



2008

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Recommended Citation

Collett, Anne, Pink icing and the sticky question of popular culture, *Kunapipi*, 30(2), 2008.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol30/iss2/10>

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Abstract

At a now not so recent conference on Caribbean popular culture,¹ I chose to speak about *Pink Icing*, Pamela Mordecai's first short story collection, because it seemed to me that short story collections in general, but more, this collection of stories in particular, allowed me to consider the complex question of popular culture: what is meant or can be understood by the term.

ANNE COLLETT

Pink Icing and the Sticky Question of Popular Culture

At a now not so recent conference on Caribbean popular culture,¹ I chose to speak about *Pink Icing*, Pamela Mordecai's first short story collection, because it seemed to me that short story collections in general, but more, this collection of stories in particular, allowed me to consider the complex question of popular culture: what is meant or can be understood by the term.

Although Pamela Mordecai is better known as a poet, children's author, anthologist, scholar and editor of the *Caribbean Journal of Education*, a number of the short stories in *Pink Icing* (published by Insomniac Press, Toronto, in 2006) had been published previously in small magazines (*Prism International & Mangrove*) and anthologies and were recognised for their literary quality. She was runner-up in the Prism International short story contest (1998) and short-listed for the James Tiptree Jnr award in 2000. But 'literary' short story collections do not tend to sell well, and would not generally fall into the category of popular culture because they do not appeal to 'the masses'; yet story-telling is perhaps one of the oldest modes of popular culture, and the Caribbean short-story in particular, draws upon that oral, performative heritage. What happens when the oral becomes literary, when voice becomes print? 'What happens' is a question about the impact of the shift from spoken to written word not only on the text itself, but also on its readership which is in turn related not only to a required level of literacy and reading skill/experience, but to the (local and global) publication process.

Using Mordecai's *Pink Icing* as a case study allows me to examine how the local and global are played out in the literary life of the author, in the short stories themselves, and in the editing, marketing and distribution of the book; which leads me in turn to the issue of the location of author, book and reader. Given the impact of globalisation on literary publication, and the degree to which an alliance between the familiar and the popular might shift to an alliance between the exotic and the popular, I am interested, Alice-like, in the degree to which, or in what circumstances, 'Caribbean popular culture' might be understood to be the same as 'the popularity of Caribbean culture'.²

Although Pamela Mordecai has lived in Canada since 1994, most of her short stories are set in the Caribbean, sometimes but not always identifiable as the Jamaica in which she was born and grew up:

In my Granny house, is a real window, a window with glass. It sit sideways and twist to open and you stick a little iron pin in a hole to make it stay. In our house, is just a

space over the door with pieces of wood shaped like the sun — not the whole sun, just half, right at the bottom, with rays sticking out and space between so the air can visit from room to room. ('Chalk it up', *Pink Icing* 15)

This is the nostalgic world of childhood and young adulthood — the formative years that place the individual within the group. These are the years that (unless irredeemably fragmented) create and consolidate a sense of belonging to a human community and a natural environment. The stories of this collection are not necessarily autobiographical but are clearly informed by personal experience: the reader is introduced to the stories and the author with a page of acknowledgements that begin, 'In 1992 my father died and I wrote "Limber Like Me", which is the story that got this book going' (7). But rather than begin with the story of initiation or the story with which the collection and perhaps the pain (and pleasure) of childhood memory begins, I will turn to the story that most closely reverberates with my own memories of childhood, 'Pink Icing', in order to elucidate and interrogate the relationship between a shared 'remembrance of things past'³ and my understanding of popular culture. *Cric-crac! Listen up!*

I take out my penny-happeney, and pass it across to the Chinese lady behind the counter. I take the slice of cake from her with great care, step outside the store, and begin by carefully peeling off the bit of wax paper at the bottom so none of the cake goes with it. Then I nibble quickly through the yellow part. Now in my hand is a bare, naked square of pink icing.

I take the first bite. ('Pink Icing', *Pink Icing* 51)

For me too, 'pink icing' is the stuff of childhood, but for me it is the birthday party cupcake, pink icing covered in hundreds and thousands or little silver cachaous; the incredible excitement of birthday party anticipation — the food, the presents accompanied by the anguish of party games and the anxiety about difference and acceptance — the desire to be part of the in group, to be popular. Like Proust's Madeline cakes, pink icing conjures remembrance of things past. The cover of the book itself encourages this reading, featuring a sepia-toned photograph of a young girl (perhaps Pamela herself). Is the stuff of childhood, the work of autobiography and memoir, the stuff of popular culture? I think perhaps it is, if popular is to be read as something held in common — the common or shared experience of childhood (no one's childhood is the same as anyone else's, but growth through experience, though the experiences will vary enormously, is much the same); and of course we also share the tendency to reflect upon childhood in our later years (from the distance of adulthood) — so (the literature of) nostalgia too might be deemed 'popular'. Thus 'popular' might be understood in terms of 'an experience or feeling shared by the majority'. The cake that features in the story 'Pink Icing' is not a party cake and thus has quite different associations for the author/protagonist; but the story nevertheless is curiously close to one I could have written from my own childhood.

The protagonist relates how she and her sister take the bus to school most days, but how, ‘on some afternoons we go home on foot to save the bus fare.’ ‘I say “we”,’ she qualifies:

because it is me and my sister Jennifer who go to Sacred Heart Academy. She is older than me and neat and always presentable, and she has lots of friends. Sometimes we walk home at the same time but it is not together. She walks ahead with her laughing friends and turns back every now and then to shout at me, ‘Why don’t you hurry up?’
(‘Pink Icing’, *Pink Icing* 41)

I am struck by the similarity of our experience (mine and the protagonist/author): I too have a sister named Jennifer, although she was younger than me; and I too took the bus to school with my sister in the mornings — the Church of England Girls Grammar School in Canberra to which I and my sister were ‘privileged’ to go because my mother taught at the school and our tuition was part of what, these days, would be called her salary package. I say ‘privileged’ with some irony because, coming from a much poorer background than the daughters of diplomats, businessmen and upper-level public servants, it was an experience of mixed pain and pleasure — probably more pain than pleasure on reflection. Like the girls in Mordecai’s story I too walked home from school with my sister — ‘at the same time but . . . not together’ — to save the bus fare of thruppence. But being older than my sister Jennifer I was the one ‘neat and always presentable’ and I was the one shouting back to my younger sister to hurry up! She, being four years younger with much shorter legs and a bit of a dawdler to boot, found it hard to keep up with my demanding pace; but it was not just meanness on my part that accelerated my walking pace, although that was certainly an aspect of our sibling rivalry — it was also my fear of dogs of which there were many and fierceome along our route home.

Although Mordecai’s story follows a route that is particular to (I assume) an area of Kingston Jamaica, and my route home is particular to my childhood in the suburbs of Canberra, that story route/root is uncannily similar in many ways, not least of which is the dénouement upon which both the protagonist and the author are focussed:

After I cross South Camp, I make another break for it, crossing Deanery so as to be on the side with Up Park Camp. (I wonder where is Down Park Camp. If it has ever existed, I have never heard it spoken of.) Again I put my life in peril. It is always waiting for you, but if you face it with firm resolve, you can overcome it. Sometimes I think that I am only eight years old and should not be facing peril, but most times I do not mind because of my prize at the end. (43)

It is at this point in the story (about half way through) that I begin to wonder about the title: where and how will the pink icing feature? For that I too have to wait for the prize at the end:

Now I start to run fast-fast down the sharp incline, for I am anxious to reach. Also, as I run, I get a nice feeling in my tummy. Quickly I round the small circular entryway into Thrifty Store. Then I stop, and compose myself, and step inside.

I am here to get my slice of cake with pink icing. It costs a penny-hapenny — my bus fare. (50)

My bus fare too was well spent at journey's end, not on a cake but an ice-block (or ice-lolly as some would say) — the double kind that you split down the middle (a stick on each side) — orange, raspberry or lime — that ran down your arm in the hot pavement sun.

Although 'Pink Icing' is a story whose belonging is specific to the Caribbean, it is a story that resounds in me, a story with which I am familiar and in whose language I feel at home. This might seem curious, even spurious, given the use of Jamaican Creole, or 'nation language' in Kamau Brathwaite's terminology.⁴ But in this story, and in all the stories of the collection, Mordecai writes in a language that is intended to be accessible to the general reader. It is a language of popular culture in that it speaks not only to the particular experience of the Caribbean, but it is sufficiently 'translated' for broader consumption, such that it also speaks (albeit differently) to those like myself who have no lived experience of the Caribbean. That is to say, it is the language of popular culture in its locality of origin by merit alone of its being vernacular, and it is the language of a 'global' popular culture in that it can be understood in the English-speaking world (Canada for example or Australia).

Interestingly, the language in which Mordecai speaks of herself and her writing, is a language that uses the metaphors of an everywoman's shared experience of domesticity (again not every woman's domestic life is the same in its particulars, but each woman nevertheless shares a commonality of experience that is at the very least biological, but also constituted by a shared history of patriarchy). A piece written for Jamaican writer Geoffrey Philp's 'blog spot' is titled 'The Freedom Recipe'. Here Mordecai relates how no matter what the writing task, 'I've got this image or shape or feeling inside me somewhere, a sort of embroidery pattern, a sort of magic-pencil outline, a sort of distant melody, that knows how what I'm writing should look', and adds that, 'the sound that I hear when I'm writing, is the sound of Jamaica Talk. The rhythms and word play of this language, its verbal sound clash, its shrill or low Anasi *keh-keh* laughing, this is the noise that drives my tap-tap-tapping on the keyboard' (Mordecai, 2006a). Writing is related to cooking, sewing, singing, child's play, and, in the second instance, with an oral folk tradition. The first might be the popular culture of a woman's home life anywhere (although not everywhere) in the world, the second is popular culture specific to the Caribbean; but it is a culture that has resonance well beyond the shores of the Caribbean — in the Africa from which it originated, and in the wider world, transported and transplanted not only by the physical diaspora of peoples, but by the diasporic nature of word culture, and more so than

ever before, by a global communication and marketing network that renders the local, global.

In a keynote address, delivered at Ryerson University (Toronto) in July 2005, Kamau Brathwaite suggested to his audience that we (meaning those of Caribbean descent) were at ‘the beginning of a second momentous middle passage’ that was ‘so much more complex ... with borders not what they used to be’, but that now the means of negotiating and crossing those borders was not only music (that those of the African diaspora had always come with) but literacy. He spoke of the migration of the tongue and of his belief in the possibility and the power of ‘a music and literature of transformation’. This was no longer he said, employing the words of Wilson Harris, a ‘tremendous voyage between two worlds’ — that of home of origin and place of exile — but a ‘spectrumification’ of base — a voyaging between multiple worlds that are one world ‘in flow’ — what he described as ‘a continuing tidalectical experience process from home to home, from home to whom, from origin to continuum, from love my beloveds to love’ (Brathwaite, 2005/06).

Yet if such a world (that ‘no man is one island and no island belong to one man’ [Brathwaite, 2005/06]) is a reality and not the misty-eyed day-dreams of an aging poet, then Pamela’s Mordecai’s revelation of how *Pink Icing* ‘came a cropper with one publisher in the US *because many of the stories were in Jamaican dialect,*’ [italics in original] should come as a surprise; but it doesn’t (not to me at least). Borders are indeed, ‘not what they used to be’. There may be a greater freedom of movement than ever before, but there is also a greater patrol of those borders than ever before. Of this inability or refusal to cross borders or even to enter into negotiation with difference, of this inability to recognise the translatability of englishes and ‘other’ cultures of the americas, and thus to reject her collection of short stories as unsuitable — indeed, unreadable or incomprehensible, Mordecai remarked:

And that’s too bad. Some other reason would have been okay, but not that one. It’s too bad in this age of languages crisscrossing each other, flying over borders and boundaries, because people will find ways to talk to one another, yes bredren and sistren, they will. Which is another reason why all writing is the same — because it’s all part of a gigantic written-spoken conversation about everything in the world that people everywhere in the world are determined to have. (2006a)

‘Now I start to run fast-fast down the sharp incline, for I am anxious to reach.’ I love that sentence — it so exactly fits my feeling and experience. For me (perhaps because I am not Caribbean) it is poetic — hitting just the right note of the strange and stimulating with the familiar and true. Having spent so much time ‘living’ in the Caribbean word/world through my love of Caribbean poetry, it may be that my sense of familiarity in the language, my sense of pleasure in the word, derives from this time; but it may also be that poetry is more of a universal language than decades of denial of the universal in the pursuit of the rights of

difference would have us believe. Mordecai certainly believes in this language. She speaks of ‘the freedom recipe’ that will be arrived at ‘by using and delighting in our heart language that slides easily onto our tongues and that will find a way to communicate with other languages of heart and home’ (2006a). Is this then popular culture? — the culture and language of the heart? I fear at this point that my critical faculty is turning to mush and I am threatening to emulate the misty-eyed aging poet for whom ‘love’ is the answer. ‘Love’ may well be the answer but it’s not easily accomplished — for borders are redrawn and fortified as quickly as they are transgressed. So as to avoid complete dissolution, I would take you back to the problem of the short story with which I began — which is also a problem of marketing, distribution and money — and back to the definition of popular culture that I am in danger of reducing to something approaching nothing.

In his address, Brathwaite explained that ‘by culture I mean the texture of life ... the texture and lifestyle of peoples ... culture seen as tidalectics of motion and emotion’. This is culture, but is it popular culture? What makes culture ‘popular’? and is this the same question as ‘what makes a culture popular’? The content of Mordecai’s collection of stories might be said to constitute popular culture in the way I have described (paradoxically, either in the Caribbean because it is vernacular and distinct but common to that culture, or globally, either because the essence of that described experience is held in common, or because the Caribbean itself has become popular — it could be said to constitute a cult of the exotic.) That which is held in common would seem to be the key here. But is the world that Mordecai describes common to all those who grew up in the Caribbean or is it particular to a class of people, or even to a group of people living in Jamaica, or living in Kingston, Jamaica, or living in a particular locality in Kingston, Jamaica. The same question might be asked of those who ‘consume’ that culture in the global economy — are they a specific group that might be defined by class, age, gender, race, education? Does something have to be valued by the masses for it to constitute popular culture? And related to that question is that which asks if ‘culture’ as ‘product’ also has to be accessible to the masses to constitute popular culture? So if Pamela Mordecai’s collection of short stories is produced by a small press with a limited print run and accessibility to the work is also thereby severely limited, can it be said to constitute popular culture? I think my answer to that is probably not. But I would like to return to the idea of popular culture as understood not so much in the marketable product (that is, the material object — the book, or the dreadlocks — as recently appropriated by my daughter at the hairdresser’s for \$350) but in the shared experience it represents. I would return you to Brathwaite’s phrase ‘tidalectics of motion and emotion’.

Tidalectics is the principle of tidal flow — a cyclical movement of coming and going in which cultures cannot be discrete or self-contained and neither can they be utterly engulfed to disappear entirely. There is a general mixing of fragments in the tidal wash of the living and the dead; the oceans are discrete

yet joined as one body of water, connecting all peoples and all land and all cultures to each other. Raphael Delleo understands this concept, as enunciated by Brathwaite in the idea of ‘tidalectics’ and Edouard Glissant in ‘errantry’, as ‘Movement, which keeps the subject-in-process from hardening into a fixed identity’ (online, para 14). Perhaps popular culture might be understood as this constant process of cultural translation — a sharing of culture that results not in some kind of monstrous undifferentiated amorphous amalgam, but in a huge diversity of possible combinations and understandings of cultural fragments. ‘For [José] Martí as much as Glissant or Brathwaite,’ writes Delleo, ‘the chaos brought on by economic and cultural exchange (what we might call globalization) simultaneously threatens Caribbean identity and cultural production, while highlighting its possibilities’ (online, para 18). When I read ‘Pink Icing’ I am not only recalled to scenes of my own childhood but hear echoes of the childhood and adolescence of Margaret Atwood and Alice Munroe’s fiction, and I wonder to what extent Pamela Mordecai’s reconstitution of a Caribbean childhood — in her memory and in her fiction — has been translated and transformed through experience of Canadian culture, and the wider culture of world literature. Is this an example of ‘the new literature of the intercultural reconstitution of fragments’ of which Eddie Kamau Brathwaite speaks?

NOTES

- ¹ I refer here to the 2007 biennial conference of the Australian Association for Caribbean Studies on ‘African Diaspora and Popular Culture’ held at Victoria University, Melbourne.
- ² A reference to Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*, and Alice’s remark at the Mad Hatter’s tea party that suggests ‘I mean what I say’ is the same thing as ‘I say what I mean’ (67).
- ³ Allusion to the original English translation of Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* [Remembrance of Things Past], most recently translated as ‘In Search of Lost Time’.
- ⁴ See use of this term in Brathwaite’s *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*.

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