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New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers

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NEW WORLD ADAMS



Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers

Daryl Cumber Dance



P E E P A L T R E E

INTRODUCTION

In a 1971 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lecture, Guyanese poet Martin Carter asserted, 'My contention is that it is almost impossible to take a piece of writing and understand it properly without having a fair idea of the circumstances which brought it into being or the circumstances which made its coming into being a reality.' [*Man and Making — Victim and Vehicle*, Georgetown, 1972, p. 14]. Richard Wright insisted that an author inevitably 'comes to the conclusion that to account for his book is to account for his life.' ['How Bigger was Born', *Native Son*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966; orig. publ. in 1940) p. viii]. Unquestionably, much of the insight into the circumstances which helped to create and to shape a particular piece of literature and ultimately insight into the text of the work itself can be gained from the author. Throughout my study and teaching of literature I have found a necessary component in the study of a work to be a consideration of what the author has to say about that work — even when his statement cannot be taken at face value. Despite the fact that William Faulkner, for example, consistently played the role of literary unsophisticate and unconscious author, I have found *Faulkner in the University* [F.L.Gwynn and J.L.Blotner, eds. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959)] and other interviews invaluable resources for the study of Faulkner. Although I have on occasions attempted to discredit some of Ralph Ellison's assertions in interviews, I believe that one of the best sources for beginning a study of *Invisible Man* is to be found in interviews with the author. John O'Brien's *Interviews with Black American Writers* [New York: Liveright, 1973] is, I think, an essential supplementary text to the study of Black American literature. The list of significant interviews could be expanded interminably.

Thus fully convinced of the importance of this added perspective to the study of a work of literature, I began to conduct interviews with Caribbean writers in order to make readily available such a resource to students of Caribbean literature. I initially drew up a list of approximately twenty writers, whom, on the basis of their recognition in studies of Caribbean literature and their commendation by teachers in the field, I deemed the major writers in the area, and I set out to contact them. The success of this project has been overwhelming, even to me. Not only did I succeed in arranging interviews with all except one of those whom I initially hoped to include, [the exception is V.S.Naipaul] but along the way I 'discovered' other significant writers in the field who also granted me interviews. That I have within this volume interviews with most of the more prominent Anglo-Caribbean writers of today is reinforced by the fact that throughout these dialogues those whom the writers themselves cite as signif-

icant are almost inevitably represented in this study. Clearly, since these interviews were conducted in 1979-80, there is now a new generation of writers emerging, particularly women. There is the encouragement to a further volume.

A challenging aspect of this adventure has been the detective work involved in locating these authors and the logistics of arranging interviews with them. Their seemingly incessant movement from one place to the other was particularly frustrating for me, since for my purposes it was absolutely requisite that all the Jamaican writers stay put in Jamaica during the seven days of my trip there and that all the Trinidadian writers remain patiently in Trinidad for the next four days, while every one of the Guyanese writers steadfastly await my arrival in Guyana immediately thereafter for a three-day stay. At another time the writers in Canada, New York and the New England states were required to remain stationary during my four-day swing through that area. Despite their busy, even hectic lives, most of the writers went out of their way to accommodate their schedules to mine, and despite the fact that no trip was planned without numerous revisions, delays and threatening conflicts (not to mention exorbitant phone bills), each one was finally a resounding success. Even the disappointments, the embarrassments, the apparent catastrophes had happy endings. For example, my first planned interview with Vic Reid was thwarted when despite an hour of searching throughout Hope Gardens for his office on the afternoon before my departure for the United States, I never succeeded in finding him. When I made my second trip to Jamaica, however, he kindly volunteered to come to me for the interview. The tape of my first quite successful interview with the somewhat difficult to contact John Hearne was given to a secretary upon my return to Virginia Commonwealth University for assistance with transcribing, and it was promptly thrown out with the trash. I was happily able to arrange another interview on my second trip to Jamaica. On another occasion I planned to spend a peaceful night resting in the luxurious Upside-Down Hilton in Trinidad before conducting my first interview the next morning. Instead I spent the night in a hot plane grounded in Puerto Rico because of mechanical problems, accompanied by a plane load of American wrestlers whose already somewhat rowdy behaviour was further stimulated by the open bar that Eastern invariably provides during such emergencies. I did, however, arrive in Trinidad in time to shower and conduct the interview as scheduled.

There were the inevitable embarrassments, of course. My interview with Salkey suffered a most inauspicious beginning when, having been misled about the writer's identity by a friend, I rather unenthusiastically and impatiently made dull conversation with him for several minutes, thinking that he was someone else. I was somewhat embarrassed again after my rather formal letter to Earl Lovelace, which requested an interview and closed with, 'I am looking forward to meeting you and talking with you about your work,' to have him respond: 'I seem to remember very clearly meeting someone by the name of Dance...' How mortified I was to have to be reminded

that not only had we met before many years ago when he was a student in the United States, but that we had indeed taught together.

There were also the innumerable fears inspired by several of the well-wishers who helped me to establish contact with the writers and to arrange my visits. Some of their warnings about the problems with violence, housing, food, travel, etc., within some of the islands were enough to alarm even the most stalwart adventurer. Others ominously predicted possible calamities arising from a host of individual aberrations of particular writers, ranging from alcoholism to lecherousness.

Luckily I found the writers to be surprisingly helpful and co-operative — and normal. They responded promptly and positively to my many letters; wrote or called immediately if any changes had to be made in our scheduled interviews; assisted me in making arrangements to travel to their homes and to contact other writers and scholars; met me at the airports; arranged to introduce me to key people in their countries who could assist me; took me to see certain significant attractions and sights; and frequently entertained me. In every island some of the writers made sure that I had the opportunity to learn and experience as much as possible about the cultural, the literary, and occasionally the political life of the area.

Only one writer stipulated a condition before he would agree to grant me an interview. In response to my first letter, Austin Clarke wrote: 'You have ranged far and wide to track me down. I received this note addressed to Yale University. It came this morning. You will have to provide me with two Virginia hams, one pepper-coated, the other sugar-coated, the cost of which I shall give you if your time and travel permit you to come here to Toronto. You'll be welcome if you brought the hams — COD!'

Before each interview I attempted to read everything written by and about the author. While this was at times an impossible goal, I was able to read all of the full-length published works by all except about three of the authors and most of the criticism done on their works. Often I was able to get manuscripts of unpublished works as well. During the interviews I talked with the writers about formative influences that helped them to develop as writers; their goals and concerns in their works; their views of the craft of writing and the role of the writer; controversies surrounding them and their work; their involvement in significant literary movements and activities at home and abroad, including festivals such as Carifesta; their founding of and contributions to significant journals; their views of the broad range of Caribbean and other literature; religious, economic, racial, sociological, and political events and problems in their homes and elsewhere; and a myriad of other subjects. Throughout each interview I attempted to pose questions that would elicit information that might be of interest and significance to the student of Caribbean literature. I avoided involving myself in any debates with the writers, though I did try to ask direct, pointed questions about controversial matters and to insist upon a response to contrary views.

The transcribing and preparing of the taped interviews for publication has been a

long and tedious task. It was a primary goal of mine to retain as much of the flavour and tone and rhythm and content of the interview as is possible in a transcription. Therefore the editing has been kept to an absolute minimum in order to allow the reader to share the full portrait of the author that emerges from an extensive candid conversation. I have attempted to avoid any tampering that might in any way alter the actual speech of the authors or destroy the informal, conversational tone of the interview. Occasionally some of the authors crossed into patois. I have attempted to transcribe such passages as accurately as possible. Within the dialogue there are a few incomplete, broken, and mixed sentences, which have been retained because there is some idea which the author was communicating that I did not wish to delete and which I could not presume to complete. Very often there are comments or questions which I pose that are repetitious, naive or downright ridiculous. I have chosen to leave them in the final manuscript for various reasons: they often elicit the kind of clarifications and information that the reader may also find helpful; the writer's response presents important material which would appear incoherent without the question; and/or I thought the reader might enjoy a good laugh at my *faux pas* as I often did when listening to these tapes. Except in the few instances in which the writers instructed me not to do so, I sent copies of the transcriptions of the conversations to each writer for his own editing, with the request that he keep such editing at a minimum to avoid altering the conversational tone of the interviews. Several writers made no changes; most made only a couple of actual corrections; a few did rather extensive editing. In almost every instance, whatever changes the writers suggested are reflected in this volume. Each interview is prefaced with a brief biographical sketch and a selective bibliography. More detailed bibliographical and critical materials can be found in what is almost a companion volume: *Fifty Caribbean Writers* published by Greenwood Press in 1986.

This project, to which I devoted most of my research time from 1978-1984 has been an exciting adventure, for it has included first of all the pleasure of discovering, for me, a new world of literature during its most illustrious period. The quality of contemporary West Indian literature is suggested by C. L. R. James's declaration, 'I do not know at the present time any country writing in English which is able to produce a trio of the literary capacity and effectiveness of Wilson Harris, George Lamming, and Vidia Naipaul.' [Ian Munro and Reinhard Sanders, 'Interviews with Three Caribbean Writers in Texas', *Kas-Kas*, University of Texas, 1972]. There is something absolutely fascinating about studying the works of a 'nation' during its most productive and eminent period and at the same time meeting the authors, who have a sense of themselves as, on the one hand, continuing a long literary and cultural tradition (largely Western and African) and, on the other hand, being a part of the beginning of an exciting new cultural development; writers who often view themselves as New Adams in a New World Eden, a fact that is symbolically reinforced by Walcott's

insistence that 'there are so many places that are virginal, really primal, in the Caribbean... so many places in St. Lucia where there has never been a human footprint... and if one can lift one's foot up sharply and put it down on that place the resonances of that are the same as the resonances that it meant for Adam to put his foot down in Eden.' [*New World Adams*, Interview with Walcott].

Daryl Cumber Dance