

“The Day Is Not Yet Done”: An Interview with Earl Lovelace

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Novelist, playwright and short-story writer Earl Lovelace is part of a middle generation of West Indian writers that started writing in the milieu of independence. A pivotal figure in Caribbean letters, Lovelace was born on July 13, 1935 to working-class parents in Toco, northern rural Trinidad, and unlike the majority of his counterparts, he has remained in the West Indies. In 2002 he received an honorary doctorate of letters from The University of the West Indies, Trinidad Campus.

Lovelace's oeuvre includes the novels *While Gods Are Falling* (1962), *The Schoolmaster* (1968), *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982), *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979), *Salt* (1996), which won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1997, and his latest *Is Just a Movie* (2011), which won the OCM Bocas Prize in 2012. He has also written the collection of plays *Jestina's Calypso and Other Plays* (1984), the short story collection *A Brief Conversation and Other Stories* (1988), and the collection of essays *Growing in the Dark* (2003). His writings are embedded in the political and cultural frameworks of the day, and aim at offering a vision of the Caribbean as a place which is just as much a part of the world as any other.

In the course of this interview, Lovelace offers his perspective on issues such as the traditional notion of the Caribbean intellectuals and their role in Caribbean society, the importance of art and artists in the region, and the artist's connection with grassroots culture. Lovelace also foregrounds the importance of his having taken a different route from the vast majority of West Indian writers, and of rejecting labels such as “postcolonial,” “intellectual” and “activist,” and instead proposing others such as “writer of independence.” The long-standing yet seldom mentioned issue of reparation closes the interview.

This interview took place at Earl Lovelace's house in Cascade, Port of Spain, on October 25, 2013, shortly after the writer had returned from participating in “The Vancouver Writer Fest.” The interview started and finished on his wonderful veranda, accompanied by the soothing sound of the creaking of bamboo poles. A sudden and typically Caribbean downpour forced us to go momentarily inside to then return to this

evocative place. As his character Bango explains in *Salt*, “things here have their own mind [and] rain decide when it going to fall. Sometimes in the middle of the day, the sky clear, you hear a rushing swooping sound and voops it fall down” (Lovelace 1996, 5).

Maria Grau Perejoan: *You are one of the few Trinidadian writers of your generation who have chosen to remain and write from Trinidad. How important is, or has been, staying for you? Why did you choose to stay?*

Earl Lovelace: I think that there are a number of reasons. I don't think I wanted to go. I went abroad after I had won the BP Independence Award with my first novel *While Gods Are Falling*. So I was published in the UK while living here. I am probably one of the few to get published abroad while living in Trinidad. But I did want to go outside of Trinidad, which I did. Then I found that I wanted to live in Trinidad, or live in the Caribbean at least. I don't think I ever thought about going away to live abroad permanently.

I think one value of staying is that you don't have to write of a remembered place. The value of staying is that I have been present to see everything unfold not just as a spectator but as a participant as well. I was involved in village councils, in playing football and cricket in the countryside, in the Black Power movement and in carnival. Being born in the Caribbean does not mean that you automatically know the place. The Caribbean was not a place you knew really, it was a place you were getting to know, and I think we are still getting to know. The whole idea of: Who are we? What is independence? How have we arrived? Where have we arrived? These are real questions that we are still answering. From the outside, I think you deal with the assumed Caribbean, the Caribbean that has been represented in history, the idea of the Caribbean that has been cultivated by the various interests.

MGP: *Would you say that Caribbean literature needs Caribbean voices to explain what the Caribbean is?*

EL: Right, right, right, and to examine again and to re-examine what it has been about and what it might be about. To explain the inequalities in the societies, to explain the society to itself, its promise and beauty and potential and in a way to present a different story than the simple calypso singing fun-filled one that represents the Caribbean people in the common imagination.

MGP: *And validate a certain culture that was dismissed or undervalued?*

EL: Yes, to validate the culture by way of validating the people who produce the culture. So, yes.

MGP: *Do you consider yourself a West Indian intellectual?*

EL: Well, I would imagine so. I consider myself a West Indian intellectual in the sense that I have been thinking from ever since about the concerns of the Caribbean and

writing about them. However, I don't know with whom I would be grouped. I have the sense that the formally educated West Indian intellectuals occupy another space and respond to issues, if not with the Western establishment guiding their hands, with it looking over their shoulders. Maybe to answer your question we should look at some people who are considered West Indian intellectuals: [Marcus] Garvey, [Lloyd] Best [and so on].

MGP: *C. L. R. James?*

EL: Well, C. L. R. James is a class in a way by himself. I would not see him as a West Indian intellectual but *the West Indian intellectual*. Such an intellectual has always been on the outside—Garvey, James, [Walter] Rodney. The intellectual I am thinking about has been a scholarship winner, someone anointed at a very early age, who seems to consolidate rather than veer too far away from the narrative developed by the colonial order to explain us to ourselves.

MGP: *I understand, as you argue, that yours is a different path. However, even though you are not part of that local intelligentsia that decided on how the Caribbean should be, you can be said to have proposed the direction the Caribbean should take in your work.*

EL: Yes, yes, yes. I suppose I am seeking to separate myself to some degree. In identifying with people at the base, the underclass if you will, I have come to emphasize the Caribbean as a place to which particularly African people (but this can be extended to other people as well) were brought stripped of name and rank, and whose struggle is fundamentally a human struggle for personhood. The narrative voice in my fiction does not have the authority of the traditional narrator who sees himself wiser and more privileged than those he is writing about. I try to find the voice of the ordinary person, not privileged by class and rank but by belonging to an elemental humanness. This gives me quite a different perspective from those who come with a narrator whose authority is derived from education, but also from class and rank.

MGP: *How would you define yourself?*

EL: Well, I don't know. I haven't really thought about it, or thought it through. I think that I will be defined at some point.

MGP: *Even though you have consciously opted for staying, you have also denounced the difficulties of making a living as an artist—in your case as a writer—in the region. Would you say that the lack of infrastructure and public support for the arts would be one of the main impediments for writers in the region?*

EL: This brings us back again to the intellectual question in a way. I don't know what system the government or the country has of supporting thinkers. The intellectuals we support with jobs. They are teaching at universities or functioning

in CARICOM [the Organisation of Caribbean countries, established in 1973, which seeks to promote economic integration and cooperation within the region] or such institutions, the university has not really made a place for writers. The society has not made a place generally for writers, nor have we the writers made a place for ourselves as independent voices engaging in the society. All of this can be understood by a closer look at the society. I am writing something now called “Reclaiming Rebellion,” in which I argue that generally the artist in the Caribbean has explored and advanced the ideas raised by the rebellions: justice, reparation, humanness. Quite understandably, rebellion was seen by the rulers as delinquency and was punished. And the institutions that might have advanced their messages and concerns were banned and were compelled to adopt disguises to survive. These institutions—I am thinking of calypso and carnival and the arts coming out of them—that revived in the early days of political independence have continued, but if we pay close attention to them we would discover that they no longer seem to challenge the status quo, express rebellion, affirm humanness in the way they used to do. We see them now as valuable, but the value we ascribe to them is principally one of entertainment. I fear that our writers follow such a path. Rebellion, outcasts, entertainment. That has been the trajectory of the arts.

It is easy in this situation to see how important it is for the country to produce independent writers with concerns connected to their origins in rebellion.

MGP: Do you think that the current Caribbean milieu is slightly more accommodating for artists? In other words, does a writer who chooses to remain in the region, as you did in your time, have it easier than you had it?

EL: Well, I want to hope so. There is much more literary activity in the region. And we welcome it. However, not much has been done to make it beneficial or easy for our writers to live here, and that has to be addressed. Recently we have the congress of Caribbean writers that offers a prize for fiction, poetry and prose writing and that meets in Guadeloupe and draws writers from every language group in the entire Caribbean—Spanish, French, Creole, English, and that includes writers who live in metropolitan centers. We have the Bocas Literary Festival in Trinidad and each year there are literary festivals in the various islands. These developments suggest that we are trying to find a way. But there is much more that we have to do.

MGP: Do you consider the specific award for writers living in the region, the Hollick Arvon Caribbean Writers Prize, to be a good initiative?

EL: I am saying that these festivals provide us with another starting point, but we will have to decide what we want to make of them. Are they to seriously take on the challenge of the Caribbean as a space or are they to consolidate things as they are and make the situation more palatable for all of us—without the challenge?

MGP: *In general terms would you say that West Indian diasporic writers are the ones mostly representing the West Indies outside of the region? Do you believe diasporic writers are being privileged over writers like yourself who have chosen to remain in the region?*

EL: It is probably quite convenient for some people to have a Caribbean in the US, the UK, Canada and so on. But I believe there is still a Caribbean in the Caribbean, with entirely new possibilities, useful to itself and valuable to the world, and my concern is with keeping that Caribbean and those possibilities alive. What is the question?

MGP: *The question is who represents the Caribbean? Due to the privileging of diasporic writers, I believe national writers like yourself are not as widely included in the curriculum of Western universities nor are they as widely promoted.*

EL: I have the feeling that the Caribbean is not at the center of the concerns of these curricula. The Caribbean is not really being addressed. When people talk about postcolonial, for example, they are continuing to pursue the line established by colonialism. Colonialism is not all that has happened to these islands and those who people them. What concerns those of us who live here is what has happened, is happening to these islands as they seek to overcome colonialism and establish a new and humane society. That is really the question we face: What are the levels of woundedness inflicted by colonialism? What are the levels of a desire for a new society? Are we interested in the future of colonialism or in the future of the people on these islands? If the world is interested in the islands or in the previously colonized people, then they have to be looked at in terms of the movement of independence. The question should be what has happened to the movement of independence and not what has happened to colonialism. Colonialism is not our goal. Putting it at the center is just blunting, and has blunted, the pursuit of independence. So if you focus on independence you will begin to see all its aspects, its flaws as well as its promise. If this examination is encouraged then we'll have to focus on national writers.

Postcolonialism is tethering our scholars to colonialism. Is it laziness, a habit of patronage, of patronizing that keeps the West Indian states being treated by the West as if we are still in some ways their colonies? Why is there a need to keep this region tethered to European colonialism? I think it could be useful for all to look at the Caribbean as another experience and its independence as having within it a new set of possibilities for all of us. I would want to see myself as a writer of that kind of emerging Caribbean, a really new place, as a new world writer. It is against this background that diasporic writers can be said to be privileged and those who have remained in the region ignored. Independence is like a stepchild of colonialism.

MGP: *Would you then say that the starting point is wrong?*

EL: Yes, there has been really no new starting point for the Caribbean. Independence was expected to provide one. Independence was granted to Jamaica and Trinidad in 1962. There was no radical change. Nothing reparative. There was a very, very short

period when independence was emphasized. By 1970 the nationalist government in Trinidad and the region faced the challenge of the Black Power movement prodding it to change. Nationalism has not lasted long, either as an economic or political expression. So what is nation?

MGP: *Would you say that diasporic writers would be postcolonial writers, whereas you would consider the more national writers as writers of independence?*

EL: I don't know if I would want to make such a rigid distinction.

MGP: *Would you agree that those who are not writers of independence are the privileged ones?*

EL: Privileged in the sense of audience? I think it is not so much about the writers as about the focus. Some people have made their mark living in the diaspora and have been taken to be representatives of their home countries. But that is not entirely so. If we are interested in what the Caribbean is saying, it would be useful to see what the writers at home are saying. I really don't know if you can have a region defined and represented by those in exile. There are writers who are living in the diaspora, and who have opportunities not open to writers at home. That makes them privileged in a way, but we have to bear in mind that all writers are still relevant because of the human story they tell. But, I understand where you are heading. If being in the diaspora brings all the plums, what then about writers who remain? What is their value? This has to be discussed too, the day is not yet done. I think that being here is of great value, we will discover it and it will reveal itself as we proceed. It also has to do with the West Indian people themselves. What do West Indian people want? What do West Indian politicians want? What vision of the West Indies do politicians have? What ideas of humanness are we advocating? I mean, where are we going? These are all questions that a lot of us have to answer. How can writers aid in the process of the development of the Caribbean? And how can they do that living abroad? I am not in their shoes. It would be good to know their thinking.

MGP: *Furthermore, Trinidad, like any island in the region, is continuously evolving, and as you were saying, if you haven't lived in the region for a long time, can you really continue to represent the region?*

EL: I suppose you can represent an idea of the region. Each one of us has his/her own Caribbean.

MGP: *You have explained that you write for your people, about what you have termed the "ordinary people" (Lovelace 2003: 4). Would you say that a non-West Indian audience shapes your writing in any way? Do you share your character Philo's view in The Dragon Can't Dance that "if they come to the tent, let them walk with a Trinidad dictionary" (Lovelace 1979: 229)?*

EL: Firstly, I am saying that in order for you to maintain a language you have to use it. The people to do it, to keep it alive must be those people writing the literature. A

language is a way of seeing as well. If we Caribbeans are saying anything new it will be transmitted by language and people have to spend a little while to understand it. We spend a lot of time understanding standard English, turned the other way.

MGP: *I would say that in your novels you represent the linguistic situation of Trinidad and Tobago. How important has the use of Creole been in your novels? Have you been conscious about it?*

EL: Well, yes, I am conscious about it. As someone of the region, a Caribbean myself, I go back and forth between standard English and the Creole. And then there is the matter of rhythm. Yes, I try to bring the Creole sensibility, if you will, into the language I write, not as an inferior but as a language with its own integrity.

MGP: *Do you think that the role of Creole should be different in society? For example, should Creole be incorporated in education?*

EL: For the ordinary people Creole is part of their everyday speech, so what creole speakers ask is to be accepted and respected. Since Creole has roots in many languages, teaching it could facilitate a more intimate understanding of our history and ourselves. In this way it would have another and a useful role in education. When you say Creole, what do you mean?

MGP: *According to linguists, the Anglophone Caribbean is characterized by a language continuum. At one end of the continuum is the official language, that is, the standard English of each respective island, and at the other are the different English-lexicon Creoles, the unofficial and informal languages.*

EL: In fiction writing, those who are presented not speaking standard English generally have the words they speak rendered phonetically—*dat* for that, *mus* for must, etc.—as one indication of their class or foreigner status. I think I fight that because if I accepted that summation, the characters that I write about would, because of language, be one of those inferiors, like the maid or the foreigner. I am saying that the people who speak Creole are not necessarily uneducated and so I do not use phonetic spelling to indicate the Creole speaker, I look at the rhythm of the language and the construction of sentences. We have to be aware also that language has also been a tool for maintaining and constructing class differences and in that way keeps people in their place. I try to utilize language in such a way to indicate the Creole but also—and principally—to express the humanness of the people.

MGP: *Nowadays, though, standard English or Trinidadian English continues to be the official language, while Trinidadian English Creole is only the informal and undervalued language.*

EL: Right, but Creole is also becoming the language of the arts. It is used liberally if not exclusively in calypso, in rap, in spoken word poetry and in poetry and fiction. I suppose as long as it remains spoken by people it will be utilized by all kinds of writers.

MGP: *Since you have published in foreign publishing houses, have you ever encountered negative attitudes towards the use of Trinidadian English Creole by editors or publishers?*

EL: Well, I would say no, but I remember when I wrote *The Wine of Astonishment* I was in North America for a little while and I gave the manuscript to somebody to type for me—it was a little bit before the computer—and this person corrected the whole grammar, brought back a totally different novel to me. I had to change it back because that was not what I wanted. Increasingly I am becoming bolder. I was aware of what I was trying to do. One instance I can remember interestingly was with *The Dragon Can't Dance*. The editor said that she wasn't too sure about the prologue. I understood what she was saying because the prologue was almost a poetic addition or preface to the story that begins more concretely, if you want. It was because of the poetic nature of the language as opposed to the beginning of the novel with the characters and the movement and so on. But this language surveyed the novel so to speak. So she wrote to me about it and I saw the point actually, and then she wrote back and withdrew the comment. At the same time I was writing back to say I was going to keep it anyhow. But it never came to that.

MGP: *In the 90s in order to engage Trinidadians who were more in the habit of reading the readily available newspapers, The Dragon Can't Dance was serialised in The Express. Did this initiative bring positive feedback from ordinary people?*

EL: I know it was quite popular. Actually it was Keith Smith, the editor of *The Express*, who was behind the idea. I thought it was well done and some people collected the daily installments and made up a book. The feedback was good. In fact, Keith, who lived in Laventille and wrote about it, told me that he felt it one of his achievements as editor of a daily paper to have been responsible for having the book serialized in the paper.

MGP: *In terms of publishing, you started publishing abroad because that was the only choice you had, right?*

EL: Well, it was the only choice and the happy choice as well because having won the prize [BP Independence Award], part of the prize was that the book would be published. So that was very good. It meant I didn't have to be concerned about a publisher in the same way. It didn't have any publishers here and it is more beneficial in the sense that first of all publishing has to do with marketing. If somebody published in Trinidad, you could hardly get it in the Caribbean. So publishing abroad has always been quite useful for someone living here, though, of course, if you were abroad much more would be done in respect of publicity and marketing. But I don't know that it will necessarily remain that way. But we here in the Caribbean have to do much more. We need to seriously make the Caribbean a market for books. I believe that it can be done and I would want to do what I could to help to advance it as a project. There is a whole lot that can be done.

MGP: *The publishing world in the West Indies has never been a prominent one. Do you envision an ending of this dependency on external publishing firms?*

EL: Today, we have a number of young writers who live in the region. And while they would want their work published internationally, there are many other aspects to consider—marketing, circulation, reviews. This dependency will end, I believe, when we place more focus on the Caribbean as a market and introduce the region to our writers.

MGP: *As far as I know, none of your writings has ever been translated into Spanish. Only your novel *The Dragon Can't Dance* has been translated into French, German, Italian, Japanese and Dutch. Have you had contact with your translators?*

EL: I went to Tokyo some time ago and met a young woman who was a poet. She would become the Japanese translator of *The Dragon Can't Dance*. She was a student at the time. She now teaches Caribbean literature. I understand it is a very good translation and it has been well received in Japan. The other translator I met was the person who translated *Dragon* into French, but that was after the translation.

MGP: *What would you expect from the prospective translator of your work?*

EL: I think it would be important to retain the language, that is, the integrity of that Creole that is used, and not to see the narrator as distinct from the people, but rather to see him as the voice of authority emanating from the community. So I would think language would be one [thing]. A sense of the characters would be another thing too. One of the things, in *Dragon*, particularly, is that I see the people in the yard as the royalty of the hill: the queen of the band, the dragon, the princess, etc., and while they live in this “regal poverty”—in a certain kind of poverty if you want—poverty is not the central idea of their lives. Poverty is a factor but for me what is important is that they are seeking to assert themselves as human beings. For me this is important to understand and not to see them just as poor people here but to see them in that other dimension.

MGP: *Finally, what prospective projects do you have in mind? You mentioned earlier on that you are writing about reclaiming rebellion. Is that a novel or the topic for a non-fiction piece?*

EL: Well, I am trying to write it as a non-fiction book but we'll see. Then there is an autobiography, and I know a novel is there somewhere nearby, I should start it very soon.

MGP: *What is this future novel going to be about?*

EL: About reclaiming rebellion—and this proves the point about the value of the writer being here in the Caribbean space, trying to ask something of this place. Actually, there is an article on it in *Wasafari*, published in June 2013. Essentially what I say in the article is that we have to reclaim rebellion as a starting point. That the starting

point that we have had is really not a starting point at all. Emancipation was something that emancipated the previously enslaved people into nothing. Emancipation was an act of bad faith that was sold to us as liberation. There is a lot to fight for. The battles we thought we had won have not even been fought. Goodwill is not enough. We cannot proceed to develop a society on the assumption that “every creed and race finds an equal place” [from the lyrics of Trinidad and Tobago anthem] when we know the injustice at the roots of the society. It is very tough to ask somebody who has emerged from a previous condition of servitude to continue to carry on his back the burden of a society without any kind of reparative address to their situation.

MGP: *The issue of reparation has been very present in your writings. Recently CARICOM has brought the topic back to the forefront. What do you think about it?*

EL: Hilary Beckles, one of the persons involved, has written a good book, *Britain's Black Debt: Reparations for Slavery and Native Genocide* (2013). I think that the question has to be raised within the Caribbean. I think that initially the leadership of the Caribbean has to take responsibility for some things. I don't know that the Caribbean leadership could easily just say to Britain or to whoever: “Well, you did this and so on and so on, and we want reparation.” You yourself must initiate the process by addressing the kind of inequality and injustice you have inherited.

It is a big question, it is the question of the Caribbean. Just as the Caribbean was exploited and so on, this question of repairing has to be equally big.

MGP: *Do you think it is too late for the issue of reparation to be addressed?*

EL: No, it is not too late. Carnival, as you know, is our biggest festival here. One of the things I have written about in terms of carnival is that we, the people who set out to parade, want to show our best selves to ourselves and each other. In real life, we need to demand our best selves from ourselves and each other. Carnival, in a way, is a presenting of our best selves, not only in terms of the costumes we wear but the behavior we exhibit, the generosity, the caring. While a lot of unsavory things have happened, while there have been serious levels of inequality and injustice, especially in dealing with those historically disadvantaged, we have managed to maintain, even if [only] symbolically, a sense of goodwill. We need to draw upon justice and that goodwill to deal with the question of reparation. We will need to demand from ourselves our best selves: “Look me!” is a wonderful idea.

MGP: *Thank you very much.*

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