

ELEVENTH CARICOM TRIENNIAL AWARD FOR WOMEN
2014

Acceptance Speech

At

The 35th Session of The Heads of Government Meeting

CARICOM

Antigua and Barbuda

Tuesday, July 1, 2014

MARION BETHEL

Nassau, Bahamas

Her Excellency Dame Louise Lake-Tack, Governor General of Antigua and Barbuda

Hon. Gaston Browne, Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda and Chairman of the Caribbean Community

Other Heads of State and Government of the Caribbean Community

Heads of Delegations of Member States and Associate Members of CARICOM

Secretary-General of the Caribbean Community

Other Heads of Regional and International Organisations

Members of Parliament of Antigua and Barbuda and other CARICOM Member Countries

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen

Members of the Media

And last, but not least, my beloved family who is here to share in this wonderful celebration with me: my husband, Alfred Sears, my daughters, Ife and Nia, my siblings, Justice Rubie Nottage, Dr. Pamela Etuk, Dr. Paulette Bethel, Owen Bethel and my niece, Kenia Nottage.

A good afternoon to everyone.

I commence with a heartfelt recognition of the plight of the young high-school girls of Chibok, Borno State, abducted in April of this year, the two teenaged Indian girls raped and hanged in Uttar Pradesh in May and the 25 year old pregnant Pakistani woman stoned to death in May for marrying against her family's wishes. The poem of Mahadai Das of Guyana, *My Finer Steel Will Grow*, aptly describes despair and hope as we confront the issue of gender-based violence. I will read the poem in order to keep the memory of the girls and this young woman alive.

My Finer Steel Will Grow

My heavens are hailing upward tonight.

The felled star is like a dagger
stuck deep in my heart. Anon. I am gone.
There is no place to rest
my accidental head.
It is a dog's life. Today there are many bones.
Yesterday there were too many.
The common fleas irritate my hairy nape.
My legs are poles the world
cannot keep upright – they
dare not fall though
my paws trace out this path
of death too often that I smell.
My snaky hunger obsesses,
my red-eye rage,
apoplectic, twists my growling gut.
Yet
the day will come when the sun
will shine its brazen face
upon my heart, gone dark
like night and rotted blood.
I will drown my fleas or the river

choke me to death. They pound
like a carpenter gone
berserk, hammering
rains the bullets
on my back.

Whilst the hammering arm
in rhythmic falter flags,
my finer steel will grow.
My heaven.

It is with profound gratitude and thankfulness that I accept this Eleventh CARICOM Triennial Award for Women. It is an award that speaks to CARICOM's highest aspirations for women in the Caribbean and, indeed, the world – that for all the violence, cruelty, inequity and injustice that women face regionally and globally, this is not our destiny. Women's creativity, imagination and perseverance as anchored in our social agency, political actions and work do matter for they are the foundation of our reach towards equity, social justice and peace.

I express my profound thanks to the Government of The Bahamas and, in particular, the Hon. Melanie Griffin, the Minister of Social Services of The Bahamas and Ms. Christine Campbell of the Bureau of Women's Affairs for nominating me and the Regional Selection Sub-Committee and the Council on Human and Social Development of CARICOM for selecting me to be the recipient of this Eleventh Triennial Award for Women.

I am cognizant that this honour is one that is coveted by Caribbean women, particularly in the academy. I am fully aware that there are many women, within and outside of academia – women who are on the front lines of the pursuit of gender justice; women who hold high office in regional and international organisations; women who work tirelessly in crisis centres to relieve suffering; women who are only known to those whom they help; women who are committed to both the creative arts and political activism - who are entirely deserving of this award. I am, therefore, humbled by this honour. While the award is often given

for a lifetime of excellent work, I consider myself somewhere in the middle of this journey, not the end.

I am honoured to join a most distinguished group of Caribbean women who have preceded me. Over the years I have interacted with some of these women such as Dr. Peggy Antrobus, Dr. Joceylin Massiah, Dr. Rhoda Reddock and Dr. Eudine Barriteau in advancing the cause of women, all of whom have forwarded to me their good wishes. Further, I am pleased to say that this award, not well known in The Bahamas, has now kindled the interest of many young and older Bahamian women.

At this point I would like to express my deepest thanks to the Caribbean Association of Feminist Research and Action based in Trinidad & Tobago and DAWN International for their support of our work on behalf of women in The Bahamas especially during the years 1986 to 1996.

On visiting the CARICOM website page on the Triennial Award for Women, I was hugely surprised to read the following quote by

Robert Love from the **Jamaica Advocate**, 1895: “The race rises as its women rise. They are the true standard of its elevation”. It was not the significance of the quote that intrigued me, but that the words of Dr. Joseph Robert Love, a Bahamian by birth and socialization, were the caption for this CARICOM Triennial award. I wondered if the wider Caribbean Community knew that this great Pan-Africanist, medical doctor, missionary and priest was, in fact, a Bahamian. But I’m getting ahead of myself here because the truth is that we as Bahamians do not yet know and appreciate fully the stature of Robert Love, his significant work not only in The Bahamas but Jamaica, Haiti and the Caribbean diaspora.

In short, Dr. Love established a significant career as a social reformer, politician and radical journalist in Jamaica in the 1890s. He founded the **Jamaica Advocate**, a Pan–Africanist newspaper. Dr. Love later became a primary mentor and friend to Marcus Garvey helping to foster Garvey’s consciousness of Africa and the ideas of Pan-Africanism. That Dr. Love was proposed to be recognised as one of the

national heroes of Jamaica speaks of the impact of his work there. That Dr. Love remains an unrecognised national hero in The Bahamas and that his name and work are not part of the vocabulary of our students speak of our collective inattention to the real business of nation building and regional engagement.

But this story of Robert Love and Marcus Garvey comes full circle for me personally. My father was named Marcus in honour of Garvey. My grandfather, Reuben Bethel, was one of the principal founders of the Garvey Movement and the Universal Negro Improvement Association in The Bahamas (UNIA). In November 1927 Garvey arrived in The Bahamas, visited the Universal Negro Improvement Association's office on Lewis St. in Grant's Town and then gave a resounding speech to hundreds of Bahamians on the Southern Recreation Ground in Grant's Town.

Grant's Town was where Robert Love was born, attended St. Agnes Church, spent his formative years and worked as a teacher. Grant's Town was also the bedrock community of several lodges and

other benevolent societies. Many Bahamians of Grant's Town proudly affirm their direct ancestry to liberated Yoruba Africans. This is the same community in which I attended preparatory and primary school; spent Saturday mornings in the Southern Public Library reading with the librarian, Ms. Lillian Coakley; went to the movies at the Capitol cinema with my siblings; and accompanied by my father or mother deposited my shillings and pence, mostly pence, in the People's Penny Savings Bank, the first and only black owned bank in The Bahamas.

And as if these references to Grant's Town were not enough to give a sense of a community rich in human and cultural capital, this is the community in which the Women's Suffrage Movement of The Bahamas was conceived and launched in 1948. The suffragist leaders Mary Ingraham, Mabel Walker, Althea Mortimer, Mildred Donaldson, Dame Dr. Doris Johnson all lived in the Grants Town and the adjacent Bain Town community of Nassau. Along with Georgiana Symonette and Eugenia Lockhart, two other leaders of the suffrage movement, all of these women were close friends and lodge sisters of my mother, Jane

Bethel, and my grandmothers, Frances Butler and Francine Bethel, who were also actively engaged in the suffrage for women.

On my return home from school in London in 1986, I immediately set about founding a women's feminist group called DAWN. One of its cultural objectives was the reclamation and affirmation of women's history in The Bahamas. At this time I read an article written by Kim Outten- Stubbs, an archivist, on the Women's Suffrage Movement in The Bahamas. I had not encountered such a coherent summary of this political movement before. It completely changed my inner compass settings. Later I read an essay by Ruth Bowe-Darville, an historian, who set the Women's Suffrage Movement squarely in the context of the Burma Road riots of 1942 and the Majority Rule Movement in The Bahamas. In these two papers, the Suffrage Movement was totally transformed from being a quaint anecdote and footnote in Bahamian history into an unassailable political landmark. I publicly thank both Kim Outten-Stubbs and Ruth Bowe- Darville along with Dr. Gail

Saunders whose research on women's history in The Bahamas is an invaluable resource.

I am also indebted to the members of DAWN Bahamas who in the latter part of 1986 diligently interviewed many women who participated in the Suffrage Movement. We were absolutely fortunate to have recorded their stories before their passing. These interviews were published throughout 1987 in the Nassau Guardian newspaper in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the suffrage for women.

During the 40s, 50s & 60s, in leading the charge for full enfranchisement of Bahamian women, the Suffrage Movement envisioned the right to vote as a portal to the expansion and extension of other human rights and civil, political and social rights in a democracy. The suffragists were deeply committed to the quest for freedom, as began by enslaved women such as Mary Prince and Kate Moss of The Bahamas. The heroic and tragic stories of these two enslaved women reached the doors of the Abolitionist Society of England.

The suffragists who were staunch leaders and members in lodges and other friendly societies were also deeply influenced by Garvey and the ideals of the Universal Negro Improvement Association.

In advancing the cause for the suffrage for women the leaders employed not only the principles established in the Magna Carta of 1215 and the clarion call of No Taxation without Representation but also the United Nations' instruments of the day such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the Convention on the Political Rights of Women of 1952. In their public education programmes, the suffragists made poignant references to the concept of self-determination as set forth in The Atlantic Charter of 1941 and Churchill's Iron Curtain speech (Sinews of Peace) of 1946, thus, laying a significant plank in the foundation for Constitutional reform, Majority Rule and political independence in The Bahamas.

In conclusion, I recognize that there are many pressing issues for the governments and civil society of our Caribbean Community. In standing resolutely and confidently on the platform of the Women's

Suffrage Movement of The Bahamas, and in the Caribbean spirit of advocacy of Robert Love, I believe that we must commit wholeheartedly to zero tolerance in regard to violence against women and girls and to the pursuit of a fifty percent representation of women in Parliament. In The Bahamas, in particular, we need to address the constitutional disabilities of women. The issue of self-determination for disabled persons and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender persons in our countries requires our serious attention and redress. I ask for social justice in regard to the statelessness of undocumented persons in our territories.

Further, the impact of climate change is also an urgent issue for small island states where populations live in coastal areas below five metres of altitude. Finally, I offer that the governments and civil society of the Caribbean Community re-consider our stance on the death penalty and abolish the same.

Distinguished leaders of the CARICOM Community, on behalf of Caribbean women regionally and in the diaspora, please accept my

heartfelt gratitude for granting me this distinguished award that I will deeply cherish throughout my continued service to our region.