around hybrid