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The Zea Mexican Dairy: 7 Sept 1926 - 7 Sept 1986. by
Kamau Brathwaite (Book Review)

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THE ZEA MEXICAN DIARY, A LOVING PAEAN TO A BLACK WOMAN**Daryl Cumber Dance**

The Zea Mexican Diary: 7 Sept 1926 - 7 Sept 1986. By Kamau Brathwaite. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993. 214 pp.

I may be hard put to **classify** the latest work of noted poet, historian, literary critic, linguist, and Africanist Kamau (Eddie) Brathwaite, but I have no problem **describing** it—compelling, riveting, unforgettable! Begun when Brathwaite received the devastating news that his wife Doris (his Zea Mexican) was dying of cancer, it is a paean to her, a record of his efforts to deal with her dying, death, and absence, an account of their relationship, and an autobiographical confessional. The *Zea Mexican Diary* includes diary entries, letters, memorates, an epigraph, expressions of sympathy, confessions, autobiographical narrative, poems—but whatever one calls it, I found it to be the most poetic, most beautifully rendered, most extraordinary expression of love for a Black woman that I have ever **read**. The grief that the reader experiences at the tragic and premature death of the beautiful and talented and productive Doris Brathwaite is balanced by the joy of knowing that she was so passionately loved. We cannot help but be moved by the eloquent expression of his love and adoration of his wife; rare in our literature is such a total devotion, admiration, appreciation, and passion for a wife, especially one of color. Black women readers, in particular, will be touched by some of these affective, poignant passages. Of course we shall respond emotionally [and no doubt, variously] as well to the confessions of his infidelity:

... God has come to punish me not cherishing enough: the long nights I sometimes/ too too often surely/ was away/ the smell of other muses on my breath/ the tales she must have heard the agonies of doubt/selfdoubt her love might well have tried to justify xplain/xplain away forgive & must have caused her generosity to hide & harbour like a pearl inside her heart/her hurt until it built itself into this tumour ... (78)

To read *Zea Mexican* is more than simply to peruse a manuscript—it is to participate in a ritual. Zea takes the form of something I have witnessed over and over in the Black community (and I know it is true elsewhere/everywhere), where upon a death, the survivor shares over and over with those who come to visit every step in the illness and dying of the deceased. This process of shared catharsis that we experience in that ritual in *Zea* is all so familiar; every event in this journey towards death is commonplace, but yet so special and unique, so surprising and compelling, because of the unusual genius of Brathwaite.

When the doctor shows him his wife's chest X rays and informs him

that she has only a few months to live, **"It was as if a clock was ticking silence in the moon"** (20). At first he must face the difficulty of knowing without telling her:

... she came in to kiss me 'for being so strangely cooperative...' and told Mary that these days I don't seem to ever leave her side ... 'Mr Brathwaite has become so attentive!' she says, smiling ... and still not knowing/still not knowing how I lie awake each night next to her/next to her/ near near nearest to her/ listening to each breath in those nightmare X/ray lungs toiling toiling away ... wishing that it cd be me instead of her/ me instead of her/ me instead of her ... going up up up in the dark & horror of the Xtinction in those lungs I had seen in the picture (30; all except the penultimate elipsis in the original)

And then when he finally blurts out the truth to her and they spend their **"first night of this knowledge together,"** at 4 a.m., they **"wake up and could only weep in each other's arms again, holding out against the coming light, deep in each other's dreams"** (53). Cherishing every day and **"precious drop & minute"** (71) that remain with her Brathwaite reflects on their life together:

I was so increasingly satisfied & in love w/ her & what she was making with & for us And she was so perfect w/ me I mean us two together We were incessantly pleasantly arguing always sharing everything even the little/est thing I saw or heard or thought or read I'd come to her with it & she to me Was like we danced together/ very very well (72)

Until the end his love and desire for her remain unabated. On September 7, 1986, the day of her death (and her birthday), as he helped her from the potty,

she collapsed forward into my arms so heavy so heavy so heavy & i so help less & happy happy happy to have her here in my arms & i cd hold her for ever & ever & ever & ever (62)

Later that day when she is being bathed, he writes:

her naked body stretched there on the bed was as beautiful & as desirable as ever. i cd have made love to her that Sunday morning felt that accustomed leap of love the golden warm & copper colour skin the plump & curves that I have so long known & loved my darling Mexican (68-9)

But then at the moment of her death he is not there. When he arrives home and is told of her demise, he writes,

I went inside & saw her: all my life all all my love & hopes & dreams & past & future still quiet on that bed & gone in the quiet flickering light of Mary's candle & there was no sound in all the world that Sunday midnight which went on & on & on forever (88)

Brathwaite plans the disposal of his wife's ashes:

Some is to go to Guyana, some to Barbados, a little I've decided to keep The rest I think I'll pour into her garden spot ... & when I was going downstairs to get the second vessel, I put some of the ashes on my tongue & swallowed her (199)

After the funeral, the planting of the tree, the disposal of the ashes—after all the prayers and hymns and obsequies, the poet laments, "**something was I still felt missing**" (202), some ritual that still needed to be performed to help him to deal with his wife's death. To read this work is to participate in that ritual through which we as readers/survivors are helped to finally deal **with** all the dying and deaths that we are now experiencing/have experienced/shall experience as we retrace all those steps and events and issues with Brathwaite: the disbelief, the denial, the hope, the anger, the quest for the right words, the agonizing over the things we did or didn't say—did or didn't do, the sense of guilt, the question of the hereafter. Ultimately *Zea* is that ritual through which we journey to the healing sense of wholeness and comfort that comes in recognizing that we are a part of a circle that be unbroken.

And that ritual is presented as only the master poet could. There are some passages in *Zea Mexican* that are rendered in such brilliant detail, in such vivid and eloquent language, with such a striking blend of Standard English and varied levels of Creole, with such emotion (be it love, guilt, grief, fear), that one must pause to read them over and over, savoring the picture, the mood, the rhythms, the drama. There are other sections that are so effective in their balancing and contrasting of events and emotions and moods and characters that (upon later reflection) one finds it hard to believe that they were the coincidental events and responses of a specific day and not the creative imagination and ordering of the poet.

This book is not merely a moving paean to his wife. Finally, of course, this is an autobiographical poem, providing us our most personal view thus far of Kamau Brathwaite, the poet, the man, the philosopher, the romantic, for *Zea* is, after all, about **him**, and here he wrestles with his own identity, the role of a poet, the agony of the creative process, his own personal demons, the survival of the poet without his Doris. She was, he insists,

the perfect poet's wife - I mean the perfect wife of/for the poet. She made it possible. Created from the very start & kept it go/ing to the last moments of her very life . the perfect temperature & space for the poems to be/come But she was also ... my very very **friend & ... therefore** ... all the more too hard to bear to overstand re/cover from ... but who care if I-man never write another word another poem ... (152-3; last two ellipses in the original)

As one lays the book down, spine tingling, eyes tearing, filled with the poignancy, the pain, the joy, the indescribable beauty of the poetry that reverberates through our minds and our bodies, **we care. But** if Kamau Brathwaite never wrote another poem, with *Zea Mexican* he has been to the

mountaintop, for this is, as Gordon Rohler proclaims on the book's jacket, "[his] finest poem," **and** this is the most beautiful and memorable tribute ever penned to a Black muse.



JULIA WRIGHT, daughter of fiction legend Richard Wright, speaking at a 1993 conference on her father in St. Louis. Photo by E.B. Redmond



ORDINATION/laying on of hands: Darryl Redmond is inundated by "hands" and "spirits" during his ordination at Pilgrim Green Baptist Church, East St. Louis, in March of 1995. Host pastor was Rev. R.C. Cosey. Participating ministers included the Reverends Keeland Atkinson, Annie Clark, Tobias Hodge, Ralph Jackson, Sam E. Jones, Harold Mckinney, Harold Whitaker, and Louis Williams. Photo by E.B. Redmond