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An Interview with Shara McCallum

Shara McCallum is Jamaican-American and the author of five books of poetry published in the US and UK, most recently *Madwoman* (2017), which won the 2018 OCM Bocas Prize in the Poetry category and is currently short-listed for the overall 2018 Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature. Her work has been widely published in the US, the Caribbean, and Europe, and has been translated into several languages. In addition, McCallum has received recognition such as a Witter Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress and an NEA Poetry Fellowship. She lives in Pennsylvania and teaches creative writing and literature at Penn State University. In February 2018, she visited SUNY Geneseo to read poems from *Madwoman*.

Gandy Dancer: It becomes clear that the concept of memory is important to *Madwoman* as early as its epigraph. What role has memory played for you in your development as a writer?

Shara McCallum: Memory has long been a driving force for me as a writer. I not only build poems (and essays) from and out of memories, but am interested in how writing itself becomes an act of memorializing—the dead, the past, all that is seemingly lost but which language tries to rescue from oblivion.

GD: This collection also explores what it means to be a woman and a mother, and what it means to use these as labels. At what point do you remember feeling comfortable with the label of “mother,” and has this, in turn, affected your writing? The piece “Now I’m a Mother” first comes to my mind in re-

gards to this, as there definitely seems to be a clear shift in attitude of how the speaker uses the word.

SM: I don't think I've ever felt *uncomfortable* with the title "Mother." If anything—and this is what I think the poem you mention explores—I have been uneasy with the roles I was supposed to play as a "mother" once I became one, with the often one-dimensional notions in our culture about "motherhood," and with the frequently unreasonable demands placed on women when we become mothers, both by others and by ourselves. I hope the poem's humor is as much a take-away as any of its potential critiques, and that it's clear I'm poking fun at myself as much as at anyone or anything else. I enjoyed writing the poem a lot, despite its serious underbelly, because it pushed me toward using satire, irony, and dark humor—tones and registers I don't work in often enough as a poet, I sometimes think.

GD: You make use of an array of forms in this collection. Staying with "Now I'm a Mother," why, for instance, did you chose to make use of and rework the ghazal form?

SM: I love that particular form, first and foremost, but I always think in terms of form when I'm writing. The "line" is the most basic element of form in a poem—so any structuring of language to me is form. When poems arrive in recognizable forms, "fixed" or "traditional" forms, this is not always entirely a conscious decision, any more than my writing in lines or sentences is entirely conscious. They arrive through habits of reading and practice often ahead of my own conscious recognition of them. I find poems suggest their forms, the shapes they want to take, early on to me in the drafting process. But why this poem suggested itself to me as a ghazal is harder to answer, exactly. I think it might be because the phrase "now I'm a mother" came to me in the first draft and I thought it worth repeating. I'd have to look back at my notebooks, though, to be sure I'm remembering this correctly and not just making this up now! With the ghazal, what I can say with certainty is that I love the tension in the form between continuity and discontinuity. The tight refrains create a lot of cohesion in the poem, on the level of sound, image, and idea. But because the couplets are self-contained and should be able to be moved around (with the exception of the first and last for reasons dictated by the form), when you are working in the ghazal it feels like casting a fishing line—out toward the water and back again, out and back like that.

GD: We loved seeing the knotted string-like illustrations that wind throughout the book. They're as visually pleasing as they are enticing, and also kind of function as a force that helps to hold the poems together. Could you speak a little to the thinking behind this aesthetic choice?

SM: Thanks for noticing this. The designer for the book, Pamela Mackay, gets all the credit for the image you see on the cover (she's responsible for

the whole of the book design for the Alice James edition, in fact). The cover image that contains the “knotted string” you noted is carried throughout the book. My role in regard to this book’s design was twofold but limited and part of a collaborative process, as I’ll try to explain here. First, unlike my previous books which all contain a reproduction of a painting on their covers, I asked the editors at Alice James Books if Pamela would come up with a cover image for the collection based solely on the title (*Madwoman*), the poems, and that would incorporate the color red. They and Pamela readily agreed, and Pamela came up with two different cover images for us to select from. When the image that contained the scribble or “knotted string” as you call it (I like that) was chosen as the cover by the editors—and I had input too on this—I then asked if it could run in some iteration throughout the collection on particular pages. I loved the idea that the “string” functions as a unifying element, as you mention, but also that it manifests “madness” in a visual manner. It might be worth saying here too that I loved the other of Pamela’s potential cover designs/images very much and was able to procure it for the UK edition of the book (published by Peepal Tree Press in England). That cover image is quite different, so I wasn’t able to use a piece of it throughout the UK edition of the book in the same leitmotif manner as the Alice James edition made a refrain of the “thread” in that cover. But I mention this all to say how much I think book design is itself an art and that I particularly admire the work of this artist, Pamela Mackay, who had also worked on my previous book with Alice James as the book designer for that one too. Here’s the link to the UK edition if you want to see her other cover image, for comparison: <http://www.peepaltreepress.com/books/madwoman>

GD: When you came to read at our school, we had the pleasure of experiencing what a dynamic and engaging reader you are. As you are writing and revising, do you think about how you will eventually read or perform a piece? Does this ever play a part in your writing process?

SM: I read my poems aloud obsessively when I revise them, so in that sense I am already thinking of them as existing in the ear. I don’t think about “performance” when I write, however, which is often surprising to people to hear. Rather, I think of how to get on the page features of orality and aurality I believe poems demand. I work to shape diction, syntax, and line so the voice of the poem and the poem’s music can be audible when I am absent. As someone who practiced arts rooted in performance (singing, dancing, acting) a long time ago, the distinction between “performance” and “performativity” matters to me. I want my poems very much to contain musicality, voice, attitude—all things I attribute to “orality” and “performativity”—but to do this through language, not to depend upon the gestures of the body, on facial cues, or the inflection of the human voice, all of which are the more rightful registers to me of “performance.” I hope that distinction makes sense. Obvi-

ously when I am reading poems aloud to an audience, though, I am aware that my vocal inflections and body language are emphasizing the tones and coloring of meaning and music I hear in my mind's ear as the poet. I also would guess that my strong attraction as a poet to the dramatic monologue (or the "persona poem" as its more commonly referred now) is likely influenced by my practice of drama at one time. So even while I think it's useful to make the distinction between "performance" and "performativity" when I'm writing, I don't hold these to be entirely separate spheres of influence when I'm giving readings or even in directing me toward the modes I work in as a poet.

GD: I remember you mentioning that Madwoman has taken the form of many female voices for you. In the collection, we get to see her depicted in some of these roles—for instance, in "Madwoman as Rasta Medusa." How much do you feel that you relate to her (to them?) on a personal level? Have you been drawing inspiration from her for a while?

SM: I think Madwoman in this collection is me and not me, at the same time. I wrote this book to try to answer your very question for myself: who is she to me? I felt at the outset of writing the poems that the Madwoman is often that figure we see at the margins of stories and history, the self we place outside of ourselves, individually and collectively. In wanting to understand her more, I had to invite her in. And in doing so, I came away feeling I could not distinguish between where she ended and I began, or vice versa. If that sounds confusing, what I mean is that I came to see while writing this book just how much she is personal, mythological, historical, political, cultural, literary all at the same time, in these poems and in my own experience as a woman, a woman of color, and an immigrant whose narratives of self have often felt not entirely of my own making.

GD: Do you feel that it's unavoidable for certain aspects of our identity to leak into our writing, both in terms of content and form? For instance, being a woman, being biracial, or being a child of immigrant caretakers.

SM: I think I unwittingly answered this above. Yes and yes and yes is my resounding answer. And why would we want to avoid ourselves, if we can do that even, when we write? This is the question I would ask in return, to you and any other younger writer embarking now. I hope your own answers will lead you toward the kind of poems you are meant to write.

Thank you for your thoughtful readings of these poems and your good questions here.