



>>>POETRY MONTH FEATURE

‘White Caribbean’: An interview with biographer Michela Calderaro on the life and work of Jamaican poet Eliot Bliss

April is recognised internationally as Poetry Month. Inaugurated by the Academy of American Poets in 1996, it is the largest literary celebration in the world with schools, publishers, libraries, booksellers, and poets celebrating poetry's vital place in our culture. In recognition of the month, every Sunday in April **Bookends** will celebrate the work of established Jamaican poets and their work in a series of interviews by author/poet/visual artist Jacqueline Bishop.

This week, the featured poet is Eliot Bliss.

Michela, I want to really thank you for this book, *Spring Evenings in Sterling Street*, poems by the Jamaican writer Eliot Bliss. Since you argue so forcefully in your introduction about the need to know this writer, I guess my first question is: Who is Eliot Bliss?

First and foremost, I think she is an unquestionably talented writer whose books and poems shed light on a very interesting literary and geo-political period.

She was born Eileen Bliss in Kingston, in 1903, while her father, an army officer, was stationed there with the West India Regiment. She spent her childhood and adolescence between Jamaica and England — where she would be sent to study in convents. Growing up in such confined environments (even prodded by her family to marry a Kingston man) she understood she did not belong in any of them and that she must live her life somewhere else, where she could express herself without inhibitions.

London seemed to be the right choice. Admittedly it was a city where homosexuality was still considered a crime,

but it was also a place where she felt she could “be” what she wanted to be, and indeed she soon found herself playing a part in one of the most exciting literary scenes of the century.

She was also an uncompromising writer, who would never sell out.

A telling episode lies in the discussion she had with Vita Sackville-West, about cutting all references to some racist remarks made by the protagonist's mother in her novel *Luminous Isle*. The episode is reported by Eliot herself in the interview with Alexandra Pringle, which constitutes the introduction to the 1984 reprint of the book. The point I'm trying to make in my introduction, is that one of the reasons *Luminous Isle*'s sales did not go well, notwithstanding the support offered by Vita Sackville-West and her husband, Harold Nicolson, is that at the time of publication, the inclusion of such remarks was not viewed as strong criticism — as indeed it was — of the island white men's attitudes but, on the contrary, as an expression of Eliot's own racism.

It is interesting to note that though she says, in the same interview, that Sackville-West was “probably” right and that she should have taken away those remarks, she never even seriously considered doing that in the reprint.

She was indeed an extremely determined person. In Patricia Allan-Burns' (Bliss's companion) own words, one would do better than “cross swords” with Eliot: her eyes would freeze you on the spot. And nobody would make her change her mind. Probably she was born in the wrong century.

However, her inner self, I guess, will

always remain a mystery, no matter how much we search.

How did you come to know of, and subsequently start working on, Eliot Bliss? How long have you been working on her?

I read the novel *Saraband* (the second edition, published in 1986) by chance, in 1998, while browsing for books in some of my favourite second-hand bookstores in New York. My main interest at the time was Jean Rhys. I was studying the literary influences of Ford Madox Ford and Modernism on Rhys's work, and had the idea of using the semiotics of passion to analyse Rhys's work. Well, the moment I held *Saraband* in my hands the whole Rhys's project fell through. Here there was an author, a Rhys's contemporary, who was not only a friend of Rhys's, but born in the Caribbean! An author I had never heard of. It was all very exciting. Not to mention the fact that I didn't agree at all with the suggestion that her book was merely *bildungsroman*.

Little by little I found out that a couple of dissertations had been written about her novels, and that Evelyn O'Callaghan had mentioned Bliss's work in her book *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women*, (New York, St Martin's Press 1993). However, I still could not find anything about her *life*. I began to be very curious...

Can you explain the transformation from Eileen to Eliot Bliss?

She became Eliot when, after cutting her hair short, she could also finally cut the

umbilical cord that had tied her to a certain class and environment.

Together with cutting her hair came the decision to change her name from the very feminine Eileen to Eliot (from TS Eliot and George Eliot - a woman writing under a male name!).

Then she went on to live with her friend Susan, as they had planned while both had been studying at a Highgate convent. Susan was not lesbian, she actually married a couple of times, but Eliot was certainly taken by her, and she is very likely one of the girls in the poem “Spring Evenings in Sterling Street”.

In London she was at the centre of literary and lesbian circles. Anna Wickham introduced her to the literary salon headed by feminist activist Natalie Clifford Barney, an American writer who was openly lesbian, and through her she was introduced to the poetry of Natalie's lover, Renée Vivien.

It was not easy, and it cost her dearly. Part of her family did not understand, let alone appreciate, the change; some of her friends disappeared, neither accepting nor approving the way she was living in London. As Louie, in her *Saraband*, says, cutting her hair, she “had robbed herself of a characteristic feature of feminine abandonment” but with it she also acquired the freedom she so much needed in order to live.

You report finding dozens of unpublished works by Bliss. Can you give us a sense of what you found?

When I began my search for Bliss's

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writings, I didn't know she had written thousands of pages of poems, novels, even plays. In the beginning I was just puzzled because I couldn't find any essays or research papers that covered her works. It was only later on, when I could read her Diaries at McFarlin Library, in Tulsa, that I became aware of Bliss's extensive writings.

Patricia Allan-Burns and I found literally hundreds of poems, many loose pages with ideas for novels, the manuscript of a novel, brief notes, letters and diaries. Another manuscript of a novel was temporarily given to me for the purpose of my research by the Eliot Bliss Estate, and will be returned after I finish my work.

The poems that are published in *Spring Evenings In Sterling Street* are just a small selection of what we retrieved. All the poems we found are extremely interesting, but I had to make a choice, and it was not easy.

Also, there are still many works that are unaccounted for, more novels, poems, and practically all the plays she wrote. I hope that the publication of her poems, and this interview, will arouse interest in her works and that curators in some libraries, or private collectors, will find her manuscripts, maybe in some collections of other authors.

You report of Bliss that “[b]eing white, Creole and lesbian shaped her personality and her life”. How so?

What she describes in her novels and poems is a period

where being lesbian and poor, in addition to coming from the colonies, was seen as a disadvantage. Eliot was also extremely proud, would neither hide nor flaunt what she was. Still, we also must remember that homosexuality in England, not to mention Jamaica, was considered a crime to be severely punished. She needed to live her life the way she felt was right, but at the same time she needed to just *live*. Also, the European attitude towards those who returned from the colonies was not very welcoming. Creoles were often regarded as an embarrassment: sure, they were white, but they were ‘white Caribbean,’ that is, they were born in the colonies, meaning a sort of an outcast group - unless you were fortunate enough to live in Paris, where you were likely to be seen as exotic!

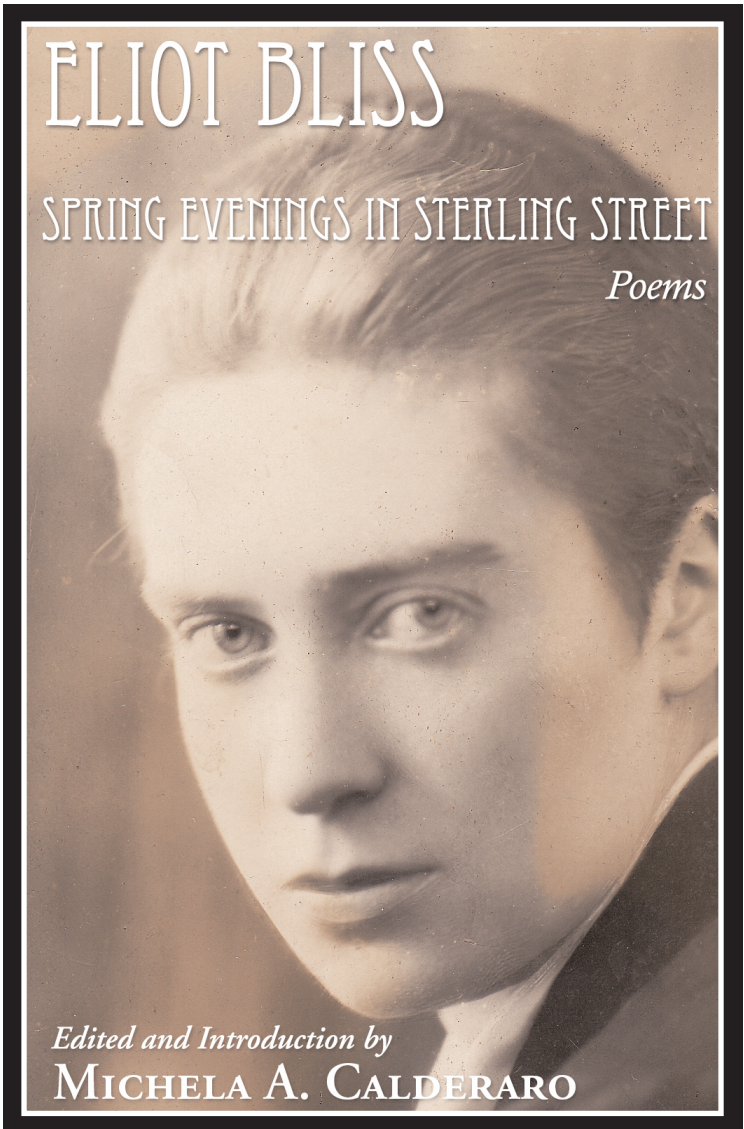
Also, in my introduction I talk of “Creole's double alienation,” borrowing Evelyn O'Callaghan's expression in *Woman Version*. It is a fitting definition, describing the difficulty of being stuck in the middle, of not really belonging to any group of people. Having lived in the island for generations, Creoles were considered not white enough by white aristocracy coming from Europe, and were despised by the black inhabitants who remembered very well the behaviour of slave owners.

A good example is how Tia in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* defines Antoinette as a “white cockroach.”

So Eliot felt alienated from the white people of the colony, with whom she shared little and had little in common, was socially alienated from the black mountain people, with whom she was not supposed to have friendly contacts, and her homosexuality set her even further apart. So in her case the double alienation became a triple alienation.

The choice to leave was in a way the logical result of all this. Later on Bliss kept being what she was, never compromising, accepting the fact that her choices would affect her life, and in this she was lucky to have at her side, no matter how difficult it must have been, a great personality such as Patricia Allan-Burns.

I know that you are working on a biography of Bliss, how is that going?
As you well know, I've been



Edited and Introduction by
MICHELA A. CALDERARO

devoting many years to Eliot Bliss. The detailed search for her writings will be part of my book *Sheer Bliss*, which is a sort of biography of Bliss interwoven with my own story of what began as, and still is, an obsession.

How is it going? In a word, slowly. But I'm quite happy with what I've been doing, and hope to have a final draft ready very soon - probably by the end of summer. The main difficulty has been the scarcity of details about her life - besides what she herself chose to disclose in the introduction to the second edition of *Luminous Isle*, and what Patricia told me in the course of our many encounters.

Unfortunately, the numerous letters she wrote to Anna Wickham, which could have told us a lot about her early life in London and which were kept at Anna's house, were destroyed during the war, together with many other letters and documents.

But the two unpublished novels I read shed *some* biographical light on the post-war period, when she was confined to her small house in

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could only happen ‘there,’ in that land.

She dedicates whole paragraphs, pages even, to the Blue Mountains of Kingston: Without those paragraphs there would not be any story to write. It is only because the protagonists live in Jamaica, or must leave Jamaica, or must return to Jamaica, or desired someone they were not even remotely allowed to in Jamaica, that the books had any reason to be written. Even a storm or heavy rain become a reflection of what goes on within the heart of the protagonist.

The character of Rebekkah, the black girl from the mountain — with whom Emmeline, the protagonist of *Luminous Isle*, feels “completely happy, [and] in solid harmony” — stands for the island and it is through Rebekkah that the island takes centre stage and becomes a protagonist in the personal story of Eliot and the fictional story of Emmeline: the realisation of the impossibility of a closer relationship adds a motive for choosing exile.

I am curious about the fact that Bliss and her work sank into oblivion, and that very little is known about her life. This is despite the fact that she garnered considerable acclaim for at least one of her novels. I have noticed that it is not that women artists do not produce, but their works, despite whatever acclaim they may obtain during their lifetime, are often “disappeared” and these women and their works “sink into oblivion”. I am curious about your views as to what is at work here. For a long time it was believed women just did not produce.

Women have always produced, either transmitting their works through the oral tradition or writing — diaries, for instance.

Being published was a different story. I think it was a question of market. The publishing world was in the hand of men, they would decide whom to publish. Women writers were relegated to the role of writers of children books, or of cheap romance novels; in order to be published some would even use male pseudonyms, and certainly could not make a living

out of writing.

Some would publish a novel, be considered a new voice in the literary panorama of the period, and then disappear, often because they had no means of supporting themselves with their writings, so they had to find a job to pay the bills; some never wrote a second novel; some continued to write, but left their works in the drawer.

I'm not so sure that things are really that different these days. It may be easier for a woman to be acknowledged as a writer, and then published, but a woman has to work harder to keep being published; at least, this is my impression.

By the way, there's another poet that has sunk into oblivion and should be “rescued”: Patience Ross, Bliss's lover at the time of the publication of *Saraband*. She was quite a good poet herself, but you cannot find any publications of her works nor any reviews or studies.

In your quite riveting introduction to Bliss's poems, Michela, you make compelling ties between Bliss's work and that of Jean Rhys'. Bliss and Rhys were tackling the same subject matter. Yet Rhys has gone on to be canonised and Bliss has sunk into oblivion, how do you account for this?

There are a few points to discuss here.

First of all, it is my strong belief that Rhys was influenced by Bliss's *Luminous Isle*. This is a fact that, to me, is undisputable. Bliss wrote her novel some 30 years before Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and not only the book was well-known at the time of publication, but Bliss had sent a copy to Rhys much before Rhys began writing her own novel and, finally, Rhys had exchanged letters with Bliss on the meaning of the “wide Sargasso sea.”

Moreover, you only have to read the opening paragraphs of the two books to recognise who influenced whom and how.

Regarding the question of oblivion and canonisation: Rhys had a real Master of the Letters to teach her how to write and get her published: her mentor and lover, Ford Madox Ford. Ford was a great writer, an excellent editor and protector of younger writers. He actually took her in, into his own house - a thing that was not actually appreciated by his wife. He taught her how to construct a novel, how and what to cut in order to reach the perfection of the written page. And Rhys followed his lessons. Bliss never had such an editor or mentor. She had friends who tried to help her, like Anna Wickham and Vita Sackville-West, but no real mentor or editor in the publishing world.

And then of course there's the problem of going around and promoting your book, as noted by Eliot herself in the introduction to *Luminous Isle*. She was very, very

poor, she didn't have fine clothes and was too proud to admit it. So, she sort of secluded herself, in London first, and in the country later.

In addition to that there is the problem of the subject matter. True, it is the same subject matter, but... at the time of *Luminous Isle*'s publication the colonies were still a reality in the Caribbean, and, as I just mentioned, some remarks in the book were considered crude and racist — whereas those remarks, and the whole book, were actually a cry for justice, a hard look at a very unpleasant reality.

Bliss's works should always be read on different levels: the personal, the historical and the political. Though these levels are fused together on the page you can clearly understand Bliss's strong criticism of a reality she had no power to change.

Also, of these women, who had “garnered acclaim” during their lifetime, as you say, very little is known because they had no influential relations. Once their books went out of print they also disappeared and nobody was interested in knowing why.

I want to add, going back to your previous question about Jean Rhys, canonisation and oblivion, that even Jean Rhys was believed to be dead, her books were out of print and nobody remembered her, then she published *Wide Sargasso Sea*... and the whole thing began rolling again!

You say that what is atypical of Eliot Bliss is that instead of letting her heroines live the life that she aspired to, rather it was Bliss herself who “lived the kind of life that she had dreamed of.” What about her personality allowed for this?

We should bear in mind that she was a writer, and she wanted to be published and appreciated. When Radclyffe Hall published *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, the very first openly lesbian novel of the 20th century, the book was immediately banned in the UK. Being a crime, homosexuality would lead to imprisonment of all those who were then defined as “invert”. Eliot Bliss did not want to undergo the same ordeal; she could not afford it, she did not belong to the privileged classes, she had to earn her living. She was not hiding who she was, but in order to publish her works she had to hide *who* her heroines were. Though, of course, a close reading might have unveiled the truth - luckily for her this reading was not carried through and a certain hint of homosexuality might have been accepted as a merely girl's thing. Moreover, the fact that two girls would live together was not seen as a sign of “depravation,” as it would have with two men living together.

Contrary to her heroines, whose lifestyles were “impeccable,” her *real* life would lead her to distressing, if not altogether dangerous, situations. Only Anna Wickham who, being lesbian herself — though married — understood very well what her younger friend was going

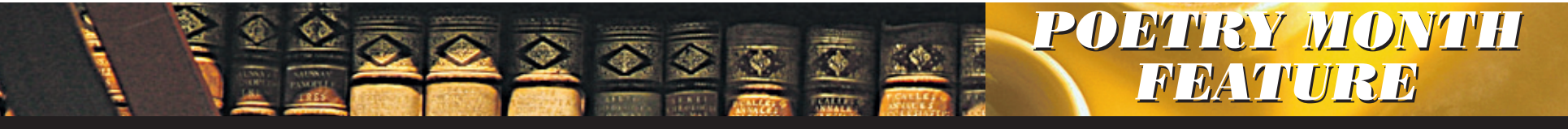
Michela Calderaro

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through, and would come to her rescue.

The two main themes I see in the poems of Bliss are that of nostalgia for her homeland, and a preoccupation with death. The nostalgia that writers away from the Caribbean tend to have in their works is well documented. More confusing is her preoccupation with death. How do you understand this preoccupation with death in her works?

Though the preoccupation with death is almost a fixture in all her works (prose and poetry) it is in her poems that it is most evident.

It is important to remember that she wrote, and rewrote, her poems throughout her life; so poems that were just sketched in the 1930s were later edited in the 1960s or even '70s or '80s, and were consequently influenced by the emotions she was

experiencing at the time of these rewrites. Unfortunately there is no way to know exactly when she edited the poems, since she would date only her first drafts.

To me this obsession seems to be twofold: On the one hand it is likely related to the death of many of her women friends. At least two should be pointed out. One was a woman whose identity has remained a mystery: the woman whose initials are AMG and to whom a selection of poems was dedicated. Unfortunately, Patricia could not help me here, because this woman belonged to the period before she met Eliot. The other woman is one of the greatest loves of her life, an American woman named Cairn, whom she met through a friend and was the reason she went at least twice to the US. In the end, however, she always came back to Patricia.

On the other hand, I think the obsession had to do with a metaphorical death: the death of her past, of her previous life. I do

not wish to offer any psychoanalytical reading of her work or life, but only to point out that in order to become Eliot, Eileen had to be forsaken, buried.

Finally, am I correct in reading "secrets" in Bliss's poems? For example, time and time again there is the reference to a "dangerous love" in her poems. Am I correct in thinking these "secrets" in her poems have to do with Bliss's lesbianism?

You are totally right. Again we must go back to the freedom she granted herself and the restraint she had to apply to her heroines.

Her love poems might be read as dedicated to a man, at least this is what you may understand if you read them without knowing the context, which is what would happen had she published the poems in the 1930s. Even the poem "Spring

Evenings in Sterling Street" could be perceived as a description of an heterosexual relationship; it is only after you learn that she was lesbian that the poems suddenly open up a whole new scenario.

The same with two other poems — "Use Me Thou; With Beauty" and "Perfect Measure", which are extremely sensual, erotic you might say — that she dedicated to Anna Wickham, and that in my view subvert the common idea and understanding that the two of them were just friends and that Eliot regarded Anna as a mother figure. Anna might not have been in love with Eliot, but Eliot was certainly in love with Anna: Why write such poems if she were not deeply and passionately in love?

Yes, she had to keep her "secrets" from the public in order to be published. Otherwise her work would have been surely banned and she herself would have become an outcast. Just remember that even Anna, who was more famous and established as a poet, was not flaunting her homosexuality.

Spring Evenings in Sterling Street

On spring evenings
In Sterling Street,
Theo and Louisa did not always
Have the blinds drawn;
Very often they would only
Pull the soft green curtain
Across the window.
Then, if we came quietly
Up the dim secluded street
About seven o'clock,
We could stand on the pavement
Outside the tall narrow house,
And watch the shapes and shadows
Moving on the curtain.
Very still we would stand;
Sometimes we would lean against the
raillings,
Tiptoe, and breathless, waiting....
On fortunate nights
We might see
Theo's tall sinuous form
Bending over the table not far from the
window,
Her arms outstretched over the
newspaper
Spread out before her.
Her shapely black head bent,
And those queer thin shoulders
Hunched up a little.
Sometimes she would stoop
To throw her cigarette end
Into the fire, or turn back
To make a remark to Louisa,
Who, sitting at the other end of the room
Would be reading her proofs.
Or we might see
Louisa rising from her chair
Cross the curtain in search of a book;
For a minute her shadow
Would eclipse Theo's at the table;
The bookcase was by the window,
Sometimes she would stand there
A long time,
Choosing the book she wanted.
Sometimes Theo would come to the
bookcase

And help her to look for it.
Their two heads, dark and fair
Would be nearly touching,
Theo's slender arm
Would be thrown round Louisa's
shoulders;
Perhaps they would laugh
At something they had just discovered,
And Louisa's head
Would rest for a moment
Against Theo's.
Sharply outlined on the curtain
We would see the two smooth heads,
Louisa's like a boy's, close cropped,
Theo's black and sleek, the hair drawn
over the head
Covering the ears.
The shadows would part and divide,
Blending once more
As Louisa passed Theo
With the book under her arm.
But on other nights
No matter how long we waited,
We could not see the shadows
On the curtain.
The light in the room
Tantalising and faintly yellow,
Would peep at us
Through a slit
Where the curtain divided
With a grim derisive wink.
We knew they were there,
Sitting in that still room,
Living the life they had made for
themselves,
Calmly ironical of the things that had hurt
them,
Removed from the gibes and mockery
That we had yet to endure.
And because we could not see them
That night or the next,
Anger would rise in us,
Fierce and insatiable anger,
Anger more bitter than tears.
We would say to each other,
"It's no use, things will always

Be like this;
Why do we come here
Night after night?
If we saw them we should be miserable,
The contrast between their lives
And ours would make us unhappy,
Theirs lived as it were
Inside a beautiful casket,
Perfumed with the security and
sweetness
Of the mind at peace, in love
With its best object;
Ours, an existence
Sharpened by want and endless striving,
Exposed to the prejudice
And oppression of ignorance.
And if we don't see them
We go away dejected,
With a sense of isolation and despair,
Feeling outcast, and forgotten."
Then we would make our way
Down the quiet discreet street,
Our hearts tight, our throats
With an iron band around them,
Not daring to say a word,
Afraid of betraying emotion.
Perhaps it had been raining....
Black and shining the streets
Like dark mirrors, and the moon
Would be rising over the city;
Into the blue spring sky
She would sail, oblivious, untroubled,
With her mocking sardonic smile.
On seeing her
We would take heart again.
It seemed to us that she knew
What we were, and what we suffered,
That she understood; tender, amused
Knew us, and mocked the earth for us.
We would walk home
Quietly sad, and dreaming....
And so it went on
Night after night,
And all because
In Sterling Street,
On spring evenings,

Theo and Louisa
Did not always have the blinds drawn;
All because there was a chance
Of seeing one of them
Outlined against the green curtain,
Or perhaps both.
They never knew; and now
They have gone away....
The people who took the house from
them
Never even draw the curtain,
But we do not stand outside on the
pavement
Gazing in at the window, anymore.....

Early Spring 1926,
London and Brighton

Michela A Calderaro, an
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Journal of Caribbean Arts and
Letters*, now published online,
teaches English and Postcolonial
Literature at the University of
Trieste (Italy). Dr Calderaro,
whose critical works include a
book on Ford Madox Ford and
numerous articles on British and
Caribbean writers, is working on a
biography of Eliot Bliss.

Jacqueline Bishop's first novel is
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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
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