eISSN: 2254-1179
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14201/candb.v10i155-167

Writing the Queer Caribbean / Canada / Beyond – A Conversation with H. Nigel Thomas

Linzey Corridon

corridol@mcmaster.ca
McMaster University

Submitted: 31/07/21
Accepted: 08/04/22

ABSTRACT
H. Nigel Thomas is the writer of twelve books and a retired professor of American literature at Laval University. Born and raised in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, he moved to Montréal in 1968. Nigel's illustrious career includes short stories, poems and articles that have appeared in multiple journals and anthologies. His novels *Spirits in the Dark* and *No Safeguards* were shortlisted for the Quebec Writers Federation Hugh MacLennan Fiction Prize. *Des vies Cassées* (the translation of *Lives: Whole and Otherwise)* was shortlisted for le Prix Carbet des Lycéens. In this interview, Linzey Corridon explores queerness in the Caribbean Canadian diaspora, intergenerational queer subjectivities, multiculturalism, audience reception, publishing, and circulation in the Caribbean.

Keywords
St. Vincent; Queer; H. Nigel Thomas; Multiculturalism; Caribbean Canadians in Montreal.

Introduction

"What [we are] Overflows"

When the call for papers first appeared, I convinced myself that I would write a critical essay about the significant literary contributions of H. Nigel Thomas to

Caribbean and Canadian public spheres. A Vincentian who moved to Canada in 1968, Nigel represents the pinnacle of Vincentian and Caribbean scholarship. He remains a pioneer and a crucial cornerstone of Caribbean social thought and literary praxis. The *longue durée* that is his literary career is not only monumental in Vincentian and diaspora cultural histories; Nigel's work also remains fundamental to the study of queerness and the Caribbean because of the ways in which both his earliest and most recent writings continue to chart the slowly changing relationships between human beings and the worlds that they occupy. His literary pursuits investigate blackness, migranthood, spirituality and more. These subjects are explored via both adolescent and mature characters, through the most powerful and the most downtrodden beings in our societies, and through what is spoken and what remains unheard. Whether it be his latest foray into lyrical poetics with *The Voyage* (Mawenzi House, 2021), his contributions to exploring the significance of an African Canadian literary tradition in *Why We Write: Conversations with African Canadian Poets and Novelists* (TSAR Publications, 2006), or in his debut *Spirits in the Dark* (Anansi, 1993) which tells the story of one buller's[1] journey from innocence to experience, to further think and write alongside Nigel's contributions to Caribbean and Canadian writing is to challenge ourselves to not only honor his practice, but to also add to a culture of further critical and creative investigations into the human condition.

Rather than add to the lexicons of hegemonic scholarship, Nigel's work presents another legitimate avenue by which to honor and *contribute* to the many conversations that I, Nigel, and other Caribbean and Canadian writers and thinkers continue to have. To pen my own insights about Nigel's writings seems too narrow of an approach and contribution to a special issue journal focusing on the richness of Caribbean Canadian cultural productions. I asked myself *instead of writing a paper, what might manifest in my choosing to have a conversation with Nigel about some of the concerns that this special journal issue take up*? How might direct dialogue with the author further muddy or elucidate our individual, yet sometimes overlapping, insights? What might an exchange between two different generations of queer Vincentian men who moved to Canada (one making the move during the 1960s, the other in the 2010s) reveal about the categories of Caribbean and Canadian? How might both of our experiences—at once similar and differing— force readers to consider their own positionality in relation to concepts such as activism, culture, and diaspora? It is in pursuit of these overarching questions that I was led to collaborate with Nigel for this project.

1. A popular Caribbean term (derogatory in nature) used to refer to homosexual men.

The writings included here took place over a series of email exchanges between Nigel and me. We moved between formal and informal communication, tackling the questions which I had drafted in response to the call for papers, while also casually veering outside of the immediate confines of the project's subject matter in our responses. This formal-informal dialogic across digital space encapsulates the ease with which we (Caribbean people) sit together from time to time, reasoning about life. In talking (or typing) to one another over email a document has emerged that now sustains our musings beyond the initial period of contact. We have done all of this supposed talking without ever verbally uttering a single word to one another. I point this fact out to readers to suggest that ideas of discourse and a culture of orality remain complex issues for Caribbean and diaspora peoples. Being able to verbalize one's ideas is but a single dimension to the multi-faceted notion of Caribbean oral cultures. This document produced over email highlights yet another dimension to this culture. It is significant then that our email conversation appears in writing as a reminder to readers that while many in the diaspora are unable to have real-time conversations with one another (life in the diaspora often, and always intentionally, makes the goal of sustaining community challenging), there exist methods by which we might speak to one another through writing or recording our thoughts and ideas (what we would say if we had the real-time opportunity) for those who choose to listen. Our recent ancestors, if and when they could afford it, sustained conversations between Canada and the archipelago through snail mail that never arrived at the right time and over telephone calls that always ended too soon. Now, we have access to email and more immersive forms of community through conversation. To accumulate conversation through our writings further enriches both active and passive traceable oral histories of Caribbean and diaspora thought and praxis.

This newest collaboration between Nigel and me is only one of many ongoing conversations unfolding across Canada between Caribbean and non-Caribbean peoples. Other recent and important Caribbean Canadian scholarship on ideas of the conversation or the interview as a pedagogical tool and (re)membering include Rosamund Elwin's *Tongues on Fire: Caribbean Lesbian Lives and Stories* (Canadian Scholars' Press, 1997), Dr. Kofi Campbell's *The Queer Caribbean Speaks: Interviews with Writers, Artists, and Activists* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), plus numerous and ongoing collaborative projects by Dr. Ronald Cummings (McMaster University) and Dr. Nalini Mohabir (Concordia University). I invoke these scholars and their works here as a means of reinforcing that the labor presented in this critical piece remains a part of a greater movement to celebrate Caribbean and diaspora intellectual pursuits. This project is made up of voices. It also carries with it traces of the voiceless, an equal glimmer of hope and despair that acknowledges the past while holding space

for the future. Ultimately, our intellectual labor is meant to generate timely discussions pertaining to H. Nigel Thomas' ongoing critical contributions to shaping Black and queer Caribbean Canadian landscapes.

Musings

Linzey Corridon: I recently completed my reading of your latest novel *Easily Fooled* (2021) published through Guernica Editions. I must tell you how exciting it is to have access to a four-part literary saga about queer Caribbean lives, sexual and otherwise. This type of chronicling of the queer Caribbean-Canadian experience, the format of narrating these diverse but unarguably connected (hi)stories across several book-length works, it is quite uncommon in Caribbean and Canadian writing literary histories. What does it mean to you to explore the Caribbean, the queer, and diaspora experiences? Is there one that demands your attention more than another? If so, how does your literary practice address these demands?

H. Nigel Thomas: Inasmuch as we carry all our experiences in a single body and experience reality with the entire self, I cannot say that I rate the Caribbean, queer, and diasporic experiences differently. Of course, from a foundational standpoint, the Caribbean experiences that shaped and misshaped me function as a matrix. In the Caribbean, the way we are programmed to enact our humanity is one of my main preoccupations, inside and outside fiction. For example, I don't want to see a single child beaten at home or in school. I don't want children to be told that they are burdens and that their Africanness is some sort of innate liability. I don't want gifted children to be beaten or insulted into silence; I want to see their curiosity nourished. I would also like us to be more robust in our analysis of the colonial propaganda we imbibed and were forced to propagate for the benefit of Britain.

To be identified as queer in the Caribbean is to endure constant wounding, occasionally physical but constantly verbal. When one emigrates, how does s/he heal from this? Moreover, in the Caribbean diaspora, one encounters similar attitudes, which prolongs the trauma. Does one cut one's self off from the diaspora and sacrifice the nurture one finds there? Does one face the opprobrium and fight the inevitable bigotry? And how does one do so when so many of one's persecutors belong to Evangelical sects who think they've been divinely mandated to persecute queer-trans people?

The foregoing are issues that I address variously in my fiction. Since we respond individually to the phenomena affecting us, my characters have no single

way of dealing with these issues. In the Quartet,[2] my fictional strategy has been to create a few foundational, sometimes contrasting, characters that are present throughout and several minor characters who support or oppose them.

LC: When you talk about our need to thoroughly interrogate colonial propaganda, your use of the word "we" comes across as a bit ambiguous. What I mean by this is that I believe you are referring to the decolonial work that needs to be done by West Indians. That said and, correct me if I am wrong to assume this, I can't help but read into your use of "we" as signifying more than the decolonial work currently being carried out by West Indians. It is a "we" that demands of Homo Sapiens to collectively undo those benefits once hoarded by imperial superpowers. Is this a fair conclusion on my part? Is there more to your use of "we"?

HNT: Thanks for asking me to clarify the meaning of "we." Indeed, the decolonization struggle is an all-hands-on-deck undertaking. It would be naïve to think, however, that the current beneficiaries of colonial dispossession and rapine will join it. Everywhere they are busy rationalizing it. They no longer say their depredations were to "civilize the natives," because the historical facts, which they once had the power to suppress, are now known, and, as is the case in Canada, acknowledged. Germany has gone further. It offered 1.1 billion Euros to Namibia as well as an apology for the genocide committed against the Herero people in the early 20th century. Of course, as the president of Namibia said, money cannot atone for the horror the Namibians endured. It will never erase the intergenerational pathology colonialism inflicted in places like Australia and Canada. In the Caribbean the most visible aspect of this is our contempt for our Africanness. More generally, the earlier colonial attitudes are now present in the form of systemic racism that brings with it a panoply of attitudes and assumptions that result in the marginalization of Black and Brown peoples.

LC: I think of many of your literary pursuits as both writing and activism. From your continued fictional writings, and I am thinking here especially about the *No Safeguards* quartet, that draws our attention to the more sinister role of Christian religion in the Caribbean quotidian, to your equally unfiltered and witty engagement with both Canadian and Caribbean political realities in *Moving Through Darkness* (AFO, 1999), your literary career carries with it activist

2. The Quartet includes a series of four novels published by Guernica editions: *No Safeguards* (2015), *Fate's Instruments* (2018), *Easily Fooled* (2021), and a forthcoming fourth and final novel.

undertones. Do you consider your literary pursuits as a form of activism? If so, how did you arrive at a space of doing activist work in the diaspora?

HNT: I have always been uncomfortable with the term literary activism. My characters deal with the challenges life throws at them. They are like real-life queer-trans people who want to be understood and left alone to pursue their dreams (which may include advocating for legal and social justice), and they battle to remove the hurdles their haters erect. To illustrate what I mean, in the Quartet, my character Neil, who seems androgynous in appearance, is shown from time but I keep him mysterious. I show the ordeal he endures—he refuses to be a victim—but I do so only from the outside because I do not know him. All I can accomplish with him is to show the casual cruelty West Indians employ when dealing with those they've othered. He succumbs to mental illness. No one, not even Millington and Jay, attributes it to the persecution he suffers. The community thinks his illness is a punishment from God, because, in their words, he sought to be a priest without an authentic call from God. I show similar persecution with my character Stilford in *Easily Fooled* and in my earlier novels: *Spirits in the Dark* and *Return to Arcadia*. It is endemic to the point that even gay characters on the down-low who engage in it, are expected to engage in it.

Fiction is futile for activism. Pathetically so, if it's focused on the Caribbean. There are too few readers of elementary expository prose (we are reverting to oral-aural cultures) and even fewer for complex prose fiction. I don't think I've ever sold more than fifty copies of any of my books in the entire Caribbean.

LC: I am moved by your honesty in response to my question on literary activism. I fixate on your final admission about selling 50 books at a time back in St. Vincent, for example. To me those are 50 copies that end up in different households. Each reader then internalizes your writing, becoming both a reader and an orator of the narratives you create. I believe that a (re)turn to oral-aural culture might yield particular benefits still for West Indians who cannot access literature in the ways that the persons purchasing your books can. So, there seems to be a subtle and ongoing connection at play between Caribbean diaspora literary productions and our obsession with print culture, and the ever-increasing turn towards orality in the Caribbean. Would you agree that the material cultural production offered up by Caribbean diaspora, Canada being one major producer, remains useful to citizens of the archipelago, even with the decreasing numbers of immediate or readily accessible readers?

HNT: I am not sufficiently versed in the sort of oral culture West Indians consume to undertake any sort of in-depth analysis of it. But I know that almost all of it is audiovisual (with all the intellectual drawbacks of audiovisual works,

chief of which is intellectual laziness) and the focus is on entertainment, usually to entice the audience to buy products, to further the consumer society. Since those products rarely originate in the Caribbean, this sort of entertainment is another manifestation of the protean properties of colonialism—some would say economic and cultural imperialism. When oral culture was Indigenous, it taught the mores of the group and inculcated its ethics. Today's oral culture is imported. It entertains by diversion, a forgetting of the self. Serious literature, on the other hand, incites reflection.

Diasporic artists will create even against great odds and hope there is an audience for their works. Most people who paint do so for pleasure. Publishers accept manuscripts at the rate of one per thousand. But people continue to write because it's a privileged space to meditate on humanity. It would be a bonus if Caribbean countries were to embrace their authors, but without that embrace those driven to write will continue to do so.

LC: As someone who is still relatively new to the lands known as Canada, I find myself thinking more and more about how the land and my experiences of Canada now transform my own work about the queer Caribbean and diaspora experience. For example, I have been playing with ecopoetry as a way of coming to terms with the feelings of sociocultural hybridity I now carry within me. I believe that it is paramount for young West Indian immigrant settlers to take the time to recognize that they occupy these lands, but to also work towards fostering a culture of reciprocity between themselves and the land. How has life in Canada impacted your relations to the land in North America, but also to the land in your native country of St. Vincent and the Grenadines?

HNT: I am glad I came to live in Canada. Its seasons, which are radically different from anything I experienced in the Caribbean, have imbued me with a profound understanding of the circularity existing within linearity. The yearly cyclical permutations in the vegetation never cease to awe me. I've always loved nature—I began to cultivate flowers from the age of six, and even as a child loved to be alone in the mountains—but here I learned to venerate nature and to understand it in the profoundest of ways, to the point of knowing how much more superior trees are to me. In the process I cemented a feeling of kinship with writers like H. D. Thoreau and William Wordsworth, writers who understood the healing power of nature.

But nature isn't prelapsarian Eden. My approach to it—and to life in general—is biological. I have little patience for phenomena that eschew the biological smell test. It largely explains my characters' rejection of Orthodox Christianity.

Before I left St. Vincent, I knew that Canada had much to offer in tertiary education that materially impoverished St Vincent couldn't. I knew vaguely that

Canada was a wealthy country with vast natural resources and that, in alliance with Europe and the United States, it exploited weaker countries. Once I got here, I understood that the label Black immigrant meant that White Canadians perceived me as a member of those groups they've designated as cheap labour. I would soon learn that Euro-Canadians resent successful non-white immigrants. This led me to explore with Bakhtinian dialogic vigour the meaning of terms like Third World, Developing Countries, colonization, slavery, the proletariat—and certainly European settler communities' treatment of Indigenous populations—which takes me to your next question.

LC: Much of your intellectual work, and correct me if I am wrong, is concerned with recording and articulating Black Caribbean and diaspora experiences. Writing Blackness, in any setting, is no small feat. We find ourselves living on unceded Indigenous territory, in a Canadian society that champions queer liberation narratives, while also failing to effectively grapple with its own brand of politely potent anti-queerness and structured racism. How has such a trifecta of realities impacted your writing of Blackness and migrant narratives?

HNT: At the core of my writing, even though this might not be evident, is the question: who are we? (Who should perhaps be what). I see colonization as a reflection of human greed and power—and all the lies, including the creation of a chauvinistic god, that justify it. The term unceded implies that there is ceded territory; and on paper, a small quantity of it is. But they are treaties that were undertaken with chicanery and signed under duress, and therefore shouldn't be considered legal. The creation of the reservations is the real story for me. These were de facto prisons governed by Indian Agents; i.e. Euro-Canadian men charged with preventing movement outside of them. The best analogy today would be Gaza. Missionaries abounded in the reservations to cleanse Indigenous peoples of their pagan ways. In the meantime, governments could proceed with populating the rest of the land with, in Emma Lazarus' words, "the wretched refuse teeming on [Europe's shores]."[3] South Africa followed Canada's example and decreed that only three percent of its land mass belonged to its Indigenous populations. Whether by decree or slaughter, usually both, the result was that everywhere Europeans settled the Indigenous populations were deprived of their lands and forced to labour for the settlers. Categorized as primitives and savages (in need of redemption, whatever that was), in Kipling's words as "half-devil and half-child,"[4] Indigenous peoples faced a second assault. This

3. A reference to Emma Lazarus' famous 1883 Petrarchan sonnet "The New Colossus."
4. A reference to Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" (1899).

time it was on their psyches. Here in Canada, it was termed taking the Indian out of the child.[5] In effect, it meant erasing the child's culture and implanting the colonizer's. It was forced psychic matricide. Those subjected to it could only emerge with a hatred for themselves and their people, and a deep sense of worthlessness and psychic instability. It's no accident that the survivors of residential schools have been traumatized and have gone on to traumatize others.

I have reflected many times (in my journals mostly) on the fact that I have lived both here and in St Vincent on terms established by colonizers. My initial reason for coming here was to attend university. The British colony I grew up in was interested chiefly in how Britons could benefit from my labour. Tertiary education did not promote the colonial project. Cheap labour for the cultivation of sugar, arrowroot, cocoa, and coconuts did. But I would soon discover that the common Canadian perception was that Brown and Black peoples should be assigned to low-wage, unskilled, dangerous, and dirty work that Euro-Canadians spurn. Unlike South Africa, where such a perception was coded into law, here it was de facto custom. Schools, unions, and governments promoted it, and employers enforced it.

Astonishingly, even so, Canada's laws and the ethics deriving therefrom were framed by the Enlightenment doctrine that all humans are created equal. My sojourn of more than 50 years here has been in large measure my witnessing of Canada's attempt to make the doctrine of human equality a lived reality. We see these changes in LGBTQ+ rights, abortion rights, the rights of children as well as a willingness now to acknowledge the wrongs committed against the Indigenous population. But the damage done in earlier times is with us, and the attitudes that promoted cultural rape and land theft are still with us. It's imperative that we join forces with those seeking to remedy the depredations of the past and to prevent them from happening in the present. Many of these issues preoccupy my fictional characters.

LC: Your collection of conversations with African Canadian poets and novelists in *Why We Write* (TSAR, 2006) is 15 years old this year. In your introduction to *Why We Write*, you share a candid experience with your readers about once being asked to speak in detail about the existence of an African Canadian

5. A reference to one of Sir John A. McDonald's many views on the "Indian problem" in Canada. In a speech on May 28, 2015, Supreme Court Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin invokes McDonald's words as she critiques Canada's historically poor treatment of Indigenous peoples. See https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/chief-justice-says-canada-attempted-cultural-genocide-on-aboriginals/article24688854/ for further insights on Justice Mclachlin's speech.

aesthetic. Your resolve to try and investigate further whether or not there was an African Canadian aesthetic at the time makes me wonder about the possibilities for differing branches, if we could think of these other aesthetics as branches, of the African Canadian aesthetic. I cannot help but wonder if there exists a clear Caribbean-Canadian aesthetic. Kaie Kellough was awarded the 2020 Griffin Poetry Prize for his third collection *Magnetic Equator* (McClelland & Stewart, 2019). Canisia Lubrin was awarded the 2021 Windham-Campbell poetry Prize this past March, and the Griffin poetry prize in June of 2021 for her collection *The Dyzgraphxst* (McClelland & Stewart, 2020). Dionne Brand was also recently awarded the 2021 Windham-Campbell prize for fiction. Right now, it seems to me that the Global North is captivated with the work of Caribbean diasporic writers and thinkers. Do you believe that there exists a Caribbean Canadian aesthetic? How does this aesthetic differ from the African Canadian one that preoccupied your thinking during the creation of *Why We Write*?

HNT: When we add a new element to a set, we automatically alter it (to what degree depends on the set's ability to absorb it). In that sense one could argue that the lineaments for a Caribbean-Canadian aesthetic exists. But it might be a protean task for the scholar who undertakes to define it. My own ruminations on the topic have led me to call myself multicultural. I am the sum of all that I have learned and experienced, and that has come from multiple places and cultures.

I'll maintain that an argument can still be made for an African Canadian literary aesthetic on the basis of the themes found in Black Canadian literature. It's almost impossible for a Black writer who is focused on the portrayal of Black ontology in Canada to ignore the impact of white supremacy. While it is true that most of Canada's Black authors have Caribbean antecedents, I still believe that there are not enough of us to constitute a distinct branch of Canadian literature. I much prefer a literature that brings different Black perspectives to the table: Pan-Caribbean, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Africadian, Prairie, African American, Pacific.

LC: You were one of the artist-activists interviewed in Dr. Kofi Campbell's groundbreaking collection of interviews, *The Queer Caribbean Speaks: Interviews with Writers, Artists, and Activists* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). In fact, yours is the first chapter that readers encounter when interacting with Dr. Campbell's text. You spoke briefly, and I quite enjoyed the way that you phrased your point, of a kind of muted optimism for the future of same-sex peoples in the West Indies. You also spend ample time in your interview with Dr. Campbell ruminating on your experiences since moving to Montréal, Québec. I have always been intrigued by your sociopolitical trajectory as a writer. I am thinking more specifically of the geopolitical sites that you come to occupy all at once, namely spaces in the Caribbean, English Canada, but as importantly in French Canada.

Lives Whole and Otherwise (TSAR, 2010), one of your short story collections, has been translated into French by Mémoire D'Encrier publishers for the education and enjoyment of French language consumers. Your ability to move between Anglophone and Francophone Global North and South spaces is representative of another form of hybridity that many Caribbean writers don't have access to during their lifetime. As someone who also moves through these two geopolitical spaces with some ease, my thinking with the Caribbean can no longer stem from a singular place or space of anglophone histories and epistemologies. How has your immersion into French Canadian society impacted your development as a citizen of the anglophone Caribbean, but also as a literary figure over the span of your career? Would you say that life in French Canada has shaped your practice in unique ways?

HNT: I think you've just made the best argument for why I should see myself as multicultural. I have been privileged to make a few wise decisions in my life. Mastering French is one of them. I made it quite early, and it is one reason why I did not leave Montréal in the early years. There's a cornucopia of artistic production here: literature, theatre, the visual arts … available in both languages, and I enjoy as much of it as time permits.

My knowledge of French enables me to participate in forums that aren't available to unilingual Anglophones. My knowledge of Spanish has opened up other cultural spaces too. I always wanted to be polyglot, but alas …

LC: Multicultural and not Caribbean Canadian. Just fascinating insights, truly. Your last two responses have drawn on ideas of the multicultural. I don't believe that I have spoken to another Caribbean migrant living in Canada who has used multicultural as a way to categorize the self in equally material and immaterial ways. It also seems to me that you have given quite some thought to this idea before settling on the term multicultural. I am curious. Do you perceive any immediate disadvantages to thinking of the Caribbean self, in the context of Canada and its pseudo-benevolent, dominant narratives of multiculturalism, as purely multicultural?

HNT: You frame the question as if multicultural is a negative, restrictive trope. My description of myself as multicultural has nothing to do with political multiculturalism. I am sure that I have a journal entry somewhere that reflects on human growth—or growth on the part of living things. In the case of trees, such growth is visible on the outside; in the case of humans, it's internal and occurs in the form of knowledge. The greatest value of knowledge about the human condition is the infinite number of nuances that it brings to what we think we already know. Today it's taken for granted that the rich and complex humanistic knowledge that

came out of the Mediterranean was the result of three continents offering their intellectual riches to the thinkers of the day. Most of the valuable knowledge that I possess comes from my interaction with other cultures, directly and indirectly. That knowledge has shaped who I am today. It is for this reason that I define myself as multicultural. Multicultural need not exclude Caribbean Canadian. I am not using the term to obscure my Afro-Caribbeanity. However, I know that what I am overflows—or has expanded—the perimeter of Caribbean Canadian. I could easily have defined myself as an earthling who searches in the world's myths and folklore for an understanding of what an earthling is and who, hopefully, continues to be shaped by the best of what he discovers. A Caribbean recipe that now contains ingredients from around the world is it still a Caribbean recipe?

LC: The form of the interview, in my opinion, holds a crucial power for Caribbean writers and thinkers in Canada and the US. I am thinking back to your own labors in organizing *Why We Write*, but also the labor of Dr. Campbell in *The Queer Caribbean Speaks*. I look to Thomas Glave's *Our Caribbean* (Duke, 2008) and Rosamund Elwin's *Tongues on Fire* (Canadian Scholars' Press, 1997) and observe the labor of gathering, the labor or rooting and routing Caribbeanity inside and outside of North America. I think of the work I am committed to realizing with your help through this project, and I can't help but feel like a link in what remains an ongoing chain of artists doing their part to sustain Caribbean ontological discourses outside of the archipelago. Collaboration is a key component in that work of sustaining one another. To collaborate, in a way, is to recover aspects of our experience from the archipelago, but also to recover those iterations of the Caribbean self across North American landscapes. How do you respond to such a thought? Is recovery a key feature of Caribbean-Canadian literary projects? How do you deploy recovery as a tool in your own works? Does the form of the interview or the conversation still appeal to you 15 years after the first appearance of *Why We Write*?

HNT: If most fiction writers are like me, they forget about literary theory and let their imaginations take them where it will. The interview, when it is conducted by interviewers who've read and reflected on the authors' works, offers opportunities to authors to reflect on the broader implications of what they've written. A good reader sees patterns in the authors' corpus and may help them see links between their lived reality and the products of their imagination. Of course, the literary critic goes further, and this is where your project on Caribbeanity seems pertinent.

Caribbeanity is not a subject I've given much thought to in recent times, although all of my novels and many of my short stories are set wholly or partially in the Caribbean. I was completely preoccupied with Caribbeanity when I wrote my first novel, which originated with the question: who is a West Indian?

I know now that *Spirits in the Dark* is a dialogical novel that examines the battle between Europe and Africa for Jerome's soul. The change now may be because I perceive my characters primarily as existentialists—like myself—i.e., as individuals trying to maintain their integrity while negotiating their way through life. That said, literature is where the collectivity finds a record of its psychic history. It's one reason that oral societies are put in disarray when their lore and art is depreciated or destroyed. It's possible that discerning Caribbean readers of my corpus might find something of that psychic history there. But when I create, it's because I'm under the tyranny of my imagination.

Certainly, there's much to be said about the contribution to Caribbean literature by the Caribbean diaspora writers living in Canada. Distance—either because what we know is handed down via our migrant parents and the community they interact with, or because we no longer live in the Caribbean and can evaluate it with an enlarged vision—offers a fresh perspective. I often say that in a closed room the inhabitants are smug, comfortable, and secure, but it takes an outsider to note the stench. An interesting study might actually be how the works by expatriate Caribbean authors differ from authors who never leave. Of course, I base this on the notion that the place one inhabits and the people one interacts with influence one's perceptions.

LC: Traditionally, the space given to POC writers and thinkers has been limited when marketing and publishing their work. We've talked briefly about the recent increase of literary acknowledgement and success amongst Caribbean writers in Canada. Is there a particular Caribbean-Canadian literary project or experience that you would like to see represented more in the literary marketplace? This may be an experience that you cannot articulate yourself for a litany of reasons. If so, why?

HNT: Perhaps the one I mentioned in the foregoing paragraph. I would love to see some sort of convergence between diasporic and resident Caribbean authors. Beyond the details that provide the texture for our texts, we are involved in exploring the larger human project: the search for a more humane world. Of course, a Euro-Canadian author might say: but that too is what motivates us. And my reply would be, indeed. All literature that's based on humanist concerns has the common goal of wanting to see a more just and equal society and human beings with greater awareness of themselves and others.