SARGASSO Interview

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GEORGE LAMMING and GORDON K. LEWIS:

INTERSECTIONS AND DIVERGENCES

(Note: The novelist George Lamming and political scientist Gordon K. Lewis have known each other for years, and both play important roles in the formation of literary and socio-political approaches to Caribbean culture and experience—Lamming through novels such as In the Castle of My Skin (1953), The Emigrants (1954), Of Age and Innocence (1958), Season of Adventure (1960), Water with Berries (1971), and Natives of My Person (1972), and Lewis through such impressive studies as Puerto Rico: Freedom and Power in the Caribbean (1963), The Growth of the Modern West Indies (1968), The Virgin Islands: A Caribbean Lilliput (1972), Notes on the Puerto Rican Revolution (1975), and Main Currents in Caribbean Thought (1983).

The editors of Sargasso felt that bringing Lamming and Lewis together in the same interview presented a rare and potentially very fertile opportunity for creative friction and interchange: on the one hand, the gifted writer Lamming is a highly informed commentator who participates actively in Caribbean political affairs; on the other, as one of the Caribbean's most astute political analysts, Lewis also demonstrates a depth of knowledge of and an acute sensitivity to Caribbean literature, to the point of incorporating literary references and examples in his more strictly "sociological" studies.

The interview was taped in December 1984 at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.)

Lowell Fiet: How would you respond if a critic called In the Castle of My Skin "the quintessential novel of the Caribbean"?
George Lamming: Well, first of all, I don't know whether it's defined that way. I would perhaps not be a very good judge of that.

I could see, though, the sense in which a definition of that kind could be applied because the way the book is structured, although it begins as the report on a particular experience of a particular person in a village, it then becomes a sort of biography of Village, and then of Island, and then it ends really in a moving out to another island. And because of the historical similarity of these territories, a seminal book is very likely to touch on a variety of aspects of the other territories because of this continuity of historical experience.

So that, although the details may be different, the essence of that kind of childhood would be found in Jamaica or Barbados or Trinidad. Or, looking very recently at Black Shack Alley--when I saw Black Shack Alley it might have been a film of In the Castle of My Skin: the same role of the children, the relation of the children to the matriarchal grandmother, the fundamental preoccupation with education, the role of the school as a rescue mission--not even so much about knowledge and so on, but if you were going to be rescued from the history of "persistent poverty," to use the phrase of the economist Beckford, then the school was the first rescue mission that you would have to turn to. So, I suppose that the definition would derive from the historical likeness and continuity of the region.

Gordon K. Lewis: Well, that novel of 1953, it really has--I wouldn't say it's "quintessential"--but it has quintessential elements which George has referred to as autobiography. There's peasant village life, there's village childhood, and ultimately the implication of emigration which George treats later in The Emigrants which I would say is the quintessential novel on the phenomenon of emigration in Caribbean life.
Zobel's novel from Martinique, which I think pre-dates In Castle of My Skin, anticipates the same thing. So, in a way, as in all national literatures, the themes are imposed by the national experience and the novelist chooses between those themes, but certain themes are quintessential. And in that sense I would say, yes, the novel [In the Castle of My Skin] is quintessential.

LF: Gordon, looking at the Caribbean from the point of view of a political scientist, do you see a specific function for the Caribbean writer?

GKL: Well, I would answer that in a twofold sense. One, there is a universal concept which relates the writer to the larger society--in any society--whether you think of Dickens in the early Victorian society or of any of the renaissance writers of the Caribbean after the 1950s. And in that sense, they all refer to the lesson presented by V. S. Pritchett in his Politics and the Novel: that is to say, the obligation of the writer to consider the theme of political consciousness.

Now, the second part of that answer is that in the Caribbean--because it is an emergent post-colonial society--there is a particular experience which is unknown to Victorian England or to the Third Republic in France, and the writer--I think the Caribbean writer--must respond to both that larger concept which I think applies to all literature and the other concept which applies peculiarly to Caribbean literature.

LF: As you analyze the politics, the history, and the literature, do you see writers who specifically comply with that both universal and more specific function?

GKL: There is some writing, of course, which is obviously defiantly revolutionary. There's a lot of revolutionary poetry in the Caribbean.
which is not so much poetry as it is revolutionary rhetoric, and that is one kind of response. Another kind of response is one in which the artist with a larger and more unique imagination relates the theme of society with the theme of politics. I would say, for example, that John Hearne does that, and I would say that Naipaul does it—probably both of the Naipauls; Hearne being particularly concerned, I think, with the figure of the expatriate in Jamaican politics. Naipaul also (the elder Naipaul) would be concerned with the figure of the expatriate, but, I think, writing with a more perceptive, psychological insight into human nature than Hearne possesses.

**LF:** And does Lamming fit within that perspective?

**GKL:** Well, if I understand it correctly, George's intellectual pilgrimage has moved from certain points in the beginning to certain points where he now stands; certainly in his essays he is more the political man than he probably was in 1953. I think there's an element of conceived Marxism in his writings now which was not apparent earlier, and this is quite natural—and, indeed, inevitable and necessary. A writer grows.

But I would like to add to that that I don't gauge writers in terms of whether they agree or not with my own political philosophy. After all, Marx's favorite authors were Balzac and Dickens, and Dickens himself was a mid-Victorian liberal reformer and Balzac was a Tory legitimist of the Second Empire.

**GL:** I'd like to add to that, because I think there are some distinctions to be made. When you are thinking of the writer in relation to the concept of function in society and commitment to it, I believe that the parallel between the Caribbean writer and the Latin American writer is perhaps a closer one than the parallel between either and say, the European equivalent. For this reason: that
the nature of the political experience, which (in the case of the Caribbean and in the case of Latin America) has been a largely colonial and neo-colonial experience. And what is very special about this experience is that it involves and touches on the personal and professional life of the entire country. That is, if you are living in a colonized situation, it doesn't really matter what is your own social formation; everybody is influenced by that. And the nature of that collective experience forces the writer—whether he likes it or not—to be writing not only about his own individual consciousness but really about the collective predicament of that situation in a more urgent way than it might be for a writer coming out of a more stable and usual arrangement. So I think that the Caribbean and Latin American writer has always been a little more embattled, so to speak, with issues of the country than his English equivalent would be. This is the first point I would make about that.

The second is that there are different ways in which we can use the term "function," this function as a writer. One is to say that any writer who's making a certain kind of critical interpretation of the society is functioning on behalf of the society—irrespective of how the interpretation comes out. You might not agree with his orientation and so on, but he's likely to be saying something which is very true about certain aspects of the society.

But there is another kind of function that in a way separates some writers from others. There are certain writers who, by virtue of their associations in a particular territory, have found themselves engaged in what you might call a certain kind of extra-literary activity. I think in the case of Jamaica, when you think of novelists like Roger Mais or Vic Reid: they happened to be developing as writers at a time when the nationalism of Jamaica is also emerging in a

very powerful way. And they are going to be very closely associated with a political institution like the people's national movement and see themselves, in a way, as voices of that kind of movement. Or if you go down to Guyana where you get the most explicit example of it, in the poet Martin Carter, who again, is developing at a time when Guyana is going through very fundamental political change and upheaval, and who would find himself functioning as the voice of a political movement [and] who would then be a member of the executive of a political party. It is that sort of concrete function that in a way sometimes separates certain writers from others; that you would get them [this second type of writer] functioning in a more general sense of observer and critical analyst, but not identified in an activist movement type of way—the way in which, for example, a Carter in Guyana, or a Mais in Jamaica have done. And we do have a certain argument going on about that: there are a number of writers who see their role as really only functioning in that first sense (the observers and interpreters) but who do not really believe—either by reasons of temperament or whatever—that the more activist role is their concern.

This raises another distinction between, if you like, the metropolitan influences on the colonial territory, the English-speaking Caribbean. It's very interesting in the sense that it has tended, sometimes, to produce a type of writer who is concerned with exploring and interpreting but has always avoided the category of being a political person. This, I think, is tied up with this [English Metropolitan] influence. Whereas it's very different in the French situation where it's not at all uncommon to find the creative writer as also a very active and practiseing political man. The outstanding example would be Césaire, of Martinique—leading poet, but also mayor and deputy to
the National Assembly. There's always been a slight distinction, I think, between writers
of the English-speaking Caribbean and the French-speaking Caribbean, where that kind
of political question is concerned.

Stella López: Ever since I read your novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, I've had the image in my
mind about the little naked boy, he's 9 years old, and his mother was giving him a bath in
the backyard. And while this is happening, the neighborhood children are watching and
laughing. And all this time, the little naked boy who is so shy and sensitive is
watching everything that is happening. And I just wondered, how does it feel to have
been such a boy and to have come from that moment in life to where you are?

If I can guess, it's an autobiographical experience. How does it feel to come from
there to now and have experienced everything that you've experienced?

GL:

Well, it's always difficult to answer that accurately or reliably because what happens
is that when you're looking back on an experience you give it a lot more order and
coherence than it probably had. Everything that has happened to me now seems to have
been a quite logical development, whereas at any point in that early past I might not have
been able to foresee the movement in that way.

It seems "logical" because--with whatever modesty I can summon--I always, very
early (and my mother may have been responsible for this in a way) always felt that I had
been "chosen"--very specially "chosen"--for some important function; we did not know how
that would manifest itself. I think a lot of the shyness and so on in that situation
has to do with a certain privacy and isolation, because of what was happening in the village
when I was growing up (that was a poor village
and a very difficult sort of life) and every
attempt was really being made to separate me
from it and protect me from it. I was, of

course, an only child; that was the other aspect of it, and therefore the entire world was made to revolve around the destiny of this experiment. This was an experiment which had to work and therefore had to be protected from any of the, you know, toxic influences and so on of that...

SL: Your mother...

GL: ...very protective, yes; I would on occasions have to steal away and so on to be part of that collective world. She was never too happy to see me too close to it because it was a time—it was a period when eighty percent, ninety percent of people would not, perhaps, get very far in life. The ones who did would be the ones who got away, and if you had no special privilege, then, in fact, very special efforts had to be made to rescue you from sinking into what would be the ordinariness that would catch up with most lives.

I think that sense of having some special destiny was there very early.

SL: Do you think that is the clue to the men or women that have the idea that they are "chosen"? Because I read that and I saw that in Richard Wright's autobiography also—that he felt that he had a destiny, that he had something to do. Do you think that that's something that has to exist?

GL: Well, now that you mention Wright: I suspect that (and Gordon may have examples here) that it's probably something that happens to certain individuals who are the products of a cultural poverty, that there is no reason why you should have been the one that got away, and it therefore has to be explained by some force and so on that you cannot locate unless—my mother would be very clear that that was the work of God; all that happened was that I was the vessel and nothing more. If you don't have
that faith, I suppose you just have to attribute it to Fate and so on.

But I suspect that—now you mention it—I imagine that in the context of English literature and the social life out of which it came that a man like D. H. Lawrence may have felt very much the same about being a "chosen one," to have come from the depth of that kind of mining village experience: without connections, without privilege, to battle your way through the rigidities of an English class system and to make an entire life a struggle with origins, and so on.

I would think that Lawrence would have seen himself as, in a way, very specially "chosen."

So that notion of being "chosen" may in some way be tied up with people who come out of a culture of poverty and deprivation.

LF:

Gordon, were you "chosen" in any way similar to that? You've devoted most of your adult intellectual life to the exploration of the Caribbean, and yet your own formation and childhood was in an entirely different setting.

GKL:

George mentions "forces." There is a variety of forces at work here.

In George's case there is the force of (if you will allow me to say so) the famous Barbadian self-conceit. Barbadians are notoriously heliocentric; they think the world revolves around that little island society. There is that force. There is the force of the impact of childhood; it has frequently been pointed out that many of the typical Victorian novels are novels about childhood, like David Copperfield. And then it's the same thing in the Caribbean: In the Castle of My Skin is about childhood; Jan Carew's novel Black Midas is about childhood in colonial British Guiana. There's that force.

There's another force: the metropolitan force. George mentioned modesty; well, Santayana once said that the English people

are the only people in the world who boast about their modesty. And so there is the metropolitan modesty of English society.

And then, ultimately, there's the force of geographical and social locale. George comes out of the poverty of colonial Barbados; I come out of the poverty of the south Wales mining fields—which is also a colonial condition, as much as the West Indies. George says he was the only child. I was one of ten, and I was "chosen" in the sense that it was the tradition in the English working class and the Welsh working class in which everybody would slave and work hard in order to send the bright boy or the bright girl to university. And, by chance, that happened in my family, that happened to be myself. So after grammar school I got the county scholarship to the University of Wales. After the war I got a scholarship to Balliol at Oxford. I am what they call "the scholarship boy." And it's rather like the old Island Scholarship system in the colonial West Indies: one was chosen, and all of those who failed: that in itself is a literature of the despair and the disappointment of those who failed. And so there are all these forces that I think are at work. I think George is right. I see him as a novelist and an essayist keeping company with García Márquez, Mario Benedetti, or Juan Bosch, or (in our own the Puerto Rican case) José Luis González. All of them, because of the environment that has shaped them, are indulging in a creative literature which is also a literature of protest, whether it's done in a magical, surrealist fashion, or whether it is done in a more directly descriptive, "English" fashion. It is all there, and as George says, some are more committed than others. I like José Luis González's phrase in his Conversaciones in which he says, "Soy marxista sin iglesia." So we have all these forces which—because they are congregated here in this small regional society—I think help to explain the amazing fascination and richness of the magie antillaise.
And as for being "chosen," I have no Judaic sense of being "chosen" or one of the Chosen People. It's just that Fate was kind to me.

**LF:** What other writers have most influenced your development and production as a novelist? Who do you see as the antecedents to your own work?

**GL:** Well, when you come to the conscious influence now, as distinct from the influence on you of a particular environment, that, too, is sometimes not always easy to locate, because influence is a process. And what is happening to you in that process is that you're absorbing things, and sometimes you're not even aware of the weight which they will have upon you.

As a writer, I would say that from the point of view of language, probably the earliest and most powerful influence was the Bible--my association with the Bible. So, I think there is in my prose a music and a patter of metaphor and imagery, that may, indeed, have had its origins in that very early absorption of the language of the King James Bible. That was the collective literature of my childhood, and I used to know that book very well.

Then, later, in a more formal sense (because, coming into the language that was English--and its literature) one recalls having a very strong preference for certain kinds of writers, even without being aware of why that was so. And I would say that very early I recall discovering Hardy (but that is, Hardy the poet) as being something very very special to me. And then, in prose narrative, Conrad. That has something more to do, now, not with message or meaning but the way in which language was working--the music of language and the metaphor of language. I think these would have been early formations.

But I was very grateful because I was taught by a man called Collymore, and it was he who really, in a way, brought alive my curiosity, who made me feel that there was a

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world of literature that was a very real world, and a world that contained immense wealth, that one could never exhaust, and so on. So that very early he had encouraged me in a kind of reading that was not now only the reading of imaginative work but very wide. I mean, I was -- at 16 or so--I would have read, say, something like Wells' Outline of History two or three times as well as The Science of Life; I remember those two enormous books, reading them through. And that very early developed in me a great interest in history and in the history of ideas. And then, coming on a little later, a man whom I met somewhat later, I would say C. L. R. James was also very important in that, in that I was very struck by the range of his interests and by his capacity to correlate what would appear to people to be distinct disciplines: that James was not only interested in politics and history but he saw those as inseparable from literature and music and the arts and--above all--from philosophy. I was always very struck by that, and found myself responding to that in a very natural sort of way. So, I would say that even most of my readings--if one had to assess in volume--that most of my reading is the reading of non-fiction; I read more non-fiction than I probably do fiction, particularly in areas of history and philosophy.

GKL: I think there are two influences we're talking about here. The first is the influence of time and place, and second is the influence of person.

As far as time and place are concerned, both George and I come out of traditional Bible belts. His is the Bible belt of Anglican Barbados; mine is the Bible belt of Baptist south Wales. We both go through that experience and at some point we emancipate ourselves from that kind of narrow-minded Protestantism to be exposed to different influences. Being the Bible belt, there is the influence of the Bible--fortunately, the King James version and not the modern Revised version--which gives us a sense of rich language. And the King James version of the Bible is the only book I know

of that is a successful book written by a committee, whereas most modern social science literature written by committees is dismal. That's the influence of time and place.

There's the influence of person. In the 1930s it was, of course, the intellectual ferment of the Europe of that day which influenced me directly and indirectly. When I was in the sixth form at grammar school in south Wales there was a history master, Walter Tidswell, who compelled all of us in the sixth form to join the Left Book Club, whether we wanted to or not. And we trace influences to people like that, who demand that you do things, you expose your mind to new intellectual horizons. And I've always wondered why Eric Williams, who was at Oxford during that period, could go through that whole Oxford experience without having any mark of intellectual ferment being left upon him. And when I was at Oxford, being a scholar at Balliol, the first college incidentally that opened its doors to black African students, it was the Balliol of then Master A. D. Lindsay, who talked of the relationship between Socialism and Christianity. And then of course, you did the school of Modern Greats, which is politics, philosophy, and economics. So, you got a sense of the intermixture of different social and historical disciplines which George tells us he learned from C. L. R. James. I learned it from Modern Greats at Oxford.

**GL:**

On Williams: I must mention him specially, though, because he does fit into a history of influences where I am concerned.

I was very lucky that I didn't go from Barbados straight to England. I think my development may have been very different from what it has had to be if it had happened that way. But when I left Barbados, the first piece of the world I saw after Barbados (at the age of eighteen) was Trinidad. And that is going to be in the late 40s, a period when a generation --my generation-- is coming to an awareness through the concept of the Caribbean as one.
And one of the most important voices promoting that concept was Williams*: it was Williams who, talking to me at that time, first brought the names Césaire of Martinique and Nicolás Guillén of Cuba to my attention. I have no recollection of ever having heard of Césaire and Martinique until I was talking with Williams in the late 40s. So, the other influence (using Gordon's example of the time and place) is going to be Trinidad and Williams in the forging within me of a sense of not just being something called "Barbadian," but being a part—an integral part—of a much wider world, that was the world of the Caribbean. So that by the time I arrived in England in the 50s, I would arrive with the seeds of that.

And then, of course, the isolation there had to reinforce that; that I then discovered corners of the Caribbean in England. That is, I met Jamaica for the first time in England; I met Guyana for the first time in England. I met the eastern Caribbean for the first time in England and was able to reinforce that sense of a Caribbean continuity which had really been given to me by Trinidad, not by Barbados. When I left Barbados, I would have said I was purely Barbadian; by the time I left Trinidad I was in the process of being very much a Caribbean person.

GKL:

It's important not to set too deterministic interpretations of what happens because we are shaped also—apart from the forces we've already mentioned—by fate and chance. And it was fate and chance that brought me to the Caribbean in the summer of 1949. But to come to Puerto Rico—and not, as you might have expected from an Englishman, to have gone to Barbados, or Trinidad, or Jamaica—I've always been grateful for that, because if I'd gone to the University of the West Indies in Jamaica in 1949 instead of the University of Puerto Rico, I can easily imagine that I would have become trapped in that narrow, insular world which still exists in the English-speaking intelligentsia, and in the

university-crowd, where it is still difficult to identify a compulsive regional sense. Fortunately, here in San Juan, which is a metropolis in a way that Kingston or Bridgetown cannot hope to become, here you came into a society which opened up for you the Latin-Hispanic aspect of the Caribbean of which most professorial mandarins in the U.W.I. are still dismally ignorant. It also meant that you were living in San Juan which was intimately in touch with the rich intellectual life of American society: you could go to New York easily in a way that you could not go to New York easily from Barbados or Trinidad. And this, I think, helps to explain why, from the very beginning, I was not only in the Caribbean but I was also self-consciously a regionalist. And I cannot see that any man or woman in his right mind can live in the Caribbean and not sooner or later become a regionalist.

LF:
That brings up a very interesting topic, something that George has talked about in a variety of situations and something that you, Gordon, have written about very effectively—and that is the notion of the Caribbean as a geopolitical region, and finding more similarities than differences between the various island nations, societies, and cultures. And I'm very interested in Gordon's statement about Puerto Rico opening that sense up because I get the sense of a degree of isolation—a strong degree of isolation—here as well: people knowing very little about the English and the French-speaking islands. What I'm trying to lead into, I think, is the whole notion of "linkage" and developing a Caribbean sense. How does one go about that?

GKL:
Well, in the first place, I think (which is an elementary statement, but necessary) you have to travel. I like the comment of one Victorian traveler in the West Indies on another: "There goes old Trollope, banging around the world." And you have to "bang" around the Caribbean,
as the first requisite for the development of this sense of regional unity and identity. So, apart from any other things that we might say—and there are a lot of other factors—the first factor I think is quite literally: you have to travel.

GL: Yes, travel is important, but it will not be the good fortune of a very large number of people to be able to travel.

But I think it is so possible to be influenced (in a regional direction) even with a minimum of travel. So that what I think we need to do is to emphasize the regional function of every important institution in every particular territory. Now, the history of each territory has been, for a long time, the history of isolationism. That is, there will have been a period when Barbados was as indifferent to Jamaica (and vice versa) as Barbados and Jamaica would have been to either Martinique or Puerto Rico. And Martinique would have had a much closer relation to Paris than it would have had to Port of Spain. That is, the history of each territory was the history of an outward glance, of looking from where you are to whatever was the particular metropolitan center that organized that life. And each institution was, in a way, shaped to fulfill that function of looking outward. It is really only within recent times that the region has been trying to look across and within itself. And this has taken—that outward look has taken—some very extreme forms. I will give you a story that illustrates it.

In nineteen—I think it was 1955—I was returning to the Caribbean for the first time after I had left [in 1950] and I went first to Haiti. And I discovered that there was in Haiti a very bright, sophisticated, intellectual class. There was a Haitian intelligentsia, there were poets, and novelists, and so on. And I had been introduced to them. And it pleased me very much to learn that the book that was a kind of Bible for them was the book The Black Jacobins, by C. L. R. James. So I
told them that I would communicate this to James; I'm quite sure that he wasn't aware of this and he would be very pleased to hear it. And they were amazed: they said, "How did you come to know James?" And I said, "Well, James is from Trinidad," and there was total stupefaction, because they all believed that James was a white man and that he was English. Now, how did this happen? French books don't carry any pictures; they're all paper-covered and they have no biographical notes. So what happened is that here is this product of Trinidad who goes to England, who writes The Black Jacobins which ten years later is translated in Paris (in French) and then reaches Haiti. That is that almost triangular kind of trip. It reaches Haiti in a French translation (that is of M. Jean, as they call him) who automatically, instinctively they said was English.

You see, I think it's probably only a post-war phenomenon and the whole experiment in federation of the English-speaking Caribbean that started to force this glance across the region. The establishment of the University of the West Indies was very decisive in reinforcing this looking across and within the region. And I think we have started to expand that, and that will go on expanding. That I don't think will contract now.

But the pace of its expansion is still slow and very much slower than it need be. I think that one of the immediate objectives—which is also manageable—is to have people inside existing institutions who function almost as evangelists, really, would function. To establish regional emphasis and regional character in the specific institution, wherever that institution may be. That is the first thing. And also to try and see how you can make the institution an integral part of a wider communal life. Because what has really happened to our institutions (particularly our institutions of learning) is that they have tended to (because of the way they were designed and conceived) to exist as autonomous

worlds, feeding upon themselves and only using the wider community as a sort of raw material on which they feed but without any re-routing of that body of knowledge and analysis back to where it derives.

So those are the two stages, I think; to regionalize the existing institutions and also to get the institutions to function in a more democratic manner, in a more communal way than they function at present.

GKL: I've got a dissenting opinion on this. It has come to achieve the status of a fact, almost, to say--to emphasize--the colonial-metropolitan relationship and how it divides Caribbean peoples one against another. I mean, I know that it's a socio-cultural fact. But I have always been impressed--ever since I came to the Caribbean--by the fact that because of intra- and extra-regional migration (and George didn't write The Emigrants for nothing) because of that, for the last eighty years or more, there has been a vast amount of work and travel by the working underclass of Caribbean society. You can find Barbadian workers who speak Spanish because they've been to the Dominican Republic or they've been to the Panama Canal Zone. And that explains to me, I think, why--looking at social changes--frequently it is the working class that is the most widely traveled; it is the working class that has a command of the three working languages of the Caribbean (certainly English and Spanish) rather than the middle class or the elite white. And I place this as a counter-force to the traditional and conventional argument that's always been this metropolitan-colonial relationship which divides rather than unites.

Apart from that, I think George is generalizing from his English-speaking Caribbean experience when he's talking about the institutions. Take the institution to which we all belong: the institution of the university. That is true of the University of the West Indies, founded in 1947. It's not true of the University...
of Puerto Rico, founded not by the Spanish but by the Americans in 1903 and which the Americans brought here, which was quite new to the Caribbean: the whole American conviction of the education of the masses. So that almost from the beginning the University of Puerto Rico was a university for the masses. The University of the West Indies was a university for the classes. And I think it is important to make this distinction. And that is why (to come back to the point I made earlier) I'm glad I came to the University of Puerto Rico and not the University of the West Indies.

GL:

I think my point about the role of institutions remains, though—that while it is true that there has been a certain amount of movement by working-class people, the fate of working-class people who move is that there is not a return that influences at the original point. That if you were, for example, part of a movement, let's say, that would have gone to Panama, or that would have gone to Cuba, and so on (either to do work on the Canal or work on sugar estates) you are not going to find, on the whole, any significant proportion of that migrant body returning in a permanent way to their original place.

What quite often happens is that the movement may have extended itself: that they may have gone on from Panama or Cuba or whatever to the United States. Or, as late in the forties, you have had the oil refinery attractions in Aruba: a lot of people of my generation came to Aruba, and then when that was over you'd run into them in Toronto. So although there was that movement at that level, there were people who were never in a position to determine movement back in that way. And then what you might find are these pockets of regionalists who are outside the region. As a matter of fact, one of the things I'm very interested in is that when I happen to be with certain types of Puerto Ricans in the United States, I discover that there is a much more developed consciousness of region and of being in some

way connected to region than I, say, discover among Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico. That is, that the Puerto Rican in that continuing connection and dealing daily with Panamanian and Jamaican and Barbadian acquires that sense of region which is not acquired in quite the same way by the Puerto Rican at home. We don't have the example of significant numbers of such people returning in a permanent way back to their original place. So that the regionalists of that class from the Caribbean are usually not in the Caribbean. They're at some point outside of the Caribbean.

**LF:** We're going to change things just a little bit. George heard me ask a very long and convoluted question to Pedro Juan Soto a few weeks ago about a self-definition in ideological terms. I think I've posed the question in a somewhat briefer context here. And it's really a question that I wanted to ask George, but since we've been going at this in different ways, I'd like to get Gordon's view on it first and then have George fill in.

The question itself is: how do you, as a writer, define yourself ideologically, as you face the friction between the First and Third Worlds—that seems to characterize the Caribbean?

Gordon, as you look at writers and as you see the region itself, is that characterization of friction between the First and Third Worlds viable?

**GKL:** Well, I can only speak autobiographically. Speaking for myself, as someone who ideologically comes out of the European democratic socialist tradition (so that's part of the First World) and coming into the Third World, I did not find friction for a variety of reasons.

In the first place, I came to the Caribbean in the late 1940s and early 1950s when you had the movement of black anti-colonial nationalism, of which Williams was of course the leading protagonist, so you could easily
identify with a society which was highly politically conscious and in which there were causes that you could embrace. And this is very different from coming from England after 1945 (which was a fatigued society because of the war experience) and also coming from the United States where Americans, on the whole, ideologically still live in the Victorian period. That is why fundamentalist Christianity seems to play a role, even in the American presidential campaigns, quite unlike any other leading industrial society.

So, coming to the Caribbean made it easy for me to assimilate my European socialism with the causes that were proliferating at that time in the region. So there was no friction. There was a natural harmony (now I'm speaking autobiographically). There are some people who come from the States or from England who bend over backwards in order to try to be more West Indian and more Caribbean than the Caribbeans, which often leads to farce and absurdity. John Hearne has written something about this in his characteristic figure of the white expatriate. I myself didn't fall into that category because, possessed by an assured ideological identity, I did not need to discover another one.

**LF:**

Is there a way to look at it from a broader political perspective in terms of the actual clash—that at least I think I see—taking place between forces here? the fact of a First World presence or First World pretensions on a large social scale and Third World reality?

**GKL:**

Well, as far as the Caribbean intelligentsia is concerned, there is certainly that. I mean, if one reads Aimé Césaire's famous letter in 1956 to Maurice Thorez in which Césaire announces his resignation from the French Communist Party, that is a remarkable document which announces, for Césaire, the statement of a Caribbean writer-artist-intellectual who is
now completely disillusioned with what he calls the European "Copernican" attitude to the Third World which, he says, is a disease of condescension, which is as bad on the European left as it is on the European right.

So, I think we have that conflict. I mean, in the Caribbean intelligentsia, the whole debate about the applicability of the so-called "Westminster model" is a particular example of that general conflict of intellectual colors. This, again, is what makes the region so exciting, because I fail to note that intellectual excitement in England or the United States of 1984.

GL: I think we may arrive at similar ground, but the journeys are very different. And it emphasizes the importance of the colonial experience. The difference between my growing-up, ideologically, and Gordon's, is that I would have been growing up in a society which didn't use the word but it certainly had an ideology, and that was the ideology of that Christian fundamentalism. And it was an unfree society; that is, it was a society which did not allow deviation from that. And it succeeded in socializing its product to the point where they too would not have felt very much desire to move out of that particular cage. If you grew up in Gordon's world, you would have been growing up in a world where even though that Christian ideology may have been dominant, it was a tradition that also co-existed with a very strong nonconformist response to that tradition. So that even within the context of a Christian ideology there would be a great variety of strains and intellectual tensions within it. Those strains and tensions would not have been part of my world, and quite often the first experience that we would have had of that kind of skeptical, intellectual inquiry—the questioning of things that had been taken for granted—would, only, in fact, be arrived at in the metropole. Things that had seemed "set," things that had seemed quite stable, we discovered should also be put under scrutiny.
Now, to be more specific about ideological corrections: this is very sharp at the moment in the Caribbean. Gordon mentioned the black nationalism, voiced by Williams. This was almost inevitable given the racist nature of the colonial experience. I mean, if you came out of a situation in which the worth of being black was negated, by dictate and by institution, the only counter to that was the assertion of blackness. The assertion of blackness is really a creation of the racist nature of the society. That has percolated and influenced a great number of people. And now it has led (because there has been a little more opening up intellectually in the region) it has led to a new kind of tension, the tension between people who believe that the black cultural nationalism, valuable as it is (in the sense that it restores and redeems the dignity of people who have been trained to feel that they were not worthy of consideration)—valuable as that is, it is not a sufficient key for resolving the problems of the society and that one may have to look at the society more in terms of its social formations, or its classes, and the particular function of those classes. That is what raises the problem between cultural nationalists, on the one hand, and those who—in a very wide way—may be defined as Marxists. (I don't like using the word because it sometimes means a variety of things to different people.) But the distinction between the two is one about priorities; where there's still a very strong current of what you might call that black cultural nationalism and there is a growing current of analysis which looks, really, at the society in terms of its class stratifications, the function of its classes, and takes the view that it is only when you can resolve that problem of class that you will be able to put the cultural nationalism in its correct perspective.

As far as my own case is concerned, I function in two ways: there is a quite visible distinction, as Gordon was saying
earlier, between, say, the emphases of the novels and, say, the emphases of essays or public statements. There is not a contradiction between them; it's simply that the forms are quite different. If you are writing an essay or you're giving an address, the function is to state very directly how the head is working and to make that statement with a view to persuading or converting. That is the language of statement.

When you are working within the context of fiction, you are really exploring individual consciousness. You are really trying to find out not so much where people are at but how, in fact, they got there—what particular journeys have people made to the point that they say they are at? So the world of the novel is bound, therefore, to be more complex a world. It is a world that is dealing with a greater variety of feeling; it is dealing with the nature of contradictions between feelings, and so on, which would not be in the direct statements. But I think some of the critics are beginning to see that the fictional world that I have created is really no different in its actual directions from the statement, the essay. The rendering is very different, but not perhaps the essential themes and the essential preoccupations.

**LF:**

I would like to (if you can hold out a little while longer) try one final thing that is not in this framework. You have known each other for a long period of time. George, is there any question that you would like to direct to Gordon, anything that you would like to find out or somehow elicit from him which you have not, until this point, had the opportunity to do?

**GL:**

Well, what I'd like first of all to say is that Gordon has been, for some of us in the English-speaking Caribbean, a very remarkable phenomenon. Earlier this year we had a conference of intellectual workers in Trinidad, and there

was a man—a very distinguished political activist and a man with a long reputation as a cultural nationalist of Guyana—who chaired one of the sessions and introduced Gordon. And he said a remarkable thing about Lewis. He said that he [Lewis] was a West Indian by choice, and that was a very important thing. That some people may be born there but there was no conscious decision about that. But that he [Lewis] was a West Indian by choice. And when you see it in his work, it is an example not of the "visiting scholar"; it is of the Caribbean scholar who is completely identified intellectually and emotionally with the terrain—that is not now only subject matter but actual human predicament. I would like to emphasize that that has been a very very rare occurrence for us.

And the question that I would perhaps like to ask him is:

One, what is his own evaluation of Caribbean scholars in his own field? How does he see the direction of their work, what would he say have been the limitations of that work, where does he think that it should be going that it has not gone so far?

And the second is, how does he see his continuing involvement in the liberation struggle of the Caribbean region?

GKL:

Well, there's been a whole transformation of the intellectual climate in the Caribbean since I came, obviously, and the scholarship of the region has contributed a lot to that. What I still find a little disturbing is that too many Caribbean scholars are still writing within terms of their own island society or a group of island societies, and they are still not writing the sort of more regional scholarship that I would like them to see. I think this is in part due to linguistic laziness. I don't think you can write about the Caribbean as a whole unless you have some kind of control—a mastery—of the three working languages of the region: French, English, and Spanish.
And I find that when I go to an annual meeting of the Caribbean Historians Association, it is an absurd spectacle. We still have to put on a whole computerized mechanism of translation in order that they can understand each other. That, I think quite frankly, is linguistic laziness.

And so, you've still got a scholarship which, on the whole, is still very insular--like Clive Thomas's latest book on Guyana (on the rise of the authoritarian state in peripheral societies) which is really, basically, a book which has as its central core the analysis of the rise of the one-party state in Mr. Burnham's Guyana over the last twenty-five years. That's an example.

Here, it is extremely difficult to get someone from there to come here, or to get someone from here to go there, because it's either Canada or England or the United States where you can further your career structure much more readily than you can do if you decide to spend a sabbatical year in a university within the region.

The second question--my further contribution. Well, I think it's quite simply that I keep on doing what I have been doing. And I see no reason to agonize that I'm at a crossroads here.

I think when I first came to the Caribbean there was a problem. In England, nobody talks about a problem of identity for the very simple reason that because of the massive self-confidence, traditionally, of the English ruling classes, every Englishman knows who he is. By conviction, he is the master of the world! He doesn't have to argue about it. And coming into the Caribbean, I think the first real challenge that confronted me was that I had to understand that there was a pattern of identity, that the colonial person--and this is something very valuable, important, fundamental--that it meant a conscious effort of will: you had to put aside certain perceptions that you inherited (moral and social values) in order to understand and confront.
that problem. I think I've succeeded in doing that. I'm still trying.

**LF:**

To close the interview, then: Gordon, do you have any question that you would particularly like to ask George Lamming?

**GKL:**

Yes. If I want to understand the problem of the English working-class boy who is denied entry into the university, I read Jude the Obscure; if I want to understand the counterpart of the problem in the Caribbean, I read George Lamming. And so, it is this kind of reading which has helped me as a political scientist and historian to enlarge my vision of what's going on in the Caribbean.

What I'd like to ask George is perhaps a delicate question: coming back to the point where we started, the function of the novelist: how do you regard yourself in comparative terms with the elder Naipaul?

**GL:**

Well, I think that there is a fundamental difference between us in the way we conceive Caribbean society that is very fundamental and it is very polarized.

Naipaul sees it [Caribbean society] as a permanent and irreversible extension of some other world and therefore incapable of any creative alternatives of its own. I see it as a world that is unique in its formation, and that is really entering almost its first chapter of the conscious discovery of itself. That we do not yet know what this Caribbean is, and all of the work that is now being done with that regional consciousness is simply aiding the process of realizing the discovery of the Caribbean. These are two very polarized positions on that.

One of the challenges which has always confronted us is that we have been writers without a substantial reading class in our region. This reading class has expanded a little in recent times, again due to the extraordinary influence that an institution can have--the fact that there is a generation

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in the English-speaking Caribbean who knows West Indian writers has to do with the insistence of the university that they have to be known. This is the importance of an institution: it has a certain kind of prestige; the entire society looks to it for a certain guidance and a certain direction. So the university has played a very critical role in helping to create and widen that reading class.

And yet it remains constricted. So it seems to me that in order to bring the substance of the writer's work to a larger and larger body of the community, I think we're going to have to try and make more creative use of other media of communication. And here I think that the television becomes a critical function, that the only hope I can see of a mass of West Indian people getting to share how their lives have been interpreted in novels will be the televisual translation of those novels. That people may become as aware of those novels via television as today many English people for the first time have become aware of books that were once thought extremely difficult or impossible to get through or may not even have been on their agenda of reading at all. So one of my extra-literary functions is always trying to see how one can identify certain agents of authority within the wider media to bring about some form of marriage between the writers and these media of communication for a wider kind of dissemination. This is our real problem: how to disseminate and to distribute in the widest possible way a whole body of knowledge and perception that remains very restricted to a few.

LF: Thank you very much.