

# with poet Opal Palmer Adisa

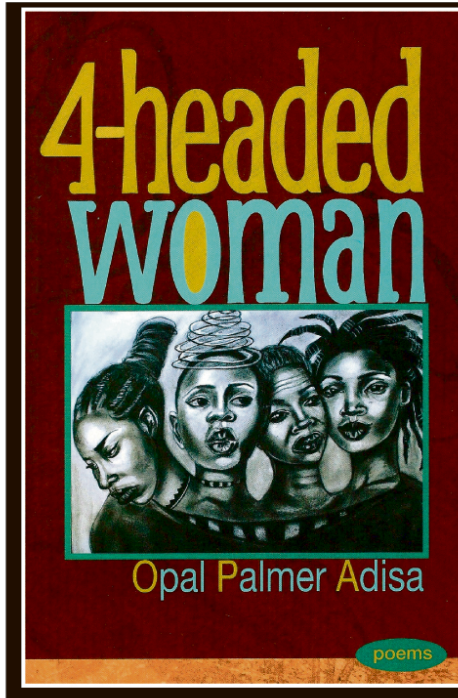
as so often our lives are, at any moment, rooted in all three zones. Anyway, I am/was experimenting with a narrative form that dances between first person and collective, which includes reader so that one is not merely a "reader," but one is also reading/narrating one's own story. Perhaps my reach is too ambitious and, too, I need to continue my search, my exploring of how to do this more effectively, seamlessly.

**One of the things that struck me while reading your poems is the demands of motherhood on your life as a writer. Do you care to comment further on this?**

I am a mother to three wonderful children - well, young adults - and we are very close and raised each other, and even though they are all independent, and live in Paris, southern and northern California, respectively, I have weekly, sometimes daily conversations with all three, who will still say, "Mommy, are you listening to me?", who want my undivided attention, and we talk about everything under the sun from the intimate to the political - and it has always been like this, and then I also have a group of students from over the years, a few from the mid-Eighties who call me their mother and their children call me grandmother, and they also call and need to talk and want me to listen, and beg for advice... Yemoja sits on my head. Motherhood in all its forms has been and remains a big part of my life and does demand and infringe on my time.

**I have to say I found the section "Graffiti Series" quite breathtaking. This is such a universal female experience, women talking to women, on bathroom walls. Can you explain to our readers how this series of poems came about and what you hope both women and men will get from this series of poems?**

First, I have to say I have sneaked into a few men's restrooms, but the writing there did not appear as detailed and revealing as in the women's. This idea of these poems is old, well, since the Eighties when I was teaching at San Francisco State University and was swept away by the writings in the restroom, and thought about making a film, which I never did. Then I began copying some of what was written in my notebook. Later, late-Eighties, through the Nineties, while teaching at UC Berkeley, I began drafting poems based on some of the writings. I wrote a one-woman play, which I performed, and which I later expanded based on bathroom graffiti and which is the last poetic play in the collection. As I was writing these I imagined them being performed around college campuses, like the Vagina Monologues. I am still hoping



someone will be interested in doing a video with the poems. I was excited to learn last year when I was invited to the University of Puerto Rico to share my work that a student there either had done or was working on her MFA thesis on bathroom graffiti.

We tend to dismiss or underestimate the need for public discourse; that everyone wants/needs to be heard, that there are things women and men can discuss publicly, anonymously, that they don't think they can privately, even with their most trusted friends. Bathroom and other graffiti sites create safe spaces for people to express their ideas without having to face the judgment, which is why the poems I included have multiple perspectives on the controversial issues.

**You describe the last poem in your collection as "a poetic performance piece". I think it would be better described as a tour-de-force or a pièce de résistance myself. Still, I found myself wondering, what made this work a poem instead of a play?**

In the past I have taught a graduate course entitled Mixed Genre, and my premise is: these different genres are imposed, artificially, and sometimes are unnecessary, and I insist that students disband and collapse these boundaries. Two of the texts I use when I teach this course are: Jean Toomer's *Cane*, which I love, love, love, and which was instrumental in setting me on the writing path, and Isabel Allende's *Aphrodite*. The genesis of the play began as a series of poems that I then fused with "dialogue." It is ostensibly a prose poem in

dramatic form.

**Finally, I know that in addition to being a writer you also have a practice of photography. Can you talk a little bit about your photographic works? What you find, for example, your main preoccupations in photography are? Is this similar to your writing preoccupations? I also had the thought as I read your bathroom graffiti piece that photographs of what is written in women's bathrooms could make a really interesting photography project in and of itself, any chance of this?**

Let me begin by saying I did take a number of photos of the graffiti in the bathrooms but now cannot find them with my moves and transitory life these last five years, consolidating, shedding and literally having stuff in three different locations... What is where, I cannot say and ownership/possession is becoming less important. Okay, back to your question. I would say I have been seriously photographing since the mid-Eighties and I still love people and faces. I have at least three books I want to do on Jamaica: one for children, entitled *Our Boonoonoos Children*. (I have such a vast collection of children from all over Jamaica, no permissions, but such sweet shots... One on Rastafarians, from Bingis I attended, one just of market place and people.)

Then there are several books I could do of Brazil, my three trips, and living there for three months, same of Egypt, Spain, Morocco, Cuba, and Trinidad, amazing images of children, Carnival as well as Easter Sunday, also of Haiti, which I am working on now, and have been since the 2012 earthquake, and now too St Croix. I love candid faces, gestures, landscape, and since the early Nineties, I've been experimenting with words and images and more recently, changing the texture in photo-shop.

Plus, for the last three years I have been curating an annual Black History Exhibition in St Croix, which always includes photography.

I need a patron and assistance to complete these projects, and I will take a chauffeur and a housekeeper, too! I have been fortunate that my photos have been exhibited and a few published in journals, but I cannot keep up with my writing and mothering and teaching to get the photos out more, which is what I would like to do.

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 Excerpt from *4-Headed Woman* (Tia Chucha), by Opal Palmer Adisa (c) 2013. Published here with the author's permission.

## 4-Headed Woman

somewhere  
 in the midst  
 of everything  
 buried between the garbage of roles  
 hidden among  
 the rubble of demands  
 is a headless life  
 probably my own  
 has anyone seen or  
 turned it into  
 the lost and found department  
 perhaps it was snatched  
 and gagged  
 by kidnapers  
 holding out for ransom  
 maybe  
 a pick-pocketeer  
 grabbed it  
 assuming value  
 can do the mothering bit  
 but cannot do the wifing  
 poems must be written  
 who decides what's easier  
 what falls by the way  
 in my imagings  
 me was always  
 at the centre  
 activities swirled  
 around me  
 not tornadic  
 me helter-skelter  
 clutching at air  
 this is my life  
 after all

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 Opal Palmer Adisa was born in 1954 in Jamaica, where she attended school. She is an award-winning poet, novelist, performance artist and educator who has been anthologised in over 100 publications. In 1970 she went to study at Hunter College in New York, and in 1979 moved to the San Francisco Bay area to pursue an MA in creative writing. Adisa has two master's degrees from San Francisco State University, and a PhD from the University of California at Berkeley. Her poetry collections include *I Name Me Name*, *Eros Muse*, *Caribbean Passion*, and *Tamarind and Mango Women*.

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 Jacqueline Bishop's first novel is *The River's Song*. She is also the author of two collections of poems, *Fauna* and *Snapshots from Istanbul*. Her non-fiction books are *My Mother Who Is Me: Life Stories from Jamaican Women in New York* and *Writers Who Paint/Painters Who Write: Three Jamaican Artists*. An accomplished visual artist with exhibitions in Belgium, Morocco, USA and Italy, she was a 2008-2009 Fulbright Fellow to Morocco; the 2009-2010 UNESCO/Fulbright Fellow; and is a full-time Master Teacher in the Liberal Studies Programme at New York University.