NEW CARIBBEAN STUDIES

THE QUEER CARIBBEAN SPEAKS

INTERVIEWS WITH WRITERS, ARTISTS, AND ACTIVISTS

KOFI OMONIYI SYLVANUS CAMPBELL

The Queer Caribbean Speaks

NEW CARIBBEAN STUDIES

Edited by Kofi Campbell and Shalini Puri

New Caribbean Studies is a unique series of monographs and essay collections focused on the still burgeoning field of Caribbean Studies, a field that is contributing to Caribbean self-understanding, global understanding of the region, and the reinvention of various disciplines and their methodologies well beyond the Caribbean. The series especially solicits humanities-informed and interdisciplinary scholarship that addresses any of the region's language traditions.

Kofi Campbell is an associate professor of English at Wilfrid Laurier University and coordinator of the English program at its Brantford Campus. He is the author of *Literature and Culture in the Black Atlantic: From Pre- to Postcolonial*.

Shalini Puri is an associate professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. Her book *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity* was the winner of the 2005 Gordon and Sybil Lewis award for the best book on the Caribbean.

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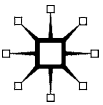

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This book is dedicated to Rachel, from whom all my joys flow.
To my family, who taught me to love the Caribbean, myself, and humanity in all its forms.
To the generous spirits of all those who participated in this project.
And to those living still in silence, or worse.

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Introduction

This book is born out of the near-silence surrounding the lives of queer Caribbean citizens. In most Caribbean countries, homosexuality is still illegal, and gay men and lesbians from the region live within cultures and countries that sometimes do not consider them fully human, much less full citizens. Organizations such as J-FLAG (the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays), CAISO (Coalition Advocating for the Inclusion of Sexual Orientation) in Trinidad, and SASOD (the Society Against Sexual-Orientation Discrimination) in Guyana have worked tirelessly to fight homophobia and to promote queer-positive environments, but their efforts are deployed against homophobic discourses that are deeply systemic and that impose harsh discipline (physical, mental, discursive) on those who attempt to insert queerness into national, regional, and human-rights discussions.

The degree to which that discipline is to be feared can be gleaned from the fact that J-FLAG, the largest and most visible pro-queer organization in the region, has the following notice on its website: "Due to the potential for violent retribution, we cannot publish the exact location of our office." One begins to understand the difficulty involved in visibly organizing to fight homophobia, and the risks inherent in speaking up; I am very grateful to all those who took risks, of varying degrees, to participate in this project.

And the violent retribution feared by J-FLAG is not an illusion; to be queer in the Caribbean is to live with the continual fear of violence. Makeda Silvera, for example, recounts a story told to her by an old family friend concerning a neighborhood man who was suspected of being gay: "every night when he was coming home, a group of guys use to lay wait for him and stone him so viciously that he had to run for his life. Dem time, he was safe only in the day" (511).[1] Numerous publications also underscore the immediacy of the threat of violence, such as the following excerpt from an article by Kelly Cogswell in *The Gully*:[2]

> In one case this summer, a group of gay men were assaulted by their neighbors. It was a family affair. Both parents and children attacked using stones, a knife and a machete. They were calling us names and threatening us so we ran. They

> chased one of us down, Lenni (not his real name), who has now moved to another country. When we met up with him later in the night, we saw that he was chopped on his face, neck, hand and back. He was bleeding bad, but just bandaged it up himself. The next day, we all went back to our yard and the neighbors tried to attack us again. We called the police. When they arrived we told them how we had been attacked and chased, but the neighbors began telling the police that we were battymen [gay men (lit. asshole-men)] and that we had to leave or they would kill us.
>
> (November 7, 2003)

Such violence is, of course, a continuing issue in the region. On July 22, 2013, 17-year-old transsexual Dwayne Jones was murdered at a party once party-goers realized that he was, in fact, cross-dressed, an incident that garnered much international attention. On August 1 of the same year, a police officer suspected of being gay was mobbed in downtown Kingston. Two weeks later, five gay men were trapped inside a house by an angry mob, and barely escaped with their lives.[3] Days later, Dean Moriah was stabbed to death, and his house set on fire with the body still inside. In St. Lucia, vacationing HIV activist Michael Baker and his boyfriend Nick Smith were attacked, beaten, and robbed by a mob who taunted them with homophobic epithets.[4]

One need only turn to much contemporary reggae music to find innumerable, and far worse, examples of encouraged and quite explicit threats of violence toward gays and lesbians and those who associate with them. Indeed, this type of music has been dubbed "murder music," and the Stop Murder Music campaign, in which contributor Joel Simpson has been involved, has worked hard to combat the violent messages it contains. Here, for example, are some of the lyrics to Buju Banton's (one of reggae's most popular stars) infamous song, "Boom Bye Bye" (the "boom" in the title is the sound of a gun being fired):

> Two man hitch-up and a-rub-up
> And a-lay down in a bed
> Hug-up one another
> And a-feel-up leg
> Send for the 'matic [automatic gun]
> And the Uzi instead
> Shoot dem, no come if we shoot dem.

As has often been noted, the song literally incites murder against homosexuals, constructing their sexuality itself as sufficient and necessary reason to get a gun and kill them. The systemic nature of these attitudes and the violence

they produce is encapsulated in the final line of the above quotation; it is directed to the police, exhorting them either to kill the homosexuals themselves or at least not to show up if those killings are carried out by ordinary citizens. And of course, they often do not show up, or if they are present, often become complicit in the violence, a point noted later in the Cogswell article quoted above:

> [A] group of victims sought refuge in a police station from an armed crowd only to report to J-FLAG, "When the police realized it was a 'batty judgment' they began to call us battymen and told us 'battyman fi dead' [Faggots should die] and shouted at us to leave the compound. We were terrified for our lives as the group of armed men were waiting for us across the street from the gate to the police station"
>
> (The Gully November 7, 2003)

The level of violence advocated by reggae stars is quite extraordinary. Banton's song continues: "Guy come near we / Then his skin must peel / Burn him up bad like a old tire wheel." Even being associated with gays is sufficient reason to incur such violence; the group T.O.K warns,

> Cause dem a park in a chi chi man [gay man] car
> Blaze de fire mek we burn dem!
> Cause dem a drink in a chi chi man bar,
> Blaze de fire mek we burn dem!
>
> (Burn dem!)

That the attitudes these songs represent are systemic and widespread is proven by the fact that, when these artists perform these songs throughout the Caribbean (and the rest of the world), they do so to packed stadiums and clubs. Jamaican men interviewed by Tracey Skelton suggest that the "batty-bwoys" trying to get Banton's music banned "should be shot, 'boom, boom!' " (265).[5] Thus to be the object of their hatred, to be a "batty-boy" or a "chi chi man" or a "sodomite," is automatically to be marginal and to be deserving not simply of violence, but of death.

The readers of this volume will find in the following interviews many examples of the violence enacted upon queer bodies and psyches by those who believe likewise.

At the same time, and in contrast to these stark images of incredible violence, gay and lesbian Caribbeans can and do find ways to live normal, fulfilled lives as part of their communities. This is attested to by many of the lesbians interviewed in Rosamund Elwin's ground-breaking anthology *Tongues on Fire: Caribbean Lesbian Lives and Stories*.[6] In that collection a

Dominican, Rhonda Sue, writes: "There are women who live like that here. Everybody knows. There's a woman . . . she raised her children with another woman. They raised two boys together, and a granddaughter. Everybody knows, they live openly. I know two other couples like that" (24). Along the way she details not only the lack of physical threat she feels but also the growing presence of open male queerness: "There are no physical threats to lesbians here. A few guys on the corner would say, 'Oh, a lesbian,' but they getting used to that. The majority of men today don't want to work, so they go out with others guys to live. People kind of accept it" (25). Another contributor, Daphne, writes: "I knew a group of women who slept with each other. These women had men and children. People knew what they were doing but no one threatened them" (64). An Antiguan, Gerri, remembers going to a club in St. Kitt's often when she was young, where she would "see these women making love and kissing. I remember this woman Mavis making love to a member of my gang" (92). So, in fact, far from feeling as if they were isolated and hunted, these women for the most part grew up with many positive lesbian role models, including doctors and journalists and teachers, and with a ready supply of willing partners. One can see, then, that the lives of queer Caribbeans are filled with contradictions and contradictory cultural receptions. How can a country that says homosexuality is a crime also be home to the Miss Gay Guyana Glory Pageant, an annual event well attended by people of all classes? Contributor Korey Anthony Chisholm, winner of the pageant in 2007, delves into these issues in our interview.

These contradictions have always fascinated me, and this collection of interviews also grew out of the memories of two incidents in my youth, incidents that have always symbolized for me the contradictory nature of queer life in the Caribbean.

The first, while I was living in Georgetown, Guyana, was very negative. When I was quite young, I met, for the first time, an out gay man who moved into our neighborhood. We grew accustomed to seeing him walking along our street. One day, I suddenly realized that I hadn't seen him for a few days, and asked my sister if she knew where he was. She told me, as gently as she could, that he had been set upon by a few young men from the neighborhood, raped with a broomstick, and sent to the hospital; once he recovered, he did not return to the neighborhood.

The second, occurring in a tiny village on the West Bank of the Demerara River where my grandmother lives, called Goed-Intent, also in Guyana, was quite different. I was much older at this point, living in Canada and in Guyana for a visit. From the time of that first incident, my awareness of the dangers of being a gay man in Guyana had steadily grown. One night, sitting on the patio of a bar having beers with my uncle and some of our friends,

I noticed a couple dancing in the corner, holding each other very tightly and grinding together like the most hormonal of adolescents. I tried not to stare out of politeness, but soon enough my curiosity overtook me and I looked fully. It was two men. My stomach tensed: this was Guyana, and small-town Guyana, and these two gay men were openly groping each other in a bar full of drunk men—surely a scene of incredible violence was to follow. I felt sick thinking about what was about to happen. My uncle noticed my stare and followed it to the two lovers. He said, "oh, that's Miss X's son and he man; you remember she, she used to sell ginnip in front of the church." With that, he turned back to his conversation and the matter was done. No violence followed (then or later, to my knowledge), and I slowly relaxed.

For those who know something of the experiences of queers in the Caribbean, the first incident doesn't seem terribly out of the ordinary; for those who don't, it is likely terribly shocking. Many outside of the region are unaware of how brutal life can be for gay men and lesbians, and queers of all identifications, in the Caribbean. At the same time, those outside the region who engage with the issues facing queers in the Caribbean often do so from perspectives grounded only in their own experience, which do not fully take account of the specific historical contexts, and contemporary realities, of life in the Caribbean. The problem is that, in a region where queerness is not just stigmatized, but outright illegal, knowledge of what life is actually like for queers there is scarce and patchy. Even for those of us who have been involved with, and study professionally, queer life in the region, the seeming contradictions—the facts that, as Thomas Glave discusses in our interview, it is often safer to be an out gay man or lesbian in a small town than in the big cities, or that one can be perfectly safe one moment and confronted with incredible violence the next—are underpinned by a lack of first-hand accounts from those on the front-lines, those who have grown up queer in the Caribbean and its diasporas. There is a serious lack of knowledge that we must begin to properly address.

That is the impetus behind this book. Those interviewed here have lived through and negotiated the exclusions and silences and violences their societies have tried to impose upon them. And they have grappled with the various ways outside cultures in the West and North have also tried to construct them. The ways in which Caribbean societies try to construct, discipline, and contain their queer subjects will become clear through the interviews themselves. Equally important for me, though, has been the need to challenge the dominance of Euro-American theories in understanding global queerness, particularly in the Caribbean. While the work of European and American queer theorists remains important in understanding the formation and governance of Caribbean sexualities, we must always bear in mind

that these theories are not universally applicable; we must pay very close attention to the cultural differences that determine how fully and how effectively a theoretical paradigm travels across cultures.

Eve Sedgwick's work is an excellent example of this, and remains important because of its seminal nature and continuing influence on queer activism. Sedgwick focuses strongly on the hetero/homo binary, and on the epistemologies of the closet, as the prime referents for understanding the operation of sexism and homophobia. But these are quite specifically Western phenomena, and in many ways don't apply to the realities of Caribbean lesbians and gays. Indeed, the hetero/homo binary in particular is quite problematic as an approach to non-heteronormative non-Western sexualities, as many scholars have suggested that bisexuality is much more the norm. Frederick Luis Aldama, for example, writes that

> not all queer sexual relationalities operate exactly like the In/Out-of-Closet Western model: in Mexico, for example, machos can have sex with men (pasivos/bottoms) and not lose face in the community as long as they identify as activos (tops); often, too, queer isn't always male-male or female-female, but can include the bakla in the Philippines, the hijra in India, and the tomboi in Indonesia, all of which identify men who crisscross-genders as opposed to men who gay identify. Often with a comparative slant, such postcolonial queer excavations complicate otherwise Anglo/Euro-centric approaches and understandings of queer subjectivity and experience.[7]

And as Glave and Simpson note in their interviews in this volume, there are many different ways of being "closeted," and of being "out."

The term "queer theory" in itself is also, in this regard, problematic. In tracing a history of queer studies, Linda Garber points out that while queer theory provides promising new models for understanding sexualities and identities,

> to assert that the tool of queer theory is adequate unto itself as a scholarly or political outlook seems to me absurd, tantamount to claiming that I can fix every leak and creak in my hundred-year-old house with a screwdriver or a power drill—both versatile tools, but inadequate on their own for complex tasks. (125)[8]

Even more pointedly, Howard Hsueh-Hao Chiang asks,

> [I]f so many historians acknowledge the "social construction" of (homo)sexuality, how come a body of literature called "gay and lesbian history" or "queer history" still exists? Alternatively put, if sexuality is indeed widely recognized as

> "socially constructed" across time and place, why are historians still assuming a core set of essential qualities that unite all those historical scholarships they categorize under "gay and lesbian history" or "queer history," or even the "history of sexuality" for that matter? (1)[9]

In other words, why haven't we figured out yet that we can't have it both ways? If sexualities and identities are indeed constructed societally, then no single universal theory can explain them, and we must pay attention to the particular cultures and societies that produce them, and which therefore produce them in specific and unique ways.

It is for this reason that I am particularly attracted to Ara Wilson's vision of a regional approach to questions of gender and queerness. Wilson begins by noting the problems associated with discussing queerness in an age of globalization: she points out that

> as conversations about queer sexualities grapple with the global level, they have had difficulty avoiding the centrifugal powers of Western formulations, particularly those attached to the hegemonic force of the United States. The dominant model for global queer subjectivities is an import-export framework: the assumption that legible queer sexualities derive from U.S.-inflected Western modes of sexuality or from Western-based systems of modernity, such as capitalism. (2)[10]

The major problem with the import–export model, Wilson continues, is that

> when it stresses the homophobia of third-world traditions, it implies—or even asserts—that modernization will make the non-Western world more liberated for queers. In this way, sexual rights reproduce a geopolitical progress narrative. Discussions about non-normative sexuality in the global south conflate Western, modern, and globalization . . . by locating the origin and agency of modern queer life squarely in the West.

The danger of such a progress narrative is that it re-institutes the age-old colonialist narrative of primitivism; that is, the historical Western tendency, as discussed most notably by Johannes Fabian, of constructing its others as primitive in relation to the observing culture, what Fabian calls "the denial of coevalness" (31).[11] And we can readily see how Western anti-homophobic campaigns in regard to the Caribbean very easily slip into the primitivist mode.

In February 2008, former Human Rights Commission spokesperson Wayne Besen wrote a piece on his blog decrying homophobia in the Caribbean, and Jamaica specifically. Besen clearly has great faith in the ability of American queers to affect foreign countries; in response to Jamaican

homophobia, he calls for an economic boycott of Jamaica. "It is time," he writes, "to hand an ultimatum to Jamaica's public officials: Stop allowing rampant abuse of gay people or your economy will be crippled." Leaving aside its unabashed imperialistic tone, the statement displays not only an understanding of American queerness as hegemonic, but also a brutal lack of understanding of the confluence of factors that affect Caribbean queerness. Does he think that precipitating a further economic crisis in Jamaica will *help* queer people? The truth is that it is likely to make things much worse, by exacerbating the society's social problems. But what is more interesting is the immediate tenor of the responses by readers of his blog to his juxtaposition of Western progress with Jamaica's backward attitudes.

Here are a few gems: Bart writes, "What a bunch of stoned savages. What a bunch of immoral a-holes. I would not spend a dime there. These people can go to HELL"; Scott writes, in reaction to another poster, "there's nothing wrong with smoking weed, but there's certainly something wrong with the savages of Jamaica"; in response to yet another poster, Scott writes again, "Anon, stop putting words in my mouth LOL. I never called any writer a 'savage.' I called Jamaicans savages"; and finally, Anonymous writes, "Civilized nations embrace their gay citizens and create an environment where they can be happy and flourish. Barbarian nations—like Jamaica—beat, maim and murder gay people. Such places must change or perish." It is clear, then, that to read queerness in relation to Western modes of thought and understanding, and in relation to Western progress narratives and hegemony, is a very risky proposition not only for the Caribbean queer but for Caribbean societies generally. To call Jamaica a homophobic country is no different than saying all Americans are racist. Yet, these images of an entire country, an entire region, persist.

Part of the solution, then, is to begin reading Caribbean queerness in light of its specific cultural histories and present realities. This is the reason that I have avoided an intensely theoretical introduction to this book, for I wish the subject matter to shine through on its own terms. It is also the reason I have done my best to use Internet sources whenever possible; the academic pay-wall behind which most journal articles lie is another means of ensuring that the theoretical discourse remains in the hands of those who can afford it, and I do not wish this book to become a rarified academic endeavor too far removed from its subject matter. This does not mean, however, that we can ignore the West and its academies, nor the influence they and their understandings of these regions exert, particularly in the age of globalization. But we must undoubtedly move away from a model in which, as Wilson writes, "visible queer life in [these regions are] read through the lens of Stonewall, Sydney's Mardi Gras and San Francisco" (3). This Western-centered view, she

argues, marks all other queer sexualities as immediately inauthentic, until they can be disciplined into the Western mold. For this reason I believe that we must, in the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty, begin to "provincialize" Europe and America,[12] to move them to the periphery while focusing on the Caribbean itself as a center of its own queer politics. As Anjali Arondekar puts it, Queer Studies needs to "decenter the hegemony of the American impact model, and to instead articulate the simultaneity of multiple local global spatialities" (247).[13] In this way, rather than simply dismissing the problems of queers as "just the way things are done in the Third World," or "those are just their traditions," we can begin to focus on specific questions, and specific solutions. Rather than, for example, simply dismissing the violence against queers in the Caribbean as a fact of life, we can recognize that often, in fact, queers live openly queer lives in the Caribbean without any violence whatsoever; rather than dismissal, this knowledge begs specific questions: what is it, then, that triggers violence against queers in the region? Why is open queerness acceptable at some times, and not at others? Who can be openly queer, and who can't? These are questions that lead to discussion and solutions, rather than to the simple dead end, "the Caribbean is a homophobic place, and that's all there is to it."

Many of the contributors to this book offer answers to the questions I have raised above, and to many others relating to their own experiences of queer life in the Caribbean. Some of their answers will undoubtedly be controversial, particularly when viewed from a Western perspective. Chief among these, perhaps, is the assertion by a few contributors that their queer sexuality is not innate and is perhaps even a choice; this is in stark contrast to Western activist discourses that stress the innateness of one's sexuality, as a refusal of those homophobias that suggest that, since it is a "lifestyle choice," one should be able to leave one's queerness behind for the good of the community and family. I ask that the readers of these interviews try to move outside of their own cultural expectations, and experience these words as windows into a world that is different from their own, yet shares many of the same concerns, problems, and potential solutions. In this way we can begin to move away from a world in which Daphne, a Caribbean lesbian, must lament that "White women try to say that [Caribbean] women don't know what we're talking about because we are not 'true dykes' " (Elwin 38), away from a world in which Anthony Burgess can confidently assert that "the best homosexuality is in America."[14] Let us move away from a viewpoint that constructs Caribbean queers only as oppressed, damaged, uneducated, and in need of Western interventions, assumptions that simply recreate the colonial ideologies of the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries.

Let us rather listen to these voices speak their own queerness with the understanding that there is no one way of being queer. Let us, rather, work toward a constellation of responses to being queer, both in the Caribbean and elsewhere: a collection of knowledges and ideas and responses and strategies and discourses that revolve around a single core—the notion that we are all human beings, all citizens of our respective nations, each and every one of us entitled to the same privileges and rights regardless of who we love and desire.

This Collection

Before going any further, I would first like to acknowledge two literary works that have already begun the project of bringing the voices of Caribbean queers into the public sphere. The first book that really undertook this project is one I have mentioned earlier in this introduction, Rosamund Elwin's *Tongues on Fires: Caribbean Lesbian Lives and Stories*. Published in 1997 in Canada by Toronto's Women's Press, this anthology for the first time brought us the voices of Caribbean lesbians, telling us their stories in their own words. The first half of the book contains first-person autobiographies of the contributors, and the second half contains creative works by, among others, Shani Mootoo, who is interviewed in this collection. A long silence followed until, in 2008, Thomas Glave's *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* was published by Duke University Press. *Our Caribbean* is an anthology of the history of queer Caribbean writing, containing reprints of previously published essays and creative works, along with some previously unpublished material. Both books were, and remain, ground-breaking, and I hope that this collection of interviews will add fruitfully to the work and conversations they have already begun. The desperate continuing need for this kind of work is attested to by the fact that all of those I approached immediately and eagerly agreed to be involved.

In this book I interview writers, artists, and activists who have worked to bring the lives of queer Caribbeans into focus, for both Caribbean audiences and international ones. The work they have undertaken is both dangerous and brave, and I thank them profusely for their willingness to participate in this project, above and beyond everything they have already done for the cause they hold so dear. For some, such as Joel Simpson (co-founder of SASOD), these interviews represent the first time they have openly acknowledged their sexuality in a public forum (although, *contra* one of the organizing principles of Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet*, and as some of these interviews will show, the keeping of such secrets in the Caribbean is almost impossible; as Joel put it in an email to me, "Everyone knows I'm gay, although I have never talked about it publicly . . . Time to officially end the

charade. This will be my 'coming-out' interview"). And in the context of the stark homophobia of many of the big reggae stars, the multiple award-winning artist Mista Majah P's release of an entire album dedicated to the fight against homophobia, and his involvement in this project, represent a huge personal and career risk.

This project is focused on the Anglophone Caribbean, and I have tried to interview a variety of people from a variety of nations to allow for as great a multiplicity of voices as possible. Within these pages you will find the words of writers, activists, professors, sex-educators, artists, beauty queens, and musicians. You will find the words of gays, lesbians, bi-sexuals, and queers. You will find the words of men, women, men who dress as women, and women who dress as men. You will find the voices of those descended from Africa, India, and Europe. You will find voices from Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. You will find the voices of those who still live in the Caribbean, and of those who have emigrated to various parts of the world. Voices of bitterness and loss, and voices of hope and love.

The interviews were conducted through face-to-face meetings, Skype, telephone, email, or a combination of two or more of those formats. My questions focus on, among many other things, the experiences of growing up queer in the Caribbean, the presence and threat of violence, the importance of class and economics in negotiating Caribbean queerness, the relationship between Caribbean and Western queerness, prospects for the future, whether it is better to remain in the Caribbean or leave for other spaces, and the place of the arts, government, the church, and activism in the struggle for queer equality. While I began with a base set of questions, many of the interviews ultimately took their own turns, and led to different sets of follow-up questions (although, of course, some contributors were too busy for extensive follow-up questioning), and inevitably, the discussions of each writer's or activist's work in relation to the struggle for queer equality took unique paths; therefore, it made little sense to arrange the interviews in this volume according to question; at the same time, comparisons of the interviewees' responses to similar questions are quite enlightening. Likewise, the free-flowing nature of the interviews meant that a thematic arrangement would also have been unwieldy. Rather, each interview stands on its own. The various contributors stress different parts of my questions in their responses, sometimes extending the questions, sometimes disagreeing with their premises, sometimes ignoring them altogether and moving off on a tangent, sometimes referring back to earlier questions. Nor have they hesitated to take me to task when they felt it necessary as, for example, Rosamond King does over my use of the word "queer" in a Caribbean context. The organic nature of our discussions was

a source of great pleasure for me, and I think it lends a greater depth to the contributors' materials; everyone was free to go wherever their thoughts took them, and to speak to whatever they thought important. And I've made no effort to render the various Caribbean nation-languages into what is commonly called Standard English; you will hear these stories in the ways the interviewees intended.

What results is not an easy collection of words. At times, editing this material proved overwhelming. The depth of honesty, the intensity of self-reflection, the pain of encounters with homophobia, and rejection by family and society, all shine through clearly in these interviews, as do the thrills and beauties of first encounters and first touches, the joys of love, and the persistence of hope. You will find anger in these pages, and controversy too.

Most importantly you will hear the voices, perhaps familiar to you, of a silenced and oppressed minority involved in a daily struggle to be recognized as equals, as human beings worthy of the most basic of human rights that have been denied to them, and the voices of those who have built meaningful lives and loving relationships amidst all this. I hope that this book will continue the work of filling that silence with voices loud with indignation and passion, and bringing the everyday realities of Caribbean queers to a larger and larger audience. It is only through knowledge that the power required for change can grow.

CHAPTER 1

H. Nigel Thomas

H. Nigel Thomas was born on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, the third of four boys. He emigrated to Canada in 1968, where he has worked as a school teacher, a civil servant, a mental health worker, and finally as an English professor at Université Laval, until he retired in 2006 to devote his attention to writing full-time. He is the author of four novels, two collections of short stories, and a book of poetry.

Kofi: Can you speak a bit about the experience of growing up queer in the Caribbean? Was it relatively easy or difficult, safe or dangerous, for you? For other gay men?

HNT: As a youngster of about eight or nine, I realized that the community—adults and my peers—treated me differently. They said I was a girl, mocked my speech, and laughed at me in general. I had forgotten much of this until, at the annual Vincy Picnic in the Thousand Islands in 2009, someone visiting from England praised me for my achievements and afterwards lamented how much he tortured me while I was growing up. Another such case of torture occurred with a different individual when I was hospitalized at age 16. My ward-mate taunted me day in and day out, and the nurses never reprimanded him. Three years later I went to live in his village, and his brother took over. At age 20 I joined the Vincentian civil service and there was open discussion among my colleagues as to whether or not I was a bullerman.[1] By then my vocal range was not the issue. Speaking grammatically correct English was. I was in a heterosexual relationship then. But Vincentians were never fooled by those.

Until I was confronted in a personal way with same-sex desire, around age 16, I never saw myself as being other than heterosexual. Cultivating flowers was the only nonmasculine behavior I engaged

in. I tended to prefer reading to playing sports, but I never avoided sports, although I was not good at them and was taunted by my fellow players. Today, I know that the extensive reading I did then made others brand me as being queer. But I wouldn't have realized that while I was growing up.

There was never any question of my even attempting to engage in homosexuality while I was in St. Vincent. When I left, I was engaged to be married. Jerome's repressed sexuality, in *Spirits in the Dark*, is my own speculation of what my life would have been like had I remained in St. Vincent. In my day every village in St. Vincent had its two or three known homosexuals, and no man or boy ever ventured onto their premises. I remember hearing a homosexual recount to a busload of people that he had a boyfriend whom he visited in Carriacou. But no one remembered his ever traveling there. It was all fantasy. He often engaged in the self-denigration that Vincentians required of homosexuals. Women complimented him for the excellent care he took of his bedridden mother.

When I was around 15, a villager, an age-mate, made a date with another teenager one night. The affair was to have been consummated in a banana field. But when the youngster took off his clothes, he was confronted by a gang who chased and beat him throughout the village while calling him bullerman and threatening to kill him. (A few years ago, I attended his mother's funeral, where he officiated as a Spiritual Baptist pastor, and I wondered how his violent homophobic encounter now affected his life.)

A second case, which I include in the novel I'm currently working on, occurred when I was around 18. This time someone in the village had seen a visitor enter the house of a known homosexual. He alerted others, and soon the house was surrounded. The villagers broke down the door, barred the windows, and beat both men almost to death.

A nonpracticing homosexual friend of mine in St. Vincent refuses to be seen in public with me, because I am an out gay man. He asked me not to write to him as well. Everyone knows that this fellow is a homosexual. But to avoid being persecuted by the community, he must reassure it that he is ashamed of his same-sex desire and contemptuous of fellow homosexuals. Two years ago, my nephew told the villagers he wouldn't accept anything I brought him from Canada. He added that if he could he'd douse all bullermen with gasoline and set them afire (the minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs in the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines had

said something similar a few months earlier). Needless to say, my nephew's statement was told to me over and over with relish. I'm sure, too, he enjoyed the sudden importance.

Persons identified as homosexuals, even when they were in heterosexual relationships, were extensively policed. To even hint that one wanted to have sex with someone of the same gender led to violence.

Kofi: To what do you attribute the intense homophobia of Caribbean societies (if you believe that they are, in fact, intensely homophobic)?

HNT: A cursory examination of the beliefs of continental Africans will reveal that they believe that the raison d'être of existence is to produce offspring. Africans brought such beliefs to the New World. Diasporic and continental Africans continue to valorize themselves on the number of offspring they produce. Somehow homosexuality is envisaged as antithetical to this need to reproduce and is persecuted. In fact, there's more tolerance of homosexuals who are fathers.

However, Caribbean men are more vicious than Caribbean women in their persecution of homosexuals. (The market scene in my novel *Sprits in the Dark* would be different if the players were men.) I think the reason is that West Indian men have very few possibilities for self-valorization, and one way of doing so is to appoint themselves members of an informal anti-homosexual squad. The attention Buju Banton and others got for advocating killing gays is instructive in this regard. Even prime ministers ride in the homophobic bandwagon, in Jamaica and in St. Vincent.

Fundamentalist Christianity and Rastafarianism feed the flames as well by arguing that homophobia is righteous. They take seriously the passage in Leviticus that advocates killing homosexuals and ignore pretty much everything else.

Kofi: Do you feel more empowered in the diaspora, more able to speak out, to make a difference? Are you optimistic about the future of queers in the region?

HNT: In December 1994, when I informed Vincentians, in *The News* and *The Vincentian*,[2] that I'm homosexual, it was to respond to some vitriolic homophobic comments in the Vincentian press, something homosexual Vincentians would not have dared to do, unless they did so anonymously. Until then no even-handed discussion of same-sex realities had taken place in the Vincentian media. I said then that it needed to be undertaken. In subsequent pieces I challenged the homophobia of the then Anglican bishop, some fundamentalist pastors, a Vincentian magistrate, and a few columnists.

Predictably, my relatives have been angry with me for doing so. I understand the opprobrium they suffer as a result of my pieces (which the press eventually stopped publishing as a result of pressure from their advertisers).

Here too (in Montreal) I have been able to challenge the homophobic views proffered by the various groups speaking on behalf of the Black community. The difference here is that I'm not alone; I receive support from several Black community leaders. That would not have been forthcoming in St. Vincent. I should say, however, that one of the Vincentian columnists I scolded back in the nineties has recently written a piece in which he was critical of the media's and the police handling of a same-sex case.

I have something of a muted optimism regarding the future of same-sex persons in the West Indies. Given the inability of Caribbean media to suppress the news about the gains in rights for same-sex persons worldwide, the relatives of same-sex persons are no longer limited to anti-gay propaganda. Those who are inclined to be brutal would no doubt choose to persecute; those predisposed to being generous would choose acceptance.

Kofi: Rosamund Elwin's anthology, *Tongues on Fire*, offers us a picture of Caribbean lesbians who, in contradiction to their portrayal in many Western activist discourses, find ways to live happy, fulfilled lives with long-term partners, openly. Further, they offer us stories of queers who have done the same, since at least the time of their grandmothers. What is your own experience in this regard? Did you grow up knowing, or knowing of, other queer persons in your community? Were you told stories of such by relatives?

HNT: Elwin's views in this regard are also to be found in Audre Lorde's commentary on what the women of Carriacou did during the long absences of their husbands/partners. There's no doubt that lesbian relationships were never as threatening to the social order. I remember one in my birth village. One of the women was an ex-mistress of my father; the other's husband had emigrated and abandoned her. I was present when people teased them. It was gentle teasing to which they responded with smiles and giggles. The teasers too, men and women, were usually smiling. I don't think that with the vitriol that has come to Vincentians via fundamentalist Christianity and Jamaican dancehall music, theirs would now be such a welcome relationship. I am reminded that Trinidad expanded its anti-homosexual legislation in the nineties to criminalize lesbianism.

Kofi: Another important aspect of Elwin's anthology is that it works to normalize queer life in the region. Patricia Powell's novel *A Small Gathering of Bones* does much the same thing—we see gay characters living normal lives, holding down normal jobs, engaging in loving and long-term relationships. Yet we know that living in an openly queer manner in the Caribbean, or even secretly, can be a magnet for incredible violence. How can we explain this dichotomy? Why do you think that some queers are able to live openly, and others not? What is it that triggers the violence, and moves an individual or a community from acceptance to violent exclusion?

HNT: As a writer of fiction I am well aware of how reality, when incorporated into fiction, must respond to the exigencies of fiction. This is undoubtedly the case with *A Small Gathering of Bones*. A huge component of this novel is the social relationships among the characters, as Powell's fictional imagination envisaged it. It's no more empirical than my rendering of the plantocracy in *Return to Arcadia*.

But it is plausible. Caribbean gays do attempt to create safe places to socialize. Jamaica Kincaid's account of this—it's almost like an afterword in *My Brother*—is an excellent reflection of how it happens in the smaller islands. A Vincentian cousin of mine attempted to live with his partner back in the eighties. His wealth and status shielded his home from the mob, but his partner broke under the weight of public harassment and fled the island. Thereafter my cousin's relationship was with someone who wore the mask of heterosexuality, and who only visited him in the wee hours of the morning and left right after sex was over.

Kofi: Those involved in Caribbean queer activism, of course, tend to stress the worst conditions that Caribbean queers experience, as a means of spurring others to action. Do you think queer literatures from the region have the same responsibility? Or do you think they serve the community better by offering examples of positive queer living in the region? Or neither?

HNT: I disagree with your statement "Those involved in Caribbean queer activism, of course, tend to stress the worst conditions that Caribbean queers experience." I think that if one lives in a society where his or her life is in danger because he or she identifies as homosexual, that fact must be emphasized. Carolyn Cooper's apologies for homophobes[3] were of no help to the people attacked at a funeral a few years ago because many of the mourners were thought to be gay. The so-called closeted gays (like [Rex] Nettleford) reify the larger community's beliefs that to be homosexual is to be subnormal,

and, as a columnist in *The Jamaica Observer* noted, Jamaicans expect them to be ashamed and to stay in the closet, "preferably a broom closet."

In 1997 I was accosted by a homophobe in my birth village in St. Vincent. My half-brother, who was visiting from England, and I were coming from the nearby town and we stopped in at a shop at the entrance to the village to have something liquid, when this fellow came up to me and began pointing his fingers in my face while calling me fag and bullerman. To their credit the rum-drinkers in the shop asked him to leave me alone. He desisted when my brother grabbed him by the collar and showed him his balled fist. In this instance the rum-drinkers' telling the aggressor to curb his behavior is not what needs to be stressed when recounting the danger affecting the lives of Caribbean homosexuals, but rather why this fellow felt he should assault me for my being gay.

Kofi: How do you see the relationship between Caribbean queer activism and Western queer activism?

HNT: First, it is very evident that "queer activism" in the "developed world" is undergirded by a profound understanding of democratic rights and values. It's on this basis that gays can argue—sometimes successfully—that they are discriminated against. Democracy in the West Indies means nothing beyond the holding of elections every five years. The West Indian nations operate as if they are theocracies. When Britain ordered its Caribbean overseas departments to change their laws regarding homosexuality and capital punishment, they protested on the basis that they were Christian nations. Of course, they pick and choose what they wish to be Christian about, but laws, even when ecclesiastically enforced, have usually exempted the powerful. Who would have dared to stone King David to death for committing adultery? Instead rationalizations were concocted to shield it.

In the Caribbean there's little attention paid to rights unless they are backed by power. It's why the physical and verbal abuse of children, for example, is so rampant, and few West Indians see anything wrong with it. With what they claim is biblical justification, they sometimes beat children to the point of maiming them. When I was around ten my father told me I was lucky he did not kill me, that the Bible gave him the right to do so if he wished. That a person's body is his/hers and is inviolate is an unknown concept in the West Indies. The magistrates in St. Vincent and the Grenadines frequently sentence youngsters to be flogged. In other words, our understanding

of human rights is poor, and until that's remedied, serious change will not take place.

Kofi: Do you, as a gay Caribbean, feel accepted in Western queer spaces? Are you able to be yourself, or do you often feel the need to perform your Caribbean-ness? Or the need to perform your queerness in a more visible way (for example, one of Elwin's contributors writes "if I go into a bar in a dress, high-heels, and make-up, there is an assumption I am heterosexual, bisexual, or a fag hag. If a white woman goes in the bar in a dress and make-up, she is called a 'lipstick lesbian' ")?

HNT: In the atmosphere of white supremacy in which Europeans and Euro-Americans (I interpret Western to mean this) are socialized, it's inevitable that they have set functions for non-Whites. This is no different in LGBT communities. There Black males embody the role of Priapus. For the first 19 years I lived in Montreal (1968–1988), I refused to be sexually involved with White men. I modified my stance during the 18 years I lived in Quebec City, since it was impossible to encounter Black gay men there. For the last five years—my years back in Montreal—my partner has been Haitian.

My philosophy as regards such decisions is simple: I won't carry any more burdens than I need to. One of the two serious relationships I had in Quebec was especially painful in this regard. Among other things, this partner asked me to forget that I was/am Black, at a time when I was enraged over the police shooting of a psychiatrically ill man. His father constantly made racist comments. He termed them jokes. "Sais-tu ce que c'est un plan nègre? Une affaire qui ne fonctionne pas."[4] His sister was always complaining of working like a nigger and earning the wages of a nigger.

That said, my closest Black friend has been in a relationship with a White man for over 30 years, and it is a relationship that seems free of the racist piffle that so many of us find annoying. I have also watched another friend, White, outgrow his own unconscious racism. He is now in what seems to be a mutually respectful relationship with a West African.

Kofi: One of the major points of contention between Western queer activists and Caribbean queers is the question of the origin of sexual preference. Western activists insist that sexuality is innate, as a response, of course, to those anti-gay movements which insist that it is a lifestyle choice, which can be voluntarily changed. Yet, many Caribbean queers (including several in Elwin's anthology) speak of the process of becoming lesbian, rather than of coming

to a realization of their queerness. Indeed, some of the contributors to Elwin's anthology move back and forth in their sexual identification, and several Caribbean theorists have suggested that bisexuality, rather than outright lesbianism or gayness, is the "queer norm" in the Caribbean. What do you make of these viewpoints? Do you have a sense that queer Caribbean identities are more fluid than Western ones? Do you believe in the innateness of sexuality?

HNT: Sounds to me like these people need to watch Kinsey. The little I know of psychology alerts me to how little people know themselves, so I'm not sure I attach a great deal of credence to such confessions. Their value, I suppose, is that they exist in print and you and I can reflect on them. As to what Caribbean theorists assert, I do not attach much value to it.

The late bishop of the Windward Islands, Sehon Goodridge, rhetorically asked on one occasion (I had asked him via the media if he intended to implement the 1998 Lambeth resolution regarding dialoguing with homosexuals): "How can we approve of this lifestyle? It will mean that husbands will abandon wives and wives husbands." It was a brilliant instance of naïve honesty. He was in fact acknowledging the Anglican Church's role in coerced heterosexuality. It is in such an environment that most West Indians come to discover their sexuality. Using myself as an example, it was not until I dreamt that I was having sex with a man that I faced the same-sex desire in me. Until then I dated girls and never gave a thought to the males I encountered. That dream traumatized me.

I treat the origin of same-sex desire the same way I treat the existence or nonexistence of God: with indifference. As with belief in God, people espouse the notions that best accord with their psychological disposition or educational conditioning. Until geneticists identify the constellations of genes that govern same-sex behavior, this discussion will continue. In fact, it will continue long after; those who *need* groups to persecute won't easily abandon this one. I think the biological basis for the existence of same-sex practice is soundly established through its observation in several species.

Kofi: To what degree does your queerness influence your writing (creative or otherwise)? You've been described as a postcolonial writer, and a queer writer. Do you think of yourself as a political writer? As a writer of queer literature?

HNT: As a writer the issue I grapple with is the complexity of being human. In my novel-length works I imbue my protagonists with same-sex desire because I think I'm creating them through the lenses

of a gay man. The Caribbean community was angry with me when my first novel appeared. They loved the postcolonial dimension and abhorred the gay content. They used terms like "betrayal," saw me as wasting my talent, and said a lot of similar claptrap. Most of the characters I create, however, are not gay. There are no gay characters in my collection of short stories *How Loud Can the Village Cock Crow?* Same-sex desire is present in my second novel *Behind the Face of Winter* but one has to look hard to find it. My novel *Return to Arcadia* is more about sexuality that originates in pathology than about homosexuality.

I don't understand the concept of political writing. If by that you mean: Do I write in order to spur people into bringing about change? I'd answer that that would be a fool's mission. For one thing, most people do not read well enough to appreciate complex fiction. For another, my books lack the sort of burlesque (simplistic) comedy that will keep West Indians turning the page. In fact, I'm usually pained when I meet the readers of my books and all they talk about are the humorous tidbits.

There are, however, vignettes in my works that some might deem political. They are there because in writing I'm oftentimes recording and rearranging what I've witnessed. In my latest book, a collection of short stories entitled *Lives: Whole and Otherwise*, there's a story, "My People! My People!" that satirizes the raison d'être of many Caribbean Island organizations. I'm sure many will call it political. I call it satirical.

Kofi: The battle for the decriminalization of homosexuality is proceeding at various paces in different countries around the Caribbean. Do you hold out much hope for these movements?

HNT: Change will come, but it will be remarkably slow. And the stranglehold of fundamentalist doctrine will for a long time prevent much of the legal change from becoming practical change. I don't think, for example, intelligent gay men would set up house with their partners in Tortola or Grand Cayman[5] where the law supposedly protects their right to do just that.

Kofi: Your book, *Lives: Whole and Otherwise*, offers us many glimpses into the Caribbean diaspora in Montreal, showing us many different kinds of people living many different kinds of lives. Do you feel there's a place in that community for gays and lesbians from the Caribbean? Do they move among those spaces more easily in the diaspora than they might at home, or is the sense of exclusion as strong?

HNT: In answering this question, I speak for myself only. In 2000, I granted an interview to Richard Burnett, a columnist with the Montreal weekly *Hour*. The piece was commissioned by *The Montreal Gazette*, and the topic ostensibly was racism within the larger LGBT community. Richard began the piece by saying, truthfully, that I told him that someone in Quebec City told me that he'd met Blacks with 12-inch penises. The problem was that I told Richard this within the context of the sort of propaganda spread by types like Phillipe Rushton.[6] But it was clear that Richard had decided to shock Montreal and, somehow, *The Montreal Gazette* went along. The article set off a firestorm among Blacks in Montreal. My phone rang off the hook with angry calls, and friends reported on the discussions that they'd overheard. Among other things, I was accused of playing up the sex stereotype about Blacks to attract attention. Predictably, the constant assertion by Black heterosexuals that gays should keep their sexual preferences to themselves was repeated always with the addendum: "I don't go around talking about my sexuality." I felt compelled to send a response to the Black community via *The Montreal Gazette*.

Many Blacks apparently swore they'd no longer buy my books, and indeed the book launches that have taken place since have had smaller audiences, and no audience to speak of in Toronto and Ottawa. Worse, male friends of mine have been asked over and over why they continue to associate with me, etc. My friend Horace Goddard, with whom I have in the past shared a room when we attended literary conferences, has on many occasions had to reply to asinine questions like: Weren't you afraid to sleep in the same room with him?—foolishness of this sort.

The above notwithstanding, I'm a member of the St. Vincent and Grenadines Association of Montreal. I attend the association's meetings, and everyone there knows I'm gay but treats me with respect. I think many even go out of their way to do so (which is probably not such a good thing). They tell me too in all sorts of ways that they are proud of me. I guess they see me as a public face for St. Vincent and the Grenadines. From their perspective, it is the face of a writer-teacher-professor; compromised by homosexuality somewhat, but still, not the face of a drug pusher. In 1993 I was the keynote speaker for the association's Independence Banquet and Ball. In 1994, I was the keynote for the Ottawa Association's Independence Banquet and Ball. Indeed at the latter, the OECS (Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States) High Commissioner, who was seated

beside me, asked me about my family. I told her I was gay. After a brief pause, she said, "That's the next big rights issue we'll have to tackle in the Caribbean."

So there's the answer to your question: We do move more easily in North American and European spaces, because however much the most rabid Evangelicals might want to stone us to death, they know what our rights are. In my own case, I have decided to claim my space in the community. I would take my partner to their functions were it not for the fact that he is unilingual Francophone.

Kofi: The dedication to *Lives: Whole and Otherwise* is an interesting one. Is this a story you care to share? [The dedication reads: "To the memory of Jimmy Cross, who saved my life; and his brother John Cross, who lost his for being gay."]

HNT: LWO is dedicated to two brothers: James and John Cross, both of whom were gay. They were Mohawk. James (Jimmy) and I were students in a psychiatric nursing program at Douglas Hospital in Montreal. After he found out that I was gay, he shared all sorts of confidential information with me, including the fact that his other two brothers were also gay. One Sunday—I think it was the Victoria Day weekend of 1971—I came to the conclusion that my life was not worth living and decided to end it. (I should say I was no stranger to suicide. I had been thinking about it since age 10. Then, the fear of going to hell prevented me. I had no such fear in 1971). Jimmy came into my room—I'd forgotten to lock the door—a few minutes after I'd overdosed and saw the suicide notes. He yanked me up from the bed I was lying in, and I vomited what I'd taken, etc., etc.

His brother John, younger, was a registered nurse. His body was found naked and covered with cigarette burns in a parking lot behind Place Bonaventure in Montreal. You'll see the connection to "Suitcases" in *LWO*. There Percy survives—the freedom of fiction. John didn't.

Kofi: In your story "Percy's Illness," and your novels *Spirits in the Dark* and *Return to Arcadia*, sexuality and mental health intertwine. That is, both Percy from the story, and Jerome and Joshua from the novels, go through periods of madness, and are considered mad by others. Do you feel this theme is reflective of the journeys that many gays undergo in the Caribbean and the diaspora? Is there a pathologization of homosexuality still that leads young men and women to internalize this view of themselves as mentally and physically ill?

HNT: It's not so long ago that same-sex desire was considered an illness. There are still many in the psychological professions who

continue to deem same-sex desire an illness. Black psychiatrist Frances Cress-Welsing is frequently quoted by Evangelicals for her poignant assertion of this position. It's hard to be called a pervert, shunned and constantly threatened with violence, and not develop some sort of anxiety or neurosis. Just the effort of masking one's sexuality and the perennial fear of being unmasked are enough to unbalance all but the very strong. I know a thing or two about psychosomatic illnesses. In fact, my MD in St. Vincent categorized many of my teenage health problems as such. And he was right.

I have a close friend in Montreal whose opinions of homosexuality in relationship to himself are exactly as they are expressed in "Percy's Illness." His real-life story, including the breakdowns, not the HIV part, is actually worse than Percy's.

Jerome's breakdown in *Spirits in the Dark* comes from his bottled-up sexuality: a consequence of his vow never to subject his parents to the sort of humiliation Boy-Boy had subjected his parents to. In the first several drafts of the novel, he was heterosexual, or rather asexual. Then it struck me that I had transferred my own closeted sexuality (I was out to some people) to him. I decided to re-insert what I'd unconsciously edited out. In fact, my friend Shirley Small, who'd read an earlier draft (I was not out to her) was upset with the new depiction. Unconsciously I used *Spirits in the Dark* as a springboard for my eventual coming out of the closet.

Return to Arcadia is altogether different. Joshua accepts his homosexuality. What he does not accept is its masochistic component. At the risk of being reductive (because I'm sure I did not come to this in any conscious way), I intertwined the violence his mother's class was subjected to with his sexuality. In a sense he must choose, before he understands the implications (in psychological matters we always do), to be whipper/plantocrat or whipped/the oppressed. In the peculiar ways in which the psyche configures such issues, he expresses it in masochism. His story without the context of class oppression would be meaningless.

His "uncle/father" Sparrow brings another dimension to the antagonism between Evangelical Christianity and homosexuality. His pedophilia reflects my view that most of the clerics who've ended up abusing young boys would not have done so if they could have engaged in honest same-sex behavior. Sparrow's need to atone for his sexuality is something I've observed closely in an ex-Seventh-Day Adventist friend. Like Sparrow, he was atoning even while engaging in same-sex acts. Unlike Sparrow, fortunately, he's not a pedophile.

Kofi: I'm also interested in the question of economics as it intersects with queerness. There are two stories that deal directly with gay characters in *Lives: Whole and Otherwise*. What is interesting is that the two experience life in the city of Montreal quite differently in some ways, based at least partly on their economic situations. Can you speak to this? Do you feel it reflects a continuing reality in the Caribbean diaspora in Montreal and elsewhere?

HNT: I don't think there's much to be made of this economic difference. It reflects the statistical distribution of wealth and poverty in the population. The popular stereotype is that gays are wealthy, are lavish spenders, and have a great deal of money to spend. Most of the ones I know—Black and White—do not correspond to this stereotype. The gay Blacks I know now have done well economically. This was not the case in the 1970s and 1980s. That crop embodied a form of insidious conditioning that to some degree equated homosexuality with prostitution. Many of those young men expected to be "kept." A Haitian tried to explain to me that in Haiti the poor fall in love with the rich. I asked what happened when the poor fell in love with the poor or the rich in love with the rich. He shook his head in exasperation and said I didn't understand how things worked in Haiti.

I was younger then and not wise, and would tell these young men that since they would never have to worry about raising a family, they should invest their time and resources in educating themselves. My "preaching" did not go down well; it was at odds with their view that life was pleasure. I laugh as I write this, remembering an ex-boyfriend, a Trinidadian, who as an allurement to my resuming the relationship with him offered to "keep" me while I studied. I found it comical then and I still do.

Kofi: *Spirits in the Dark* is notable in the body of queer Caribbean literature in that it introduces a Black Atlantic element to the discussion. The protagonist experiences pressures from the Western world, his own Caribbean childhood, and his African ancestry. It is perhaps surprising to some that, in the end, he finds solace, and himself to a large degree, in his African heritage, through his encounters with the Spiritualists; surprising because, to the popular imagination, Africa seems to struggle with the same intense homophobia evident in the Caribbean. How did you arrive at Africa and its spiritual life as the salvation point? Thomas Glave, in our interview, pointed to an African history with several examples of gods who were male and female simultaneously;[7] in your novel *Behind the Face*

of Winter, Pedro refers to "Mawu-Lisa, the Benin male/female twin God." Is this a part of it?

HNT: Long before I could understand how the Spiritual Baptist religion worked, I loved its rituals and the devotion of its members to one another. In cases where the big traditional churches told their members who joined the Spiritual Baptists to leave it or be excommunicated, the latter chose excommunication.

In the small village where I lived until I was 17 there were frequent outdoor gatherings. Basic services mostly, but sometimes it was someone who'd come back from "mourning ground,"[8] and the visions they recounted were truly uplifting and poetic. Their conversations with the deceased and the messages they brought back from them intrigued me. There were individuals too—one was an ex-mistress of my maternal grandfather—who got blocked in the process because of heinous acts they'd committed. While on mourning ground, this ex-mistress came blindfolded and accompanied by her "Pointer" around 4 AM on a Sunday morning to seek my grandmother's forgiveness. A week later she returned to the village insane. This seemed to surprise no one. When I came to understand the unity of life as West Africans understand it, as well as the communal structure of African society, it became clear to me that this religion was a continuation of what existed in Africa. Moral cleansing and spiritual enlightenment seemed to be at the core of this religion. Jerome's father belongs to it, and by West Indian standards he is a model father. Jerome is drawn to it both for healing and self-understanding.

In *Behind the Face of Winter* I chose to incorporate Shangoism into the narrative to account for the wholesome life Mr. Sam leads and from which Pedro indirectly benefits, though he holds on to none of Mr. Sam's beliefs. I also wanted to show the war the Christian churches in the Caribbean waged against all competing beliefs. I don't think that in referencing Mawu-Lisa I wanted to imply anything about same-gender sexuality. Pedro opines that the Mawu-Lisa myth explains the importance of women in Shangoism.

A cursory examination of the anti-homosexual rhetoric on the African continent reveals, on the one hand, that it's part of that continent's anticolonial spiel and, on the other, that institutionalized scapegoating continues to be deep rooted on the continent. Gays are now the new witches whose presence in the population causes droughts, pestilence, and destitution. The echoes of this can be heard in Uganda's rationalizations for persecuting gays.

Kofi: You said that Jerome, in *Spirits in the Dark*, is in some ways an exploration of what your life would have been if you had remained in St. Vincent. Are Pedro, in *Behind the Face of Winter*, and Joshua, in *Return to Arcadia*, explorations of the you that left? To what extent are those novels autobiographical?

HNT: There are a couple of things about Pedro that are autobiographical: education is his visa out of indigence, and since he did not know what else to do, he went back to school. I pursued a PhD when it became clear to me that I would not return to the Caribbean. The grandmother in *Behind the Face of Winter* and in another novel I've just completed probably derive their ethos from the admiration I had for my maternal grandmother. With the exception of Henry in *Spirits in the Dark* and Calvert in "Bankruptcy," fathers do not seem to fare well in my fiction. My father was at the cruel end of the monstrosity the plantocracy instituted. He inspired the character in "How Loud Can the Village Cock Crow?" My maternal grandfather influenced me greatly. But I knew about the life he led before my birth, and it severely dampened my admiration for him. Apart from the above, Pedro's life does not reflect my own. His narrative relates my observations of the experiences of my high school students. The events described in his school are modeled on real events that took place in a high school where I taught—all except the demonstration. That too had been planned, but it never took place.

Return to Arcadia reflects the Nigel Thomas who left St. Vincent and the Grenadines only insofar as I acquired the skills that allow me to fictionally explore the Caribbean world I grew up in: the plantocracy's abuse of its power, the transfer of such abuse down the pecking order, and the pathology it engendered and continues to engender. The basic human decency that Joshua seeks and wants to enact reflects my own values. I certainly believe that nature can be redemptive and healing. Romanticism à la Wordsworth and Thoreau might well be operating here.

Kofi: The ending of your novel *Return to Arcadia* is one that offers no easy answers. Yes, Joshua decides to return home and live the rest of his life on the Caribbean island of Isabella. At the same time, the novel ends with Joshua voicing awareness of the many examples of brutality faced by gays in the region: a bank manager who commits suicide because he's being blackmailed by men who know he is gay, a youth who hangs himself to avoid the taunts, and a former government minister who opines in the media that his replacement should

make the enforcement of jail terms for homosexuals a top priority. He thinks of "Buju Banton's and Shabba Ranks's songs advocating death for homosexuals." It reminds me of Thomas Glave's story "Out There," in his collection *The Torturer's Wife*, in which the main character, Aston, says that his friend Carlton, who a few days earlier had been burned to death in his house by villagers who hate him because he is gay, is stupid for staying and trying to live a gay life in the Caribbean; in fact, Aston becomes angry at his dead friend for making that choice. He says: "It had not been necessary to have been that much of a fool, no matter how much you loved your country that did not at all love you." Indeed, one of the questions Glave asks in his seminal anthology, *Our Caribbean*, is, can "we remain in that place—the place we might have called home—as the people we were?" How would you answer that question? Do you think that, at this point in time, the only real option for queer Caribbean subjects is to leave for safer spaces, or do you believe Joshua can find a fulfilling future on Isabella Island?

HNT: All of those events Joshua thinks of and voices are culled from actual events in St. Vincent and Jamaica.

Glave's "Out There" echoes a discussion that took place between Diana Macaulay—columnist for *The Jamaica Gleaner*—and Brian Williamson—an out gay activist who was subsequently murdered.[9] Macaulay expresses surprise that Williamson does not emigrate. Williamson insists that Jamaica is his home. In my own pieces to the press in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (when the Vincentian press still published my pieces), I informed Vincentian gays that they could emigrate and claim refugee status based on same-sex persecution. Here in Canada I have provided lawyers working with same-sex refugee claimants with newspaper clippings that document the harassment gays in St. Vincent experience on an ongoing basis. It's worth noting that the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which actively engages in such persecution, denies that it exists, claiming that all refugee claims on this or any other basis are bogus.

Glave's question is an interesting one. Joshua's wealth provides something of an aegis against scorching homophobia. He's also discriminating about the company he keeps. As a loner, he is less dependent on what others think, and his obligations to others are few. This contrasts with actual reality: the gay youngster, for example, who lives in a tenement under the scrutiny of some of the crudest and cruelest people in the society. Such a youngster, if he's to truly

experience the benefits of his sexuality, would be well advised to leave the Caribbean if she/he is able to do so. A few manage to do so à la Terry Macmillan.

Pedro, a less complex and considerably younger character than Joshua (he hasn't even got around to dealing with his sexuality), says that his indefinite return to Isabella Island lasted two weeks. On the plane going back to Isabella Island, he is convinced that his years in Canada left him coated with shit. He returns to Canada with an even thicker coat of shit. In other words, his return to Isabella was the shattering of the last of his promised-land illusions. There is no clear-cut answer to your question. That said, I believe that everyone should choose those options that foster self-actualization.

Kofi: In light of your visit in 1997, and your nephew's violent, vitriolic threats, do you ever go back to St. Vincent, especially now that your literary fame means you can no longer trust to anonymity there?

HNT: I return to St. Vincent often and I do not know why. I have had the good fortune to travel widely and I know St. Vincent has little to offer me now by way of spiritual and intellectual enrichment. In 2001 I vowed I would not return, but I did two years later and have been going almost every year since then.

Outside of the five or six villages where I'm known—villages I lived or taught in—few Vincentians know me. They certainly don't know my books. The media ignore them. The bookstores that carry them sell them to tourists. The lectures I've given there were sponsored by non-Vincentian agencies.

Kofi: It's interesting, the seemingly random things that can "out" you in the minds of others, in the Caribbean; some examples just from your response to question 1 are: your voice, speaking English too well, and reading too much. So there's a very prescribed set of behaviors allowed men who want to remain within the heteronormative "safe zone?"

HNT: Indeed, in the Caribbean and in the African diaspora here in North America and Western Europe. Worse is the fact that many West Indian gays reinforce such policing, ostracism, etc. Frequently I hear gay Black acquaintances disparaging others using such terms. It would be absurd to expect lumber soaking in poison not to absorb it. We are subjected to such contempt long before we have defenses to deal with them.

Kofi: It's also interesting that there were some gay men in your village who avoided persecution, and some who didn't. Is it a matter of, in Thomas Glave's words, honoring the social contract? For example,

as you said earlier, there's more tolerance of homosexuals who are fathers. So everyone can know you're gay, but if you actually try to express that in any way, especially sexually or politically, then the repercussions begin? You can be gay, just repress it completely?

HNT: Exactly.

Kofi: You noted earlier that the lesbian relationship that once flourished in your birth village would be unwelcome today, because of expanding fundamentalist Christianity and the explosion of dancehall. It certainly seems to be true that there was a time of tolerance and acceptance that gave way to a more intolerant one. What role do you think AIDS, and Caribbean attitudes to AIDS, played in that loss of (at least partial) communal acceptance?

HNT: Those who've always wanted to oppress gays found a new rationalization for their persecution with the advent of AIDS. With it came the vitriolic pieces in the Caribbean press. I outed myself in St. Vincent in order to address what seemed to me to be an asinine issue. A medical doctor had died of AIDS and *The News* stated the cause of death. It created an uproar: the paper was accused of being insensitive to the doctor's relatives. Three of the paper's columnists resigned and started their own newspaper. I remember mentioning it to an uncle of mine here, then a recently retired United Church minister. (Incidentally he's one of those who believe that the public affirmation of my sexuality is an embarrassment to him and the members of our family.) I was surprised that he, a United Church clergyman, thought too that it was insensitive. It was clear that homosexuality, not the cause of the doctor's death per se, was the issue. My piece to the press stated this and urged Vincentians to begin examining and dealing with their homophobia.

I remember too that in the 1980s a gay club existed in Barbados. Barbadians demanded its closure after AIDS made its appearance.

Kofi: Do you have a specific cultural/racial/geographic community (ex-Caribbean, Canadian, Montrealer, Vincentian) in mind as an audience when you write?

HNT: Although my writing is centered in West Indian reality—and is hence probably more suited to a West Indian audience—I'm fairly certain that I write foremost for myself. It so happens that publishers think there's an audience for it. Based on what most West Indian readers of my books tell me—that they don't enjoy my writing, that it's too complex, that they can't follow the story: a surprise I might add, since I think I write in the plainest of styles and focus

on empirical reality—I would have immense difficulties were I to tailor my writing to a Caribbean audience. I hope my work interests anyone who is preoccupied with the human condition.

Books by H. Nigel Thomas

Lives, Whole and Otherwise (2010). Short Stories.
Return to Arcadia (2007). Novel.
Behind the Face of Winter (2001). Novel.
Moving Through Darkness (1999). Poems.
How Loud Can the Village Cock Crow? and Other Stories (1995). Short Stories.
Spirits in the Dark (1993). Novel.

CHAPTER 2

Thomas Glave

Thomas Glave is a co-founder of J-FLAG, one of the earliest and most influential LGBT-rights organizations in the Caribbean. Glave grew up in Kingston, Jamaica, and in the Bronx, NY. A vocal and prominent activist, he has published short stories, essays, and the critically acclaimed anthology Words to Our Now. *He is currently a Full Professor of English at the State University of New York at Binghamton. He will also be the 2014 Leverhulme Visiting Professor at the Yesu Persaud Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Warwick.*

Kofi: I think one of the first things our readers are going to be interested in is the formation of J-FLAG, which was one of the first pro-queer organizations in the Caribbean. Of course, you were one of the co-founders of that organization. So could you tell us a bit about the formation of J-FLAG, and what led you to be involved with the formation of this organization at, let's face it, great risk to yourself?

TG: So, first of all, J-FLAG was actually preceded by an organization called GFM, The Gay Freedom Movement, founded by Larry Chang, who now lives in the United States. Many people both in and outside of Jamaica and the larger Caribbean don't know about GFM, so it's very important that I mention it as we speak. Larry was one of J-FLAG's founding members, and thus a living link, historically and politically, between the earlier GFM and the later J-FLAG. He ended up donating some of GFM's archival materials to J-FLAG, including mimeographed copies of the *Jamaica Gaily News*, the publication that GFM began, which is just wonderful to read in an historical context. Larry also permitted J-FLAG to use the mailing address that was originally GFM's—so the younger, "descendant" organization literally moved into the "house" of the elder "ancestor." (Anyone who is interested might find very useful Kanika Batra's fascinating article on GFM, "Our Own Gayful Rest: A Postcolonial

Archive," published in the Caribbean literary journal *Small Axe* in 2010. It provides a great deal of information about some of GFM's early concerns, challenges, and quotidian realities. Some of GFM's archives are also now available through the Digital Library of the Caribbean.)

Our work as a group in what would become J-FLAG actually began in September 1998, but we declared ourselves to the Jamaican public in December 1998, which means that the organization has now existed for well over ten years. As I recall, in 1995—in, I believe, the spring or summer of that year—I was doing volunteer work at Jamaica AIDS Support (JAS) on a regular basis, and so was in touch with many people in the gay community at that time, which meant that I was able to gain a sense, if you will, of what ideas and possibilities were developing. (As it happened, JAS eventually became a sort of benefactor in some ways of J-FLAG down the road, and in the 1990s—at least from 1995 onward, which is the period I definitely know about—JAS held weekly meetings in its office space, called "JAS meetings," for the LGBT community at large, that eventually developed into what were to be called "GLABCOM" meetings. [The acronym stood for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Community.]) Anyway, at some point in 1995, a pan-Caribbean "queer" activists' organizing meeting took place in Curaçao, which I couldn't attend. Unfortunately, I don't recall now exactly who conceptualized and did the work to organize this meeting, but it turned out to be a powerfully signal event—and so at that meeting was born C-FLAG, the Caribbean Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays. Some of the people who later helped co-found J-FLAG were at the Curaçao meeting. When they returned to Kingston from Curaçao, they had much information to share about what had happened there.

For the record, I'm not giving their names, because they still live and work in Jamaica; all realities considered, they certainly wouldn't want their names publicly disclosed. Given the nature of our work, and what it's very much ultimately about—freedom, liberation, and social change—I think it's important to acknowledge in this interview that even now, so many years after J-FLAG's founding in 1998, the safety of those still involved with the organization could be compromised were their names publicly revealed.

As time continued to pass, I think it began to dawn on us in Jamaica that some kind of increasingly political LGBT-themed conversation—*perhaps* emboldened by what had just happened in

Curaçao—was happening among us, either with each other as an entire large body or as smaller groups here and there (including people like Larry). Then, somehow, September 1998 just seemed to be the time when the people who would become J-FLAG's founding members all got together in a small, private meeting at JAS, and decided to just go ahead and start working on doing something; the "something," soon enough, would formally become J-FLAG. It was either at that first meeting we had, or at the second, perhaps even the third, that we decided to call ourselves J-FLAG. It was definitely in the first or second week, because by the second or third week we had already begun our mission statement. I do distinctly remember sitting with other founding members in the house of a founding member, Robert Cork (who died a few years ago), on a bright, very hot Saturday morning, taking notes on legal-sized yellow sheets of paper that I still have tucked away somewhere, about this thing that we had begun to call "J-FLAG."

Kofi: You've written a famous essay called "The Death and Light of Brian Williamson."[1] Brian, of course, was very involved with J-FLAG, and is also one of its co-founders. His story is a tragic one. For those who aren't aware of his life and his work, and his untimely death, could you speak a little bit about him?

TG: Brian was deeply instrumental in J-FLAG's success for a variety of reasons, and very much in the gay movement as it existed at the time in Jamaica—we're still talking about the mid- to late 1990s—partly because he owned his own home in New Kingston, so at a central location in Kingston, and made that home available to the general public, or, rather, to the general LGBT public. Now that I think of it, Brian's house at 3A Haughton Avenue served almost as a kind of drop-in center/LGBT center, as did JAS. You could go there any time of the day, and until quite late at night, and talk with Brian about some queer business, or just sit and gossip, lime[2]—whatever, as long as you didn't behave violently or aggressively. As for Entourage—the queer dance club that Brian opened at 3A Haughton Avenue—it was open for business on weekend nights, but it too became a sort of drop-in center for people: a place for people just to be *gay* (and often very, outrageously, extremely queen-ishly gay), where what really did become a community, enabled by a space like Brian's house and the club, was able to find a friendly, welcoming space. I think that Brian's house and club were particularly empowering because he lived right in the middle of Kingston, and also because he didn't fear the police. When the police attempted to harass them, he cussed them off, and

they mostly left him in peace afterward, I suspect because of his light skin color and because he lived in an upscale neighborhood. For all the years I knew him, Brian had always been extremely open as a gay man, which in itself was deeply refreshing and really *attracting*, at least to me, in Jamaica at that time.

But look also at the fact that Brian had a Canadian passport as well as a Jamaican passport (which meant that he could depart Jamaica whenever he wanted, if need be), and also was self-employed and, frankly, well-off. All of these privileges, plus his lighter skin color and social class, were resources that he used to the LGBT population's benefit. All of Brian's activism was informed by these privileges, including his daring representation of J-FLAG on the radio talk shows using his *own name*—something that *no one* in the organization had done up until then, with good reason. He could afford to take such risks because of his privilege, and he knew it.

Thus, to me, even though Entourage was, in the end, a frankly money-making entity, there was something kind of sacred about its space to me, partly because of the daring, risk, and great generosity that it represented. When I went there, I would help clean up, for example, because I felt that one owed that to Brian. And I can't tell you how many hours I spent at Brian's, on how many evenings, typing up J-FLAG notes, memos, minutes, and doing research on the Internet, such as it was then (these were pre-Google days, if you can imagine that!). In those years, I either didn't yet have a reliable computer, and/or didn't have a printer, and/or Internet access in my apartment just down the road from Brian's house . . . and so he, as one J-FLAGot, let me, another J-FLAGot, spend hours and hours at his home doing work for the organization. He also made Entourage available to J-FLAG and to JAS, for all kinds of fundraisers, publicity parties, and so on.

Kofi: And he lived quite openly and spoke quite publically.

TG: Yes, Brian was always open about himself from J-FLAG's start, and from well before then. I wrote about him in the essay to which you referred as "a laughing man with a head of silver coins"—a description I told him in person, which he found amusing—but, you know, he really was like that. I can't honestly think of another person who loved laughing, jokes, and bawdy, really outre Jamaican humor as much as he did. And he did have that wonderfully curly gray hair, which I saw as an incorrigible head of gray coins. And so because, among us, he was so completely identifiable as an *openly* gay man—which identity also put him at risk in Jamaica—he really provided a

human face for the organization in its early days, particularly within the context of public representation, for the other founding members who spoke on the radio on J-FLAG's behalf in those days, all of whom were people who had permanent jobs, homes, and families in Jamaica, understandably didn't feel safe in using their real names, an instinct in which they were utterly correct. In the first week of J-FLAG's going on the radio, our representative was someone who called himself "Mr. X," who was in fact Robert Cork. Other people used different names. But Brian, being identifiable, provided a different sort of reality for us; for a long time, I think, he was "the homosexual" among us all.

I spoke briefly before about Entourage's location, and I should just add that where the club *was* was especially significant given that all the other gay party sites at the time were high up in the more secluded hills above Kingston, in palatial homes that the party organizers rented for the occasion. Of course, there had been another central Kingston queer party place, Marshall's, that I understand had been situated in the Cross Roads area, but Marshall's, though legendary, was before my time. But Entourage, just a few yards north of the important main thoroughfare Trafalgar Road, was something special. I can't tell you what it felt like to walk along busy Trafalgar Road, then turn onto Brian's quiet Haughton Avenue, and, especially on nights when Entourage was open, see all those cars parked along the road, knowing that their owners were dancing, socializing, drinking, flirting, *romancing*, inside Brian's house, and in his garden that provided Entourage with its outdoor area. So, without question, the centrality of Brian's home, and Entourage's bold presence, were central to J-FLAG's mission as well.

Kofi: Do you think it was his very openness that lead ultimately to his tragic end? The police of course don't attach any sort of homophobic motive to the crime.

TG: That's a very difficult question to answer. Who knows? Even years after Brian's death, we *must* be very clear-eyed about the whole thing, and be honest in saying that no one can really say if homophobia directly (so to speak) factored into his death. I tried to suggest in the essay that I don't see, in some ways, how, given Jamaica's prevailing social climate, it could *not* have contributed to his death. But it's impossible to know what those guys were thinking when they killed him. The murder *seems* to have been motivated by robbery, but I remain convinced that the fact that Brian was gay didn't help when it came to their deciding to kill him.

Kofi: What was the public reaction to J-FLAG, once the organization went fully public? Was there a lot of blowback? Was there a lot of support from the community?

TG: Just to remind, in terms of J-FLAG's beginnings, we're speaking about the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century. And yes, there was an enormous amount of hostility expressed publicly: on the radio stations, in the newspapers, to some degree on TV, and in the public arena at large. I think that it really is impossible to accurately convey now, in the twenty-first century, just how fierce, painful, scary, and draining that hostility was—although its intensity also stoked our determination to carry on with the work. The word that I think best describes the reaction in Jamaica is *vociferous*. And of course, in different ways now, such hostility still occurs—but J-FLAG's existence and work have profoundly changed much of the tenor of the discussions, and also, in all but the most fundamentalist quarters, have in some ways substantially undermined the credibility of the accusations.

There was some support during those early months, though I could hardly say a great deal, from some LGBT people. I'd be more honest in saying that, more than anything, we really supported ourselves. Gradually, some creeping support from some people at the University of the West Indies. Almost from the start, J-FLAG worked very hard to try and make alliances in various quarters, which took time, of course, but it did begin to work. The FLAG (as I still call it) held workshops and seminars designed at times for media people, at other times for our university supporters. A bit later in the organization's genesis, we were *invited* to participate in discussions with journalists. All of these forums were useful, notwithstanding the fact that many of the media people, at least in those early days, always seemed to feel it would be appropriate to include a representative either from the intractable Jamaica Council of Churches (JCC) or from the Christian church in general—and those religious people, by and large, were largely greatly *un*helpful. Their intransigence and dogma just contributed to the prevailing hostility and ignorance, since what they believed and still believe to be the Word of God is infallible, like the Pope.

In any event, GFM's prior successes with its *Jamaica Gaily News* notwithstanding, J-FLAG was operating in an era of increased media, in which context there'd never been anything quite as public in Jamaica regarding the subject of homosexuality. I think that the greatest coverage of J-FLAG in those early days was on the radio talk

shows that were so popular with a great number of Jamaicans across all social classes. These radio talk shows have the same popularity today, if not even more so than they did then.

Kofi: Talk shows are a big national thing, right? So when J-FLAG's representatives began to intrude on a national scale, into national discourse, and into that sense of Jamaican nationalism, that's when the hostility really ramped up.

TG: Well, yes, what you suggest was certainly part of the reason for the great outpouring of hostility toward J-FLAG back then. Homosexuality linked to a *national* and *cultural* Jamaican sense of identity was a concept seen not only as incompatible, even impossible, but literally unthinkable—and certainly unspeakable. It was (and to a good extent still is) an idea that was loathsome, anathema, and frankly, to a lot of people, horrifying. I'm not exaggerating on this point. All anyone need do is listen to some of the talk shows that I recorded in those days, as J-FLAG's informal archivist, to listen to how much fear and repulsion people expressed—with some occasionally remarkably open-minded, accepting people among them, such as Beverly Anderson Manley, who did a wonderfully receptive interview with Brian in 1999, I think it was. However upset and freaked out people were, though, all of those media discussions really were ultimately productive, because they forced Jamaica at one point or another to deal with the reality of homosexuality *in* Jamaica. People at least had to think to some degree about it, and accept the fact that they heard their fellow Jamaicans, speaking with strong Jamaican accents, on the talk shows.

It was a fascinating time. Those media engagements ultimately really helped J-FLAG with its work. Yet for all of that work, as recently as 2011, the *Jamaica Observer* printed a deeply offensive homophobic cartoon—something sophomoric and stupid whose offensiveness the editors clearly must have believed would appeal to a broad swath of Jamaican society. They may have been right. So, not surprisingly, there's still a great deal of work to do. And of course the religious fundamentalists are still loudly in opposition to J-FLAG and to homosexuality in general.

Kofi: The religious aspect obviously is a big part of what's going on in terms of the homophobia among some in the Caribbean. Do you agree with this? To what else would you ascribe the intense homophobia in the Caribbean?

TG: I'd have to qualify my response by saying that I can only speak with real knowledge about Jamaica, since it's the Caribbean society

that I know best. When you say "the Caribbean," are you including countries like Cuba, Haiti? That is, non-Anglophone countries?

But in regard to Jamaica, I think a lot of the intense anti-gay sentiment is due to many people's literal interpretations of the Bible. Add to this the prominence, in many people's religious imagination, of the Old Testament, which features a stern, unforgiving, vengeful God. This is a God who enacts drastic measures against anybody who transgresses, although some transgressions aren't punished nearly as severely as others. So we have this problem, and it's a big problem still, of the ways in which people literally interpret the Bible, and the outrage caused by such an approach when confronted with something as "unnatural" and alien, if you will, as homosexuality.

But also I think there is and has been a longstanding anxiety in the population, certainly in the male population, about sexuality in general. I think—this is just my personal opinion, mind—that some of this anxiety comes from our not having really resolved, or come to terms with, our deeply violent and traumatizing slavery history, our slavery past. I feel certain that we still have an enormous amount of angst about the fact that we came out of this terrible history—and how does one really deal with all that, with a history that is so vast and unknowable and at the same time clearly still so present in our lives today? Following this reasoning, it seems plausible to assume that at the present-day end of such a history, our bodies would be—are—very fraught subjects that also spent centuries as objects, or at least as beasts of burden that could also be sexually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually abused. Take all of *that*, which is a great deal—really too much for any one person to deal with, let alone an entire population of people, millions of people, including other Black people who have a slavery history—take all of this history and look at it, try to hold it in your hand, and then think about how Jamaican masculinity must have been influenced by this history and reality. Look at how men in Jamaica today, across social classes, perform their masculinity—how and from whom they learn it, and the ways that, as is the case everywhere, sexism and misogyny go hand in glove with masculine supremacy, and with homophobia, right? So all of these factors work together. But I'm not a sociologist, so remember that I'm only expressing personal opinions based on personal experience and casual observation.

One thing that I do find interesting, though, is the disconnect of denial between so many Jamaicans' insisting that homosexuality comes from "foreign," from abroad, from white people, and the reality that, as we know, homosexuality appears in all segments of

Jamaican society, as it does everywhere. In some of the most economically stressed places in Jamaica, the poorest communities, you'll find homo men living in those places, very accepted by the community and very acknowledged, although the people who know them may not call them "gay," for a variety of reasons. Yet those people have a place there—a very complicatedly negotiated place. These sorts of realities are often overlooked when people both within and outside of Jamaica talk about LGBT life on the island.

Kofi: So you've spoken about how, even in some of the most financially stressed areas, one finds gay men and women living openly. In Rosamund Elwin's anthology *Tongues on Fire*, she offers us pictures of some Caribbean lesbians who, somehow, find ways to live happy, fulfilled lives integrated within their communities, even with long-term partners. And they tell stories of this happening even in the time of their grandmothers. What's your own experience in this regard? Did you grow up knowing any other gay men who lived so openly and freely within their communities, whether in the diaspora or in Jamaica?

TG: No, I didn't—but that doesn't mean that they weren't there. My time as a child and young man in Jamaica was spent mostly in a middle to upper-middle class environment: urban-centered, in one of the "suburban" neighborhoods to the north of Kingston proper, we were connected to the Anglican church, although I don't remember many of those adults ever attending church, except for some of the much older people, like my grandparents and older aunts. I can't say that the people in my family whom I knew at that time were what one could call ultra-religious in a Jamaican context. They weren't, although they did often call the name of the Lord "in vain." That said, I don't recall *ever* hearing anyone speak about homosexuality when I was a child—I mean *never*, as in Never with a capital N. I heard some talk on "the subject" later, in my teenage years, mostly in denigrating tones. As far as I knew, all the people around me were heterosexually defined. I have no idea what they were doing privately, but in public places everything was heterosexual.

That was also true in my diaspora experience in New York. So it was quite stunning for me to encounter Jamaican LGBT stories and realities later on, more than a decade later, actually, by which time I was in my thirties and volunteering on and off for JAS and GLABCOM. At one point, sometime around 1993 or 1994, the then-executive director of JAS (who also later became another J-FLAG founding member) sent me a message—I don't think we had full email technology yet—and said that the "gay and

lesbian community in Jamaica" would be ready to "welcome" me "with open arms." I nearly fell off my seat on reading that! I can still see his words on the page. I thought, the *gay and lesbian community*? What community is that? In *Jamaica*? I just couldn't believe it. The very idea was as unthinkable and impossible to me as it had been and would continue to be to so many people—yet it was that very reality that I'd been longing for, for so long. And of course a great irony is that during my teenage years in Jamaica, the Gay Freedom Movement was actually publishing articles and publishing letters in the newspapers—I think, if I remember correctly from conversations with Larry Chang, that they published a few pieces and letters in the *Gleaner*, Jamaica's paper of record, and the newspaper for which my father and some of his brothers had worked as journalists. (In 2004, when Brian was murdered, the *Gleaner* would publish my article on Brian before I revised it to include in my second book, *Words to Our Now*.) They were publishing the *Jamaica Gaily News*. There was LGBT work being done right there in Kingston, and I as a young person had no idea whatsoever about any of it. And I lived only a few miles away from where they were based. But such is the power of silence and invisibility. The fact that I missed GFM as a young person makes me slightly sad, but the fact that they existed just down the road, as we'd say in Jamaica, also thrills me.

Of course one of the greatest surprises would be my discovering many years later, in the early years of this century, that I had gay relatives—at least three I can think of, all men. I can't say any more about them, but it's nice to know that they're there, sort of, even though my relationship with two of them is complicated and uneasy. But still.

Kofi: One of the important things about Elwin's anthology is that it works to normalize gay and lesbian life in the region, to show its history. I think Patricia Powell's work does a lot of the same thing; we see her characters holding down jobs, engaging in loving long-term relationships. But it's a bit of a dichotomy, right? I mean, how can we explain these men who are able to live so openly within their communities? Why are some queers able to live openly, and others are not? Is it purely economic?

TG: In the context of Jamaica, I would say no; that the reasons why some queers are able to live openly aren't rooted purely in economics. Some of this reality has to do with a very nuanced, subtle social contract. I have thought a great deal about this contract—these

contracts—and I think that in Jamaica the contracts, plural, are very important in LGBT lives in terms of negotiation, hierarchy, all sorts of things. In some poorer communities, but also in more affluent ones, there exist very intricately established kinship networks that move across and between biological blood lines: people have, as I do, "play" uncles, "play" aunts, etc. These kinship and social networks are very important in helping people survive and live in general, since there are no social services to speak of in Jamaica, and if you're poor, you have very little recourse, unless you have family or friends in the community who will help you. Jamaica is still very much a "We" society, as opposed to an "I" one, and the social contracts are the backbone of *We*: perhaps not spoken about, but understood by everybody. Social contracts like these are probably even more important in a smaller, densely populated country like Jamaica—and probably even more important in much smaller countries like St. Vincent, Barbados, or Dominica.

Anyway, whether we're queer or not, men or women (or in between), we all learn the rules, as it were, of how to behave in our society: what we're supposed to do, in the light of scrutinized day, to survive, to get along, and even to prosper. It may not be acceptable in Jamaica for a man to kiss another man on the road—as it still isn't in many parts of the United States and the UK—but it could be OK to receive a man discreetly in your home; it depends on the contracts you have with those with whom your life interacts. In Jamaica, the punishment of homosexuals can become complicated, because if you decide to beat someone up for their being gay, what if the person whom you wish to harm turns out to be so-and-so's grandson, or Miss so-and-so's nephew? And what if you or one of your relatives changed that nephew's diapers 15 years ago, or what if you're beating so-and-so's brother, and so-and-so happens to be a gunman? Connections like these are extremely important in a country the size of Jamaica.

When it comes to the more economically privileged social context, some of the social contract realities are less reliably applicable in part because the "We"-ness factor is undermined and begins to change: those who have more money can live in the world more as "I" people, and if they're wealthier they can afford to surround themselves with more space. They can and do have larger homes, yards, expansive gardens, and fences: the privilege of privacy enabled by the privilege of wealth. What did someone say about paradise? That it could only be paradise as long as most people couldn't enter it?

Socially speaking, the middle-class context, by way of my family and their friends, is the one with which I'm most familiar vis-à-vis Jamaica. In my experience, I have known gay people who have lived very unmolested lives in middle-class neighborhoods—as has happened in poorer areas—as couples, for example. It doesn't necessarily mean that they're not gossiped about by their neighbors. They very well may be gossiped about, scorned, and even vilified behind their backs. But people aren't necessarily going to come and cause them harm at their gates or in their yard, although I would never rule out such violence as a possibility either.

Kofi: And that's one of the crazy things about the situation there, right? The unpredictability of it. How very easily you can move from inclusion to this utter exclusion and violence, you know?

TG: Right. These complications and paradoxes show, in part, just how complex and multilayered Jamaican society actually is, challenging the often rather monochromatic discussions of Jamaica that abound in certain global north activist and media circles. I was curious enough about some of this complexity that I wanted to explore it in a short story that I wrote, "Out There," included in the last book that I published, *The Torturer's Wife*. The story takes place in contemporary Jamaica, and violence is enacted upon one of the protagonists, who lives in a small country town. One of the reasons that the violence seems so possible is because the villagers didn't know him as someone who grew up there, among them.

Kofi: Right, he inherited his aunt's house and moved in, but he didn't grow up there.

TG: If that character, named Carlton, had grown up in that town, perhaps he wouldn't have suffered the fate recounted in the story. It might have been more difficult for the townspeople to "execute" him, as it were. It's hard to say.

Kofi: Yes, it seems to be this quite intricate dance of survival—of knowing which lines to cross, when you're allowed to cross them, and when not, right?

TG: Yes, I think so. This would be true in any society, obviously, but we're speaking about Jamaica now. So, definitely yes.

Kofi: So what about your own experiences, growing up gay in the Caribbean and its diaspora? Was it relatively easy and smooth for you, or did you experience a lot of intense homophobia?

TG: I did experience and still do experience homophobia, though not only from Caribbean people. Americans (and even Canadians who especially like to pretend that they're so faultless and thus so "unlike"

Americans) can be, as you know, incredibly ugly, homophobically speaking. In the United States I experienced homophobia alongside racial insults. When I was younger—a teenager, but also when I was a child—I think that people were negatively reacting to me not so much because they thought that I was a "homosexual," whatever that was, but rather because they thought I was not manly. And since I was considered unmanly—"faggot-ish" and so on, or whatever words they used—I was loathed and perhaps also feared, certainly reviled, by many people in my family, and others. Remember that there's nothing as loathsome in misogynistic culture—a culture that really, truly hates women—as a "woman"-ish man or "girl"-ish boy.

In my case, as I got older, became a teenager, etc., I was just seen more and more as peculiar—as not fitting a specific kind of mold of man, of Black man, of Black Caribbean man, etc., so that various individuals whom I encountered, including those in my family, didn't quite know what to make of me. Some men were very disturbed by me, I think, recalling that time now, and so were a lot of women, partly because if one is viewed as "peculiar," one might not therefore fit into the heterosexual erotic equation—and that equation certainly didn't interest me at the time.

Kofi: It reminds me of a character, Cee-Cee, in one of your stories, "The Final Inning," in *Whose Song*?, who speaks about this idea—and Makeda Silvera brought it up early on—that being Black or being Caribbean, and being gay, are mutually exclusive, right? And Cee-Cee says, in the story, "wouldn't no real Black man do some shit like that" (160). And so again it's this idea that if you're gay, you're not a "real" Black man.

TG: Yes, whatever that means. I've actually heard people say things like that, many times. People in my family have said that homosexuality is "not a Jamaican thing," or "not part of our culture," or "we don't do that." It's this very rigid kind of idea of who "we" are and what "we" do. But who exactly is "we"? That particular "we" excludes a great many people, to its own detriment.

Kofi: So this idea is still prevalent then, of the incompatibility of queerness and blackness?

TG: Yes, of course—especially, in the Caribbean context, in the Anglophone Caribbean. I don't know very much about the Dutch-speaking Caribbean, but in the Hispanophone and Francophone Caribbean there seems to be a bit more latitude regarding these cultural definitions. But then in Cuba, for example, gay men especially have been extremely visible as dissidents and in the powerful Cuban

literary scene. I think that Virgilio Piñera was only one of several gay men who refused to leave Cuba after the Revolution, much to the exasperation and bewilderment of Che and Fidel, who didn't know what to do with the gifted queer, who loudly proclaimed both his love of and dedication to Cuba and his homosexuality in the same sentence; Cuba isn't so keen on telling those stories. As for the Francophone (and Creoleophone) Caribbean, I don't know just now of any very visible gay men or lesbians who have been a part of public discourse in those places (I'm thinking of Haiti, Martinque, Guadeloupe, St. Martin, and French Guyana)—but that doesn't mean they're not there, just that I don't know of them. The French *department* islands have a particularly intricate relationship to French laws, since they're part of France.

Years ago, when speaking about his GFM experiences, Larry Chang told me that until a Black man—a dark-skinned Black man, in line with Jamaican racial and color definitions—came out in Jamaica as gay, many people would refuse to accept the reality of Jamaican homosexuality. Because if a Black man were to come out (and this has begun to happen a little, here and there in Jamaica, in recent years), people would *have* to deal with the reality that homosexuality and blackness can *and do* exist in the same body. This point about blackness in Jamaica, and its importance in terms of masculinity and self-representation, is one of the reasons why Larry felt reservations about being the public face of GFM, as a Chinese Jamaican. He felt that he didn't want to go around representing GFM as a Chinese Jamaican, when the majority of the country was (and still is) of dark-skinned African descent. I disagreed with Larry on this, and told him so, but obviously he had the right to feel as he did. But when it comes to color in Jamaica, well, it's a long, deeply complicated story, isn't it? We still tend to equate darkness with virility and sexual potency—and lightness with, well, where even to begin on that subject? But at the very least, lightness of skin tends to suggest to people in Jamaica possible effeminacy, softness, and sexual ambiguity, whereas blackness and darkness suggest absolute, virile heterosexuality. These stereotypes are obviously legacies of plantation mythologies. Remember how, in regard to women, blackness and darkness suggest ugliness and all things negative. Yes, for sure, we're still very hung up on that kind of color dynamic, in Jamaica. Extremely.

Kofi: Going back to something you said a minute ago, about how your gayness wasn't talked about in Jamaica: you've achieved quite a bit

of fame over the years, you've been a very active activist; do you still have that sort of anonymity, that ability to have your sexuality remain unaddressed?

TG: In regard to my sexuality not being addressed—the political aspects of it, I mean, as opposed to the personal, which I wouldn't discuss with anyone anyway—yes: that is, I'd say that most of the people in my family, for example, still essentially refuse to talk about either my sexuality or my work, for the most part. There are some exceptions among them, but very few. They aggressively *don't* bring up the subjects. Even—especially?—if something appeared in the local Jamaican newspaper about me or if I published something in one of the local papers—something that has occurred on several occasions—most of them wouldn't talk about it, and might even be deeply embarrassed by or ashamed of it, unfortunately. On the extremely rare occasions that some sort of genuine, uninhibited discussion does take place, I really appreciate it.

Kofi: Interesting, that silence, eh?

TG: It's a kind of autocratic silence—a silence whose intention is erasure.

Kofi: I'm interested in how you see the relationship between Caribbean queerness and Western queer activism. And I understand that when I use the word "queerness" in relation to Caribbean spaces, it's a very fraught word, and that even words like gay and lesbian, well, these are words that Caribbean men who love men, and women who love women, don't necessarily ascribe to themselves. So, even at the level of terminology, there are points of contention. And in Elwin's anthology, many of her contributors felt that their struggles had become minimized, subsumed by Western queer activism and activists into their own objectives. Does this mirror your experience?

TG: Ah, you're talking, I think, about the ways in which Western activism and its terminologies can overshadow the activism and specificities of people in the Caribbean?

Kofi: Yes, and this idea that Caribbean people can't seem to find a home within Western activist philosophies, that they're not treated as equals, that their struggles aren't given the same sort of priority.

TG: A complex question. The landscapes are so different, and it's important to remember that what we call "the Caribbean" is part of "the West," as much as "the West" shares a history with "the Caribbean"—the geographical and historical realities and questions can't really be divided into either/or categories. At the same time, the challenges that many Caribbean LGBT people face—as I tried

to note in the introduction to *Our Caribbean*—are very much part of the region's social, political, and economic realities, problems faced by most people: vulnerability to poverty and discrimination, for example, and corrupt governments, and the difficulty of gaining access to resources of all kinds, and so on. LGBT Caribbean activism has had to address all these issues as well. I sometimes think that in the regions that we're now referring to as the global north, the LGBT activism often, though not always, tends to focus more on single-issue politics, such as the gay marriage narrative that's such a big thing in the United States right now. A single-issue politics approach risks leaving out all kinds of concerns like immigration, and poverty, and people who are in prison, and people who are disempowered by way of race, gender, social class, immigration status, and all kinds of other ways.

I do think it's often true that many global northern activists—at least some whom I have encountered and with whom I've worked—don't always "get" the nuances, nor seem interested in learning about the nuances, of Caribbean LGBT realities, and Caribbean societies in general. The Caribbean is such a mish-mash of illusions, isn't it? It often packages itself—deeply problematically but seductively—as a tourist "paradise," and so many people outside of the Caribbean don't know anything about the Caribbean people beyond these very carefully, elaborately constructed illusions of paradise. Many people outside the Caribbean, including many global north activists, don't even realize that many of these islands are sovereign *countries*. And then of course one of the great problems within both north and south is that the voices of the poorest people—including the poorest LGBT people—are rarely heard, rarely included, in any activism discussions. In a country like Jamaica, as in most Caribbean countries, the poor are the majority, which means that poor LGBT people would be the majority of the LGBT population.

It's significant, and I daresay not particularly "accidental," that most of J-FLAG's founding members were from the middle class, myself included. We as a founding group never really addressed this problem. I think that in part we wanted to ignore it, but then again there was a great deal of urgent work to do, all of which seemed much more urgent at the time than the prospect of a social class analysis. (Someone out there will probably want to smack me for saying that, but . . .)

Anyway, just to touch again briefly on an earlier point, it's important to remember that some global north activists will levy

decisions, or highly visible opinions, over the Caribbean in ways that are clearly categorical and ultimately not helpful to activists working in the Caribbean—for example, when northern activists feel that they should boycott Red Stripe beer in Jamaica because of alleged homophobia within the company (that happens to be owned now by Guinness)—but they won't consult first with J-FLAG and defer to J-FLAG's leadership and recommendations. These sorts of problematic approaches happen in Latin America and on the African continent as well—invariably engendered by well-meaning, but often poorly informed and, if we're honest, rather ignorant (and sometimes patently racist and paternalistic) northern activists. You know, you'll hear people speaking about Argentina as if it's the same as El Salvador, or speaking about Malawi as if it's Nigeria—or, God knows, speaking about "Africa" as if it's a country, not a vast, *very* old, and diverse continent. But they'd never do that with Italy and Norway.

Kofi: A bit of a loaded question next. One of the major points of contention between Western activists and people on the ground in the Caribbean, gay men and lesbians, is this question of the origin of sexual preference. Western activists tend to argue that sexuality is absolutely innate. And obviously this is a response to those anti-gay movements, especially in the United States, that insist that sexuality is always a choice and that gays should give up their "lifestyle" for the betterment of the community and their families and their souls, etc. But a lot of the Caribbean women in Elwin's anthology speak about a process of "becoming" lesbian, rather than one of coming to an awareness of their already lesbian sexuality. And there's some back and forward movement too—they sometimes move back and forth in their sexual identification. And some Caribbean theorists have suggested that bisexuality is really the "queer norm," if we can speak of such a thing, in the Caribbean, rather than outright gayness or lesbianism. What do you make of these viewpoints? Do you have a sense that queer Caribbean identities are more fluid than Western ones?

TG: Sometimes, yes, I think so. But then I think that this is actually a question for the entire world, not just for the Caribbean, because I think that most of the world probably is, and always has been, very fluid sexually. And the notion of a specifically *sexual* identity, or orientation, is very much a twentieth-century development, correct? I don't *think* that most people in the world—in the non-Western world especially—think of gay and lesbian as identity

categories. As for the Caribbean, well, we *must* constantly clarify which Caribbean we're talking about: Anglophone, Creoleophone, Francophone, Hispanophone, Dutch-speaking? "Queer" ways of being are manifested very differently in each of them.

So the answer to your question is yes and no. That is, yes, sexual identity is very much present in the Caribbean that I know, and no, sexual identity isn't necessarily an issue in the Caribbean that I know. But that doesn't mean that sexual *behavior* isn't an issue, and a charged one at that. Also, there's a highly important difference between not *thinking about* sexual identity as a concern and people not *wanting* to think about or discuss sexual identity as a concern.

Kofi: And again, it's important to focus on the specifics of Caribbean gay and lesbian realities, but we also have to realize that they exist in this international context as well, right? That they are part of these global movements and this global history of queerness.

TG: Yes, certainly.

Kofi: This is another thing; many of your stories show us gay men who are married to women, but have gay relationships, gay yearnings, gay encounters. Do you think this is a common occurrence in the Caribbean?

TG: But wait—*are* they "gay" men? And do they have "gay" encounters, or erotic encounters with other people of the same gender? There's a difference, isn't there?

In any event, I think that such encounters are common occurrences everywhere, all over the world, and they have been historically, as we'll learn in any study of art history and honestly told cultural histories. I didn't necessarily think about that reality when I was writing those stories, but my imagination seemed to go that way. As we know, marriage—heterosexual marriage, for the moment—is so much the societal norm. It's an institution of great emotional importance to many people, and so symbolic of a variety of things. It often brings widespread societal approval. The rewards might be difficult to resist, right? And of course people also get married for all sorts of reasons. I was just thinking of a very good friend of mine in Jamaica, whom I just saw a few days ago when I was there, who is still married but who has now identified as gay. He and his wife are separated now, but they're still married: a couple now in their fifties. They still care for each other very much, as husband and wife and as friends to each other as well, and he said to her that he honestly hadn't entered into the marriage thinking that he was going to become gay. He stressed that, when he was a young man, there

was simply no way of talking about homosexuality or ambivalent-ambiguous desire in Jamaica. When he was in his late teens, then in his early twenties, and married, he couldn't imagine that the day would come when something like J-FLAG would emerge. I believe him. Even those of us who founded J-FLAG couldn't believe that its time had come, so imagine the interior life of someone like him?

This man's reality is one of the reasons, I sincerely believe, why our work as activists and artists is so very important—so that people will see more and more that they have choices, as women began to learn some time ago (at least women with more resources). God knows that if I had been more heterosexually inclined, or at least had felt when I was younger that I *should* marry a woman because that's what men (and especially a "real" man) ought to do, I'm sure that I would have wound up in a life of complete agony. Can you imagine the loneliness, isolation, and pressure of a life like that? It wouldn't be a life that would easily invite intimacy.

Kofi: You have a story in *The Torturer's Wife*, "Out There," in which the main character, Aston, makes a very strong statement. He says that his friend Carlton, who has earlier been burnt to death inside his house by villagers who hated him because he was gay, is stupid for trying to stay and live a gay life in the Caribbean. And in fact Aston is angry at his friend for staying. He says, "It had not been necessary to have been that much of a fool . . . no matter how much you loved your country that did not at all love you" (241). And you bring this question up again in your introduction to *Our Caribbean*; one of the questions you hoped would be provoked by that book is "Could we remain in that place—the place we might have called home—as the people that we were?" (5). So how would you answer that question today? Do you think that the only real option for gay and lesbian Caribbean people who want to live openly is to leave for safer spaces?

TG: No, I don't think that's necessarily the case at all! Not one bit! I think it very much depends on the specific circumstances, once again—how much money and support, especially social and psychic support, one has, etc. I mean, I could live to a certain degree with some safety in Jamaica if I kept my circumstances as they are, in terms of my present job, which provides me with an income, so that I wouldn't have to depend on people there. At the same time, there are other people, across social classes (both those who have money and those who don't), for whom living openly in a place like Jamaica (I'm not talking about Barbados now, or Guyana, but specifically

Jamaica) would be very difficult, and perhaps dangerous. It's *possible* to live as a gay person in Jamaica, and even possible to live as openly as Brian did. But remember that Brian was a "white" Jamaican man, self-employed, fairly well-off, owner of a Canadian *and* Jamaican passport, and owner of his own home in an upscale neighborhood in the capital city (so not in a country town): in other words, tremendously privileged. He used those privileges to help J-FLAG and the LGBT population in Jamaica in general.

Still, the decision that Carlton made, to remain in Jamaica in spite of perceived and real dangers, is interesting to me, because he seemed to weigh, against the desirability of going abroad, the joys in his country life. I had the impression that he really enjoyed that life. There are things that he really loved about Jamaica—its beauty and so on—that made him want to stay there. I've known other people who have made similar decisions. Brian certainly was one of those people. He never really wanted to live anyplace except Jamaica. And Brian *had* left; when his life was threatened earlier, he left Jamaica for a while, and went back to Canada, where he ultimately wasn't really happy.

Some people whom I know in Jamaica are very out there—although when we talk about "out," taking into account the specific differences between north and south (or even "First World" and "Third World"), what do we mean by "out?" Do we mean that some people know? Some friends? I can think of several people in Jamaica who are out in the sense that their friends know, even if there's little or no discussion between them on the subject. Others may not be out in what we think of as gay society. They may be out to their children. "Out"-ness in Jamaica—the reality and concept, and certainly one's self-definitions—are all very much particularized in Jamaica, as is true everywhere.

Kofi: I always think, in regard to this question of "out"-ness, of Eve Sedgwick, and her in/out of the closet model. That doesn't really work in Caribbean spaces, does it, where these secrets are very, very hard to keep, simply because most people live in small villages or move always among extended kinship and friendship lines, so that wherever you are, there's always the real chance that someone there knows you/your family or knows about you/your family? So someone could not have told anyone, and still be "out" to a certain degree. But as long as they honor the social contracts, they can continue to be out in that way.

TG: I wouldn't say that Eve Sedgwick's theorizing absolutely *can't* be applied to Caribbean spaces. Just about anything can be applied anywhere if the will, imagination, and discipline exist. Most societies are ultimately much more porous than their inhabitants would like to think, which means that there is room for negotiation and adaptation everywhere in this regard. One could apply Jamaican proverbs to a North American *modus vivendi*, and they'd work, if the recipients of the knowledge were willing to incorporate Jamaican "folk" wisdom into their North American lives. However, I do think that our questioning the notion of "the closet," and absolutely *not* accepting that paradigm as an inevitable reality in everyone's life, is important. One person's closet is another's okra patch.

But as far as consideration of the power, reach, and limits of the Jamaican social contract, it's hard not to think of, and discuss, the late great Rex Nettleford, who was—as most people knew—really and truly gay. Many people in the Jamaican LGBT population, myself included, saw and interacted with Rex at particular gay-populated small house parties and dinners. Rex lived a discreet, if you will, life in Jamaica, and was simultaneously dedicated to remaining in Jamaica. He was a real Caribbean man: a real "race" man. He was dark skinned, was from a poor background, and worked his way up into the intelligentsia. I think that Rex was one of the twentieth century's last real Renaissance men. He attended Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar; founded the National Dance Company; worked in theater; wrote several *very* interesting books; commanded a brilliant, witty, ironical oratorical style; taught at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica and eventually became its vice chancellor; and so on. Amazing, when you look at his accomplishments. He clearly was so determined, focused, and disciplined. There's no question but that he made a grand, in fact *powerful*, contribution to Jamaican culture specifically and to Caribbean culture in general. I used to say that I thought it sad that someone as powerful as Rex couldn't (wouldn't) come out, although now I'm wondering about that sentiment. In any event, I think that Rex's general reluctance to engage with the "queer" Jamaican activist population at large is unfortunate. Can you imagine what sorts of discussions might have occurred if Rex had worked with J-FLAG, and/or with GFM? Amazing to think of those possibilities! Here was this man who was able to achieve *so many* superlative things, be awarded numerous honors, but couldn't—or wouldn't—say publically: "I am a gay man."

Some people would argue against what I'm saying, of course, and say that I'm imposing "Western" political definitions of sexuality and "out"-ness on Rex and on Jamaica, making the point that there are different ways of being out. I'd agree with them about the different ways of being out part. Yet I do think that Rex is a very good example of the pros and cons involved in this "out"-ness question. He wasn't a friend to J-FLAG, in any event, and when times were rough—which they usually were—we could certainly have used the support and fellow-traveling of someone like that.

Kofi: He wasn't a friend of J-FLAG's?

TG: No. He never did anything to support J-FLAG—not as far as I know, at least. I used to get very angry about the lack of support, or solidarity, of people like Rex, especially when thinking about all the people suffering in silence—younger people but also older ones. In that context, one small bit of generosity or bravery can make such a big difference in the lives of those people, and possibly also prevent them from ending their own lives, or living longer in misery than they actually need to. I subscribe to what some people would perhaps term a rather old-fashioned, quaint belief: that a kind of responsibility comes with a certain level of status. But perhaps none of this is any of my business, and I should just shut up about it. We still managed to get our work done, after all. It doesn't make sense to harbor anger over things, or people, that can't be changed.

Kofi: The battle for the decriminalization of homosexuality is proceeding at various paces in different countries around the Caribbean. At the same time, major setbacks continue: the Bahamian government, for example, just in July 2011, moved to ensure that the definition of marriage, as between a man and a woman, became enshrined in all of the Marriage Acts governing the country. Do you hold out much hope that Caribbean governments will act to ensure that queer citizens are treated as full citizens? Do you hold out hope for the decriminalization movements in the Caribbean?

TG: I wouldn't say that I have a lot of hope, but I have hope. I think that it will happen eventually. Look at what is happening in the United States, for example, where there exists, similarly to the Caribbean, a strong faction of religious fundamentalists who oppose progress in these arenas. So unlike Canada, right?

But yes, of course—eventually all sorts of change will happen. Maybe not in our lifetime, but eventually. As someone who has worked as an activist, I would have to think this way, and have some hope. How could one work as an activist with any other

outlook—without hope? I've been a willing participant in a hopeful movement. And then surely the very act of writing, the things that I've written—the act of making *art*, in a world that often ignores and devalues the important soul-work potential of art—these are also acts of hope. I know for a fact that things have changed in Jamaica since GFM's days *because* of the work GFM did, and so they've changed also because of J-FLAG's work—because of its very existence—in Jamaica and around the larger Caribbean.

Kofi: So you've seen some change yourself?

TG: Yes, absolutely. I mean, people are *talking* in all sorts of ways—far more productive ways, in many instances—about homosexuality in Jamaica now. The vocabulary for the subject, even a more compassionate vocabulary—something I would never have thought possible in the Jamaica of my younger years—has emerged. And sure, retrograde attitudes still exist, of course. Change usually happens at a glacial pace, as we know. I don't know if gay marriage, for example, will be something that I see in my lifetime in the Caribbean or in the United States. But the topic is constantly afoot, and our human imaginations about what is possible for *all* of us as human beings are expanding. What activist and creative artist wouldn't be happy with such a result?

Kofi: Your story "He Who Would Have Become 'Joshua', 1791," in *The Torturer's Wife*, is an interesting one to me. In that story, set in the time when Europeans are rampaging through Africa brutally enslaving its people, two young African men enjoy an open relationship. It's a relationship sanctioned not only by their community, but by one of the communal spirits that played such an important part in African life. It reminds me both of H. Nigel Thomas's novel *Spirits in the Dark* and Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads*, in that both those novels also portrayed queer men and women in a pre-Middle Passage African past. Yet, when most people think of Africa, they think of cultures that are as starkly homophobic as Caribbean ones are seen to be. So why Africa, and why historic Africa? Is it a means of re-placing queerness into our long history?

TG: Well, certainly I wanted to see that story told, but I also knew that that particular story had to exist—it had existed many times—because the African continent is so complex, so vast, so old: the cradle of humanity. Something that has long fascinated me during visits to museums in African countries and elsewhere is the presence of hermaphroditism—literal, allegorical, figurative, symbolic, metaphorical—in so many African deities. You see so much of it

in the statuary, in the oldest relics, and in countless fetish objects. And then so many texts document the old and contemporary ritual dances during which the dancers, and other participants, are possessed by a female or male spirit, or one that brings both genders (or more). These sorts of deeply fluid sexualities often seem merged with a wide range of African spiritual practices and beliefs, and have seemed so over the millennia of African peoples' existence. I just thought, with all of that fluidity going on, how could a story like the "Joshua" story *not* be true?

But then of course we also know that a lot of homophobia that we see manifested in various African situations today (like some of the brouhaha occurring in and about Uganda these days) is very much a legacy of colonialism, and British colonialism in particular. This is also the case with Jamaica and the rest of the Anglophone Caribbean. We have the British, the French, the Dutch, and their narrow-minded Christianities to thank for many of our present-day attitudes.

I recently read a fascinating book on Chinese imperial history and same-gender/homosexual traditions within particular dynasties. I learned through that reading that men occasionally did live together as couples in imperial China throughout every dynasty—but it would have far more likely for them to do so if they had a great deal of money. Most people—that is, not the wealthy—would have needed their children to care for them when they got older, as happens in China today. So anyone who didn't have children and who had enough money to live childless with a partner would have been well-off indeed, hopefully. I suspect that, given the importance of family and kinship networks in most of the premodern world, a similar societal structure would have been in operation throughout at least some parts of the African continent, broadly speaking. But again, Africa is a *huge* place that merits considerable and careful historical attention, especially in the context of so-called "queer" historical life. One would be dealing with thousands of years of history, after all, to say nothing of migrations, languages, ethnic groups, wars, and so on.

Kofi: You've been described as a postcolonial writer, and a queer writer. Do you think of yourself in these terms? Do you think of yourself as a political writer? As a queer writer, whatever that means?

TG: Um, postcolonial, eh? Well, terms like that can be interesting to think about, but they ultimately don't do a great deal for me as someone who is actually writing—because whatever term is bandied

about in an attempt to describe or delimit the writer, the writer still has to do the actual *writing*, which is, make no mistake, extremely hard work. Whether someone views and defines me as postcolonial or queer or Black or Caribbean on a particular day isn't going to help me write the next sentence, you know? I've been saying this for years. That said, I do like to think of myself as exactly what I am: a Jamaican-American gay man who writes. And whatever comes out of that is fine.

Along these lines, someone—an African-American gay man—asked me what I've always thought was a rather strange question in an interview some years ago; he remarked that very few LGBT people of African descent write essays, so why had I decided to write a book of essays? I thought it a distinctly odd question. Doesn't it sound strange to say, "Hey, people in a particular demographic don't usually do this particular thing, so why did you do it?" Weird. Similarly, another African-American gay man said to me, fairly recently, that he wondered why I was writing so much about torture and dictatorship—for those topics, he said, have nothing to do with "us," really (I was especially struck by the "us"—who are "we"?), so why was I writing so much about them? I was fascinated by the strangeness and frank ahistoricism of the question. This person clearly hadn't made the connection between the torture and dictatorship realities of the present day and those that had been part of the lives of Black people for centuries—realities that had in fact *destroyed* the lives of Black people. After all, isn't it largely because of those historical tortures and dictatorships of slavery that most people of African descent now find themselves in the so-called New World?

Kofi: And so the response is at least partly that you write because you're a writer—it's what you do.

TG: Yes, although at the same time, I don't just write out of the thin air. Everyone who makes art does it within the parameters of a specific social and historical context, obviously. The imagination—mine or anyone's—is informed by race, cultural background, sexual orientation, private desires, age, gender, and so on. So each of these factors, and no doubt many more, of course bear on what I produce and how I think.

Kofi: Those people who are involved in queer activism in the Caribbean often stress the worst conditions that Caribbean queers experience, as a means of spurring others to action. Do you think queer literatures from the region have the same responsibility? Or do

you think they serve the community better by offering examples of positive queer living in the region?

TG: When you say "queer literatures from the region," you mean the queer-themed creative writing?

Kofi: Yes

TG: No, I don't think that the creative writing has any responsibility to anyone, really, except to itself, to be the best that it can be, and to tell its own particular truths. And those charges are charges visited upon the head of the writer. We begin getting into very dangerous and indefensible territory when we start to ask questions about what "responsibility" art has to society. I don't think that art has, or *ought* to have, any "responsibility" to anyone. One risks becoming a mouthpiece or pamphleteer for a movement, or group, etc., and also risks embracing a kind of representer's arrogance, if one believes that it's necessary to speak "for" or "on behalf of" whomever.

It's also very important to make clear the difference between—but also confluence between—what we do as creative people and what we do as activists. If you're an activist you have a particular goal toward which you're working, and that's one thing. I say this having been an activist. But as a creative writer, at least for me, I don't want to be anybody's foot soldier—otherwise I just become a pamphleteer who's doing agitprop. I have no interest in writing something that people feel might be a kind of manifesto of "the movement," whichever movement we're talking about. That doesn't interest me. The imagination is a place where we can really be unbounded, and be free to tell all kinds of stories. Why would we want to place strictures of "responsibility" on that realm?

That said, if we as creative people are writing about a culture, for example, I do think that it's our responsibility to do our very best to represent that culture in as nuanced and finely tuned a manner as possible. This is how I feel about what I do, anyway; I can't speak for other people.

If anything, I think that creative people have a responsibility—and I say this very carefully—toward those who made it possible for us to do all the things that we do. *I* feel a responsibility historically to those people, and feel that in working out the parameters of this responsibility, I can do the best honor to them by doing my best work and by telling the stories that I tell as truthfully as I can without feeling that I'm following an agenda (which I think would be dishonest and problematic). There are creative writers who are "in

service" to a movement and/or population, but that's not the kind of work that I wish to do—not ever.

I'll just say one more thing on this subject: I've noticed, having being an activist and a creative writer, that there's a great difference between the two regarding the language that one uses for the discrete occupations. They're vastly different, actually, as the language of literary theory is vastly different from that of what a fiction writer may wish to conjure for a novel or short story (or essay). I've also been aware that in some of my nonfiction, the realities of language change from what they might have been in fiction to what they become in nonfiction. In nonfiction, I found that I'm often saying that *I* think this or that, or that *I* believe this or that: a stance that I would never adopt in fiction, since in that realm, I'm listening to and working with the characters. Or rather, the characters are working through me, so that I listen to what they have to say; one thus hopefully disappears as a writer in those circumstances. When I'm writing nonfiction, I'm speaking from my own point of view, for the most part, and talking about social realities that make up the realities of our world, this world, our world always beyond complete understanding.

Books by Thomas Glave

Among the Blood People: Politics and Flesh (2013). Essays.
Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles (2008). Anthology.
The Torturer's Wife (2008). Short Stories.
Whose Song? and Other Stories (2000). Short Stories.
Words to Our Now: Imagination and Dissent (2005). Essays.

CHAPTER 3

Faizal Deen Forrester

Faizal Deen is a Guyanese writer, whose book The Land Without Chocolate *was Guyana's first published coming-out narrative, and the Caribbean's first critically celebrated poetic narrative of queerness. Deen has experienced life in Guyana, Trinidad, and Jamaica. He currently resides in Canada, and is pursuing an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Windsor. In 2013, he will become the university's first Student Writer-in-Residence.*

Kofi: Can you speak a bit about the experience of growing up queer in the Caribbean? Was it relatively easy or difficult for you?

FDF: I left Georgetown, Guyana, in 1977 to settle in Ottawa, Canada. I was 9 years old, so I did not come into my queer sexuality in Guyana. But as a queer boy, the projections of queerness were always being made onto me by adults who saw stereotypical markers of homosexuality in my aversion to sports and my fascination with creative and artistic impulses, like dressing up, singing, drawing, writing, speaking, making up stories and wanting to entertain, wanting to hold an audience. In the early seventies, my mother dressed me like a hippie and my hair was always long, and those who lived through hetero-normative codes wished she'd make me look more like a boy. I can see now that there were acknowledgments in the ways in which I was regarded that I was somehow different, and truth is I always felt different, though I would argue that as all children begin to feel what makes them *them*, difference becomes something celebrated by the burgeoning ego. But I believe that the society had already qualified my differences as queer, a turn, a reversal of what the other male grandchildren in my family were up to: mostly cricket and cars and a disdain for school. I loved all those things too but I loved to incorporate cricket and cars and whatever

else into playtime games rather than do them or ride them as the case may be.

People always said things, as I visited Guyana every summer through my teens up until university, to see my grandparents and to accompany my mother who always longed for some other Guyana that had been lost, that I could never know; there were constant comments about my femme ways, the pitch of my voice, the gender-fuck of my manners. I remember an aunt trying to give me voice lessons to deepen my voice at 17, and I went along with it just to see what she had to say. I'm one of those lucky queers that found an emotional landscape from a very young age that I recognized was true to me and so I never allowed any of these vibes to railroad my sense of self.

Violence associated with my sexuality was never an issue for me because class protected me in many ways. Homophobia in the Caribbean is also a class issue, an economic issue, in that many who have privilege and are queer have the freedom of movement to leave and to live queerness elsewhere—but with that constant divide in themselves when they ponder the reasons why they cannot live queer where they are happiest, at home. Others are like my sister who is *not* queer but is Queer in the Jamaica Kincaid-sense—with her heroines who do not engage in certain nostalgias that so many people in my family still carry around for "home," for Guyana or Trinidad or Jamaica. Kincaid's heroines make a history beyond or outside of national or ethnic rootedness. That's how I've always felt about Lucy and Annie John.[1] That's how I feel about my sister and that's how some Caribbean queers I know feel about where they were born. First-generation queers of West Indian descent, in Canada or anywhere else in the diasporas, might have less of a battle against the emotional pulls of nostalgia. As an artist, I can't wage war in those ways against some imagined, imaginary, romanticized birthplace; I feel it's my right to engage in such narratives because it deepens my experience of what it means to be alive, indeed, to be queer.

Kofi: The threat of violence toward queers dominates discussions of Caribbean queerness. What were/are your own feelings of safety/danger, acceptance/ostracism at home and in the diasporic Caribbean community?

FDF: I haven't lived at home—Georgetown, Guyana, my birthplace—as an adult queer poet. I've visited but never lived there.

My "return" was to Kingston, Jamaica, pan-Caribbeanly speaking, in the early nineties.

I guess some of my response to this question of violence is contained above. When I lived in Jamaica in the early nineties, it began with me going there for a conference—I had academic ambitions, or I thought that's where my writing life would lie. I was giving a paper on Jean Rhys and Roland Barthes, go figure, and during that conference I found out I had been accepted into the MPhil at UWI MONA. I had many Jamaican family and friends and decided to stay and begin my research and to teach in Kingston. I love Jamaica. It was odd that my "return" to the Caribbean to live would not be Guyana or even Trinidad but rather Jamaica. And this is complicated: my literary politics, although engaged in queerings (especially my work on Mittelholzer and Salkey), rested mostly on anti-imperial and anti-colonial themes. Being a part of a revolutionary community was at the forefront of things for me. It didn't occur to me at first that I could be killed or beaten up for being queer. That being queer might rule me out completely of the equation even though I felt such immense pan-Caribbean pride. In those days, as it remains today, it seemed impossible to consolidate.

This was 1992. There were already debates and discussions and arguments raging on Jamaica's incredible talk radios, in the newspapers, on campuses; indeed, it seemed like everywhere; murder lyrics in certain Reggae Dancehall tracks, anti-queer, but mostly against queer men, was a big big conversation. People had been killed and every time a well-to-do man who lived alone or who, rumor had it, was a battyman,[2] was found murdered; it was always assumed that, well, "'Im die cause 'im is a battyman!" As an academic and as a foreigner, as someone who was privileging his Trinidadian-Guyanese roots over his Canadian roots, which was all over his voice, as someone who lived in another class, another setting, I might have been spared the violence. I'm not sure.

But I will say this. I worked in all sectors of Kingston society as a teacher. I taught the children of lawyers, doctors, dons, engineers, taxi drivers, clerks. I taught in private schools, government schools, the university, community centers, and I was always myself: engaged, femme, with my hands flying all over the place as I got excited. I never realized the danger that my colleagues have since documented in various ways. All that mattered to me were the greetings of "Teach," which was how I was referred to, and the free coconut water I always got. I was experiencing inside a conflict between not just two halves but so many parts of myself. How could one part of me take all of the rest away? Why should that be? I never sought out

Kingston's underground gay communities, a system unto itself for obvious reasons. I developed my own systems and waited for others to bring up the topic. The people who adopted me, who looked over me, looked out for me, who all brought up the violence against homosexuals and the murder lyrics of DJs, all condemned these ideas without ever once asking me if I was queer. It was their way of letting me know that they knew and that they were not homophobic.

But I remember many of them attributing their "open-mindedness" to their education, their class, their opportunities to live and travel abroad, etc. There was this attempt to rescue Jamaica's reputation internationally as a place of unbridled and rampant and violent homophobia. To say to me, the foreigner, that this was the product of the ghetto, of the working class, or the no-class. And the equations between the poor, the sufferers, and barbarism in the form of killing queers were being made quite explicitly. Traveling during that time to Trinidad and Guyana, something interesting happened in conversations I had with people or those in the media. As a result of on-going feelings and attitudes around the dominance of Jamaica's economic and cultural legacies, I noticed a tendency to conflate homophobia in Jamaica with an ideation of Jamaica and Jamaicans as a bad place, a place of bad people. This was nationalism and patriotism at work here, post-independence and through all the disappointments and failures of how we fared through the Cold War, and, of course, post the collapse of the Caribbean Federation—in any case, people seemed to believe that Trinidad and Guyana were somehow better because they didn't give birth to the murder lyrics of some Jamaican DJs. I felt that Jamaica was being seen as somehow not quite/not civilized/not quite/not quite/not modern in these conflations and yet the same shit laws are in place in Trinidad and Guyana, brought by centuries of the Judeo-Christian Christ and the right to colonization; those sodomy laws are the same.

My South Asian friends tell me that it's the same on the subcontinent, well, at least, in India. You know, it doesn't matter—Hindu, Muslim, Christian, African, Portuguese, Chinese, Indian, any class and across religious, racial, economic, and national lines. I have queer friends who represent all the Caribbeans and who no longer live in the archipelago, who continue to feel that their queerness has ruled them out of active participation in their countries of birth, and even in their diasporic communities away, which retain and uphold homophobia even as they have assimilated economically into places where homophobia is clearly defined as a human rights abuse. Again,

it's so complicated to unpack. How one part rules you out of the whole. I tried to address this feeling of being split down the middle or into all of these misplaced pieces of the self in poems such as "Confuse the Gentlemen Dem."

Kofi: To what do you attribute the intense homophobia of Caribbean societies (if you believe that they are, in fact, intensely homophobic)?

FDF: God, it's so impossible to talk about this without factoring in the psychic and emotional landscapes of diaspora. For example, never living in the Caribbean since 1995, and accessing so much of what has transpired in LGBT rights and activism throughout the region through the media, never through the lived experience of being there, it's hard to say if the homophobia one experiences in Port-of-Spain or Bridgetown or Georgetown or Toronto or New York or Montreal or Los Angeles, etc., etc., etc., wherever the diasporas are—it's hard to say if it's any more intense in one place than it is in another regardless of geographies and locations. The difference is, in the major urban cities of the so-called Western world, the metropoles of the former and current empires, certain hard-fought social and political and cultural revolutions have been successful in creating spaces of safety and freedom for queers, and these spaces have absorbed and welcomed all queers to the extent that our sexual freedoms and choices are protected under laws, charters, policies, etc.

So to get back to the question, when we speak of "intense" homophobia in the Caribbean, do we mean Jamaica and the bad press murder lyrics have generated through the last 15 years or so? The reports of, let's say, gay cruise ships being turned away from Nassau, or cross-dressers being arrested in Georgetown, or homophobic murders in San Juan, or even the treatment of LGBT revolutionaries in Cuba pre-Castro's apology don't really drum up the same sensations as what happens in Jamaica. Certainly, the provincialism of thought and the "Kincaidian" smallness of place psyche that Lamming spoke of so beautifully in his great work *In the Castle of my Skin* suggests an intensity of violence akin to small-town Bible Belt mid-Western America, the places Nan Goldin and all of her friends were escaping from when they built queer communities in Boston and New York in the seventies. In any case, there have been no widespread social revolutions around queer in the places in the Caribbean I know and have lived in. People were busy trying to survive independence, ethnic and economic strife, the disappearance of the middle class, the backlash against socialist experiments, which was, again, us caught up in the master narratives, that is, Cold War

politics—and yet, the brain drains continued and many decided no longer to participate in the experiment of building new nations.

So what remained unchanged were private and public models of social interaction and negotiation, and within the revolutions needed by certain populations, the disappointments and the catastrophes of the past creep in. So homosexuality is still criminalized in Jamaica and Guyana, so if someone is beating you to death, do you expect the police, an ideological state apparatus armed and dangerous, to come to your rescue? And homosexuality is still criminal because those old colonial laws were never repealed. They're still on the books.

Then, there's the practice and power of Old Testament Christianity, which we all know about, and the conservatism of Roman Catholics, Hindus, and Muslims to be taken account of when we consider countries such as Trinidad and Guyana.

And, then, powerfully, there's the hetero-anxiety of what happens when the histories "die you," to appropriate Lamming once again. There is so much placed on the need for the procreation and regeneration of families and communities because of the enormities of loss, lost bodies through the passages—all of them, slavery and indentureship. This is how intense a discussion of homophobia in the Caribbean becomes when I have it with myself, in my work. And that's just scratching the surface.

But if an indigenous and successful social revolution emerges throughout the region, one where the queer body itself is not banned, is not imprisonable without impunity, for starters, then all of this has to be considered. Queer cannot be considered without race and class and history and the imaginative and psychic terrains of all of those movements, consensual and/or forced. We are a region still impelled by the possession of bodies—bodies of thought, of being, of politics, of community, etc.—precisely because we survived some of the most horrendous acts of willful and intentional dispossession under what I call the Five Hundred Imperialism—for 500 years—that was late capitalism. This indigenous queer movement, even in its specific and local forms, will have to take into account a materialism that is the result of histories of dispossession that find their most powerful expression in the belief that the complementary opposites of male/female, without understanding how those are actually social constructs, the biological function of male/female, then, is an absolute law of nature. Queer means no kids, no husband, no wife, no wedding, no grandkids, no future, no family, no bloodline, no continuation of the name, even if our names have been

subject to those Walcottian "sea-changes," etc., etc. Boy, wouldn't it be great if the Caribbean were at the same stage of the history of queer liberation where we were now fighting for the law to civilly and economically recognize our domestic partnerships, our marriages?

And with all that I have said, LGBT people continue to build meaningful lives and careers and forge courageous change throughout the Caribbean, in places many of us have left to become part of this thing we call "diaspora," which, for me, is "the Family that had no country"[3] and yet is always affected by the SGMS, the sad Guyanese moments of loss and yearning for some imagined home. I think about playwrights like Godfrey Sealy, who wrote *One of Our Sons Is Missing*, and his death from HIV/AIDS in Trinidad, and I think of how little we hear about artists such as him who live/lived, actually lived/live in, the places we recall or remember in our diasporic imaginations in Vancouver or New York or London or Toronto or Ottawa or wherever else.

Kofi: Do you feel more empowered in the diaspora, more able to speak out, to make a difference? Are you optimistic about the future of queers in the region?

FDF: I'm not sure what difference my arguments with the intellectual and historical and cultural narratives of what bred me and placed me in this body and where I happen to live physically and sexually in the world, I'm not sure how, as all of that relates to queer, empowered I feel. I am not one of those people who necessarily or easily use terms like "diaspora." The term makes me anxious because to me it means that the person is never ever at home even when they are at home, because we always grow stranger to the places we fictively identify as home, and those places forget us, don't they? I think I feel empowered as queer and I have been feeling more and more that since queer roots me out of my roots in my own community—then it might be more of an identity to attach myself to, if and when I am political on page or in public, than my brownness, let's say. You know, I stand with my West Indians as we face racism together in the Imperial cities made rich by the blood and tears of our ancestors, *but* what happens when my West Indians won't stand with me when I face homophobia? What happens when the homophobia is coming from my own Black and brown and red populations, and my alliances, formed for the self-preservation of that part of myself that is queer, happen in those socially progressive gay villages in those Imperial cities, and the alliances are formed across so many lines, some about race and class and place, others about sex and drugs and pleasure and

just being able to be what you are and who you are outside of religion and history and all of it? I am empowered wherever I get to write but my dream is to be able to do some of this work in Georgetown, in Port-of-Spain, in Bridgetown—the cities of my childhood and teens.

Kofi: Rosamund Elwin's anthology, *Tongues on Fire*, offers us a picture of Caribbean lesbians who, in contradiction to their portrayal in Western activist theories, find ways to live happy, fulfilled lives with long-term partners, openly. Further, they offer us stories of queers who have done the same, since at least the time of their grandmothers. What is your own experience in this regard? Did you grow up knowing, or knowing of, other queer persons in your community? Were you told stories of such by relatives?

FDF: We always heard such stories but I was never aware of where in Georgetown queers would socialize. When I was little, my mother dated a man who was rumored to be bisexual and who had a sister who was gay, openly gay. I grew up in a household and in an extended family that concerned itself with the economic and cultural survival of the country, a young country at that; Guyana was becoming Guyana, independent and saddled with racial, ethnic, and cultural challenges of which I would not learn the extent until much later on in life. When I grew up and started asking questions. For example, a bigger deal was the fact that I came from a multi-racial, diversely religious or spiritual family. I had cousins who were African-Guyanese, Indian-Guyanese, Portuguese-Guyanese, Jamaican, Trinidadian, Grenadian, Irish. While my grandparents were Muslims, my own household participated infrequently in religious or cultural celebrations; Eid and funerals and the odd wedding came to reveal our Islamic roots, so to speak. Uncles and aunts had become Marxists or socialists and were preoccupied with the economic survival of the young nation.

Sexual and social justice issues pertaining to sexual minorities never really entered my consciousness until I started to think through the wider conversations around homophobia in Jamaica, when I was a young graduate student living in Jamaica and studying at the Mona Campus of UWI in the early nineties. I had already come out in Canada and had already begun writing about homosexual themes in novels that contained such instances of sexual transgression, from Mittelholzer's *A Morning at the Office* to Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, which was much maligned as being a sensationalistic narrative that played into outsider anxieties around

homophobia in Jamaica. It seemed to confirm the Western belief that Jamaica was this site of rampant violent homophobia without context, and somehow worse than the spate of homophobic assaults and murders that occur everywhere in the world including Canada and the US—the belief that these things only happened in places that are easy to write off as being backward, religiously intolerant, and educationally stunted places, such as the American midwest or Bible Belt, without considering the levels of violence against Queers in urban, supposedly more progressive, spaces and cities. So I started to think about Guyana and Trinidad and started asking questions and considering the differences inherent even *within* terms such as "battyman," literally and actually incorrect since some of us don't fit in, no pun intended, to top/bottom dichotomies but are actually oral fellas, quite vanilla, quite dull for some—so there was "battyman" and then there was the term we used in Guyana, "auntieman," which seemed to denote a more socially divergent identity, one that lay outside the heteronormative norms/expectations and could be that outsider eye, that third eye, that auntie or best friend or girlfriend one consulted because they could look in at your boy–girl, man–woman problems, having an objectivity, what we might call, what, a queer wisdom? A queer eye, dare I say it?

In any case, while all of these ideas are subject to debate and discussion and nothing is fixed with regard to what appear to be very dangerous and necessarily closeted lives for Guyanese queers, I did remember, that before my grandfather died he used to do business with a transgendered member of the community, affectionately known as Jack and Jill, as Jill was going to become a reality finally through operations she was seeing through in the States. I remember Miami being the place where she was getting her surgery but I'm not sure now. It was so long ago. Here was a queer person who had found a life inside of Guyana, without having to migrate elsewhere and was running a business and funding her surgery abroad and was not cloistered or protected by upper class Guyanese life. She was very much a part of the community. When I volunteered for Teens in Action in Kingston, Jamaica, the person who employed me, a founding member of the SISTREN Theatre Collective, told me stories of gay women living out their lives in their villages and communities and keeping to themselves during the week, of work and tending to matters of the yard, but actively participating in church and community events on Sundays. My friend wanted me to understand that within what we would call closets in the West, there was life for queers in

Jamaica, though she herself agreed that for a man the terrain was much more dangerous and required a lot more negotiation.

After all, Red Dragon had put out a single in—1994? I don't remember the exact year but it went something like, "Buju said Boom Bye Bye/and mi nuh see nothing wrong with dat/all battybwoys mus die," and then he goes on to suggest setting the "batty trap," which means to cruise a battyman and make him think you're a battyman too and then when you get him alone, you get the picture. I remember that song vividly and I wish I had a recording of it and I knew the lyrics exactly. I haven't seen anyone study it yet. In any case, that didn't appear to be lyrical, as in the "lyrical gun" of reggae-dancehall. There was very much a belief locked into the lyrics that suggested an abomination beyond Leviticus. "Boom Bye Bye" is to me actually a love song that uses the DJ's condemnation of homosexuality as a foil for some sort of confused big-up or privileging of the beauty and "rightness" of man–woman love. Men and women would dance slow to "Boom Bye Bye" in a celebration of heterosexuality and I always wondered, can't heterosexuality be celebrated as a love unto itself? Must it be defined or reified against homosexuality? Why is homosexuality as it pertains to men considered an abominable rejection of the sexual desirability of women?

Meanwhile, in Trinidad, the late Godfrey Sealy had written *One of Our Sons Is Missing*, about the AIDS pandemic and of course the way it brought discussions of homosexuality to the forefront, and challenged Christian concepts of love, and even brought people back to the New Testament, which many of course still don't recognize as "God's Word." There was also a calypso that celebrated the fluidity of sexuality and I believe it went something like "if you can't find a woman take a man" and it was humorous but also sincere in its message. Or, at least, that's how I read it. My point is that there would never have been any of these discussions, any of these conversations or narratives, if gay people weren't living in the community, next door, let's say, whether one knew it or not.

Kofi: Another important aspect of Elwin's anthology is that it works to normalize queer life in the region. Patricia Powell's novel, *A Small Gathering of Bones*, does much the same thing—we see gay characters living normal lives, holding down normal jobs, engaging in loving and long-term relationships. Yet we know that living in an openly queer manner in the Caribbean, or even secretly, can be a magnet for incredible violence. How can we explain this dichotomy? Why do you think that some queers are able to live openly, and others not?

What is it that triggers the violence, and moves an individual or a community from acceptance to violent exclusion?

FDF: Well, there was a time in Canada, not that long ago, actually, when homosexuality was still criminalized and retired queers who were civil servants have told me of active "witch hunts" in government ranks to expel homosexuals. The same thing was going on in Malaysia when I was there a few years ago and, well, we all remember Bruce Golding's wonderfully revealing comments, that is, wonderful for those of us who wanted to have some record of homophobic exclusion from his tongue and his tongue alone, on the BBC's *HardTalk* a few years back.[4] Don't Show. Don't Ask. Definitely Don't Tell. And, if you can, Try not to See. That's what it felt like for me living in Jamaica and through countless summers at home in Georgetown or Port-of-Spain or St. George's. But I knew that in our family we always told, always spoke about those who might be gay and maybe that's why they developed drinking problems or committed suicide or came to some such tragic end. People spoke in secret, as gossip, of great men of culture who might have been and probably were.

From my own experience and from what my gay West Indian friends have told me through the years, it's a different kind of closet in the Caribbean. It's a system of being that calls into play the very West Indian-ness of the person, an understanding, a deep understanding of the performative nature of life—and those who don't play straight, or ambiguous at the very least, disrupt the dichotomy of comfort, of moral comfort, and then we hear the stories of violence. Some disclosures that led to violence while I was living in Kingston involved an inherited sense of class from the colonial imaginative implantations, where at least two well-known and rumored-to-be-gay intellectuals of great standing and widespread respect were murdered by their working class, no class, the way Kingstonians would mean it—in any case, these high-end men were murdered by their economically disadvantaged lovers; let's say, a version of Watchman in Cliff's controversial and problematic masterpiece, *No Telephone to Heaven*. I played the closet, those *closets*, privileged as I was to be a child from the "outside" and though I have dual citizenship with Trinidad and Canada, what's written mostly from the sounds of my tongue is a Canadian accent. It was my other essentialisms that made me consider deeply moments for transformation around queer acceptance and that led to *Land Without Chocolate*, because I loved being back home—that love gave my

sexuality a deep fulfilling context, that myth of return and home and rootedness and place of birth and all the essentialisms that identity politics fused with postmodernity had warned me against, and yet attracted me to even more at the same time.

The human rights question, though, would be: why couldn't I or anyone else have all of that plus sexuality and all of the cultures and aesthetics and intelligences that might come from sexual difference? That's the issue, and the violence can come in through this issue of wanting, of needing visibility, of having all freedom in a history where freedom might have been nothing but a pipe dream—and I guess this is where the right to sexual freedom and its separate sets of identities conjoins those of the racial and ethnic and economic and social and cultural. This is why movements for queer liberation, equity, equality, visibility, and open participation in the Caribbean, and anywhere else outside of the Western world, cannot and must not transplant specific Western models for activism, dissent, and conversation into their own specific, and local, populations. This is not to say that we cannot learn from each other in a sexual-minorities-of-the-world-unite moment, which as we all know is necessary for planetary harmony and peace.

Kofi: Those involved in Caribbean queer activism, of course, tend to stress the worst conditions that Caribbean queers experience, as a means of spurring others to action. Do you think queer literatures from the region have the same responsibility? Or do you think they serve the community better by offering examples of positive queer living in the region? Or neither?

FDF: Shouldn't queer literatures from the region do both?

For example, against environments of potential violence in the English-speaking Caribbean, from the Bahamas to Jamaica to Guyana, is it not possible to show how queers have been able to secure for themselves lives in which they are able to participate in their communities? I guess it depends on where in the Caribbean we are talking about. Is all of the Caribbean, including the Spanish and French and Dutch Caribbean, a place of totalizing violence and marginality for queers? You know, this question is actually leading me into contemplating a lot of the other issues I have already dealt with in previous questions. If we take queer living or the model for queer life to be that of the urban areas of North America and Europe, and we insist on "coming out" and "visibility" as essential to our rights as queers, then, of course, in places like Guyana, where you can be arrested for being in drag regardless of your sexual orientation, then,

of course, we are dealing here with countries where to be gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgendered is in fact to be banned.

However, within such landscapes, is it not true that queers are living lives? Is it not true that those queers who haven't had the privilege of growing up abroad and writing books such as my own from relatively safe and protected spaces such as Montreal or Toronto or Ottawa, is it not true that those queers who live in their own countries and have not acquired the additional challenges of being an immigrant and being racially-othered, and being queer and not knowing where you're going to truly belong because one or the other might rule you out of a sustaining sense of belonging—is it not true that queers who never left are living lives? Are working, drinking, gathering, loving, contributing, etc.? I lived in the country that most of these questions would, and most of the discussions in the "West" have, positioned as notoriously homophobic. Yes, I lived in Jamaica. In Kingston, Jamaica and I met queers of all classes and backgrounds and they had their own social spaces and gatherings and all of these places were "underground." Not visible, and therefore in relation to what we have enjoyed in the big North American and European cities, limited, confined, oppressed. Whenever someone tried to start a gay bar, let's say in New Kingston, it would be rooted out by homophobes and pretty soon closed down out of fear for the lives of the patrons and owners. Outside of London and New York and San Francisco and Toronto and Montreal are similar realities not playing themselves out? Within the so-called liberated and tolerant countries, there are Matthew Sheppards upon Matthew Sheppards, gay White youth that are murdered, bullied into suicide, etc. All of this is the experience of being and living and seeing the world as queer. The violence, the oppression, the fear, the confusion, the liberation, regardless of how it happens, whether it is private or public, it must all be the subject matter of writers who take as their central themes issues of queer life in the Caribbean and/or its diasporas.

Kofi: How do you see the relationship between Caribbean queerness and Western queer activism? Many of Elwin's contributors feel that their own struggles are minimized, or subsumed by Western queer activists into their own, Western-focussed objectives. Daphne, for example, laments the ways in which Western lesbianism tries to constrain her, "especially when we have other battles to fight, and we have given much to build the White gay and lesbian community." Does this match your experience?

FDF: Well, there has been a lot of discussion around Western models of activism or awareness-building on many issues—from the rights of girls and women to issues of the environment and environmental concerns—and these discussions tend to include or be carried out anywhere in the world where there is a consciousness of the effects of Western cultural globalization and influence.

The discussion around Western queer activism, for example, is one that continues in many of the countries, all post-colonies of some former Imperial power or historical Metropole, that I traveled through in East and South East Asia as part of a project I have been working on for years. I have been intrigued by the traces of "Englishness," or of a palimpsest of colonial influence and history that echoes through those layers and that is still part of a visible landscape that forms a differently similar relation to the Guyana of my imagined childhood. Portugal 'pon Holland 'pon England, you might say, and inside of these occupiers, their servants and slaves and settlers.

In taking these travels further—into queer spaces from Hong Kong to Singapore to Kl to Melaka to Penang, among other cities—I found a different kind of attitude toward the so-called Western queer activism example. There wasn't the feeling that somehow there was a form of *queer* cultural imperialism being imposed on local or specific manifestations or expressions of queerness in the wake of Britain's old sodomy laws, or the fortification of such prejudices in places such as Malaysia through Islamic practices and/or the rise of Sharia in parts of that country. In fact, there seemed more to be an awareness through the Internet that a queer in the Malay peninsula was not alone as a planetary subjectivity, and having access to social histories of unrest, dissent, and revolt in the West served to strengthen the resolve of queers in this particular non-Western location to continue finding strategies for survival and expression and ultimately representation. What I am saying is that there did not seem to be a "look at these privileged queers from America and Europe telling us how to live our lives or what to do with our culture or what is wrong with our culture etc." kind of positioning.

Now, in response to the question directly and how it relates not only to Daphne's experiences with so-called Western lesbianism, but to my own experience, I have to first ponder the Western/non-Western divide with regard to the Caribbean. Firstly, how non-Western is the Caribbean? I would argue not at all in relation to Malaysia or Indonesia or Hong Kong or South Korea or Laos or

Cambodia or Thailand, etc. The Caribbean is and has always been part and parcel of the Western world, geographically, at least, and with a cultural, social, and artistic/intellectual proximity, not to mention economic, that has tied it for at least 500 years to what we consider to be the "Western" world. Yes, we grew up with hybridity and litanies of culturally syncretic moments and identities, so many markers of difference, including language and environment and food, but we also grew up hand in hand with the BBC and the Voice of America and the cultural and social exports of England and America and, much later on, Canada.

I think by "Western" what we really mean is *White* but what is that exactly? To my knowledge, Stonewall was achieved by mostly Black and Latino drag queens who showed a multi-racial police force that they weren't going to take discrimination and brutality lying down. As queers who are *not* White regardless of which post-colony we claim, the struggle has *always* been about race and sexuality or sexuality and race and also, within issues of race and sexuality, economics. These days one does not necessarily, or perhaps is not even likely to, arrive in a queer community abroad that is strictly White and/or ignorant of the struggles to be non-White in what were at one point in history White-dominated places/spaces. Queer is so diversified in the major urban centers of North America and Europe that if you have arrived in one of those cities, you could very well find a community or social/public space that is organized around your identity—sexual, racial, linguistic, and so forth. Likewise, these cities are so diversified that you might, as someone of African–West Indian descent, let's say, end up in a bar for queers of mostly African-American descent and not necessarily find that feeling of "heartease" or community in a sense of imagined/shared Africanness/blackness. The same might be the case with those of us who are "South Asian" or Indian. We might end up at a conference for Desi Queers in Toronto and have nothing in common with other brown queers who are invested in a language and a culture and a memory and a historicity that is firmly anchored in Sri Lanka or Bangladesh or India or Pakistan, whereas we can only imagine what that kind of authenticity must feel like as West Indians remotely this and that, firmly something else but what exactly?

For me, race is something not exclusive to White queer communities and spaces but something that applies to the entire geography of life in Canada. Ten years ago I might have agreed with Daphne's position more, and sided with some of the positions Carolyn Cooper

has made in defense and explication of what she sees as a misreading/misappropriation/misunderstanding of homophobic lyrics in Reggae-Dancehall music by critics who could not possibly understand certain contextual complexities as a result of these critics being "Western" or White or, if not White, then, "Western" or "Westernized." Look, essentially, everyone needs to find their own way of being and feeling "queer," or not, acknowledging at this point that "queer" is a word that in the first place is part of this so-called Western activist moment.

Whatever the semantics, though, in my own experience queer usually comes before race, because living in Canada allowed me the opportunity to first and foremost, as a young man, enter queer spaces in search of sex and sexual fulfillment and experience, to satiate my desire. It had very little to do with having friends or community at first because I didn't understand how anyone could build a sense of community just based on shared sexual interests. Then, of course, I realized the complexities of my own queerness as I grew older and more experienced. I have always felt that within queer communities there are spaces within which I do not need to feel confined or constrained.

Kofi: Do you, as a gay Caribbean, feel accepted in Western queer spaces? Are you able to be yourself, or do you often feel the need to perform your Caribbean-ness? Or the need to perform your queerness in a more visible way (for example, one of Elwin's contributors writes: "if I go into a bar in a dress, high-heels and make-up, there is an assumption I am heterosexual, bisexual, or a fag hag. If a White woman goes in the bar in a dress and make-up, she is called a 'lipstick lesbian' ")?

FDF: Well, first of all, am I a gay Caribbean person? I don't feel particularly Caribbean. I haven't lived in the country I was born in since 1977, and throughout the eighties and numerous visits to Guyana to visit my grandparents I cared more for Star Wars and comic books and school and music than I did about my feelings for boys, and I was much too young to go off and explore anything gay or queer in the city; even then everyone in my class seemed terrified of being on the streets for any long period of time.

So in terms of performing my Caribbean-ness in Canadian queer spaces I am not sure how that would work or what that would mean. I suppose there was a time when I would carry the "exotic" with me into the bar because I was not White, so what this meant for me is that I sought-out queers of color who also had various

backgrounds othered to Anglo-Saxon or European backgrounds because together we could express the compoundedness of queer within other differences—cultural, racial, linguistic, etc. In terms of religion and religious identities, which is really a huge issue in the Caribbean, where Christianity and Islam are used as moral points of departure into justifications for homophobia, I also built communities with queer Jews, and Mormons and Roman Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses, who had all faced various forms of exclusion and expulsion. It really depends on which Western queer space we are talking about. As for lesbians, in cities such as Montreal and Brooklyn, and I would imagine, again, most major urban centers, there are communities of femmes and butches of all races and cultures and backgrounds. I find the expectations to perform my Caribbeanness and my queerness occur more in predominantly straight spaces/venues/forums that host or support the arts, places where as a writer people expect me to educate them as to the struggles of being brown and queer, and aren't necessarily interested in stories that might have nothing to do with struggle but might have more to do with the chapters that come afterwards, the stories after coming out, after the family dramas of acceptance or exclusion.

My early work in *Land Without Chocolate: a Memoir*, had more to do with taking on the narratives of homophobia: such as in "Reason, a Guyanese Coming Out," for example, where I address the themes of religion in acts of oppression against queerness or more specifically and folklorically, if there is such a word (let's make it a word for now), how homosexuality is positioned against the fear of the disintegration/extermination of families, bloodlines, ancestral routes, etc., as a result of the pillages and violences of slavery and indentureship. In my poem, homosexuality is perceived by certain folks as a possession, a demonic possession, a jumbie, a duppy, that must be exorcised for the sake of the perpetuation of community and family. What I assert ultimately is that the queer is the one who occupies a position within which his progeny will be the recording of the histories, of the memories; in the poem, "Burials," for example, this is what is happening. The funny funny child, the half-girl, the wormchild, writes the ancestors, gives them a voice in the body of the word. The fact that I was able to be queer in Canada and to explore my subjectivity, my difference, whether that be defined through desire or aesthetics or perspective or wit or humor or what have you, has given me the opportunity to create a queer poetics of

diaspora that, ironically, celebrates in part the very same communities that might have rejected me or thrown me out had they been alive and aware of my sexual difference.

Kofi: One of the major points of contention between Western queer activists and Caribbean queers is the question of the origin of sexual preference. Western activists insist that sexuality is innate, as a response, of course, to those anti-gay movements which insist that it is a lifestyle choice, which can be voluntarily changed. Yet, many Caribbean queers (including several in Elwin's anthology) speak of the process of becoming lesbian, rather than of coming to a realization of their queerness. Indeed, some of the contributors to Elwin's anthology move back and forth in their sexual identification, and several Caribbean theorists have suggested that bisexuality, rather than outright lesbianism or gayness, is the "queer norm" in the Caribbean. What do you make of these viewpoints? Do you have a sense that queer Caribbean identities are more fluid than Western ones? Do you believe in the innateness of sexuality?

FDF: Who knows? This question, for me, is like pondering the existence of God or a maker or master or universal truth or the meaning of life. I know that I didn't become queer. I was born queer and from my earliest memories growing up in Guyana I was always attracted to the energies of boys. This tells me that my homosexuality is innate and if so, and if there is a God or universal truth or some design to the universe, this is the way I am supposed to be. I just never had any residual guilt or fear or confusion over this because I wasn't raised in a religious environment. So, in terms of my sexual desire this was innate. However, when we talk about queer within cultural and social contexts, I would argue that living in Canada allowed me to *become* queer in terms of historical and cultural and social and linguistic markers and understandings. Does that make sense?

I don't have enough experience in the Caribbean or throughout the Caribbean to comment further on whether or not the "queer norm" in the Caribbean is bisexuality. But, I will say that the men I met in the Caribbean who were married and who had children and who participated in their communities and who would not give any of this up, did not necessarily choose to live bisexually because they were functionally bisexual but chose this path because they felt they had to, that they had no other choice but to also fit in to the heteronormative. The Bahamian film, *Children of God*, deals with this issue bravely through one of its plot-lines. I have to question

whether or not we are talking about functional bisexuality or people who are just in the "closet," which I am assuming is considered a Western/White concept as well. I cannot speak for the lesbian community or women in the Caribbean but the men I have met are certainly in the closet and those men who have mobility and wealth and access to, let's say, cities such as Miami and New York and Toronto *are* in the bathhouses and the saunas—and I know because I have met them and have chatted with them, and they have discussed with me their sense of oppression and of being unhappy with the lies they must live in when they are back home in Mandeville or WestMoorings or Eleuthera.

Kofi: To what degree does your queerness influence your writing (creative or otherwise)? You've been described as a postcolonial writer, and a queer writer. Do you think of yourself as a political writer? As a writer of queer literature?

FDF: My writing is about all of my experience or comes from various correspondences and conversations with politics, culture, language, sexuality, music, film, memory, diaspora, race, gender, imagination, economics, travel—I could go on. I am known, because of my first book and because of my involvement with certain landmark projects and events, as a writer of queer and postcolonial themes—in that I look at the intersections of imposed/inherited master languages and narratives, vis-a-vis genealogies of Europe's imperial histories, and the articulation of forms of transgressive sexual desire and yearning against histories that have already rendered me a racial or cultural *other*. So, yes, my early work was formed and informed by classical, first wave postcolonial language and theory and inquiry and in order to pull it off or give life to it I appropriated my own memory of Guyanese English, which is more a composite, a romanticization of what it means to sound Caribbean or West Indian, being as I am from a family that encompasses most of the archipelago. I also wrote out of and from some of my own cherished canons of Caribbean literary and critical texts, from Sarduy to Glissant to Kamau Brathwaite to Martin Carter to my beloved Benitez-Rojo.

I think I write because I need to intellectually engage with all the issues that matter to me and all of the popular and not so popular cultural products that my wanderings and travels have given me access to. I am all of those things: colonial, postcolonial, queer, political, apolitical, historical, ahistorical, and the list goes on. I think I am an intellectual and I am an intellectual because I care most of all

about ideas and the expression of ideas in all forms of art and artistic expression. And for me this calling happens to align itself with social justice issues and practices.

I must say, however, within the context of these questions, that what moves me the most are the effects of economic globalization on the ever-developing regions of the world and the brutality of war, famine, poverty and disease on communities that have been left behind in these Late Imperial times. Within these catastrophes lie the continued persecution of queers and of women and of girls and of children and of the environment—so, in terms of being a political writer, I don't see the world as one that has succeeded imperialism. I see the world as a place that has moved into late imperialism and must indeed implode at some point either through large scale revolutionary movements or a collection of smaller revolts and dissenting moments. Homophobia, in my opinion, is an extension of patriarchal capitalism and its master narratives, created to sustain and legitimize and propagate and perpetuate its dominance.

Kofi: The battle for the decriminalization of homosexuality is proceeding at various paces in different countries around the Caribbean. Do you hold out much hope for these movements?

FDF: The only way this will happen is for those with intellectual and cultural and political power in the region, real power, in that they are on TV and on the radio and in print and visible—you know, the Caribbean still has a vibrant culture of public intellectuals and a radio culture and a culture that promotes visibility and celebration of those who have achieved great things in their respective careers—these people must continue the work of decolonizing imaginations. For example, in Jamaica, where it is perceived even by those in power that the popular consensus is that most of the electorate agree that homosexuality is a sin and might base that belief on Scripture—and even if this is the case, listen to Jamaican radio, for example and you will hear the diversity of opinion—why would anyone repeal or work actively towards repealing the old British sodomy laws when Europe's greatest narrative of imaginative conquest, the King James Bible, is still entrenched as unquestionable in its moral and societal dictates? Legally decriminalizing homosexuality in the Caribbean means nothing if those who administer power, for example, the Police, still believe that what their church or mosque or temple teaches them about homosexuality is true. Exclusion and expulsion will continue in schools, communities, workplaces, unless there is a revolution in thinking around inclusion and the politics of inclusion, and the right

to love is defined exclusively as a human right to be upheld and protected, and prosecuted if denied or deferred.

We must also ask ourselves: where is homophobia coming from within our communities? What is the relationship between the syncretic nature of our histories—from the Africanist to the European to the Roman Catholic to the Islamic to the Hindu to the Socialist, among so many other influences and identities and philosophies and ideologies—and our social practices? How might histories of catastrophe and chaos contribute to our views on homosexuality? What of the missing bodies of history? The fear that homosexuality is an extension, a further extermination of communities already uprooted, rerooted/rerouted, marooned, fragmented? What of homosexualities rather than a monolithic homosexuality, acknowledging that throughout the Caribbean attitudes might vary, from let's say the French-speaking Caribbean to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean to the English-speaking Caribbean?

Deen's Book of Poetry

Land Without Chocolate. (2000).

CHAPTER 4

Korey Anthony Chisholm

Korey Anthony Chisholm lives in Guyana, the country of his birth. He was the 2007 winner of the Miss Gay Guyana Glory Pageant; the pageant is still put on annually. Korey has been involved in youth activism in the Caribbean for a long time, and has been involved with organizations such as The Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS. He is currently an advisor at the Global Forum on MSM and HIV, and an Ambassador at One Young World.

Kofi: So can you tell us a bit about what it's like growing up gay in Guyana?

KAC: It is difficult. It's very difficult, but it depends also on who you are. Because if you're a very flamboyant person, you get troubles, you get bottles pelted at you, people will give you a lot of verbal harassment, throw bricks, things like that most commonly. So most times you get that form of reaction. And you have persons who are not out, they cover everything up—and that's how most people live, because they're afraid of the discrimination they will receive from everyone: community, family members, sometimes anyone who sees you and knows or thinks, perceives—they don't even have to know that you're gay—if they perceive you as being gay, you hear "fire bun!,"[1] or if is more than one of you, you find bottles coming at you. So it is very difficult to be outdoors, or to walk around. So we don't really go anywhere.

I remember growing up in my village: to walk from school to home was a challenge. I need to take the back streets; I need to think about if I see a group of guys liming[2] at the corner, I don't pass at that corner, I walk around, I find a short cut where there's not much people, because of fright of being pelt at or hearing the slang; you just don't want to deal with it.

Kofi: And these are people who don't even know, people who just think you're acting in a certain stereotypical way, or something like that?

KAC: Yeah, because they don't know you, they just see you and that's what they perceive that you are, and so they act.

There are some people, some gay persons in society, who are maybe respected for many different reasons, right? Because after a while if people start troubling you, and you react like a bad-ass—and you can fight and stuff—people don't trouble you, they say, "oh, I wouldn't dare go there," right? They respect you. So you have a bit of leverage in terms of being public. So sometimes you can find those persons in society who can lime at a park, or you know, walk about without hearing those kind of slangs.

Sometimes, for me, I feel it's very ethnic. Sometimes maybe East Indian guys trouble you, but that's a very low percentage. But in the African population, homophobia is very, very deep, and so if you go out anywhere in a public area and there's a lot of African guys, you're bound to be troubled. In a venue where there are Indian people, your chances of not being troubled, or you know, not getting that kind of emotional distress put upon you, are much much better. So there's not much of a public scene here; we're private and enclosed.

Kofi: So is there *any* sort of open gay scene then, in Guyana?

KAC: It differs in the Caribbean, in terms of gay scenes, or places where you can go. I know in Guyana we do not have a club, we do not have any lime corner really. Most times if we party it's like, I tell you, you tell whoever, they tell Joseph, and so on. You know where the party is, in some private place, but there's no acceptance of gayness here, so there's no actual public place in any meaningful way; there isn't any place where you openly lime.

Kofi: You were saying that your ability to live openly in Guyanese society depends on who you are. Does economics play a role in that?

KAC: Of course, yes. Because many gay people in the Caribbean—I don't know about the rest of the world—but in Guyana, are seen as very well-educated persons; they're thought of as the sort of persons who went through school, they are seen as really bright and intelligent people, right? And that's the expectation, and the way society stereotypes gay people. And a lot of the time the popular gay persons who live openly in society either have money, or they've been to school, or they have high positions. So people expect that everybody else who is gay will also be like that and have those things.

But yes, of course, if you have money, you travel in a car. That's the first thing; so you don't have to walk down the streets or catch a bus. Some times when I catch a bus, and the collector knows I'm gay, they open the door, see me, lock the door back up, and drive away. That's the kind of trouble we live with—if they don't want to put you in the bus, they don't have to, or if they feel like, they can decide to put you out of the bus. So yes, if you have money, you have that leverage; you go everywhere in a car, you have a different class of people you lime with. So there's less stigma attached to you because the persons that you lime with are well educated too.

So in our society, I guess the people who are really at the heart of the battle are the young people now coming up—now there's a lot of young gay men who are dropping out of school because of harassment or fear for their lives, can't get a proper job because they're gay, and that makes it really hard on them. Yeah. A lot of them turn to sex work.

Kofi: Is sex work a big part of life in the gay community in Guyana, then?

KAC: Yes, it is. It's practically a common job, is the way I would put it. I know a lot of guys who are sex workers; they don't want even to call it sex work often, but it is. I tell you, they stay home all day and they hook up online, and the guy comes to their house and they do it, or they go on the road and do it, it's the same thing. There's this site now called *Adam for Adam*, where visitors coming to the country or other places in the Caribbean are soliciting in advance. So you find a lot of our gay men who are engaged in trading sex for money, or other means of getting paid. If they're not giving you money they're buying you clothes, phones—you know, something.

Kofi: Now, you're one of the winners of the Miss Gay Guyana Pageant. Congrats, first of all.

KAC: Ah yes, I won in 2007. And thanks.

Kofi: Can you tell us a bit about the pageant itself? How old is it, and how did it start up?

KAC: The pageant is very old. It started off with a woman who had a gay son and they're from the ghetto area, All-Boy's Town. She started the pageant for entertainment, and he was involved helping her. When she died, there was an absence, and then he decided, in honor of her, to keep up the pageant. And so he started it going again, and it was an on-again off-again kinda thing. It was around 1999 or 2000 that it got really heated.

When I won the pageant, I only knew three of the queens before me. And my thing is that I like working with persons who . . . I didn't really go to join the pageant—I went to see how I could assist, because the pageant had a lot of stigma attached to it because it's from the ghetto area. A lot of the contestants in the pageant were sex workers—that's what they did for a living, understand—they were not professional persons who had a day job; most of them, not all, but most of them, were sex workers. So most of the professional gay persons would not attend the pageant; they are associated with the business and professional communities, and so to associate with a low class of gay people in the community, that wasn't the thing for them.

The pageant attracts a lot of straight women who are very supportive, or who just want to see the show. You find a lot of straight women who would pull their husbands and boyfriends along, and they come in groups all the time, so the guys don't have any choice. There be guys that are straight, and with he girlfriend, and three of her girlfriends, so he's the only guy with these three girls at a gay pageant, but he keep in line because he just come along, and he just watch the pageant. I think this is how we become, you know, more aware and conscious of not discriminating—just to sit and watch these gay people having a good time and to have a good time along with them; I see it in that light.

When I joined, I wanted to help the girls. I saw a need, in terms of giving what I knew, so I normally worked with the educational aspect of the pageant, the intelligence segment, and grooming them in that respect. And one of the coordinators that year, he had a different way of dealing with things, and there was an incident with a contestant and the contestant decided that she's going to drop out—refused to do it—and so they were left with five contestants and I said—you know, I was doing our scene, our sessions on HIV and AIDS—and I said fine, I'll take it on. That was a month before the actual pageant. That's how I joined the pageant. And I just went on, and it was fun. Very interesting.

And I also wanted to remove the barriers. Because I lived in a different area, never lived in the ghetto area; I speak properly, I won't speak the normal dialect here, and so I had a stigma attached to me, if I went into the ghetto area. I'm known as the up-class gay person. So I said no, as a leader I cannot have that label—people need to see me as someone who can come and be there with the sex workers on the streets, and tomorrow, or three hours from then, I can put a good

shirt and pants on and go sit in the UN office and do my work. And so I said the pageant would be a good way to show my solidarity with the community at the grassroots level. People were surprised, shocked, disappointed, but I said, "this is my story." I don't see it as belittling my education or my intelligence to be a part of this pageant. And I got to see another side of the gay community, I got to really know the sex workers, and what kinds of discrimination these openly gay guys who cross-dress were trying to push through, and I was able to put more context to it and really understand, you know, what they go through and I saw what they experience. And I continue to work for the pageant and support it.

Kofi: How did your family members and your community react when you won the pageant?

KAC: I don't even think my family . . . I was living alone at the time. I start living alone since I was at the age of 17. My mom had just left the country and I didn't want to go back to the country area with my grandparents so I decided to just stay in Georgetown with my mom's friend. After then I moved on to living alone, working, going to school, and you know, just trying to make it.

I mean, I think my mom . . . I mean, we don't have these conversations. So I know my aunt I live with now, she won't have a problem, she's accepting by now. She does everything for me: she washes, cooks and clean. So by now, with she going through my room all the time, she would realize that something ain't right, 'cause I got women's clothes in there. I got all kinds of crazy stuff. Even porn, in a box, and I told her, "you better stop going through my things, you're going to see something you're not supposed to see!" And she said, "Well then I already see what I ain't supposed to see!" and I am like, ok, so I don't need to confirm anything else.

This year's pageant I was so involved that I bought the trophies and stuff for the pageant, and I had the trophies in the house, and the winner didn't want to carry him/her trophy because her mom is not at that level of acceptance, you know, even though he's very flamboyant and you can hear and see plain who he is. But to carry the trophy and put it in her house would cause maybe a different argument, you know, that you don't want to have with your mother. You know she's already trying to deal with it, so you don't want to add on to the pressure. So I had the trophy kept in my house and I even give my aunt the gown that I wore, to wash, and I just say "oh it's costume" and she say ok. She's very accepting, but my mom, I think knows—but she doesn't want to accept it. I think mothers

are like that in this country. Rarely you'll find a mother say, "that's fine, I know, yes, and that's fine."

She heard about the pageant, apparently somebody told my father, and he said he'd call my aunt, and my aunt call her and give her the run-down. But family is very difficult because it is so emotional. You don't want to disappoint or break your family's heart. So the issue of being gay is just not discussed. I think that everybody in the house know, family know, but we just don't talk about it. We just go along and live as it is. If I walk down the road and someone troubles me, my aunt will say, "why y'all don't rest y'all self?" and she will take them on—I wouldn't even say a thing, and finally I say to her, "listen, I grew up hearing this, this is from nursery school, my whole village trouble me." If I go home to that village now, I know the same thing would happen, they would just pick up from where they left off. You understand? So I say to her, "I have become tolerant to the name calling—so you don't take on, if I don't take on—you have no worries to take on."

Kofi: So there's a lot of silence surrounding being gay, then. It's just ignored unless you cross certain lines.

KAC: Yes. And we can get proper wicked ourselves. So sometimes when a guy decided that he going to behave like he in a rage, and especially if we in a group, a big group, we will deal with he in a not-appropriate manner. We'll carry on very flamboyantly, say all kinds of things. Like okay, you want to play, let's play. And sometimes you just, you know, throw it over your shoulder, because you never know how it can end. One time some gay peer-educators were walking and this guy call out and say "fire bun" or whatever, and one of the peer-educators, the present Queen, Miss Gay Glory, turned and said, "thank you!" Well of course, that's a shock because most of them, they are accustomed to us reacting negatively and when you smile and say "thank you," they don't know what to do. And that could have been the end of it. But another one in the group decide they going to take it a little further and said something else and it became very violent, where not just the guy alone that they were talking to got up, but all the guys around him got up too—it nearly turn into this big thing. So sometimes it is appropriate and sometimes it is not, to react to it, and especially when you're alone.

We don't walk late at night; if we have to, we choose the areas carefully because, of course, you can get mobbed and raped and all kinds of stuff. And you don't necessarily know when they are looking at you—they know what time you come in so they can, so when

you're walking, a group of them come up, they hold you down, they do what they have to do, they take what you have and they go away again. They think raping you will solve the whole problem.

Kofi: I spoke to Joel Simpson about the pageant, and he said that, by and large, it's actually been well received in Guyana. Do you agree with that?[3]

KAC: It is. It is because we made it that way—because people see it now as a show. The last pageant we had, over 200 people attend. And it was a mixed crowd. It was gay people, straight men and women, racially mixed. And I was shocked. There were so many people there cheering on the contestants, and it was a very decent crowed. In years past we had some interesting, and not-so-interesting, crowds. Weird stuff, because the way that they were promoting the pageant before was just all about these gay guys on stage showing off. So the audience would drink and carry on. It was never showcased as a professional thing where you sit down and you come dressed decently and you don't boo anyone, and all of that. But that's what it is now.

It is very well received. I go to the trophy store and the guy encourages me to come back and get all the trophies from him every year. By doing it often, it starts to become part of the culture. People look forward to it, if we do any show, any gay show. Especially the women; that's our main target audience. But whenever there's a show, all we hear is "what time the show on?" from everybody we meet.

I mean, it sometimes can be looked at in a bad way. When a popular person die, there's usually a very big funeral. And for two reasons: one is that people might be trying to see the family and they might be going in a good gesture, but the other reason they go to the funeral is to see the girls! Of course, they're going to come out in their best outfits, black and white or red or something! And you're confused as to where the dead person is: is all about the spectacle and being seen and showing off. It's like gay people, especially cross-dressers, are celebrities; especially when they have lots of women around them—they will cheer and carry on, and try to get your picture.

And partly too it's because of the novelty. They are not accustomed, you know, to such scenes, to seeing persons dressing up like this. So when they get the opportunity to, they come out in big numbers.

Kofi: Still, it's all very encouraging.

KAC: Yes, it is. Very. It is.

Kofi: Is there a lot of media coverage?

KAC: There hasn't been much. The media need to be careful while they're covering it, because they're state owned; we have a lot of state-controlled stuff in this country. The president could shut you down just like that. I think next year we're going to try to do it. The editor told me "yes, we publish stuff like that." He's telling me there won't be any problems with publishing a story about the pageant. And I said, "Okay, I didn't know that."

Kofi: Again, that's very encouraging. There was a time not too long ago when they would never have thought about putting a story about the pageant in the newspaper.

KAC: True. Definitely. I mean, there have been great steps, but then there are some key things about the whole process of Guyana becoming more accepting that, sometimes you want to say things are becoming better, and then some other times, you just want to say, "oh gosh, when is it going to change? When am I going to be able to walk down the road and not have to worry about the name-calling or bottle being pelt or something else thrown at me? Or getting beat up by somebody who thinks, you know, whatever he thinks?"

That always has to be a concern. You can never say you're safe, at any point in time, because something can happen and these people, they smile at things, and then, you know, in a blink of an eye they just do something to you—I've seen it happen a lot of times.

Kofi: Well, this is one of the strange things, because there are gay and lesbian people in the Caribbean who live very open lives. But we also know that living that openly queer life can be a magnet for violence; this violence can just find you. As you said, it's economics, partly, that determines how openly you can live. But what do you think it is that triggers that violence; what is it that makes the situation go from ok to, all of a sudden, violent?

KAC: You know, I don't even know where it comes from or why. And then you try to figure out, maybe they were abused, maybe they . . . I don't know—I'm trying to think of reasons why they would want to do this, react or act out in those ways. And I guess each and every one of them has their own different reason, but it's just not understood as yet.

Kofi: You were saying that sometimes it seems as if progress is being made, and sometimes there are setbacks. I'm thinking of the efforts being made toward the decriminalization of homosexuality—something that basic. This battle is being fought throughout the Caribbean, but there always setbacks, as you say. Just in July of last

year, the government of the Bahamas moved to make sure that marriage was defined as being between a man and a woman. Do you hold out a lot of hope that these governments are going to act to ensure that their gay and lesbian citizens are treated as full citizens? Do you hold out hope for these decriminalization movements?

KAC: In the Caribbean, I must say . . . I have to say Caribbean, not Guyana, because Guyana would not move on that, unless there is a regional move, a regional discussion on this. What happens within our parliament here is: we have these discussions, about protolerance legislation that needs to be passed, and they're going to pass, really and truly; and then what happens with the thing is, one person realize, they realize at the last moment, in a small committee, a select committee, that "oh my god, this is what they're going to pass," and then they contact the church and the church come out in their royal numbers against the bill.

We're talking about human rights. Why should people be living according to what religious organizations are saying? I mean, we can't have a law because of a religion? If everybody is free, if the religious people themselves want to be free to practice their religion, then why cannot individuals freely say what it is that they want to do with themselves, with their lives?

It needs to be a regional move, so probably some drastic changes need to be happening. Funding that they are receiving needs to be stopped—you understand? The US government, the Canadian government, and the Netherlands, they need to see clearly that they are funding religion. And they need to say, "These are our policies. And your country has laws that kill people for that, or prosecutes people for that—we cannot fund or support your country anymore." I think that's the kind of action that needs to happen for them to rethink their stance.

Kofi: So you think the international community has a big role to play?

KAC: Yes, they do. I mean, them changing their laws is good, but if you're giving money to countries that have a law that persecutes, you need to examine that carefully. Let's say some of your citizens want to come here. These two guys are married, they want to come to Guyana, they can't really—I mean, we don't have a law to recognize them, and so they're here, they're two individuals, they're two guys—they're not married, they're not a partnership. You understand?

Kofi: Yeah, they're two guys who are in danger.

KAC: Yes. And we saw the incident in Saint Lucia, where the gay tourist guy was killed. I think these are the kinds of things they

should wake up and see. So I think the international community has a greater role to play. And it also has to be a regional move because no one CARICOM country can make it on their own—they will not say that they're going to do it if the others aren't doing it.

So for example, they all receive Jamaican music—so the first thing that would happen, all the murder music they have, they would have to stop that. All that would have to be censored, because it is against human rights to advocate killing a group of people because of who they are.

Kofi: Popular music plays a role in all this, of course.

KAC: The thing with music is, it's so easy to pick up a lyric and get it stuck in your head, because most people just focusing on the music, and the lyrics just sink in subconsciously. From Buju Banton and now Mavado and Vybz Kartel: people just pick up on the words they're saying, it becomes the slang to use. And our young people are very into the Jamaican music and culture.

Kofi: What about the media? What role do the media play in all of this?

KAC: I think media is media. Media plays an important role in anything. Because they are the ones that publicize. If they don't print it, we don't hear about it. If they don't report it, we don't hear about it. And they're a business. If they know five hundred people are going to tune it to listen to a story about this lesbian woman who killed her lover, that everybody going to be waiting to hear the news, they'll publish it front page; that's front page story, right? They're going to make sure that gets enough coverage. But when it's, say, a workshop for AIDS, they put it off, you know. You have to invite them and hope they turn out. They may come, but they may turn up late. But if it was some bigger story, they're there early. So I think they play a very important role, and they basically operate like a business here. So I always tell people, "oh no—do not believe media houses."

And of course, the taboo issues are what sell, just like in any media market. Gay and same-sex relationships are very taboo. Right? So if something drastic happens, like what happened in Barbados the other day . . . I was there for a show, backstage, and someone died. And the first day in the media it was proper, the story, everything was lovely the first day, right? And then the next day it had to be made known that this contestant was actually in a gay show. The day before it was "Contestant dies at Miss Galaxy World Pageant in Barbados." So how it go from that neutral headline, where you don't

even know even if is a man or a woman, and turn to "Contestant dies in a gay show?" They realize that "wait, Miss Galaxy pageant isn't selling any papers, nobody logging on online," but if you say "gay show," everybody read. And then you put the picture of the person, then you decide and make it more interesting and put the franchise owner, crying, and a judge consoling him in the newspaper. And then you will even go farther and mention the position of the franchise owner all over the article: they have to say that he's not only the franchise owner, he's also the president of the United Gay and Lesbian Organization in Barbados. Right? So he is in the news. Everybody wants to know who-is-who, right?

I feel that sometimes they could be more educated about knowing how to deal with these sensitive issues, but then at the end of the day they're just rolling with the business. They are to be blamed sometimes because of the way they may write certain issues, or the way they may say things, just to get people to look or to laugh—that may be the issue. But they still play an important role because, on the other hand, I always look at the positive part of that article: they're getting more conscious and aware of the community and its presence. So I don't see it as bad media. At the end of the day the pageant was promoted in the papers. People will say "I didn't know they had a pageant." And it gets people thinking. And it stirs up conversations with families too.

And people start to get seeing, you know, and mothers may say . . . because I remember when I was young I used to laugh a lot, my tongue was always out laughing, and boys do not laugh with their tongues outside their mouths, and I did one night, and my mother said "If I know you was going to grow up to be a girl, I woulda bore out your eye!" Yes! I mean it's very emotional, and if we can help to stop things like that from happening, in any way . . .

Coming back to this, this kind of discrimination based on ignorance, I remember one day walking down the road, and I had a cold, so I coughed. And a person turned and said "boy, is like the AIDS acting up?" [Laughter]. That's one other stigma these days here, that everyone has this idea that all gay persons, or most gay persons, are HIV positive. The thing is, those gay person with AIDS often have to identify themselves publicly to get help, so many out gay people do have AIDS. So if you only know 10 gay persons, and all 10 of them are HIV positive, then that's your perception of the gay community. Yeah. One of our other issues. But this guy shocked me to the bone when he said that to me. So you perceive I am gay, so then

you saw me sneezing and that's your comment? My AIDS is acting up? I can never forget that comment!

Kofi: So what do you attribute it to, then, this intense homophobia in Guyana?

KAC: Maybe people have had personal experiences that weren't what they wanted. There are some gay men who very aggressive and they may approach a guy, and a guy says no, and they don't think it should end there.

I've always wondered about the psychology of someone who sees me and immediately feels sick to his stomach. Maybe he feels that that's not a choice we should make. Maybe he thinks that gays are tarnishing the reputation, the machismo of the male reputation in the Caribbean. That might be another problem I suppose.

Kofi: And I suppose religion plays its part too, right?

KAC: Religion, of course, is a part of it. But I look at these people who are spouting these religious arguments, and most of these people aren't church-goers; it's mostly guys who are liming, these are guys who are liming at the park, or bus conductors, normal people. And I'll tell you something else: you'll rarely find professional guys saying things at you or hitting out. You may see them turn and stare at you, but they won't take any action.

I think it has to do with where you're from; if they are from the ghetto, they approach things as ghetto people will. If they have a professional job, they tend to react a bit differently, in terms of how they will discriminate. Not that they won't, but they just have a different way of doing it.

The religion that pushes the homophobia the most is the Rastafarian religion. Yes! There ain't no Rasta man that would see you and not say something. The Christians and the Muslims, yeah, they have their ways, but they're basically conservative about it; they know how to use the system. Even though they argue amongst themselves, when it comes to legislation their decisions come together.

So, I mean, you see how it goes. Religion plays some major roles in decisions, but I feel it has to do with something else. Because I am saying, if you're a religious person, you believe in god, you're not supposed to hassle anyone who makes a choice that you don't like.

I'll have to ask some of my friends on Facebook what they think. Like, I have this one friend who is always wanting to find out why men like men. And he was asking me all these questions about this and that. So I asked him a question; I said: If you're in the mood to have sex, not only in the mood, but if you just found a guy on your

bed, and you just woke up and found this guy giving you oral sex, what would you do? And he said he doesn't know what he would do. I said: What do you mean you don't know what you'd do? Allow for him to give you oral sex, or tell him to move on? And he couldn't understand what I was trying to ask him. It's a simple question. If you like women, you're attracted to women, then if you see a guy giving you oral sex, it would not be a turn on to you, right? There are reasons that women like men, or men like women: there is a sexual attraction, there is a physical attraction, there is an emotional attraction that happens. As far as I know, I was never aroused by, and I don't have dreams about, women. If I see a guy pass, I have a tendency of staring. The women, they don't make me stare—if they're half-naked at the bars, yeah I'll look, but I won't be assessing "oh sexy" or "mmm . . . nice." So if she half-naked and a guy come next to her, she's out of the picture. She don't exist.

Kofi: I was reading through the "Testimony" section on the SASOD website, and I read about one man who wanted to cure himself of his homosexuality, to leave it all behind. Do you think that's possible?

KAC: [Ironic laughter] I have a good friend, I just saw him, who likes guys, and he's married now to a woman. I mean, it's all very funny to me. There is this particular pastor in this country that thinks—she's a woman—she can pray it all away; so there is this young guy who is very gay and he even likes her son. And they go to the same church. And one night she overheard me talking to him, and she told him that he needs to stop talking to me. Right? And so for years now, because she's his pastor—he's a young guy, 17, and she's the pastor, and I guess she knows that he likes men—she's been trying to cure him. But little she knows that the guy's sleeping with her son! I mean, there's a whole lot of them in this church, I realize, that are gay, but are not gay acting. And she knows they are in the church and she's trying to tell them that if they focus on God . . . look, trust me, I am totally, totally attuned; I have had high positions directing church clubs for youth and youth ministry and everything, and I sing in the choir and all of that, and that doesn't change the fact of who I am.

I think it's a form of denial where you just think that it's not right, and you were groomed in this way to think that it's not right, and so no matter what kind of feelings you have for men, you're trying to make right, but it never goes away. Most of them can tell you, if they see a sexy guy pass, they will look and see what is there to be seen. You can stay away from the sexual activity, but it is still part of them . . . they're just hiding it.

Kofi: And of course, there are a lot of married gay men; I mean married, practicing gay men.

KAC: Yes. Oh yes, that's popular. Big, in Guyana. That's the easiest way to get your family off your back! There's a woman who wrote an article in the paper and she's really ridiculous: she wrote that this guy that she's getting married to, her family thinks he's gay. Now her first confession in the article is that she thought he was gay too! Asked him if he's gay, and he says no. So now they are applying to get married, but her family is concerned. So her family concern became her concern, so she decided to write some column, yes? To get some advice. What is this? My thing to her, I would have said, you need to tell your man that there is this perception that people have, this is a perception that I have, and these are things that you're doing that make me think that you're gay. Don't go to the columnist to ask! The columnist says just to marry the man. That's what the columnist says. My friend says, here is this columnist encouraging this woman to marry a gay man. Ha! So I mean, it's become a big thing, because people wondering if they should be asking questions of every man now before they marry him.

I have a good friend who doesn't believe in bisexualism; he doesn't believe that there are bisexuals. He likes guys, he lives home with his child's mother, his mother ask him all the time when he's getting married, because his sister is claiming that he's gay because one day she was there and he was on the phone and she could have sworn that it's a guy he was talking to, not a woman. His mom lives in New York now—so when they pass the marriage bill, she call him on the phone and telling him "they passed the bill, gay people can marry now." And I am like, well, these are your cues to say to your momma . . . you know, she came back and she sat him down and she told him she saw this movie and how, you know, if he's gay, it is fine. You know, because now she understands. And of course he told her no! And I said to him, you missed your opportunity! If she said it the first time, and she come back again trying to make sure, you shouldn't have lied to her! You should've taken the opportunity to say, well, that is the reality. Right? And of course she asked him, when are you getting married? Sometimes they're trying to hide and cover it, and this is what happens.

And then you have the fact he's telling me he's not into feminine guys. He's looking for this straight-acting guy who's only a girl in bed. And he goes on and on and on about this and I say, well, that's your thing. I said to him those people go through a whole lot to be

straight-acting, and they go through a lot of emotional trauma. Just ask them. They'll tell you.

Kofi: One of the things we hear about are gays and lesbians who find ways to live long-term lives together with their partners. Did you grow up knowing or knowing of any other queer people in your community, or did your parents or family members ever tell you of any other queer people they knew growing up?

KAC: No. No. Wait, now that I think about it, yes, there's this one guy; I don't know if the guy was gay, but everyone would just say, you know, don't let he touch you, they would say all this stuff. But that was it. I mean, in our community, he was the only person of that kind that I knew, or heard anyone talking about, being gay. It was a small community and a village, so nothing is unknown, everything is public knowledge. And at that time, technology wasn't very advanced.

When I came to Georgetown, after my mom really left in 2004, then I really got into the gay community a lot more, getting to know a lot more people in the community, and became more comfortable myself; because before that I was generally home-schooled, that's it. So before that, nothing. My mom would not even go to have that discussion.

But of course there are some well-known gays in public life. We have our prominent characters, like Mr. Kwame McCoy who is the presidential advisor, and he's of course a government official, so he's under public scrutiny. You hear about our own dear old president—of course there are speculations, about him being gay, yes. And then the incident with his wife didn't really make it any better. They were at a cricket game or something, she was sitting at the other side of the grounds, and he sent the guards to tell her to come sit next to him. And she refused. And they had a big argument in public, and they separated. I think they're now divorced. Yes! They had a big thing. And after she confessed that he used to beat her and he was abusive and it was a big thing in the country! Yes! The president was accused of doing that. He was also accused of being gay; yes, she said that they were never really legally married, and they never had sex or anything like that. And all kinds of crazy things. It was a big thing. Of course, people believe her. Nobody is against her; she's praised. And they make jokes about him now.

Kofi: So I see that you're also the Guyana Focal Point for the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS.

KAC: Yes, I was the regional focal point for a good three years, and then I thought, it's time someone else stepped in to do this. So yeah, I was the National Focal Point before, and then became the Regional Focal Point, and now I'm the National again.

Kofi: So you've obviously had some dealings with Western activists. Do you think those Western activist take the problems of Caribbean gays and lesbians seriously?

KAC: I have had a few. I can safely say that they don't know the issues, really.

Because you don't hear a lot of news about it, coming out of the Caribbean. In Guyana we have a problem with reporting; we can't even go to the police to report cases of abuse and stigma based on sexual orientation. I mean, it's against the law to be gay, right—so what can you go to the police and say to them? So nothing is reported or documented, so no one can read or hear about many of the issues in the region. So they don't really understand; there're not many studies out there in Guyana, or really in the Caribbean, so they can't really represent the issue at all.

So outside activists always have to try to find someone in the region or someone close to the area to be a sort of relay. So that relay person may only represent the issues or the things or the concerns that they hear about or that they know about. So I don't think the Western advocates really, really comprehend the issues that we are facing. They understand that there are issues in the regions, yes, but that's it.

Kofi: So, my last question: have you seen any real change in Guyana, or in the wider Caribbean?

KAC: Yes, and I think it's because, you know, some people have become a bit more aware of the community, of the gay persons in society. I wouldn't say there's a great, big change, but there are some commendable changes happening in the region, happening in different countries. And things are different in different countries. I went to Barbados for a pageant, and I remember the contestant from Guyana who was there had to go down the road to walk and he was very feminine, permed hair and everything, but not fully dressed for the pageant, and one of the other contestants said "you need to put in your bubbies,[4] so people think you are a woman, you cannot go on the road like that, half-man and half-woman." We said alright, we're in a different country, you know; these are things we'd wear at home, and they might not trouble you, or if they trouble you you don't have any time for them—but you don't know what

to expect in Barbados. And the stigma that we received is a stigma the Bajans allow; and the ones who want to walk down the road like this, force themselves not to. Every day I go on the road, I find a new challenge. And I say to myself, I must challenge the community. Challenge them to see.

And I think that this is the height of my responsibility, and also my friends' responsibility: to sit down, share this knowledge, and talk. Gay men—old and young—in Guyana: how is it that they can carry themselves in society? Because sometimes they really set themselves up for the stigma and discrimination they receive. And so sometimes it needs to be toned down, and not be done. And that's not to say, oh you can't be yourself, but knowing when it is fine that you can really just be yourself self, and sometimes just half of yourself, not being someone else, but just being protective of who you are as a person, as an individual. But there are small changes and, as I say, there's a great deal more work to be done, particularly in the African, Afro-Guyanese context.

CHAPTER 5

Patricia Powell (1)

Patricia Powell is the author of four novels, and has won numerous literary awards. Born in Jamaica, she moved to the United States in her later teens. She has previously taught at Harvard, The University of Massachusetts at Boston, and MIT. Currently, she teaches Creative Writing, Caribbean Literature, and Queer Studies at Mills College in Oakland,California.

Kofi: Can you speak a bit about the experience of growing up queer in the Caribbean? Was it relatively easy or difficult for you?

PP: I feel really lucky that I had an older gay brother. He was totally open and welcoming when I came out to him. He would take me with him to the house parties in Mandeville or the balls in Kingston where people socialized and networked. There was even a newspaper, *The Gaily News*, which I read regularly. I met many gay couples and had a glimpse into their lives. I was about twelve or thirteen at the time. And even though swirling all around were stories of harassment and violence, people were still living and loving, and here was this community that was also holding them together.

I left Jamaica at 16 so I can't really speak to being a gay adult in a relationship there. But during those years that I lived there, I was aware of the dangers lurking, and how gay people had to find innovative ways of making contact with each other. We spoke in codes so that publicly we could identify each other; we had our own particular ways of dressing that signified who we were; certain nights were deemed "gay nights" at clubs, but only because a group of people planned ahead to all be there. Still, despite all these precautions, there were stories of police raids on clubs where people were severely beaten.

Kofi: The threat of violence toward queers dominates discussions of Caribbean queerness. What were/are your own feelings of

safety/danger, acceptance/ostracism at home and in the diasporic Caribbean community?

PP: The one really challenging moment occurred when I came out to my great aunt who raised me. I was fourteen. She was in her sixties and had been sickly of late. That Sunday afternoon when I told her she had been sleeping on and off; perhaps it was not the best time to tell her. Anyway, we were sitting together on the edge of the bed and we had been talking quietly and laughing. The moment felt intimate and good. This was a woman who had a few lesbian friends and was quick to defend gay people. But when I told her that Sunday afternoon, she said nothing at first and then she sighed and fell back heavily into the bed. She had fainted. I thought for sure the news had killed her, for she wouldn't move, she wouldn't talk. And she was barely breathing. So immediately I retracted everything I had said; I'm not a lesbian, I said, it's only a phase, I'm sure I'll snap out of it. Then I went calling for help and my cousin came with a bottle of smelling salts which he waved frantically under her nose. Finally she opened her eyes and looked at me. I never brought this topic up again and neither did she. But this episode prompted me to see a psychiatrist.

At the public hospital I met with Dr. Barnaby. I only remember that she was tall, perhaps in her late thirties, she wore a white coat/jacket and thick-rimmed glasses. Behind them her eyes were tiny and they swam. Our conversation went something like this: I told her I thought I was a lesbian. She told me being a lesbian was a beautiful thing. But they are killing us, I said to her, surprised by her response. Yes, she said, but that shouldn't stop you from loving. Love, she said. Love! I will always remember this. From that point on, I stopped feeling afraid. It was as if she had given me permission to thrive. I felt so emboldened to love. As a result, I fell in love with every girl I met. I saw how beautiful they all were, how beautiful their skin and hair and teeth, and I loved the way they laughed and talked and walked. Sometimes I'd shower them with gifts, or walk them home carrying their books; sometimes I'd declare my love. They were often surprised and puzzled and worried. I was just happy.

Kofi: To what do you attribute the intense homophobia of Caribbean societies (if you believe that they are, in fact, intensely homophobic)?

PP: I do believe that Caribbean societies, like many societies, are homophobic, but I also think that that homophobia is directly related to our beliefs about sexuality and desire and the feminine

inside us. Gay men, the world over, and gay women too, have been portrayed as betrayers of the patriarchal order. Jamaica is no exception. Gay men love men and as a result are often considered women, and in many ways are subjected to policing and harassment, and sexual and physical violation, the ways in which women often are.

The more afraid we are of our sexuality, and our internal feminine, the more difficult it will be to accept homosexuality. Having sex, which we do quite a bit of, is not the same as appreciating the body or appreciating the erotic inside us, or appreciating the feminine. The church propagates fear and disgust for the body and the state follows up by trying to police and control our bodies and our desires. We are afraid and disgusted by women's bodies and by extension the homosexual body, hence all the ways we rape and violate. In fact it seems as if it it's only in gay relationships that the feminine aspect of the male self can thrive. There is little room for male femininity to express itself safely in the conventional heterosexual model. A society not so terrified of the erotic and the feminine will not only stop tyrannizing women but will also stop tyrannizing gay people and will become more appreciative of the body and the ways it wants to express desire.

Kofi: Do you feel more empowered in the diaspora, more able to speak out, to make a difference?

PP: I do feel more empowered. I love the fact that I can write and publish and speak out without fear of reprisal; that I can march during Gay Pride if I want, and that there are community organizations that welcome me. Sometimes I do wonder if my work ever makes a difference. Or if I am just preaching to the choir. Does it make one homophobic person think differently? I will never know. But I'm hopeful that maybe it makes one isolated gay person feel less alone. Maybe it gives that person voice, boldness, safety. Perhaps that person shares the work with others.

Kofi: Are you optimistic about the future of queers in the region?

PP: I am optimistic. We cannot kill the life force, the human spirit. We can't kill desire nor can we kill love. We can punish and criminalize but eventually that must end. Times are changing. The consciousness of the world is evolving and changing and those shifts are contagious. Now, more than ever, we are connected to each other by radio, by television, by internet. And the changes that are happening in the world will sweep us up, whether we want to be swept up or not. Queers even in remote places will be ignited by the mobilization they see elsewhere. They will want the discrimination to stop. They

will want to be free. And they will be free. And straight people, terrorized by their own fears of difference, will grow tired of themselves; they too will want freedom. If the queer person is not free, the straight person cannot be free.

Kofi: Rosamund Elwin's anthology, *Tongues on Fire*, offers us a picture of Caribbean lesbians who, in contradiction to their portrayal in Western activist theories, find ways to live happy, fulfilled lives with long-term partners, openly. Further, they offer us stories of queers who have done the same, since at least the time of their grandmothers. What is your own experience in this regard? Did you grow up knowing, or knowing of, other queer persons in your community? Were you told stories of such by relatives?

PP: I did grow up knowing lots of gay couples who were in long term relationships, some with children. They were open, but only to a degree. I don't think they were affectionate in public; I don't think they would hold hands. At the parties and the balls, I got the sense that they could really let go. In public settings, they were more careful. Still, many people in their communities knew, and it seemed as if they were accepted. But I got the sense that they were never entirely at ease.

I knew one older lesbian who lived on her own and who was brutally murdered by her gardener. And I've often wondered, would he have killed her as savagely as he did had she been just a straight older woman living on her own?

Kofi: Another important aspect of Elwin's anthology is that it works to normalize queer life in the region. Your novel, *A Small Gathering of Bones*, does much the same thing—we see gay characters living normal lives, holding down normal jobs, engaging in loving and long-term relationships. Yet we know that living in an openly queer manner in the Caribbean, or even secretly, can be a magnet for incredible violence. How can we explain this dichotomy? Why do you think that some queers are able to live openly, and others not? What is it that triggers the violence, and moves an individual or a community from acceptance to violent exclusion?

PP: Living openly is a relative term, I think. From my observations, I have never really known anyone to be completely out, the way one may be out in some North American cities, walking down the street, holding hands, kissing in public, etc. But I've certainly known people to have steady loving long-term relationships and for those relationships to be supported by a community of straight friends and even some family members. These couples have also raised children

and they employ housekeepers and gardeners who behave in respectful ways to them. They have also lived in their neighborhoods for years, and though their neighbors must certainly know, these gay couples are never disrespected publicly. These living arrangements happen in rural villages and in urban centers. But I also believe that these couples live with the knowledge that something can go very wrong at any time.

It seems also that one can be protected to some degree by class, that if one has some clout or some talent, if one is well-respected and well-loved, members of the community are willing to overlook certain things.

It is always fascinating to me what people will refuse to see, the complex double standards they live with. How they will be against homosexuality in principle, but will love their gay friends.

Kofi: Those involved in Caribbean queer activism, of course, tend to stress the worst conditions that Caribbean queers experience, as a means of spurring others to action. Do you think queer literatures from the region have the same responsibility? Or do you think they serve the community better by offering examples of positive queer living in the region? Or neither?

PP: I think both aspects are necessary. I think examples of positive queer lives help to affirm our lives and offer possibilities about the ways we can live. What an amazing thing it is to see positive reflections of ourselves especially when we live in societies that deem us outcasts. How wonderful it is for our self-esteem to see ourselves positively reflected in books, on television, to see ourselves as the beautiful complex people we are, making meaning out of life and love and work and spirit and the world. Those reflections are essential. And it is important for writers to portray these positive images of us and our lives.

And what is equally as important is for writers to create stories of realities that do not yet exist. We must not only write what we see and what we know, but we must also be willing to imagine and to envision what does not yet exist. A world where there is more justice for example, a world that is more heart-centered, a world where the feminine is equally as valuable as the masculine and where we can live in harmony with both in equal balance. We must envision possibilities for healthier living and loving. As writers we must envision new possibilities for life.

And yet we still live with the church daily condemning our lives. And we still live with gay people who are terrorized daily by the

state. And we still have gay kids who are afraid to come out or who feel isolated or who kill themselves. And those stories have to be told as well. We have to mobilize for their well-being.

Kofi: The battle for the decriminalization of homosexuality is proceeding at various paces in different countries around the Caribbean. Do you hold out much hope for these movements?

PP: I have hope for these movements. And I also think that we need some very fearless leaders in the different countries in the Caribbean; leaders who are not waiting for the people to tell them how to lead them, but bold leaders who will take risks, stick out their necks for justice. A lot of our leaders are fearful and myopic. They do not have new ideas. They do not have a vision. They take their power for granted, and as a result do very little with it except to carry on everything that was already there before them. I think things will change. But we also need to change the old guard and elect leaders who are not only willing to take risks, but also to engage their hearts in all the decisions they make. A leader who only leads with his head and not with his heart will be a cruel leader.

Kofi: How do you see the relationship between Caribbean queerness and Western queer activism? Many of Elwin's contributors feel that their own struggles are minimized, or subsumed by Western queer activists into their own, Western-focused objectives. Daphne, for example, laments the ways in which Western lesbianism tries to constrain her, "especially when we have other battles to fight, and we have given much to build the white gay and lesbian community." Does this match your experience?

PP: Perhaps because I am a writer, my activism is more private. I set the agenda. I work out the complications among the characters in the story. I have some control of the outcome. There are messages and medicine in the words. I don't feel as if my struggles are necessarily minimized per say. But certainly in publishing, one could argue that publishers are not necessarily rushing to publish queer Caribbean writings.

Kofi: Do you, as a lesbian Caribbean, feel accepted in Western queer spaces? Are you able to be yourself, or do you often feel the need to perform your Caribbean-ness? Or the need to perform your queerness in a more visible way (for example, one of Elwin's contributors writes, "if I go into a bar in a dress, high-heels and make-up, there is an assumption I am heterosexual, bisexual, or a fag hag. If a white woman goes in the bar in a dress and make-up, she is called a 'lipstick lesbian' ")?

PP: Not sure how to respond to this question. I think for the most part I try to be myself, though admittedly that self is always changing. Some spaces are more comfortable than others. Because of my work, I often find myself in spaces where I am the only black person or the only Caribbean or the only woman or the only queer and I have to find a way to be comfortable in the discomfort of those moments. They might not change whatever story they have made up about me, or how they see me, and the best I can possibly do is to try to be comfortable in and be accepting of my own skin despite their perspectives.

Kofi: One of the major points of contention between Western queer activists and Caribbean queers is the question of the origin of sexual preference. Western activists insist that sexuality is innate, as a response, of course, to those anti-gay movements that insist that it is a lifestyle choice, which can be voluntarily changed. Yet many Caribbean queers (including several in Elwin's anthology) speak of the process of becoming lesbian, rather than of coming to a realization of their queerness. Indeed, some of the contributors to Elwin's anthology move back and forth in their sexual identification, and several Caribbean theorists have suggested that bisexuality, rather than outright lesbianism or gayness, is the "queer norm" in the Caribbean. What do you make of these viewpoints? Do you have a sense that queer Caribbean identities are more fluid than Western ones? Do you believe in the innateness of sexuality?

PP: I find sexuality to be so complex, my own included, that it's hard for me to draw a conclusion about what is and isn't innate. I remember the point in my own childhood when I decided that it was safer to love women than it was to love men. The men I saw around me modeled a kind of masculinity that was completely intolerable and unacceptable to me. I didn't understand patriarchy yet, but it seemed to me that men had way too much power in the world, and it was clear to me even as a child, that women and girls got the unfair end of the stick in every aspect of life, and especially in relationships and marriages. All around me, again and again, women seemed crushed by love. And though I was attracted to men, I refused to allow myself to be subjected to that kind of unfairness and cruelty. I did not want to be a part of that game of patriarchy. And so I chose women because I felt I could be freer, I could be more authentic, I could be happier and I could be more autonomous and independent and our relationships could be more balanced. This was clear to me by the time I was twelve. I don't know if all girls are aware that they have a choice in

love even if they don't act on it. And maybe a choice is not available to everyone, maybe some people are born straight, some are born gay and some are born with the ability to choose even if that choice comes later in life.

Perhaps when our societies become less patriarchal and more balanced, when the feminine is allowed to thrive fully in both men and women and even the masculine too is transformed, we won't need these categories of gay and lesbian. I do believe that gayness is in some way a response to patriarchy. That the moment the feminine was eclipsed, only in gay unions could men safely express femininity and women safely express masculinity. That in heterosexual unions, a healthy feminine expressed by men and a healthy masculine expressed by women has no place. And because it is in our DNA to thrive, to evolve, to move towards balance, despite patriarchy and the resulting distortions to our masculine and feminine selves, humans have still tried to find ways to express balance. And perhaps gayness is simply where we are now on the evolutionary trail toward masculine/feminine balance and wholeness.

I must say Kofi that this question of yours actually led me to write a paper about finding the feminine in my own work.

Kofi: To what degree does your queerness influence your writing (creative or otherwise)? You've been described as a postcolonial writer, and a queer writer. Do you think of yourself as a political writer? As a writer of queer literature?

PP: My themes have changed over the years as I have changed as an individual. This is a large question. I am attaching an unpublished paper I recently wrote where I talk about this at length.[1]

Novels by Patricia Powell

The Fullness of Everything (2009).
A Small Gathering of Bones (2003).
The Pagoda: A Novel (1998).
Me Dying Trial (1993).

CHAPTER 6

Patricia Powell (2)

A Search for Caribbean Masculinities

The search for Caribbean masculinities is a topic of immense interest and importance to me as my novels are primarily peopled by men—gay men who in the face of AIDS are searching for community and spiritual meaning, straight men who are struggling with love and with intimacy in their relationships with women who want more than just a strong and powerful man, straight men who feel restricted by the legacies of masculinity handed down to them from their fathers, and a Chinese woman who has lived her whole life as a man.

Why this interest in the masculine? It began early. In the Jamaica I grew up, men had all the power. They didn't always deserve it or use it well, but by virtue of being male, they were the heads of state, they were the doctors and preachers and farmers and teachers. To me, they were the ones with money, the ones who had access, and the ones with final say. In my family, it was no different. Sometimes in a family dispute, if the eldest in the clan were a female, she would be consulted, but she would not necessarily have the final word on the decision. My male cousins, my uncles, my brothers could do anything they wanted. They could make independent decisions about their lives. They could travel abroad to make money and stay there if they wished. They could step out on their wives; they could lie and cheat; they reported to no one.

Did I have penis envy? I not only wanted the master's tools, I wanted his house. I wanted to be powerful. I wanted to have money jiggling in my pocket. I wanted to have the final say over my life. I wanted to be big and loud and powerful in the world, like they were. But I was a girl. There would not be that kind of power and privilege for me in that hot small place.

The women around me gave everything to their men, they gave their bodies, their love, their support, their loyalty, and oh how they suffered in love. Women were the ones raped, beaten, violated, betrayed, left, and often with their brood of children they raised single-handedly. That's what I saw around me. They were the ones mired in poverty because of their children, they were the ones trying to make ends meet, they were the ones caring for their children, they were the ones working like dogs to hold their families together. They were the ones silenced in church. Silenced in their marriages, silenced in what seemed to me like every important moment of their lives. Who would want that kind of life? Not me.

My great aunt who raised me was an old woman by the time I arrived; both her husbands were dead. Every day of my childhood I heard the stories of how she woke early to load the donkey with the produce she had grown on that land which was just a scratch of red dirt then, and how both she and the donkey walked in that predawn dark the five miles to the market where she had a stall. Little by little she saved, she acquired more land, which she farmed and eventually she built a house and a shop and a church so she could praise her God. Still she was lonely. She missed the second husband who had died early. But she could not imagine marrying again. She would lose everything, she said, everything she had worked for would go to her husband. Because by law, woman had no right to anything. Everything was his. And she was not willing to give away all she had acquired.

I tended both the shop and the church. At the bar, where I worked after school and all day on Saturday and for a few hours on Sundays, I saw it all. The women came early in the morning and left quickly. It was mostly the men who stayed; they drank and talked passionately about politics. Some played dominoes all day. On Sundays I listened to those sermons in our church, and I wanted to be the minister at that pulpit feeding messages of transformation to those people, mostly older women, all of them with hats on and scarves because they, unlike the men, could not be bareheaded. They had to cover themselves up before the Lord. I wanted to be the one telling them that they could change their lives right here, right now; they didn't have to wait for heaven. Heaven was not going to help them. I wanted to tell them that this poison these ministers are feeding you about being meek, being passive, turning the other cheek, that heaven is waiting for you, *spit it out now*! Maybe my desire to be a preacher/teacher/writer began then. That shop is certainly a major character in all my novels. And after decades of wrestling with that vicious old testament God, I've developed a relationship with him/her now that is more healthy and responsible and co-creative.

When I started to write, it was difficult for me to imagine women as heroes of their own lives. And this was probably further complicated by the fact that

I had been adopted, so I also couldn't imagine myself as a hero when I was also the found or rescued thing. So I chose men to be in those starring roles. I lived vicariously through them, through what I perceived to be their power, their strength, their greatness in the world. But the thing about writing, the thing about engaging the unconscious, the thing about tapping into the creative source, is that your little ego striving for power can never win, the ego can never get its way. Because as writers, as artists, we are tapping into a source wiser, more balanced, and with a longer memory than we could ever imagine. We are tapping into a source that has a lot more compassion and a greater vision of what we are and can become, if, of course, we are willing to listen. Much of writing is listening, with your ears bent close to the page, and if we are willing to be smashed open by the work. Nadine Gordimer says we don't choose our books, they choose us. We are invited, she says. And once we accept that invitation, anything goes.

Unbeknownst to me, all along, through all those novels peopled by men and through that memoir, the unconscious was slowly, quietly, deliberately leading me back to the self. It was teaching me that I did not have to hanker after the spoils of patriarchy to find power. Penis envy wasn't necessary. There was plenty of power in being female, plenty of power in the feminine. All I had to do was remember the missing parts of myself, they would help to bring the balance to my life.

But how could we do that when we live in cultures that not only systematically demonize everything that is feminine but sanction what is considered appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors, which are then upheld by so-called traditions and conventions and the family and the state. Men could be strong and independent and courageous and powerful and intellectual and scientific and rational and smart. But they were not allowed to be sensitive and loving and nurturing and intuitive and soft. Only women were allowed to do that. Similarly women were not allowed to be independent and courageous and powerful and intellectual. If they were, they were killed. They were burned. They were raped. They were ostracized. They were called bitches and whores and man royals and sodomites and you name it. And the men too, if they showed any evidence of possessing these qualities that were considered feminine, they were beaten and ostracized and shamed and dishonored. In fact, from childhood we start training them. We tell them: don't cry; man up. Button up your feelings. Play with guns and not with dolls. Don't wear those colors; don't sit like that; don't walk like that. Don't do anything that vaguely hints at the feminine! This is the kind of environment that breeds men and boys who can't talk about their feelings, who can't hold hands, who can so easily pull out his gun and shoot another man for looking at him seductively, for looking at him as if he were a bitch. This is what it

means to be masculine in our world, to deny everything inside them that is remotely feminine. Both men and women patrol these behaviors in men and in women.

Patriarchy has not only eclipsed the feminine from the masculine, leaving men severely imbalanced, but has also deprived women of their strength and courage and power. How many world leaders are women? You can probably count them on the fingers of one hand. And some of the ones who are, are so male oriented and conservative in their values, it's hard to believe that they are indeed women. In fact they often seem clones of men, partly because the idea of women in a position of world leadership is unheard of, there are no models; women are simply mimicking what they see. Thanks to women's movements all over the world and our shifting evolutionary consciousness, much of that is changing. But we see the gender imbalance everywhere, in all aspects of our social, legal, political, and economic institutions. We see it in our relationships with each other. We see it in our relationships with the earth and the environment. We see who is in charge and we see what is valued. And what is not valued has everything to do with the feminine. But the truth of the matter is that the masculine is never truly free until the feminine is also free. And if we want to live in a just and equitable world, we have to free ourselves by bringing balance into our lives.

In Chinese philosophy there is the model of the yin and the yang, seemingly contrary forces that not only are interconnected and interdependent in the natural word but also give rise to each other in turn. We know that the presence of too much yin (feminine) or yang (masculine) in any system can only lead to imbalance and illness. Yin and yang are complementary opposites, parts of a whole. So the fact that we live in a world so heavily favored toward the yang speaks volumes about the level of our imbalance. Both the yin and the yang must be adjusted for homeostasis to occur. Therefore, our existing patriarchal model must be reconfigured for new and multiple forms/models of masculine and feminine to express themselves. Without that balance in the masculine, there will be excess, there will be pillage and overpowering and greed and destruction. Without balance everything goes awry. This is true for the feminine as well. Without balance she too is prone to the worst aspects of the human self. She too must bring in her masculine. These are archetypes of course. These are principles. But they serve us still today and especially now as we strive for balance.

What is an authentic feminine? This is a question I've been exploring my entire writing life, and paradoxically enough, through my male characters. But another layer of my understanding unfolded while writing my most recent work, a memoir.

The memoir for me was a search for my mother and a way too, I think, of understanding what it means to be my mother's daughter, what it means to be female in the Caribbean and in the world. My mother gave me up for adoption when I was three months old. And even though I knew who she was while growing up, I didn't really know her, anymore than I knew myself, or the man who fathered me. What I found most peculiar about the memoir was the interior odyssey it invited, as if to find the feminine, or to find any authentic aspect of the self, I had to retreat inward, to the world of the unconscious or a foreign country. I also had to engage the "I" more directly, more honestly, putting myself through the eye of the needle so to speak. The self could not be projected outward onto another character, whether masculine or feminine, as I had always done in my novels; the investigation resided with me and me only; I was the center of the investigation. Another thing I found curious was that the memoir turned out to be the most spiritual of all of my books, and this observation led me to conclude that perhaps at the heart of an authentic feminine is the sacred—life-giving energy.

This search for the feminine (by way of the masculine) is evidenced in all my novels. Very briefly here, I want to trace its trajectory, highlight some of the major conclusions I found, and think about the implications of an authentic feminine and masculine for nation building, for adding new perspectives and stories to the collective consciousness of the nation.

I completed my first novel, *Me Dying Trial*, at 22, but even then I was beginning to question the alternatives to conventional womanhood available to Caribbean women. Gwennie, the main character, married and with children, not only has an affair and child by another man with whom she falls in love, but later on eventually leaves the marriage and migrates to the United States.

The novel is by no means a Caribbean romance. Gwennie's life is not easy. A mature woman, single, and with a Jamaican education worth little in the American city she calls home, literally has to start over as a live-in domestic, saving and saving until she can bring her children to America. Admittedly, my ideas for what was possible for the feminine were limited at 22. I could imagine Gwennie leaving a trapped marriage in search of happiness, but I could only imagine that the happiness would include an affair that would end in further complications—pregnancy. I could imagine her eventually leaving her husband and her country in search of another kind of life, a certain kind of freedom and self-expression, but I couldn't imagine her happy in this other place so far away and foreign from everything familiar. She works a million jobs to make ends meet; the new man she meets is chased away by her children; her religion is consoling, but her adherence to its rigid teachings creates rifts between her and her gay son.

Still, in my initial search for the feminine, some things became clear. The feminine did not exist outside the self and therefore could not be found in a loveless marriage. Nor could it be found in the restrictive teachings of her religion. And also it could not be found in her close-knit extended family environment, where all the traditional ways of being masculine and feminine were policed and maintained by the family and state. It had to be an internal odyssey. She had to leave everything that was familiar. She had to move to the foreign country inside herself. But I did not understand that yet.

Continuing my search for the feminine, I turned my gaze next to the gay men who peopled *A Small Gathering of Bones*. Gay men, the world over, have been portrayed as betrayers of the patriarchal order. Jamaica is no exception. Gay men love men and as a result are often considered women and in many ways subjected to policing and harassment and sexual and physical violation and victimization the ways in which women everywhere in the world often are. That novel showed me the many ways men could be feminine. Here were men who were lovers and wives and mistresses and homemakers and caretakers and everything imaginable in between. They could be cruel in love and vulnerable too; they were trying to find balance between the fundamental tenets of the religion they held so dear, and their basic human right to love. In the face of AIDS they were creating intentional families and communities that would heal and comfort and support them. In fact it seemed as if it was only in these gay relationships that the feminine aspects of the male self could thrive. There was little room for male femininity to express itself safely in the conventional heterosexual model.

In *The Pagoda*, I unpacked this theme more thoroughly through the figure of Lowe, the Chinese woman passing as a male shopkeeper to bypass immigration laws but who comes to live the disguise she has put on. By the end of the novel though, Lowe wants freedom; she no longer wants to live a disguise; she wants to find an authentic self. But what is an authentic self? Who are we without our disguises, our various consciousnesses; who are we outside of our masculine and feminine gender roles? When we remove the clothing and the trappings of race and class, who are we? In fact it's because of Lowe's decision to no longer live as a "man" and the subsequent exposure and vulnerability and unraveling that unfold as a result of that decision, that Lowe becomes a more accessible figure, to the reader and to the other characters in the novel.

In my search for the feminine, it was clear that neither men nor women were free, that the conventional male and female identities as we know them are repressive to us, to an authentic masculine and feminine inside women and an authentic masculine and feminine inside men. And though Lowe may have found at first a certain level of freedom in her male disguise and ability

to pass and to have access and perform masculinity, eventually that guise, that mimicry turned oppressive—not because of the fear of being found out, but because to be "masculine" as she understood it and lived it and the society expected, certain parts of her had to be locked down, particularly her emotional life, her emotional intelligence. Lowe wanted something else. And in that search, she becomes more active in the village; she no longer binds her breasts but allows them to fall free; she discards the fake moustache, grows out her hair, wears less restrictive clothing, becomes interested in color, in fabric, in texture; she grows more sociable, begins collecting friends and deepening her intimacy with them; she starts to laugh, life opens up inside her, she allows herself to dream. Feelings that had long been hidden away rush to the surface, filling her and fleshing her out as a fuller and embodied person.

The search for the feminine took an even more radical approach in *The Fullness of Everything*. It proposed dismantling altogether that archaic mode of masculinity that no longer serves men or women. Winston, the History professor who has been estranged from his Jamaican family for 30 years returns home after receiving the news that his father is dying. But the minute he arrives, he recognizes again all the reasons why he had left and never looked back. There was a certain kind of ultra masculinity his father espoused, a violence against women passing as power that Winston abhorred. True, his father was a solid provider and protector, he worked hard, they never hungered, they always had a roof over their heads. Still, he ruled and controlled his household with an iron fist, behaving as he pleased, with little regard for their feelings, stifling as best he could any sparks of creativity or independence. He answered only to himself, and the woman and children in his care, he violated again and again.

During the years he'd been away, Winston had been developing an internal strength and power of his own brought on by his interest in various alternative forms of spirituality that he practiced with his European girlfriend. This gives him courage to challenge his father, and to challenge this outdated model of masculinity and to put something else in place.

The little girl that the father made elsewhere with another woman and brings home to his wife for her to raise becomes a symbol of the vulnerable feminine self that Winston felt he'd lost back when he was a boy, the effeminate self he'd had to hide in order for his father to respect him. He befriends the little girl, his former self. He falls in love with her all over again. He wants to adopt her and take her back with him to the United States. He wants to raise her so she'll grow; he wants that aspect of himself to flourish. He cannot imagine his life as a complete man without this female aspect of himself also thriving.

At the end of the novel he doesn't exactly kill the father, but he brings about a swift death, and the death of the father's brand of masculinity, one that sees women and girls as objects of his desire only, brings healing to the women and men in the family.

The yearning for balance is a yearning for both the feminine and the masculine within us. It's essentially a search for balance. It is a yearning for an order, a world order, even, that is based on equilibrium. A world order in which all of life, not just some, is valued and appreciated and respected. A world order where not just men are in power, but women too, and where both the masculine and the feminine inside ourselves are empowered and balanced.

Growing up in the church, it was clear that Christianity could tolerate only one version of the feminine, and that is of the sweet compassionate virgin mother of Jesus. But Nanny, the ferocious woman warrior, was definitely more compelling to me. Nanny is the African woman who was sold into slavery but who escaped into the hills upon arrival, joined the maroons, and carried out a bloody and protracted campaign against the British. This image of Nanny as courageous warrior skilled at guerilla tactics, brandishing weapons as she fights against the British slavers, always brings to mind pictures of Kali and Durga, Hindu goddesses, who, armed and ready for battle, fight against inner demons of desire, anger, greed, pride, delusion, and jealousy among others and are always victorious. It is said that Nanny possessed "powers," and that these enabled her to catch bullets in her genitals and kill her attackers with them. Perhaps Nanny, like Kali and Durga, was indeed filled with what the Hindus call *Kundalini*, the primal power of the universe, and she was using hers to fight against the outer demons of slavery. There is considerable disagreement in the Caribbean about what the term *obeah* really means, partly because it is considered witchcraft by some and by others it is employed for healing and other positive ends. I like to think of obeah as an essential part of our African/Caribbean cosmology, a fundamental way of knowing ourselves in the world. Hindus refer to inner spiritual power and strength as *Kundalini* or *Shakti*, the Chinese call it *Chi*; in Mexico it's called *Quetzalcoatl*, in Cuban Santaria it's known as *ashe*; I agree with Bob Marley that it is indeed our very own natural mystic flowing. *Obeah and other Powers.*

An authentic feminine then, as I understand it, cannot be something that is outside of ourselves; she is not external to us, in our garb or our performance or our possessions. She is not lipstick and high heels, for example, and all the outer trappings that we refer to as "feminine." An authentic feminine is not about the biology of being female, real or constructed. It is not about the physical body though feminine energy can move through the body and

needs the body for its expression. In my mind, authentic feminine is something more intrinsic, an immense power source that is innate to both men and women and waiting to be tapped. Audre Lorde, in her essay on the Erotic, refers to this power as Eros. It is a power one must acknowledge, activate, cultivate, and direct, she says. It is a power that thrives on love, balance, and harmony in ourselves and in the world.

The masculine too, like the feminine, is not a look, it's not trousers and boots, and a commanding presence, it is not power, or a loud voice, or virility. It is not strength and bravery, it is not your money; it is not wealth. Though those can be aspects of masculinity as they can be of femininity. Think Nanny. Eva Perriakos in the *Pathwork Lectures* says that the masculine energy can be considered an outward energy, one that is active; it activates, it sets in motion, it determines, it is a doing energy. Similarly the feminine energy is receptive, inward; it holds and nurtures. But an action can only be destructive or exaggerated if it doesn't also use the receptive qualities of stillness, of quiet, of harmony to give it balance. The same is true for receptive qualities. They can have a deadening effect if they are not balanced by the active masculine principles of alertness, wakefulness, etc., that would make those qualities alive and in harmony.

The masculine is energy. A current. It is available to men and women. We can all tap into it, men and women alike, giving us precisely what we need at the moment. True masculine energy is also balanced energy, without the distortions of patriarchy. It is not unlike the current of love. We open ourselves to love—not masculine love or feminine love—we open ourselves to love.

Masculine energy isn't any more the domain of men than feminine energy the domain of women. We need them both. Men do not embody it in greater ways, in greater forms, and women in lesser ways. Men and women have different body forms, different purposes that engender this energy differently and complementarily. And always in balance. Similarly, the energy of the feminine is for both men and women in a balanced way. For men to get closer to a more balanced masculine, they must remove all fears of the feminine and welcome them. A true masculine requires returning the feminine to itself.

We must actively begin to cultivate this balance in ourselves. Only then can we heal the split between feminine and masculine, only then can we remember that we are indeed both. We must start the courtship now between these archetypes within ourselves. And as the feminine develops, takes up more room in our psyche and in our physical bodies, reconfigures our internal and external workings, the prevailing masculine energy must also reconfigure itself. It has no choice. Change only brings more change. There cannot be an authentic feminine for women, if the prevailing feminine model comes

out of the prevailing masculine model. The old masculine as we know it, patriarchy, must transform, so new and multiple forms/models of masculinity and femininity can express themselves.

What then does this imply for nation building and for self-rule in the Caribbean and in the Caribbean imagination? It means turning to the feminine as a way of moving forward. So many of our societies are heavily patriarchal. But by turning to the feminine, which will then reconfigure both the masculine and the feminine inside us, we are turning to balance, we are turning to harmony, we are turning to a mindset that values life, that sees all life as valuable and sacred. Not just the lives of those who are White or light-skinned or wealthy or heterosexual or powerful or male or two legged, but all life and all life forms.

As writers we can begin this process with the way we know best, through stories. Stories as we know carry energy. And old stories that carry the template of the old values we still hold dear, those old values that uphold one race over another, one gender over another, people of a particular class over others, those old stories can keep us stuck in primitive and destructive patterns, they can make us ill, they can keep us comfortable and complacent and myopic.

We can infuse the feminine into our stories to create change. We can infuse this marriage of the feminine and masculine into our stories to create balance. A new story can help bring about a shift in consciousness. A new story can restore balance and harmony in our lives. A new story can reconfigure the psyche, can heal us, transform us, and create social change in our societies. New stories can be salve. They can be the antidote to the ills we know and face daily. They can affect our states of mind. They can help us thrive. Through PET scans scientists are finding out the brain shows different patterns of blood flow when we are happy and when we are depressed. Since the brain can regulate everything in the body, when the brain changes, so does the body. What new stories can we tell to ignite joy in the brain, to change perceptions of the world, to change how we perceive our experiences?

Here is an example of a new riff on an old story of the middle passage and slavery. This new riff seeks to infuse into the old story of greed and disregard for human life a new template that heals, nurtures, celebrates life and human dignity, and respects freedom. If slavery is a direct by-product of patriarchy or the distorted masculine's outward need to conquer without regard for human life, then this new riff is an example of the authentic feminine's need to bring healing and balance.

What if on those ships leaving the gold coast of Africa there was no one shackled on board. No one raped, or beaten, or killed, or tossed overboard. No diseases. The only thing propelling those Africans across the Atlantic was

curiosity, a desire for change, for starting life anew in a different world. In fact the only things filling the ships next to those people sitting and talking stories and singing were the wild flowers they had brought, sodden still with mounds of soil at their roots. What if on those ships were nuts and seeds of the fruits and vegetables they intended to plant so they could breed a little of themselves in this new world. What if the people weren't naked at all, the flesh torn up already from lashes, but they were covered instead in printed fabrics so colorful and bright they filled the ship with cheer. What if babies dawdling at their feet and sleeping in their laps and crawling along the floors cried only because they were happy? What if every hour or so people could go on deck to contemplate the widening expanse of the sea, to hose down when it got too hot, to fetch a drink of water when they got thirsty? What if on deck they could play cards or dominoes or ring games?

And what if when they arrived on shore in the Americas, there were no auction blocks greeting them? There were no slaveholders waiting to buy and sell them? There were no plantations ready to kill them with work? Instead, upon arrival, the Africans found tribes and tribes of Arawaks dressed in ceremonial garb happy to meet them. What if the Europeans that were there weren't armed, didn't have weapons; instead they were helping the Africans off the ships, they were welcoming them to the Caribbean? Along with the Arawaks they had food waiting, food they'd been preparing all week, pigs and jack rabbits roasting on spits, goats they had been stewing for hours; what if they had crude little houses set up; there was plenty of land for everybody to farm and live on. What if . . .?

What if you could put this story alongside the old one that we know so well? What if this story was also in our soil, in our bones, in our cells, in our DNA strands? We wouldn't necessarily want to destroy the old one; in fact we wouldn't want to; we would want to remember so it never happens again, and we want to enjoy as well the gifts of that old story, the lessons we learned, lessons of strength and perseverance and rebellion and survival and ancestry and bravery.

But who would we also be with the gifts from the new story? What would our relationships look like, those with ourselves and with each other? What else could we add to our arrival story? We could add joy, we could add health, we could add zest for life, harmony, we could add laughter, we could add pleasure, we could add love; we could add love.

In his book *Coyote Wisdom*, Lewis Madrona argues that stories contain the hidden secrets of our own transformation. If we hear and read enough stories about change, he says, we will find ourselves changing, even in spite of ourselves. The right story heard at the right time can shift consciousness, include where once there had been exclusion, rewrite history, say what has

never been said, sooth where once there had only been wounding. This is the balanced integration of the masculine and feminine. This is how we begin to restore balance to our lives, or to use Helen Klonaris's term from the Gaulin project, this is how we re-story change.

Thank you,

Patricia Powell

CHAPTER 7

Helen Klonaris

Helen Klonaris is a Greek-Bahamian activist and author. She divides her time between Nassau, Bahamas, and Oakland, California, where she moved to study creative writing. She is a co-founder of the Rainbow Alliance of the Bahamas. She recently co-founded the Bahamas Writers Summer Institute. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in several publications, and her debut collection of short stories, The Lovers, *is forthcoming.*

Kofi: Can you speak a bit about the experience of growing up queer in the Caribbean? Was it relatively easy or difficult for you?

HK: It's a funny phrase, "growing up queer in the Caribbean." When I think of growing up queer, I think about my childhood best friend, our intensely sexual relationship, and how when we became "conscious" of what we were doing, or more importantly, that what we were doing was not acceptable, was punishable, was absolutely wrong, it went underground so that at an early age I was very split. We were both Greek girls. I remember being in the back seat of her mother's car, and somehow the word "lesbian" bubbled up from some unconscious place, or conscious place, and I have no memory of what the context was (of course, the larger context was us, was how we played, how we undressed and explored each other's bodies, how in the back of a pickup truck on back roads, her brother driving, she'd lay her head in my lap and I'd caress her hair, feeling the wind careening past and the stillness of that moment, both), or if she was asking her mother what a lesbian was, but I do remember the vehemence with which her mother shut her down, said "*Never* say that word again." And we didn't. Not for a long time.

My early experience of sexuality was pushed down into what I dared not look at, a place of intense shame. I lived a split life of a good Greek girl, who was polite to adults, who did not run

around with boys, who buried herself in books, literally reading my way across school playgrounds and down hallways, unavailable to my peers and certainly not interested in the school yard games of kiss 'n catchers, and postman, which were of course always heterosexual; while in my shadow life, in fantasy and dreams, I kissed girls and prayed to God to forgive me, and to keep the devil away. I grew up Greek Orthodox, and was intensely spiritual, and so this split that was shaping itself in my body was also one that reflected the erotophobia of the church; by the time I was 17 I wanted nothing more than to be a disembodied spirit. I was consumed by hatred for my body. I wanted out. I wanted to be as close to "God" as I could get, and being in a body, this female body that dreamed of having sex with girls, that was not possible.

When I left the Bahamas for the first time, for school on the East Coast of the US, this inner turmoil got louder and louder till I couldn't contain it any longer. Looking back on it now, I realize I was having a breakdown, which thankfully opened me up to resources—spiritual, mental, political—that led me to different possibilities, and kept me alive.

Kofi: The threat of violence toward queers dominates discussions of Caribbean queerness. What were/are your own feelings of safety/danger, acceptance/ostracism at home and in the diasporic Caribbean community?

HK: When I returned to the Bahamas after university, I had become politicized; I understood myself to be queer, a feminist, an anti-imperialist, and felt that the only way I could go on living in the community I was from would be to resist those attitudes and policies that I understood as socially divisive. To say I considered myself "queer" sounds a little too easy, however. It was never an easy designation. I still felt conflicted. I did not know if I was a lesbian, or bisexual. I did not understand yet the fluidity of gender that I experienced, and what it might mean to be "queer" in a Bahamian context.

When I did begin the long process of revealing myself to others, the dangers I felt were primarily within the intimate spaces of family, church, and community. The first dangers were those of being cut off at the roots, by family, and by the communities I wanted to be loved by the most. I believe there was also always the fear of physical violence, but we were already so conscribed by religious values, so trained to be obedient as a society in general, that physical violence did not have to come into play, as long as we stayed "inside,"

within the realms of silence. One knew, though, that the shadow of it was always there. The more "out" I became, the more acute my feelings of exile at home. The more I spoke publicly on behalf of my own experiences and of the LGBT community in general, the more I became a target of the church's indictment. My immediate family went through various stages of rejection and acceptance, and by the time I decided to become a public spokesperson for the Rainbow Alliance, they had tentatively accepted who it seemed I was becoming. Yet, the closeness of it all made each interview or article in the papers, and every letter or press release in retaliation, a significant disturbance in the lives of family members closest to me.

By the time I was fully involved in the LGBT movement, I was often warned by friends to be careful. Straight male friends would report threats they had heard or been privy to, regarding my safety. I didn't let those threats stop me from speaking. Yet, it is hard to say how much my actions were determined or not by fear. What I did feel was that I could not see how I would be able to sustain a relationship with another woman in this place where I seemed always to be fighting. Where I was not satisfied with the level of visibility others seemed to be satisfied with. Where all my creative energies were being used up in the struggle for acceptance of our human rights, but where there was no time or space for imagination to create new stories about how we might live, how we might accept ourselves.

Kofi: To what do you attribute the intense homophobia of Caribbean societies (if you believe that they are, in fact, intensely homophobic)?

HK: I attribute it to the shutting down of imagination by unhealed colonial traumas, by fundamentalist Christianity, by patriarchy. Particularly in the Bahamas, our obedience to colonial world views, to a fundamentalist Christianity that forbids us to question what "God says," and to a patriarchally defined system of gender, has not simply made queerness anathema, it has made the act of imagining heretical. There is no need for violence when one of the first violences has been to abandon our own intrinsic right to imagine and to create.

Kofi: Can you speak a bit about your activism? How and why did you become involved in the first place?

HK: When I returned from university I became involved with a grassroots feminist organization named DAWN (Developing Alternatives for Women Now). I was involved in raising awareness around reproductive rights as well as issues around domestic violence and rape. I did not feel that being an activist for gay rights was even a remote possibility at that time, but my analysis of gendered violence,

and of sexism in general, did inform my growing understanding of heterosexism and homophobia. It wasn't until I had come out to my immediate family in the late 1990s that I felt the freedom to begin articulating my positions around sexual orientation and discrimination against LGBT Bahamians.

With the advent of publicized gay cruises in 1997, the issue of homophobia emerged more concretely in public discourse, and a number of us came together to form the first organized group of LGBT folk positioning ourselves to talk back to the mainstream discourse. We wanted specifically to demystify the idea that there was such a thing as a "gay agenda," and to position ourselves as human rights advocates, insisting on gay rights as human rights. In 1998 we formed a small coalition called Hope TEA (Hope Through Education and Awareness), which lasted for a short time before dissolving. I left to live in NYC for a year, and when I returned, in 2000, I initiated the formation of a PRIDE committee—a group that would come together to organize a week of PRIDE events for our community, with the twin purposes of building community and politicizing ourselves and each other, so that eventually we might have a stronger foundation from which to dialogue with the larger community.

We organized two annual PRIDE weeks, complete with queer church services, evenings of panel discussions, a film night, and a final fête—a "PRIDE Ball" at one of our only queer clubs, Endangered Species.

In 2003, our relatively underground PRIDE committee would be called on to go public, evolving into an LGBT advocacy organization we would call the Rainbow Alliance of the Bahamas (RAB). In July of that year, on the heels of growing discomfort within the Episcopalian church globally around issues of gays in the pulpit, as well as the legalization of same sex marriage in Canada, the president of the Bahamas Christian Council, Rev. Samuel Greene, stated on national television on the eve of Independence that if Parliament dared to legalize same sex marriage in the Bahamas, he would personally become the next Guy Fawkes, and where Fawkes failed, he would succeed; in other words, he would blow Parliament to bits.

Outraged, I penned a letter in response, which was published several days later, and which caused somewhat of an uproar within the religious community and split public opinion around the issue of gay rights. The energy which this public confrontation generated galvanized many of us within the PRIDE committee to become public spokespersons for the LGBT community; some of our members, not

comfortable with this visibility, left, and others joined. And over the next several months we continued a public debate through the daily newspapers, bringing the issues of homophobia and LGBT rights to the forefront in a way that was unprecedented. Key members of the group then were Erin Greene and Vicky Evonne Sawyer, the first openly transgender Bahamian.

Two years and a small, unsustainable community center later, I decided to leave the Bahamas to pursue my writing.

Kofi: You lived in the Caribbean until 2005, and now you split your time between the Bahamas and Oakland. Was there a bit of culture shock coming to the United States and experiencing a new set of attitudes toward LGBT sexualities? Or perhaps you didn't find much of a difference?

HK: I absolutely experienced culture shock when I arrived here in the Bay Area. It was a painful several years. In many ways, even though it was my choice to leave the Bahamas, I also felt as if I had been exiled. I felt that I left because who I wanted to be there, what I wanted to do, to live fully as a queer woman, as a writer, as an out lesbian, seemed not to be possible. When I arrived in the Bay Area, wanting finally to call myself a lesbian, to find community in the LGBT community as a lesbian and writer, I found that I had arrived a generation too late. No one seemed even to be using the term lesbian. (I had not up to that point used the term "queer" to identify myself. I have since found it to be a useful term). I arrived to find that queer women had very little, it seemed to me, to do with queer men. White lesbians had little to do with lesbians of color. Asian and African-American and Latina women seemed not to gather in the same places. The queer movement was overwhelmingly white and certainly the struggles being faced here were at a different place in the trajectory of LGBT rights than those we were dealing with at home. I felt the splitting along racial and gender lines keenly; I missed my black gay brothers and sisters.

This is not to say that racism does not separate us in Bahamian communities; it does. But there is still far more mixing of races and genders in the LGBT community in the Bahamas than I found here.

I also feel that the "luxury" of space, in a place like North America, has allowed LGBT people to separate into queer communities that do not have to ask themselves how to co-create communities with heterosexuals where everyone has the right to exist without discrimination and the threat of violence. In smaller places, like the Bahamas, and other Caribbean societies, the focus of our activism tends to be

on how to create alliances within our mixed communities. Gay rights activists are also working on Haitian rights, and issues around police brutality and capital punishment and violence against women and children. In a small place where so much is at stake, a single-issue agenda doesn't seem to work.

So the irony is that while I can walk freely on most streets in San Francisco, arm in arm with my lover, I don't feel part of a gay rights movement in the way that I did in the Bahamas. I am more keenly aware of race and racism and questions of how to locate myself as a white woman who is a Greek Bahamian lesbian living in the US.

Kofi: Now that you've left the Caribbean, do you feel more empowered in the diaspora, more able to speak out, to make a difference? Are you optimistic about the future of queers in the region?

HK: I think what I have left behind is a powerful story (a collective one, and my own) that said I could not live as myself, as an out Greek Bahamian lesbian writer. In the diaspora I have been able to imagine new stories, which have empowered me to first of all value my life as a Greek Bahamian lesbian, and secondly, to go back and create and co-create institutions that build creative capacity in my country, without the burden of having to prove to anyone that I have the right to exist. Moving out from under that old story has freed me to be creative in ways that I could not sustain while there. I have finally completed a collection of short stories that will be published by Calyx Press called *The Lovers*, another collection of essays hopes to find a publisher soon, and I have begun another book of creative nonfiction. I have been able to co-found a writing program in the Bahamas (The Bahamas Writers Summer Institute) which is now in its fourth year. So, I do feel that my ability to contribute to the Bahamas and the Caribbean has certainly been strengthened by living outside of the region. I think those of us who made the choice to leave while still maintaining connections, have the capacity to act as conduits—to bring new parts of ourselves to our communities there, and to bring those parts of ourselves at home in the Caribbean to bear on our dialogue with our new communities in the diaspora. It is an exchange that feels important and very rich.

Kofi: Rosamund Elwin's anthology, *Tongues on Fire*, offers us a picture of Caribbean lesbians who, in contradiction to their portrayal in Western activist theories, find ways to live happy, fulfilled lives with long-term partners, openly. Further, they offer us stories of queers who have done the same, since at least the time of their grandmothers. What is your own experience in this regard? Did you grow up

knowing, or knowing of, other queer persons in your community? Were you told stories of such by relatives? How big do you think the queer community is in the Bahamas?

HK: I did not grow up knowing of other queer people in my community. It wasn't until much later, when I had begun to identify as lesbian in my early 20s, that I came into contact with lesbians and gay men in the community; some of them even Greek, which was extremely comforting! I was inducted into the community through gatherings at various women's and men's homes, and began to see the depth and diversity of the LGBT community. I did find that there were many who had been living their lives in long-term relationships, and this too was inspiring for me at that point in my life.

I began to see some differences between acceptance within the Black community and my own Greek community. I noticed many more Black lesbians who had tacit acceptance or full acceptance within their immediate families, whereas I felt that the Greek community was far less accepting of our own. That could also have been a difference in ages—I was still in the early years of my "coming out" and many of the women I was talking to were older and had been out for many years, and in serious relationships with their partners. But, I did sense a difference in terms of how Black and Greek and Anglo families negotiated difference.

Kofi: Another important aspect of Elwin's anthology is that it works to normalize queer life in the region. Patricia Powell's novel, *A Small Gathering of Bones*, does much the same thing—we see gay characters living normal lives, holding down normal jobs, engaging in loving and long-term relationships. Yet we know that living in an openly queer manner in the Caribbean, or even secretly, can be a magnet for incredible violence. How can we explain this dichotomy? Why do you think that some queers are able to live openly, and others not? What is it that triggers the violence, and moves an individual or a community from acceptance to violent exclusion?

HK: This is a good question. My sense is that when lesbian women or gay men living in relationships with each other continue to live "normally" in other ways, going to church, working at the shop, the office, etc., there is less sense in the community that their presence will upset the status quo. They may be "that way," but they aren't trying to change the fundamental structures in which the majority of heterosexuals live and are invested. As long as lesbians and gays remain invested in the fundamental structures of heterosexual society, they can live under the radar and be comfortable.

I think it is harder for young, single, gay men and women who, by virtue of their perceived gender and/or orientation, appear to be threatening to those fundamental structures, like gender, that the society has determined are inviolable. Young transsexuals, for example, or very feminine men and masculine-appearing women, threaten the foundations upon which society has based its most cherished ideals: a man, we are told, includes nothing of the female, and a woman, we are again told, includes nothing of the male; sex and gender must be rigid exclusive binaries for heterosexuality and its institutions to function. The fact that these queer bodies appear to allow both masculine and feminine to co-exist, and that they are unpartnered, or appear to be, is threatening to mainstream culture because the desires of these men and women also appear to be open and unrestrained, and unrestrained desire in such a body could bring down walls, beginning with the ones in our own heads; the walls which keep male and female separate inside our own psyches, for example.

I think heterosexuals who fear us are intuitively aware of the power of desire, and no matter that our desire is not expressed towards them, the fact of that desire seems to cause them to question the absoluteness of their most cherished and sacred truths. Which must be protected at all costs. When violence erupts, I think it is an overflow of that fear, the psyche's terror of being changed in some fundamental way, and having no alternative framework within which to make sense of impending changes.

I have been convinced that the reason queers are so vehemently rejected by patriarchal religions is that we have been defined by our desire; and desire, and even more specifically, erotic energy, has the power to bring human beings in touch with their own divinity. A human being so in touch does not need a priest to lead her to God, might instead understand "God" to be centered in her own body. A human being so in touch does not need or want to be controlled by an external body or institution; her framework for understanding power and relationships has its roots in her own body and any ideology that attempts to split her from her own body is a specious one.

Kofi: Those involved in Caribbean queer activism, of course, tend to stress the worst conditions that Caribbean queers experience, as a means of spurring others to action. Do you think queer literatures from the region have the same responsibility? Or do you think they serve the community better by offering examples of positive queer living in the region? Or neither?

HK: When I first began writing fiction I wanted to show my community—the community at large—the consequences of their fear, the damage it was doing to queers and to the community as a whole. I do feel that story was coming out of my activist experience, wanting to talk back to my community and *make them see* what they were doing. My fiction had the burden of acting as sermon. As I continued to write, it became more important to write from a place that was less victimized, and more open to showing myself and other queer Caribbean people that we can survive, spiritually and emotionally and physically; we can move into new stories in which we fly instead of die; new stories in which we grow old with those we love. Today, I think the queer writer's responsibility is manifold. I think we must write out of the violence we experience, we must write out of the despair, we must write out of the desire and the yearning and the love we experience, and we must write out of possibility. Out of our visions for what we want to live and believe we can.

Kofi: How do you see the relationship between Caribbean queerness and Western queer activism? Many of Elwin's contributors feel that their own struggles are minimized, or subsumed by Western queer activists into their own, Western-focused objectives. Daphne, for example, laments the ways in which Western lesbianism tries to constrain her, "especially when we have other battles to fight, and we have given much to build the white gay and lesbian community." Does this match your experience?

HK: I find myself living and thinking and fashioning my own responses to oppression out of the interstices between mainstream white LGBT culture here in the US, western LGBT counterculture, the POC community, and my LGBT community in the Caribbean. I do not feel fully part of any of the LGBT movements here in the US, but I do feel informed by them, and by my resistance to and/or disagreement with some of their responses.

As a queer Caribbean person I am aware of many things at the same time: I am a queer, middle class, Greek girl from a Caribbean tourist economy, from an island south of Miami, Florida, and north of Havana, Cuba. I do not wish to be aligned with any activism which would have me cut away any part of who I am. My writing is my response to this separation: I attempt in my writing to bring all of myself together, over and over; in my writing I am learning to be a different kind of activist, one who is learning the necessity of inclusion, of dialogue with the many parts of myself, of not killing

off any part of me that may feel uncomfortable in the company of others.

Kofi: Do you, as a lesbian Caribbean, feel accepted in Western queer spaces? Are you able to be yourself, or do you often feel the need to perform your Caribbean-ness? Or the need to perform your queerness in a more visible way?

HK: It isn't a question of feeling accepted in Western queer spaces—I think as a Greek Bahamian I am perceived as a white woman, and am not "noticed" in mostly white western LGBT spaces, and therefore "accepted"; the question is whether I feel comfortable in Western queer spaces: and the answer is for the most part, no, I don't feel comfortable. I enjoy aspects of some of those spaces, like seeing queer people, feeling that there is freedom to be out and visible, but I also feel like a stranger in them, unfamiliar with dress codes, unwilling to present myself according to the codes of dress I do recognize as urban queer, or butch-femme queer, for example.

The more I am able to insert myself through verbalizing my own location and experience as a queer Greek Bahamian, the more comfortable I feel in my difference.

Kofi: One of the major points of contention between Western queer activists and Caribbean queers is the question of the origin of sexual preference. Western activists insist that sexuality is innate, as a response, of course, to those anti-gay movements that insist that it is a lifestyle choice, which can be voluntarily changed. Yet many Caribbean queers (including several in Elwin's anthology) speak of the process of becoming lesbian, rather than of coming to a realization of their queerness. Indeed, some of the contributors to Elwin's anthology move back and forth in their sexual identification, and several Caribbean theorists have suggested that bisexuality, rather than outright lesbianism or gayness, is the "queer norm" in the Caribbean. What do you make of these viewpoints? Do you have a sense that queer Caribbean identities are more fluid than Western ones? Do you believe in the innateness of sexuality?

HK: When I was growing up in Nassau, a phrase used to describe being lesbian or gay was "to go that way"; it was an identifier that focused on what one *does* rather than what one *is*. I remember trying to explain this difference to a white American lesbian, and how her blank gaze seemed to say she didn't get it, and how her subsequent argument seemed to imply we Bahamian queers just weren't ready to own the consequences of being fully "out" and therefore taking on the identity of "lesbian" or "gay." There was an element of shaming

in this, and I wasn't yet confident enough around issues of sexuality and Caribbeanness to be able to defend what may well have been a very Bahamian sensibility.

I think what I sensed then, in my early twenties, was the cultural belief that one's desire could mean that you *went with* men, or *went with* women, but doing so didn't separate you from participation in the rest of the community by creating an identifying label around you that differentiated you from your straight sister or mother or co-worker. You were still Judy's sister, or Mother Rolle's youngest son. I wonder now if this way of seeing sexuality, as something you do, not as something you are, particularly coming from an African Bahamian cultural sensibility, was what led to a different way of accepting sons and daughters who "went that way." In Greek society, you didn't just "go that way," you *were* that. And if what you were wasn't in conformity with the identity of the family unit, you would be excluded.

My sense also has been that there is far more fluidity in sexual activity in Bahamian communities than seems to be the case in American ones. "She goes that way" could imply that she only has sex with women, or, it could also imply that she does so on occasion. That her desire is fluid. I like that. It allows for desire to be mutable, changing, not fixed. I think that the necessity for labels to identify what a person is based on her or his desire may have the effect of shutting down this fluidity, shutting down the possibility that desire is by nature fluid and it chooses what it needs in order to bring balance to the human being, and to the society itself.

Instead of demonizing, or glorifying people for their sexual orientations, we might instead see erotic energy as a necessary life force which balances internal and external energies, masculine and feminine, yin and yang; we might see human beings as self regulating, and where there is imbalance energetically (which shows up in all our social systems), nature uses erotic energy to redirect the flow of energies through human beings and subsequently, throughout our communities and the systems we create. What is powerful for me here is that erotic union is not reduced to the role of making babies. It is rather about bringing balance to human beings and creating worlds out of that balance.

I think the focus on a fixed sexual identity comes out of a European and European- American fixation on the need for identifiers to delineate between one thing and the other. Between good and evil, between spirit and flesh, between male and female, between

white and black, and so on. And perhaps there isn't a danger so much in the delineation of differences, so much as ending one's journey with those delineations, seeing the delineated idea of reality as the absolute real, and proceeding to value one difference over the other, instead of observing how these differences might be necessary polarities, and part and parcel of each other. Erotic energy is that energy which allows us to alchemize our polarities, to bring them back into relationship with each other, and therefore, bring balance back to our systems. Racism is one of the diseases brought on by an interruption of the alchemy of differences. To stop at the stage of identifying differences and see them as fixed and exclusive of each other, and in hierarchy over one another, is to disrupt the alchemy of polarity, and to stop the flow of energy between those polarities so that they might inform one another and help the whole to grow. We get sick when the energy stops flowing, or when it only flows in one direction.

I think this (Western) way of seeing "queers" and "straights" as exclusive of one another actually stunts our growth as human beings. If we saw desire, or erotic life-force energy, as that which brings us into relationship with each other to create greater balance in our bodies and in our societies, and our differences as polarities that inform our individual and collective consciousness, I believe we would be healthier and more abundantly creative human beings.

Kofi: To what degree does your queerness influence your writing (creative or otherwise)? You've been described as a postcolonial writer, and a queer writer. Do you think of yourself as a political writer? As a writer of queer literature?

HK: I do think of myself as a political writer. And by that I mean that I write to dialogue with my communities about those conditions of our human lives that matter most. I am a writer who writes from this particular body—female, queer, Greek, Caribbean, all vantage points from which to view and critique mainstream society and its institutions, for what I hope is the betterment of us all. But I don't see myself as a writer of *queer* literature, any more than I imagine George Lamming sees himself as a writer of straight literature, or Toni Morrison sees herself as a writer of Black literature. I see myself as a writer of literature, and hope that my particular stories and particular characters and particular metaphors will add to the diversity of stories within literature, and to the possibilities for seeing and being that our collective stories help to generate.

Kofi: The website of the Rainbow Alliance of the Bahamas, an organization that you co-founded, lists two cases in which men were

acquitted of murder using the "gay panic" defence; the two men they killed were Trevor Wilson and Dale Williams. Can you tell us a bit about these cases, and how they relate to the ways in which queers and the legal system interact in the Bahamas?

HK: I know that in both cases the defendants claimed these men made "sexual advances" toward them; one was given a lenient sentence and the other acquitted altogether, on the grounds that "one is entitled to use whatever force is necessary to prevent one's self being the victim of a homosexual act," according to the President of the Court of Appeals, Joan Sawyer.

In 2004, Trevor Wilson was shot in the head by his roommate, Latherio Jones. Jones served five years in prison waiting for his trial, and then was given three years' probation, what the Attorney General's office called an "unduly lenient" sentence. The AG appealed the sentence, but to no avail. Had Jones committed the murder *directly* after the alleged "sexual advance," the Bahamian Court of Appeals said he would have been acquitted.

In 2005, just a year later, Dale Williams was stabbed three times by Frederick Green-Neely. Green-Neely, who claimed Dale had "grabbed his genitals" and told him he had a crush on him, was acquitted in 2008 on the grounds that he was "defending his manhood," (Green-Neely's lawyer's words), and the court's implied agreement that a straight man has the right to kill if necessary to protect himself from homosexuality.

There was outrage in the local activist and legal communities, but it did little to change either verdict. Clearly, there is so much work to be done in the area of education not only at the popular level, but at the level of law. LGBT Bahamians really have no recourse through the law—if they are discriminated against at work, violated in the extreme, as in these murders—because we are not seen as legitimate human beings; the law perceives us as being undefendable. The work of changing minds, perceptions, is ongoing.

Kofi: The battle for the decriminalization of homosexuality is proceeding at various paces in different countries around the Caribbean. At the same time, major setbacks continue: the Bahamian government, for example, in July 2011, moved to ensure that the definition of marriage, as between a man and a woman, became enshrined in all of the Marriage Acts governing the country. Do you hold out much hope that Caribbean governments will act to ensure that queer citizens are treated as full citizens? Do you hold out hope for the decriminalization movements in the Caribbean?

HK: The more we continue to become visible, through activism, teaching, literature, art of all kinds, the impact of expanding awareness will be felt throughout our communities, and change will come. It is a matter of time. It means greater risk taking. It means telling our stories. It means bringing healing to ourselves and sharing our insights with our communities. It means holding out hope that queer Caribbean people will be recognized as full citizens in our homes and in the world, and acting in the knowledge that we are, regardless of what any government has to say.

CHAPTER 8

Shani Mootoo

Shani Mootoo was born in Ireland to Trinidadian parents. She grew up in Trinidad, and moved to British Columbia, Canada, at the age of 24. She has published five books, including novels, a short-story collection, and a book of poetry, and has written, directed, and filmed several videos and other visual art exhibitions. She has previously served as Writer-in-Residence at the University of Guelph. She currently resides in Ontario, Canada, where she is working on her next novel.

Kofi: Can you speak a bit about the experience of growing up queer in the Caribbean? Was it relatively easy or difficult for you?

SM: When I was growing up, I knew that I was unlike my sisters, or my girl cousins, and unlike the other girls in the all-girls convent school I attended. I preferred to wear jeans and t-shirts, but I was forced by my parents, who were themselves guided here by convention, to wear dresses and crinolines, and ribbons in my long hair when I was a child, and when I was older and late into my teens to wear dresses, panty hose, bras, slips, open-toed shoes with heels, and a touch of make-up to go out to parties and dinners. I so hated this kind of dressing that I would often actually become quite ill—stomach aches, mostly—in order to be allowed to stay back at home.

Young girls in Trinidad during the time of my youth, at least those in my family's circle, didn't have boyfriends, or spend much time talking about boys.

We were being groomed for a future time when we would be consumed by thoughts of nothing else: we were being taught to sit properly, to laugh delicately, to speak with delicate voices, to set a table properly, to arrange flowers for a centerpiece, to bake a

chocolate cake and ice it, to make fudge, guava jam, and omelettes, to make our own beds and those of our brothers, to crochet, knit, and mend a broken hem. Boys were not on any of our minds. But when, at the age of 11, quite unheralded, I found myself distractedly attracted to a teacher who had just graduated from A-levels in my same convent school and come directly into the classroom to teach English, I still had the good sense that what I felt was "wrong" and misdirected and was never to be expressed in any way- certainly not to her, and not even to my closest friend.

The word queer was very often used in my family, but in the earlier sense of the word: "I wonder why Aunty Sylvia didn't phone today. Rather queer, don't you think?" When I was about seven years old, I'd heard the word lesbo for the first time. It—not lesbian, which I don't believe I heard until I came to Canada to attend university—was fired by one of my classmates, at the elementary school associated with the same convent, at another classmate who, I only now, many years later, realize might have been physically, or mentally challenged. Lesbo meant only that one who was so called was to be ostracized, but the reasons for this had nothing to do with the real meaning of the word—which was entirely lost to us all. No one ever told me that it was OK, or not OK, for girls to fall in love with girls, or boys with boys. It was something about having to wear those high-heeled shoes, slips, panty hose, bras, and then all the hush-hush about the bleeding stuff, something about mending a hem and sewing a button, that made me understand that I should never let it be known that I wanted to dress more like my brother in his khaki pants and fine check shirts, with a cummerbund like my uncle, in a white dress shirt with a bow-tie like my father, and like him have a sparkle of charm and mischief—all the make-up needed—in my eyes, and dance with the girls, and that I ought never to let anyone, including the girl in my dreams, know any of this.

Perhaps it was, too, because at every encounter the aunts and uncles never failed to ask with expectant glee, "So, any boyfriend yet?" It wasn't difficult to read in this that I was supposed to have a love interest, and that love interest was 100 percent expected to be a boy, not a girl.

My parents used to regularly have cocktail parties to which only couples came, male/female couples. The men would all move to the den where the bar was located, and the women would stay on the patio. Ever observant and analyzing, I saw that there was a kind of free giddiness in those two groupings, and when the men and women

did join up, that freedom and wildness was immediately toned down. I used to pair off the women with each other and the men with each other and think that they would be better off, happier that is, in those configurations. So, I wrote a poem one day—I must have been about ten or so—and quite innocently expressed this in the last idealistic lines: Man loves man/ woman loves man/ woman loves woman. I gave the poem, an entirely idealistic thing about the beauty of life—sunsets, silhouettes, swaying coconut trees, and frolicking deer, and love between people—to my parents. The beauty expressed in it was overshadowed by those last three lines. I was made to sit down with them and explain to them again and again—I couldn't, because it seemed so natural and obvious to me—and was finally told, my mother horrified and crying, that the way it worked was that men and women loved each other and that was all. In my 53rd year of life my mother would tell me that it was when I was about ten years old that she "knew" that I was gay. I wonder now if that is why my parents did not allow me to play tennis, or to have or participate in sleep-overs with other girls, and if that is why she tried to force me to go to the big fashion shows when I knew well that I didn't want to look like the female models or to wear the kinds of clothing that they would be modeling. It was at about that age, too, that me being a tomboy was no longer seen to be cute, and I was criticized for it—usually with the admonishment that I was to stop showing off and behave like a girl.

But then, I watched my father taking off, all dressed up for his evening out "with the boys," his shoes polished and cologne in the air around him, returning with a bounce in his step, his face brighter than when he'd left, laughter in his voice, and—what was that on the collar of his shirt? That pale dash of red. Was it lipstick? My mother, I observed, didn't have time-out on her own. She was always either with us, or with my father. She lived only for us. As far as I knew, women did what she did, and men did what my father did. Men lived lives outside of the house, outside of the family. They had adventures that we were not privy to. It was, for me, a time of the conflation of gender and sexuality. In a place like Trinidad, at the time when I was growing up, I was not exposed to the notion, or the possibility, that there were many different genders, all of which, save for the obvious two, went unread. So, I was trapped in the binary, and my desire was not to be a stronger woman who could have adventures of her own, but to be the man. But the kind of man who took his woman on adventures with him. My woman, I knew, would have

to be strong. She would have to be exactly like me, but she would want to be the woman and she would want me to be the man. There were in my midst no role models; they had to emerge from the confusion of the confidence I got from my family's class position in Trinidad society, and the fear of knowing that I was something that would be disapproved of within the family, and in society at large.

I don't remember girls being teased or chastised for closeness with other girls, and girls did hold hands with other girls and hug them in the school yard, but boys who were not rough and tough, who could not swing a cricket bat, or sprint with runner's elegance, were teased mercilessly by other boys and by older men. Some innate survival instinct in me must have been intelligent enough to take this in and take heed. I would never, then, have engaged in such physical closeness with girls on the school grounds. In fact, I remember one friend during my A level days always wanting to throw her arms around me—the girls all did this, at that high school—and I eventually became irate and produced a pathology that let it be known that I could not bear being touched—some sort of problem, worse than claustrophobia, that I had.

In my bed at night, when the lights were turned off and I could hear the deep-sleep breathing of my two sisters, I would kiss the back of my hand with my open mouth and think of my English teacher.

I instinctively knew that something that felt so explosively good, and that seemed to bring out the best in me, could not be a bad thing. I knew from *Time Magazine* that in London and New York people did all sorts of things that would be frowned upon in Trinidad. All I had to do was lie low, study hard, pass my A-level exams, and leave for one of those bigger places.

Kofi: The threat of violence toward queers dominates discussions of Caribbean queerness. What were/are your own feelings of safety/danger, acceptance/ostracism at home and in the diasporic Caribbean community?

SM: No one in Trinidad or in the diasporic Caribbean Community has ever hit or pushed me. I have not ever experienced any physical damage to my body. Yet I can't say that I have ever felt really safe in Trinidad or in the general diasporic Caribbean community.

Safety and danger and acceptance and ostracism are not always quantifiable, particularly if there isn't a visible mark on the body, or a specific incident of recordable, or recorded, exclusion or rejection one can point to. Claims of feeling unsafe or of ostracism can sound

like paranoia or as if one has a chip on one's shoulder. Furthermore, having a chip on one's shoulder or being paranoid are often seen as problems that have been caused by oneself. Is it that I am lesbian, or is it that I am difficult? That I am too direct in the way I speak, or look at someone? Or in the ways I dress or refuse to dress? No one is to blame but yourself.

From the time we are conscious beings we are being taught and are learning—as a matter of survival—how to read the expressions and actions of people around us, and we are being taught and are learning about social expectations, what gets rewarded and what is punished. Because of the topics I deal with in my novels and short stories, and because of the point of view of the narrations, my sexual identity is out in the open, known to strangers whom I know nothing about. I long ago learned to read facial and bodily expressions of pleasure and of disapproval, and I often see in the faces of strangers who have read my work, or who know even when they haven't read my work, that I am lesbian, their judgment of me—not as a writer—but as a human being.

Pursed lips, narrowed eyes, a sideways glance are all small, tolerable punches that one can shrug off.

But introduced at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad to a woman who won't look directly at me, whose body is angled as if she is ready to move on, and who puts her limp hand in mine when I offer it to her in a polite gesture of greeting, pulling the limp thing back as if she had touched the body of a snake, I can't help but feel dirty and scorned. The feeling usually leads to an overwhelming sleepiness, and inability to get air into my lungs.

A mother who forbids her first-year university-student daughter to write on my work for her English course, is certainly a slap to her daughter, but I feel it like a hand around my throat.

At a conference in Germany a Jamaican university professor, in front of me and in the face of interest there in me and my work, publicly defends the homophobic lyrics of hip hop music.[1] She might as well have tied me to a stake and set it and me afire.

When friends of my family in Trinidad talk to me, it is often to ask about my writing career. They don't want to know what I am writing about, but about how many books I've written, about sales of my book, translations, prizes, royalties. They turn to my sisters and want to know about their private lives, and again it is a whip across my back that they haven't asked if I have a partner, or, if they know I do, how she is or what she does.

Say in Toronto I feel homesick and need a little connection to back-home. A real and specific incident, but one that has happened again and again and in different roti shops in and around Toronto: I go to a roti shop imagining that seeing people from my world, people of my color, eating the kinds of foods that I was weaned on, would comfort me. But the Caribbean man or woman in the roti shop in Toronto looks at me—their (paying) customer—from head to toe. The muscles of their face tighten, their lips purse, their bodies recoil. I realize that they do not regard me as community. All a we is NOT one. I hear customers who are strangers to each other talking to each other, commenting on the food, on a news item or sporting score from back home, asking each other how long they have been in this country. I soften my stance and smile as much like a friendly girl as I am able to, but in an expressive flash they have glanced at me and made a swift assessment, and have decided that I am not includable. Did I do something unfriendly in the moment? I had softened my face, even had a little hello-smile on my face. But I know, as a matter of survival, that these people are from a region where expertise in and policing of gender norms are honed in infancy. As a matter of survival it is in my best interest to realize, to know, to imagine, to think, that they can read my jeans and t-shirt and running shoes, and short hair well. I wish I could simply lift my head high and say that those people are ignorant homophobes. But because of my reasons for going there in the first place, I leave feeling ostracized. They had not asked me to leave and they gave me the roti I asked for, so how can I say they were homophobic? Because I have had so much practice in reading disapproval.

The violence of homophobia in one's community, at home or abroad, doesn't always leave a bruise on your skin, but it can fuck with your head and your heart and make you quite ill.

Kofi: To what do you attribute the intense homophobia of Caribbean societies (if you believe that they are, in fact, intensely homophobic)?

SM: I would say that the Caribbean brand of homophobia is a phenomenon. There are several reasons for the intense and obsessive homophobia in the Caribbean, reasons that reinforce and amplify each other. The simple explanation, and a more recent curiosity, has to do with a certain kind of Christianity and Bible teaching. Granted, it is not a Caribbean Bible that has Leviticus 20:13 saying *"If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death. Their bloodguiltiness is upon them."* But it is a Caribbean kind of music, a Caribbean form of cultural production, that broadcasts

the sentiment in a mainstream medium of entertainment. It is the obsession of Caribbean radio evangelists who broadcast again and again the fire and brimstone condemnation of homosexuality and homosexuals.

Not long ago, in Barbados, I was in the back seat of a taxi with my girlfriend. The affable taxi driver had his radio turned to a station on which there was such a program, such animated preaching that extolled the virtues of all those who condemned this abomination. I was appalled, and like a person who fears the sea and is yet drawn to every glimpse of it, I asked the driver to please turn up the radio. He misread my intention, which came from an intellectual curiosity, and was delighted, and went on to tell me that this preacher was very popular and very good, and that he was pleased that I wanted to hear him. It occurred to me that Biblical strictures against homosexuality give permission to action, to playing out straight, generally male, anxieties about adequacy and power, about the position in the world of men and women, their relationship to one another, and any kind of deviation from these. My girlfriend and I, already well into our one day tour and in the heart of Barbados, made sure to sit well apart from each other in the back of his car.

But that same Bible says many controversial and problematic things. The Bible also frowns on fornication—*Thou shalt not commit adultery*; and on outside families—*No one born of a forbidden union may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord* (Deuteronomy 23:2). Yet, for many, marriage has been treated as unnecessary in the Caribbean and many children in the Caribbean are born out of wedlock. At the same time, a man in the Caribbean is not a real man if he doesn't play around. Calypsos endorse it, and carnival is an open stage for the exhibition of the suggestion of proud licentiousness—as long as it is between a man and a woman. The same Bible also endorses slavery: *However, you may purchase male or female slaves from among the foreigners who live among you. You may also purchase the children of such resident foreigners, including those who have been born in your land. You may treat them as your property, passing them on to your children as a permanent inheritance. You may treat your slaves like this, but the people of Israel, your relatives, must never be treated this way.* Poor Leviticus again, 25:44–46. What are the criteria, then, for accepting or rejecting parts of the Bible? Why are some parts of the Bible rejected, and others promoted?

All of this and then one is reminded that the Bible and the local preacher were important tools of colonialism, and, on further

thought, one arrives at the realization that the Bible is only a small part of what contributes to homophobia in the Caribbean.

Colonialism isn't a phenomenon of the past; there is no post-colonialism without a present day harkening back to the same old colonialism. The umbrella reason for the intense homophobia of Caribbean societies has to do, I've come to see on further exploration, with the legacy of colonialism, of slavery, of the way class is configured in post-colonial spaces.

We in the Caribbean are not British, or "first world," yet, for some, despite the various anti-white and anti first world movements (Black Power, the less formal back-to-Africa and Indian fundamental movements), the legacy endures that identity tends to be defined in relation to the British or the Americans, or to white people abroad and at home. One might say that we still suffer from a master-enslaved (and I think of indentureship as a form of slavery, beginning with the enslavement of the mind) identity. We quite easily, almost willingly, replace one master with another in the Caribbean, one kind of emulation with another. White people in the Caribbean, that lost and floundering tribe, covertly identify in relation to an upper middle class, or upper class from the first world.

It's all inevitably reactive, and in part has to do with showing "them" that we in the Caribbean are good enough or even better, and therefore we are able to get "it" right. This can mean taking on the most conservative kind of respectability, a sometimes empty formality. But we are a complex people, because, at the same time as we emulate and copy, we blame foreign—blame the master, that is—for scourges like homosexuality, or for merely the notion of such a thing. In doing so, we get to be good—no, better than the master, because the master is, in the end, bad. I am good because you are bad. We know that racism has often concerned itself with sexuality, attributing a kind of inherent slackness to non-whites, or non middle and upper class whites, so we have this unconscious and perennial imperative: we'll show them!!! Respectability über alles! And respectability means both policing oneself and allowing oneself to be policed. (Of course the irony is that the white upper class abroad tends to be very liberal and transgressions are the badges of the unchained.)

Added to this is a hyper-masculinity which emerged as a reaction to oppression, the idea being that "manhood" was stripped away by slavery, by the burden of indentureship and by colonialism, and the only way to get it back is to affirm a rigid masculinity.

Masculinity demonstrates its power in relationship, and in the Caribbean that relationship is to women, gays and lesbians. Patriarchy, (anti)feminism and the resulting homophobia braid to form a lethal strap with which gender and sexuality are policed.

Recently in Trinidad, my father and I stepped in to stop a man from beating his wife. The man had been drinking and his wife, who works for my family, had returned home an hour later than usual. Despite the fact that she was the bread winner in her family, and had been paid double for her extra hour of work, he did what he usually did whenever he had had a few drinks. My heterosexual sister who lives in Trinidad would not phone their house, as we had promised her we would do to make sure that all was well with her returning an hour late. My sister knew, she said, the dangers inherent in an outsider checking up on a "Trinidadian man." Gender trumped class and common sense. I, the foreigner, and the known lesbian, made the call, and sure enough he was beating her. I asked to speak with him, and he proceeded to tell me that she was a bad woman, and that he didn't believe that the reason she was late was because she was working longer. When I pleaded with him to be the best man he could be and to protect her rather than to hurt her, he informed me those are all good ideals, but that "at the end of the day, I am the man," which implied an entire constellation of expectations about power and obedience. My father came in in the middle of this conversation and took the phone from me and pleaded with him too, but he told my father a litany of her sins (she is lazy, she talks to other men like her brother in law and her cousin) and that in the end he was the husband. The following day our worker told us that her husband did not hit her again after we spoke with him, and insinuated that he respects me in particular, is a little afraid of me, and at the same time dismisses me. Gays and lesbians not only transgress the categories, they mix them up and by their very existence demonstrate that the categories are not carved in stone.

My girlfriend and I were at a lime in Port of Spain with four straight couples who are from my family's background, and who took some pride in the fact that they were enlightened enough to have us at the table with them. The conversation turned to "women are like this, men are like that," a complete articulation and reiteration, at first heartfelt and then humorous and then heartfelt again, of the binary codes, codes which inevitably excuse certain kinds of behavior—women like to keep the house, look after the children, to shop, to wear make-up and look good for their men, and men

are born with a wandering eye and they have to have their regular lime date, they like to come home after a day's work to a meal that has been cooked especially for them, and it is not in them to be tied down to hearth and home. My girlfriend and I were sitting right there, and when we tried to gently, even humorously, challenge their rigid notions of gender, a friendly plea to intellectualize and be included in the conversation—not all men, not all women are like them, for instance look at us—they would have none of it, they wanted their codes!!! In that context this made us invisible as lesbians and insisted that in the end we were simply women or nothing at all; in another context this would make us a threat. If men in the Caribbean must shore up their masculinity with rigid binary codes, I can't help but wonder what investment women have in this and in policing themselves to these ends, too?

And the other part of homophobia in the Caribbean is the old story of the mob, of the crowd coming together to destroy the scapegoat who has been designated as a threat to society, hence the hip-hop war-cries a la Eminem: "You faggots keep eggin' me on till I have you at knifepoint"; "Hates fags? The answer's yes." Eminem's lyrics that denigrate women amount to more air time than all that he has said against gays and lesbians, and yet women in the Caribbean are part of the homophobic mob. This trend will only keep happening if the society as a whole, and especially the police, the government, and religion and religious leaders send the message that it's not only OK, but necessary to maintain the status quo as it relates to gender and sexuality, and it's OK to have scapegoats in order to do so. In ancient Greece the scapegoat was an actual goat that was paraded through the town to take on the sins of the inhabitants, before being beaten on the genitals and put out into the wilderness. To wit, even before questions about homophobia, there are other very real questions: why does so much anxiety coalesce around sex and sexuality, why the age-old obsession, the world over, with sex and genitalia?

Kofi: Do you feel more empowered in the diaspora, more able to speak out, to make a difference? And are you optimistic about the future of queers in the region?

SM: Yes. As a writer I have a medium that can and does reach far into the diaspora and the region. Trinidadians, for one, are quite enthusiastic about writers who are from Trinidad, and are very keen on seeing how they are represented back to themselves and out to the world, and so there is a ready interest in my work. The subject

of my work is often underlain by an appeal for acceptance and for equality. I feel as if I am able to speak to people I want to appeal to. But from responses to my work I also, very happily, see that there are people like myself who want said what I am saying. They themselves are not writers and they do not have the kind of soap-box I have, so, in a way, I am able to shout out for them, too.

The world is changing, for better and for worse. There is more recognition of gays, lesbians, transgendered people, bisexuals, and all those whose sexual expression challenges us all, than there was even ten years ago. We're not as invisible as we once were. But while in much of the developed world we're being accepted, or tolerated, or seen as people with income to spend, I fear that in the Caribbean there will long be the tendency towards a righteousness and correctness, towards a policing that will take eons to dismantle. There is a kind of rigidness there that reaches far—not only in regards to queerness, but in the ways that heterosexuality, masculinity, femininity and family are conceived—that keeps the enforcers of rules and roles from being free themselves. Perhaps we have for so long been chained, or subservient, that even when we have power to do the right thing, we find ways to allow that power to continue to imprison us. I am optimistic that in 100 years or so we will be recognized in countries in the Caribbean, but what happens NOW to queer people at home? I am not optimistic for them. At least Caribbean queers in the diaspora of much of the developed world benefit from equal rights laws. At the same time, however, what happens behind the closed doors of homophobic families, and in the diasporic communities even in the developed world, is another story, and can leave invisible wounds that are slow to heal or don't heal at all.

Books by Shani Mootoo

Valmiki's Daughter (2009). Novel.
He Drown She in the Sea (2005). Novel.
The Predicament of Or (2001). Poetry's
Cereus Blooms at Night (1996). Novel.
Out on Main Street (1993). Short Stories.

CHAPTER 9

Mista Majah P

Mista Majah P is the first reggae artist to record and release an entire album of pro-LGBT songs. The 13-track album includes such tracks as "Love and Tolerance," "Gay Adoption," and "Letter to Bruce Golding." Majah was born in Kingston, Jamaica, the youngest of five children. In 1982 he moved to Canada and his recording career took off. He then moved to the United States, where he lives today with his wife; he is the father of five children.

Kofi: You're an award-winning musical artist, having won at the Canadian Reggae Music Awards four times (nominated ten times), and having been voted "Entertainer of the Year" in 1997. You've performed all through the Americas, and appeared in numerous music videos and feature films. In other words, you have a very high profile within the Caribbean community, both at home and abroad. All of which is to say, you had a lot to lose by releasing an album like *Tolerance*, which celebrates LGBT experience and tries to fight homophobia in the Caribbean; quite a risk, for a man who is himself straight and could easily afford to ignore the problems faced by gays and lesbians in the region. Can you tell us a bit about the album, and what led you to make and release it?

MMP: The album is all about the LGBQT community, and one of the main reasons is that reggae stars—like Beenie Man, Bounty Killer, Elephant Man, Sizzla, Buju Banton, Capleton, Spragga Benz, Vybz Kartel—has use the music to turn it into a propaganda of hate against the gay community. They have use the music and turn it to their advantage to incite murder, discrimination and bigotry, and because of that a lot of gay and straight people are suffering. Let me explain: when you has a straight person hear these songs and the homophobic message in them, and you know that you have

somebody gay in your family or one of your friend is gay, it hurt you to know that these hateful words and songs is being sung or played. So not only the gay community is affected but also the straight community. But a lot of people don't see that, and that is what I am trying to show not only reggae artists, but the world: that homophobia goes deeper than they think, it affect family too.

Sometimes it better to lose fame and save lives, and I believe that by me making this album, yes, I have lost a lot of so-called prestige with a lot of my fellow reggae artist and friend. But frankly, I don't care—if my album can help to bring the issues to the forefront and show people and save lives, then I have gain not loss. And another reason for me making this album: I was discriminated against by a gay person who stereotype me and thought I was another homophobic reggae artist from Jamaica, because he saw me with dreads[1] and knew I was from Jamaica and do reggae music. He made me feel very uncomfortable; when he was around he would make smart remarks and did stuff to make me aware that he knew I was Jamaican. I had to ask somebody what I did to this person; then when I was told it was because I come from Jamaica and do reggae music, plus wear dreads, he say Jamaicans was very homophobic and I was also put in that category. So I finally felt how the gay community felt and it was not nice; so I decided that enough is enough. Also, to see most of these reggae artist come to Europe, Canada and the USA, and perform to a large percentage of gay audience, perform in gay establishment, talk to gay promoter, then leave and go back and bash them—to me that is very hypocritical, and they need to be called out on that.

Kofi: How has the album been received in the Caribbean, and in the Caribbean communities in North America? Has there been any praise from the gay community? Have you received any threats or anything like that since its release?

MMP: The album is not well-received in the Caribbean. It was announce on the television in Jamaica but the album was muted; you only saw the album cover picture, but no heard no sound. On the other hand the gay organization J-FLAG in Jamaica has requested to use some of the songs on the album for teaching purpose. I have gotten a lot of praises from gay community all over the world but most of the Caribbean has been very quiet about the album. I think they are trying to see if it will die out but I don't think that going to happen anytime soon—this album is gaining strength daily, it's new and something refreshing, and a lot of people are supporting it and I am

hoping a lot more will do so in the near future. Since the release of this album I have gotten a lot of death threat, told I should not come back to Jamaica, even Canada, because I am trying to change reggae music. Even in my home town right now, reggae artist and promoter who live there say they won't work with me anymore. Some don't want to be in the same room with me. I am blacklisted by certain Jamaican promoter and artist who don't agree with my stance against homophobia and murder music.

Kofi: Do you still spend time in the Caribbean? Has this album made that more difficult? Could you have made this album if you were still living in Jamaica?

MMP: I go to Jamaica something like twice a year and I don't think any studio would allow me to do an album of this caliber or of this kind in Jamaica; they would be afraid to lose customers. That is my belief. If somebody would be willing in Jamaica, I would do it, but honestly, I would have to be very, very careful.

Kofi: Have you heard from any other reggae singers about the album, especially considering you take some of them on in your lyrics; for example, the song "Love and Tolerance specifically mentions the "murder music" genre, and the album makes reference to murder music's three biggest stars (Buju, Beanie, and Bounty)?

MMP: To tell you the truth, no, I have not heard from nobody in Jamaica, or any of these reggae super stars—they have suddenly become silent, hoping this will blow over. As I stated in one of my song, I do believe these reggae artists are coward—they are so used to bully and bash the gay community that they are so scared that somebody has call their bluff. But as you know, that's what all bully do—they run away when confronted and I think that is what is happening; they are all cowering in fear somewhere. I have called them out and they are all silent. What I really want is for me and all these reggae artist do a debate—nothing confrontational, a civil debate—so we can put a end to this murder music and their homophobic stance. I DARE THEM TO COME AND DEBATE WITH ME—I AM CALLING OUT BEENIE MAN CAPLETON SIZZLA ELEPHANT VYBZ KARTEL BOUNTY KILLER SPRAZZA BENZ and all of the other who have this homophobic stance.

Kofi: Do you feel that the homophobic attitude some reggae stars take on has made it more difficult for you to find opportunities in the music world—have people assumed that you too (or all Jamaicans) are homophobic?

MMP: Yes sir, the homophobic stance and the murder music has made it sometime very difficult for me to get work or certain opportunities, because some promoters who are aware of the homophobia in the reggae music are very cautious in who they are hiring. Because some of them don't do their research on the artist, and when they hire or start to promote the artist, is only when protestor show up at their establishment they find out this artist has done homophobic music—then they lose a lot of money, so promoters are kinda staying away from reggae at this moment. Yes sir people assume that all reggae artist are homophobic—away from Bob Marley—so that is why I have to try and make the record clear that not all reggae artist are homophobic, and not all Jamaican either. I am trying to kill that stereotype and help to get reggae music back to that international voice of peace and love, not murder and homophobia that it is stuck in right now. I only hope other artist take my lead and come forward and give a voice.

Kofi: Did you grow up with a lot of homophobia around you in the Caribbean? Did you ever see any violence toward gays and lesbians?

MMP: Growing up for me in Jamaica, that was kinda normal. I use to hear a lot of homophobic comment from adult, saw a lot of name-calling, and then finally witness a homophobic assault. There was a young man growing up with us and they were saying he was gay, but he was never bother [harassed] because he was one of us growing up. Then one day he had a male visitor and the alarm was raised in the community and they went over his house and drag out his male visitor and beat him and cut him—he manage to get away and run for his life. The guy who grew up with us was never harmed. That was the first time I witness that as a young man growing up in Jamaica and it was not pleasant. And you know, the police never came. And you know that memory was supress in me for a very long time until recently when all this talk of murder music and homophobia came back up in the news.

Kofi: Did you ever know of any gays or lesbians who lived openly in the Caribbean, or were you ever told such stories by relatives?

MMP: I knew about five or six person who were branded as gay, and have been told by friend that they have gay people in their family. I have been told a lot of story by people, even now, that I would be surprise by how many gay people these homophobic reggae artist are associated with.

Kofi: Why do you think the Caribbean is so homophobic?

MMP: I think the reason the Caribbean is so homophobic is because of ignorance, lack of knowledge. A lot of people in the Caribbean only go by a thing we call hearsay—they only hear, they have never talk to or have the experience of meeting a gay person one on one. They only hear stories and then all of a sudden the gay community is the big bad boogy man. The gay community has suffered tremendously because of this ignorance. For instance, in my song "Peodophile/Predator" I have to explain the difference between a pedophile and a gay person; Jamaican and the Caribbean has use the gay community as a scapegoat to cover up the crime against children for a long time, by demonizing the gay community, telling people that gays are the one who are raping little boy and girl, when in 99 percent of the time it either a family member or a close friend of the family—and that is a proven statistic. That is the education this album is trying to get across, and to stop the myths, and to get these reggae artist to come clean and stop spreading lie. And another thing—I think the bible has a lot to do with homophobia. Not the bible itself, just the interpretation of the bible. Reggae artist and the church use the bible to their own advantage and that has to stop.

Kofi: You express support for many aspects of gay and lesbian life on this album, including adoption, marriage, human rights, and military service; even government service, as in your song "Letter to Bruce Golding." Do you hold out hope that Caribbean governments will move to ensure that their gay and lesbian citizens enjoy the full rights of citizenship, and are able to participate fully in public and private life, as straight couples do? Do you believe that life will get better for gays and lesbians in the region?

MMP: I believe that one day the gay community will be able to live and enjoy their life openly and freely. If I can see the light—growing up in the environment I did and heard and saw all that homophobic behaviour in Jamaica—then more will eventually see the light. I know a change is coming, and another thing I believe is that people are getting love and attraction mix up. Like for instance, people are always using this, saying how can two men or two women be attracted to each other, as if is only lust they feeling for each other? Attraction to me is lusting, but when somebody saying "I love you," that a big difference. That mean that person want to commit to you, man or women, it does not matter. Whether it two male or two female, love is love, and as long as it two consenting adult it nobody business what they want to do in their home and bedroom in privacy.

I know it will get better. The gay community too have to take a very big step in this—they have to become more unified, share the same voice, show no weakness, stand up and let their voices be heard, show more support, and then the community will be more supportive. Their voice have to be heard, and then and only then HOMOPHOBIA WILL HAVE TO STOP.

CHAPTER 10

Rosamond S. King

Rosamond S. King is a critical and creative writer, an artist, and a teacher. She has spoken about her research throughout the Americas and Africa, and her poetry has been widely anthologized. She teaches courses on Creative Writing, Caribbean Literature, and Sexuality in the African Diaspora at Brooklyn College in Brooklyn, NY.

RK [note attached to emailed interview responses]: I'm not sure about your use of the term *queer* when not only is it hardly used within the region, but when it's use in the USA (I'm not sure about Canada) is directly related to the age, class, and education of Black people (see Juan Battle's studies).

Kofi: The threat of violence toward queers dominates discussions of Caribbean queerness. What were/are your own feelings of safety/danger, acceptance/ostracism in the Caribbean and in the diasporic Caribbean community?

RK: I have been chased down a street in New York City by a man calling me a "fucking dyke" and yelling that he was going to "teach me a lesson," something that has not happened to me in the Caribbean. Among heterosexuals, I find that most prefer the notion of the "open secret," in which they may know but no-one explicitly addresses, acknowledges, or discusses a non-heterosexual sexuality. I have often felt quickly and generously accepted into sexual minority communities in the Caribbean, which I think is partly due to general Caribbean hospitality, partly to people who are on the margins of the society being less likely to marginalize others, and partly to the novelty of a new person to introduce and get to know.

Kofi: To what do you attribute the intense homophobia of Caribbean societies (if you believe that they are, in fact, intensely homophobic)?

RK: I do not believe that Caribbean societies are more homophobic than other societies—and any internet search will yield ostracism, beatings, murder, and "corrective" rape in other regions around the world. Countries, such as Jamaica, that seem to exhibit "intensely" homophobic violence will typically also be found to have "intense" violence in general, and often intense poverty and lack of access to free and/or adequate health care and education. (Even in Jamaica, homophobic violence is most likely to be found in places where other types of violence also occur.) When they come from abroad, portrayals of the Caribbean as uniquely or exponentially homophobic are often grounded in racism and xenophobia. When they come from within the region, such portrayals are often part of a politics of distraction from important issues (again, poverty, education, violence) that affect a majority of the population.

Kofi: Do you feel more empowered in the diaspora, more able to speak out, to make a difference, than when you are in the Caribbean? Are you optimistic about the future of queers in the region?

RK: It is difficult for me to compare my feelings in the region and the diaspora, since I have not lived for multiple years in the region.

Yes, I am optimistic about the future of sexual minorities in the region. Heterosexism, homophobia, and related ostracism and violence are very real in the Caribbean (as elsewhere). However, if more attention was paid to organizations such as Pink House in Curaçao, SASOD in Guyana, and CAISO in Trinidad, and less on sensationalizing the violence in the region, more people would be as optimistic as I am.

Kofi: Rosamund Elwin's anthology, *Tongues on Fire*, offers us a picture of Caribbean lesbians who, in contradiction to their portrayal in Western activist theories, find ways to live happy, fulfilled lives with long-term partners, openly. Further, they offer us stories of queers who have done the same, since at least the time of their grandmothers. What is your own experience in this regard? Do you know of any such examples, or have you been told stories of gay and lesbian people who are able to live openly?

RK: As a young adult I was told a story of a man who lived as a hermit, sequestered with his mother, after his sexuality was discovered. When I went to live in the region, and during shorter visits, I have met several women who live with "roommates" for years, inhabiting the *open secret* in which their families and communities know but do not acknowledge or discuss the nature of their relationship.

Kofi: Another important aspect of Elwin's anthology is that it works to normalize queer life in the region. Patricia Powell's novel, *A Small Gathering of Bones*, does much the same thing—we see gay characters living normal lives, holding down normal jobs, engaging in loving and long-term relationships. Yet we know that living in an openly queer manner in the Caribbean, or even secretly, can be a magnet for incredible violence. How can we explain this dichotomy? Why do you think that some queers are able to live openly, and others not? What is it that triggers the violence, and moves an individual or a community from acceptance to violent exclusion?

RK: What does it mean to be "openly queer?" In, say, Boston, a woman with shortly cropped hair, sitting with her legs spread wide and smoking a pipe, would be gender variant and might be assumed to be non-heterosexual as well. But the same woman in, say, Tableland (Trinidad), would not be gender variant. We need to avoid expecting Caribbean people to be "queer" in exactly the same ways that white (or people of color) North Americans are "queer"—which means we need to stop labeling people as queer at all, unless they self-identify that way.

That being said, though gender expectations are different in different places, they still exist in the Caribbean. Those who are able to exhibit gender non-conforming traits or behaviors without major consequences are often protected by their class or social standing, or are considered a long and integral part of the community where they live. Sometimes, as in other parts of the world, gender variant people are accepted as long as they stay in particular professions (e.g. the man who is a hairdresser or choir leader).

Kofi: Those involved in Caribbean queer activism tend to stress the worst conditions that Caribbean queers experience, as a means of spurring others to action. Do you think queer artists from the region have the same responsibility? Or do you think they serve the community better by offering examples of positive queer living in the region? Or neither?

RK: I disagree that those involved in Caribbean sexual minority activism "tend to stress the worst conditions"—in fact, I think that SASOD and CAISO, for example, have a very different approach to advocacy and visibility than that statement implies.

I would be loath to assign responsibility to anyone to portray specifically negative or positive realities in Caribbean communities. Both are real and exist.

Kofi: How do you see the relationship between Caribbean queerness and Western queer activism? Many of Elwin's contributors feel that their own struggles are minimized, or subsumed by Western queer activists into their own, Western-focused objectives. Daphne, for example, laments the ways in which Western lesbianism tries to constrain her, "especially when we have other battles to fight, and we have given much to build the white gay and lesbian community." Does this match your experience? Do the communities have different priorities?

RK: I assume you are asking about Caribbean people in the global north? If that's accurate, then it seems to me that there are certainly areas where the concerns of queer whites in the global north and those of lgbtqgncq (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender nonconforming, and/or queer) Caribbean people in the global north, as well as those of lgbtqgncq people of color, generally overlap. But there are also clearly areas in which the communities' concerns are not seen as overlapping—for instance, lgbtqgncq Caribbean people are more likely to be concerned with immigration policies, police violence, and racism than are your average queer white people. That's why organizations that pursue multi-issue, intersectional strategies, such as SONG (Southerners On New Ground; http://southernersonnewground.org/) and ALP (the Audre Lorde Project; alp.org) are so important.

Kofi: Do you feel accepted in Western queer spaces? Are you able to be yourself, or do you often feel the need to perform your non-Western-ness? Or the need to perform your queerness in a more visible way (for example, one of Elwin's contributors writes, "if I go into a bar in a dress, high-heels and make-up, there is an assumption I am heterosexual, bisexual, or a fag hag. If a white woman goes in the bar in a dress and make-up, she is called a 'lipstick lesbian' ")?

RK: Perhaps I would feel the need to perform more if I patronized more majority-white spaces. The danger with that kind of performance, though, is that it can also encourage other people to exoticize you. In New York City, queer whites can accept the fact that queer people of color exist, but if you are a dark-skinned black person, they tend to either be afraid of you or to assume that you are of a lower class than them and therefore are not worth speaking to. It's generally not worth the effort.

Kofi: One of the major points of contention between Western queer activists and Caribbean queers is the question of the origin of sexual preference. Western activists insist that sexuality is innate, as a

response, of course, to those anti-gay movements that insist that it is a lifestyle choice, which can be voluntarily changed. Yet many Caribbean queers (including several in Elwin's anthology) speak of the process of becoming lesbian, rather than of coming to a realization of their queerness. Indeed, some of the contributors to Elwin's anthology move back and forth in their sexual identification, and several Caribbean theorists have suggested that bisexuality, rather than outright lesbianism or gayness, is the "queer norm" in the Caribbean. What do you make of these viewpoints? Do you have a sense that queer Caribbean identities are more fluid than Western ones? Do you believe in the innateness of sexuality? Or do feel these questions are irrelevant?

RK: I am not convinced that the situation is that clear-cut, that most sexual minorities in the global south believe that sexuality is a choice and most in the global north believe that it is innate. I've recently watched again the documentaries *Orgullo en Puerto Rico/Pride in Puerto Rico, Songs of Freedom* (Jamaica), and *Of Men and Gods* (Haiti). In all three of these films Caribbean sexual minorities insist that they were born with their sexuality and gender expression.

While I think that activists probably care less about the nature/nurture debate, that question can affect how heterosexuals view sexual minorities; those who believe sexuality is a choice may be more likely to consider us diseased people who need to be "cured" through prayer, marriage, therapy, or "corrective" rape.

Kofi: To what degree does your queerness influence your creative work? You've been described as a postcolonial artist, and a queer artist. Do you think of yourself as a political artist? As a queer artist?

RK: I think every act we engage in is political, though they are often political in different ways and with different impacts. Every aspect of myself deeply influences my creative and intellectual work (even if those influences are not apparent to others), so I am all of the above and more.

Kofi: The battle for the decriminalization of homosexuality is proceeding at various paces in different countries around the Caribbean. At the same time, major setbacks continue: the Bahamian government, for example, in July 2011, moved to ensure that the definition of marriage, as between a man and a woman, became enshrined in all of the Marriage Acts governing the country. Do you hold out much hope that Caribbean governments will act to ensure that queer citizens are treated as full citizens? Do you hold out hope for the decriminalization movements in the Caribbean?

RK: The decriminalization of homosexual acts would, of course, be important. Even though these laws are rarely enforced in much of the region, they often provide official sanction for more "vigilante" harassment and violence. But it would be naïve to assume that decriminalization will lead directly to greater social acceptance. We must work on multiple fronts—with our families, our local communities, and our faith communities, as well as on political and legal levels, to make meaningful changes in the lives of sexual minorities in the region.

Kofi: In your essay "More Notes on the Invisibility of Caribbean Lesbians,"[1] you speak of the incommensurability, in the minds of so many, of the terms "queer" and "Caribbean." As soon as you say you're gay, "people might insist that I have not been raised with 'Caribbean values,' must not have spent enough time in the region, or must have been 'contaminated' by the USA" (191). In some ways it's ok for a woman to love women, "as long as we don't use the word lesbian, and as long as we don't link it to the word—the identity—Caribbean." The same idea is evident in the Makeda Silvera essay from which you take your title; when Silvera comes out to her grandmother, her grandmother responds, "this is a white people 'ting." Six years after the publication of that article, do you believe that this holds true? Does the hetero-normative Caribbean still believe, by and large, that one cannot be queer and a "real Caribbean?"

RK: I still think this is true on a conscious level. I've been thinking, lately, about the concept of the "open secret." I think that a lot of Caribbean people know that people in their family or community are not heterosexual, but that knowledge is either hidden, or kept silent, or is on an unconscious level, and in turn the non-heterosexual person does not explicitly reveal their sexuality. If one keeps to those rules and isn't blatantly gender non-conforming, then sometimes your family and community will accept you.

Kofi: Can you speak a bit about the place of lesbian activism in the larger Caribbean LGBQT movement? Do lesbians occupy a place of relative invisibility even within these Caribbean movements?

RK: Yes; lesbians have been quite active in sexual minority activism in Jamaica, St. Kitts, Trinidad & Tobago, and elsewhere in the region, but with very few exceptions, the people who are publicly identified with the movement (leading sometimes to praise and sometimes to danger) are men. Activism around sexual minority women is also less visible, in part because such women are more likely to prioritize

community building and support over more public and traditionally political activism. The manuscript I'm working on now: *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* discusses this in detail.

Kofi: You make another very interesting observation in the article "More Notes . . ." You write that, "between the moment of Silvera's essay and today it is possible that we have become more invisible in the Caribbean, gone more underground because of the increasingly vocal homophobia of our cultures." Nigel Thomas, in my interview with him, made a similar point, noting that the lesbian couple who lived in his village when he was a child could probably no longer do so today. Why is this? What factors are behind this seeming step backwards? AIDS certainly played a role—is there more to it than that?

RK: An increase in stigma against and the scapegoating of Caribbean sexual minorities, as well as a general increase in the level and types of violence perpetrated, have contributed to this situation.

CHAPTER 11

Nalo Hopkinson

Nalo Hopkinson was born in Kingston, Jamaica. Her father, Muhammed Abdur-Rahman Slade Hopkinson, was a Guyanese writer and actor, and Nalo grew up in Jamaica, Guyana, and Trinidad. She is a multiple-award-winning science fiction writer, and has written and edited ten books. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside.

Kofi: Can you speak a bit about the experience of growing up queer in the Caribbean, and/or the Caribbean diaspora? Was it relatively easy or difficult for you?

NH: I grew up straight. As far as I knew, I was straight. Yet it was still pretty difficult. I don't much fit in anywhere, no matter what configuration of person I'm currently attracted to. Actually, my experience of living in the world may be affected more by the fact that I'm neurodiverse than directly by my sexuality.

Kofi: Rosamund Elwin's anthology, *Tongues on Fire*, offers us a picture of Caribbean lesbians who, in contradiction to their portrayal in Western activist theories, find ways to live happy, fulfilled lives with long-term partners, openly. Further, they offer us stories of queers who have done the same, since at least the time of their grandmothers. What is your own experience in this regard? Did you grow up knowing, or knowing of, other queer persons in your community? Were you told stories of such by relatives?

NH: Not especially, and it didn't occur to me to start looking for them until I began to perceive myself as queer. By then, I was in my early 40s and living in Toronto, Canada. That was in the early 2000s, so it was relatively easier by then to find stories of happy same-sex partnerships. There was more research being done, more stories being uncovered, and by then I had Caribbean friends who were in happy same-sex partnerships. You'll note that I'm saying "same-sex"

and "queer," not "lesbian." It's because I wasn't looking only for lesbian models for queer relationships. I'm attracted to many genders of people, not only to other women.

Kofi: Another important aspect of Elwin's anthology is that it works to normalize queer life in the region. Patricia Powell's novel, *A Small Gathering of Bones*, does much the same thing—we see gay characters living normal lives, holding down normal jobs, engaging in loving and long-term relationships. This is true too of your story "Fisherman." Yet we know that living in an openly queer manner in the Caribbean, or even secretly, can be a magnet for incredible violence. How can we explain this dichotomy? Why do you think that some queers are able to live openly, and others not? What is it that triggers the violence, and moves an individual or a community from acceptance to violent exclusion?

NH: Before I try to answer that question; Kelly, my protagonist in "Fisherman," is perhaps straight. He's attracted to women, not to men. Because he's non-op trans, many reviewers want to read him as female. It baffles me, since the whole point of the story is about him finding ways to inhabit his maleness in circumstances where his options for doing so are limited.

Anyway, you ask how to explain the dichotomy? It's the beautiful thing about being a fiction writer; you can write the world you want to see. As to what triggers the violence, I feel as though you're asking me, a novelist, a question better suited to a research project by a sociologist. All kinds of things trigger it. I can guess at some of them, but they're always going to be particular and contextual. Some queer people in the Caribbean manage to navigate relatively openly through a combination of luck, individual circumstance, and approach. I'm not really sure what the mix is, and I doubt it would work the same for everyone, every time.

Kofi: Those involved in Caribbean queer activism, of course, tend to stress the worst conditions that Caribbean queers experience, as a means of spurring others to action. Do you think queer literatures from the region have the same responsibility? Or do you think they serve the community better by offering examples of positive queer living in the region? Or neither?

NH: I think that queer writers—and by extension, literatures—from the Caribbean have the responsibility to write the strongest they can about whatever they want to, however they want to.

Kofi: How do you see the relationship between Caribbean queerness and Western queer activism? Many of Elwin's contributors feel that

their own struggles are minimized, or subsumed by Western queer activists into their own, Western-focused objectives. Daphne, for example, laments the ways in which Western lesbianism tries to constrain her, "especially when we have other battles to fight, and we have given much to build the white gay and lesbian community." Does this match your experience?

NH: Not really sure how to answer this. Basically, if I'm not finding my voice and experience reflected among non-Caribbean queer activists, I can go elsewhere. They are no longer the only game in town. The brave, hard, dangerous work that Caribbean queers have done in the decades before me and are still doing goes a long way to giving me that luxury, and for that, I honor them. On the other hand, I am seeing non-Caribbean queer activism taking more and more steps towards being more inclusive. They are hesitant steps and often they are missteps, but the rock is beginning to budge. By the way; I'm saying "non-Caribbean" as opposed to Western, because in these latter days, it seems to me that the Caribbean is in many ways as Western as, for example, the rest of the Americas.

Kofi: Do you, as a lesbian Caribbean, feel accepted in Western queer spaces? Are you able to be yourself, or do you often feel the need to perform your Caribbean-ness? Or the need to perform your queerness in a more visible way (for example, one of Elwin's contributors writes, "if I go into a bar in a dress, high-heels and make-up, there is an assumption I am heterosexual, bisexual, or a fag hag. If a white woman goes in the bar in a dress and make-up, she is called a 'lipstick lesbian' ")?

NH: I'm queer, neither gay nor lesbian. I haven't had too much trouble being seen as a queer femme. Maybe it's the weird hair and the tattoos. And if someone has any doubt, they can ask me. Or Google me. So yes, there's a performative aspect to my outward presentation. There was even when I was straight. There is to everyone's outward presentation, whether they acknowledge it or not. I know the struggles of other queer femmes to be seen as queer, but I don't feel that it's limited to Caribbean dykes. Now mind you, as someone who's only had a queer identity for a decade or so, I'm still new to all this. I may not have the first idea what I'm talking about.

Kofi: One of the major points of contention between Western queer activists and Caribbean queers is the question of the origin of sexual preference. Western activists insist that sexuality is innate, as a response, of course, to those anti-gay movements that insist that it is a lifestyle choice, which can be voluntarily changed. Yet many

Caribbean queers (including several in Elwin's anthology) speak of the process of becoming lesbian, rather than of coming to a realization of their queerness. Indeed, some of the contributors to Elwin's anthology move back and forth in their sexual identification, and several Caribbean theorists have suggested that bisexuality, rather than outright lesbianism or gayness, is the "queer norm" in the Caribbean (reminiscent, of course, of the female characters in *The Salt Roads*). What do you make of these viewpoints? Do you have a sense that queer Caribbean identities are more fluid than Western ones? Do you believe in the innateness of sexuality?

NH: Another note; there are no bisexual characters in *The Salt Roads*. There are no gay people, no lesbians, no straight people in *The Salt Roads*. The characters all live in times and places in which there is little queer/straight identity politic around which to accrue a sense of self. They think of their sexual behavior as what they do or would prefer to do, not as what they are.

Now, to answer your question; I certainly became queer. It is more fluid for me. Yet I've met many people, Caribbean and non-, whose sexual identity is innate. For them, it is what it is from birth, and will never change. And I also know that it can be near impossible to get a good sense of what one's sexual self is, because sexual attraction is so strongly constrained societally. I've talked about that in an essay I wrote for *First Person Queer*.[1] Life is complicated. People are complicated.

Kofi: To what degree does your queerness influence your writing (creative or otherwise)? You've been described as a postcolonial writer, and a queer writer. Do you think of yourself as a political writer? As a writer of queer literature?

NH: Yes/no/and/or/neither/either/all/none of the above. And yes, it does influence my writing, as does everything else that makes up my experience.

Kofi: The battle for the decriminalization of homosexuality is proceeding at various paces in different countries around the Caribbean. Do you hold out much hope for these movements?

NH: I do! My Caribbean people are powerful! We been agitating for change from since, and we don't rest.

Kofi: The continuity of lesbian life in the Caribbean is a marked feature of Rosamund Elwin's anthology; Makeda Silvera, for example, tells us stories from her grandmother's childhood of lesbians living happily and peacefully within their communities. Your novel, *Salt Roads*, also offers us such a continuity of queer life, stretching across time and

space. Can you speak a bit about this aspect of the novel? Is the idea of establishing a history of queerness, of making sure its place in history is acknowledged, an important one for you?

NH: Yes, it's important. It's just as important to me to complicate simplistic narratives. In *The Salt Roads*, Meritet loves men. Mer loves women. Lemer (one of Jeanne Duval's nicknames) loves women, men, and ultimately, a cross-dressing kinkster. I do feel the need to not let myself forget that people are complicated and plastic, and to represent aspects of the experiences of my life and the lives of others that tend to get erased.

Kofi: Your story "Fisherman," collected in *Skin Folk*, is a very interesting one, particularly because the main character is a fisherman, an occupation so familiar to so many people in the Caribbean, especially the working poor. In a way, the fisherman is a national (and regional) symbol. Is this a deliberate choice, an attempt to re-weave queer sexuality into the fabric of Caribbean life?

NH: You know, that's grasping the question by the wrong end? I don't set out to "re-weave queer sexuality into the fabric of Caribbean life." I get a story idea and I start writing. Who I am affects what the story is, where it is, who's in it. I don't have to re-weave queer sexuality into Caribbean life. It was always there, and always will be. I'm not even sure that I'm revealing the queer sexualities that already exist in Caribbean life. I'm writing what I want to write. I'm blessed in that there are people who want to publish it. And yet I do want to represent queer Caribbean sexualities. It's just that writers don't write the way that you're asking the question, if you see what I mean. Or at least I don't.

Books by Nalo Hopkinson

Sister Mine (2013). Novel.
The Chaos (2012). Novel.
The New Moon's Arms (2007). Novel.
So Long Been Dreaming (2004). Anthology.
The Salt Roads (2003). Novel.
Mojo: Conjure Stories (2003). Anthology.
Skin Folk (2001). Short Stories.
Midnight Robber (2000). Novel.
Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction (2000). Anthology.
Brown Girl in the Ring (1998). Novel.

CHAPTER 12

Erin Greene

Erin Greene is a Bahamian activist and artist who has been involved with the Rainbow Alliance of the Bahamas, Pride Bahamas, CARIFLAG, the Bahamian-Haitian Solidarity Group for immigration rights, and the Bahamas Human Rights Network. Her artwork examines humanity's relationships to culture and sexuality as a means of social activism. She has been involved in stand-up comedy and with improv troupes, and hosted the internet show The Culture of Things.

Kofi: Can you speak a bit about the experience of growing up queer in the Caribbean? Was it relatively easy or difficult for you?

EG: I didn't really grow up queer. I grew up straight, and didn't begin to think about queerness until I entered my twenties, and really began defining my identity and politics general. Coming into my queerness and my activism wasn't difficult either for me.

Kofi: The threat of violence toward queers dominates discussions of Caribbean queerness. What were/are your own feelings of safety/danger, acceptance/ostracism at home and in the diasporic Caribbean community?

EG: I think people of color never feel safe, not even in African majority countries and communities. Queer, Christian people of color must experience a degree of psychological dissonance that is never addressed, and women of color bear the depression of their ancestors like a genetic marker. In my activism I consistently address my own social privilege and how it engages my work and my life as an activist and spokesperson for the LGBT community in the Bahamas. I am obligated to address how my own privilege affords me a degree of safety and comfort that other members of the LGBT community do not and cannot enjoy when confronted with various degrees of physical, psychological and spiritual violence and social and economic discrimination.

Kofi: To what do you attribute the intense homophobia of Caribbean societies (if you believe that they are, in fact, intensely homophobic)?

EG: The majority of the behavior that we label as homophobic, I think, is in fact a form of transphobia where the individual fears that a person or persons (usually homosexual) can cause the individual to become gay or to want to engage in homosexual behavior, or a fear that the individual could be tricked into thinking they are engaging in intercourse with a member of the opposite sex, and thus be tricked into being gay. When we acknowledge that the individual's fear is not irrational then we will most often find that this fear, personal and collective, is rooted in our cultures of sexual violence and of silence surrounding sex and sexual abuse, that have been developing within yet other cultures of sexism, heterosexism and post colonial imperialism, where the body is ultimately viewed as a commodity.

Kofi: Can you speak a bit about your activism? How/why did you become involved in the first place?

EG: My motivation for activism is as selfish as it is altruistic. I was raised in a culture of volunteerism and community awareness, and so activism was a natural fit, but when I knew I wanted to live as an out gay woman in relationships with Caribbean women I knew that I would have to work to create safe communities and spaces for all queer people, not just myself and my family. Over the last ten years I have worked with a number of local and regional organizations addressing women's rights, LGBT rights, migrant rights, sexual health rights and more recently food security issues. I work currently as a human rights activist in the Bahamas.

Kofi: You're a very public spokesperson on LGBQT issues. How has this affected your life in the Bahamas (and in the wider Caribbean)? Have you received threats and/or praise from various parts of the community?

EG: Since I became a spokesperson for the Rainbow Alliance of the Bahamas and the LGBT community I have been formally and informally recognized as a member of civil society and a stakeholder in national discourse. I have been asked to speak at colleges and national organizations. I have organized and participated in inter-organizational human rights projects. At the same time I am widely perceived as an enemy of the church and a deviant radical. I have been accused of promoting pedophilia and engaging in the exploitation of young women and men. I have been verbally harassed and publicly threatened with physical harm. I have been slandered, defamed and discriminated against with little to no recourse.

Kofi: Are you optimistic about the future of queers in the region?

EG: Yes . . . very.

Kofi: Rosamund Elwin's anthology, *Tongues on Fire*, offers us a picture of Caribbean lesbians who, in contradiction to their portrayal in Western activist theories, find ways to live happy, fulfilled lives with long-term partners, openly. Further, they offer us stories of queers who have done the same, since at least the time of their grandmothers. What is your own experience in this regard? Did you grow up knowing, or knowing of, other queer persons in your community? Were you told stories of such by relatives? How big do you think the queer community is in the Bahamas?

EG: There is no statistical data on the size of the LGBT community in the Bahamas. I think approximately 10–15 percent of the population either identify as LGBT or are MSM or WSW. I never heard stories about queer people growing up, never heard people talking about homosexuality, and I have no memories of queer people in my family or community. As my self-awareness grew, I gradually became aware of other queer people in my community. I think LGBT Bahamians have generally been able to carve out small but safe spaces of community and family, sometimes sacrificing identity for safety, sometimes sacrificing safety for identity. While some of us enjoy the safety that class and privilege afford, many of us are too busy working and living to be concerned with such esoteric things.

Kofi: Another important aspect of Elwin's anthology is that it works to normalize queer life in the region. But we know that living in an openly queer manner in the Caribbean, or even secretly, can be a magnet for incredible violence. How can we explain this dichotomy? Why do you think that some queers are able to live openly, and others not? What is it that triggers the violence, and moves an individual or a community from acceptance to violent exclusion?

EG: As much privilege as I enjoy, as great the access to nation-building that I am afforded, I am faced with equal amounts of spiritual, psychological and physical violence from my community and fellow Bahamians. What I can say is that homophobia and transphobia are intrinsically linked to sexism, heterosexism, classism and imperialism. Until we address the issues of violence in our communities with a method that can identify where and how these issues intersect we will perpetuate the violence we wish to resolve.

Kofi: How do you see the relationship between Caribbean queerness and Western queer activism? Many of Elwin's contributors feel that

their own struggles are minimized, or subsumed by Western queer activists into their own, Western-focused objectives. Does this match your experience?

EG: Yes. One of the larger obstacles in Caribbean activism is funding, and more specifically balancing local activist goals with Western funder expectations. Asking Western organizations to fund and participate in discussions and projects that aim to address directly issues of Western imperialism and postcolonial politics is problematic to say the least. And generally, Western activism views Caribbean issues through Western lenses only and can often exacerbate issues that they seek to resolve.

Kofi: Do you, as a lesbian Caribbean, feel accepted in Western queer spaces? Are you able to be yourself, or do you often feel the need to perform your Caribbean-ness? Or the need to perform your queerness in a more visible way (for example, one of Elwin's contributors writes, "if I go into a bar in a dress, high-heels and make-up, there is an assumption I am heterosexual, bisexual, or a fag hag. If a white woman goes in the bar in a dress and make-up, she is called a 'lipstick lesbian' ")?

EG: I don't feel accepted in Western queer spaces, but I also don't feel acceptance in Caribbean queer spaces . . . I've never really personally identified as either butch or femme, although I am identified as butch because of my choice of dress, which has less to do with an expression of sexuality and more to do with an expression of politics. I think both sexuality and gender are more fluid than concrete and this concerns Westerners and Caribbean people in particular greatly. When I dated, my expression of sexuality was fluid and changed from partner to partner, and even in monogamous relationships I seek partners who are comfortable with this fluidity.

Kofi: One of the major points of contention between Western queer activists and Caribbean queers is the question of the origin of sexual preference. Western activists insist that sexuality is innate, as a response, of course, to those anti-gay movements that insist that it is a lifestyle choice, which can be voluntarily changed. Yet many Caribbean queers (including several in Elwin's anthology) speak of the process of becoming lesbian, rather than of coming to a realization of their queerness. Indeed, some of the contributors to Elwin's anthology move back and forth in their sexual identification, and several Caribbean theorists have suggested that bisexuality, rather than outright lesbianism or gayness, is the "queer norm" in the Caribbean. What do you make of these viewpoints? Do you have

a sense that queer Caribbean identities are more fluid than Western ones? Do you believe in the innateness of sexuality?

EG: I think that individuals have an innate right to be in a relationship of mutual consent and that they also have a right to choose their own sexual identity or expression of identity.

I think it is impossible to determine whether an individual is born gay, becomes gay or chooses to be gay, and thus the question has no relevance in the discourse on human rights and the law.

I think Caribbean sexual identities are far more static in theory than in practice . . . I think Caribbean people are willing to experience sexually far more than they are willing to talk about or are willing or able to ask for.

Kofi: The battle for the decriminalization of homosexuality is proceeding at various paces in different countries around the Caribbean. At the same time, major setbacks continue: the Bahamian government, for example, in July 2011, moved to ensure that the definition of marriage, as between a man and a woman, became enshrined in all of the Marriage Acts governing the country. Do you hold out much hope that Caribbean governments will act to ensure that queer citizens are treated as full citizens? Do you hold out hope for the decriminalization movements in the Caribbean?

EG: I think that Caribbean governments, like all small island developing states, are constantly balancing the weight of international pressures and relationships against the weight of local expectations and obligations. In many jurisdictions where explicit protection for LGBT citizens does not exist, rights can be accessed and wrongs can be redressed through existing legislation. It is difficult to determine whether Caribbean government positions on LGBT rights and same-sex marriage are focused on forming sound governmental policy or focused on satisfying political party obligations.

I think that these decriminalization movements will be successful, if they can create radical strategies that find balance between global trends, colonial obligations and regional cultural norms.

CHAPTER 13

Joel Simpson

Joel Simpson is the founder and co-chairperson of SASOD in Guyana. He is a practicing lawyer in the country of his birth, and the country's leading LGBT activist. He is also a Steering Committee member of CARIFLAG. He is also a Legal Core Member of the Human Rights Working Group of the Caribbean Vulnerable Communities Coalition.

Kofi: Can you tell us a bit about SASOD and its formation? What led you to form this organization at, let's face it, great risk to yourself?

JS: I started SASOD in 2003, when I was in school at the University of Guyana. At the time in Guyana there was debate going on around whether we should include sexual orientation as problems of discrimination in our constitution. The parliament had unanimously passed it in 2001, but religious leaders had petitioned the president not to assent to the constitutional amendment. And the president sent it back to the parliament. At the time I was just finishing up my second year as a law student at the university. I had an interest, an academic interest, in issues related to human rights and sexual orientation. In fact at the time I was doing my undergrad thesis on whether sexual orientation should be included as grounds for discrimination under our constitution. One of my lectures at the university, who was from India, was pretty well known for being supportive of LGBT issues; he would write frequently in the local press, supporting these issues. He invited me to a public forum that he and his friends and colleagues were putting together to discuss sexual orientation issues. I went to that forum and met other like-minded people from outside the university who were interested in pursuing advocacy around sexual orientation.

As part of that meeting, networking and so on, one of the things we came up with was a strategy: that I could mobilize other like-minded university students who were supportive of the issue. I had a network of friends and colleagues on the campus, across various faculties and so on, who are supportive, who are proactive, and I could mobilize that group to start an activist movement. So SASOD started as "Students Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination." The "Student" evolved into "Society" later on. We were just supposed to be a sort of informal student lobby in the initial days. Deliberately as part of the strategy, we said we'd include others who were not university students at the time, not technically as part of SASOD (because we wanted the main thrust to be student-led), but as supporting partners of SASOD. One of the people I met early on was Vidyaratha Kissoon, who is a founding member of SASOD, and initially a supporting partner. So he was one who was involved who was not a student at the university. Because how we designed it at the time, it had to be student led. So we did that and I mobilized colleagues and friends from across campus, medical students and Health Science students and law students and others like that. And we wrote a letter inviting parliament to a forum about the issue. And eventually we had this forum at the National Library. We didn't have any government officials that did attend. There seemed to be clear instructions that no-one from the government should attend this forum. But we had a few opposition members of parliament that came. There was press coverage and news reports and things like that. So we had myself and some other founding members of SASOD who are still around, at the forum: such as my colleague Vidyaratha Kissoon who is also on the board, and my friend and colleague Keimo Benjamin, who also spoke at the forum, and so on. We held a public forum with the parliament, and we continued to lobby and to do advocacy, we spoke to who we knew, that sort of thing; particularly when we knew the bill was coming up again for debate in parliament. The bill didn't pass. In fact, it wasn't even voted on. The government said they weren't in a position to support it, although they'd brought it to the House. And it wasn't voted on. So the entire bill lapsed.

And, you know, more or less, at the time our only real goal had been to get this legislation passed. So we started to think about what kind of work we needed to do—longer term work, on the ground work—to get back in a position that we could get the bill to come back up again, so that if and when it did come back we would have done sufficient ground work to get it passed. One of the first things

we realized was that we needed to mobilize the community. A lot of people did not come out to publically support us, out of fear. So we started working in the community. We started having ad hoc community events and meetings, where we would get people together to discuss issues around sexuality which were affecting them and the community. For many people—although that kind of work was going on, in the context of HIV prevention—for many people just that coming together to discuss issues which affect them, and which affect the community, was a great thing.

That kind of activity many people attended, and it was the first of its kind for many of those people. A lot of active members actually came to us from those meetings. Our Advocacy and Communications officer, who works for SASOD full-time, actually came to us through open sessions and said that the entire thing was really powerful because it was the first time members of the community came together over this kind of issue, everyday issues, social issues that affect them, and outside of the context of HIV. Because before SASOD, the basis of a lot of the LGBT work was related to HIV prevention and support and cure and things like that. But because of the nature our genesis we didn't have a focus on HIV, but rather a focus on human rights and social issues and things of that sort.

So in the process of, you know, having community meetings, we felt like there is some longer term community work that needed to happen, and we changed the name to "Society Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination." By 2004 I had graduated from university and a lot of the people who were involved initially, most of them were no longer involved because they'd gone on with their lives, migrated, things like that. But there were new people who came in interested in continuing the work, but in a broader perspective beyond the university campus. So we renamed the society around 2004–2005, I think 2005, if my memory serves me correctly; after I graduated. And from then, you know, we started to think about the broader kinds of work we wanted to do. One of the first major things we wanted to do was continue to have advocacies and forums around human rights; those were key activities for us. Forums around international issues of homophobia and transphobia, and we did a lot of media advocacy as well. If any relevant issue arose or if anything of any significance happened, we would put out press releases, statements to the press, write letters to the editors, etc.

One of the other things that we did very early on, which we're still doing, was a film festival; somebody suggested, in 2005, doing

a film festival. One of my colleagues who was a Guyanese doctor, a young guy who lives in Barbados now, suggested a festival might be an easy way to get people to come out to movies and things like that; so we thought why not give it a shot? There was a bit of trepidation, as you can imagine, having an LGBT film festival in a place where homosexuality is still criminalized. My colleague Vidyaratha Kissoon is the lead coordinator of the film festival. The first was in 2005, with some amount of opposition from the detractors and the press, but largely incident-free; we didn't have any protesters, any major issues. We had a lawyer waiting outside in anticipation of trouble, but there was none. I think deliberately on the part of the government and the press, because they felt that if they gave it more attention, we'd get more support. We had it in October 2005, but after that we decided to have it in June of every year to commemorate LGBT Pride. Prior to the film festival, there was no public recognition of LGBT Pride in Guyana. So the festival became an LGBT Pride event, the nexus for other springboard events; we'd have annual kite parties and things like that. After we started to commemorate pride in 2006, it's kept going ever since.

Kofi: So the original community outreach that you used to do in the early days: was that mostly centered in the capital, Georgetown, or were you able to move out into rural areas as well?

JS: No, definitely just around Regions Three and Four. It was more like: we get the word out, and whoever could come to Georgetown could come. We didn't have the resources and, you know, couldn't afford to do much more at the time.

Kofi: How has SASOD been received, in the press and in the community?

JS: Well, of course there is always opposition. But I think that over the years we've been making some strides. I think the organization is very, very well received by the media in Guyana. [Kofi: Really!] Ah, yes. The media, by and large, has been very responsive to anything that we put out to the press, media releases, etc. And when we don't put out releases, and when other LGBT issues come up, they contact us for comments, for interviews, that sort of thing. So we definitely have a space in the media to articulate our positions.

Kofi: That's very encouraging.

JS: Yes. I think we have a few very vocal detractors who try to appear as if they represent the majority, but I really question whether most people actually feel the way that they claim, as leaders of their constituents. One of them, ironically the chair of the Ethnic Relations

Commission, who is an evangelical religious leader of sorts, and another named Rodger Williams, are probably *the* most vocal, visible anti-gay campaigners against us, and who claim to represent constituents of quote, unquote, Christians, who hold the same views. But I would say we consistently see about five people at max, over the years, who would write stuff like that—not supporting LGBT issues, actually directly attacking SASOD. So to my mind, the society, the general population, is far more tolerant, far more respectful than they probably get credit for, that being because, the people who are the homophobic voices dominate the space. People support us, might tentatively, silently support us, not necessarily go out of their way to publically demonstrate that, but people motivated by hate are far more driven to be public in their support, especially when they feel justified on religious grounds to publicly articulate their positions.

Kofi: Can you tell us a bit about the Miss Guyana Gay Glory Pageant? Have you heard of it?

JS: Yes of course. I think the pageant has been going on for a number of years, I am not exactly sure when it started. But over the years it has become more visible, and I remember one year there was even a press release and television news media; the news anchor read the teleprompter and uncontrollably burst into fits of laughter, couldn't stop laughing for the entire news item, could barely read the rest of the teleprompter. So it has been underway for a while. I heard that about 200 people were there this year. I couldn't make it this year, but I've attended in previous years. Last year, and the year before.

Kofi: And there have been no problems around it, no violence or anything like that?

JS: No. Not at all.

Kofi: Can you speak a bit about what it's like for a Guyanese citizen growing up gay or lesbian in Guyana? What's it like for him or her?

JS: That's a complex question because it really depends on so many variables, so many different factors: whether you live in a rural or urban area, whether you're working class, middle class, or upper class. If you're upper class you're probably able to access certain protections that someone from a lower socio-economic class wouldn't have access to. The rural and urban areas are also very, very different. So, it really varies—you could talk to ten different people, and hear ten completely different experiences. So, you can encounter acceptance, total acceptance, support, you know, that sort of thing, and on the other hand you can encounter people totally without hope who've been put

out of their houses, excommunicated from their family, family don't speak to them from an early age, been physically abused by family, including parents, that kind of thing. The experiences are very, very different, and very diverse, so it's difficult to generalize.

Kofi: It's interesting—we tend to assume that the middle class has it a lot easier, but I was interviewing Thomas Glave and he made the point that, often in the rural communities, you can be safe because of the web of connections that are there, and the fact that everyone knows everyone; everyone's in everyone else's business, everyone's helped everyone else out at some point or another, and so there can be a bit of safety in that as well, if you're from that community.

JS: Yeah, definitely.

Kofi: The threat of violence toward gays and lesbians dominates discussions of Caribbean queerness. Do you think the level of threat is something that's been exaggerated? What were/are your own feelings of safety/danger, acceptance/ostracism in Guyana, particularly being a public face of such a controversial organization?

JS: I think there *are* people who face everyday threats of violence, especially in working class communities, rough communities, communities that are already prone to violence. If you come from a community like that, where there is a lot of violence in the community already—a lot of crime already, and you are known to be gay, and there might not necessarily be any affinity because you may not have grown up in that community—you can be in a situation where you're facing the everyday threat of violence. I remember in 2008 there was a young man who had come to the film festival—he was a young dancer. Once it was after dark, he did not feel comfortable taking public transportation to go back home after the film festival; and he didn't want to come out at night, because people would immediately assume that he was gay, just because he's a dancer, he wears tight clothes and you know, all those stereotypical things. And you know, he was really restrained by that as a young guy. And he lived in more or less a middle class community. There are people who definitely experience threats of homophobic violence, or find that fear of homophobic violence is an everyday reality for them.

Speaking personally for me, I think I have been privileged in some ways as somebody who comes from a middle class family. My parents are both educators. I have in some ways had some protection: I've grown up in middle class neighborhood, lived in more or less middle class communities, so in that regard, I've been able to manoeuvre without a great deal of threat to my personal security.

But that being said there are certain precautions that I sensibly have to take. Recognizing the personal sacrifices that I've made, that I've decided to make to lead the organization: um, I don't have my home address ever publically disclosed when we post documents publically. For instance we filed a constitutional case challenging the laws against cross-dressing in Guyana, where I am the litigant on behalf of SASOD—when we put those documents out publicly, I obviously take my home address off. If we apply for a grant or a funding opportunity and I am the contact person—for the sake of transparency we like to share the proposals—I black out my personal details before we put them out in public. I don't share many identifying details, because if someone decides to go out of their way to commit a homophobic crime, I shouldn't be an easy target because I am probably the most popular, or known, activist in the country. So, even though I have been fortunate to have certain class protections, I think that even from that privileged position, I also have to take precautions for my own personal safety and security.

Kofi: So have you ever been personally threatened in any way because of your sexuality?

JS: Yes.

Kofi: Is that something you care to talk about?

JS: I guess I could. I, ah, um . . . high school, I recall many incidents in high school. And I recall experiences in university. Particularly in university, even at the beginning of my university career. At first mostly with stereotypes, even before SASOD—some guys on campus thought that I was gay and would verbally attack and ridicule me in public, in the cantina, that sort of thing. Based on the stereotypes, right?: you walk a certain way, wear tight clothes, you talk a certain way, and that kind of stupidness. And I have had a few incidents of that nature over the years.

I remember when I was in university, the one that's most distinct in my mind: I remember well, I was sort of chatting with a guy, and we sort of had interest in each other, and his brother and I—the guy I was interested in was a few years older than me, but his younger brother went to the same high school that I did, and when he discovered we were talking and he began seeing that we were very close, he waited for me at the mini-bus park late one night (when I was a student I had the same routine every day; I would go to the library every night and stay until it closed). A friend of mine, her dad used to pick us up and they would drop me off by the East Coast bus park, and from there, I would take a mini-bus, the public transportation

in Guyana, to get home, 14 or 15 miles up the East coast, outside of Georgetown. Anyone who paid attention to me could predict my routine, and I remember the guy's brother approaching me late at night at the park, around 11 PM or thereabout, and telling me that I should no longer call the house to speak with his brother, or have anything to do with his brother, or, you know, he would injure me in some way. So, yeah, you know.

Kofi: And this is someone you knew from since high school.

JS: And this is someone I knew from high school. I went to Queen's college, yeah? Probably the best secondary school in the country. It's not like I went to a rough school. What I discovered in later years was that that same brother who approached me, the one I knew from high school, was on the down low even then,[1] so that had its own complexities as well. They grew up in a family where the mother was homophobic—the mother rejecting and putting out the older brother- and in that situation the younger brother found himself, who was struggling with same-sex . . . let me not say struggling: exploring his same-sex desire. And he saw that. And he might have even been bisexual, I don't know. But those feelings, he desired to suppress that and kinda creep on the down low and you know . . . with all the rejection and that sort of thing, I guess that was the only way that he could deal with it. So you know, there are those complexities as well, and it is only because it is such a small place: you know so much about people and find out so much about people—maybe not at the time, but later on.

But to answer your question, I have been verbally threatened I should say; I have never been physically attacked, but I have been verbally threatened, um, and threatened with silence. On-campus ridiculing, public ridicule—that sort of thing. You know, scenarios like that.

Kofi: So have there been any examples of recent violence toward queer men or women in Guyana?

JS: Just recently a young lady, a popular broadcaster, who identified as lesbian I believe, or at least as bisexual, was attacked, in Georgetown very early one morning outside of a pub, for trying to protect two lesbian friends of hers. Some guy from the army was making moves on the girls and they were rejecting the advances, and he became aggressive and this girl intervened to protect them and, you know, I think he punched her in the face. It was in the local media; it just happened in June/July (2011). *Demerarawaves.com* reported it.

That's a very, very recent incident. We approached the media and put out a statement.

Kofi: Were there any consequences for the soldier?

JS: From what I remember, she made a police report, and an investigation was taking place. He's just gotten a slap on the wrist so far. The army says he has a record of violence, even outside of this context of homophobic violence, and that he would be disciplined internally.

Kofi: When the newspapers reported on it, did they report it as having a possible homophobic motive?

JS: Yeah, they did because the victim, Nerissa Pearson, made it very clear that she was defending two lesbian friends of hers and this guy was attacking them because they didn't give him his advantage and he made very anti-lesbian comments when he attacked them. Yeah.

Kofi: Because it's interesting that one rarely reads, in Caribbean newspapers, of homophobia as the motive for a crime, right? I'm thinking in particular of the Brian Williamson case in Jamaica. Is this different in Guyana?

JS: There are such crimes, and I think the media is a little cautious in trying not to jump to conclusions. There've been incidents over the years and the media has often just reported the facts. One time we were wondering if there was a real anti-gay murderer on the loose, sometime in 2008–2009, the second half of 2008 and into 2009, we were seeing many incidents of murders of gay men. A very, very violent wave, like, in their homes, with a knife, stabbed to death, that kind of thing; suggesting that these were more interpersonal crimes. And, many times, there are situation where I don't really know for sure. They report the facts, you know, very clearly, you know: this person was found with their throat slit against the wall; they were topless, or their pants were half-way down. You know. It creates a suggestion there could be elements of homophobic violence—or that there's a homophobic motive—but in a situation like that you don't know for sure. I think too that the media often try to be respectful of people and of family and things like that. So because it's a small community somebody will know somebody and say "Oooh that person was gay." So the media suggest that it could be . . . but "homophobia," "gay," you're not going to find those words used. You read the facts that they report clearly—there are clear indications and clear suggestions—but they try to objectively report. So unless it's a clear case like this one with Nerissa, where the attacker said something specifically, the media isn't going to overreach to say that this

could be a homophobic incident because this person is thought or known to be gay, or that sort of thing.

Kofi: So just responsible journalism, really?

JS: Right. That's right. Yes. And to be fair, I think media in Guyana is far more progressive and far more responsible than many other places like Jamaica.

Kofi: Is there any sort of open gay "scene" at all in Guyana?

JS: Umm . . . there are places that you can go from time to time. The most popular I think, quite recently, is a club called Wildberry in Georgetown. I think it may have been closed for a couple of months; they had some electricity problems. But that has been a popular spot for the last couple of years. Occasionally, from time to time, there will be clubs and bars but they rarely seem to be in Georgetown. Outside of Georgetown, there is one popular spot a bit further down the East Coast, and there are other spots on the East Bank and so on. There are spots as well which are not exclusively gay, or necessarily branded gay, but are very gay friendly, which a lot of LGBT people, or mostly LGBT people, would frequent. So there are a few spots, but not many, and not a full-fledged gay club.

Kofi: So the big question: to what do you attribute the intense homophobia that we see throughout the entire Caribbean, and in Guyana specifically? What's the cause of all this?

JS: That's a big question. It's several, several, several, several, several factors: I don't think we can discount that traditional religious beliefs in the region, mostly Christianity, largely consider homosexuality a sin. I think a lot of that spilled over into peoples' opinions, views and attitudes. A lot of that shapes how people view and think about the issues, and a lot of people want to come forward and make policy and laws and so on, based on their own religious background, traditional views and upbringing. So there's that.

What else is responsible for homophobia in the region? Um . . . in recent discussion and recent analysis and so on, by activists throughout the region, we think part of it now is a certain fear and ideology that many people have that the world is seemingly going places that you can't control—so it's kind of a conservative ideology to hold on to. Because the world is evolving in ways that you can't predict or control. So the only explanation for it is through your conservative religious values and so on, which you now want to make an ideology, and enforce at policy and legislative levels. So they think, you know, that we get these tsunamis and earthquakes and the effects of global warming and climate change, all because there is all this sin

and evil in the world, so you must campaign against homosexuality, or campaign against legalizing abortion, and you campaign against legalizing casino gambling. We see that happen in other parts of the world as well. So I think there's that.

In some parts of the region, although Guyana may be an exception to this, we've seen how LGBT lifestyles—lives and voices and people—are publically misrepresented and denigrated. The media in Jamaica tends to be very rough when it comes to these issues for example. Although I think I've seen strides and improvements over the last couple of years in how the media reports on LGBT issues in Jamaica. For instance there was a period when almost any time there was some violence against anybody who was known to be gay, or homophobic violence, and murder in particular (because that person will not be able to speak, or be able to respond), there was always the implication that it was a crime of passion: that gay people love violence, and when they don't get their way, they kill each other. So the media is a very powerful tool that contributes to homophobia. When things are represented in a certain way, they have an impact on how people view the issues and so on.

One of my academic friends who is also an activist in Jamaica tends to argue that homophobia is a function of the socio-economics of this society: he points out that a lot of the home invasions and home entrapments of gays that you read about in Jamaica, have been in working-class communities. When you begin to dissect who is attacking who, and why and so on, it is young men who are liming on the block all night because they are unemployed; so they have nothing else to do, so then anything and everything that is happening in the community becomes a point of interest. You pay attention to who is going home with who, at what time and that sort of thing, and you have nothing else to do, and you already have this conservative outlook that two men aren't supposed to be having sex, or two women aren't supposed to be together. And because, you know, we live in a society where there is a high propensity towards violence, the way that you respond to your dissenting view of other peoples' behaviour is to resort to violence, and it often seems justified and celebrated by the music.

Through the work we've done with international partners at Challenge, you know, I think we've managed to quell a lot of it, but it certainly hasn't been totally exterminated. There is a lot of justification in music as well, and popular culture at large, which to a large extent ridicules LGBT people.

But the point I was making about the socio-economics: so, when you have these unemployed men, and so on, who have the time to make other peoples' lifestyles their business, they will resort to violence when they see something that differs from their own view. My friend makes the point that, you know, if there wasn't such high unemployment and great poverty in Jamaica, if people had jobs to go to regularly and so on, nobody would have the time to care about who was visiting the neighbor, or notice that is just man alone coming to see the neighbor, and that sort of thing, and so on. So many argue too that some of the violence is a function of the working class violence, and the violence in communities—in particular in Jamaica, and not to say that it exclusively happens in Jamaica, but it is just a ready example because of the frequency with which it occurs there. They suggest the violence is because of that.

And the socio-economic thing works in a different way in a place like Trinidad, where I've also lived, between March of 2007 and April of 2008; I was working at UWI. And one of the things that we developed to respond to a particular kind of violence happening in Trinidad—which was that gangs of men were entrapping gay men on websites that were designed for, you know, people to hookup on primarily, and raping them, video-taping them, getting them to withdraw all the money that they had from their ATM accounts, continuing to blackmail them and so on, and extorting money from them by threatening to out them. They would call and report and we were able to document a series of complaints, and things like that. We started a project, my colleague Colin Robinson and I, which we called the Trinidad and Tobago Anti-Violence Project—which was eventually subsumed by a larger Trinidadian movement called The Coalition Advocating the Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO). And, you know, that is also a flip-side function of economic motives behind the crime. And I don't think, in Trinidad, it is because of poverty. I would say that it's greed, because there is a very low unemployment rate in Trinidad, and so on, but there is all of this organized crime: there are a bunch of kidnappings and other things and so on, and gay men are an easy target because the society generally forces them to be in closets—to be closeted about their sexuality. And people want to maintain that at all costs. So that also puts you in a position of vulnerability, and makes you a target for homophobic violence and entrapment and blackmail, and things like that.

Kofi: A lot of people see fundamentalist religious attitudes as being at the root of Caribbean homosexuality, yet many gay Caribbean men and women, as we can see in some of the stories on the SASOD website, are quite religious. How can we explain this?

JS: Well, for one, I don't think . . . religion isn't static, eh? I think nowadays religion is evolving. I think even the theology is becoming more inclusive and the academic work in that area is revealing that a lot of things that we think should be interpreted in one way may not necessarily be the case. I think you will see that there are a lot of religions that have gone beyond the idea that somebody's sexual orientation is sinful; or, even if it is, they might say it shouldn't be made a crime. Regardless of what your view might be, you should be welcoming to LGBT people. I think spirituality is generally important to most people, especially in a region like this, which professes to be so highly religious. We all grow up with some exposure to religion, so for some people it is almost unimaginable to not have some form of God in their lives, regardless of who they are. I think it is fair for people to negotiate that kind of relationship to God or gods and spirits and spirituality and religion and things like that. And, you know, because of how much more liberal some religious groupings have become over the years, that has provided some space.

And, of course, there are some people who can go to a church which holds an anti-gay stance, and make a separation and decide that well, I don't agree with that, but it's the only thing I don't agree with, you see. By and large I agree with 90 percent of what the church preaches; I can ignore the 10 percent, which might include the views on homosexuality, the views on condoms, the views on abortion and some of those other controversial issues.

To give an example, the Catholic church's official position is against condoms. But you don't think the majority of parishioners sitting down listening are using condoms? So people are able, and not just homosexual people—think about heterosexual Catholics and how they view condoms compared to homosexual Catholics and how the church may view their sexuality and how both groups are able to separate the two –to be a good Catholic, a good Christian or whatever, even though they don't agree 100 percent with what is being said.

Kofi: Rosamund Elwin's anthology, *Tongues on Fire*, offers us stories of Caribbean lesbians, in their own words, who somehow find ways to live happy, fulfilled lives with long-term partners, openly. Further,

they offer us stories of other queers who have done the same, since at least the time of their grandmothers. What is your own experience in this regard? Did you grow up knowing, or knowing of, other queer persons in your community? Were you told stories of such by relatives?

JS: I definitely grew up knowing some gay men in my neighborhood. In fact, there was a gay couple who lived next door when I grew up in Georgetown, as a child. My mother became friends with them, but they weren't openly spoken about in so many words. They lived more or less to themselves, with a few friends in the neighborhood—a few neighbors who were friendly and that sort of thing. And those who weren't friendly weren't overtly discriminatory or hateful in public or in ways that they acted out. Most people might be able to identify someone growing up, public personalities as well, who were known to be or thought to be gay. And there were other personalities who people would know, people who grew up in Guyana over the last 30 years; now more than ever, in the arts especially.

There were many people who were in some ways accepted in the community that they were a part of. My dance instructor who has been a very popular dance choreographer in Guyana for decades, is openly gay and known to be gay, and is accepted in the fraternity of dance for his talent. He has for a number of years taught young girls ballet, and, you know, he is able to do that, to run a school of dance with enough pupils to make it work well. And there are some people not taking their daughters there because he is a gay man, or they might not be taking their sons, but this is the same in any part of the word. I am sure in liberal Toronto there are people who are homophobic. There are homophobic crimes in New York. So, you know, while there are people who might hold their own dissenting views, I think by and large people can find a community of support and respect in their own areas, in their own fields, in their own lives.

Kofi: SASOD began, then, as an organization that aimed to enact legislative change. And the battle for the decriminalization of homosexuality is proceeding at various paces in different countries around the Caribbean. At the same time, major setbacks continue: the Bahamian government, for example, in July 2011, moved to ensure that the definition of marriage, as between a man and a woman, became enshrined in their legal system. Do you hold out much hope that Caribbean governments will act to ensure that their gay and lesbian citizens are treated as full citizens? Do you hold out hope for the decriminalization movements in the Caribbean?

JS: Well, it depends on what you mean when you say government. For one, what I have realized is that because of the dynamics of our society, politicians are going to pander to popular views for the most part. Politicians are not going to go against what the populace subscribes to. And politicians are in the business of staying in leadership, and staying in politics. So, even though you may have politicians who in their own minds want to support gays, that is not a popular political view, so they don't go too far in terms of articulating that view publically. So I think a lot of change will initially have to come through the judicial arm of government. That's why a lot of our strategies now are focused on strategic litigation. We have been advocating for fewer discriminatory laws since the inception of SASOD. One of the laws that we see constantly enforced is the anti-sodomy law, enforced against private consensual activity amongst adults, for decades.

We've seen laws against cross dressing enforced from time to time; in 2006, for instance, they arrested one person, and then again in 2009 there was a crack-down. We've advocated against it since then, and been largely ignored by the government. They haven't addressed that issue, that law that subjects a group of people to a certain kind of discrimination. We've taken that issue to court, and we're challenging the constitutional validity of that law, and that challenge is going through the court system. Our hope is that eventually we would be able to use the counter-majoritarian nature of the judiciary to limit the kind of violations and breaches and so on that the executive and the parliament are seemingly allowing, by having discriminatory laws on the books and failing to address them just because it is not popular to do so. So we have to have a lot of mixed strategies, but a lot of change might be driven through judicial intervention, judicial support, simply because the judiciary is a counter-majoritarian influence—they act in the interest of the people even when it's not popular. The court can act in the interest of one person, or the minority, even when the majority is against them. Our political system doesn't lend itself to that.

Kofi: So could a pro-gay politician ever be elected?

JS: I would never say never. Um . . .

Kofi: Today? Or is that something for the future?

JS: I think it's possible. I don't know who that person could be, but I certainly think it is possible. It could happen. It could happen today.

Kofi: So you've seen real change in Guyana?

JS: What do you mean by real change?

Kofi: In the way that gay people are treated. In the way, for example, the court is handling these cases?

JS: I think definitely we've made huge strides, but there is a lot more to be done and it is not overnight work. So, you know. We have seen significant changes in the last 7, 8 years of our existence, yeah.

Kofi: One of the major points of contention between Western queer activists and Caribbean queers is the question of the origin of sexual preference. Western activists insist that sexuality is innate, as a response, of course, to those anti-gay movements that insist that it is a lifestyle choice, which can be voluntarily changed. Yet many Caribbean queers (including several in Elwin's anthology) speak of the process of becoming lesbian, rather than of coming to a realization of their queerness. Indeed, some of the contributors to Elwin's anthology move back and forth in their sexual identification—sometimes we see women loving women, sometimes women loving men. And several Caribbean theorists have suggested that bisexuality, rather than outright lesbianism or gayness, is the "queer norm" in the Caribbean. What do you make of these viewpoints? Do you have a sense that queer Caribbean identities are more fluid than Western ones? Or do you believe that one is born gay, and that's all there is to it?

JS: I think people are born with a certain sexual orientation, yes: an inclination to be homosexual or heterosexual as the case may be. But how people express that depends on a number of other things; how people express their sexuality isn't just about their sexual orientation alone. It is also a function of their environment; ah, people are certainly influenced by their religious upbringing, you know, the views of their family, their social class, and their social status, and that sort of thing. All these factors will determine by and large whether people may determine to explore an orientation that they are predisposed to: whether they choose to live as LGBT, as the case may be, or whether they choose to conform, and to quietly explore their same-sex sexuality in closeted ways without disclosing, or necessarily identifying politically as part of a minority group.

Basically what I am saying is, sexuality is not just a function of sexual orientation alone; all the other social factors matter. In the Caribbean, it is a very complex thing, and a complex decision for people to make; and it depends on so many other things which are a function of the dynamics of the region. If you live on a small island like Dominica for example, where everybody knows everybody, there

is a certain stigma attached to being gay, so you might not come out, you might not explore that sexuality, because it's just so stigmatized. But you may go somewhere—North America for example—and be totally out because you can get lost in the size of the place. But I don't hold the view that people become gay or lesbian or whatever; I think people decide to act on it, or people might realize it.

Kofi: Have you had many dealings with white and/or Western activists? What I'm really wondering is, do you feel that Western queer activism takes the problems of Caribbean gays and lesbians seriously?

JS: I have been involved in a movement across the UK, the US, and the Caribbean region called the "Stop Murder Music" campaign. Which has been involved in challenging homophobic dancehall music, and we struggle sometimes to work with Western queer activists who, for several reasons I think, don't have an understanding of the region. And sometimes we honestly don't have the same goals and the same aims, for a lot of queer Western activism is built on the premise of winning: we just have to win and that sort of thing. There is a whole masculinist conception of being the victor in the end, even if we have to squash somebody to get what we want. And the process is sometimes not about coming to an amicable agreement and moving forward, not about engaging whoever you are sharing a difference of opinion with, in a way where both of you can coexist in the same space: it's often about, like, "I want gay marriage, and I will get it, and you, you religious figure, you will lose," you know? "I win the battle and I move forward from there," sort of thing. Here in the region we have different views that, you know, by and large we're dealing with people without a lot of education, and that have grown up in very very rough neighborhoods and so on, and they're not really tied to any particular ideology against homosexuality; it's just stylish and crap like that. These are people from the region; we're not adversaries, enemies, that we need to coerce and try to ruin their lives, and that kind of thing. So I think we struggle to work with Western activist and the only context I can use to evaluate that is the "Stop Murder Music" campaign, because by and large, the other trans-national movements that I have been involved in were with Global South people: Latin American activists working in the inter-American system at the Commonwealth level, and also activists from Asia and Africa. But in terms of Western activists, we struggle because I think many times we have different values about what we're trying to gain in the end, and we aren't all necessarily fighting for the same thing just because we're all LGBT activists. And to be frank

too, there have often been questions about racism involved in some of these movements.

Kofi: In terms of those different priorities, is gay marriage an important part of the Caribbean queer movement?

JS: Well, I don't think that is a shared priority of the movement in the region at this time. We are still in places where there are laws criminalizing homosexuality, discriminatory laws; so there are lots of other bread and butter issues—access to employment, access to justice, these kinds of things. While I don't think most activists in the region would reject marriage if it becomes an option, it's certainly not a priority that we are working towards at this point in time.

CHAPTER 14

Ryon Rawlins

Ryon Rawlins is a Guyanese activist living in Guyana. He has been a member of SASOD almost since its inception, and is the founder of its Youth Wing.

Kofi: How are you doing?

RR: Cool, calm, and extremely collected.

Kofi: Good way to be first thing in the morning. So maybe we can start of with you talking a bit about what it's like to be a Guyanese citizen growing up gay in Guyana. What's life like?

RR: Well, the most I can do is share about myself because different persons go through different stages and different issues when it comes to growing up as a gay man, so, I can only say about myself and maybe mention some of the things that I personally know about.

Well, the first 21 years of my life I spent in one community. I didn't have issues with anyone except my grandma when it comes to me being gay. Because growing up, it was always there. I myself may not have understand what it was for, maybe, the first ten years of my life, but it was always there, when I think back and look at how things were. Because I was always effeminate, wearing my tight clothes, etc., so I never really had to come out to my family. So that was one thing that I didn't have to face.

Kofi: So your family basically knew the whole time?

RR: Other families, you know, would have tried stuff like try to make me not come out as gay, or try to keep me from liming with persons they know are gay, and trying to make me a bit more masculine, but mine didn't.

The support was always there from my grandmother, because she was the one who really nurtured me. I didn't spend much time with my father because, you know, I was coming out of a

bastard relationship—I was marked a bastard child. And, you know, although my mother was there—my mother was bisexual . . . my mother *is* bisexual—we never used to get along. And she always, you know, maybe she had her own issues, but she used to try to make me not be effeminate or gay. I don't know why, but that was her. And I would have thought that she would know how it is; she lived for a couple of years with a woman. And I was right there too, but I didn't know what was going on, until, you know, I became a young teenager, and my knowledge expanded. Onto day like today, me and my mother, we don't have that communication that should be there. I am thinking now she wants it, but with what I went through, I prefer not to have this tight mother–child relationship with her. My father, well, I never really knew much of my father's family. Um . . . I grew with my mother's family. My father—we never had this relationship because, you know, there was this other child, he had this lady who have issues with me. And I know most men, they have this thing, especially when it comes to their children, being homophobic—the same thing with my grandfather and uncles.

Kofi: So you had more problems with the males in the family?

RR: Yes! I had this out gay friend— trans, to be specific—living in the village, and you know, we started communicating and so on, and if I want to go to talk to this friend, I have to hide. I can't allow my uncle or my grandfather to pass and see me. I couldn't have allowed it.

Kofi: So this trans-person lived openly in the community**?**

RR: He was open—he was living with a guy. Everyone knew the Flaming Queen Cassandra. Yes, yes, yes. He was open.

Kofi: So how about you? Are you in the kind of situation where you can be fairly open?

RR: I am out, if someone asks. But people don't need to ask me if I am gay—they can see it. I never lie or try to hide it. Although, when I am in certain places, I wouldn't try to be this flamboyant bitch. But I'm out, I'm out.

Kofi: And do you find your community fairly accepting, or . . .

RR: What can I say . . . ah . . . I think I had to accept myself; because first I had major issues when it comes to name calling and so on. But once I accepted myself, then it wasn't an issue for me. And then the village that I was living in—'cause I moved like a year and a half ago—I would have been living there for 21 years of my life, they were accustomed to me, so I didn't have this stress with people always in my face. There were always those people who would talk, and whatever, but it wasn't as, you know, rampant as how it would

be for a new person in the village. But when it comes to living in the city, that's where the stress is.

Kofi: So it would be a totally different thing for a new gay man to move into the village?

RR: Yeah, yeah, definitely.

Kofi: So you're living in Georgetown now?

RR: No, no, no . . . I am living in the same general area; I live in West Demerara. I just moved 3 villages away from where I was living, but it is in the same area.

Kofi: This fear, or threat of violence, seems to be a way of life for gay men in the Caribbean. And you say you're a fairly out man. When you're walking around, do you generally feel safe? Do you feel you're in danger? Is it something you even think about at all?

RR: Yes, I do, but the thing is not to let people think you are afraid of them, not to show this side, because there's many times I would . . . that *we* face these situations, and I would be trembling inside, but I'm trying not to let it show because as soon as I allow that to happen, the person would see that they . . . they know they can devour me. When you're walking in Georgetown, especially in the evening when you can't really look around and see what is going on, and also because I attend a university and everyone on campus knows me, I have to be very careful, but project strength and confidence, you know?

People would talk, they will say stuff, yes? But they don't say it in front of my face. I don't have people coming up to me and saying battyboy and all that sort of stuff; they're going to say it behind my back. And I have friends who would tell me when I passed or whatever, these were the remarks that were made, you know, but it's not in front of my face. I'm in all these classes, you know, and there are people that other persons think they're gay, and those people are having a hard time with this harassment on campus. I don't have that issue.

Kofi: And this comes from not letting them see that fear?

RR: People say I try to put on this "bad woman" attitude, but they need to know that this "bad woman" attitude, it has helped me.

Kofi: What about other gay men? Can you think of any recent examples of any violence toward queer men or women in Guyana?

RR: I know there was this out guy, Lloyd, somewhere on the East Coast, who got beat up and gashed in his face etc. Yeah, that gruesome; he's still scarred. Yeah, it still happens because even me I had an issue. Last year I had to ride the speedboat from Comfort

and Hope to Georgetown, and there was this one Rasta guy, he had an issue with me for some reason. I didn't know, but he started saying whenever I go near the boats, I can't go in his boats and shit. And if I went in anyway, he wouldn't move the boat till I got out. And you know, it started escalating, because others see that happen and no one told him anything, so the others think they can do the same. I had to address a letter to the GM, and the Minister responsible for maritime issues, and told her she had to do something about it. Some of them stopped, but the same one fella, he still had the issue, he and another Rasta guy. Two weeks ago I went again, and I ensured that I detailed everything and mentioned that it was just these two people alone.

Kofi: So they actually did something about it when you wrote the letters.

RR: Yes, she told them to desist, or else she might have to do something.

Kofi: It's interesting, because it seems like in Guyana there's more of a willingness on the part of people to speak out.

RR: Well, you see, I had to, 'cause when you have to use the boat to get to Georgetown, it's critical. You can take the bus but it has to cross the bridge, and then of course the bridge has its retracting times—it can totally take you off track. The boat is the fastest thing for me to get to Georgetown when it's in the day.

Kofi: Do you find that certain groups are more homophobic than others—for example, you mentioned the Rastas who . . .

RR: Black people! Black people, Black people, Black people! There are some Indian guys, you know, but it's more rampant among black people, this homophobia.

And the Rastas! My locks now come in and it's a big issue. I have my locks, so, when they tell me something about my hair I just tell them, "you don't want it on my head, you come cut it off." Yes, let them come and cut it off! They don't say a thing else. They don't say anything else. But if you put your tail between your legs you're in trouble, 'cause they'll want to show off more and take advantage of you.

Kofi: So is there any kind of open gay scene in Guyana?

RR: They had this one place named Wildberry, but the management was . . . I don't think they had proper management so the place closed down. So at least there's nowhere that I can . . . for me, there isn't anywhere that gay people can really go and really be free, like, themselves. I was in Trinidad in 2008—I so adore and love that country

because it is nothing like Guyana, right? Nothing like Guyana, because there are places to go; you can walk the streets and you *might* hear "fire bun," but not all the time like Guyana.

Kofi: So there's more of an open scene there? You can just go out in public and be more yourself, in Trinidad?

RR: Yes. I was there for carnival in 2008, and my same friend I mentioned before, Cassandra, was also going. I went the day before her, right? So I went the next morning to the airport to get her, and we dropped off her stuff and then we went downtown. And any taxi take you—you pay them and they drop you off, no hassle. And we were out walking, you know, and she was like, "Ryon, you see what is going on?" I said "What?" And she was like, "I ain't hearin no fire bun." People looking, yes, but that is all. She not accustomed to that, because if she were here in Guyana and she gotta catch a bus she might be out there from 2 onwards until somebody who really knows her come and stop for she. And it wasn't like that; any taxi car will stop and you jump in and you pay the money and that is it—you have no vehicle issue in that country. At least that is what I can tell you I experienced. And me and she, we were walking around and, you know, it was good.

Kofi: You said your mom is a bisexual woman.

RR: She is bisexual, yes.

Kofi: Did you grow up—even looking back now—knowing a lot of gay people in your community, or in Guyana in general?

RR: Yeah, yeah, there were quite a lot of gay people.

Kofi: It's interesting, because a lot of Caribbean people talk about how there aren't really any gay people in the Caribbean.

RR: Well, in Guyana, especially when it comes to bisexual men, they're rampant. Especially when it comes to the young population. You know where the Cathedral is, right? You go to the Cathedral now whenever you come to Guyana again, on a weekend night, and you will see who really . . . you know the sex workers out there, they're all young people. Young people I can say less than 29 years old. Young people. And a lot of them, they're there not because of sex, but because they have to try and maintain themselves and put some food in their belly, etc.

Kofi: So is there a lot of sex work in the gay community?

RR: Yes! Yeah. I don't know, I may have to turn a sex worker soon to maintain myself, because I ain't got a job here and a house—so many bills to pay and then I have school.

Kofi: Do you find that being gay keeps you from a lot of opportunities?

RR: Yes, because the homophobia is blatantly there. I've been to places, you know, when it comes to employment, where they see me and try their utmost not to employ me. Until I'm at a point now where I'm tired of sending applications, you know. Until I know that it, maybe, is somewhere that I am recommended to or something, I won't even try working there.

Kofi: But just walking in off the street, they see you and they . . .

RR: Exactly.

Kofi: Now, there are gay people in the region who live very openly, and at the same time we know that there's this violence that happens. Why do you think that some people are able to live so openly and freely, and others aren't? What is it that makes people turn to violence all of a sudden?

RR: It depends on the area they live, and then money, money, money; money is a big thing. If you have money . . . if I had a couple million dollars, I wouldn't even have to think about it—maybe go and live somewhere else. And there's this thing with class. When people see you as a certain class, and you're let's say driving and so on, you know, they not going to stress with you because they know you'll be able to pull some strings . . . mmm hmmmm. I think it mostly has to do with class and the area you're living in. If you're in an Indian area, you ain't going to have the stress. And it depends on how strong you yourself are.

But basically, money, money, money, yes. Money and class. Money and class.

Kofi: It's even different, I guess, if you can get into your own car and drive around, or if you have to wait for a taxi.

RR: Yes, *big* difference.

Kofi: So what's the cause? Why does Guyanese society seem to be so homophobic?

RR: Culture. How they were brought up, how they were oriented. And the Guyanese government needs to look into this bashing thing that is going on. We need better police. Because when gay people feel comfortable enough lodging a police report, and knowing that the police they will look into the matter, right, we will all be better off.

And this other thing, this buggery law—they need to wipe that nonsense out of the constitution! It all has to do with where they woulda come from because everyone grows up learning that "you're gay, you're bad, you have AIDS, you're a sex worker, you're dirty," and all these negative things! And it starts from childhood; no one would ever want to tell their young children about being gay.

Kofi: Growing up, did you ever have any conversations about gay people? Or is it something that just wasn't talked about?

RR: No, I never had any conversations of that sort; only when I get big and I say either they accept it or kiss me ass.

Kofi: Speaking of all these buggery laws, there's a struggle going on across the Caribbean to decriminalize homosexuality. And there is progress in some ways, and sometimes major setbacks; the Bahamian government in 2011, for example, made sure that their laws stated that marriage is between a man and a woman. They made sure that became enshrined in their law. Do you have a lot of hope that Caribbean governments are going to act to ensure that their queer citizens are treated as full citizens?

RR: I hope so, but I don't see it happening any time soon because if our government has an issue with buggery laws . . . . The decriminalization of homosexuality would also mean that same-sex marriages and so on can happen here, right? I don't see it happening in the Caribbean anytime soon. I don't see it happening. Maybe Trinidad or Barbados may have it, or maybe Suriname.

Kofi: Do you think if one country does it, the rest might follow?

RR: Yes, it is possible, but they would need . . . a lot of lobbying would have to be done.

Kofi: In your own lifetime, have you seen any real change in Guyana?

RR: Real change? For the better? No. I just see [laughter] the normal thing—because the rich is getting richer and the poorer getting poorer, and that's the same thing for the gay community because it is only the one set of people benefiting from anything pertaining to the LGBT community—one set of people benefitting. Maybe not the people with money, but the people who were able to . . . let's say they were able to rise to the management level. Because when you're at these meetings, it's the same set of faces that you keep seeing. One set of people, and those people, they have no intention of building the other weaker ones so they'll be able to reach that level, because they don't want nobody else to be able to replace them—to be preferred over them. Yes! There is class within the LGBT community—there is classism, because some of them think they're bigger than the rest and so on.

Kofi: So you think a lot of middle-class gay people turn up their noses at what they consider lower class?

RR: Yes—they even pass you on the road. And they're the persons who are supposed to be there to help. I always hear about capacity-building and so on. But they're not doing what they're there to do.

Kofi: I understand you do activist work? Can you tell us a bit about your own activism in Guyana?

RR: Yes, when I can. I've been a SASOD member since 2006 or 2007.

Kofi: Do you think SASOD does good work?

RR: Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm . . . yes and no. Yes and no. I am not going to be biased. It is a good organization. They have good influence. They have good people, but there is room for improvement. There is room for improvement . . . I have to think, I have to think . . .

Kofi: Would you say it's a middle-class organization, whatever that means exactly?

RR: No, I wouldn't say that. Maybe some of the persons—not the organization itself, but some of the management. But that shouldn't be so.

Kofi: But basically you think they're doing good work.

RR: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. They're a good organization, with good opportunities; there is room for improvement and for the wider dispersal of opportunities. They have good people there, but they gotta work with them more. I need help with my public speaking, for example, and I could use that help from them. They need to pay some focus on such persons as myself, and not just have it so that whenever anything happens, it's just 1 or 2 or 3 that benefit from it.

Kofi: Do you see a big difference between a place like Georgetown and a more rural area like the West Bank? Is it really different in Georgetown, or are there parts of the country where the situation is better or worse?

RR: I've been to Berbice maybe three or four times in my life. I didn't travel with public transportation when I went to Berbice, so I didn't see anything like homophobia there. I've been to Linden maybe 10 times; a couple of time, yes, I traveled there on public transportation, you know, but as soon as I hit the taxi park there was a big commotion, but I think that has a lot to do with when they're now seeing you for the first time. Because I know out people in Linden, out more than me, and they traversing and living in Linden and so on and they're not getting in problems, so . . .

Kofi: So again, if your community knows you, you're probably ok.

RR: Yes. Because first time I used to come to Georgetown, there used to be big commotion. Now they're accustomed to seeing me—sometimes I walk and I don't even hear a thing.

Notes

Introduction

1. Silvera, Makeda. "Man Royals and Sodomites: Some Thoughts on the Invisibility of Afro-Caribbean Lesbians." Stephan Likosky, ed. *Coming Out: An Anthology of International Gay and Lesbian Writings*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992. 507–21.
2. Numerous other examples and sources can be found on the website Global Gayz: http://www.globalgayz.com/jamaica-news99-02.html.
3. Footage of the incident can be found here: http://www.towleroad.com/2013/08/jamaica.html
4. A first-person account of the ordeal can be found here: http://www.towleroad.com/2011/03/saint-lucia.html
5. Skelton, Tracey. " 'Boom Bye Bye': Jamaican Reggae and Gay Resistance." David Bell and Gill Valentine, eds. *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*. London: Routledge, 1995. 264–83.
6. Toronto: Women's Press, 1998.
7. Aldama, Frederick Luis. "Querying Postcolonial and U.S. Ethnic Queer Theory." *Humanities Retooled*; Online, 2004.
8. "One Step Global, Two Steps Back? Race, Gender, and Queer Studies." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10(1) (2003): 125–28.
9. "Post-colonial Historiography, Queer Historiography: The Political Spaces of History Writing." *InterAlia: A Journal of Queer Studies* 2 (2007): Online, 7pp.
10. "Intra-Asian Circuits and the Problem of Global Queer." Online paper, available at: https://digitalcollections.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/8683/1/Wilson_Intra-Asian%20circuits...pdf (15 pp.)
11. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).
12. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).
13. "Border/Line Sex: Postcolonialities, or How Race Matters Outside the United States." *Interventions* 7(2) (2005): 236–50.
14. "Notes from the Blue Coast," *Saturday Review*, April 28, 1979.

1 H. Nigel Thomas

1. Derogatory term for a homosexual man.
2. Two newspapers published in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.
3. See Dr. Cooper's letter in the November 1, 2009, edition of the Jamaican newspaper *The Gleaner*. See also her *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Dr. Cooper is currently head of the Department of Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus.
4. "Do you know what a black/negro plan is? One that doesn't work."
5. Tortola is the largest and most populous of the British Virgin Islands. Grand Cayman is the largest of the three Cayman Islands.
6. Jean Phillipe Rushton is a tenured professor of psychology at the University of Western Ontario in Ontario, Canada, who works on, in his own words, "Evolutionary Psychology" and "Ethnic Variations"; these quotations are taken from his official website at the university. His work has been described as racist, and has been heavily criticized by the scientific community.
7. See Glave interview, p. 55–6.
8. A ritual common to the Spiritual Baptists, wherein a devotee undertakes a meditative, spiritual journey such as that undertaken by the author's character Jerome in *Spirits in the Dark*.
9. For much more on Brian Williamson, see Glave's interview, p. 35.

2 Thomas Glave

1. The essay was published in *Words to Our Now: Imagination and Dissent*, by Thomas Glave (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
2. Hang out (alone or with friends).

3 Faizal Deen Forrester

1. Heroines from the Jamaica Kincaid novels named after them.
2. Pejorative terms for male homosexuals.
3. This is the title of the poetry collection on which Deen is currently at work.
4. During his appearance on the show on May 20, 2008, then-Jamaican Prime Minister Bruce Golding reiterated his stance, first mentioned during his election campaign, that no homosexual person would ever have a place in his Cabinet. Pressed as to whether he could ever imagine gays in the Cabinet in the future, Golding replied, "Sure they can be in the Cabinet. But not mine."

4 Korey Anthony Chisholm

1. An epithet often hurled at gay men and lesbians in the Caribbean, literally meaning "fire burn." It has several resonances, including referencing the fire and brimstone,

which will supposedly be rained down upon queers, and the threat of a literal burning of queer persons.
2. Hanging out.
3. See Simpson's interview, p. 177.
4. Breasts, fake in this case.

5 Patricia Powell (1)

1. This is the same paper referenced in the final sentence of Powell's response to my previous question. It is published for the first time in this volume, in the following chapter.

8 Shani Mootoo

1. Carolyn Cooper. See also Nigel Thomas's and Faizal Deen Forrester's interview, p. 75.

9 Mista Majah P

1. Dreadlocks.

10 Rosamond S. King

1. In Thomas Glave's *Our Caribbean*, pp. 191–96.

11 Nalo Hopkinson

1. "Genderquerulous," in *First Person Queer: Who We Are (so far)*, Richard Labonte and Lawrence Schimel, eds. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007, 20–27).

13 Joel Simpson

1. Ie Hiding his own homosexuality.

Index