

# An Interview with Vladimir Lucien: Winner of the 2015 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature

means that even though they are able to easily keep up with what is happening in the region via the web or frequent visits, living in the US or elsewhere may deflect certain corners of experience, and there may develop a predilection for or an imperative to deal with these aspects of experience that living in the US throws into sharp relief. This is one aspect of Caribbean literature. Although it isn't as prominent now, you also have the ambivalence and the inclination to flight of the persona at home. I wondered about the other aspect: those who are unequivocally here, whether it is because they can't leave or don't want to or do not have plans to. I mean in the vein of writers like Tanya Shirley or Andre Baggio or, further back, early Derek Walcott or Eric Roach in spite of his ambivalence. Roach, I think, is the most interesting example in the way he was ambivalent but was too much part of that ecosystem, the "homestead" to not express it, to not write from it.

So what about inter-island feuds, or the price of bread, the crime rate, Shanique Myrie, the bloom of the Poui or Glory Cedar, the smell of rain on a hot road, as Walcott put it. I mean a consciousness of the island/s with its finger, like Kaiso, on the pulse of the place. Not to the exclusion of the diasporic or ambivalent aspects of experience but in addition to these or all muddled up with them. So this prize lets me know that one can write about these "smaller" experiences of Caribbean that are not immediately connected to the grand narrative of a metropolitan people. And if the kind of natural allusions one is likely to make, the kind of contained world one chooses to inhabit in a more regulated relationship with the outside may elude recognition elsewhere, there is recognition right here at home.

**SM:** As you know, I reviewed *Sounding Ground* for the Jamaica Observer's arts magazine *Bookends*, not long ago and gave the book a rave review, describing you as a "significant poet" who has entered the public domain of poetry with "full grace". I also suggested you were a "metaphysical poet" whose work cannot be placed within an easy camp. That is, I suggested you were neither a strict "Walcottian" nor "Brathwaitean" disciple (and, perhaps, I should mention Goodison here, too) but that

your influences were varied and diverse. For some reason, I felt a bit of Yeats in this book. Can you talk a bit about the poets who have influenced you? The poets whose styles you might borrow from or attempt to borrow from? What about the poets you simply love first and foremost?

**VL:** Well, I am one of, I think, many poets who are not strictly Walcottian or Brathwaitean. It's a dichotomy many of us had the good fortune of being able to disregard to some degree. That dichotomy, as I suspect it did when it was more influential, obscured the channelling and influence of several other poets on Caribbean writing. In Jamaica, in poets like Kei Miller or Tanya Shirley, you see the influence, for instance, of Lorna Goodison on modern Jamaican poetry. Or in my case, Anthony McNeill.

I think one of the central figures in poetry for me has always been WH Auden who really introduced me to the joy of creation, the joy of tradition, of form. There is always this joy I feel embedded in his craft: something about it is playful, and I believe very much in "play" being a serious part of creating and crafting poetry. It is ultimately a very serious part of human experience. Ritual and all of these fall into, or straddle, play. Play mas'. Play Egungun. Man as Homo ludens. Victor Turner's book title, for instance — *The Human Seriousness of Play* — captures it perfectly. Poetry is probably one of the best examples of that. Martin Carter was an influence very much in terms of my way of thinking about the poet in the society. So I paid a lot more attention to his content, his philosophy, his activism, his life: the experience around and the experience of his poetry. Now this is a question that I revisit all the time. Of late, I am even realising how much *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which I've read a zillion times, was such an important book for me, especially as one who started writing seriously at university. Kamau Brathwaite, both in his criticism and poetry, is a major influence. He got me to appreciate Caribbean cosmologies and ontology in a serious way. There are too many influences to talk about, some who are not poets at all. But other poets I love or am excited by: Lorca, Neruda, Césaire, Nikki Finney, Kwame Dawes, Cornelius Eady, Christian Campbell, Patricia Smith... the list goes on and on. I am reading a book now by Somali-American writer Ladan Osman and am enjoying it. I recently read Louise Glück's *Forward Prize* shortlisted *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, which is a remarkable collection!

**SM:** How would you like to be defined as a poet? You've published with Peepal Tree Press (dedicated to publishing literature from the Caribbean), and you're described by that house and others as a poet from St Lucia. The OCM Bocas Prize positions you, by virtue of the award being a prize for Caribbean literature, as a Caribbean writer. Do you find regional and national descriptors useful in your identification as a poet? Do you like them? What is the worth in placing poets within regional and national categories? Or are such parameters destructive? Would you rather be known, perhaps, as a poet of the world?

**VL:** I don't feel them to be destructive. At least, not to me. I am a poet. That means something and links me up with people who also work with words and language in that way. I am from the Caribbean and, yes, most certainly St Lucian. Those are the colours of my experience and how I engage the world. I don't think that locks me into a faction or limits the concerns I am allowed to have. I would suggest that really being a poet of the world requires provinciality, which is

absolutely necessary to be a poet with a texture, a taste, a feel. As a poet, I believe in the necessity of limits and the deep-and-wide and limitless worlds they eventually lead one to.

**SM:** I remember hearing mention of you years back, in Barbados, when I was asking around about poets to watch for in the Caribbean. That was in 2012. The rumour was that there was a very talented poet in St Lucia who was working on a manuscript but who hadn't yet released it. How long did this book take you to write?

**VL:** The book probably in all took about four years. Of course, I didn't start out writing a book; I was writing poems or trying to "achieve poetry". But I was, unwittingly, covering some ground.

**SM:** What do you think the purpose of a poet is? What do you think your role is as a poet?

**VL:** Purpose for me is a personal t'ing. I would be tempted to ask, my role to whom? Or in what? I think one principle I believe in is responsibility. I believe that the way the Caribbean is represented and spoken about needs to be taken very seriously. Whether it's a person, the history, the landscape, we have to approach this with great care, not apologetics, but care. Our history is a history of being misquoted, misunderstood, mistaken for something other than what we were. We cannot, in this day and age, in any small way, be contributing to that tradition of lies and intellectual indolence that has plagued the Caribbean. And we have to read each other's works with similar care and rigour. One reviewer of my book referred to Tjenbwa/Obeah — about which I wrote a suite of poems — as Voodoo, even though it was glossed right there in the notes to the back of the book! We have to come better than that or we unwittingly join the ranks of Anthony Trollope, Charles Kingsley, Froude, Stedman and, in St Lucia, Father Charles Jesse in defaming and denigrating people, their stories, what they are trying to say for themselves in the world.

**SM:** You dedicate this book to your father, saying that *Sounding Ground* is a continuation of his work. Can you talk about the influence your father had, and has, on your poetry?

**VL:** Well, in looking at the very names yuh call there, I can already see a pattern. They are thinkers who, in some form or fashion, experience(d) the world in ways that I do. Much of my life has been spent and will be spent in trying to reconcile my social consciousness with a spiritual root like the way people like Boukman, Sam Sharpe and others succeeded in doing. I remember going to James' grave with Rawle Gibbons in Tunapuna and seeing the remains of a candle on his grave and Rawle

generation or newer voices (irrespective of age) are re-shaping an understanding of Caribbean poetry and/or introducing new breath, styles, themes into Caribbean

best be able to account for outside the blur of flux which I am part of. I think it's safe, though, to say something about the continuous development and growth of strong national consciousness. You have had some splendid national anthologies released of late in Jamaica, Trinidad, St Lucia, St Martin and, I am sure, elsewhere. I mark this change in two videos I watch ad infinitum: an interview with Kamau Brathwaite conducted by Eddie Baugh in Miami in 1993, and Kwame Dawes' keynote at the Narrating the Caribbean Nation conference some years back. (These dates don't suggest when the change happened, but simply how I mark it.) Kamau was talking about the Caribbean and its inherent, submarine unity. He was talking about the cordillera and Atlantis, almost physical and tangible articles of a faith in the spirit of Caribbean. Kwame, admitting the growth of dogged national consciousness, spoke of the Caribbean nation as having to be seen as an invented one, but a useful one, not only a conceptual space but also a common mythic root for these now national traditions. Now, we know this well enough — about a nation being an idea that is permitted reality by our agreeing to shut up about it being, really, an idea. People have to believe di ting re-all! So that awareness of "mythic root," that awareness of the usefulness of myth, is post-religious. It is when something formerly believed in/real, eroded by scepticism, is reclaimed as heritage, has a sort of second life. Nothing wrong with that. Nothing unnatural.

We're also a generation obsessed with 'Posts': Post-colonial, post-racial, post-post colonial. Persons are really trying to define what they are doing that may be new or different from the generation before. The problem with this way of marking periods is that it superannuates prematurely what came before. It helps us pretend that the questions we choose not to deal with anymore, that we feel were either contended with or borne by earlier generations on our behalf, have somehow gone away. They haven't. As in society, as in literature. We have not answered these

questions and they are still there. So even when I remark with a great degree of optimism about the appearance of more Caribbean writers who are white, people take offence. Why? "People should just be writers." Okay. The key word there is "just"... in consequence. But we are in the Caribbean. What essentially has changed with the mass of white or black persons in these societies? So why do we expect that our literature is magically transcending that reality? You cyah go over it, you have to go tru. Mi cyah deal with that airy-fairy business. You have good works: entertaining and to use the new lingo "badass" ????. Recently, at the Congrès des Ecrivains de la Caraïbe in Guadeloupe, there was a panel tracing Caribbean writing to the early diaries and personal writings of colonial observers. I mean people like Lady Nugent. I not too sure 'bout that. But if we were to do that, Huracan by Diana McCaulay, for instance, becomes an important development from that tradition of white writers who have not traditionally been active participants in Caribbean society. She is part of a still burgeoning tradition of white writers contributing to something that all, both black and white, could equally call their own. A Literature. And it is important that this is not done in ignorance of the extant issues but in an embracing of them, and a willingness to face their difficulties and doughtiness.

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**VL:** My father wrote. He recited poetry often but never published a collection, though he had a collection of poems put together in a folder at home. But I think his greatest influence has been my understanding of poetry as something to be shared. He shared poetry with us all the time, even though we did not understand it all. This, perhaps, is why I place so much emphasis on being a good performer of my work and the work of others. After every satisfactory reading, I feel like I have published a new collection! Or something so! That moment of sharing is important, though I'm not sure many poets see it that way. There are many poets who are okay with being bad or mediocre performers or readers of their own work. And some who just aren't performers or readers but simply writers. And that, I suppose, is fine. People share and give in different ways. But yes, this has been my father's influence.

Allow me to say two words on my mother. The world I write from, or I attempt to build around my poetry, is very much one given to me by my mother. I mean, a world that is willing to probe myth, spirituality, mystery. I start off always in that mystical area where she comes from: Monchy as cosmos. It should also be said that my sense of duty as regards writing comes ironically in large part from my mother. So although my father had that sense of urgency and service that was affixed to a leftist vision of society, I also emerge from that working-class sense of the importance of Education and well, "English." (In St Lucian Kwéyòl they say reading and writing in more or less one word, or one breath: 'Li-ékwi') I make reference to this in my poem "Medium" in SG. There was a premium placed on those prized assets of my society and the possibilities that it afforded one and that these possibilities must be met with a sense of duty to create better circumstances for those whom you love. One's people. So certainly, in meeting Auden's pessimistic proclamation that "poetry makes nothing happen", I just could not relate. My sense of words and language having true transformative power was too strong.

**SM:** A number of your poems are either dedicated to or pay homage to writers and intellectuals: William Blake, Aimé Césaire, Walter Rodney, Ovid, Vahni Capildeo, Rawle Gibbons, and *Sounding Ground* itself begins with an epigraph from CLR James. Can you talk a bit about these people (or some of them) and how/why they have had an influence on you?

**VL:** Well, in looking at the very names yuh call there, I can already see a pattern. They are thinkers who, in some form or fashion, experience(d) the world in ways that I do. Much of my life has been spent and will be spent in trying to reconcile my social consciousness with a spiritual root like the way people like Boukman, Sam Sharpe and others succeeded in doing. I remember going to James' grave with Rawle Gibbons in Tunapuna and seeing the remains of a candle on his grave and Rawle



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