

An Interview with Fred D'Aguiar

FRANK BIRBALSINGH

You were born in London, in 1960, of Guyanese parents; then in 1962 you were taken to Guyana, where you remained until 1972 when you went back to London. While you were at school in Guyana, do you recall any influences that may have led to your writing poetry?

Yes, I remember an East Indian teacher . . . read poetry and nursery rhymes to us and would get us to say things from memory. There was also my grandfather [on my mother's side] who liked Tennyson and Victorian poetry—Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. He was a merchant seaman who would be away for long periods when he would learn poetry by heart, and recite it to us from memory when he came home. The radio also had a powerful influence on us. We listened to calypsos and learned them by heart. For instance, we learned all of Sparrow's calypso tunes by heart. So, alongside heraldic English poetry with its Tennysonian, Victorian metres, we also had some crude creole poetry bursting over the airwaves into our ears.

Did you see any local writing—by Martin Carter or A. J. Seymour, for instance?

I know from talking to other Guyanese, that people used to recite Martin Carter's poems at street corners, and dramatists would practise reading his poems as a way of presenting their own work. But it didn't filter down to us in school. I don't think my grandfather would have countenanced anyone mentioning Martin Carter in the same breath as Tennyson.

What happened when you returned to London in 1972?

My parents' marriage had dissolved, and we [children] came back to a house with one parent. It wasn't as distressing as it might have been, partly because of the newness of England. Our Guyanese relatives had always made us feel that we were English children waiting to be sent home to England. We enjoyed all the novelties of England, although we missed relatives back in Guyana. After my A-level school exams, I went into psychiatric nursing for three years before going on to university.

It sounds like a big change from psychiatric nursing to university and, I presume, an arts degree?

I'm glad it happened that way because by the time I came to re-apply to university, after nursing, I had heard about the University of Kent's course in African and Caribbean literature—it was quite new then—and I went for that instead. There was nothing else to do but read and write while I was nursing. I knew by then that I'd be a poet of some kind.

When did you begin writing poetry?

At secondary school.

Was there any encouragement from teachers?

I had a couple of very good English teachers at secondary school. They got me involved in the school magazine, and I edited one issue of it with a lot of poetry. But I never thought of black subjects or West Indian things like carnival as subjects to write about.

How did you respond to university?

Valerie Bloom was in her last or second last year at Kent when I arrived there. She was already known as a poet. I had published one or two poems in magazines, and people were talking about me as one of the up-and-coming Caribbean writers. There was also the whole canon of Brathwaite and Walcott that I was furiously reading through. But, before that, I had already started reading people like Lamming when I was a psychiatric nurse. I worked my way through Caribbean literature, re-familiarizing myself with the region in a strange way, because I had been away

from it for all those years in London while I was at secondary school. I also read African American novels, for example, *The Invisible Man* [1952] by Ralph Ellison.

And [James] Baldwin?

Yes, I read Baldwin with great excitement: his essays were very strong.

Apart from Valerie Bloom, was there anyone else at university that you met or whose work caught your interest?

Sandra Agard was known as a black woman poet in London in the mid-1980s, and she was at Kent. Achebe's two children were also studying there at the time. Achebe and other writers visited and read from their work. So, there was a feeling of something exciting happening. I had not read African literature until I took the course for which I applied and opened *Things Fall Apart*. The course introduced me to Ama Ata Aidoo, Ayi Kwei Armah, and other writers. It tied culture and history with literature, so the literature wasn't taken out of context.

That was quite an awakening obviously. It must have influenced you during university and perhaps immediately afterwards.

Mama Dot [London: Chatto & Windus, 1985] came out while I was just finishing my degree at Kent. I got a first class degree and applied to do a Ph.D. on Wilson Harris at the University of Warwick. I was going to work with Michael Gilkes who wrote a very good study of Harris. But in trying to make ends meet, I got diverted, and did a writer-in-residency, part-time, at Birmingham Polytechnic. Immediately after that, a writer-in-residency came up at Cambridge University, where I spent another year. By that time, Wilson Harris studies had receded from my mind, and I was writing all the time.

Both Mama Dot and Airy Hall [London: Chatto & Windus, 1989] are divided into three parts of which the first is biographical, dwelling, for example, on aspects of Mama Dot's life and character; the second is more general, commenting on the society and people; while the third reflects on the whole experience of the society and all that is involved therein. Is that more or less how the structure of these two volumes works?

Yes. I had a body of poems that I made up around the character of Mama Dot, who was slightly larger than life, and I found other poems for example, "Dreadtalk" [28-31] which is a long, creole-type poem about Britain. There were other characters and poems which didn't quite fit into the Mama Dot body of poems because they were more overtly political or seemed to be doing other things. Then the third part looked back at the whole experience of childhood. I was particularly interested in literacy in that long poem "Guyanese Days" that forms Part Three [43-48]. I had an awareness of being caught up in the sounds, smells, and innocence of running around in Airy Hall [a village on the Atlantic coast of Guyana], which didn't quite mix with the formality of having to learn to read and write. The sensual experiences didn't seem to correspond with trying to write on a slate in a sequential way. I remember also the feeling of liberation when I did learn to read; so I tried in "Guyanese Days" to look at the notion of someone who is aware of the printed page while being steeped in an oral culture, at the contrast between the two.

I think that "Guyanese Days" fully captures the day-to-day actuality of the life you are describing. I can relate it back to my own experience in Guyana in the 1940s and 1950s.

Country life is country life.

It is earthy and vigorous—the same for Zola's peasants as for Chekhov's muziks. So there is no intentional meaning in your three-part structure.

No, I didn't consciously think of innocence, experience, death, or anything like that. I had a body of poems which just put themselves in that sort of order. The same is true for my *Airy Hall* sequence in which I examine place. The poems all work together.

I divide your poems into three categories, the first of which is political. This includes poems in which you make observations about life in Guyana under [Forbes] Burnham. For instance, in "El Dorado Update" [32-35] you talk sneeringly about the "fowl coop republic" [35], and mockingly ask, "what people, what nation, what destiny?" [35]. In "Letter from Mama Dot" [20-21] you have such lines as "With all the talk of nationality we still hungry" [20] and, "People are stabbing one another for a place" [20] in a queue. Such lines express great disappointment in

Independence. In fact, in the same poem you write: "Since independence / This country hasn't stopped stepping back" [20]. Surely Guyanese had a right to expect that Independence would benefit them. Yet this has not happened. You record the continuing suffering and deprivation of Guyanese under Burnham; but you do not condemn anyone. I am struck by the absence of any instinct to blame. Your quiet recording of the human toll of Guyanese politics suggests deep and genuine affection for the victims—a firm bond of unspoken communal solidarity with them. But you don't cry out.

You draw your own conclusion, I think. In writing about politics, I felt I should try and step back from any emotional attempt to lay blame or responsibility. I felt there are other forms of writing where that could be done more properly. The appeal of a poem should be in the way the images work. Sentiment would have to be kept under tight rein if I were to communicate a sense of hunger, distress, deprivation, inhumanity, or injustice, and communicate it in a way that was loyal to poetry-making. I felt if I were loyal to certain rules in poetry, I would better serve the community about which I was writing. One of the rules was not to stand on a soap box, because people might stop listening. Another was that people who heard my message might be the very people who perpetrated the terrible things I described, and might not want to listen if I judged them: I didn't want to cast the first stone. I felt there would be no progress if I took sides. Besides, I was interested in the lyrical line. I like poetry which will both sound good and prove to be memorable; and I do try to secrete one or two overt political phrases in the course of my poems, which show clearly that I am not sitting on the fence.

My second category includes what I call evocative poems, for example, "Mama Dot Warns Against an Easter Rising" [17] and particularly "Guyanese Days." In these poems, or in "Airy Hall" [9] and "Airy Hall Wash-Boy" [12], you present everyday occurrences or scenes and evoke their uniquely Guyanese or Caribbean qualities, that is to say, their openness, freshness, and lack of restrictive conventions. More than thirty years ago I recall Selvon, Salkey, Carew, Lamming, and other Caribbean writers using West Indian speech and local experiences in somewhat

exotic fashion because they aimed their work at an English audience. Do you write with a particular audience in mind?

When I wrote these poems I didn't think of an audience; I wrote them for a personal, or selfish reason. I'd seen Airy Hall change beyond recognition, so I tried in my poems to rescue a place which I had in my head and heart, but which didn't exist anymore. Each memory is exactly as I remember it when I was there, and each now has an emotional weight for me, because I played in those trees and ran on that red sand road, which is now paved, while the trees have been cut down. I was aware of creating an emotional map of a place and of superimposing it on a geography that no longer existed. My second reason for writing is that I realized that all black British children would know was Britain — they may have an inkling of another place, of Caribbean music, reggae, or of stories heard from their parents—but they would not have first-hand experience of them. I had ten years in the Caribbean, and those impressions were clearly in my head; but they were colliding with English rhythms. I therefore have a twin heritage—literature written by other Caribbean writers about a Caribbean setting that I know, and literature about an English landscape or location. In my poems I wanted to put the two against each other. I wanted to use an English way of speaking that went back to Wordsworth and before, and set against it a countrified, Guyanese experience, including the creole language.

They fit together very well, with the creole language adding colour and texture to the standard English and creating a mixed medium that is true to its subject and coherent at the same time. Basically, it is the contact between England and the Caribbean that you are recording. But you have an insider's viewpoint that Selvon, Salkey, and the earlier writers did not have. This is an advantage that you have over these earlier writers. You also have an advantage over younger Caribbean writers living in the diaspora because of your first-hand Caribbean experience during those ten childhood years in Guyana.

I had come through the late 1970s when there were racial riots in England, for example, at Notting Hill. These riots made everyone aware of a young black population that was growing up in

England. Then, in 1981, the Brixton riots were even more disastrous, and affected black communities right across the country. By then, people were talking about the black British experience, so I couldn't pretend that black Caribbean immigrants living in Britain did not form a unique community. At the same time, leaving the Caribbean and coming to Britain wasn't like leaving one planet and going to the next; there was direct continuity between the two places. I had to try to bring that home to the children of Caribbean immigrants in Britain who did not know the Caribbean.

That gives you a role as interpreter or arbitrator, someone who can bring two opposed sides together. But in a poem like "Guyanese Days," you mention "coconuts banging grooves in the mud," "a Downs-tree," "splintery plimplers," "a stinging marabunta" [43], and so on. What effect do such expressions have on your [white] English readers who, I believe, are still your main audience?

I don't have footnotes; but I expect that interested readers could find out about those things or look them up in a dictionary. All those things were part of my childhood experience. I was preoccupied with childhood as an experience that was lost and replaced by adult life. I knew from Wordsworth's *Prelude*, and other similar works, for instance, Derek Walcott's *Another Life*, that writers appear to go through a period where they have to assess their early years in order to move on, or at least use the assessment as a yardstick to judge other things. When I was writing about childhood, even though I was specific about Guyana, I knew I was on a big, wide field with many other players. So I didn't feel I was being exotic or marginal at all. I just felt that I had to be specific.

But when you mention a "train-crushed knife" [44] in "Guyanese Days," the phrase cannot communicate to an English reader what it communicates to me. Maybe it is similar to our reading of poems like Wordsworth's sonnet "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802" when we were at school in the Caribbean, or to your grandfather's response when he recited Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott." I believe that these works, like many others, evoke a local as well as universal level of response, and just as West Indians might have failed to pick up the local level of response in

some traditional English poems, English readers may now have difficulty in picking up the local references in your work. In your creole language poems—my third category—which have the strongest local flavour, for example, “Dreadtalk,” “Mama Dot Warns Against an Easter Rising,” and “El Dorado Update” one can’t miss the outspoken earthiness of the Caribbean language, which acquires force, again largely local in character, through its incorporation of oral elements—popular songs and calypsos—and references to political events and personalities. Your creole poems will appeal most powerfully to readers whose first language is creole, but that shouldn’t make them totally inaccessible to other readers.

I was aware of holding a microphone in “El Dorado Update” to a place that had gone down the road of destitution. I wanted to record the spirit of that experience, so I surrendered my pen to those people to try and get their own phrasings, the exact things they were saying. Then I had to put all those voices together in some kind of order. It is different from my usual method of finding an image of my own that would channel the people’s thoughts and emotions. Here, I did it the other way around: I found a phrase from the community and tried to see if it carried my thoughts and feelings—I was trying to be more loyal to the group I was describing.

Loyalty comes through both volumes—a genuine sense of affection or delight in your Guyanese origin, despite those unpleasant aspects of it that you report. It is not a lyrical evocation like Laurie Lee’s autobiographical Cider with Rosie [1959].

Actually nostalgia is a pitfall. Another pitfall is an over-lyrical way of writing that romanticizes one’s material. I try to avoid those two problems by giving my writing a hard edge all the time. Whenever I find myself being over lyrical, I introduce political observation, or something that is slightly harder.

Your poems in both books are indeed hard-edged, conveying sentiment without being sentimental. You reproduce concrete experience frankly, without frills. To achieve this you use varied techniques and forms. Some stanzas are three lines, some two lines, and some five or six lines. Where do your techniques and forms come from? Are you aware of consciously responding to specific writers, styles, or principles?

From Milton's *Paradise Lost* I get a sense of the poet speaking to a multitude about man's first disobedience and other subjects of equally grand importance and weight. That's one strain of voice in me. Then I sometimes hear a less public voice like Philip Larkin's which I just happen to overhear because it is fine, domestic, and very quiet, expressing itself in small sayings and throw-away phrases, which undermine and work against the lofty, heraldic Miltonic voice. In addition to these voices, and those of contemporary figures from the recent past—Yeats and Eliot, principally—I also hear Claude McKay whose poetry and novels I very much like, especially his early volumes of poetry, *Songs of Jamaica* [1912] and *Constabulary Ballads* [1912]. In everything I write, I'm pushing against what's been done before. Of course, in writing "Mama Dot Warns Against an Easter Rising," the line lengths were dictated by breath. The line "Doan raise no kite is good friday" [17] has a natural length based on how Mama Dot would say it.

It is based on Guyanese speech rhythms that we immediately recognize.

Exactly. There was nothing telling me to include two or five beats per line. As to the form, I knew I wanted to tell a story. As long as it took to tell the story, that's how long the poem would be. Then the language had to be creole to be plausible in terms of the character and her environment; it couldn't be in standard English. Those are the kinds of rules I followed. The community I was observing was not a literary community; it was essentially oral based. My poems have many sources, some literary, some based on experience, and others made up or imagined.

But the fact that you can consider Guyanese subjects so naturally in poems published in England seems a phenomenon in itself. Selvon, Salkey, Lamming, and the others could not write as naturally in the 1950s.

The difference between Selvon and myself is that I do not have to explain everything. Selvon was creating an audience as he wrote. In other words, his story had to have all the necessary constituents to make it understood by an audience who had no idea where it was coming from. Today, after Selvon has written in that

way, I know that I can take a number of things for granted. There is now an audience for my writing, and I know they will take the trouble to find out things they do not understand in my poems. Also, there is more knowledge about the West Indies from newspapers, television, and travel. Derek Walcott said that in his day the only fruit he could put in his poems was an apple; he couldn't put a mango, for instance. I was stunned, because by the time I came to write *Mama Dot* in 1985, I could mention mango and apple in the course of a poem without any trouble. That shows how things have changed in one generation. In the book I am now writing, *British Subjects* [due in 1993], I'm trying to discuss Caribbean experience as part of a British cultural identity. Nowadays Caribbean culture in Britain is no longer exotic, marginal, remembered, or in the process of being introduced to a host nation. The British host identity itself actually consists of Caribbean elements.

Contemporary British culture has Caribbean components in the same way that it has Jewish, Asian, or Greek Cypriot components, and even as it has older regional variations in Cornwall, Wales, or Yorkshire.

Absolutely. Now poems can mention all those tropical Caribbean fruits because they are available in stalls and supermarkets all over London. In my writing, I have to respond to changing attitudes toward the Caribbean.

In doing that, you are acknowledging the evolution of a Caribbean literary tradition in which one generation uses their social and cultural conditions and sources to create literature, and in the process stimulate interest in their subject and find an audience for it; then, a later generation builds on what they have created. By writing as you do, you are being truthful to your time, place, and experience. You don't write like Selvon or Walcott; you write like someone from your generation. But is it not realistic to expect that the purely Caribbean characteristics of your generation—in England, Canada, and America—will tend to diminish through inter-marriage and other factors? What implications might this have for Caribbean art and literature?

Wilson Harris, who has been in England for forty years, still maintains that he's writing from the margin, which means he has

brought a perspective to English letters which could not have come out of England. The difference between Harris and myself is that whereas I belong in England where I have put down roots, I'm still being made to feel like an alien. I also have a language which appears to belong in Brixton market or places like that. I come up against BBC English, the Queen's English, or whatever language holds sway and power. In that sense, my Caribbean language works like any regional dialect in England, whether it is in Yorkshire, Liverpool, or Wales. This means that I still feel a sense of being on the margin, and still have an adversarial relationship with England. But the values have changed slightly from those encountered by Harris, because I am now located in England. Although I still have to fight a David and Goliath kind of battle with an official or dominant opposition, my Goliath is no longer remote and out of reach.

In the days of Harris and Selvon, it was essentially a colonial relationship, and the British Goliath was way out of reach. First, one had to make the long, sea journey to come to his land. Second, one was always excluded, and felt excluded while living there. But, as you say, you have a legitimate claim to Goliath's home space, where the centre of power exists. Your relationship does not carry quite the alienating, obliterating force of colonial exclusion; it is one of several regional sub-cultures in Britain which are excluded from the centre, but are within striking distance of it.

I think that's right. *British Subjects*, my new book, is trying to consider Britishness in terms of Salman Rushdie's idea of mongrelization, or Stuart Hall's idea of hybridization. Homi Bhabha also mentions this idea of multiplicity and plurality. These are the catch-phrases which have to do with a contemporary situation that allows me to acknowledge the particular cultural strain that I inhabit while belonging to a larger culture. I now play a role in this larger British culture that is dominated by small pockets of people who are in charge. In Scotland, Tom Leonard and others still perceive themselves in a David and Goliath relationship with an English metropolitan centre that is always trying to keep itself pure against what it views as corrupting influences in terms of the creole, Scottish dialects, and so on.

The English metropolitan centre took a similar view toward the poetry of Robert Burns in the eighteenth century. More recently, Hugh MacDiarmid is only one of many writers considered pejoratively as being “fringe,” or regional—who waged war against this centre.

That metropolitan belief in its own purity and authority is still true today. I feel I am now entering an arena of cultural and artistic debate standing in a Caribbean corner from where I'm fighting. After all, the Caribbean dialect that is being spoken in London will not be heard in Kingston, Jamaica. Caribbean people in London sound Jamaican because of the power, size, and strength of the overseas Jamaican community compared to the Guyanese, Trinidadian, Barbadian, or St. Lucian. Young blacks are picking up this London Caribbean dialect from the record industry. It is a dialect that is a hybrid of all the Caribbean dialects boiled down into one mixture that is served up with a mainly Jamaican flavour. Caribbean people in London make grammatical “errors” by introducing structures and features of their Caribbean dialect, or language into their use of English. What they speak is not a “nation language”; that is making too big a claim for it. But it is having some impact on their comprehension of English, and English grammar. It is an otherness of English that they are trying to register. I don't think it's bad English. But the metropolitan cultural centre or establishment is trying to exclude this Caribbean, creole otherness from what they consider to be correct or acceptable English. So this is a battle of cultural recognition and linguistic validation in which I am engaged.

*The battle lines are clearly drawn in your two volumes of poetry. That is why I asked earlier about the use of Guyanese linguistic and cultural practices in your poems without seeming to care whether they might confound your British audience. There is no danger of Mama Dot being pejoratively labelled exotic, as Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* was in 1956. Thirty years have made a difference.*

I belong to a community of writers like many others, all over the world, who are fighting battles with similar centres and despotisms. But while belonging to this global literary community, I am also trying to address local problems in England. I am still pas-

sionately interested in the Caribbean, and will continue to write about it and be intrigued by it, partly because of my parents, and partly because of the experience I had while I lived there. But my memories of the place are now receding. When I go back there, my friends and relatives say "Hello English," because of my views, and how I talk about the place. I have to remind them that in England I am told "Hey, go back to the Caribbean!". This is good ground for a writer because it produces precisely the tension that will generate poems. I'm pleased about the multiplicity and the multi-faceted nature of my experience. I actually welcome all the complexity. It means there are lots of books to be written, and I am glad about that.

NOTE

- 1 This interview took place on 11 April 1992, at York University, Toronto.