

## “I Could Have Been Susanna From Thistlewood’s Plantation Diary”

Jamaican Poet Ann-Margaret Lim Discusses Her Second Poetry Collection *Kingston Buttercup*

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On Reading Thistlewood’s Diary

II

Susanna, dat’s ma name  
Don’t confuse it wid de open-air African Savannah.  
If yu look mi up *In Miserable Slavery*  
you’ll si mi listed under children,  
wid Congo in bracket, page 29.  
Ah was part o’ de pickney gang in 1751  
when him firs’ tek mi  
in de curing house.

Ah wet him bed him tek me in .  
Each time ah wet de bed,  
But him neva stop.

An’yu, who fin’ him diary an’ call mi favourite,  
Tell de worl’ how dem whip me and Mazerine  
For refusing backra an’ him fren;

tell di worl’ how Thistlewood  
an’ slavery ruin mi.  
(Ann-Margaret Lim, excerpt from *Kingston Buttercup*)

In this interview, Ann-Margaret Lim discusses why in her two poetry collections, *Festival of Wild Orchid* (Peepal Tree Press, 2012) and *Kingston Buttercup* (Peepal Tree Press, 2016), she writes frankly about family relationships, her African, Chinese and Puerto Rican heritage, the rapes

catalogued in Thomas Thistlewood's diary, and the domestic and societal violence of Jamaica's past that impacts the present, as well as art and popular music.

**AUTHORS** Your first poetry collection, *The Festival of Wild Orchid* (Peepal Tree Press, 2012), begins with poems about the arrival of your African and Chinese ancestors to Jamaica, the voyage of your father ("a brown boy in a yellow land" - "The Darkening"), who was taken as a youth to China to learn the culture, and hints about your mother, who left Jamaica for Venezuela, never to return, when you were young. In *Kingston Buttercup*, the complex family history is elaborated on as you describe your own recent journeys to China and Venezuela.

**ANN-MARGARET LIM** Yes, in the poem "At the Karaoke Bar, 21st Century Hotel", the speaker, in China, watches a karaoke singer, who flirts and orders her a whiskey, but she thinks of her father: "I remember you playing the harmonica, | the banjo, singing Chinese opera, | telling me stories of being brown in China, | being loved by a Chinese stepmother; | of girls intrigued by an oval face, | long brown limbs and massive waves of hair; | being the village basketball star". In "Yesterday", the speaker confides "Once I gulped a container of pills | wishing to never come back | to a room, a house without my mother". In "Venezuela Journal" the speaker asks about her mother "Did she think of me, as I of her | at the back of the plane | on the way to Venezuela?": "Today I sit at the window in the Hotel Alex, | sip Jamaican rum from the bottle | ... and look down to see mi madre | in every brown-skinned woman | passing on the road..."

**AUTHORS** In *Kingston Buttercup*, some of the most powerful poems are in response to Thomas Thistlewood's 14,000-page diary, published in part as *In Miserable Slavery* (1750-1786), which documents his work and life as an overseer on the Egypt Plantation in Jamaica. When you were writing the poem "On Reading Thistlewood's Diary", which process was more difficult, reading his journal or writing your poems based on his diary? How did you decide on the personages to whom you would give a voice?

**A.-M.L.** Reading the journal was more difficult. I think all Jamaicans should read journals like this, though, so that we can appreciate where we are coming from and decide to treat each other better. The two women I referenced in the poems stayed with me, Phibba and Susanna. All the slaves were ill-treated, but these resonated most because I could have been either of them. Susanna could even be an ancestor of mine, and she, a girl, was raped repeatedly by a grown man. Susanna, for me, represents the voice from the grave that speaks out against paedophilia, carnal abuse. Susanna's psychological and

physical reaction to the childhood rapes she suffered is documented by Thistlewood. Not only does he complain of her wetting the bed each time, but also of her fighting him off. Thistlewood ruined Susanna. What happened to her, and many others, still affects us now. It is one of the reasons why we should be owed reparations. I see my writing of Susanna's life in relation to the Tambourine Army Movement, which started in Jamaica in 2016, whereby victims of child sexual molestation have decided to publicly call the names of their abusers in the "Say their Names" and "Me, too" campaigns.

Phibba is the woman who was somehow able to 'stomach' criminal objectification of herself and women at large and benefit from her 'favouritism' as a means of economic empowerment. Susanna resisted and suffered irrevocable trauma, while Phibba somehow managed to 'earn her economic freedom'. When Thistlewood died, she was willed land and property and was a free woman. Both of these reactions represent choices that modern day women in Jamaica make. Too many women are raped in childhood. Some are destroyed, and visibly so. Others endure violence, viewing men as economic providers only, and seek to use them as such. It is an unhealthy cycle.

Living here and knowing our history, I become more convinced daily that the past and present in this country are constantly communicating, and that the miserable past of slavery keeps dictating the present day 'work plantations', inter-class relations and family and intimate relations.

**AUTHORS** Your poems critically engage with other source material related to slavery. The poem "Drawing" alludes to an illustration, "Full Freedom 1838", published in the book *A Twelve Month's Residence in the West Indies, During the Transition from Slavery to Apprenticeship*, by Richard Robert Madden. It depicts the moment of the Emancipation Proclamation in Jamaica. How do you see ekphrastic poetry as a means of revisiting history?

**A.-M.L.** I saw the drawing before reading Thistlewood's journal and was affected by it enough to write the poem. This is not my first attempt at ekphrastic poetry. In high school, I was drawn to West Indian history, and the fact that my high school was on a former plantation definitely helped to reinforce my awareness. I use illustrations to rewrite history from my perspective: "There's a ship | distant, unrigged, skeletal, | that squats, like memory, on the sea".

**AUTHORS** Could you tell us about your research process?

**A.-M.L.** The Internet represents an immediate source of information, so instead of waiting to go to a library to find pictures on slave auctions, or to find a West Indian History Book, I can just type 'slave auction

pictures' in Google. The beauty of that is instead of just the specific West Indian reference I seek, I see more. I buck upon slaves like Philip in the poem "Philip, an Excellent Fisherman", a slave in the U.S. being auctioned: "Was there nowhere to sail to, | or were you only a fisherman | in bracketed waters, | the plantations your parenthesis?"

**AUTHORS** Poems make reference to other sorts of source materials, such as music and sculpture. In "On Reading Thistlewood's Diary", Ding Dong's song "Syvah" is referenced, and Christopher Gonzalez' tree-like sculpture of Bob Marley is admired in "The Artist". Do you follow a particular process when translating these source works into your writing?

**A.-M.L.** I may be so drawn to a piece of art, literature or music that poetry comes from that. I first saw the Gonzalez tribute statue for Marley as a 6th former in high school. We were touring the National Gallery of Jamaica, and I was told the story of the statue, why it was at the gallery and not in front of the National Stadium. The public wouldn't accept Gonzalez' vision of the reggae singer portrayed with tree roots and trunk instead of legs. I, however, loved the piece and thought it befitting of Marley. Then, meeting Gonzalez confirmed my love and preference for that sculpture over the one that was 'acceptable'. I later spent a day at the beach with Christopher Gonzalez. I saw how that rejection hurt him. For me, spending time with a 'rhatid', excellent artist, who met and loved Marley, was precious and exhilarating.

It is also the same process for my use of the song "Syvah" in my poem for Phibba. I live and breathe reggae and dance hall music. "Syvah" happened to be the 'hot' song at the time when I was reading Thistlewood's diary. The dance move, which involved squatting and flapping of the arms, reminded me of the act of release and flight. Below is a link to one of the videos doing the rounds. I interpret the dance moves like this: "And the takeoff | when the body comes fully into play | is the throwing off of shackles | ... And as the women release in | *syvah, syvah, syvah* | their hands like albatross' wings".<sup>1</sup>

**AUTHORS** In various poems, you pursue the theme of contemporary urban violence. Where do you find the material that inspired poems such as "Shaker Way", "Missing", and "Domestic: A Dyptych"?

**A.-M.L.** The thing about these poems is that they are personal. Shaker Way is where I live. Good Friday is celebrated in Jamaica, as the Friday on which Jesus was killed, and that was the day we woke and realised our neighbour's car was stolen. Some two years later, those same neighbours were held up in their homes, robbed and gun

<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZAS2iVsns&list=RDTZAS2iVsns&t=22> (2018-11-21).

butted. “Missing” is also autobiographical, and, yes, “Domestic” is autobiographical: “She goes down, gets up, | goes down again. His hands | feet deliver blows. | A house looks up | intermittently from the paper”. What those poems may remind people is that poets can be considered historians or journalists, who write down what’s happening now, but with a different approach, different tools.

**AUTHORS** In both of your poetry collections, you include either a tribute or allusion to the confessional poet Sylvia Plath. Many of your poems about your African, Chinese and Puerto Rican heritage (“likkle Coromantine, quarter Chinese/Puerto Rican gal”, “Granmammy”), your family history, your abandonment at a young age by your mother, the early death of your brother and your estrangement from your father, as well as poems about love relationships, seem to be closely based on your own autobiography and sometimes traumatic experiences. Do you feel that you are contributing to confessional poetry in the Jamaican or larger Caribbean context?

**A.-M.L.** There was no deliberate attempt to be confessional or contribute to that genre. I know that I want to write the reality I live in, not what I think Caribbean poetry should sound and feel like, something I think we poets may have been trapped into thinking we should do. I don’t come from the rural part of Jamaica, so I can’t write much about growing up in the ‘country’ and have all the rustic, rural scenery some people come to expect from ‘Caribbean poetry’. Plus, I will not fake it. So yes, I may be contributing to that body of Caribbean poetry considered confessional, but as I see it, it’s not only that. There is that, and there is my preoccupation with history and how it colours the present. For me, that past and present conversation, at times, also joins with the confessional.

I think my poetry style is fluid. My poetry has been described as lyric. I aim for truth, and since my locale is mainly Jamaica, most of the truth I see and discover is set in Jamaica. Writing is therapy, an important part of the healing process, since to write the poem, you have to process the actions, thoughts, emotions, motives, etc. You have to be on the inside of what you’re writing about. Writing is my guttural release.

Would you classify Olive Senior as confessional? Perhaps I would. I love her work. I am drawn to Shara McCallum, Safiya Sinclair - even Colin Channer’s book *Providential* can be considered confessional. I love Shivane Ramlocan’s work. Some of it can be considered confessional, but there is also that ‘trick’. There is so much intimacy, that you feel it is autobiographical, but it is not necessarily.

