

## Interview with Tanya Shirley—An Important Poet to Watch For: A Discussion of *She Who Sleeps with Bones*, the Kingston Poetry Scene, and Contemporary Caribbean Poetry

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Tanya Shirley was born and now lives in Jamaica. She is a graduate student and teacher in the Department of Literatures in English at the University of the West Indies, Mona. She was awarded an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland, USA. Her work has appeared in *Small Axe* and *The Caribbean Writer* and in *New Caribbean Poetry: An Anthology*. She is a Cave Canem Fellow and a past participant in Callaloo Creative Writing Workshops. *She Who Sleeps With Bones*, Shirley's debut collection of poetry, was named a 2009 Jamaican bestseller (see Campbell). Shirley is currently completing her second collection of poetry, which will be published by Peepal Tree Press.

SM: Tanya, thank you for agreeing to do an interview with me. First of all, I was wondering who Naomi Shihab Nye is, whose words from *Under the Words*, a book of hers, form an epigraph to your work [The epigraph reads: “Later our dreams begin catching fire around the edges,/ they burn like paper, we wake with our hands full of ash.”]

TS: Naomi Shihab Nye is a Palestinian-American poet. I heard about her when I did a workshop with *Callaloo* journal in Texas. Somebody recommended her work. And I love some of her poems. She has a poem about kindness that I particularly love, but I found that she was very in touch with human suffering and taking something that sometimes we sentimentalize [. . .] I thought that she brought out human suffering in a very fresh way. And so she was just somebody who influenced my work. And I love that quote.

SM: I'll look up her work in the near future. Some of these questions I'm going to ask are general and some are going to be more specific about your collection *She Who Sleeps with Bones*. First of all, though, I'd like to ask you [. . .] You were born in Jamaica, and you now study [. . .], you're engaged in your PhD project and teach at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus. Were you born in Kingston? How is the Jamaica of

today, Kingston, similar to or different from the Jamaica or the Kingston you grew up in?

TS: Wow, that's a good question. The first thing that pops into my mind is that we grew up spending a lot more time outdoors and feeling relatively safe. So the yard was a kind of indoor/outdoor space for a Jamaican child. And you find that—and of course I'm speaking with a certain bias in terms of class perspective—but you find that that has shifted nowadays because there are so many people being [. . .] I don't know if it's necessarily because, you know, you have all these computer games now and [. . .] But you find that you don't drive on a street and pass as many children playing in the yard as you would, say, you know, back in the day, within a certain middle-class area. But also, I remember, even just as a teenager being able to hang out, you know? Hang out at somebody's house outdoors, hang out and just feel very relaxed, and I find that we are [. . .] Things have shifted now where you feel that people are more, even when you go out at night, people feel a little more conscious—or security conscious. So that's a big thing. And I don't know if that's ever going to change. I don't know if I'm sure I'm aware of the statistics, but part of it is also a general state of fear and paranoia that has crept into our society. So, for me, the Kingston of today isn't as free; it isn't defined by freedom the way that it was when I was growing up. But, I mean, you still have wonderful experiences. I think the cultural landscape is still rich, so there are still lots of plays, still lots of things to do. There's a rich contemporary arts scene. So, you know, things are definitely there to do, and things have grown, but just in terms of physical freedom of the body and freedom of movement, I feel a little more restricted.

SM: That's interesting from my perspective, too, because I arrived in 1997, and I was already given the warnings, right? You must do this [Shirley laughs] for safety. You must do that for safety. And I'm feeling this trip, thirteen years later, safer for some reason, so [. . .] so I don't know [. . .]

TS: Interesting! That's interesting.

SM: Turning to a consideration of your book more specifically, I'm interested in Peepal Tree Press. What are your opinions of Peepal Tree Press? It seems to be a very important player in the publication and dissemination of West Indian literature. Was this the first publisher you approached? Is there or are there other presses dedicated to publishing Jamaican poetry or Caribbean poetry?

TS: I had a wonderful experience with Peepal Tree Press. They're doing quite a lot for Caribbean literature right now. Their poetry editor, Kwame Dawes, knew my work from before because of a workshop I had done with him, so he recommended them. So they were the first people that I

approached. I got a positive response from them, and I enjoyed the process. I liked that they included me very much in the process of the artwork and the process of discussing, you know, certain choices in the work in terms of editing. So I had a really positive experience with them. In terms of [. . .] that's one of the things I would love to see improving and changing in terms of publishing options for Caribbean writers. There is Carcanet Press that published Mervyn Morris and Lorna Goodison, but, once again, it's in England. In terms of in the Caribbean, the publishers that we do have, not many of them are interested in taking poetry. So I think that needs to be improved. And, then, of course, we do have access to American publishers, but I'm not sure that they are as willing to work with Caribbean poets who reside in the Caribbean. [. . .] You have to spend more time convincing them that there is an American market for your work. So that's something I would love to see changing, and I think Peepal Tree is making people aware of how many Caribbean writers are out there and that there is an audience for our work, and so I think, perhaps eventually, other presses will approach Caribbean writers. I'm hoping that that's what will happen.

SM: Are there events such as poetry festivals, reading series, etcetera, which serve to disseminate contemporary poetic voices in Jamaica? I'm aware of Calabash, for example. I was just out in Treasure Beach for a while. I've heard a lot about that. I wonder if you could speak about that. I'm also wondering if you could speak about any other venues, maybe in the Kingston area, where poets read or perhaps perform, including Open Mics.

TS: That's going well. So for a while it was mainly Calabash, which did an excellent job of setting the stage, but now several other annual literary festivals have emerged. Many of them are in the country, but what you do have in Kingston are Open Mic events and poetry competitions. So there is Redbones Café, which is like a restaurant /bar/lounge, you know? And they host an annual performance poetry competition, for many years now [. . .] I think recently they celebrated the competition's tenth anniversary? There is also a monthly Open Mic gathering hosted by the Poetry Society, and that's been going on for years. And there is a group called Seh Supm, and they're very good at including a lot of the university students in readings.

SM: What is that?

TS: Seh Supm, it's in patois meaning "say something." I think it's sometimes once a week; sometimes it's once a month, but they host poetry readings and poetry competitions. There is Nell's Café, I believe, which is a café in Kingston that hosts a poetry night, so what you find is that there are several restaurants and bars that now [. . .] and that was the case even years ago because I'm remembering there was somewhere called Weekenz

Bar, I think, and they had a poetry series. But what happens with a lot of these contests, though, is that I'm not sure in terms of the recognition and the corporate sponsorship if they can maximize their full potential. I think we can still go a far way in that regard, getting corporate sponsorship for the prizes. Because even the Redbones poetry one I judged the other day [ . . . ] I think the main prize was less than a hundred U.S. And so you want it to be worth people's time, and you also want to send the message that we value poetry, as a nation. So I think people are doing the best they can, but we still need a lot more corporate sponsorship, and we still need, I think, a culture that places more value on the importance of poetry. [ . . . ] I think poetry is very vibrant in Jamaica, but we can do more to involve our young people and to give them avenues to strengthen their craft. But, yes, I think there are several outlets, and even on the campus there is a creative writing club at the University of the West Indies and they hold readings as well. So I think we're doing a good job in that regard.

SM: Just as a follow up to that question, how would I for instance, having come to Kingston recently as I just did, how would I find out about the readings that are going on?

TS: Excellent question. I think some of it still operates as kind of an underground movement, and I think that's because of the lack of sufficient funding and sufficient corporate sponsorship. So it's really not promoted as heavily as I think it could be. Mainly what people are using now would be social networking, so it would probably be on Facebook. And there are some cultural Jamaican sites. There is Jamaican Cultural Enterprises. There is JamaicanLiterature.com. There is also the Arts section of our newspapers which can be accessed online. So I think you probably have to rely on the internet to kind of find out what's going on in the arts spaces. But it would be nice if we had some kind of unified body where, you know, with funding there could be even a magazine that was published that, you know, gave you an idea of what was going on each week and, you know, things [ . . . ] I think we have a publishing body that is trying to do a lot of work now in terms of getting published writers to meet every few months and discuss things. So, you know, we're getting there. But, really, it would probably be through social networking.

SM: Moving on now to a consideration of your book, and regarding primarily the first section of your book, "She Who Sleeps With Bones," there is something very Brand-like—and, of course I mean "Dionne-Brand-like"—and so, that's a high, high compliment: very Brand-like at times about your poetry. For example, I'm reminded of her words in *Land to Light On* when you write in your poem "What I Learned in Grenada" that, and as you say, "I always knew I was deeper than this life I'm living." I can't off the top of my head remember the line from Dionne Brand, but I'm going to go look it up later.<sup>1</sup> And there are obvious connections here considering the time Brand spent in Grenada. As well,

you pay obvious homage to her when you frame your poem “Even Rolling Stones Gather Moss” with an epigraph taken from *A Map to the Door of No Return*. Which of her works, would you say, has been the most important to you and why?

TS: Well first of all that’s a huge compliment. So thank you! I’ve read her more recent work, but I would probably say that *No Language is Neutral* and *Land to Light* still really stay with me. I think, particularly because I read her work when I was living in Maryland, thinking “do I want to move back to Jamaica?” [. . .] And then [. . .] But even being in Maryland and missing home, but then moving back home and then thinking, you know, “have I made the right choice? Is this where home is?” So her work for me really meant something at that time and continues to be important to me because it echoed what I was thinking in terms of home and how do we define home, especially after you’ve lived somewhere for a while. So that’s the main thing, and, then, just a lot of her images, particularly the image and the metaphor of the doorway. Even without the historical context, just in the sense of being in that in-between kind of liminal space has always been interesting to me because there are times I feel as if I’m straddling several spaces [. . .] even in terms of a clairvoyant sensibility. There are times where I’m just not sure if I’m in a dream world, did this happen in a dream, or was it real [. . .] And you can relate to this being an academic person but also being a creative writer. There are times when I feel like I’m being torn and I’m being pulled. And which space do I occupy at what time? So the idea of the doorway really resonated with me.

SM: I’m going to continue that last question for a little while. In a later poem “Sacrifice,” which appears in the second section of your book, the poem begins “there are women who stand in doorways their entire life.” You’ve quoted Brand’s words as we’ve just discussed a second ago before in “Even Rolling Stones Gather Moss,” and her words are “the frame of the doorway is the only space of true existence.” What comment are you trying to make in “Sacrifice” when you say there are women who stand in doorways their entire life? Is this comment in keeping with Brand’s ideologies in *A Map to the Door of No Return*? Is it different? Are you agreeing with Brand, or are you making a different point here?

TS: That’s an excellent question. I think one of the things I love about being a creative writer is just the ability to take certain ideologies, certain philosophical viewpoints, and just apply them to different situations and different things that resonate with you. So thinking of that poem, “Sacrifice,” I consciously used the doorway coming from Brand, but I wanted to use it in a way that moved beyond the history of slavery and moved it more into a kind of feminist point-of-view, particularly in terms of male-female relationships. So I wanted to take a kind of metaphor that can stand as a very public metaphor and in many ways personalize it. But also I think for it to work it has to rely on the historical reference that

Dionne Brand has postulated. I think without that historical reference it really wouldn't work. I'm thinking. Because even though I'm talking about women and them looking out and them waiting on men and them confused, I think I'm also talking about inheriting that *history* of being in that space. So, I think in that way, you know, it's almost an expansion, in my mind, of taking this kind of public metaphor and personalizing it. So, I am indebted to her, and now that I'm talking to you, I realize that I am indebted to her in more ways than I was probably even aware of before.

SM: (laughs) I think you've just answered the next question. And that is, would you consider yourself a feminist poet? I'd consider you a feminist poet, having read your book. But [ . . . ] would you consider yourself a feminist poet?

TS: Definitely. Of course. Yeah, and I'm also aware that people have so many different definitions of "feminist." So I'm not even going to define the word again, but I think however people take feminism [ . . . ] For me, as long as it's in support of women and concerns regarding women and enhancing the lives of women, elevating the status of women [ . . . ] you know I guess I am defining (laughs). So from all of those perspectives, definitely. I think [ . . . ] I know I'm very consciously preoccupied with the idea of talking about female experiences that men [ . . . ] We can't leave it up to men--to talk about. Also talking about those experiences in a way that validates them. Not that they're secondary to, you know, the male experience but that they are just as important as or even more important as. So, yes, I claim the title of a feminist.

SM: Excellent. Music and dance seem to be consistent themes in this book, especially in the first section. Was this a conscious choice, or could you suggest why these repetitive themes or images appear? It seems, for example, that your poem "Music is Made of Smoke"—and I don't want to be prescriptive here—but I'm just saying what I saw as a critic. "Music is Made of Smoke" suggests that music can be an escape from the history, not all of the history, but the brutal history, that is, of the West Indies. Is this simply my interpretation, or do you think you were trying to make this comment or a different comment about music and dance and their roles?

TS: No, we're on the same page. Actually, I wrote that poem when I first started my MFA in Maryland, so that would be maybe 1998? Right. And part of that [ . . . ] I used to dance. Somewhat professionally, you know, with the university dance troupe and with other troupes before, as I like to say, during my "slimmer days." I was always very interested in dance as a creative art form. We were fortunate when we were part of the university dance troupe to be exposed to dancers from other parts of the world. So there was one dancer, a Haitian dancer, who taught us a lot of the rituals for certain ceremonies while we were dancing. So this dance would be the dance that would be performed at a funeral, for example. So I was very

interested in the way in which dance works as a form of marking an occasion and of signifying the occasion. And then when I got to Maryland, I stopped dancing, and, then, of course I stopped hearing the music that I would hear every day, and so I started to think more about how was my identity connected to music and dance, you know, because you don't realize how connected you are to something until you are away from it. But also in terms of trying to produce this MFA thesis, doing creative writing. How was that connected to music and dance? How is the writing connected to music and dance? So that poem I was thinking of [. . .] Lee "Scratch" Perry. I had done some research on him at the time and had read that he had burnt down his studio and just read things that made me feel he was an artistic genius, a kind of revolutionary figure. And so that's what prompted this poem. Because, for me, it was kind of my way of thinking how do we connect music and dance to a kind of revolutionary spirit, to a spirit that wants to break free, to a spirit that is trying to find a comfortable home or a comfortable space of belonging? So, I don't know if I have definitive answers, but that's where I was at the time. When I'm in this space where I don't have as much access to music and dance, how do I, through words, recreate the significance of music and dance [. . .] and I remember my apartment at the time, sometimes feeling a little trapped in the apartment. So it was, how do I recreate through words the act of breaking free that I would associate with music and dance? I think that was where all of that came from.

SM: Yeah, that's interesting. I didn't know you had a background in dance. It does come out in your book.

[SM and TS laugh]

SM: You thank Kwame Dawes in your acknowledgements for his commitment to this manuscript. What was the editorial process like while you were working to produce this book? Was there significant editorial intervention or suggestions, for example? Did you receive suggestions about line breaks—which I really admire, by the way (I really like your line breaks)—and diction and other concerns of prosody? Ah, did you sequence the book yourself, or did you receive help with this? I ask this as a fellow poet, ah [. . .] as I think sequencing is one of the most difficult processes in producing a manuscript.

TS: Yeah, definitely. This second book is [. . .] the process for the second book I'm working on is completely different from the first one. So in the first one I had poems that were around from my MFA days, so that would be early [. . .] 2000 [. . .] And, then, I met Kwame many years ago, and so I started sending him poems. So he was aware of my work even before I put everything together. And I think that always helps, you know, having someone editing your work who knows your voice from before, where you're trying to get to and where you're coming from. And then he,

through Calabash, hosted a master's class workshop. I think it was about five of us who had manuscripts and you came for a few days and it was really "how do you get this manuscript published?"

SM: This was where?

TS: In Jamaica. In Kingston. Because Calabash Foundation is involved with other things, not just the Festival.

SM: I didn't know that.

TS: Right, right. So that was of tremendous assistance because Kwame was the person doing that, and so he actually took home our manuscripts, and went through and kind of said, "Okay, this poem can work; that poem needs work." So I was able to think "okay, which poems just need to be tossed aside for a while and which poems can I work with?" And then he gave a lot of pointers with the sequencing. I think the best pointer he gave was to go back through the books of poets you like and kinda see how *they* go about it. Because a lot of times when we read poetry we read and we like the poems, but we don't necessarily pay attention to which poem comes after which poem and how it's structured. Unless you're criticizing the work, we don't read it in that way. So he recommended that you go back and read it, paying attention to how they structure it. And that's when I realized most of the poets who I admire had their books in sequences. So I began to think of my work in terms of how do I group them. So would there be a group that would fit under this? Would there be a group that would fit under that? It was a painstaking process but. [. . .] So that was the process, and, then, I also noticed that a lot of American poets at the time had epigraphs for certain sections for their books. So I started to cull quotes that I liked, just from everywhere [. . .] from Jamaica Kincaid [. . .] I just started to think of quotes from the Bible, just anywhere, you know, and I started to think of how they would be applicable. So it was a fun process, actually. And I think with Kwame's guidance it—I know for some people, it can be an overbearing process, especially if you have a deadline from your publisher—but I think with Kwame's guidance it became somewhat of a fun process because it allowed me to go back through the work, through *my* work, but also go back to the work of other people and look at the work in a whole different light, to appreciate it on a whole different level. So that was the process.

SM: What about line breaks, was he—?

TS: No, no. The thing about line breaks is—it's interesting hearing you say that because it's something I doubt [. . .] because I don't think there's any class on line breaks that I can think of really. So I've relied a lot on, I think [. . .] this is where the dancing background comes in. I've relied a lot on what intrinsically feels good in my body. I say a lot of my work aloud,



and when I'm breaking a line I usually say it, and so it's a kind of rhythmic thing that I rely on, and I don't always trust that, which is why it's nice to get feedback because I don't always trust that. I do know that in the Cave Canem workshops (because I'm a Cave Canem Fellow), one of the things we were taught about line breaks, you know, is be careful how you break the line, say, on a conjunction or be careful of what word ends the line. So I became a little bit more aware of the word that is at the end of a line. But in terms of choosing where to end it, I rely a lot on a kind of inner rhythm. Yeah, so you never know if you're right or wrong. [laughter]

SM: [checks tape recorder] Regarding the second section—I'm going to address the book as a whole at the end—I'm interested in those poems which seem to be concrete-like or found poems, poems that play with layout and with space. And in particular I'm thinking about "Colour Me Dis, Colour Me Dat," on page thirty-one, and "Restoration," on page 25. Were there any poets, or any schools of poets, you had in mind when you were experimenting with form and space in this way?

TS: Excellent question. I'm trying to think of anybody in particular who has influenced layout. You know, the one poem I've written that I consciously—I mean I'm very aware of how I was influenced by layout—is, I don't even know which section it is in, but it's the poem to my sister, "The Distance Between Us." It was influenced by an American poet, Claudia Emerson. I think she won the Pulitzer Prize. I remember reading her book at the time, and she has a poem about a bird being trapped in the house and I thought, "hmm [. . .] I wonder if I alternate the lines and I play with indentation a little bit like that, I wonder what will happen." Other than that, I don't think I've approached any other poem consciously trying to mimic somebody else's work in terms of layout and form. For "Colour Me Dis, Colour Me Dat," it really, for me, I wanted to echo that feeling of madness. And, for me, madness isn't necessarily structured, so I played around a lot with just moving the lines all over the place. And it's interesting because it's a poem I come back to quite a bit, and it's a poem that has been rejected by at least one journal (laughs). But it's a poem that I like because there's something about it that just feels like a sense of abandonment, of wild abandon, and I think, for me, I just wanted the layout. Most times I write a poem not very aware of structure or form or layout, and after, when I'm crafting the poem, I come back to that because, for me, that is always secondary. Most of the time. That's secondary to the content, so when I think of how I frame the work, I normally think of what feels good based on what this poem wants to achieve or what I am discussing and how best to convey this. Because I feel that there are some poems that need space, and then there are some poems that don't need as much space. So that's usually how I am. It's a kind of intuitive thing that I'm going with [. . .] for example, the poem "Negotiation" [. . .] For nearly all my poems in terms of craft I don't

change the words a lot or the diction. I don't come back to that a lot, but I always come back to the shaping of the poem. That takes me several drafts, to get the shaping of the poem right.

SM: Yeah [. . .] No. It does make sense. I mean, I'm thinking of oh, geez now [. . .] in Canada, for instance, I don't know if you've come across bpNichol's poetry or the sound poets, The Four Horsemen, right? And when you see it on the page there's just the visual—

TS: And the language poets.

SM: Yeah, and the language poets as well. So there was something that just kind of reminded me of a strain of that in those two poems.

TS: That's interesting because [. . .] I don't know. There's something about me when I read those poems that has a kind of anti-response [laughs]. Something about it makes me feel uncomfortable. Yeah, something about some of that what we call, still, experimental poetry [. . .] some of it makes me feel [. . .] and I feel uncomfortable when I read, and I'm not sure where that discomfort is from. We can have this discomfort, and it still subconsciously slips into our work, so I don't know if this is happening, but usually when I read poems, and especially if the words do too many things on the page, there is something in me that backs off from the page. Perhaps it's my inclination towards trying to order the madness in some way. But at the same time when you're exposed to these things, you never know when you write what is there, you know, what is there waiting to come out, whether you want it to or not. Because some of what I do like about that kind of poetry, though, is how it captures chaos. And I think, coming back to Dionne Brand's framework, her doorframe, there's something in her work in terms of how she, or a kind of poetics of chaos, you know [. . .] how she handles chaos. For me, the doorway is almost a balancing act in that poetics of chaos, and so that's another reason I'm interested in it, and when I think of form and layout, I normally think, "is this adding too much chaos to this poem? What is this doing?"

SM: That's really interesting. There's a sharp shift, and I don't know if (laughs) you would deny it or not, but there is a sharp shift from the first section of your book, "Restoration," to the erotic poems included in the second section, "Waiting for Rain." We move, for example, from the first section's strong emphasis on strong women, prized elders and the strength and weight of a West Indian inheritance to the second section's erotic poems, which are highly sexualized. What do you think holds these two first sections together? And I might as well ask now at this point too, what do you think holds the collection together?

TS: Good question. On a really simplistic level, one of the things that was driving me in terms of arranging the book was the feeling that, okay, "I

really cannot put this erotic poem beside my dead grandmother poem,” you know? I kinda felt like, “you need to space things out a bit” [. . .] So I put the erotic poems together and thought, “okay, well, how do I fit them into this collection?” I don’t know if I was really aware of the water imagery at the time, but I’m always fascinated by the sea and water, and so the poem “Waiting for Rain” seemed, for me, a suitable title for that section, just in terms of the eroticism of water and the idea of thirst. Then that was something that I felt connected the manuscript because the first section, “Restoration,” was examining history, examining female lineage, to get to a place where you’re comfortable in your sexuality, it’s almost as if you have to go back. You have to examine the women of the past, you have to examine your strength, the strength that has been inherited, and, then, when you get all of that out of the way, you can get to a place where you can celebrate more, who you are as a woman in terms of sexuality, being a part of that experience. But I think it’s “*Waiting For Rain*” because I think we’re still at a place where we’re not fully free to celebrate our sexuality.

SM: And how!

TS: And then the last section, now, “The Shifting Ground,” was moving now, feeling as if you’re aware of history, you’re aware of the strength, aware of your sexuality but now trying to create balance out in the world. Sometimes I think, “did I really think about all of this then, or is it that now you go back to it and you’re aware of it?” So I’m not really sure how it worked, but I know that the erotic poems I separated, and I kind of felt that, for the most part, they needed their own space. I didn’t want it to be BAM at the front. I just felt that you had to come into them which was why I kind of wanted them in the middle.

SM: I have not encountered much heavy eroticism in Caribbean poetry. The writing of Dionne Brand, originally from Trinidad, who writes in Toronto now and her feminist lesbian poetics is perhaps the most highly eroticized poetry I have come across in Caribbean verse and perhaps even more so in her prose writings like *In Another Place Not Here*. Would you say I’m right here? Or is there a tradition of erotic verse which you are consciously or unconsciously drawing on here?<sup>2</sup>

TS: Wow. Hmm [. . .] So first I should say I’m aware of poets doing a lot in the [. . .] oh, what do you say? The public performance space? I think you have more freedom or celebration of eroticism in that space. So I think, even out of Jamaica, I think we have a group of poets called Pum Pum Posse.<sup>3</sup> They go around to different places. So we have more people in that genre, then, who are writing, you know, erotic and performing erotic poetry. When it comes on, and I’m not even sure I should be making this distinction, but when it comes on to the published, printed word, I’m not very aware of a tradition. I don’t want to say that and be

accused of leaving people out. For me, I'm heavily influenced by Lorna Goodison's work. I really love her work. And I think the erotic is there, but it's a very veiled eroticism because I teach her work, and even now you appreciate her work every time you re-read it. And one of the things I'm amazed at is her skill at making a poem operate on one level but on a whole other level it has this erotic interpretation. You know, I'm thinking of her poem "Love Song of Cane in Three Parts" which *definitely* celebrates the erotic encounter. So I think there is a tradition there, but eroticism is usually still somewhat veiled. And I think I'm trying to take that and push the boundaries a bit based on my exposure to people like Sharon Olds, who is one of my favourite poets, often thought of as maybe like a confessional poet because you feel as if you are getting too much information. [TS and SM laugh] But in the Caribbean space, I think we still come from a history of "don't-air-your-dirty-laundry-in-public," so that there are still certain things that shouldn't be spoken about in public. And that I think we're still affected by that kind of British aristocracy where, you know, women don't speak about certain things. I think we've moved away from that in many ways, you know, but I think that's still a part of our history [ . . . ] Even if you talk about sex, you should talk about it in certain ways, the—quote, unquote—ladylike ways. So I'm very aware of pushing the boundaries. I also am aware of pushing the boundaries in terms of class and class dynamics because I think, especially in our Jamaican culture, that we have the influence of the dance hall culture where women are doing so many radical things. And I think, in an academic world, we can borrow from that, and in the creative writing world we can borrow from that as a way of expression, as a borrowing upon that as a *tradition* of expression. In other words, I feel, as a contemporary writer, that I have the benefit of borrowing metaphors from various places, so from the dance hall, from American poets. I can borrow from *different* traditions. I'm trying to think of the eroticism in poetry with anybody else, but I think it's definitely more of an influence based on my exposure to American writers.

SM: I hadn't thought about Lorna Goodison's poetry in that way before. I'm going to go back and take a look at it. Okay, regarding the third section, there's a mourning—and I think maybe you broached this already when you talked about being in Maryland and thinking about whether you were going to be moving back to Jamaica or not—but there's a mourning in your poem (in the sense of lament) "Sunday Ritual" for Jamaica and the language of Jamaica, which you call "patois" in this poem, and I realize people use different terms. Some use Creole or Jamaican language.

TS: I even spell patois differently.

SM: Right. Yeah. In one of your early poems, "Even Rolling Stones Gather Moss," there is a sense that the narrator has returned to Jamaica. As a poet and critic myself, I'm obviously nervous and suspect of having

all my poems understood as biographically inflected, but I'm wondering if these poems were written in different places and at different stages of your life and how long it took you to write this book. And, again, I think you might have answered that, but if you don't mind just repeating [. . .]

TS: Yeah, no. It's an excellent question, but just to touch back on the thing before about the tradition of writing erotic poetry. I remember that one of the first reviews this book got, and this was my first encounter in dealing with reviews, was by a gentleman. I won't say in what forum, but by a gentleman who, at some point in his review, said, "if you like personal poetry, this is the poetry for you." And I felt it was a very patriarchal way of dismissing the poetry. And so I still think that we as writers—as a Caribbean writer—I operate in a space where when you talk about certain things, particularly female sexuality, it's seen as talking about something that is not as important *as*. You know what I mean? So it's like, let's not focus too much on this writer because she's talking about erotic stuff. You know, let's go to the people who are talking about politics. As if female sexuality isn't something that is important.

SM: Or political.

TS: Exactly! And as if it doesn't influence several other spheres of our society. You know what I mean? It overlaps with everything else. So I'm very aware that I am following a certain agenda in terms of writing erotic poetry. Sometimes I'm a bit nervous about following that agenda, but for the most part, I think it's something that needs to be done because I think we still have so many—and I'm just thinking that even as an educator I have several friends who teach in the high school system, and we still have so many teenagers having sex, engaging, and not being able to talk to any adults about it, not knowing what they are really doing. You know, for some of them it's just by rote. But it's because I think, for the most part, we still live in a society where, you know, where certain things you don't discuss. You know? So that was that part. And coming back to this last part. So, for example, "Even Rolling Stones Gather Moss" [. . .] that was definitely a later poem and that was when I had returned home. And I always say about this book it's not autobiographical, but most of the poems begin with some kind of autobiographical instinct and then the poems (which, you know, as a poet) take off on their own. But the instinct is usually autobiographical. So, yeah, a lot of the poems had to do with where I was at that stage in my life, and so there were some poems that were written in Maryland, some poems that were written, even I think maybe one or two, before I went to Maryland. Of course, they went through several edits. And, then, there were the later "I'm-now-back-at-home-how-settled-am-I?" kind of poems.

SM: The third section also witnesses a movement. It seems to most solidly place the reader within a Jamaican or West Indian space. What I mean

here is that the primary focus seems to be Jamaican life. Well, the first two sections are obviously *infused* with West Indian realities; however, the third section seems to be an array of different Jamaican experiences. We have [. . .] Do you pronounce it “guinep”?

TS: “Guinep.” Yep.

SM: We have the opening poem in the third section, “The Guinep,” for example, a poem about a fruit *here* in Jamaica. We have a poem about the ambassador that comes from Jamaica from “over there” and must learn how to live here in Jamaica. We have the poem “Sunday Ritual,” where there is a longing to be back in Jamaica. We have the Rasta man in “The Shifting Ground,” and we have the gang wars referenced or talked about in your poem “Perhaps if I Loved More I Would Risk My Life.” Do you see yourself primarily as a Jamaican poet, one who speaks for Jamaica first and foremost? Or do you understand yourself as a poet of the world? Or both?

TS: Hmm [. . .] I think of myself as a Jamaican writer, but I think that being a Jamaican writer gives me permission to be a writer of the world. I don’t know if that makes sense. But I think, for me, being Jamaican has always, perhaps because of our legacy of migration, has always meant a very open-ended kind of identity. And so I gladly claim, you know, the title or role, you know, of a Jamaican writer, but to clarify I would say that for me being a Jamaican writer means that I am open to the rest of the world, that I have access to the rest of the world. You know Jamaicans, we feel we belong anywhere and everywhere [laughs]. We’re everywhere! So it doesn’t make me feel as if being a Jamaican writer is somehow going to limit what I have to say. I feel as if claiming that label of a Jamaican writer makes me just as gives me as much authority as anybody else to write about things happening all over the world. It simply means that my *focus*, the lens that I look at it through, is going to be different from somebody else in another region. I’m definitely aware that whatever I see or discuss in terms of a global perspective I’m looking at through lenses that have been influenced by a Jamaican cultural upbringing. So I’m very aware of that. I don’t know how else to [. . .] It’s interesting because there are people who don’t want to be labeled. I think it would be great if we lived in a world without labels. But I think that even just for publishing's sake people feel that they have to label you and they have to package you and decide where on the shelf to put you. And so if that is the case then I don’t have a problem being packaged as a Jamaican writer, but I just don't want that to be somehow reductionist. You know, I don’t want that to reduce my potential as a writer.

SM: I think that’s pretty natural for serious writers. Right? Yeah. I’ve noticed as well that death is an undeniable concern in this book of poetry. There are a number of people who die, and there are a number of things

which die. Why do you think this is? What can we learn from a poetic examination of death? Or what have you learnt?

TS: Wow. This is an excellent question. Thank you. Because, because I'm especially in the process now of putting the second manuscript together. I think your questions really help me just re-think even some of the newer poems and what am I doing with them. Where do I want to put them in the manuscript? It just brings a lot of awareness, so I'm really glad for these questions. For example, the death thing. Now that I think about it, I have some new poems that focus on that, too, and it's not something that I was even aware of. But I think that's going to help in terms of my sequencing, so I'm glad you brought it up. You know, for me, and I can't speak for anybody else, but for me life has always been [. . .] I grew up with [. . .] Let me give you a prime example. In my family, we never ever come off the phone or never say goodbye to each other, even if it's just for the night, or we're just going to separate rooms, without saying "I love you." And it's always been because very early on, I mean, my mom said to us, "you never want somebody to die and think that the last words you shared were harsh words." So, if somebody dies, you're going to need to find something to comfort you, and one of the things that may be able to comfort you is knowing the last thing you said to that person was "I love you." So I was brought up in a household where we were always aware of how close death was to life. My dad's brother died before [. . .] (I think before I was born). So, I mean, he had experienced the death of someone he loved. That was in a car accident, so we grew up in a kind of—we weren't too sheltered. I think they struck a good balance. But it was a sense of you had to be careful whose car you went in, who was driving. You had to be careful. My mom knew somebody whose children drowned, so you had to be careful if you were going by a pool. So we were always [. . .] For us, it was always a fine balance of "you're living your life, you're enjoying your life, but death can come at any second." And, so, for me there were times when that made me enjoy life even more? Because we never know the minute or the hour? And then there were times when it did seem like a bit of a burden, where you wanted to do things, and you had to deal with your parents saying, "oh, well, you know, so-and-so died doing this." You know? So it's quite interesting because my sister came along, and she was just a rebel who just loved to do everything. She was just like, "listen, if I'm going to die, I want to know that I'm dying having fun." So my parents kind of just said, "okay, well, she's living her life." But also because I come from a family of dreamers, we would often dream about the death of someone, and we were not always clear. I think that's in many households in Jamaica; like, for example, you have a dream that your teeth fell out. Someone died. But you're never sure who the person is who died. So, for the next few weeks, you'd think, "Oh, no! We're gonna get some news of death!" And sometimes it's not even anybody you're close to. It's just maybe news of death. But people get very nervous, like, "Is it somebody we know? Is it somebody we don't know? Is it real? Is it

not real?" And I say sometimes it could be just because you're grinding your teeth, you know? It's the weight that we put on dreams. And so for me death was something that was not separate from life. And this is a funny thing that has happened to me: one of the ways I know I love somebody is I always dream of them dying. Always. So even if I'm seeing somebody new, I know that I am not at the point where I love the person unless I dream that I am at their funeral [SM laughs]. It's almost like a rite of passage which is very weird, but it's this sense of [. . .] and I teach a course on campus called "Love, Death and Poetry." Because for me it's a way in which an awareness of death actually enhances your experience of life and how you love. You know, you kinda love with a little more urgency and desperation. And so for me that's how I kind of bring the death into it, and, then, too, also I was really affected by my grandmother's death. And so the book is dedicated to her. But she's also someone whose spirit I still feel is with me. And so for me, poetics of death would mean charting the way in which the dead still in some ways stay with you but not in too much of a supernatural way, not in too much of a gothic way, not in too much of a scary way. Just, you know, something as simple as she didn't eat chicken, so sometimes maybe I'm eating something like oxtail and I feel as if she is eating it with me but not in a way that I can explain. So, that's just where my interest is.

SM: Death is not an easy thing to talk about [. . .] Besides yourself (and I'm going to say that), who would you say are some of the most important emerging poets in Jamaica and the Caribbean today? Or diasporic Caribbean writers?

TS: Wow. I think this is a really good time. I feel like Caribbean writing right now is a fertile ground. So I'm afraid of making any lists because there are people I will forget, but I'm just going to throw out, right now, the names that are in my mind. I'm thinking of Kei Miller, Christian Campbell, Ishion Hutchinson, Jacqueline Bishop, Shara McCallum (who already has a Selected Poems out with Peepal Tree Press), Millicent Graham [. . .] Are we just doing poets? Yeah, poets, [. . .] I'm thinking of Marion Bethel in Bahamas. I'm thinking of Trinidad. I think there is Nicolette Bethel? I'm not sure if that's where she is. There's Andre Bago in Trinidad. So I'm thinking of people who have been published in terms of a book but also thinking of people whose work I know through journals. There are people constantly emerging so you know we are going in the right direction. There's Monica Minott who won the Small Axe competition a few years ago. I hope I'm not forgetting anybody right now. But there are lots of people so I feel as if we're at a good place.

SM: And another question. What are you working on at the moment? You've talked about a next book of poetry. Can you talk just a little bit more about that?



TS: Well, I'm not sure what will actually end up [laughs] published, but I have a few poems on madness. And those were written because there's an empty lot beside my house, and for some reason, it was occupied by two madmen who basically located themselves underneath my window. And I felt that there must be a reason why this is happening. And so not to lose my sanity myself, I decided to start writing about it because, I mean, three o'clock in the morning they'd be having conversations with each other, with themselves. It really took me a while to adjust. And every now and then they move, and, then, they come back, and they have the most interesting conversations, especially with themselves. And so I would stay up a lot of nights. And, so, then in the days, I would actually pass one of them, and he would always look me straight in the eyes. So I have a few poems where I talk about madness. And it's because I went through a phase where I was thinking "what really [. . .]" See, literally I have a concrete wall that separates us. But, you know, what else and on a metaphoric level, really separates us? I mean, what makes it that they're in there and I'm here or I could be there and they could be here. You know, so that whole idea of madness. And the other thing I'm working on is a set of poems, which I really like, about dance hall culture because I'm trying to write more urban poetry, poetry that reflects more my experience. I mean, I have access to the rural experience, and I have access to the urban, and I think too often we privilege the rural as Caribbean writers—that that is the authentic experience. So I'm trying to, you know, expand our notions of (quote, unquote) authentic experience. So I have a few dance hall poems, and, yeah, so there is a collection. It's just a matter of putting it together and seeing which ones really work, and it's just a matter of saying which ones really work within the entire collection.

SM: Well, those are the questions that I had prepared for you, and I'd just like to ask you if you want to say anything else or if you'd like to produce any other comments.

TS: No, just thank you. This is amazing. I mean, I think the work you're doing is amazing; the questions are amazing, yeah. I look forward to reading your work and maybe interviewing you and just, I think, the dialogue [. . .] and I think that's one of the things that has [. . .] I would hope has enriched my writing.

SM: Dialogue with other poets?

TS: Exactly, exactly.

SM: Writers can get lonely for exchanges.

TS: I've graduated from Cave Canem, so I haven't met any writers outside of Jamaican writers in a while. And I got used to meeting writers every summer, and that really enriches your work, you know, because you may

talk about a poet that I've never heard of. You mentioned somebody [. . .]  
bp [. . .]?

SM: bpNichol.

TS: Right. So it also expands your range and what you realize is possible.  
So this has been wonderful. Thank you!

SM: Thank you.

## Notes

1. See Dionne Brand, I v, *Land to Light On*, 7: “My life was supposed to be wider, not so forlorn / and not standing out in this north country bled / like maple . . .”

2. See the recent anthology *Caribbean Erotic: Poetry, Prose and Essays*. In her introduction, “Creating a Safer Space,” Donna Aza Weir-Soley asserts that “in general, Anglophone Caribbean writers of [the] pioneer generation [late 1950s, 1960s] [. . .] traditionally avoided overt representations of the erotic in their writings” (15). Weir-Soley further maintains that “[h]istorically, western discourses have grossly misrepresented and impugned the Caribbean woman’s sexuality—so much so that she has felt it necessary to deny or repress her sexuality in order to gain ‘respectability’” (16). However, Weir-Soley now notes that “[w]ith the emergence of a new generation of transnational writers, many of whom have working-class roots, the landscape of Caribbean writing is beginning to change, and eroticism is one area that is no longer taboo” (17).

3. “Sandra Joy Alcott, [t]he lawyer and poet [,] performs under the pseudonym ‘Sajoya’ and is the founder of the Pum Pum Posse. Sajoya explained to *The Sunday Gleaner* that the aim of the Pum Pum Posse is to have women define their own sexuality. The Pum Pum Posse has travelled around the island performing their works. They do not focus merely on sex, but also touch on issues such as physical, sexual and mental abuse. Sajoya argues that it is essential that people talk freely about sex. ‘We have to talk about sex, we can’t keep quiet about it anymore.’ Sajoya revealed that the Pum Pum Posse came out of the need to express her life’s trials, as well as the trials others face because they are women. She stated that the name Pum Pum Posse was a natural progression from her song, No Pum Pum No Record Deal, from the play *Feel Di Riddim*” (*Jamaica Gleaner*. Sunday, 13 April 2003. Web. 26 July 2012).

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