



Interrogating Diaspora: Lessons Learned from a Fictional Protagonist

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Abstract: The novel *Aunt Jen* (2002) is used as a point of departure for engaging in a conversation on issues related to diaspora, migration, identity, gender and other post-colonial and diasporic issues. The article provides an overview of the novel, its epistolary structure, its focus on migration, and its effects on children. The issues are discussed and analysed for how they provide insight into family, maroon heritage, religious preferences and the resilience of a young girl faced with the silence of an absent mother. The meaning of silence in the novel is studied in relation to questions of diaspora. The bildungsroman's development amidst concerns with migration, questions of connection to country, individual identity and agency brings into focus several post-colonial and post-diasporic concerns of who wants to be part of a diaspora and of how individuals may engage in the reconstruction of new diasporic identities and links to communities and nations.

Keywords: diaspora, fictional, protagonist, epistolary, identity, post-colonial, diasporic identity, agency, gender

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Introduction

The suggestion by Dr Leith Dunn to use my novel *Aunt Jen* (2002) as a point of departure for beginning or continuing a conversation on issues related to diaspora, migration, identity, gender, nation – at first seemed a bit unusual and too self-centred, too self-serving – I initially thought. However, after considering the various ways in which the same novel invites discussion of several of these post-colonial and diasporic issues through the carefully crafted letters of its curious and probing female protagonist, I decided to do exactly what was suggested. Besides, I also considered that perhaps this approach would allow me to deliver a somewhat less theoretically overloaded presentation that would appeal to a wider audience.

So, let me begin with my reason or reasons for writing *Aunt Jen*. I always knew that I wanted to write. I grew up reading voraciously and wanted to write like Enid Blyton, Andrew Salkey, C. Everard Palmer, Mark Twain, Jack Shaefer, Michael Anthony, Garth St. Omer, Roger Mais, among others. Note that most of the writers were men living faraway – even in the case of the Jamaicans, but I knew I wanted to be one of Jamaica's women writers one day and when I met Jean DaCosta as a teenager, I knew then that it was possible to write a Jamaican book like *Sprat Morrison*, albeit with a girl protagonist.

My girl protagonist would be a model girl, bright, articulate, perceptive, and fully bilingual – code-switching and moving through Jamaica's unique linguistic space with ease and facility. So, I really carried a type of Jamaican girl protagonist in my head for a very long time. I knew that when I eventually created a world and placed her in it, or followed her around in it, I would draw attention to her rich cultural space, the folk culture in which she lives, the histories of her people, their belief systems, the ancestral wisdom of the adults in her world, and the proverbs and folktales that preserve much of their world view and shape her values.

So, I wrote an epistolary novel, because in the main, I also wanted to move away from the traditional approach – omniscient third or first person narrator using very descriptive prose. I knew I had to write what I have characterised as a “talking book” by doing something I immensely enjoyed: letter writing. But I also knew that these could not just be like any everyday type of letter. These letters had to depict and very poignantly capture the way many Jamaicans speak and live in a particular space, and the issues that affect their daily lives, during the time period that is in focus.

Perhaps because I grew up with several friends who were children of either both parents, or one parent who lived abroad; perhaps because I had grown up with one parent living abroad and one who had returned from living abroad, somehow, I always knew that I would one day write about migration and its effects on children, who knew their parents or a parent mainly or only through letters. I also wrote many letters, to friends and relatives who lived abroad in different parts of the world. This fascination with talking to people through letters, I believe, explained my fascination with the epistolary genre. So, I wrote this novel in which a young girl writes letters to connect with her mother. According to Edward Baugh, “the letter writing that will bridge an ocean becomes a metaphor for the need to bridge emotional and psychological distance” (Baugh 2003, F9). The entire plot is advanced through her letters and all characters, including her absent mother, are depicted through her interesting and at times amusing letters. Sunshine voices all her experiences for public consumption and it is this public nature of her letters that leads Warner-Lewis to say that: The letters are a “charmingly revelatory mechanism to draw the reader into the mind or personality of Sunshine” (Warner-Lewis 2002, 80).

Reading Aunt Jen

There is a difference between writing a novel and then reading the novel. As writer, I set out to focus on certain themes/key issues, but later as a reader, I am in awe at the many ideas that are generated by the work's development and

unfolding. As a writer, I wanted to draw attention to some reasons people migrate, the effects of migration on children left behind and the effects on family life. I wanted to highlight the importance of family, heritage, ancestral ties, maroon heritage, and I simply wanted to depict the ways in which a young girl remains focused and alert, despite her frustrating attempts to get to know the person referred to by Edward Baugh as her “illegitimate mother” (F6).

Sunshine writes to her mother who never replies, but she continues to write because her blood connection will not allow her to not write, suggesting that blood does matter. Her sharing of events with the silent Aunt Jen is, indeed, reflective of my time of growing up – where people in a community or family were considered to be accountable to each other.

Religious preoccupations in Jamaica have always fascinated me, especially in relation to church preferences and choices because my development has been shaped by the attitudes of rural folk to church and religion. I have witnessed serious and ironic debates during my time growing up, about which churches were superior to the other. I also grew up with an army of strong grandmothers, aunts, cousins, friends, and village women who all were involved in community building; this became an inevitable part of Sunshine's world that would be explored, to bring into focus issues related to gender and genre.

Part I

As a literary critic, I was forced to distance myself from the work to probe beyond the thematic foci, to judge the ways in which this fictional collection of letters allows the contemplation, interrogation and problematising of several key issues related to diaspora, diasporic identity, migration, subjectivity, identity, and nation. Ironically, the aspect of the novel which repeatedly served to provide answers, was the aspect that in itself had no clear answers, but seemed nevertheless to pose questions: the silence of Aunt Jen who never replies. It is this

silence that led one critic to declare that the novel is very much about “the importance of things unsaid” (Baugh 2003, F9).

The letters bring to light the matter of “scattering” – the condition of people who have left their homelands to live in other parts of the world, often in a place in which they are racially and socially different. “Scattering” is accompanied by ideas of movement and migration. Sunshine brings attention to the mother, the intended recipient of her letters, living in “scatteration”¹. It is this silence that also allows rumination about several post-colonial or post-diasporic issues. But Aunt Jen’s silence suggests her disinterest in what is happening in Jamaica. That is one way of interpreting her unspoken or unwritten words. Through Sunshine’s letters we witness an attempt to pull her back into a particular identity. But her silence leads us to conclude that she is not actually seeking to preserve the identity that Sunshine and those who have known her expect her to maintain in the Jamaica British/Jamaica West Indian diaspora.

Diaspora

The term diaspora seems to be used very loosely in our local context, especially in Jamaica. This use seems to ignore the widespread dispersion of Caribbean people all over the world to the UK, Canada, Costa Rica, Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, Mexico, and Ecuador, at different periods in our history. Often the term is used in a simplistic manner to refer only to those in the USA or Canada. The specificities or unique contexts are never usually explored and the ways in which race, politics and the specific cultural and socio-economic contexts of the multiple transnational spaces affect our people are often not considered. Furthermore, very often politicians and other persons in Jamaica, for instance, speak of diaspora as though the term referred to one single group of persons. We must be careful of using the term to homogenise all Jamaicans, or Caribbean people anywhere outside of their respective countries and regions without the specificity of locale –for instance, the Jamaican/Canadian diaspora, Cuban/Jamaican diaspora, and Nicaraguan/Jamaican diaspora.

Talks of diaspora are also premised on the assumption that all persons who have emigrated wish to continue to be associated with the past and maintain a particular identity linked to the past, space and culture. Aunt Jen's silence suggests that perhaps, she does not wish to maintain a particular identity that has been used to keep her in the minds of those left behind. It has been argued that migrants adapt to their new societies and many eventually become citizens, but are also able to simultaneously retain their cultural links and emotional attachments to their homelands. While we end this novel without knowing the truth about Aunt Jen, we may surmise that perhaps there is this ambivalence on her part. Indeed, Ashcroft and Tiffin speak of the dual ontology in which the "diasporic subject looks in two directions towards a historic diasporic cultural identity on one hand and the society of the relocation on the other" (427).

The consistent silence which meets Sunshine's letters, designed to keep Aunt Jen up to date and to remind us of her culture and the socio-political developments in her village and country, leads us to question whether or not Aunt Jen is really ambivalent or is simply involved in what may be regarded as the reconstruction of her own new cultural/diasporic identity. Indeed, Sunshine assumes that her mother still maintains a fixed identity rooted in Jamaicaness, but it could well be that this is not so.

Loss

Salman Rushdie maintains that the migrant always carries a deep sense of loss (428, 434). Indeed, loss is different from ambivalence as the former implies deep longing, mourning and the desire to repossess the lost home. Ambivalence suggests that the individual is torn between wanting to leave and wanting to stay – suggesting that both places hold the same emotional value to the person, accompanied by indecision about where to settle. There are no letters from Aunt Jen to indicate any loss on her part, but the very existence of Sunshine's letters and her insistence on writing in the face of ongoing silence, speak to her

own sense of loss. She is compelled by this sense of loss to write and make connections with someone with whom she understands that she is connected by blood and to whom she is, in fact connected. In her mind she has probably lost this person.

Sunshine assumes that Aunt Jen carries a similar sense of loss, because she embraces the commonly held generalisation that all migrants experience this loss. Here, it seems that the novel problematises this generalisation of the migrant to force us to admit that not all migrants constitute one homogeneous nostalgic type, but that there may be those for whom leaving results in no desperate longing but a happy and welcome departure. Here, we must consider Sunshine's discovery of Aunt Jen's letter and the phrase she wrote in French: "Dear God, je veux quitter cet endroit" / "I want to leave this place" (7). Indeed, I recall the words of an associate who declared to me: "An island is an easy thing to give up!" This as she was preparing to permanently leave for Canada. *Aunt Jen* forces us to rethink our overt tendency to be sorry for the mournful migrant. Of course, we acknowledge that the sense of loss is real for many migrants, and I will always recall the recollection of third generation migrants in Limón, Costa Rica, who repeatedly recalled their grandparents' constant longing and nostalgia for Jamaica and their pledge to one day return home. The same is true for second and third generation Jamaicans in Guantanamo, Cuba who long to see the "Motherland". These West Indian migrants clung to the past and recreated their British West Indian culture in Costa Rica, cooking rice and peas, speaking Jamaican creole and a type of "English", playing dominoes, attending Burial Scheme and UNIA meetings.

Language and Identity

Interestingly, Sunshine's discovery of Aunt Jen's secret confession inscribed in French uncovers her private construction of identity from an early age before she leaves Jamaica. It is easy to surmise then that her silence and the absence

of any interest in being in contact with Jamaica intimates that she has elected to define herself in terms of her connection to a new European culture.

The importance of language as an indication of cultural identity is also presented in the person of Mrs Delgado who loses her speech after tragedy, but retains one Spanish word *adiós*. She simultaneously bids goodbye to English and the present but reveals the language – a marker of identity that is deeply embedded in her psycho-system – thus revealing her preferred or chosen or true identity.

Writing

I addressed the matter of writing earlier and of how as a child I dreamed of becoming a writer. When I wrote *Aunt Jen*, I was actually a writing teacher. I spent many hours trying to convince my students of the importance of writing for clarifying thoughts, issues and ideas, for communicating effectively and for honing one's linguistic skills. I also had always valued writing in my personal life. I wrote a lot as a taciturn, young person who enjoyed writing and wrote well. I was also very conscious of how many women writers deliberately write to give voice to women since traditional forms of literature have been mainly male-authored. Elaine Showalter asserts that women have always been forced to write subversively claiming "the feminist content of feminine art is typically oblique, displaced, ironic and subversive" (270). I cannot say that I set out to be subversive in the strictly feminist sense that Showalter implies, but I was sure that I wanted to create a child narrator who could simultaneously be innocent, deeply probing and able to alert readers to inconsistencies in the behaviours of people around her, or in things people say, and one whose critical thinking skills are very sharp.

I utilise irony as a crucial discursive strategy. As a writer and literary critic, I was fully aware of the versatility and power of verbal irony in drawing attention to contradictions, inconsistencies and even dishonesty and hypocrisy. So Sunshine

writes to create her own story, include other people's stories, and question other stories at the same time. Her story seems simple on the surface, but at the subterranean level, it is a complex story about growing up and discovering the challenges of understanding adults in her immediate environment and those like Aunt Jen, who are absent and silent. It is noteworthy that the young child also questions Caribbean history and several accepted traditions. In this regard, Curdella Forbes writes:

Deceptive is the simple prose of Ramsay's child narrator (Sunshine herself writing her story in the form of letters to her mother in England who never answers) masks and reveals several layers of reality that make for a complex, finely nuanced story. *Aunt Jen* is a sophisticated exploration of the issues of migration, exile and diaspora from a point of intersection between Caribbean migration in the early days and the present. Ramsay's narrative specifically explores the effect of these issues on children, a group given scant, if any, attention both in our traditional readings of the Caribbean bildungsroman, and in the current preoccupation with adult gender and cross border identity in diaspora studies. (81)

Writing deserves full critical consideration as Sunshine realises the importance of writing at an early stage and asks Ma if she should write to her mother:

I asked Ma if she thought it was a good idea to write to you and she said she will neither say yeah nor nay. She said maybe if she was me she wouldn't write but she not me so I must decide for myself cause is ebry dankey to him sankey. So I decided to write. (1-2)

Writing therefore becomes the first way in which Sunshine establishes herself as a person of agency even at a young age. It is her way of wading through the complexities of various issues and life. She decides that she wants to write despite Ma's misgivings/scepticism. Moreover, writing is what she loves – it is her past-time:

Anyway, I was just sitting down doing nothing so I thought I would write to you. Actually, I like to write. Sometimes I write poems or letters to myself so I enjoy doing it. Sometimes I think that maybe you didn't get my letters. Sometimes letters get lost. Still it would be strange if my two letters to you got lost. Uncle Roy always gets my letters. (4)

Her writing reveals her to be the stubborn, insistent individual, who will eventually choose her career path and family members with whom she will associate. We see too that it becomes an important hobby as she sarcastically confesses one day:

I cannot write you a longer letter because I hear Ma calling me. She says I spend too much time writing, writing and my writing getting me nowhere . . . I have to stop now. (6)

It is writing that reveals her feistiness and her ability to use words as weapons to reprimand Aunt Jen and “put her in her place” or “tell her off”:

When I started writing to you I thought it would be the beginning of a meaningful relationship in which we – me and you – would exchange pleasant, enjoyable and interesting letters on a regular basis. It was not my idea that I would be the only one writing and I certainly didn't think I would end up just writing to relay Ma's and Gramps' messages. But unfortunately, due to no fault of my own, this is what is happening. I have now become the scribe of two parents who feel neglected by a daughter for whom they scraped up every last penny so that she could make a better life for herself in England. (46)

As she writes her letters she realises the extent to which this mode of writing allows her to express herself in a direct manner, but also allows her the pretence of pulling Aunt Jen into her space:

Writing is now in my bones and when anything strange happens, the first thing I think of doing is to write about it. So, I am writing to you. (78)

The irony of the situation and her writing habit is emphasised by the fact that it continues to be a one-way process; she receives no letters in return, and Aunt Jen remains many miles away in her silence.

Community

The sense of community with which I grew up in rural Jamaica had a very positive impact on me and on my impressions of Jamaica and rural folk. This is the community spirit that Sunshine conveys: a supportive place in which people nurture, support and take care of each other. Sunshine writes of the people who take time to love her, counsel her, encourage her: Ma, Gramps, Uncle Johnny and Uncle Roy. So too is portrayed a world of strong women, grandmothers, and neighbours, like Ma and Aunt Sue, who form a strong foundation for her to grow, think and write and express herself.

The community is also one in which there is a rich combination of the comic and “the tragic and the tragic which borders on the comic in a carnivalesque sort of way” (Forbes 2002, 82). This is the case in the recounting of Miss Clara’s daughter’s funeral:

Yesterday evening was Miss Clara’s daughter’s funeral – Miss Clara from Bowen’s Pasture, not Miss Clara from Cross Roads. We are not so sure what happened but she went to Lucea to have her baby and died before the baby was born. Anyway, yesterday when they were marching with her body from the Salvation Army church to the burial ground, the funeral car got out of control as it was coming down the hill and crashed into the big plum tree at our gate. It crashed into the tree so hard that the coffin flew right out of it and landed on its side in the middle of the gate. The dropping

was bad enough but when the coffin burst open at the sides everybody started to scream and shout. Some started to run and Major Rankine started to shout, 'Demons of hell! Demons of hell! Be gone with you!' She shouted even louder when all kinds of things started to tumble out of the coffin – scissors, broom needle and thread, baby nappy, baby bottle, baby pin, olive oil, vials with other oils and a whole heap of other things that I couldn't make out. When the things stopped tumbling out everybody just stopped bawling and screaming at the same time. Everybody stood there waiting to see if the body would drop out too. When they waited for about a half a minute and nothing happened Miss Clara threw herself on the ground and started to roll and bawl. Some men ran and lifted up the coffin and started to push back the things into it. Major Rankine said, 'Sweet Jesus, resurrector of Lazarus, what is this? Deliver us from the enemy's trap. Demons of hell be gone!' Well it seems as if Major Rankine teeth could not take the pressure any more so by the time she started to say 'Gone' again, the teeth flew right out of her mouth and landed on the pile of things that dropped out of the coffin. I thought Major Rankine would run and grab them up, but instead she just pulled up her white Salvation Army uniform above her knee and ran and ran shouting, 'Thave me Jesus, Thave me!' I don't think any of us could catch her at the speed she was going. (40–41).

This is the essence of Caribbean performance of tragic comedy which in itself may be fully placed within a broad Caribbean aesthetics which includes performance (Forbes 2004). It is the essence of Caribbean people showing how they laugh and grieve at the same time. The hilarious recounting of what is nothing less than horrific tragedy conveys this well.

Politics etc.

Aunt Jen promotes “the search for and actualization of individual and national autonomy through the act of writing – an art of identity formation and reclamation” (13). So declares Paige Gray in an article on national and individual identity in the novel. Indeed, one of the unexpected paths on which I followed *Sunshine* was the one that led to the exploration of Jamaica’s political climate in the 1980s. Even as I wrote, I did not consider that the chronology of events surrounding the Michael Manley era would come to be regarded as paralleling *Sunshine*’s journey into independence and discovery of her identity. But a reading undertaken by Gray seems to credibly/plausibly support this idea:

Aunt Jen advocates the search – the search for and actualization of individual and national autonomy through writing . . . *Aunt Jen* represents a compelling example of Jamaican literature as a means of cultural awareness in that it depicts the very state of ‘becoming’ through *Sunshine*’s physical, intellectual and emotional narration . . . *Sunshine*’s coming-of-age story corresponds to Jamaica’s coming-of-age after it gained independence from the United Kingdom . . . During the period in which *Sunshine* writes, Jamaica grappled with its own self-perception and autonomy. In the years following independence, the country faced the challenge of discerning itself and asserting authority as an entity separate from the United Kingdom after centuries of dependency. (14–17)

Indeed, as *Sunshine* continues to write, she reflects on a critical period in Jamaica’s national and political development – the Manley campaign that resulted in the national exploration of self and heritage – the importance of nation building and identity building and she later also begins to further explore history and discovers that history is “real real”, because Ma is a real Maroon:

Everything I know from history class suddenly turned real real through Ma’s stories about her parents. Ma’s great great grandparents were Maroons. My great great great grandmother

was with either Cudjoe, Nanny or Three Finger Jack. Now I know why Ma is so strong and fiery at her age. (73)

Conclusion

Finally, Sunshine develops in a space typified by linguistic diversity in which she blends standard Jamaican English with Jamaican Creole and other vernacular voices/idiolects of the community. She develops and moves from writing in perfect English in the early letters to using Creole increasingly more and more, similar to Ma, as she finds her own voice and identity.

Important questions related to gender and female agency are also raised by other female characters depicted in the strong characters of Ma, Aunt Sue, and reflect the violation of stereotypical gender representations. These women are strong, decisive, independent, and innovative. Sunshine herself develops into a strong woman, bold enough to assert self and to take her own decisions. We are given the impression too that identity is shaped by place and geography. Perhaps Aunt Jen is engaged in the restoration of her own new identity outside of a context in Jamaica. Paige Gray asserts that the birthplace is important in understanding national politics and for establishing identity and self. Sunshine has remained in Jamaica and is, therefore, able to continue to relate to the place and define herself in this space in a manner in which Aunt Jen cannot. In what we may regard as a post-diasporic construct, we may consider that diaspora is not only about place and the construction of cultural identity, but is a survival strategy which may be emotional or even financial. We may consider too that the migrant chooses to live and be identified the way in which he or she wants to, for that is the reason many leave in the first place. I participate in research on diasporic communities such as Cuba, Ecuador, and Mexico and have found that in some cases diasporic movements/contacts and reconnections are often made/done for more private and personal reasons besides "love of Motherland".

Indeed, the complexity of diaspora, migration and identity seem to be captured in an excerpt from one of my own poems, "Caribbean Global"²:

migration from Kingston, Georgetown, Bridgetown
to London, New York, Madrid, Amsterdam, Brussels
journeying
crossing boundaries
re - mapping the past
deterritorialization a constant reminder
of home, self and place
questions of belonging
reverberate through the mind
ardent Grenadian student
in the library at the Ivy League University
in New England
interrogating knowledge - power episteme
constructing identity
writing Creole identities,
asserting alternatives

all over,
Caribbean people in action
decolonization in progress
accommodating local and global
all over the world
Caribbean people
engaging oppositional politics
making place
laughing othering, (violent or subtle) in the face
writing freedom

strumming reggae songs
on the bass guitar,
writing independent identities.

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¹ "Scatteration" is term referred to by Jerome C. Branche in the preface of his book *The Poetics and Politics of Diaspora: Transatlantic Musings* (London: Routledge, 2015)

² Excerpt from the poem "Caribbean Global", in *October Afternoon* (Hertford, UK: Hansib Publications, 2012), 16–17