

# Book Reviews

## "... BUT WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?" STORIES OF IDENTITY AND ASSIMILATION IN CANADA

Hazelle Palmer, ed. Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1997.

BY LISA MARSHALL

Hazelle Palmer's book, "*... but where are you really from?*" is a timeless question to many who feel and are marginalized in their daily contact with an ignorant and naive world. I can't remember in how many different contexts I have heard it said and in so many different ways—where are you from? As if to say certainly you are a new arrival to this fair land called Canada. The immediate marking of territory into mine and mine that I cautiously share—always an outsider asking permission to play.

This is a collection of thoughts by women of colour on their forced battle to fit into the supposedly welcoming Canadian mosaic. It brings together known and less known writers (for example, Ayanna Black, Susan Lee and Althea Samuels) to express their views on this question and more specifically on their identity formulation. It speaks to dilemmas of being part of a melting pot or part of a mosaic. Do we give up some of our mannerisms, practices and beliefs because others brand or imply that they are not truly the Canadian way? What makes straight hair and an Italian tailored suit more Canadian

than dreads or braids and an African printed dress? Simply, the reactions and assumptions they bring. We must be militant, non-conformist, revolutionary ... what about just being who we want to be and what if *we are* militant about our convictions? Does this society not make one defensive, based on the images and conclusions drawn about "those" hyphenated Canadians (African-Canadians, Japanese-Canadians, Chinese-Canadians)? Is it not right to cherish what makes us who we are?

This book is about looking inward to define oneself irrespective of the reaction received. It is about questioning what we think we need to do and what we do to fit in. It is about projecting a body and soulful image of self that is self-gratifying first and foremost. It is about women of colour who speak something besides the queen's English. It is a book about finding a home within us and within our Canadian communities that challenges the representations of media, advertising, educational conformity, employment constraints and above all individuals and their hierarchy of Canadian-ness. It is about questioning the projected picture-perfect image of being respectful of difference. The society in which we live is told to be tolerant and non-judgmental—this is quite a shortfall from being respectful. "*... but where are you really from?*" brings together the thoughts and experiences of women in the Canadian diaspora, highlighting the issues that concretize expressions of culture and tensions of difference that make up Canada.

The power struggle continues to name ourselves *vs.* others naming us....

## MA-KA: DIASPORIC JUKS: CONTEMPORARY WRITINGS BY QUEERS OF AFRICAN DESCENT

Debbie Douglas, Courtney McFarlane, Makeda Silvera and Douglas Stewart, eds. Toronto: Sister Vision, 1998.

BY MEGAN BUTCHER

There are two immutable facts about literary collections: the quality of writing will be uneven and everyone will have at least one argument with the selected pieces. *Ma-ka: Diasporic Juks*, of course, is no exception; however, overall the pieces chosen are well-written and interesting. They represent a variety of different experiences, viewpoints, and styles; they provoke thought, are touching, or amusing. Whether you like a selection or not, agree with it or not, each section has something to offer on the subject of the identity that is at the core of this collection.

Besides setting the parameters of the collection, the four part introduction defines and redefines the meaning of the title. *Ma-ka*, a thorny plant, can *juk* you, prick you into remembrance, watchfulness, vitality. It can work as a sort of cultural role model: determining a varied set of experiences as political acts, calling for pride in experience and self. As Douglas says in the introduction, "we are committed to being visible, to the disrupting of the status quo, to speaking out, and to working to provide others with the opportunity to do the same." And others do here.

The profusion of those other voices makes it impossible to mark all of the moments that moved and challenged me; almost as impossible to list all of the moments that bored me or made me cringe. Thankfully, there were more of the former than the latter. The pieces that struck me as particularly good and appropriate for the book were those that wrestled with the language they were using to tell their story—those pieces that refused, in some way, to participate in mainstream English, the High English of Literature. This starts with Douglas Stewart's explanation of ma-ka, and its importance. He eschews a coherent explanation, presenting the metaphor in snippets and words, refusing lengthy exposition for slices of definition and an imperative: "Mind this book. Mind ma-ka juk ya!" Mind: obey, or alternately, watch out. And it frames the collection perfectly.

This attention to the power of language, its abstractions and power to control, is fleshed out particularly in the work of Lawrence Ytzhak Braithwaite and T. J. Bryan. Both take liberties with narrative as well. In "Baggy Trousers" there's hardly any story to speak of, but fragment layered upon fragment of dialogue, until the relationship between the pieces causes the characters and meanings to emerge. There's no linear tale, no one meaning leaping out at the reader. The way he uses language disorients every sense of how identity is formed. As the first text, it gets to the heart of the collection immediately.

T. J. Bryan's "Melting my Iron Maiden" is a different kind of story, possibly the sexiest I've ever read. She combines porn stories and multiple voices to probe the link between sex and sexy and the tensions that produce both. Sex is intricately linked, she argues, to politics. To strip one from the other impoverishes both, and helps no one. Her writing is lyrical and precise, and Bryan writes intelligently to fill the lack she deplors.

Selections like Braithwaite's and

Bryan's are what make this collection so good. What keeps it from being excellent are selections like Terry R. Drayton's "Pink Curlers and Fluffy Slippers" and "Untitled" by Shamza Nya Akoma. The latter is a poem about masturbating, an interesting place to start, but with flat language, clichés and misplaced exclamation points, it is a cold poem about a sensual act. But it is inoffensive. This cannot be said of "Pink Curlers and Fluffy Slippers," which is virulently sexist, and is not saved by the stilted prose, or the characters, which are merely a series of stereotypes. It is the only piece in this collection that actually made me angry. But as I said above, with such a large number of stories, poems and essays, everyone is bound to dislike some; in the case of *Ma-ka*, the ones I disliked were outweighed by those that were well written and smart.

As a collection of voices, as the "elder sister" of a movement trying to disrupt the mainstream, this book is admirable. It provides a place from which to start speaking louder, and louder again. It presents a forum in which voices can be heard in reference and relation to each other, building text, documenting history. I may not have liked every selection, but I was more than happy to listen.

#### THE BUTTERFLY HEALING: A LIFE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Julia Ching. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998.

BY CHRIS KLASSEN

*The Butterfly Healing: A Life between East and West* is a courageous personal pondering of the multiple connections between spiritual and religious life, the physical body, social and political relations, and academic development. Through this pondering Julia Ching, a professor of East Asian philosophy and religion at the

University of Toronto, shares with readers her journey toward integration and wholeness.

In *The Butterfly Healing* we are given a story of transition and transformation on a variety of levels. We see geographical transitions as Ching travels the world from China to America, from Taiwan to Australia, and finally to her present home—Canada. Ching also shares with us her religious development, beginning with her conversion to Catholicism, followed by her joining and eventually leaving the Ursuline order, and ultimately to her integration of Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian concepts within her Catholicism. Ching's physical transformations are addressed in a reflection on her multiple experiences with cancer and the resulting physical disabilities with which she must learn to live. Overall, Ching aptly demonstrates how being healthy requires a consideration of more than the physical body. Her physical health is connected to her spiritual life, which is dependent on her interactions with many cultures through travel, and which in turn affects her physical health. Health and wholeness depend on a circle of interconnections.

Ching tells her story with an impressive amount of respect for the past. As she looks back to her religious beliefs as a young nun, she is able to give validity to her early experiences without diminishing her decision to leave the order. She allows herself to be critical of the religious tradition she chose as a young woman without forsaking it completely. Thus, while she integrates other religious practices in her life, Ching remains strongly influenced by Catholicism.

Unfortunately the feminist questions Ching raises are insufficiently developed. For instance, she makes reference to the under-representation of women in the Catholic church leadership and in the academic world, but these are only briefly mentioned with the feel of an afterthought. Where she could have considered