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'Grung Tell Me Wud': An Introduction to Karl

Daryl Cumber Dance

Olive Senior informs us in 'The Poem as Gardening, the Story as Su-Su: Finding a Literary Voice' that Jamaican elders believe the ground is the place where ancestral wisdom is located and they will explain and validate their warning or advice by saying, 'Grung tell me wud' (36). Jamaican linguist/literary critic/poet/and novelist Velma Pollard has put her ear to the ground of Jamaica and shared many important words of ancestral wisdom with us. This was a natural development for the talented girlchild born into an artistic family in Woodside, Jamaica, a rural community rich in folk traditions: her father was a member of a rural drama group; both parents were avid readers; Velma won a First Prize for a poem she wrote at Woodside Elementary School when she was seven; and through the years she and her sister, novelist/sociologist/and historian Erna Brodber, have read and commented on each other's writings.

When Pollard, then living in Guyana, sent the first pages of *Karl* to Brodber in 1972, 'She sent me back and said, "But you can *write!*"'¹ It is also well known that some years later it was Velma Pollard who took the manuscript of her sister's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* to John La Rose of New Beacon Books in London (Brodber had

prepared it merely as a case study to teach her students the dissociative personality). These budding literary stars also were fortunate to grow up in the farming community of Woodside, Jamaica, and throughout their works both of them eloquently remember, evoke, and honour the ground from which they harvested ancestral wisdom. And Woodside is rich in the folk tradition. It is the first place that I did fieldwork when I began to collect for *Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans*. I am certain that they first heard several of the stories, proverbs, songs, and beliefs that permeate their writings from some of those same neighbours to whom Brodber introduced me in 1978.

Woodside reverberates throughout *Karl* and numerous other of Pollard's works in the beauties of the land, the rhythms of the language, the aroma and taste of the foods, the magical mischief of the tricksters, the foolishness of the hurry-come-ups (nouveau riche), and the wisdom of the ancestors.

Despite the fact that *Karl* received the prestigious Casa de las Americas Award in 1992, it has not received the critical attention it warrants. Those who have commented on the novelette have rightfully noted Pollard's brilliant language, her moving evocation of Jamaican places, events, and lives, and her account of the quest of the archetypal bright Jamaican male for identity and manhood. I would like here, however, to emphasize the rich *folklore* that provides context and commentary, beginning with the opening lines of the novelette:

Im is a self-made man

Im mek imself

Das why im no mek good

(Masters, who will define what 'good' is?) (26)

The tales of the Black man who was too impatient to wait for the Lord to create him are legend in African Caribbean and African American folklore, and undoubtedly Velma Pollard grew up hearing these tales in Woodside, where I collected one of the eight etiological tales about creation that I published in 1985 in *Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans*.² These narratives, which are all too often regarded as self-denigrating stories, are taboo in Jamaica (as they are in many levels of African American society), and they were not at first readily shared with me. They do, however, reflect aspects of the issue of identity with which Pollard, like most of her fellow Caribbean writers, often wrestles.

The opening lines of Pollard's verse force us to reflect upon the difficult issue of manhood and identity in a colonised society, whose definitions of 'good,' of 'manhood,' and of 'freedom' create many conflicts for the person of African descent. The 'masters' addressed are generally conceived as holding the power to determine who will define manhood. In all of the similar etiological tales, whether they explain why the Black man is messed up, why he is Black, why his hair is nappy, why his feet are big, or why he is poor, the *presumed* given is the value system of the colonial society, when in fact, I would argue, these tales *signify* on those values, as Pollard does in *Karl*, where she forces us to ask ourselves whether the Karls of the world are better off when they make themselves in their own image or when they mould themselves in the master's image?

As we view Karl's life, we realize that no matter how fortunate he is in his intelligence, his scholarships, his colonial education, his travels abroad, his awards, and his high level job in the bank, he can never fit comfortably in

colonial society: 'Now you tell me what is left of a man for a man in this badword society if you make it? You cap tight at work; you zoot zoot don't really fit no matter how much time you spend fixing it up; for you don't know when a zip will burst a button fall off' (97). Nor can he ever truly be accepted in an elitist Jamaican society that rejects its African culture and is based on issues of colour and class, for Karl is a short Black man whose unmarried mother was a higgler and whose grandfather worked on the Panama Canal, which Pearl, the first woman to whom he proposes, describes scornfully as 'sort of like farm work to America' (50). Considering her mother's expected response to Karl's family background, she reflects, 'I can't see Mama dealing with that' (50). But even worse than his failure to fit in and be himself in this society (though he does not initially recognize this as unfortunate) is the fact that he can never recapture his beginnings and re-enter the symbolic garden of his folk community.

Karl, whose name ironically means 'man' and 'free man,' is at the beginning of the novelette, a broken, confused, and unbalanced creature who finds some reprieve from the hell of his existence through his sense that pure water is dripping 'through the chaos in [his] head' (26) and that 'Aunti' (his deceased, single, unsophisticated, but dedicated and sacrificing mother) 'frees' him (27): 'I can feel the cool of her hand on my forehead ... she finds the nail hole and gently puts her little finger in it to stretch it a little ... she finds the little strings they have marking off those boxes in my brain and she loosens them. I thought the nail hole was the best but this is boss!!! Aunti, thank you!' (99). Throughout the novel, Aunti and pure water symbolize the folk community that Karl so eagerly left.

Though Aunti is long since dead, the now-institutionalized Karl recognizes that his only salvation is to return to his home in the significantly named Hopeville: 'If I leave here the only place I want to go is Hopeville. I want to sit down on a stone behind the tombs round church and let time slip through my mind slowly ... or let me head spin and spin till it straighten itself' (98). (It is interesting to note that when Karl reflects on being home he sometimes shifts from the perfect English he ordinarily uses into the folk idiom.)

As a child Karl had shown great intellectual promise, and somehow Aunti, his proud, but very poor mother, raised the funds to provide him tuition, uniforms, books, and sustenance throughout his schooling in Jamaica. Delighted at the opportunities opening to him, he disregarded Ras I's warning, 'You gwine to *Babylon* school man!' (33; my emphasis); he was already committed to the temptations of his colonial society:

*Ef you cyan cook Daddy white rice
You cyan go a Daddy yard.
Ef you cyan wash Daddy white shirt
You cyan go a Daddy yard ... [']*

If you can't read Daddy book you can't buy Daddy house (34).

Again, Pollard's added commentary to the traditional verse offers more food for thought and reinforces her emphasis here on the impact of the colonial education. The use of the house as representative of British culture is frequently found in Caribbean literature, especially notable in Derek Walcott's declaration in *Another Life*, 'I had entered the house of literature as a houseboy' (77),

and Mervyn Morris's signifying on that in 'The House-Slave': 'And these are my rooms now' (17).

Karl's grandfather was a Colon Man, a Caribbean man who went to Panama to work on the Panama Canal. Although he sports the usual accoutrements – money, gold teeth and the big watch – he is more substantive than the stereotypical Colon Men, as Pollard reminds us: 'But he could read the time; not like the Colon-man the song made famous' (39).³ This responsible man saved his money, bought land when he returned to Jamaica, and acknowledged paternity of Aunti. Karl remembers him as 'a great singer' (40) 'with a brain full of long stories ... and long recitations' (38). He is also an admirable and influential *ancestral figure*, much like the grandfather of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, who offered Invisible Man wisdom that could have guided and saved him. However, Karl is like Invisible Man, who 'fails to understand the simple facts of life. *Understand. Understand?* It's worse than that. He registers with his sense but short-circuits his brain' (*Invisible Man* 92). Karl's grandfather's versions of popular and well known verses, 'I Took Me Girl to a Dance One Night' (about the girl who is in the relationship for the food and money she can get from her date) and 'Blackbird Go Eat Busha Corn' (about stealing from the master), always entertained and amused Karl, but as he notes of the latter, he missed 'the true significance of the song' (41). Similarly he failed to heed the warnings of Ras I, explaining, 'I used to hear, but never listened and I never for once questioned, the Babylon zoot zoot I was so busy fixing up' (34). (*Invisible Man* too ignores a Ras with similar results.)

Karl, who keeps getting involved with elitist Jamaican women whose only concern is class, status, and wealth, finally marries Daphne. One might think that

in moving from 'Pearl' to 'Daphne Burrows' (*Daphne* is the nymph in Greek mythology who was transformed into a tree, and *Burrows* reminds of that ground where ancestral wisdom resides) Karl would be moving from the costly and artificial to the natural, but such is not the case. Though Daphne grew up in Hopeville, poor and Black like Karl, she delights in all of the cocktail parties and other similar social trappings associated with his job in the bank, and insists that he continue in the prestigious banking position that causes him so much distress, warning him through the popular proverb, 'If you want good you nose hafi run' (64).⁴ Karl observes that she, who had once loved 'to dance and relax now happy happy in the stiff sherry and shrimps syndrome' (63).

Pollard reinforces the tragedy of Karl's separation from his home community of Hopeville, of which she notes, '*this Karl* can't go there any more' (77; emphasis mine), through references to the popular folk game that provides the title, structure, and theme to Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*. That game reinforces the motif of separation from community as occasioned by travel for education in both *Jane and Louisa* and *Karl* (and a host of other Caribbean novels) and serves, as Brodber has said, as a symbol of the process of 'reintegrating, ... finding a place in the community' (Notes). Reflecting on a marital relationship that he does not recognize mirrors his own, Karl recalls the opening lines of the game – 'my-dear-will-you-'low-me-to-waltz-with-you-into-this-beautiful-garden!' – and then muses, 'Of course, she may not have considered his garden beautiful, and of course, he may not have asked her in a way she could understand ...' (66).

Pollard also suggests the significance of folk dishes in *Karl*, with the rejection of this cuisine reinforcing one's alienation from the community. Karl hears tales of the Governor General's wife's efforts to recapture self through sneaking and eating soul food:

[She] wait late late till everyone gone to bed, then she cook her little pot of banana and mackerel and sit down in her private little kitchen and eat it; wash out the pot clean so nobody can't know ... well how them know? And anyway what wrong with banana and mackerel ... except that Daphne don't use it in her house either. (97)

As Aunti ages, she is coaxed to live with her successful son and his wife, but she is clearly not happy in their ostentatious Kingston house, for, as she comments of Karl's wife, 'Miss Daph a little extra, ... a little too cris' (73). One expects her response might be the same as that of the unidentified speaker in *Jane and Louisa*, who laments: 'This poach egg and toast bread and cornflakes when I must have yam and pear and bammy for my breakfast. ... And you can't make them know that is hard food you want. It will shame them' (40). In Karl and Daphne's Kingston house, Aunti's only respite seems to be to 'bake a potato pudding now and then or make the beef soup on Saturday' (72). She makes failed efforts to raise some vegetables; however 'the little tomato seeds she scattered wouldn't catch' (72). One recognizes that there is something missing in the Kingston 'grung.'

Karl's alienation from community, his frustrated quest for manhood and identity, his sacrifice of everything natural, including fathering children,⁵ speaking his language, eating his foods, returning to the ground that nourished him, and drinking his clear

water, finally result in a breakdown for him as it does for Brodber's Nellie in *Jane and Louisa* – and countless other Caribbean personae – a fate that he might have foreseen in the dilemma of Clifton, a madman in his community when he was growing up: 'I can't remember now whether his studies had sent him mad or whether somebody had worked obeah on him' (82). Karl finally accurately assesses his condition and its causes in the following passage, where he reflects on the community's response were he to ever again return to the calmness of Hopeville:

[Y]ou will hear that Miss Elvy bright son study till im tun fool

Or ... dem tell him god mother since him mother pass on, fih tek dem advise and go see if dih man a calabash tree can see fih help him

And everybody would be right. For when you get what you want and stop wanting what you get, is fool you turn fool. And the smaddy who do you so is yourself

Where Daphne? Daphne gone miles pass me now I never really asked her into my garden,

Draft porter, shell shock; Clifton, duppy shock or book shock; Karl, time shock, life shock. What a mess!!!' (82-83)

Throughout, Pollard has Karl reflect on folk proverbs, songs and sayings that reinforce his condition and that might have offered some forewarnings about his associates and his actions had he but understood the knowledge contained therein:

The pen is lighter than the cutlass (33).

What is not killing, is fattening! (42)

If you love the man you has, you will love the child
you have (68).

Every day bucket go a well one day the bottom will
leave there' (91).

A no same day leaf drop it rotten (91).

Who the cap fit, wear it (95).

[She] refuse[d] to put her head next to his (65).⁷

As the story ends (perhaps a little too conveniently) ten years after Karl's death, we meet Kenneth, another similarly talented and educated young man who, with his wife's blessings has given up Babylon ('Babylon can only hold you as strong as you allow it' [73]) and relishes his freedom to enjoy the pure water of Jamaica and the beautiful garden that is his homeland. We know that unlike Karl, Kenneth will continue to hear 'Grung tell [him] wud.' This is clearly Pollard's lesson for the legions of Caribbean intellectuals whose manhood and identity are sacrificed on the altar of Westernization because they have lost their grounding. We are all so much the richer because Velma Pollard continues to place her ear to her Jamaican ground!

Notes

1 Daryl Cumber Dance, 'A Conversation with Velma Pollard,' 261. See also Pollard's dedication to *Karl*.

2 See pp. 5-8. The closest version to Pollard's tale that I collected is, however, in my African American collection, *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, which ends:

And He [God] turned around and it was a nigger – he made himself. He say, 'Since you so smart, now, you stay like that.'

And that's why the nigger is so messed up. He couldn't wait until the Lord fixed him right. He had to make himself. (8)

- 3 See 'Colon Man a Come' (*Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans* 173-74): 'Ask 'im what's de time an' 'im look/ Up pon de sun.'
- 4 G. Llewellyn Watson interprets this as 'Success does not come without maximum effort' (120); I would substitute 'effort' with 'suffering' or 'discomfort.'
- 5 Though Karl wanted children, his wife notes, 'after we get the [big, showplace house on Jack Hill] tell the truth I couldn't bear to imagine any little finger marks all about the wall and any ... wee wee on the carpet' (68).
- 7 Karl later explains this as the necessity 'to share the inside of your head with [your woman] so you can spread out what is there and examine it sometimes, with a sympathetic sharer looking inside with you' (40).

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