

Amazon in the writing of Cyril Dabydeen

Miguel Nenevé

Universidade Federal de Rondônia

We discussed how Caribbean

Writers only look north,

And how maybe I'm a unique

Among them (I want to believe)

Because of my interest

In all of South America (Dabydeen, "Amazonia")

Cyril Dabydeen is an acclaimed Canadian poet and fiction writer. Although living in Canada for more than thirty years, Dabydeen keeps writing about his origin in the Republic of Guyana, the Amazon region. Unlike most of the writers of Guyana, Dabydeen does not explore much the Caribbean context, but the South-American myths and landscapes, as for example, one finds in his book *Born in Amazonia*. Amazonian voices mix with other voices in order to be heard in his poetry. In this presentation I would like to discuss the mixture of Canadian, Guyanese and South-American beliefs in Dabydeen's poetry, especially in *Born in Amazonia*. It seems that most of his origins are imaginary and invented origins, one needs to have in order to survive in country which is not his. Brazil seems to be present as the important neighbour which like any South-American country suffers from colonization. If Latin America and the Amazon are presented as ruins, or as a decadent region, one can say it is a noble decadence, something which one likes to remember, of which one is proud of belonging to.

In his book of poetry *Born in Amazonia* the author explores his worldview based on his South-American experience. At the first sight, the book, with its colored cover showing a picture of a supposed indigenous girl seems to be a work of travel writing written by someone who wants to show the exotic image of the Amazon to the world. In fact the first time I saw the book in a shelf in Ottawa, and, as I was coming from Rondonia, I asked myself: “Who is this guy who assumes he can write about the Amazon? This could be just one more of those writers who writes about the Amazon just to denounce the “burning of the forest” or to warn about the destruction of the “World’s lungs” “the Green Hell” or to announce “the end of the Paradise.” However, coming closer to the work, by reading some of the poems, I could realize that the poet is somewhat deconstructing the traditional discourse on the Amazon. He reveals his connection to this region where his world of imagination began. In this aspect, the poet satirizes the stereotyped vision about the region. Moreover, the poetical text suggests a travel to the past in order to mold the present and to build a better and more beautiful future to the Amazon and its people. In this aspect, *Born in Amazônia* offers also a political reading once it subverts the media discourse and invokes the possibility of several visions of everything that was written about this region of the planet. For those of us who live in the Amazon, this work is an invitation to the reading and re-reading and a reflection about the myths, values and culture to be recovered. The Yanomamy Indians so much shown in the international Media appears here as with no perspective, other than just look to the sky in search for some help or at least search for an understanding of what is going on. The Indigenous group seems to be embodying the displaced environment of the Amazon people, of Brazil and its frontiers in Roraima and its memories, remembering a voice which is not heard, the Yanomamis’s voice.

Yanomamis:

The Yanomami Indian, too
never really down under,
never in erstwhile disdain

Of the forest he has known all his life;
Eyes riveted to an ancient sky

as Brazil continues to shape destiny (35)

Brazil shapes the destiny, a destiny which was shaped long ago when the colonizers arrived and determined what kind of life the Indians would have.

Born in Amazonia presents the poet's worldview always grounded in his South-American origin and experience. The legend of the jaguar is associated with its "continuing myth-making in South America."

Rosettes of broken rings, black. Golden fur
Surrounding. The spotted pelt pales
Jaguar scratches more of a beast as it waits
For the female to come along. Further growls,
Mate-calls. The forest burnishes, the lair grows
Suddenly hot.

The animal jaguar is considered to be king of the South American rainforest, appears and reappears in the poems as if leaping from one page to another. The animal, *Panthera onça* is the largest and most powerful cat in the Americas, has its name derived from the Indian word "yaguar" meaning "he who kills at one leap." The Jaguar poems mixes legends of South-American and Guyanese beliefs and experiences with the Canadian imagination. In the Amazon we live mystery and fantasy - gods, anthropomorphized animals and birds, chimera, phantasmagorical creatures - that posits out of the imagination some sort of explanation for the mystery. Humans and their fellow creatures live in a world of expectations, loss, nostalgia. The jaguar is sometimes a competitor to the men – something which reminds of the Borges' story "La Escritura del Dios" when man is in a prison facing a jaguar

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seems to be haunting the poet's spirit and memory. There is a voice, a "voice that will continually be a scream" as the poet states.

Born in Amazonia combines heterogeneous peoples, landscapes, ecology and a very significant concern with the social and historical reality of these peoples. The poet seems to be saying that we are surrounded by Myths which may be stories that mediate in this way between the known and unknown. Allusion to South American historical and literary characters and the use of Spanish words seem to reveal the poet's desire to be inserted in this context, a South and Latin-American context. In the poem "Bolivian Miners" he writes:

As Bolivian miners are alive
The rest of the world is dead.
They live for forty years or less,
Wheezing heavily at nights..

This is the environment, this is the social reality one grows to be surrounded in Latin America. History, Myths, and a feeble expectation:

In the sun, the mountains.
Guevara too is dead.(54)
I open a dead eye—
and continue the watch. (53)

The colonizer takes life away from the scene, even the rainbow disappears: as we see in the poem "Cortez meets Montezuma in the Afterworld":

They discuss a map of territory,
and call it home.
.....
Montezuma closes his eyes,
and considers a life
without rainbow colours (58)"

Desolation as the Latin American treasures seem to disappear because "when gods become more human, life takes a turn for the worse." (55)

The poet seems to keep reminding the reader that his small world is a part of a larger ones where the beliefs and myths meet. The large forested region of the Amazon seems to be haunting the poet's spirit and memory. There is a voice, a "voice that will continually be a scream" as the poet states.

In his article "On knowing Wilson Harris", Dabydeen tells us that the Amazon theme received the influence of Wilson Harris.:

In my teens and young manhood Wilson Harris's novels were my staple reading. In a sense I might have been reading Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* most of all, which brought the hinterland closer to us living on the coast of Guyana. With the later works, Harris's influence on me became more than seminal. Significantly Harris, like the other Guyanese writer Edgar Mittelholzer, was born in the small town of New Amsterdam, four miles from where I was born in the Canje district. But mine was a sugar plantation world at best, not Harris's world for sure; his was the vast interior, with dreams, memories, mythologies, all awakened in his powerful imagination

In the poem "Outhouse" from *Born in Amazonia*, one can confirm the influence of Wilson Harris. It seems that here the poet ironically refers to his native land, local of ruins. There is a diffuse frontier, a complex relation to the new and what used to be memory. The images of the interior of Guyana and of the Amazon get mixed with reality. Evolution is necessary, identity must be transformed as one sees in the poem "Evolution":

I have evolved
From sugar cane
(so goes the hoary
Indian myth)

I sprout leaves
In the sun unleashing
Blades in the wind
Arrows pointing upward
As I am tropical
To the bone.

My sucrose memory
Reeks through
Molasses time.

A memory of the work in the sugar cane plantation, a symbol of the hard life of a colonized , a memory which could be sweet , but presents itself as bitter. It seems that memory is mixed with nostalgia, with a desire to return and a need to go. It suggests that the sweetness of sugar cane is mixed with the tropical decadence. So the arrows point aimlessly to the sky as it is impossible to fight the destiny.

The poet's world reveals itself to be both complex and pure like the green sugar cane or the forest of Guyana and the Whole Amazon. In his imaginary origins Dabydeen presents the sweetness of the past, a past more fictional than real. The sweet and the bitter form a vulnerable identity as one sees in the poem "Coastland:

"I am the squeal and running hooves
... I am the howl against the moon
in a father's sun-absence
where gall and bitter dew-drop
make for memory much too long"

The image of ruins, the imagined , re-invented and dreamed seem to be part of this forsaken world:

place of ruins. i am here. stark and bare. this pit. this self
unwinding. / mound, earth. / tendrils of flowers in your hair.
I laugh loudest. other places too. / you, touching me with
perfume. jasmine filling my days and nights./ now imagining
continents. all other fictions, phrases too. / and still
passing on stranger beliefs about the self./ forever aglow we
continue to make our marker/ in this place of ruins where it is
still bare and dark. (p 42)

Live memory mixed with the reality of ruins seems to be present in Amazonian and Latin-American life. To a Peruvian girl, with Incan origin, who is forsaken in a room in Canada the poet says:

The Incas offered their hearts

To salvage a life
You look back once in a while,
Remembering other lives

In his poetry, the immigrant's memories, and desires to "fit" become visible. In "As an Immigrant" living in North America, the poet reveals his search for meaning in and belongingness in an environment which is still strange to him: "I am bound by water, trees, sand, other lakes, ground swirling --- And let the beaver draw me closer/As I quarry silence and talk/In riddles so that the maple leaf/itself will understand"(62). Beaver, Maple Leaf remind the poet of another reality, another marks and symbol, another language which must be mixed with his origins for his own survival. Jaguar, Anacondas and Capibaras must be "translated" into Canadian landscapes. Sometimes, when writing about the Amazon the poet seems to satirize the discourse produced on the region by the First World Media. Anacondas and Capybaras are staple food as one sees in the poem "Amazônia" from *Imaginary Origins*(2004). If Jaguar's as other animal's cry is an attempt for survival, it is also a cry for a ground, for a place to feel at home, comfortable. Without sacrificing his regionality the poet reveals the extreme need to live other culture in order to survive.

It is in this sense that the author draws our attention to his multiple origins, someone "Born in the Amazon", in a British colony, being Caribbean of Indian ancestors and living in Canada. He needs to establish prints, to have a ground, he needs myths, stories, history to step on.

.... i will establish
footprints larger than yours. / call me by another name.
bigfoot too if you like. my being here. / you there. i heave
with a false note. the bloodstream. the land here. / in us. /
i say, you will understand later what its all about. you
will tell stories to your children. always will. let the
stories take over once / again... (p.76)

The poet confesses that he has to disguise, he acknowledges that he is not himself that he probably will never be, with his origins in a poor South-American country and his experience in "other worlds."

I am disguised,
I am not myself

I am a common folk,
Excited by the privilege
Of being one, of mixing
With the rich

One can conclude that Dabydeen's poetical work suggests the production of an image of identity and transformation in his origins. Going back to the past, to the Amazon, to a place where he is born but it is not his real home anymore. The very transformation of the subject who assumes this image is perceptible in his poems. Running through landscapes of the interior of Guyana, of the Amazon, and South America, the author seems to be running through his inner self, in several parts of the world, with no fix address, in a constant search for an identity. His voice from the Amazon is a voice from many places, a voice spoken by many mouths, a voice which reflects many visions, from many perspectives. It is in this sense that the acclaimed Caribbean writer and critic Edward Kamau Brathwaite states that Dabydeen is "one of the most confident and accomplished voices of the Caribbean Diaspora this side of the late twentieth century." One can say, perhaps, that Dabydeen has made a genuine contribution to postcolonial literature, which Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin have defined as "writing that is grounded in the cultural realities of those societies whose subjectivity has been constituted at least in part by the subordinating power of European colonialism" (ix). Therefore the study of his work may be very relevant both to the Canadian and post-colonial literature and, I would go even further and argue that Dabydeen's work is important for Amazonian studies.

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Cyril Dabydeen (born 1945) is a Canadian poet and fiction writer. Dabydeen was born in the Canje, Guyana, a locality that also produced his contemporaries Arnold Itwaru and Jan Shinebourne. He grew up in a sugar plantation with the sense of Indian indenture rooted in his family background (his parents were humble folk, and he grew up with his mother who worked as a seamstress, and with a grandmother, in an extended family of aunt, nieces, nephews). He is a cousin of U.K. writer David Dabydeen. Cyril Dabydeen, editor. *Beyond Sangre Grande: Caribbean Writing Today*. TSAR. xvi, 232. \$28.95. Cyril Dabydeen has produced a fine anthology which strives, as he explains, "to find a greater relevance in and acceptance of the diaspora" to extend the Caribbean space beyond "borders" or accepted boundaries. Many of this anthology's writers do not live in the Caribbean but write from such places as Toronto ("the Caribbean of the North"), other Canadian cities, the United States, or elsewhere. As Dabydeen questions, [End Page 565] "who or what is truly West Indian or Caribbean in an inexorably" Cyril Dabydeen is a Guyana-born Canadian writer of Indian descent. He grew up in a sugar plantation with the sense of Indian indenture rooted in his family background. He is a cousin of the UK writer David Dabydeen. He began writing in the early 1960s, winning the Sandbach Parker Gold Medal for poetry and the first A. J. Seymour Lyric Poetry Prize. His first chapbook collection, *Poems in Recession*, was published in 1972. In his early years he taught school, from 1961 to 1970, beginning as a pupil teacher; Dabydeen received formal teacher-training during this period. In 1970 he left Guyana for