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## Under the Palaver Tree

### 2. *Endangered Species and Other Stories*

By Angela Barry

Angela Barry is interviewed by Dr. Badara Sall, English Department, Université Gaston Berger of Saint-Louis, Sénégal.

In the *Bermudian* of February 2003, Kim Dismont Robinson wrote that Angela Barry was the first Bermudian writer of adult fiction since 1960s with the publication of her collection of short stories titled *Endangered Species and Other Stories*. The book was a bestseller not in Barry's native island only, but also in the US, the UK, in Canada and the Caribbean Islands.

In the five stories that make the collection expresses the identitarian preoccupations of a woman whose identity lies at the crossroads of America, Europe and Africa. They combine the experience widely-travelled woman whose sense of culture and identity is rather environmental. "To be honest, several people are endangered species [...] There are several types of persons whose life is threatened in some ways," Barry acknowledges

Angela Barry who is currently a teacher of English at Bermuda High School writes about race, gender, class and diaspora which are part of her life as a woman of African descent.

In January 2005, Angela Barry visited Sénégal. I travelled with her from Dakar to Saint-Louis. After an enthusiastic dialogue with the first year students of the English department, she generously accepted to answer the following questions.

**Question:** Angela, since you are from Bermuda, you belong to the African Diaspora. How did you first get in contact with Mother Africa? How did you feel when you visited the continent for the first time?

**Angela Barry -** My first visit to Senegal – and Africa – was in 1974 (if my memory serves me correctly). It was a very important moment in my life for many reasons, one certainly being that of a "return". But really the reason that overshadowed all others was to meet the family of my soon-to-be husband. Now that I think back on it all, I feel that the sense of belonging to a family of which Africa was the center was there long before I set foot in Africa. Through my Guyanese father, I had been aware from early childhood of connections with the Caribbean, with the "Negroes" (as they were then called) of the United States and also with Africa. I remember

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guests from Anglophone Africa coming to our house and having fascinating stories to tell. Then I went to live with my sister in England at the age of fifteen. She was married to a South African and so I had yet another experience of the variety that is Africa. Don't forget that this was also the time of Black Power, when, in the West, Black was Beautiful for the very first time. Being a child of my generation, I embraced it all. So when I did finally visit Senegal in 1974, I was full of all kinds of expectations, most of which were totally unrealistic and romantic. Reality came as a terrific shock for someone like me who had had a comfortable, sheltered life up till that point. Two things stand out as issues in that first trip; one, the scarcity of the kind of toilets I was used to and two, the almost impenetrable complexity of social relations. Despite the fact that my fiancé had given me what could only be described as a "training course" before the trip, nothing really prepared me for it. And although everyone said I looked like a "fille du pays", my body language and my lack of actual language revealed my foreignness every time. Apart from my black skin, I was as "toubab" as anyone from Europe – or so it seemed. Yet, despite my distress, I knew I was among people motivated by kindness and generosity at a level I had never encountered before. So in answer to your question about how I felt that first time, I would have to say that from that first time, as difficult as it was, my life was never the same. And the change was for the better and has been ongoing.

**Question:** You have been to African countries like Senegal and the Gambia. To what extent does your experience of life in the two countries give you a sense of belonging? You have travelled to the US, to England, West Africa, to the Caribbean Islands etc. Does this constant relocation manifest a quest for identity? A friend of yours, Ronald Lightbourne has defined you as a "global writer". What does the term mean ?

**Angela Barry** - I have been lucky enough to do some traveling in my life and hope to do more – within Africa and beyond. The truth is that the traveling I have done so far has been within the "Atlantic World", the same world to which this diaspora belongs – Africa, Europe, the Americas. I did not plan it this way – it just happened but it has given me insights into different branches of the diaspora and has shown me that, despite the great diversity of countries and conditions, there is

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still a common thread of experience. Africa seems to have left an indelible cultural and psychological imprint on the consciousness of those who traveled beyond her shores. And yet the “sea change” that Shakespeare and Eliot talk about is real. The transatlantic voyage did wreak changes, did, by necessity, create something new. What I am exploring in my writing thus far is the fault line between that permanent cultural retention and the changed vision of the world. And the possibility of mutually beneficial exchange. In this task – which can be seen as a version of the quest for identity – I don’t feel very different from most people of the world in this new millennium which requires of us all a re-evaluation of who we are, where we stand, what our values are. In that way, perhaps I am a “global writer” but then, as someone from a tiny North Atlantic island, I have always had to look beyond my own shores. But then, don’t most writers?

**Question:** Your first collection of short stories is titled *Endangered Species*. Can you explain the trope? The story entitled “Endangered Species” is the longest. Why? What is its message?

**Angela Barry -** The title story of the “Endangered Species” collection reflects on notions of the diaspora at a more subterranean level. It looks at the psychological dislocation of black people in the US and Bermuda – people who have come adrift from the social cohesion which is such a hallmark of the African world. The “endangered species” in question is a kind of person who in the past could be relied upon to hold the fabric of society together but who is fast disappearing under pressure from an increasingly brutal and materialistic way of living. This story is long because I attempted to make it more about describing the inner landscape of the main character rather than concentrating on a fast-moving plot. Writing this story also made me realize that it was time for me to attempt a novel. A short story of 80 pages was just too long!

**Question:** It seems that you are finishing a non-fiction account of your trip into the Guyanese interior titled *Interior Monologue*. It reminds me of your natural use of the interior monologue in the short story “Voices of a Summer Night”.

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Why do you opt for characters who speak from within? Is that a literary influence or a trait of your personality?

**Angela Barry** - “Interior Monologue” is a new departure, a non-fiction reflection on a journey which was both physical and psychological. It gave me the opportunity to articulate feelings about a particular landscape which was so large and powerful that it would not let me rest until I had tried to capture not so much the essence of the landscape – much too immense for a mere mortal to do – but my response to it. What was also interesting and unexpected was that, deep in the South American rainforest, I met people whose kindness and “rootedness” were very reminiscent of people I’d met in Africa. As for the interior monologue as a literary device, I think I must plead guilty to this. As I work on my current project, I find myself drifting into this mode as a way of getting deeper inside the head of the character.

**Question:** The verisimilitude of your short story titled “Doudou’s Wife” is so striking. How much of the persons and places you’ve known or visited, in England and in the Gambia went into it?

**Angela Barry** - Of all the stories in the “Endangered Species” collection, “Doudou’s Wife” was the easiest to write. Although all of the stories had been influenced by people I had known or experiences I had had, this was the only one actually based on a particular person, a very charming man from The Gambia whom my family knew in our London days. I’m not quite sure why this story came with such ease but it did and I’m grateful for it. I always think of “Doudou’s Wife” as a gift that I was given.

**Question:** You said that your literary talents were inherited from your grandmother, Edna Louise Williams who was a

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talented poet. Can you be more specific about that literary legacy?

**Angela Barry** - My grandmother was a beautiful person who wrote poetry for most of her life. But I must also say that several other people put me in the path of writing. There were books in the house; both my parents were teachers, readers and good storytellers. I had plenty of interesting aunts and uncles and, as I said earlier, the house was always full of people from overseas. So the environment was there. In addition, I was always a day-dreamer, with a head full of stories and characters. Although I didn't start writing until I was an adult, my earliest memories include "making up stories" when I should have been cleaning my room.