

# AUNT CHLOE

20020 ISSUE

Wandeka Gayle: On Calling Back to the Caribbean

Wandeka Gayle's writing has appeared in, or is forthcoming in, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Rumpus*, *Pleiades*, *Interviewing the Caribbean*, and other journals and magazines. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Aunt Chloe spoke to her about how her home, Jamaica, has influenced her work.

AUNT CHLOE: Where are you from?

GAYLE: I'm originally from Jamaica. I grew up in Saint Catherine.

AUNT CHLOE: When did you realize that you wanted to become a writer?

GAYLE: I would say very early. When I was eight, I used to write on these legal-sized paper packs and walk around bugging my siblings by asking them, "How do you spell so and so?" so that I could finish some weird story and force them to listen to it.

More seriously though, when I was about twelve, I would start to write longer stories, and then I read this book, *Beka Lamb* by Zee Edgell, as a teenager and I thought: I want to write more about people I know. I kept writing about other people, with red hair and green eyes, because that's what I would see, not around me but in books. So, when I got that book, which was about a girl in Belize who looked like me, that is what I think sparked the idea that I could write more about things that I saw around me. Reading *Beka Lamb* was like a window opening! I don't want to sound cheesy, but when I was growing up we did not have cable. My parents created a reading culture, so we had books, but they weren't always about people like us.

AUNT CHLOE: Do you remember the first time you shared your work with someone outside of your family?

GAYLE: In high school, I got a lot of motivation when I was in second form (grade 8). My English teacher, Amos Thompson, said, “You’re going to write a book one day.” I don’t think my assignment was the best thing I ever wrote, but I think he just saw the passion and motivation that I had, so he encouraged me. Interestingly though, my mother was one of my first English teachers. She taught me when I was in 5th form. She would always write “Fair” on my stories. Long after, as an adult, I said to her, “Why?” She said to me that I was really good, but... I didn’t get that sense from her at the time because when she taught me, she would say it was just...average. She said, “Well, I didn’t want you to think that that was how far you could go.” I guess she wanted me to do more, and she was also my mother teaching me, so she wanted to be unbiased in her judgments. I do think that was also instrumental. Because of her, I was never complacent.

AUNT CHLOE: Which author was influential in you becoming a writer?

GAYLE: As I mentioned, Zee Edgell’s Beka Lamb. When I was in college, I became more interested in James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones as I was exposed to more American writers, but I also read Claude McKay, Jamaica Kincaid, and Elizabeth Nunez.

Definitely Elizabeth Nunez in terms of writing about the themes that I focus on because I write a lot about the immigrant experience in America. She is Trinidadian and writes from the perspective of being in America. But she also writes about the British colonizing Trinidad, and the residual effects of that, as well as what it is like when you are in America and you are a transplant. I think that finding her work was very instrumental for me because she wrote *Anna In-Between* which is something that I used in my dissertation. I got to meet her in 2019, which was interesting. I had a fellowship at Howard University in August, and I got to workshop with her. She liked my work, which was very motivating, and it was definitely a full circle moment.

Also, Edwidge Danticat who wrote *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, a Haitian writer who writes similar narratives about being Haitian-American, and so those writers are who I gravitated toward.

AUNT CHLOE: When did you transition from reading books where people did not look like you to wanting to make your own books?

GAYLE: I think that happened over time. I went to college to study engineering originally, which was crazy. Then the next semester I realized that I was not very technical, I was more artistic. In my head I heard my mom’s voice telling me to do something more practical, so I studied Mass Communication and then decided to do English as well. It was during that time that I started to gravitate towards books that I would not usually read.

AUNT CHLOE: What’s your favorite work by Elizabeth Nunez?

GAYLE: I love *Anna In-Between* because it provided a look into “in-betweenness,” or what it is to be Caribbean and live in America for a long time. You can’t be fully where you are from anymore, nor can you be fully American. There is a line in her book that says, “An immigrant

survives by forgetting,” which is telling because sometimes you do forget the bad things. You look back at your home and say, “Isn’t it wonderful or wasn’t it wonderful?” even if there were legitimate reasons why you left.

AUNT CHLOE: What is your favorite work that you’ve written?

GAYLE: I love all my work! It's like asking me to choose one of my children... I'm working on a novel and I think maybe that's where my love is right now. The novel, *My Name Is Sweet Thing*, is based on the Nina Simone song, “Four Women.” There’s a whole stanza in the song about what’s happening to Sweet Thing and we get the sense that she’s a prostitute through the lines, “Whose little girl am I? / Anybody who wanted to buy.” I gave her a back story, made her Jamaican, and gave her more of why she would be in this position. I feel very connected to Sweet Thing, so I think right now, because I’m focused on the novel, I would say I love that work the most.

AUNT CHLOE: What is your writing process and how is it different than the way you approach your visual art?

GAYLE: It's definitely different because I like to write long-hand first in books that I make, sometimes using aged paper which, I suppose, gives me this sense of “writerliness.” Then, I have a writing log that keeps track of plans and story ideas that may come to me. I don’t normally have an outline. With an academic piece, I always have an outline or even a diagram, but with my creative pieces, I have drafts of discovery. I write out something by hand and see what the character is saying to me, but usually it’s sparked by something. Either a sister or friend inexplicably says something that sounds like it could be a story or I get inspiration from observation or something that happened in my own past. Usually my visual art is more pastoral, things in nature, things around me.

AUNT CHLOE: Creatively, do you always go back to Jamaica?

GAYLE: Yes. That’s a thing that, at first, I thought was an issue because I had a very bad writing experience in a poetry workshop when I was doing my Ph.D. The professor said that it was the wrong socio-cultural environment because I introduced a dub poem, which is a two-beat poem in Jamaican culture. I tried to have the class do it, but he wasn’t into it. So it made me feel like maybe not everybody is going to receive my work well. It made me wonder: what do I write about, then? I really feel passionate about exploring either the Caribbean immigrant or the Caribbean person at home. So many things can come from that. For a moment I let it stop me, but then I realized that this is what I care about, but it’s not like I’m saying the same thing over and over. It’s just the point from where I’ve pulled inspiration. So, I always write about a Jamaican or a Caribbean person because I’m calling back to where I’m from. It’s sort of my way to show how I’m tethered to it...however far away I am from it. I’m always going to write about Jamaica. I’m always going to write about the Caribbean. I’m never going to feel motivated to center my stories around a Caucasian person who’s in the Alps because that’s not my experience. Could I? Yeah. As a former journalist, I am trained to write and research about anything, but I

don't have any motivation to do that, not at this point, anyway. And I think it's fine; there are lots of writers out there that write from the themes that they care about, and I do too.

AUNT CHLOE: How do you use critique creatively? Are critical analysis and creativity two different modes for you, or do they always coexist together?

GAYLE: You need to know when to listen to yourself. I have been part of writing workshops because I find that it's helpful when people can say, "This is what works and this is what doesn't work," or, "This is what does not translate." I've mostly gone to workshops with primarily Black writers, but I've also been to workshops where it is a mixture of different groups of people. In those workshops, you get to see what it means if your work can transcend that. If they're not from Jamaica or the Caribbean and they don't have the Black experience, can they understand it? So, I've had different kinds of critique and sometimes it's how you distill from it, because you're going to get people saying things about your work that you don't agree with, you never envisioned, or that can be detrimental to you. You have to say to yourself, "If that's going to take me away from my vision, then I have to decide what to use and what to lose." It took me some time to do that, it will take you time.

Rejection is a part of the process. It only takes one person to say yes for your work to have a home somewhere, so don't be discouraged by it. Something shameful that I did was delete one set of declines from my Submittable account. I only did that once, but it wasn't a true representation...and so I said I probably shouldn't do that again,...they should stay as testament.

I've heard from people coming from a good place and from people who are coming from a bad place, and you can tell the difference, if they are mean-spirited. There was a guy in my class who was so happy about the horrible things he was saying about people's work... That taught me that not everyone is going to have your best interest at heart. Find those who do. Have a reader. I send my work to a friend. Have a mentor. One of my mentors was my dissertation chair, Dr. John McNally, and I still would send him pieces after I graduated. I still plan to ask him to write a blurb about the collection that is coming out. You need to kind of have this rapport with someone because it is something that is very central to this whole process of conception, execution, critique, publication. You're going to get rejected, you're going to get feedback; it is just part of it. So criticism and creativity are intertwined in that way.

AUNT CHLOE: You attended the University of Louisiana-Lafayette...Louisiana is known for its Creole culture, Mardi Gras, and much more. It is also known for its storytelling. Did their creative folktales play any role in the development of your folktales?

GAYLE: Yes! I found out about their folktales because I am writing, as I said, the novel, and half of it is set in Jamaica and then Sweet Thing is going to go to Louisiana. Because the story has this central focus of spiritism and folklore and because she is in Jamaica, I thought about how that could relate to New Orleans culture. I found out about the stories of voodoo priestess, Marie Laveau. Her story was just so riveting, and I'd love to incorporate aspects like that in

some way. I already wrote a story set in Louisiana called “Finding Joy” (in the forthcoming collection) where West African folktales play a role.

AUNT CHLOE: You have been awarded many prestigious fellowships. How have they shaped and nurtured your work?

GAYLE: Kimbilio was one which I got during my Ph.D. study. It was very crucial because it happened when I was at the University of Louisiana where I felt kind of invisible because it’s a predominantly white institution, and since in my program there were not many Black students, here was this opportunity for me to connect with Black writers. Once you’re accepted, you can attend three different times. I went consecutively, and every year I would get time to work with different writers at various stages in their career. The last one I went to, my work was analyzed by Natalie Baszile, author of *Queen Sugar*; she was one of the faculty members, which was such a great experience.

Also, this year I got to go to Martha’s Vineyard with a Voices of Color fellowship. It was a partial author fellowship. I got to meet a lot of great writers and talk about craft in different genres. So these fellowships helped me by giving me a sense of the community, giving me a space to work on my craft, and through critique and evaluation. Like I said, that’s essential. We can’t be afraid to let people look at our work because how else are we going to know what we need to improve on? How are we going to know how things translate? If you’re writing and you never share it, who are you writing it for?

At Callaloo, [Summer Creative Writing Workshop] which I did in 2015, I finalized the short story, “Birdie,” and I wasn’t sure how it would end. I kind of figured it out there. As I said, they have helped me in those three ways...and through connections. The other one I went to was the Hurston-Wright Foundation. I got accepted into that in summer 2019. They always have different opportunities besides workshops, where they also offer craft talks, a panel on publishing, and other resources.

AUNT CHLOE: You mentioned that you have a collection of short stories coming out this year...

GAYLE: *Motherland and Other Stories* are all connected by theme. They’re about different people who either come from Jamaica or the Caribbean to America, or are still in their home country. “Motherland” is the only one where someone goes to England. It’s called “Motherland” because that is how Britain was referred to by their colonies, before Jamaica’s independence. Even though, in other ways of thinking about it, Africa is our motherland...but that is something we had to reclaim because of colonization. So those stories are discussing the immigrant experience, or even the postcolonial experience in some sense. I have stories about why people leave: self-discovery, employment, or curiosity; and why people stay: limited resources or they feel more at home in their own country.

With “Melba,” she goes to Louisiana with her husband and there is the dynamic of her and her husband not achieving this great “American Dream.” That’s another theme too: the

disappointment immigrants may feel. While presenting at a conference about this topic, one question I got was: “Do you think that we’ll ever stop telling these tales of disappointment?” And my answer was no, because once you leave your country with these expectations, and then are met with discrimination and hardships, it’s hard for you to not feel disappointed, right?

But I also discuss how you can thrive here as well, so it’s not just doom and gloom. And there are other concerns too, because in “Reunion” a Haitian man meets a Jamaican woman from his past and it’s more about losing contact with this person he thought he was going to spend the rest of his life with. So, it’s not all about how hard it is being an immigrant, it’s also about how your life can be independent of that. So, I try, with all of the stories, to give a sense of human experiences, and if they happen to be Caribbean, that adds to it...so you kind of have a mix going on there. It should be coming out in October 2020, and it’s going to be published by Peepal Tree Press. I just got back some edits, so it's moving along in the process....

(Interview by Starr Lewis)

Also by Wandeka Gayle: [Jamaican Bus Rides](#)

Photo courtesy of Wandeka Gayle

