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HEALING THE HURTS OF MY PEOPLE SLIGHTLY: DISCOURSES OF SOCIETAL VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA

It is a privilege to stand before you this evening to deliver my inaugural professorial lecture. This has been a most arduous uphill climb with lots of obstacles, digressions and bunny trails – each one a blessing. Later I will gratefully acknowledge the many without whose help and encouragement I would not have arrived at this milestone.

A child of the independence movement, I came to the study of Caribbean Literature in the mid-1970s when the nations and their corpus of literary work were still in their infancy. It was, to borrow Chinua Achebe's elegant phrase, "morning yet on creation day." Decades later, I have evolved into a literary and cultural scholar with a deep conviction in the power of the creative imagination to unearth and diagnose enduring social issues.

While fiction does not deal with facts, it clothes them with textured and embodied imagined worlds. It has the potential to represent the ordinary life stories which will not make their way into official records. And, when, as David Chariandy states, "Memory is a bruise still tender. History is a rusted pile of blades and manacles," fiction can lend a plausible sense of the lived reality of traumatic histories and their contemporary outworkings. Indeed when dealing

with trauma, the half that has never yet been told – the submerged, the silenced, the erased, the vestiges, the fragments, the phantom limbs – is arguably more significant than the half that finds its way into uneasy articulation.

If the region's imperative to grapple with a painful collective past so as to alleviate its unwelcome present day outworkings now seems to be a global requirement, it is because the Caribbean was at the forefront of the early experiment in global capitalism. The current age of late capitalism has seen the eruption and ripening of related issues worldwide: how to craft viable multiethnic and multicultural nation states out of crucibles of violence and pain? How to deal with forced and voluntary mass migrations? How to grapple with the loss of ancestral and natal lands and cultures? How to negotiate crises of being and belonging? How to affirm the value of ALL of our peoples within social systemics which accord differential value based on race, gender, class and monetary worth? Our locale has always been in a most fundamental sense, global.

Our beautiful coastal and island landscapes are homes to the remnants of the indigenous peoples and social orders, alongside modern settlers who have been transported here under extremely violating circumstances. Make no mistake: slavery and indentureship were terrorist regimes buttressed by extremes of everyday violence. Social suffering and deep psychic wounds have been inflicted by murderous blows – near genocide of indigenous tribes, sea journeys in vessels of horror, the raping of our soil and extracting its wealth for foreign consumption, the systematic erasure of ancestral and natal cultures and grounds of being.

And today our societies are still reeling as a result of extremes of wealth and poverty, with shrinking middle classes struggling to hold on to hard-won gains in the standard of living, and a substantial cross section of our populations still enduring structural inequity, lack of opportunity, racism and denigration. Our social advance, creativity, talent and great potentiality coexist with deep collective pain and trauma, which erupt in myriad ways to threaten the quality of our lives. The societal wounds of the past will not simply erase themselves.

Together we need to engage troubling questions: How are violent and violating histories manifesting themselves in contemporary social orders? How are we to plumb the mysteries of individual and collective body's visceral ways of digesting and regurgitating trauma? And above all, how do we trace and alleviate the intergenerational, interconnected and insidious nature of the outworkings of psychic pain?

Notions of trauma have been popularised in everyday understanding, primarily through war movies. Simply put, a traumatizing catalyst is an event which overrides the body's coping mechanisms, triggering a response of fight or flight. The event, too horrific to take on board in entirety, sinks into the subconscious only to crop up in intrusive memories as the mind tries to bring it out of the domain of submerged memory. The traumatizing event is both absent and present. It produces belated hauntings, cycles of uncanny repetition, hyper-arousal, dissociated consciousness, and a fear reflex which is unrelated or disproportionate to any external causal factor.

Trauma does not have a single cause. It can result from repressive political ideologies, colonization, war, domestic violence, rape, poverty, and the list continues. Groups which have suffered catastrophic events can suffer from direct physical and psychic trauma. They suffer insidious trauma when a past catastrophic event generates poverty and underdevelopment in its wake. Cultural traumas occur when a damaging event which has not been directly experienced becomes engrained in the collective memory through representation.

The local is global. The private is political. Societal trauma is often linked to gender-based violence. Let us ferret out seeds planted in the genesis of the modern Caribbean social order. One of the most popular images of the encounter between old and new worlds shows a European conquistador with phallic spears standing erect over a supine, partially naked, dark-skinned woman who represents feminized indigenous populations. David Dabydeen interprets Empire as a pornographic project in which coerced sexual relations played a key role in the subjugation of peoples and lands:

Ultimately the plantation experience had severe and traumatic psychic impacts that had to do with the loss of, or traumatic changes in epistemologies and philosophies, but overwhelmingly had to do with what is the very ground of our beings, which is our body (Interview with Dawes 1997:220)

Horrific acts of sexual violence were perpetrated on the slave ships which we can read as floating microcosms of slavery's terrorist order. This is the transitional space in which free men – Africans and Europeans became enslaved and enslavers – bound together in a macabre union which robbed the dignity of both.

Here and on the plantation, sexual access to enslaved bodies was considered a right of enslavers and a key weapon for affirming the ascendancy of males of the master race over males of the subordinated races. As horrifically evoked in George Lamming's *Water with Berries*, it is as if the very materiality of the body and more so the relative vulnerability of the female body makes it a slate on which to inscribe violent power relations, in a season of social upheaval.

In the wake of colonization, racism and colourism have become endemic to the way we see ourselves. This functions in rather an odd way. We all know for sure that race does not determine the calibre and worth of the human. This notwithstanding, valuation of the human person based on race and skin colour erupts in our mindsets and social relations – irrational, unbidden, unwelcome. Inhabiting racialized bodies which are socially perceived as undesirable and retrogressive or as hypersexualized and lascivious, is a persistent cause of insidious trauma, with which our nations are still contending today. How is this manifested in practices of sexual harassment of the denigrated and impoverished other in the workplace today? In other words, as explored by Zee Edgell in *Beka Lamb*, how are we to undermine the notion that some bodies – by virtue the intersection of race, class and gender are reserved for marriage, domesticity and reproductive labour; while others are relegated to productive and sex labour? Have such assumptions and the resultant social practices been eliminated today or have they become more subtle and difficult to trace?

Male empowerment and disempowerment within the family work best if masked as love and duty. This I know well. I grew up in a large extended family. We were rich in love, in books, in music, in stories, but poor in money. Something as simple

as dividing a chicken demonstrated dominance relations of the home. The choicest piece of meat belonged to the patriarch and the pecking order of sharing parts would come down, starting from the eldest. My great aunt was the proverbial unmarried sibling who came to help her sister with her large family and stayed after her sister died to shoulder an enormous burden. She cooked, cleaned, empowered and nurtured multiple generations and waited for better days to come. Until then she regularly ate the gravy and the fragments because after she put everyone else's wellbeing in front of her own, that was her share. How is this herculean effort of love and sacrifice, which ensured the survival of our families, manifesting itself today? What is the dynamic that compels women to assume the lowest rung of the ladder at the perilous crossroads where self-effacing sacrifice meets domestic dominance relations? And what happens when women determine to migrate from that position?

I would like to briefly apply these insights to a media report on a real life example of domestic violence leading to murder, which was one of four which occurred in Belize in July 2015. This analysis is founded on the notion that social identities are constructed through discourses – historical and contemporary, as well as through social relationships among people and through broader systems of knowledge, culture and beliefs. Past events are shared by the society within which they are reconstructed. As news reporters refer back to them, social reality, values and assumptions are foregrounded and constructed anew based on the reportage.

Ms. Karen Fullerton (name changed) was the 25-year-old mother of a four-year-old son. The headline reads “Female Customs Officer Savagely Stabbed.” The report goes on to note “she and her husband got into a heated domestic dispute.” The sentence names her first and thereby accords her primacy in terms of agency regarding the quarrel; moreover, terming it a heated domestic dispute relegates it to the private domain of husband-wife business, in which law enforcement agencies have traditionally been reluctant to meddle.

The extract from the media report reads:

Fullerton’s (name changed) death came as a shock to her colleagues in the Customs Department. She only recently passed her promotion exam, and her career was on the rise. She was about to finish up a two-year stint in Benque and was leaving on vacation next week... she did make multiple reports of domestic violence... but in each case, she went to the police or to the Court to request that the charges be dropped. So in every case, he was released without charge. Our sources say that they lived together in Benque Veijo, and had separated some weeks ago – but she recently took him back. We are also told that he didn’t work and she was supporting him.”

(<http://www.7newsbelize.com/printstory.php>)

Note the selection and ordering of details of the media report. The successes of Karen Fullerton are comprehensively itemized and only the last line discloses that her common-law partner was unemployed and financially dependent on her. This

simple act of addressing who, what, when, where and how is feeding into a veritable bee hive of norms, ideologies, assumptions:

- men as heads of household should earn more than and should exercise, rule and dominance within the home
- Women through acquiring education and succeeding at their careers jobs are usurping male position and privilege
- women thereby emasculate these man who may as a result take violent action in their frustration and in their attempts to keep them in their place
- the onus is on the women to avail themselves of the domestic violence legislation to secure their wellbeing
- the legislation and readily available intervention of the police can and will secure their wellbeing
- women frustrate attempts of the police to protect them by withdrawing charges and hence become accomplices in their abuse and must bear a measure of liability for their deaths

The tacit appeal to a range of commonly held and unquestioned assumptions and the construction of the media discourse combine to generate understanding for the perpetrator and a substantial measure of blame for the victim.

I am advocating an approach which would move beyond received cultural prescriptions to probe if perchance Fullerton may have been influenced by cultural assumptions of Caribbean women as called to sacrifice themselves on behalf of their families at the cost of their wellbeing and even at risk of their lives? Did she perchance construct herself as strong and able to endure while the

abusive partner was needy and brutalized by past and present life circumstances? To what extent was she seeking to live up to, or compensate for, stringent differential social standards of acceptability based on gender?

I am convinced that newspaper reporting by admitting into evidence more complex causative issues would do a greater service in terms of informing and educating the populace, moreso than echoing impulses towards victim blame for escalating violence in a season of societal change.

We are all caught in complex webs of traumatic historical legacies and national narratives, deeply entrenched cultural norms, faiths and traditions. These shape our notions of what we must do to be true to ourselves, our families and to our callings, and to be accepted and acceptable within our societies. In our quest to address gender-based violence we need to take heed of our unique, socially contextualized dynamics and not to simply apply stock notions as plasters and panaceas to deep and festering wounds.

Finally let us bring matters home to a far more complex interface of societal violence and trauma. In Trinidad and Tobago, where feteing and liming are deadly serious past times, the society has erupted with clockwork regularity since the 1890s. Professor Emeritus Gordon Rohlehr has spoken eloquently on this.

Using Derek Walcott's poem "Laventille" as a point of departure I am going to explore an interface between discourse and collective trauma. Ron Eyerman argues that cultural trauma occurs when a nation memorializes a foundational

event which is seen as threatening, violating and indelible. This event is repackaged and relived by cultural and knowledge workers – academics, singers, dancers – and transmitted from generation to generation.

Such a scenario, by its very nature, involves the participation of a diverse array of knowledge workers, selective representations and contestation over meanings responsibility and blame. Transmission of cultural trauma can be conceived as the outcome of a shared communal negotiation between the individual and the collectivity by which “combined discourses of self: sexual, racial, historical, regional, ethnic, cultural, national, familial” intersect. Apart from its formation in discourse, Eyerman indicates that collective memory resides in material objects, customs, habits and spaces.

Let us retrace the ground here:

Modern Caribbean societies were birthed in terrorist imperial systems. The attendant rupture of ancient cultural systems of work, gender and kinship systems proved devastating. These historical forces have thrust their rhizomic roots over time and transnational space to produce social worlds of savagery and violation. Cultural traumas are the inheritance of collectivities which have been wounded by historical violations. Make no mistake all Caribbean people suffered in this regard. Walcott contends: “But who in the New World does not have a horror of the past, whether his ancestor was torturer or victim? Who, in the depth of conscience, is not silently screaming for pardon or revenge?” (1974)

Mediated by knowledge and cultural workers to those who have had no direct experience of the traumatizing catalyst, cultural traumas manifest in notions of them and us – group assemblages and antipathies. They feed in turn into direct, insidious trauma. Minute traumatizing catalysts layer incrementally to bring the individuals and communities to a breaking point. The epistemic violence of racism, colourism and classism which have remained entrenched within the post-colonial social order, relegates segments of the society to entrenched poverty and underdevelopment. Insidious trauma is implicated in a range of mental conditions. Erna Brodber and Olive Senior brilliantly evoke the manner in which this complex has impacted high functioning middle and upper strata Caribbean peoples.

Let us turn now to application.

Laventille – as both physical landscape and cultural site of memory – holds an iconic location in the burgeoning multi-ethnic, multicultural nation's symbology and narrative of how it came to construct and name itself. The sprawling settlement, which overlooks the capital city of Port of Spain, was a catchment for a substantial cross-section of the newly freed slaves who embraced emancipation in 1834–38 by fleeing the estates in pursuit of a better life. They were joined by waves of immigrants from other Caribbean nations who flocked to the then oil-rich Trinidad in the early and mid-1900s.

Laventille is a large and complex community with its fair share of upwardly mobile as well as impoverished citizens and districts. While some areas exist under siege;

others are peaceful. All are resilient. Laventille has its towering heroes as surely as it has its villains.

Laventille is also iconic because, as Earl Lovelace powerfully evokes, it was out of this hillside ghetto of the urban poor that restless and denigrated young men produced their compelling acts of resistance and creativity. Trinidad and Tobago's primary cultural export – the carnival arts – was crafted by this and other settlements on the periphery of Port of Spain. Trinidad-style carnivals have grown exponentially; they have been exported to metropolitan centres to become the world's largest street festival and gathering place for migrants of the Caribbean diaspora and beyond. More significantly, Laventille and its people have led the way in generating what Rawle Gibbons terms "a theatre of self-liberation."

The nation, which has proven to be highly effective in incorporating the community's energies and creative potential, has failed spectacularly in terms of alleviating its ills. This diverse and evolving community has come to be symbolically flattened and reduced in the national psyche. It has today become iconic of the grim living conditions generated by persistent poverty, State neglect, the emergence of virulent gun and gang violence and the challenge of healing diseased communities.

Walcott published the poem "Laventille" and the essay "What the Twilight Says" in 1970, the year of the tumultuous Black Power revolution in Trinidad and Tobago, in which suppurating fissures of woundedness were erupting to shake the foundations of the social order. The opening lines of the poem allude briefly

to the emblem of hope, creativity and potentiality hammered out in this terrible crucible: “It huddled there / steel tinkling its blue painted metal air, / tempered in violence, like Rio’s favelas.” The persona ascends the hill for the christening of a child destined for a journey between the “habitual womb” – the repository of seed sprouting from loveless, passionless, mechanical couplings – and the “patient tomb”, which is content to wait quietly, certain of its harvest. The life of this child will follow a trajectory “fixed in the unalterable groove / of grinding poverty.” The persona attributes this condition to psychic woundedness caused by the ruptures of the Middle Passage:

Something inside is laid wide like a wound,
some open passage that has cleft the brain,
some deep, amnesiac blow. We left
somewhere a life we never found,

customs and gods that are not born again,
some crib, some grille of light
clanged shut on us in bondage, and withheld

us from that world below us and beyond,
and in its swaddling cerements we’re still bound.

The physical surroundings externalize the grim quality of the people’s lives:

we climbed where lank electric
lines and tension cables linked its raw brick
hovels like a complex feud,

where the inheritors of the middle passage stewed,
five to a room, still clamped below their hatch,
breeding like felonies,

whose lives revolve round prison, graveyard, church.
Below bent breadfruit trees . . .

Walcott sketches in highly compressed word pictures an external environment which reflects grim socioeconomic and psychic realities. The electric wires convey both the dense interconnectedness of the people in the community and the inevitable tensions generated by overcrowding, poverty, frustration, flouted desire and hopelessness. To ascend is to descend. The journey uphill causes the poet to envision a metaphorical parallel – the middle passage – as inflicting a deep wound through a violent blow which has cleft the brain and caused the amnesia, which Walcott identifies in “The Muse of History” as the “true history of the New World.” The journey sent dispossessed peoples into futile repetitious cycles of time, space, oppression and loss, which undermine attempts to plot a trajectory for escape. The horrific journey cannot be relegated to the past if two centuries later its survivors still live the legacy of its horrors daily “clamped below their hatch, breeding like felonies.” A pervasive culture of criminality emanates from both the historical blow and the contemporary social environment.

Walcott grounds his representation of grim outcomes of the trans-generational transfer of trauma in place. This compelling socio-symbolic construct does not emerge from an internal perspective which Walcott constructs in “The Spoiler’s Return” as a confident and condemnatory calypsonian. This persona uses his elevated vantage point in the hills of Laventille where he is “crowned and mitred as bedbug the first” to pour stringent critique of the post-independence political order. In stark contrast, the persona of “Laventille” speaking as a sympathetic outsider constructs the community as a site of raw pain in which poverty, denigration, hopelessness and despair are created anew with every passing day.

The vantage point is as significant in life as in literature. In life, those who aspire towards the hegemonic Euro-creole sensibility steeped in amnesia and / or shame generated by the African presence in must bear Laventille’s intrusive enactments of cultural rituals of transcendence and resistance, the embodied assertion of the ancestral danced faiths of the Orishas and Spiritual Baptists, the rhythms and energies of drumbeats transmuted into “steel tinkling its blue painted metal air, / tempered in violence” (Walcott).

In life, despite overall real family and community gains and accomplishments, too many inhabitants of the hill remain locked out of potentiality, upward mobility and trans-generational progress which have been accessed by more privileged descendants of slaves and indentees. While this social condition is not the full nature of the sprawling leviathan released by the Middle Passage, it is certainly its dark underbelly.

This is a 1970 poetic evocation of the impact of psychic and direct trauma on a community. Let us leap forward some forty years to 2009 to the online site www.Soca Warriors.com to gauge reactions to the news the “Despers Flee the Hill: Crime Forces Laventille Panorama Champ to Seek Shelter in Belmont.” (*Daily Express*). The fuller reading analyses both the newspaper report and a range of online responses to this disturbing news. Time this evening will allow me to zero in on one example of how Laventille is constructed in discourse, as a social barometer for the entire nation:

Pan started in those hills. Men died to play. Their deaths marked the path that pan took to reach this place, in this time. Now, in its birthplace, people are simply being killed and a pivotal, iconic band has to tear up roots. It's just pan I know. There are more important things like food and shelter and clothes on your back. Those people who are doing the crimes don't really see what pan has to do with anything. An old piece of tin can't stop a fella from hacking off your wrist for that watch or slamming a bullet in your belly because [*sic*] you looked at him the wrong way.

They big and strong and armed and dangerous and ruling the hills now. And where once the pan identified Trinidad and Tobago, they are now the symbol of what we have become. (Soca Warriors 2009, reply #1)

Here, as is invariably the case in the popular imaginary, the commentator synthesizes the competing legends and narratives of origin, and the diverse

experimental processes which rolled out in numerous panyards in and around Port of Spain in the late 1930s and early 1940s, into a single understanding: “Pan started in those hills.”

The second synoptic statement, that “men died to play”, constructs the steelpan as bathed in the blood of martyrs. At the inception of the steelband movement, it was perceived by representatives of the colonial hegemonic order as the noise of unruly hooligans. There was police harassment alongside confiscation of instruments, skirmishes and violence against the players. According to Stephen Stuempfle in *The Steelband Movement: The Forging of a National Art in Trinidad and Tobago*, even greater violence was generated by inter-band rivalries. In the 1940s conflicts frequently broke out over female supporters of the bandsmen – many of whom were engaged in prostitution – when they were seen consorting with men of rival steelbands. Competition for the attention and earnings of these women, which has been imprinted on the national psyche by Sparrow’s Classic “Jean and Dinah” was a major source of inter-band rivalry and violent skirmishes, on Carnival days and year-round.

The Soca Warrior post conflates anti-establishment resistance with bloodshed for a just cause as reflected in the assumption that “men died to play.” This romanticization feeds into the logic of the following statement: “Now, in its birthplace, people are simply being killed and a pivotal, iconic band has to tear up roots.” The word *simply* implies that people are being killed for no just cause.

By constructing the panmen as victims of the hegemonic order and of a younger generation of bad-johns, the online commentator recognizes only intragroup violence and communal breakdown threatening a cherished national cultural icon. In this discursive construction, there is no acknowledgment of intergenerational communal responsibility for what the area has become; there is no acknowledgement of the impact of the socio-symbolic location of Laventille in the national psyche; there is no acknowledgement of the impact of scapegoating and denigration; racism and classism; poverty, overcrowding and underdevelopment. Yet the online commentator makes another leap. "And where once the pan identified Trinidad and Tobago, it is now a symbol of what we have become." The equation goes like this: if Laventille's cultural inventions are national symbols of accomplishment, pride, resistance and cultural assertiveness, then Laventille's lacerations, violence and eruptions in crime, are symptomatic of the contemporary state of the nation.

The psychic disease and the grim social conditions which Walcott envisioned as a legacy of empire have proven resistant to healing despite decades of independence. The nascent violence then, reflected in traumatized, displaced and dispossessed Afro-Caribbean warriors, has ripened into full-scale urban gang warfare. Much of the aggression is turned inwards. Ascendancy is marked out in turf. Rival gangs slaughter each other, largely untroubled by police intervention. Entire communities are being held to ransom. Children and infants are being felled by stray bullets or in revenge killings. Vigilante justice is taking root.

The literary and popular representations point to the notion of place as archive or symbolic repository. Laventille has come to be a significant locus of meaning for all, rooted in latent personal and communal histories which reflect the traumatized consciousness of entire nation. The deeply rooted psychic lacerations generated by the known, as well as the silenced and submerged abuses of the colonial and neo-colonial social orders travel underground like rhizomes, linking people-groups into complex networks of relations and of unresolved hurt. These roots of rejection, bitterness, acrimony and loss crop up where we least expect them.

It explains in part why every contestation over national emblems proceeds with fresh rancour as the unhealed wounds erupt and suppurate anew, generating fresh pain. I contend that it is trauma's re-experiencing, created by the inability to take in all at once the enormity of the suffering and loss in its entirety. It is trauma's hyper-arousal which generates an intensity of response which is disproportionate to its catalyst. It is trauma's uncanny repetition which causes this complex of issues to crop up repeatedly, intra- and inter-generationally. For a substantial cross-section of our society it is simpler to resort to avoidance of thought and feeling and distancing of shame through collective amnesia. It is more painful to deal with *hypernesia* – trauma's intrusive memory of haunting ancestral presences which intrude centuries later.

If discourses of collective trauma have the power to generate a sense of collectivity, which in turn can fix its adherents into notions of victimhood, they can also be mobilized in the interest of empowerment and agency in terms of

redress. In relation to the community of Laventille, there is an urgent imperative to address material deficiencies and social services. There is need for a new conversation which addresses victim blame while acknowledging shared responsibility for action and therapeutic intervention. Even more so there is need for spiritual invention to bring peace to warring hearts, individuals and communities.

But my major contention today is that the collective trauma for which the city on this hill acts as a symbolic repository or archive, is a national condition which we share with post-colonial nations globally. Therapeutic intervention is required if we are to be healed. Distancing ourselves from its historical and contemporary processes, archiving them in troubled communities, perpetuating group hostilities based on race and class will bring us no good. Collective memory is always selective. Knowledge and cultural workers nationwide need to reshape collective memory and formulate empowering group memories with which emerging individual memories can intersect. And because the body remembers, this memory work should also be undertaken in visual modes and embodied modes of dance and performance. The UWI has been instrumental here through its consistent recognition of the people's philosophers through the award of honorary doctorates. Professor Patricia Mohammed's recent film *The City on the Hill* is also exemplary of positive refashioning. Most significantly there is need to formulate a new foundational narrative, to reconstitute the torn social fabric, and to realize the potentialities of a new future.

I thank you for your attention.

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