

Bookends

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#CaribbeanStrong

Today, Bookends presents the second in a series of conversations, #CaribbeanStrong, between Jacqueline Bishop and writers from around the region. Today's featured writer is Sonia Farmer from The Bahamas.

Sonia Farmer: Interrogating the Idea of Paradise

Sonia, thanks for this interview which will focus on your books *Infidelities* (2017) and *The Best Estimation in the World* (2019) and on your chapbooks *The Overall Record for Being Human* (2016) and *A True & Exact History: A Reading* (2018), all published by the press you founded, Poinciana Paper Press in Nassau, Bahamas. I guess a good place to start is with the recent hurricane Dorian, which swept across the islands of the Bahamas causing incalculable damage. It seems like more and more as I do these interviews, I am starting in the place of asking someone from the region: How are things now on the islands post-hurricane?

Thank you for this opportunity to share my work and creative practice with your readers.

I think this is the most difficult question in the entire interview for me to answer, first of all because I don't really feel hopeful, and second of all because I think hurricanes, despite being devastating nationally, are deeply personal experiences so I can only truly speak for myself. It's hard for me to gauge the entire archipelago beyond what I feel is a collective trauma and fear for the future due to our vulnerable place in a time of climate change and climate injustice. I try to focus on the good or hopeful things — for example, some of my friends and colleagues have come together to form The

Cat Island Conservation Institute, which drafted a climate crisis declaration as a first step toward visualising what survival looks like for small island developing states in the future. I was also moved by the mobilisation by fellow Bahamians to help each other in the aftermath. As communications were cut off from Abaco and Grand Bahama, a digital platform was created first on *Facebook* and then on an independent website to seek and find missing people, which was a hugely successful collective national effort. Then of course, various local and international organisations and individuals came together to recover and rebuild. But honestly, the storm exposed some real ugliness and shame at a national level, at the same time. I continue to feel sad and ashamed by the way we treat our most vulnerable communities who bore the brunt of the storm's violence in shanty towns because we do not have legislation in place to empower and protect immigrants. I am shocked and angered that our national emergency response continues to be inadequate to address the needs of increasingly stronger storms and that the Bahamian people have to bear that burden, especially after multiple opportunities in the past four years to address and improve recovery and rebuilding efforts through such storms as Joaquin and Matthew. I

am angry that we are in an energy crisis that is not being addressed. The island of New Providence, where I live along with the majority of Bahamians in the densely populated city of Nassau, did not sustain a direct hit from Dorian like The Abaco Islands and Grand Bahama, which were decimated. However, the swipe we did receive was enough to knock out our power for three days and flood several areas. I just moved back home after three years in Iowa City, where I earned my MFA in Book Arts, to find the island's electricity supply on a schedule of "load shedding" which would cut off power to various parts of the island for three to four hours at a time, while charging us hundreds of dollars per month for this service. This way of living is unsustainable and unethical, and absolutely terrifying for its implications should we sustain a direct hit here, and finally, bleak in its outlook because I question whether our leaders and this outdated system have the imagination or capacity to rethink the energy systems, building codes, immigration laws, and emergency responses necessary for our survival. Part of that is because we are also totally disempowered on a global scale. We can make our changes, but if the entire globe does not come together, we bear the brunt of climate injustice

anyway. And so within this — and here is where it gets very personal — I feel frozen and very helpless.

Turn to PARADISE on Page 50



Sonia Farmer



PARADISE from Page 49

The chapbook *The Overall Record for Being Human* is a palimpsest of two narratives. You often utilise the strategy of more than one voice and multiple narratives and point of views to tell a story. Can you talk us through why you use the strategies you do in the chapbook?

I want to just pick up on a word you use in this question, “palimpsest”, for a minute because I think it sets the tone for a lot of my work discussed here, which is concerned with the narrative of paradise — that is, concerned with erasure. The narrative of paradise is a palimpsest, a page wiped clean to bring a new narrative to the forefront — a narrative that has endured to sustain and privilege the voice of the visitor/conqueror as protagonist in places occupied by other bodies with their own silenced stories that prop up this narrative. What makes a palimpsest a palimpsest is the presence of those silenced and erased traces that still endure. So I am interested in excavating the page to challenge the singular narrative of paradise, and often this is presented in multiple voices through my poems, and through multiple presentations of language in my artist books and chapbooks.

Infidelities is a ham-burning book, which raises so many delicious questions for a reader. This is a book that centres the character of Anne Bonny. Tell us who Anne Bonny is and about her relationship to both Nassau and Jamaica. How did you first come to know about her?

Anne Bonny is a historical figure with a complex mythology. She is probably the most well-known female pirate in history but not the most well-understood. By that I mean: out of all the female pirates in history — and there have been many — she has captured the popular imagination the most, and so most people might have heard of her and her colleague Mary Reade over others. But her history has been built by sensationalist and sexist accounts. Though not from The Bahamas, she married a sailor and left behind her life of means to move to Nassau. There, she fell in love with the pirate Calico Jack and became part of the Republic of Pirates. She had a close friendship, or perhaps more, with fellow female pirate Mary Reade. They were captured and tried in Jamaica, where they were to be hanged. Mary died in jail; no records exist of Anne’s fate. There are many embellishments to this story, many theories, and so much unknown. In popular culture she is portrayed so embarrassingly through the male gaze, I find so much of it rather unimaginative and lazy. I just wanted to make

Sonia Farmer: Interrogating

room for possibility, to let the unknown be. I wanted to give her the benefit of curiosity and complexity, because so many historical accounts of women are not afforded that. I am excited that you say the book raises “questions” because that was my aim — to interrogate and explore these accounts out in the open, without providing answers.

I first heard about Anne Bonny through history class in high school — probably a line highlighting her and Mary with other figures around during the Golden Age of Piracy such as Blackbeard and Calico Jack. We study piracy in Bahamian history because The Bahamas was a pirate haven for many years. This was partly due to our geography & topography — we couldn’t sustain sugarcane or cotton monocrops at the level desired, our archipelago is fragmented and hard to govern, and our shallow waters contain hidden coral that will wreck ships unless you know what you’re doing, so no one would pursue pirate ships that retreated into these waters for fear of wrecking. Even our national crest, once our first Royal Governor Woodes Rodgers had restored British rule in the 1700s, literally included the phrase “expel pirates, restore commerce” and we used that all the way up until our independence from Britain in 1973, at which point we introduced a new crest. There are Bahamians alive today who grew up internalising that crest. I use the phrase “internalising” because I think we carry a kind of shame that we were overrun by pirates at some point in our history — largely because eradicating pirates and restoring commerce (power) literally kicked off the idealised, sanitised, curated, and romanticised paradise narrative we market today. I’m very intrigued by how that shame is at odds with the sensationalised view of pirates in the modern imagination — and how, in turn, that sensationalised view hardly very seriously examines the radical power dynamics that were at play during the golden age of piracy, and their implications. So my interest in Anne Bonny includes an interest in her positionality during this historical moment, as a woman.

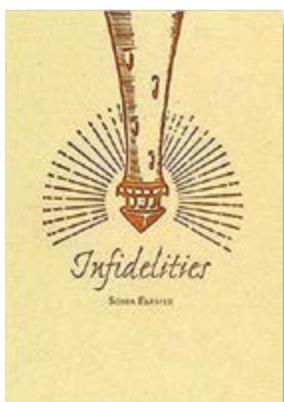
There are so many references to fire and flames in this book! What do you think these repeated references are all about?

While writing this collection and completing my final year of school in New York, I was writing my way home while also questioning

my commitment to and love for this home. Adding to this was a relationship with a man in New York that I could feel myself outgrowing because I would not adhere to the one-dimensional expectations he had for me (and all women). I think he could feel me leaving which created this sort of love triangle between him, my home in the Caribbean, and myself. Ultimately, both choices carry their abuse. It is not easy to choose to live in paradise. I think that this driving question I had for Anne Bonny, “how do women’s stories not belong to them?”, made me think about the ways I had been portrayed or idealised by my significant others — that I exist with multiple identities in multiple imaginations like she does — and, at the same time, that my home undergoes this same kind of idealisation as paradise and existing as multiple realities for multiple people. These three things intersected in the book through repeated imagery of fire, especially the “fire” of an uncontrolled willful woman; fire as a means to live, to survive, a part of advancing civilization; and fire also as a means to destroy, a tool of violence, of erasure, or starting anew.

You have written a series of poems about one character, which is always interesting. However, there are a few other poems that are not directly related to the primary subject in the book. How did you make the decision as to the other poems to fill out the collection?

I think there are three main voices or stories in the book: Anne Bonny, told in third person in the form of a prose poem which came from my research and exploration; a sort of contemporary narrator in a free verse form which concerns itself with the subject matter of belonging to person and place as a woman and how that adds or takes away from her identity; and a third narrative about the sea monster whose titles announce themselves passive aggressively. The sea monster comes from that side of research into seafaring mythology — how sea monsters and myths are gendered, sexualised, and distorted extensions of the male psyche upon which to place superstition or blame. Female sea monsters are often shapeshifters, and shapeshifters are terrifying because they cannot be pinned down. I think Anne Bonny is a shapeshifter. Actually I think all women are. So I wanted to use the sea monster to create room for ugliness and messiness in the female identity — something that

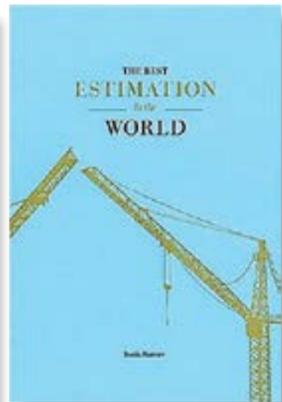


is real, and also imagined at the same time, and weaponised. It was the final voice that I clarified, and I see it functioning as an intersection between the other two narratives.

One of the things that strike me about this collection is the overall absence of enslaved people in *Infidelities*, but for a slave woman being murdered by Bonny. Why does this murder happen and why are the enslaved generally missing from the narrative?

The way I approached making these poems about Anne Bonny was to take a “myth” about her life and explore it — perhaps putting it into the narrative, or presenting it as an option, or subverting it. In one particular poem, I examine two myths about her — that she beat a suitor off after his advances and also that she stabbed a servant girl (who I imagine was a slave because of a plantation). I paired these things together because they both are presented as evidence of her “violent” past (her red hair comes into it, too, you know those feisty redheads; it’s biological). I find these myths curious. Did she beat off a suitor, or did she beat off a rapist? Was she really so cruel as to stab a servant girl? What leads someone to do the things they do? I explore their not to rationalise or exonerate them, but just to present them, to build up this person in the narrative that exists to see how much it makes sense.

In this poem, I imagine that Anne is being watched by the slave girl after the beating of a “suitor”, a punishment of confinement, let’s say, but that by stabbing the girl, she is able to escape into town and meet her future husband, the sailor James Bonny. So she stabs the servant girl for the same reason she beats the suitor: to escape confinement — not just physical confinement, but also the expectations of



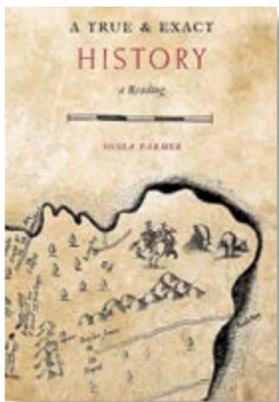
her gender and class, that she will have to endure arranged marriage just as her mother and grandmother did. So she escapes and marries a sailor, who was lower than her station, and they head to Nassau — that is how she leaves the Carolinas and her father behind. But I didn’t want the slave girl to be just a myth in the story of Anne Bonny, that’s why I end the poem with her story and her history. Because as much as Anne feels confined by her gender, she is not confined by her race — that is why her “white hand” is mentioned at the end, holding the knife. She escapes confinement and at the same time perpetuates a longstanding history of confinement and violence against black bodies. I didn’t have a lot of room to explore the enslaved in this collection as I wanted to focus it on Anne Bonny and her experience is primarily white (even though I read some fascinating insight into the democratic space of the pirate vessel for all bodies on board), but this poem presented an opportunity for a narrative that was not hers to reverberate.

By the time a reader comes to *A True & Exact History* it is evident that history in fact is your primary muse so far, specifically the history of the Bahamas. Why are you so fascinated by history in general and the history of your country (and region) in particular? What does history have to offer to our digital lives today?

The best history teachers make you question whose experience gets documented, who is doing the documenting, and who the enduring documentation or narrative serves. I had an excellent history teacher, Allan Murray — to whom *Infidelities* is dedicated — who built these questions into our study as best he could, considering the restrictions of the syllabus and national exam demands. He assigned these writing exercises called “empathy” exercises where



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we would write first-person accounts of our experiences in a specific time in history, for example, a Jewish person living in 1939 Germany. I would turn in novels when he wanted two pages. This is why *Infidelities* is dedicated to him, because the three years I spent in his class taught me as a historian to use my humanity and empathy to read between the lines of an academic overview of the dates, numbers, places, and people that endure. He taught me the importance of research for my creative projects, and examining such research carefully. And even though he would gripe about the novel I turned in, he was very encouraging in his own way.

I don’t feel Bahamians have a real sense of actual Bahamian history in terms of post-1973 Independence. What we are taught is a history of our oppression and then our freedom from it, and that sort of victory story needs to end on that high note, so we stop at independence. I wonder if it is the same in other Caribbean nations? Where do we “stop” history, and why do we teach that history “stops” somewhere? Who does that serve? What about facing that oppression still exists and informs the way we live and interact? What about facing that history is not linear and fixed and focused on one space alone but rather dispersive and intersectional and ongoing? Whose voices are privileged and whose are silenced? What gets to endure?

A True & Exact History is fascinating in so far as your stated aim is “a poetic erasure of Richard Ligon’s *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* (1657)”. Firstly, what surprised or disturbed you about Ligon’s book? Secondly, what do you mean by your chapbook being “a poetic erasure” of the Ligon’s book and why would that be important to do?

I encountered Ligon’s book

during an artist residency at Fresh Milk in Barbados in early 2016. I went with the intention of working on the poems for *The Best Estimation in the World* but when the Founder of Fresh Milk, Annalee Davis, heard about my interests, she somehow knew to pull Ligon’s text for me to review from their Colleen Lewis Reading Room.

Ligon’s book is, as you say, surprising and disturbing. And somehow delightful, too. He is a very charming narrator; I found myself surprised by the poetic language he used freely in this “historical” document. It’s not really an historical document though, not in the way it promises to be with a title like *A True & Exact History* — it’s a travelogue, a natural history, a business manual even, and contains his own botanical drawings, architectural drawings and even a topological map — and I think that is what I enjoyed most about the book, the way it resists categorisation. But here is this white man who calls his three years or so of lived experience in this place “a true and exact history”; that is telling. And because Ligon arrives to Barbados during a historically significant time as the sugar plantation industry was reaching full swing, totally transforming the island socially, politically, financially, and physically, his observations endure as one of the few remaining first-person accounts of that time.

An erasure is the act of removing pieces of text from an existing text to form a new text. I align erasure with my artistic philosophy of excavation of the palimpsest of paradise — if paradise is a space of erasure, what happens when we erase and disrupt the dominant, colonial narrative, what reveals itself in the things we chose to leave behind? What does that tell us about history, and how does that inform our present? Throughout the poem, we find references to language being weaponised, treasured, protected. That is an intentional and central theme that I hope leads the reader to question the power of language in the creation of history.

Now let’s talk a little about you. Where you were born, what your childhood was like, what schools you attended both on and off the island of Nassau? When did you realise that you were both a writer and a visual artist?

I was born in the city of Nassau in The Bahamas. My parents hail from other places in the world, but grew up and met in Nassau.

So, for my entire childhood and young adult life, I lived here and went to the same local school that many of my family members attended. I was very lucky to be born to these parents, John and Pia, because they always encouraged my creativity and love for books. I remember when we would visit Florida occasionally, I was more interested in visiting Barnes & Noble than Disneyland — we would travel with an empty suitcase so dad and I could fill it with books. They didn’t spend money on too many frivolous toys or clothes, but would buy literally any book or art supply I wanted. I read so much, thanks to them. I remember at a young age writing and illustrating poems and folding them into crude books with staples as gifts to them, then later getting really into comic strips like *Archie*, *Garfield* and *Calvin & Hobbes*, and then later manga comics, so I think I always found that intersection between storytelling and illustration in some sort of book form very compelling, and it was treasured and encouraged.

In general they taught me that art was valuable to society and culture — my mother sang professionally in addition to her day job, she even starred in a Jimmy Buffet play here for a stint, winning out a part over Broadway professionals, and she also took me to plays and exhibitions and encouraged extracurricular interests like school plays, photography club, helped me enter art contests, etc. To them, art was a valid way to make a living or to make part of your life somehow, so they supported my desire to study creative writing at the college level.

I applied to Pratt Institute because I wanted to live in New York City, which felt like the physical and ideological opposite of suffocating island life, but also because I could study writing at an art school so that I could maybe get back in touch with the visual arts which I had let fall away during the academically-demanding GCSE years. Pratt’s writing programme also promised not to be entirely creative-writing centred, providing a BFA in “Writing for Performance, Publication & Media” and I had a budding interest in the journalism field. I actually did not care to write creatively at the time. Especially about home. But it turned out Partt’s programme was centred on the creative writing workshop. And that was good because it turned out I did want to write creatively and got to do

that guided by some excellent teachers and a brilliant cohort.

Sometime in my third year, things became clarified: I took two classes: “Introduction to Book Arts” with Miriam Schaeer and “The Tiny Presses Shall Inherit the Earth” with Ryan Murphy. I had no idea that my love for writing and visual art could come together in this way, that books could be part of the storytelling experience, that I could control every aspect of my narrative as writer and maker — that I could publish my own work and other work I liked. From there I took as many remaining electives as I could in printmaking since I could use those techniques in making books. I sought internship opportunities with paper mills, book artists, and letterpress printers, and I volunteered with local presses in Brooklyn. I also made up a press name: Poinciana Press (later becoming Poinciana Paper Press). Since that time, I have aimed to try and learn as much as I can about designing and making books so that I can build a press model that works for my community.

I moved back home in 2010, and made books in between jobs, on and off for five years. As much as I could I travelled to take workshops and learn more about the craft, and I collaborated with the writing and art communities on various projects. But I still felt a little bit like a fraud — my skills were not meeting my standards. After giving a couple of years of my life to a kind of traumatising job in the hospitality industry — during which time I did not advance my creative practice or press mission at all — I took this job’s bankruptcy as a sign to get my life together and decided to finally pursue my craft at the graduate level. I just finished up a three-year MFA in Book Arts at the University of Iowa, some of the most transformative years of my personal, professional, and creative life so far. My thesis focused on building a publishing model for Poinciana Paper Press, which I plan to implement now that I am back in Nassau (again).

In the poem “Threats, Practices And Offerings Of The Highest Standards” from your most recent collection *The Best Estimation in the World* (2019) the reader is told:

the Chinese government sponsored the road costume this feathered infrastructure development

but we all agreed to lie

who is it then selling all that exists in the country.

Very powerful words! What do you as the writer think about the narrator’s observations?

The poem is a direct reference to China’s investment in vulnerable developing countries — particularly in the Caribbean and in Africa — through infrastructure loans, which concern me because of the debt we incur to them as a developing country both financially and diplomatically. We’ve always been in debt to someone, historically. But what I have observed in my lifetime was how powerless we are as a nation in the grand scheme of these foreign powers and investments in our country, and how little we reap the benefits, but how much we bear the consequences. As I write this, another resort destination development downtown is nearing completion under the same work agreements of Chinese funding and labour. We just keep letting them do this to us. What choice do we have? I don’t know. It’s the question the poem asks when it shows us how complicit we are in this exchange. The reader has to answer the question for themselves.

The Gymnast & Other Positions is Jacqueline Bishop’s most recent book, which was awarded the 2016 OCM Bocas Award in Non-Fiction. Bishop, an associate professor at New York University, is also the author of *My Mother Who Is Me: Life Stories from Jamaican Women in New York and Writers Who Paint/Painters Who Write: Three Jamaican Artists*. She was a 2008-2009 Fulbright Fellow to Morocco, and the 2009-2010 UNESCO/Fulbright Fellow.

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