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Poinciana Paper Press: a publishing model for the Caribbean

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POINCIANA PAPER PRESS:
A PUBLISHING MODEL FOR THE CARIBBEAN

by

Sonia Farmer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts degree in Book Arts
in the Graduate College
of The University of Iowa

May 2019

Thesis Supervisor:
Associate Professor Julia Leonard

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My time at the University of Iowa Center for the Book has been an extremely formative three years. I entered with a specific goal: to gain the skills and confidence I would need to build a publishing model through my small press, Poinciana Paper Press. I feel that my thesis successfully realizes this goal, but in ways more expansive than I could have predicted. On the way here I also clarified my personal artistic practice and developed my love for teaching, and realized that these interests play relevant roles in my greater goal to expand the reach of book arts in the Caribbean. I am so grateful to the faculty at the Center for the Book, especially my thesis committee comprised of Julie Leonard, Sara Sauers, Karen Carcia, Sara Langworthy, and Matthew Brown, for patiently and expertly guiding my ambition while also giving me the resources to reach this conclusion on my own terms. I am thankful for every opportunity and challenge put before me, and I feel I have not wasted a single moment of my time here. I never felt doubted or unsupported by this community of teachers, administrators and peers, especially in moments when I questioned myself, and I feel very fortunate that I could incubate my practice in this special and supportive environment. I will miss it so much, but I know the connections I made here will endure in inspiring ways. Thank you so much, UICB, for welcoming me into this special community.

Collaboration is central to this thesis, and these projects would not have existed without the support of my beloved Caribbean art community. I am especially grateful to The National Art Gallery of The Bahamas, The Current Baha Mar Gallery and Art Center, The NGC Bocas Literary Festival, Fresh Milk, and The University of the Bahamas Blue Flamingo Literary Festival for giving me exhibition, residency, artist talk and workshop opportunities to return to throughout my three years abroad. Thank you for keeping me connected, and for embarking on

these projects with me. Thank you, Shivane Ramlochan and Yasmin Ginton, for trusting me with your words. Thank you Oscar, Italia, and Gladys for supporting The Craftsman Press Archive, and speaking with me about your parent's legacy.

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Manfred, I made it here today because of your love, support, and willingness to adventure wherever my work takes me. Thank you for being my partner. I am so lucky to come home to you.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

In 2007, with a ten-minute InDesign tutorial, a manuscript of poems, and a needle and thread to bind some pages together, I made my first handmade book and manifested my press: Poinciana Paper Press. Since then, the mission of my small press has evolved from publishing exclusively handmade and limited-edition books of Caribbean literature to using multiple forms of publishing to advance the diversity of narratives in Caribbean literature. At first a nomadic press, I am committed to establishing Poinciana Paper Press in my home country, The Bahamas, to position it as a major collaborator in the literary and visual arts communities in the region. To that end, presented here are four projects that propose a direction for my press: *The Best Estimation in the World* (a model for full-length book design and distribution for my work and work by others); Current Books (a model for chapbook design and institutional collaboration); *The Red Thread Cycle* (a model for artist book projects and artistic collaboration); and The Craftsman Press Archive (a model for ongoing digital publishing projects and community collaboration). In their collective subject matter that resists the singular Caribbean narrative, in their range of materials and forms that span from handmade limited-edition printed books to websites, and in their outreach, these projects lay the groundwork for an unprecedented publishing model in The Caribbean.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2009, I made two limited-edition chapbooks for Bahamian writers and published them without ISBN numbers under a press name, Poinciana Paper Press. Having just completed my BFA in Writing at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, I had been recently exposed to small presses through the chapbook form—a small collection of work by an author or authors, shorter than a full-length book. The chapbooks I encountered combined digital printing, letterpress printing, and hand-binding into limited editions that were distributed at poetry readings, book festivals, independent bookstores, or through trade with other small presses for their chapbooks. Indeed, the literary communities I navigated in Brooklyn at the time were sustained by these small presses that gave them a voice. While this “alternative” form of publishing spoke to my desire to make books the way I thought they should live in the world—using some handmade aesthetic in limited quantities—small presses appealed to me because they play a vital role in building and sustaining cultural communities. While completing an internship at a literary agency, I was disillusioned by the large scale global publishing model they sustained where published book content is reduced to their commercial value; in small presses I found instead a favoring of books for their cultural currency, putting the author and their work ahead of economic gains. I felt small presses did not ask, “Is this marketable?” but instead asked, “Does this contribute meaningfully to the contemporary conversation around our literary interests and community?” In addition, small presses positioned themselves as collaborators with their authors, bringing them into the book-making process and determining together how they would shape contemporary literature through publishing. I witnessed also support for writers through fundraising, publishing prizes, fair royalties, and support for experimental projects—all for often marginalized voices. Most importantly, unlike the gatekeeper industry of mainstream publishing, I felt welcome in small

presses as spaces of community—here one could volunteer and learn, take a class, network, find collaborators, and attend literary events. When I started Poinciana Paper Press, I too wanted to take on projects using this collaborative approach that contributed building my immediate literary & artistic communities in Nassau, The Bahamas, and that by extension contributed to building the Caribbean (and their diasporic) literary & artistic communities as well—specifically from within that geographical space.

To contribute to a growing and flourishing creative ecosystem in the Caribbean, I'm compelled to physically position my publishing work within The Bahamas rather than outside of the Caribbean because I think it is vital to our self-determination. I'm particularly excited to align the work I make as a writer and a publisher with this current regional pushback against the single Caribbean story and space. Starting with Columbus and enduring to this day through the all-inclusive resorts of the tourism industry, Caribbean identity has been built to sustain and privilege the voice of the visitor as protagonist in places occupied by other bodies and silenced stories. In my time at the University of Iowa, I have identified and positioned my creative practice in direct opposition to this privileging. As a writer, I am interested in using my writing as a tool for disrupting and investigating existing narratives as a way to question their inherent power structures and expose alternative marginalized voices. As an artist, I use handmade books, papermaking, letterpress printing, and digital projects to build platforms and homes for these narratives. As a publisher of a small independent press, I work with writers and artists using multiple forms of publishing to advance the diversity of narratives in Caribbean literature. I think that we need to see ourselves take this action rather than outside forces.

When I first relocated back to Nassau after my time in Brooklyn, I embarked on a personal research project to investigate how Bahamians published their work. My primary

motivation for this research was to help me think about how my small press, Poinciana Paper Press, could serve the community, especially with its handmade aesthetic. What I found out is that The Bahamas had a special history of alternative publishing: scores of authors who, finding no outlet or platform for their books, had made up a press name, purchased an ISBN, and proceeded to publish their books using a local offset printer—and then, later, print-on-demand services and digital platforms. I sat down with Bahamian authors to talk about their experiences within the publishing industry. Through firsthand accounts, I discovered how in pre-Independence times, The Bahamas, through the ever-contentious “are-we-or-aren’t-we part of the Caribbean anyway” argument that seeks to keep us divided and oppressed as a region, were left out of British-run publishing endeavors in the region, including Heinemann and Longman, which shaped the Anglophone Caribbean literary canon. I maintain that this “blind spot” had a silencing effect on literature from The Bahamas in the Caribbean space for decades, and I purposefully align the efforts of my press, and my own personal writing practice as well, to rectify that.

As a result of this research, I’ve concluded that Bahamian writers have for decades been self-publishing with small presses—such as Guanima Press, Verse Place Press, Silk Cotton Tree Press, Rosebud Press, and Cerasee Books, for example—and making their own anthologies and literary journals—*WomanSpeak: A Journal of Writing and Art by Caribbean Women* and *tongues of the ocean*, for example—as acts of survival from a geographical place where our bodies are constantly threatened with erasure. But what if we made books that moved publishing from the realm of survival into the realm of flourishing—so that they become an empowering, creative, and fulfilling practice that can transform the way we see ourselves and the way our country and world sees us? As writers, I think we have been conditioned to think about publishing as

something someone else does for us, or something we do for ourselves, but I'd like to use Poinciana Paper Press to explore how publishing can be done *with* a community, instead of *for* a community, something that involves positioning myself within the space, and embracing multiple forms of storytelling to help us own our narratives. For my thesis, I explored what this could look like through a publishing model made with writers, artists, cultural spaces, and everyday Bahamians.

THE PROJECTS

The Best Estimation in the World

The first model I'd propose as a publishing method for Poinciana Paper Press is a carefully designed full-length book available in multiple formats: a digitally-printed limited-edition book, perfect-bound with letterpress-printed covers, sold and distributed personally by Poinciana Paper Press; a print-on-demand book shared by a global book distributor on multiple platforms; and a digital book as a downloadable PDF on the Poinciana Paper Press website when it is re-launched. My aim is to increase accessibility to my books by providing multiple formats via multiple avenues in the face of distribution difficulties in the Caribbean region.

This project highlights how I would like to incorporate “intentional” book design into my work. As with all things to do with this press, the guinea pig is my own work. I first utilized this model in my final project for the Digital Design for Publishing class offered at the University of Iowa Center for the Book, where the course culminated in a full-length book we design and send to a print-on-demand service. I chose to design my first full-length collection of poems, *Infidelities* (Poinciana Paper Press 2017) and take the exercise beyond a single printed copy that fulfills a class project, purchasing an ISBN and planning to print 250 copies for an official book launch. This class became my first foray into digitally designing books with what I would call “informed intention.” By that I mean it's the moment I recognized that I was designing books without a thorough knowledge of InDesign or book design principles. Even though I pored over mass-produced poetry books in my library for some sort of guidance, I can see, in the chapbooks I made before this time, that I didn't know what I was doing: I leaned on auto leading, I used problematic typefaces for reading, I had no understanding of typographic color or line length or how to properly set margins, how to achieve balance and pleasing proportion on the page. In

designing *Infidelities*, I was able to make more informed decisions about how to clearly and beautifully present my words in the book form with digital tools.

Despite the use of a digital printer to manufacture this full-length book, I wanted to preserve the letterpress-printed aesthetic I included in my handmade chapbooks. I found that service through Bookmobile Printing Services, based out of Minnesota, at the recommendation of Ugly Duckling Presse who said that Bookmobile allowed publishers to send in letterpress-printed covers for their books. I enlisted their services for *Infidelities* then, and again for all three hundred copies of *The Best Estimation in the World* using my own letterpress-printed covers. In addition to their superior digital printing quality, I find their willingness to work with small presses using a variety of finishes, and the quality of their digital printing to be a perfect match for my press needs for years to come.

The problem, as always for small presses, especially small presses run by one person, comes with distribution. After its launch, *Infidelities* was in high demand when it was longlisted for the OCM Bocas Prize for Literature in the poetry category. My book wasn't, as many asked for it, on Amazon. I was mailing copies out myself from Iowa City, an expensive endeavor once the packages leave the United States (just sending the five books to be considered for the award to Trinidad came to \$100.00 in shipping), making me realize that regular shipping out of The Bahamas would pose just as expensive an endeavor. I had to build upon this publishing model to ensure my books could be accessible to everyone who would want to read them, and that meant I had to explore multiple formats to meet several possible desires and restrictions from my readers.

I researched digital printers and distributors to get my books onto multiple global platforms and also to print books on demand to supply me when my Bookmobile limited-edition sells out. I also wanted the option to print books that I decide, because of time or budget

constraints, don't need to have a print run with letterpress printed covers, and don't meet the twenty-five copy minimum for Bookmobile's services. I decided to use IngramSpark for its high praise in the publishing world, noting especially that it fulfilled my needs by distributing globally, including to Amazon. Unfortunately, IngramSpark did not offer to print books in the format I had originally designed *Infidelities*, so I had to adjust my design. I'm not exactly happy with how it looks in this format, but I am content to overlook this at the expense of the accessibility and affordability it provides for some of my readers. I knew, going forward, I would have to start from a place in my design that considered both of these printing options. So, for my second full-length collection, *The Best Estimation in the World*, I started at the beginning knowing I would use this same approach for printing and distributing my book.

In subject matter, *The Best Estimation in the World* aligns itself with the work I'd like to see my press sharing, critiquing and expanding upon Caribbean realities. This collection of poetry, portrayed as eighteen interviews with employees at a resort development, examine the effect of the tourism industry on Bahamian identity. This idea originated through a rare job opportunity I had to build narratives in a resort development called Baha Mar, with the tagline: "The Best Destination in the World." I was hired to be one of the core members of what would become "The Current": a team of Bahamian artists tasked with a five million dollar budget to fill this development exclusively with Bahamian art, and to build a rich art program for hotel guests and the community after the resort opened to the public.

Because I joined as a writer for the art team, the marketing department borrowed me to help write The Baha Mar Documentary. I did not feel experienced enough in script writing to be the person they needed, however, due to my background in journalism, I agreed to take on drafting questions and conducting the interviews that could form the basis of an overall script

written by someone else that would meet their demands for a market-friendly success story about the development. Once conducted, I also did not have time to transcribe. No one wanted to transcribe—so much so that the Audio Visual department ran these twenty-or so interviews through a voice recognition program instead and sent them my way before checking them. The best use of this software is to train it for one specific voice. It cannot be applied to twenty different voices with different accents, slangs, and intonations to come up with a true transcription. So what came out was complete gibberish. Blocks of mostly indistinguishable text rife with errors and mistranslations, these transcripts were useless to my professional task at hand. However, I started to pull out phrases that stood out to me as particularly strange, humorous, tragic, or poignant, and began to craft poems out of them. Even though there are almost no traces of the original interview dialogue, through this isolation of key phrases, new narratives began to emerge that addressed some of the very complex feelings I was internalizing in my job—feelings I recognized many Bahamians who work in the service industry also internalize.

Tourism is our number one industry in The Bahamas, and much like other tropical destinations around the world, it stems from a problematic exoticization of paradise and demands a specifically cultivated landscape and packaged identity to serve this narrative, always at the expense of the home country and its community. Major destination hotels are the number one employer in The Bahamas, which means our livelihood as a nation is dependent on maintaining this lie of paradise. Every Bahamian lives within two narratives of home: the one we create, and the one we live, and we code switch so constantly that this duality has extremely problematic repercussions on our identity and self worth. Being on the job felt like lucid dreaming: I had never understood the degree to which I participated in this practice, and also, became aware of

how many Bahamians—much more underprivileged than me—had lived with this practice in much more extreme and dehumanizing ways. The tension in my poems plays out from these interactions: this back-and-forth code switching, this realization of participation in your own dehumanization, and the powerlessness of that. The question that is explored in each poem is then: what happens when you realize this, what do you do about it, how do you live with it?

With the development 97% completed, Baha Mar filed for bankruptcy in 2015. That was, to put it mildly, a very difficult and bizarre period. Managers and workers who I had interviewed left, my contract was under question, an ugly legal battle was brewing over the brand, and many of us were left unemployed or with tremendous debts due to unfulfilled contracts. It showed me how powerless we are as a nation in the grand scheme of foreign powers and investments in our country, and how little we reap the benefits, but how much we bear the consequences. It also demonstrated how easy it is to change an origin story in the tropics. Over a year later and under new ownership, Baha Mar is open to the public, though the documentary I helped to make evaporated into thin air. Nobody wants to recount that unfortunate event and bring into focus the ugly business of curating paradise. Nobody wants to relive that trauma—nobody except for the characters in these poems, who challenge the erasure of this event from our cultural consciousness.

Upon finalizing the collection, I experienced a return to the newly-opened resort, an experience that informed the approach of my design for *The Best Estimation in the World*. In 2017, I returned back to The Current at Baha Mar for a summer writing residency to finish these poems. It felt strange to return to a space that I both recognized and did not recognize—I could see traces of the thing I had helped to create, but I could also feel the cultural shift under new ownership. Because the resort had just opened, almost always, I felt Bahamians outnumbered the

guests. After a while, I began to feel like I was witnessing a film set with many extras waiting around for the main stars to arrive: Bahamian croupiers stood expectantly at empty tables in the casino, groundskeepers over-pruned on walking paths, housekeeping re-cleaned already impeccable restrooms. I thought about the tension between performance and authenticity. I thought about how the numbered sections of my poems feel like acts in a play, or several takes of a film scene, the arc of the voice as a character finding its way to the voice of the person underneath, giving us pause to digest the sometimes hard-hitting confessions that result.

In designing the final book, I wanted to engage with the commodification of paradise. Using a format of 7x10 inches, the book moves away from our expectation of poetry collection sizes and instead enters into the world of annual reports, or glossy employee manuals. Negative space functions as an important part of the book to make readers confront space as emptiness and space as luxury, and to think about who gets to take up this space. Without accompanying tropical imagery, perhaps readers will be asked build their own visual of the resort and people using their own imaginative arsenal of marketed narratives, and the poetry could then hold them accountable for these conjurings. Each numbered section takes up its own page, and the body of the poems are set aligned to the gutter and the foot of the page, growing out of each other, and also out of the ground like the multi-storied structures of hotels. I poached Baha Mar's display typeface, Bauer Bodoni, which they combine with Futura for their body text but which I replaced with Helvetica for its ubiquity in the corporate narrative. The only visual allowed is a clean grey rule beneath every heading, numbered subheading, or pull quote. I see this rule assuming another sort of corporate design element, but as it rises and falls with each numbered subhead, the rules resist this static function. In one way, they are an allusion to the horizon line seen often in the explorer narrative, which changes depending on our positionality. Combined with the stanzas of

different length, each spread presents new positions and interactions, like a pair of cranes you almost never see moving when you glance their way, but which you do notice, day after day, changing position on the horizon. Altogether, I hope the design highlights the satire of the collection—that its readers have a hard time distinguishing what is real and what is imagined.

The Best Estimation in the World will be launched later this year at The Current, using elements of performance, and will be available to purchase in several formats. The three-hundred copy limited-edition by Bookmobile with letterpress-printed covers will be distributed through my efforts to those who wish to purchase a book with this design element. Simultaneously, I will launch a print-on-demand copy with a scan of this cover via IngramSpark on global distribution platforms. I would also like to offer a copy for purchase as a downloadable PDF, understanding that a digital form might be more affordable for those who live in the islands, like me, who can't afford for the book with the letterpress cover to be shipped their way from The Bahamas, or even the costs of the print-on-demand book which may have a printing and distribution center in international territories. I am confident there will always be people willing to buy each format—it depends on what is important to them. What is important to me, as a publisher, is that I can meet them using an integrated model of book printing and distribution that I feel best represents the work.

Current Books

Current Books represents how I would like to use my skills through Poinciana Paper Press to support, empower, and sustain other publishing projects in the region through partnerships with institutions. In this case, I have partnered with The Current to curate a special series of chapbooks for their writers-in-residence, available for purchase through The Current's

retail store. In form, Current Books represents the chapbook publishing model that I would like to follow. I began Poinciana Paper Press with the intention to publish only chapbooks, and though I have expanded publishing formats, I hope that chapbooks production remains a central component of my publishing efforts. In its shifting nature that provides multiple possibilities for form and function, the chapbook is the best publishing tool for this particular collaboration which will involve many writers, artists, and designers in the future.

My preferred method of publishing has always been the chapbook form—a small collection of work by an author that is often shorter than a full-length book. I think this publishing standard emerged out of the collaborative spaces and experiences I’ve had with small presses in New York, producing mostly limited-edition hand-sewn pamphlets with digitally-printed content and (at times) letterpress-printed covers (perhaps with other printmaking techniques combined). I associated these pamphlets with labors of love—in them, I could witness the tactile handiwork of its maker—and I also associated them with persistence, mouthpieces of authors or groups who had something so important to say they couldn’t wait for a full-length production. I also love that the chapbook can take many forms. I believe it is in the nature of chapbooks to exist as a shifting entity, able to meet a myriad of needs while also retaining its “chapbook-ness”. As I’ve explored what the chapbook can be over the years, my appreciation has grown for its flexibility and forgiveness—I can approach any chapbook project with any amount of resources and make it happen, whether it’s a Xeroxed and stapled zine or a carefully handset poem printed on handmade paper and bound with a needle and thread. Due to this flexibility, and speed at which I can complete chapbook projects, I find that it is the best form for this particular collaboration with The Current.

As detailed earlier, The Current Baha Mar Gallery and Art Center is an art space supported by the resort development Baha Mar in Nassau, The Bahamas. They provide residencies to local Bahamian artists, diasporic Bahamian artists, regional Caribbean artists, and international artists as well; curate the visual art across the property and three separate gallery spaces with rotating exhibitions of work by Bahamian artists and from prominent collectors of Bahamian art; provide tours of the artwork on property and in their galleries; facilitate the sale of Bahamian artwork to potential international buyers; design programming opportunities such as workshops; facilitate lectures and special social events; and house a retail outlet for artsy products made by Bahamians. This art platform is the first of its kind in the local resort industry. What makes it particularly special is that its exhibitions, residencies, programming, and retail store are shaped and driven by Bahamian artists led by its Creative Arts Director, John Cox, whose contributions to the Bahamian art community via his own projects and practice make him an ideal visionary for how the space can serve the local visual arts community. I'm excited for Poinciana Paper Press to share in their outreach, resources, and vision for the community through a publishing project together.

This partnership is built upon my history with the space and my awareness of its mission to use art as a tool for education and resistance in the resort space. I was employed as part of the “original” Current team, back before the debt crisis of 2015 that foreclosed Baha Mar, as the Art Archives and Communication Coordinator. When I worked there, we were all skeptical of the wider context we had to operate in. But ultimately we hoped that Baha Mar would give us the opportunity and funding to provide the visibility that our dynamic art community deserved. To us, it felt like no hotel or tourism development had much interest in authentic Bahamian art—sure, they had room for a palm tree or harbor painting in the odd hotel room, but not art which

presented experimental mediums or challenging subject matter, and certainly not using that art as a central narrative in the experience of hotel guests, certainly not moments of education, certainly not gallery spaces, certainly not art workshops, certainly not to the tune of millions of dollars. So that investment in our artistic community was exciting and promising; it made the hotel feel like something we were actively participating in creating on our own terms.

Ultimately: to be seen. Even further: understood and appreciated. Even so far as: to make visitors aware of their privilege. Art is especially well equipped to do that, especially in the form of books.

Current Books has the potential to fulfill several functions in The Current. When a visual artist completes their residency, it typically culminates in an exhibition with tangible objects to see and purchase. When writers complete their residency, they may have a reading, but what physical object can manifest as their culmination? Perhaps Current Books could facilitate producing a limited-edition chapbook with a small selection of writing completed during the residency. These books can act as a memento for the patrons who attend the reading as well as the writers who will receive some to give away at their discretion; can build up the library space and retail offerings at their store Glo; and can also act as an archive of the writers who become part of The Current community through their residencies.

Current Books has existed long before this thesis, but this is an intentional revival of a dormant project. During my time of employment at The Current, I made three limited-edition art catalogues, *Buildings Are People, Too*; *11 Strong*; and *Keeping Connected*, to accompany some of our first exhibitions. I gave these books the press name “Current Books” because it was my understanding at this time that our collective plan as a team was to continue to release these limited-edition hand-bound books to accompany future endeavors. My boss John Cox, partial to

the grunge aesthetic of DIY culture, had shared with me as his employee a desire to incorporate handmade books, zines, and ephemera into the retail store we would eventually operate once the development opened. I was hoping to adopt that mission as an employee. Now that I am no longer an employee, nor foresee joining The Current again in that capacity, I instead approached John with a collaborative proposal: reviving Current Books as a curatorial project through two sets of chapbooks for the first writers-in-residence in that space that summer—Bahamian poet Yasmin Ginton, and myself—to be jointly launched at our residency exhibition at the end of the year. I decided to stick with my favorite tried-and-true chapbook formula for the two books: digitally designed and printed interiors with letterpress-printed colors in a limited edition of one hundred copies each, hand-bound with a pamphlet stitch.

My chapbook, *Now That I Change: (This is Not) an Interview with the Creative Arts Director* was an opportunity for me to share something that was emerging in the larger scope of my work as a writer. It holds the first poem I constructed from *The Best Estimation in the World*, and it was made from my boss' mistranslated interview—John Cox himself. John thought the poems were dark and funny and completely necessary; in truth, he was the first person who knew what I was doing and understood that the interview was not “him”, and still, at the same time, spoke to the inner conflict we all feel when we occupy these positions in the tourism industry. It was through his initial response that I felt encouraged to continue. I wanted to pay tribute to that by making this poem into a chapbook that could stand apart from the collection. To accompany the chapbook, I also recorded John reading the poem. The book and recording were exhibited together at the residency exhibition that December of 2018, and in my colophon I note that the book should accompany this reading (available to hear on my website). The chapbook here does

not function as an accompaniment to my larger scope of work, but becomes, through its making, its own piece.

Yasmin Glinton's poems in her chapbook *At the Shore* showcases The Current's commitment to providing an intersectional space for the arts, bringing creative people from all backgrounds to draw inspiration from each other and sustain the art platforms in the resort. Yasmin had been commissioned by The Current to write poems inspired by their most recent exhibition, "Fairwind," on display in the Baha Mar Convention, Arts & Entertainment Center. Able to hold hundreds of paintings, "Fairwind" is a comprehensive historical sweep of key narratives in visual art made in and about The Bahamas. Yasmin's resulting poems start out as poignant love letters to the resilient creative spirit of Bahamian people, but peppered with meditations of the loss and violence we endured in our history and still endure today, they just resist saccharine surface narratives, functioning instead as fortifying calls to witness and invest in our homegrown talent. The collection is not an accompaniment to the exhibition however—in its chapbook form, it becomes its own contribution to the gallery space.

I consciously designed these two chapbooks for Current Books as a pair, even though they have different design directions. Both chapbooks share the same materials, binding structure, and number of edition with letterpress-printed covers and digitally-printed interiors. Their trim sizes are both proportions of a folded letter-sized sheet. Even though they use different color schemes, they are united through the same gold ink on their covers. However, typography and interior design choices give the books their own personalities: *Now That I Change*, with its geometric display typeface, slab serif, and generous negative space, feels urban and structured—a tribute to the digital intervention in the making of the poem—while *At the Shore* utilizes a script typeface and an elegant italic to create a warm and nostalgic space

appropriate for exploring cultural history through art. I designed, printed, and bound the books for the December 14, 2018 launch and exhibition, “Pattern”, at The Current. Though these books were produced within the shadow of an urgent deadline, I was reminded of what a relief making chapbooks are for me in the long and drawn out process of making concurrent full and complex artist book projects. I enjoy how quickly they come together, and the feeling of accomplishing something in a relatively short amount of time. This experience showed me how important it will be for me to include such quick and satisfying projects along with more demanding ongoing projects for Poinciana Paper Press.

The launch of Current Books solidified for me the intention of this project to build more publishing opportunities beyond my press. Often I’m approached to publish projects that don’t fit the model for my press. Through collaborative projects like Current Books, I hope that one of the long-term effects is the diversification of publishing platforms and local book production. John and I spoke about my role becoming more curatorial as time goes on, identifying artists and designers who may wish to collaborate on a Current Book project instead of handling the making of all of those books alone. As opposed to Poinciana Paper Press, which will be a more local and intimate studio space that I have complete control over, Current Books, through its outreach and programming in a resort space, provides a fantastic platform to diversify publishing methods, forms, aesthetics, and intentions with a large community of writers, artists, and visitors, that is always in flux.

I’m encouraged by the continued perseverance of The Current in this space, aware of its complicity in this space, and also excited by the disruption it provides to this space, and I maintain that it can be allowed to occupy that paradoxical position because its all the tourism industry ever allows. But, I think, with enough self-awareness and courage, it can be progressive.

Art, wherever it is, even in a hotel, will always provide a space and an opportunity for subversion, and I imagine my collaboration with Current Books will grow out of our shared motivation. At first disparate projects that I felt anxious about creating at the same time, I now understand it was intentional of me to create *The Best Estimation in the World*—which will be launched at The Current later this year—and to resurrect Current Books at the same time. They both exist for the same reason The Current is allowed to exist in the hotel and also criticize the hotel: the people looking hard enough and willing to do the work will see it—for the others, they will open the shiny red chapbook on the shelf in the retail store and find a bomb planted there.

I'm curious to explore how Current Books will evolve through this partnership—will all writers-in-residence want to collaborate on a chapbook? Would visual artists like to explore their craft in the form of a book? What artists and designers could I bring into this exercise? Can I imagine more catalogues? How else can the book form engage with this space? The mission, we've decided, for now is: "Publishing limited-edition chapbooks and ephemera, Current Books promotes cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary collaboration in the realm of design using a variety of mediums and resources." I'm excited to leave this open ended instead of using a restriction—of design, of budget, of number, of length, of material— to define the series. Starting out with the form of the chapbook is promising for me, with all of the flexibility it can provide.

The Red Thread Cycle

The Red Thread Cycle is an example of how I would like to incorporate artist book production within Poinciana Paper Press, particularly in collaboration with other Caribbean writers and artists. For this project, I made a series of seven books based on poems by Trinidadian poet Shivane Ramlochan. I chose this body of work simply because I felt a

powerful connection with her writing. However, making this artist book has shown me the importance of collaborating regionally to explore possibilities of form and function in Caribbean literature, even if that work has already been published outside of Poinciana Paper Press.

The root of our collaboration is mutual admiration and respect for each other's work in the Caribbean literary landscape. As emerging poets in the scene, we read each other's work in various journals, we both received accolades from the Small Axe Literary Competition in poetry, and were both New Talent Showcase writers at the Bocas Literary Festival in 2013 where we met for the first time. The poems I heard her read then were shortlisted for the Hollick Arvon Caribbean Writer's Prize in 2015 and then went on to be included in her first poetry collection, *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting* (Peepal Tree Press, 2017). This book has been met with exciting regional and international praise. Most notably, it was shortlisted for the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection by the Forward Arts Foundation. I read her book when it was released in the summer of 2017, and I was particularly struck by the powerful *Red Thread Cycle*, a section of seven poems—which she calls the “spine” of the collection—that catalogue sexual assault and its aftermath. When I asked her for permission to explore these poems in book form, she agreed, because she said she knew my work as a writer and my efforts as a publisher, and trusted me to meaningfully engage with the work.

My goal for *The Red Thread Cycle* is to demand from its viewers the same careful and sustained engagement that they demanded of me when I first read them. They are hard poems to digest, especially when one is acutely aware of the sexual violence that disproportionately affects our region of the world. I sat with the poems for a long while, that whole summer, allowing poetry to do what it's always done for me: unpack my own discomfort and pain. Witness me. Help me to witness, in return. I've never understood the criticism against art delving into these

difficult and unspoken places from people who believe that art should be palatable—for me, the work that Shivaneer does here is the gut-wrenching work of witness, which is especially necessary for healing. It's not easy on the eye, heart, or gut—but we must be open to what the pain of these poems teaches us about trauma and survival in the Caribbean. We have to look. That realization, or command, or mantra—we have to look—became my guide for making the books.

Each poem in *The Red Thread Cycle* deserves its own consideration of form, pacing, and reading, so I used a different folding structure for each poem, each one inviting its own particular witness and engagement, but all belonging to one whole. This spoke to the seven different voices in the poems that share their own individual encounters within the overall experience of sexual trauma. Linked through repetitive imagery directly mined from the poems, these books reinterpret the original linear poetic form, each structure inhabiting the individual voice of the poem to refract and reflect its narrative, allowing the reader to access its core emotional complexity as they engage with each piece:

I. *On the Third Anniversary of the Rape* uses an “ox-plow” structure to locate the reader within the labyrinthine environment of the poem;

II. *Nail It to The Barn Door Where It Happened* uses a French fold structure that is bound with a red thread to mirror such doors, and to hold, in its stitched inner core, a wound;

III. *You Wait for Five years, and Then* uses a “snake book” structure to re-create the unwieldy experience navigating the same space as one's abuser, its sharp points calling to the barbed wires and sinister smiling teeth in the poem;

IV. *The Policeman in Your Throat* uses a Turkish map fold to present the act of trauma in a spiral of text, as well as to unearth and bury its narrator by opening and closing the book;

V. *The Five Count* uses a folded-over accordion to mirror the action of counting rosary beads, its slits containing a message of poetic refrain in a violent red core;

VI. *Public Holiday* uses a blizzard book to conceal and reveal text to explore alternative narratives about a sexual encounter;

VII. *The Open Mic of Every Deya, Burning* uses a structure of a single sheet that unfolds four times, growing in size, allowing readers to unearth the triumphant and defiant conclusion buried within, calling back to the first book as its now whole counterpart.

Though they have different structures, these books are linked by typeface, materials, color palette, medium, and proportions. I chose Centaur to set the poem, which felt fitting for Shivanees's collection so rooted in the mythological world. I chose Rives Lightweight for the paper because of how well it responds to pressure printing. I thought it would be thick enough to hold the structures of the folded books I chose and stand as display objects, but flexible enough to take the many folds they demand and allow the reader to engage with them. When considering colors, I chose a strong and deep red to convey the violence (and shared title) in the poems. Black for text would hold up against this strong color, and a light warm grey would hold its own but fall back against the red when needed. The red and grey also layered in interesting ways, and I used the depth this layering provided to create complexity with this limited palette. I determined the different sizes of the books by meeting all of the realistic limitations of hand printing, nonetheless uniting them with an underlying mathematical logic. Altogether, these design decisions serve to coalesce the seven different structures.

A central experience to these artist books is repetitive imagery, which, through their uncontrollable methods of making, creates a necessary raw aesthetic to accompany the prose. These images, mined directly from the language of the poems, are rooted in the body (teeth,

spines, eyes), in the natural world (hummingbirds, fisheyes), in violent objects (barbed wire, scissors, gun), and also in mythology or spirituality (Greek myths, Hindu festivals, Christian rituals). I also added some repetitive background textures, such as spray and spatter. The imagery was created by pressure printing, or through experimental platemaking techniques such as scratch negative, resist with rapidograph ink, spray paint, etc. This was an unusual way for me to work—up until now, I have used found or purchased imagery to make plates with clean lines and predictable outcomes. However, using other materials and my own hand in often uncontrollable processes to make organic images gave the work a sort of restlessness that held a conversation with its subject matter, layered and repeated throughout the books so that they take on multiple meanings in their fragmented silhouettes and abstract forms.

After being in total control while making previous projects, *The Red Thread Cycle* proved to be an uncomfortable process in its organic nature—the structures were challenging, the imagemaking unpredictable, and the outcome raw—but I don't think these books could have been made any other way. In unbearable moments of making, I would turn to Shivaneer—not to confess this anxiety, but to check in, to make sure that despite my difficulty, the books and imagery were coming together in a way that felt right to her, as author. We spoke through structures that troubled me, imagemaking dead-ends, sometimes finding comfort in realizing that the poems that challenged me the most also had challenged her the most when she wrote them. Then, when something came together, we celebrated success and resolution. Through our collaboration, I learned to lean in to this process that demanded discomfort. In their making, these books do service to the work, and I hope that in their reading, viewers too find the willingness to endure for all of the rewards it can hold through its witness.

The importance of our regional collaboration resounded when we had a chance to exhibit *The Red Thread Cycle* at the National Art Gallery of The Bahamas as part of the Ninth National Exhibition under the theme “The Fruit & The Seed.” This theme captured the collaborative process I feel as a person who makes artist books—whether I use my own written work or the work of others, I treat these words as seeds to grow the fruit: the structure, imagery, and materials for a final visual project. In “The Fruit & The Seed,” the books from *The Red Thread Cycle* were contained in black shadowboxes sunken in seven red plinths, opened to various spreads and positions. A set of headphones accompanied each plinth so that viewers could hear Shivaneer read the poem paired with the book inside that shadowbox. The powerful display received successful reviews in newspapers, blogs, podcasts, and even in a review of the exhibition in *Hyperallergic*. The National Art Gallery of The Bahamas even brought Shivaneer to The Bahamas so that we could share our collaborative process in an artist talk, lead a collaborative workshop on writing processes, and provide a guided handling of *The Red Thread Cycle* books outside of their shadowboxes. This was the first time Shivaneer had seen and handled the books in person, and the first time we had an opportunity to reflect honestly on our rewarding process of working together. One observation made by Shivaneer struck me—that she felt the books were not simply her poems any longer, but entirely new pieces, that they had undergone a necessary widening of scope through our collaboration. This, to me, is the most important function of artist books—not necessarily to publish something new, but to revisit and explore our literary canon and to make the reading experience expansive. *The Red Thread Cycle* stands as a powerful model for how important it is for Poinciana Paper Press to engage with Caribbean writers and artists toward this goal.

The Craftsman Press Archive

The Craftsman Press Archive is an in-progress example of how I'd like to use Poinciana Paper Press to create "publishing projects" outside of the printed book form. This digital archive collects personal narratives prompted by restored letterpress printing cuts from a once-thriving press called The Craftsman Press, located in The Bahamas, that I purchased years ago, and inherited a valuable resource to explore the social history of Bahamians. A challenge came when I questioned how best to proceed in archiving, sharing, and growing this resource. Primarily a tool of research and preservation, this project, in its visibility, is also a tool of resistance against erasure of local people in the paradise narrative. Utilizing the digital resources at the Center for the Book, as well as its functioning Chandler & Price that is an exact replica of the press from The Craftsman Press, I initiated the process of archiving letterpress-printed proofs in order to build the imagery for the digital database.

When I purchased this press, I had no idea that I would become responsible for such a rich wealth of history. A leading service provider for printing during its time of operation between 1954 to 2001, The Craftsman Press was operated by Mr. Oscar Johnson Sr. and his wife Sylvia. In 2012, with the kind permission of Mr. Johnson's children, I moved a Chandler & Price press, along with several typecases and miscellaneous printing equipment, into my studio space. In exploring, restoring, and organizing this equipment, I came across several typecases labeled "CUTS", with printing blocks inside that held logos of business, bars, hotels, and organizations that no longer exist in the physical landscape. Not only that, but they barely existed online as well—in cursory research, I could only find skeletal details about each of these places—when they opened and closed, where they were, perhaps a few celebrity sightings if pertinent. Printing and sharing these blocks, I soon realized each one held a vast, intricate, important history, full of dispersive narratives, adding to the complexity of Bahamian identity in colonial (pre-1973)

times, specifically the grappling that takes place for people who live within and actively create the myth of paradise for others. Soon enough, as I heard personal story after personal story from complete strangers prompted by encountering the prints at these crafts fairs, I realized that the act of restoring these blocks go beyond cosmetic cleanup and repair. Though these spaces have long been erased from the landscape, they persist in the collective cultural consciousness of everyday Bahamians, and those memories, insights, and narratives need to be collected and preserved somehow to remind us of our humanity in the face of a dehumanizing industry and way of life.

Despite feeling the call, as a journalist, to seek out, gather, and synthesize these narratives, I struggled with how best to present them, especially with my lack of formal training in archiving. To keep these blocks, prints, interviews, and contributions in a physical location felt limiting, especially because The Bahamas is such an isolated space. I decided that the project would best be served as a digital platform. So I set out to make the Craftsman Press Archive, a digital visibility project to preserve and share certain narratives that challenge the singular framework of paradise in Bahamian history. These narratives are told through the lens of these cuts. What I plan to do is treat each block as a starting point and let it inform self-directed research, general invitations for contributions, and targeted solicitations for interviews, resources, and any ephemera that members from the community would be willing to contribute. I will gather and curate these on the website, building a rich narrative driven by Bahamian experiences. I consider this a sort of collaborative publishing experience with evolving content. My ultimate hope is that with these narratives and collection of material, I can build an online resource that is free and available for members of the public—in The Bahamas and beyond—to access, enjoy, educate themselves, or do further research.

I'd like to allow this website to grow organically based on how the public contributions will shape it. For example, when I first shared these blocks, I printed an old logo of The Montagu Beach Hotel, a once-thriving tourism hot-spot on the eastern end of New Providence that has been demolished in my lifetime (my parents took me to watch it go down when I was very young). I received a link from a total stranger of a video he took walking through the abandoned Montagu Beach Hotel before it was demolished in the early nineties. I also received some postcards featuring the hotel, several cocktail napkins, and a menu. I found out recently that Mr. Johnson himself worked as the hotel printer right after his initial apprenticeship and before establishing The Craftsman Press, and I'd like to expand on that story, as well as the dozen others I have heard from everyday Bahamians about how they worked there, celebrated significant events, or watched it come down in a controlled demolition almost thirty years ago now. I believe that a website will effectively allow me to capture each of these contributions, allowing the history of the hotel to reveal itself in their intersections of voice and artifact.

A central component of this website is an interactive map that functions not only as an effective central visualization of the project, but also as a tool to resist the violent erasure of the landscape at the service of paradise narratives. Using the online mapping program Carto, I can pinpoint on Google Maps where these places used to exist on New Providence (with a few blocks also hailing from Eleuthera). By mapping these blocks, the archive is collected into one central effective visualization that will allow the viewer to see the magnitude of the archive from a birds-eye-view before zooming in or hovering over the points to find out more. This map can also help its viewers to draw conclusions about how Bahamians have been allowed to navigate boundaries within their home. Ultimately, this map challenges the erasure of the landscape in creating "paradise" by giving voice to the people who live and sustain that space. Paradise

promotes itself as untouched, virginal, remote, existing for discovery and exploration. It does not have a narrative. It never did—until the visitor arrived to explore and conquer it. Every time we close or tear down a failing hotel to build another one, we contribute to this mythology. Every time we forget the local businesses that sustained the lives of people who live in paradise, that helped to nurture the rich cultural offerings of the tourism industry, we contribute to the problematic consequences of this mythology. The Craftsman Press was well poised to do business at all levels, and we see that in the range of spaces the blocks occupy—tourism rich areas like downtown and Cable Beach, local businesses, and even “over the hill” places like the Cat & Fiddle nightclub. This range of spaces in turn will yield a wide range of narratives about the way of life in The Bahamas during this time, actively resisting the cycle of erasure in our history.

The Craftsman Press Archive is an enormous responsibility that extends beyond my thesis, and requires that I locate myself at home among the resources that can best help me build this project over many years. For my thesis, I have printed, scanned, and photographed all of the blocks to provide an effective and consistent visual foundation from which to build outward. When I am at home, I will be closer to the resources to help me flesh out this map and their stories—such as our department of archives, local historians, our public library, and the very people who lived during this time who have invaluable stories to share. Within the scope of my publishing model, it provides a long-term ongoing research project for Poinciana Paper Press to build with the wider Bahamian public, holding space for everyone’s story.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these four projects present a publishing model for Poinciana Paper Press—but they are not an absolute fixed standard. I see these projects instead as presenting a range of materials, forms, and outreach which can have multiple intersections to meet the needs of each individual project that Poinciana Paper Press produces. Allowing my approach to publishing to be flexible also allows room for further exploration in material, forms, and community engagement as these opportunities arise. To counter what could become an overwhelming or unmanageable fluidity however, I return to the underlying motivation for my projects—with Poinciana Paper Press, I am committed to advancing the diversity of narratives in Caribbean literature. With every project, I'd like to ask: "Is this provocative work challenging or complicating the canon?" If I am excited by the answer, I'd then like to ask: "How should it live?" and go about utilizing my range of forms, materials, and collaborators to manifest it. In this way, I can also understand how this act of publishing is an extension of my own artistic practice of disrupting or complicating the single Caribbean narrative. As I have used the press to serve my own publishing needs, so too can I use the press to serve the needs of my collaborators, moving us from the realm of survival into the realm of thriving self-determination.