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I Am Still Your Negro: An Homage to James Baldwin by Valerie Mason-John

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Lucy: Mother of Us All

I Am Still Your Negro: An Homage to James Baldwin, by VALERIE MASON-JOHN

University of Alberta Press, 2020 \$19.99

Reviewed by **gillian harding-russell**

In *I Am Still Your Negro: An Homage to James Baldwin*, Valerie Mason-John writes poems of social justice from the African diaspora with its history of slavery and oppression stemming from White imperialism. Whereas the title of Raoul Peck's screenplay documentary about Baldwin entitled *I AM Not Your Negro* registers defiance against anti-Black racism, Mason-John's *I Am Still Your Negro* reminds us that this racism still prevails. With recent news events, such as the unprovoked assault on George Floyd by a white Texas police officer and too many incidents like it, Mason-John's thematic preoccupation gathers increased relevance for our own times. Intertwining with this central theme of racial oppression are associated thematic threads of oppression, including sexual discrimination against women in relation to the #MeToo movement, homophobia, and transphobia. Connecting the various thematic strands and as a backdrop to the poems is the voice of Yaati, Supreme Being, who exhorts each of us to embrace the identity that nature has given us. Mason-John alternates between a spoken-word rap style using anaphora with short staccato or cadenced lines to Yaati's prose-poem expositions that, with sweeping eloquence, tell a story of White imperialism and its effect on the Black population.

In "The Ghost of Thomas Peters" Mason-John gives a first-person account from a slave who runs away to enlist in the "King's army," and in "Windrush" – with its weighted title that evokes the "Windrush generation" of immigrants from the Caribbean who arrived in England by boat in the late 1940s-70s – she dramatizes the story of a stowaway who hopes to find the streets of London paved in gold. In "The Ghost of Thomas Peters," the slave asks for newspapers in which to wrap himself to keep warm but he can secretly read and is on the lookout for a way to escape slavery. When he comes across a proclamation that calls on all 'negroes' to enlist in the 'king's army', he immediately runs away to join. With the plight of his ancestors in Sierra Leone heavily on his mind, the slave recounts this scene as passed down to him and preserved in an oral history that readily lends itself to a modern rap-style:

Dem a shackle we neck to neck
Chain we wrist to wrist
Clamp we foot to foot
Frog-marched to Bunce Island (12)

Similarly, the stowaway in "The Windrush" is driven by a desire for freedom. From the secretly literate slave in "The Ghost of Thomas Peters" to the voice of the grandmother in "The Windrush," it is the authentic voice and dialect of the various speakers that bring these poems to dramatic life. When the stowaway tries to tell her granny that the ship's name is not "*de Goldrush*" but instead "*de Windrush*" and that the streets of London are paved with "wid sleet,"

not “wid gold,” to the reader’s wry amusement, her grandmother’s response carries the warmth and sweet personality of the speaker:

Sleet? A wah dat
Some kina of fancy name fi yuh man
Granny skrawl bak (23)

Accordingly, Mason-John evokes these historical *mis-en-scène* in full character, using minimal dramatic lines and with all the weight of history’s continuing wrongs.

Aligned with racial discrimination is a historic prejudice against women as epitomized in cases of sexual assault. The poem “#MeToo” uses a rap style with hard-hitting end-rhymes that bring home to the reader the speaker’s anger against the too common pattern of rationalization that benefits men at the expense of their assaulted victims:

It’s all just after all
Harmless fun
Boys being boys
Using girls as toys
What’s up with all the noise?
It’s what men do – Normal
Hormonal (44)

The closing lines of the stanza “Business as usual/Endure it” typify a misogynist’s attitude that women have been forced to accept in silence (44). In measured cadence, the poem sums up the rationale behind a tolerance for male rapists and a tendency to blame the victim who, it turns out, is not titillated, but instead entertaining “thoughts of castration” (45).

In contrast to this tolerance for male seduction and rape, Mason-John points to intolerance towards even a minor lesbian seduction in “Yellowknife.” Here the speaker admits to attempting to seduce another woman but recounts how the woman entered into something that seemed consensual:

Of course I looked at her.
Even undressed her with my eyes.
And she undressed me too.
Exotic, she whispered. (55)

That the woman turns against her own feelings becomes evident in the following verse: “In the next breath spat out, *You beast*” (55). And perhaps it is this turning against her feelings and essential self, the poet suggests, that leads to the emotionally-disturbed bulimic speaker in “The Binge” or “The Anorectic” from “#IfMyPlantsCouldSpeak.”

As a backdrop to these poems of racial and sexual discrimination, Yaati, Supreme Being provides a voice of reason and moral perspective that brings the reader to attention. From “Yaati’s Lament” (8-10) which outlines the damage to nature from white imperialism (8-10), through “Yaati’s Yowl” describing the desecration of animals and humans (30-31), “Yaati’s Groan” bearing witness to the sexual abuse of black women (50-52) or “Yaati’s Manifesto” a turning to “modern philosophers” such as Bob Marley (61), “Yaati’s Rap” articulating blacks resorting to illegal drugs and rave scenes (70) to “Yaati’s Prophecy” the current scene with a prognosis for the future(82-83), we see from the rhetorical perspective of an African goddess who becomes a mouthpiece for the poet herself. In this last oration, the “Hungry Ghosts” morph from greedy imperialists to purveyors of hate and delusion in their racial profiling. Even positive racist profiling that sees strength in the ability to run, dance and, sing in the black population, Yaati intimates evolved through epigenetics for a reason: in the need to run away, to sing and, dance for soul comfort during slavery. Perhaps most stunning in its call for redemption is Yaati’s claim that hate itself is an “illusion,” an unwanted gift of “delusion” (83), and her reminder that she, as “the mother of all beings,” (95) has the capacity to “remember and forgive . . . all sentient beings”(95):

Remember, humankind began in
Africa with Lucy and every one
of you descend from me. Yes! Lucy is
the ancestor of every race in
the world. And all of you must
someday find peace.” (95)

Lucy, the first humanoid skeleton and our common ancestor, was discovered in Africa, Yaati reminds us, and so in the modern scientific world, she replaces Eve in Christian mythology. The image is a *tour-de-force* as it unites all races at a matrix of human evolution and includes every reader. *I Am Still Your Negro* is a powerful collection that speaks from the heart and personal experience but also involves us all; not only does it outline the damage to nature and society but also projects a vision of the future that brings together race and erases the “unwanted gift of delusion”: hate grounded in prejudice that is based on ignorance (83).

gillian harding-russell is a poet, editor, and reviewer. Her most recent poetry collection *In Another Air* (Radiant 2018) was shortlisted for a City of Regina, Saskatchewan Book Award. A new poetry collection *Uninterrupted* will be published by Ekstasis Editions in 2021. Her work has appeared in seventeen anthologies and has been published in journals across Canada. She has a PhD in English Literature from The University of Saskatchewan.