

Language - Uses and Misuses - What the Poets Know

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The proposed presentation will consider the insights about language articulated by a selection of Caribbean poets whose works range from the 1960s to the present. Collectively, they offer an at times ironic but always multi-dimensional perspective on word use as an important aspect of historical and contemporary Caribbean reality.

Even when themselves engaged in seemingly ludic language use, the poets show the gravity of language use to the awareness, self-definition, and future of Caribbean people (if there is a future). For poets of the past and of the future, poetic language use is not play but serious and transformative work. Aptly deployed, poetry is a fusion of rhyme and reason to achieve “explosive emotional expression” effecting spiritual and educational change, generating mental rebellion/revolution, revelation and understanding. For one, it is the metaphorical scalpel performing a Caesarean delivery in consciousness to save Barbados’ future. For another, it is a subversive assertion of political and ideological freedom in which the former colonial master is made complicit. For a third, it is an indictment of the ignorance of language purists who do not know that the colonizer’s language was itself once a “bastard” language; an actuality that would logically compel rejection of canonical writings in the English language so beloved by those who despise their own mother tongues. For a fourth, language must be subordinated to the imperatives of brute survival. Language is in fact so critical that one poet declares she has had to regrow her tongue when she lost her language in the process of migration.

These are but a sampling of the truths Caribbean poets present. They are the truths they are prepared to tell even when such truths antagonize.

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