"CORRECTING THE BALANCE"

NALO HOPKINSON INTERVIEWED BY TERRY BISSON

Your work is often described, even by yourself, as "subverting the genre." Isn't that against the rules? Or at least rude?

Science fiction's supposed to be polite? Dang, maybe I'll take up poetry instead. To tell the truth, I kinda rue the day I ever let that quotation out into the world. I used it in a Canadian grant application fifteen years ago. In that context, when not a lot of science fiction and fantasy writers were getting grants from the arts councils because many of the jurors thought science fiction and fantasy were inherently immature, it worked. It allowed me to come out swinging and get the jury's attention. But as something said to science fiction people, it just sounds presumptuous. I don't remember how it got out of my confidential grant application and into the larger world. It was probably my own doing, and my own folly. Now the dang thing keeps coming back to haunt me. People quote it all over the place, and I can feel my face heating up with embarrassment. Science fiction and fantasy are

already about subverting paradigms. It's something I love about them.

And yet, if I'm being honest, there is some truth to that piece of braggadociousness. No one can make me give up the writing I love that's by straight, white, Western male (and female) writers, but at a certain point, I began to long to see other cultures, other aesthetics, other histories, realities, and bodies represented in force as well. There was some. I wanted more. I wanted lots more. I wanted to write some of it. I think I am doing so.

Does the title of your debut novel, Brown Girl in the Ring, *come from the game, the song, or a wish to connect with Tolkien?*

Tolkien? Ah, I get it! One brown girl to rule them all! Well, no. The song comes from the game. ("There is a brown girl in the ring, tra-la-la-la-la/and she look like a little sugar plum") It's an Anglo-Caribbean ring game, mostly played by girls. I used to play it as a little girl. All the girls hold hands to form a ring, and one girl is in the middle. When the other girls sing, "Show me your motion, tra-la-la-la-la," the girl in the centre does some kind of dance or athletic move that she figures will be difficult to copy. The rest try to copy it. She picks the one whose version she likes the best, and they switch places. And so on.

In my first novel, Ti-Jeanne the protagonist is surrounded by her life dilemmas and challenges, and things are getting worse. She's the brown girl in the ring, and she is young and untried. She herself doesn't know what she's capable of, but she needs to figure her skills out and

employ them, quickly, before she loses everything she cares about. Tra-la-la-la-la.

Who is Derek Walcott and why is he important?

Derek is a St. Lucia–born poet, a playwright, a Nobel Prize winner, and a master wordsmith. These words are his, from his poem "The Schooner *Flight*":

> I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
> I had a sound colonial education,
> I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
> and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation . . .

Doesn't that last line just fucking give you chills, coming hard on the heels of what preceded it? Goddamn. *Much* respect. Derek started and for many years was the Artistic Director of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop. My father was one of the actors and playwrights in the company. He and Walcott eventually fell out and stopped speaking to each other. But in a way, that's beside the point. Walcott and my father are two of many talented Caribbean wordsmiths whose work I was absorbing as a child.

One of Walcott's early plays was a fantastical piece called "Ti-Jean and His Brothers." I believe it was modelled on a St. Lucian folk tale. Ti-Jean ("young John") is the youngest of three brothers who set out to beat the Devil, who appears in the play as that archetypical monster, the white plantation owner. The two elder brothers fail, and it's left to Ti-Jean to save the day. At some point during the writing of my first novel, I realised that since I was writing about three generations of women who were all facing the

same central evils in their lives, there were parallels with the basic framework of "Ti-Jean and His Brothers," so I used the parallels to inform my plot. I wanted to make Walcott's influence evident, so I gave my three characters feminised versions of the brothers' names, and I embedded brief quotations from the play into my story. Walcott generously gave me his permission to do so.

Folktales are great for learning dynamic storytelling and how to structure the resonant echoes that give a plot forward motion. It wouldn't be the last time that I modelled a plot upon the shell of a preexisting folktale. I've discovered that it doesn't matter whether your readers recognise the folktale. It may not even matter whether the folktale is real, or one you invented. What matters is that it has structure, echoes, trajectory, and style.

Skin Folk *won a World Fantasy Award, and there was talk of a movie. What's up with that?*

The movie project isn't mine. The director who optioned it is the visionary Asli Dukan, of Mizan Productions. I believe the project is currently in the development stage, which means raising the money to make the film. That is the stage at which most film projects die stillborn, so if anyone who wants to see the final product is of a mind to support Asli with some hard cash, I know she'll appreciate it. Particularly when I speak at schools, people in the audience want to know whether there are going to be films of my books. Myself, I'm more jaundiced. I've seen what can happen when text-based science fiction gets zombified by Hollywood. Look at what happened to Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic."

I know. I wrote the novelization of that unfortunate script.

My condolences! I've also seen what can happen when mainstream American film and television try to depict black Caribbean people. You get the likes of Kendra the vampire slayer, Sebastian the crab from "The Little Mermaid," and the eternal disgrace that is Jar-Jar Binks. Seriously, would it be so hard to hire actors who can do accurate Caribbean accents? Though that wouldn't solve the depiction problem; mainstream American media seem to believe that Caribbean people are little more than simple-minded, marijuana-steeped clowns who say "de" instead of "the." In any case, my work isn't going to make it to the big screen any time soon, given the types of characters that are in it. It'd be a lot of money for producers to invest in a project when they're not sure there's a big enough audience out there for it.

And because people are always quick to jump down my throat whenever I talk about institutionalised discrimination, let me acknowledge that there have been a few SF/fantasy films and television programs with Caribbean characters that weren't stereotyped. Actor Sullivan Walker as Yale in the short-lived series *Earth 2*, for example. Geoffrey Holder's voice as the narrator for the 2005 *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. There are probably one or two more, but not many at all.

Some people hear me talking like this and get pissed off at me. They don't tolerate critique of the things they love. They miss the fact that I may love those things, too. I just don't think love should be blind.

Anyway, we were talking film. When directors option my stories, I'm more confident if they are

independent artists with some personal connection to some of my communities (science fiction, black, Caribbean, Canadian, queer, women, etc.). There are two other novels of mine in development: *Brown Girl in the Ring*, by Toronto's Sharon Lewis, and *The New Moon's Arms*, by Frances Anne Solomon of Toronto's Leda Serene productions. Both women, like Asli Dukan, have roots in the Caribbean.

You once identified the central question of utopia as "who's going to do the dirty work?" (Ursula Le Guin would agree.) So how would you describe Midnight Robber*'s planet Toussaint, where work is a sacrament (to some)?*

A sacrament? Did I do that? Not trying to dodge the question. Just that my memory is poor, and it's been a long, busy, often stressful few years since the time it was published. I'm trying to remember back to when I finished the novel, perhaps sometime in 1999. I suspect I hadn't yet come up with the notion that the big dilemma of science fiction is who's going to do the dirty work. I may have just begun asking myself that very question . . . ah.

I do remember this: the people of Toussaint have a maxim that backbreaking labour isn't fit for them as sentient beings. They've come from a legacy of slavery, of having been forced to do hard labour, and they're not about to forget it. But manual labour still needs to be done. So they mechanise it as much as possible. The machines that do that labour are unaware extensions of the self-aware planetary artificial intelligence that sustains their various support systems. So how you gonna keep your machine overseer down on the farm, once she's crossed the Turing

threshold? They *programme* her not to mind doing all that work. They make her like her servitude. When you think of it, our brains are also wired to respond in certain ways to certain situations. But do we get to make that decision for other creatures? You could argue that we do so all the time, through domestication and by breeding other living things for specific traits. You could argue that that doesn't count, since other animals aren't self-aware. But anyone who's ever lived in close quarters with another animal for an extended period of time can present convincing evidence that many animals are indeed self-aware. You could argue that it's okay to mess with creatures who are less intelligent than we are. But as someone with a couple of cognitive variances and as someone black and female, I have reason to be suspicious of intelligence tests. I'm not sure that we understand enough about cognition to be able to measure cognition effectively. For one thing, we're measuring it against human markers of intelligence. I wonder whether those are the only markers.

So, in *Midnight Robber*, there is a powerful human-manufactured sentience that we have programmed to love us and to want to take care of us. Was it wrong of us to do that to her? Ethically, it's a conundrum. That was deliberate on my part. The planet of Toussaint isn't exactly Utopia. I didn't solve the problem of who does the menial work. I just put it into the hands of a being that's been designed to accept those tasks. I may have had some of the human citizens voluntarily take on forms of manual labour as part of a practice of ethical mindfulness.

These are the people I meant, who see labour as a sacrament.

It's their way of acknowledging that work that looks after oneself and others isn't really beneath them. You know, something like the old proverb attributed to Buddhism: "Before Enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After Enlightenment, chop wood, carry water."

I still haven't answered the question of who does the work in a Utopia. I have an alternative history fantasy novel in progress in which I'm exploring the idea that everyone in a municipality is assigned menial tasks in a rotating schedule. But in practice, my characters have all kinds of ways of slipping out of their turn taking out the town's nightsoil or working on the building site of that new community centre. In the novel, it's a cooperative system, but not politically Socialist; I'm trying to build something a bit different than our current political paradigms. I'm not quite happy with it yet as a world-building element.

My partner tells me I need to wrestle with systems of exchange in return for labour, money being the primary one that we use in this world. I need to look at effective alternatives to money. I'm daunted by that, but he's right.

You have a lot of uncollected short stories. Any plans for them?

Un*collected*, yes, but all but one of them have been published. I've actually collected them up into a manuscript, which I plan to submit to a publisher soon. Honestly, it's the formatting that's slowing me down, and the thought of writing intros to each story. Maybe I don't have to do that last bit.

You often speak of putting the "threads" of a story into a "weave." Not uncommon, yet from you it seems something more than metaphor. How did you get into fabric design?

On a lark, thanks to a company called Spoonflower which came along to take advantage of new technologies of printing with ink on fabric. Spoonflower's website democratises the process and makes it easy for someone with basic image editing skills to dabble in fabric design. They've built an online community of people interested in cool fabric. We range from hobbyists to professionals. We talk to one another, vote on one another's designs, and buy fabric to sew. It's like print-on-demand for fabric.

I sew as a hobby; have done since I was a teenager. When I hit the fashion-conscious teen years and my desire for new clothes outstripped my parents' income, they bought me a sewing machine. My mother taught me how to use it. It was an extraordinarily frustrating learning curve for someone with undiagnosed ADHD. Once, I glued the seams of a blouse because I was too impatient to stitch them. My mother was horrified. But I did learn how to sew, and how to get to a place of patience around it (plus some time-saving tricks that kept me from going supernova). Since then, I've always had a sewing machine. I have an ever-growing collection of clothing patterns, some dating back to the 1930s. I'm a big girl, almost always have been. There was a time when attractive clothing at reasonable prices just wasn't available for larger women. Being able to sew meant that I could make my own. It's easier now to find nonhideous off-the-rack clothing in my size, but when you make it yourself, the fit can be better, the clothing more unique.

Now that I can design my own fabric and have the designs printed, I can create and use iconography I don't find on store-bought fabric. Ever since I was a child, I've been hesitant to wear images of non-black people on my body. Not because I hate white people, or some rubbish like that, but because I wanted to be able to love black people and my own blackness. Nowadays, you can find fabric with images of black people on it that doesn't make you want to go postal, but good lord, does it ever tend toward the twee! I prefer images with a bit more bite, a bit more perversity, and a bit less saccharin.

I can make science fiction and fantasy imagery, too, that isn't all unicorns with flowing manes on a background of rainbow-coloured stars. I adapt a lot of historical imagery, and my own photographs as well, and sometimes I draw. I know nothing about design, and I haven't conjured up the patience to learn. I make fabric designs by trial and error. Some of them are hideous. Some of them are just okay, and some of them are successful. I'm always a bit surprised when someone who doesn't know me buys fabric from my online Spoonflower store: (http://www.spoonflower.com/profiles/nalo_hopkinson)

I make stuff. I was a craftsperson and did a lot of my own cooking long before I took up writing. I have my mother to thank for showing me that it was possible to make things for pleasure, for sustenance, and to save money. Come the zombie apocalypse, I know I'll have some survival skills to offer.

*You have edited several anthologies (*Mojo: Conjure Stories, So Long Been Dreaming*, etc.). Is this part of a plot to wedge more black and female writers into the genre until they*

outnumber, overwhelm, and eventually drive out the white men? Or not?

Good lord, you've sussed out my cunning plan for world domination! Excuse me for a second while I go work some obeah to keep you quiet. Please ignore the toad and the padlock lurking behind the curtain. Okay, I'm back. That toad's never gonna croak again. So. How does trying to foster a more representative literary field translate to wanting to exclude white male writers? How would that be representative? I mean, I'm bad at math, but I'm not that damned bad at it.

Just now, once I was done burning a candle of a particular colour and padlocking a toad's lips shut, I glanced at the pile of books beside my desk. Among them are titles by Gene Wolfe, Steven Gould, Rudyard Kipling, China Miéville, Stieg Larsson, Hal Duncan, Charlie Stross, George R.R. Martin, Kim Stanley Robinson, and a certain Terry Bisson.

Whew. Frankly, you gave me quite a turn with the intimation that white male authors were in danger of extinction. If that were true, we'd have to immediately start the Society for the Protection of White Male Writers. We'd get a Board of Directors together, and we'd do a fundraising drive on Kickstarter, and make depositions to all the major publishing houses, and hand out T-shirts with our logo on them, and infiltrate government, media, the churches, and the multinationals. We'd become so ubiquitous that pretty soon, people would cease referring to us by our full name—TSFTPOWMW is so unwieldy, don't you think?—Instead, they'd just refer us as Society. Oh, wait . . .

I get it. You would have the status quo.

You said it, not me. Anyway, beside my bed are also books by Liz Hand, Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, Madeleine E. Robins, Nisi Shawl, Ivan E. Coyote, Ayize Jama-Everett, Barbara Lalla, Olive Senior, and Rabindranath Maharaj. That list comprises some women, some black folks, white folks, multiracial folks, South Asian, queer, Canadian, Jamaican, and Trinidadian writers. They are for the most part books I had to go a bit out of my way to find, which meant that I had to figure out where to look.

There are a lot of readers who pride themselves on not paying attention to the identities of their favourite writers. Some of them think this means that they're not prejudiced. I don't know anyone who isn't, myself included. But let's just say for argument's sake that those particular readers in fact are not prejudiced. How many books by writers of colour do you think you'll find on their bookshelves? I'd lay odds that if there are any at all, they will be far outnumbered by the books by white authors. Not necessarily because those readers are deliberately choosing mostly white/male authors. They don't have to. The status quo does it for them. So those readers' self-satisfied "I don't know" is really an "I don't care enough to look beyond my nose."

And that's cool. So many causes, so little time. But don't pretend that indifference and an unwillingness to make positive change constitute enlightenment. If you truly want to be a colourblind, unprejudiced reader, you can't do so from a place of being racism-blind, or you'll never have the diverse selection of authors you say you'd

like. Why get pissed off at people who are fighting for the very thing you say you want?

Yet I don't think there's some conspiracy of evil racist editors. There doesn't have to be. The system has its own momentum. In order to be antiracist, you actually have to choose to do something different than the status quo. People who're trying to make positive change (editors and publishers included) have a hell of a battle. Fighting it requires a grasp of how the complex juggernaut of institutionalised marginalisation works, and what types of intervention will, by inches, bring that siege engine down.

We're in a genre that is heavily invested in the romance of the individual villain and the lone hero who defeats that villain. We want to know who the bad guy is. Dammit, we want someone to blame! And there are people who say and do racist things, consciously in ignorance. You can try to change them, or to limit the harm they do. These are useful and necessary actions. But pulling the weed doesn't destroy the root system, and what do you do when you realise that we are all in some way part of that system? I don't know all the answers. I'm sure that some of what I say here is going to come back to haunt me with its ignorance or naiveté. Remember when Robert Silverberg published that essay about why the stories of James R. Tiptree, Jr. (pen name of Alice Sheldon) could only have been written by a man? I'm impressed by how graciously he later acknowledged that he'd been wrong. That's a grace to which I aspire. I have a feeling I'll need it.

There are those who fear that if books get published according to some kind of identity-based quota system, literary excellence will suffer. What seems to be buried in the shallow grave of that concept is the assumption that

there are no good writers in marginalised communities. That huge prejudice aside, there is some validity to the fear. If you want to vary your diet, you put a larger selection of foods into your mouth. You don't toss vitamins into the toilet. The latter would be attacking the problem from the wrong end.

So to speak. So what would be attacking the problem from the right end?

A few years ago, when I was about to put out the call for submissions to the anthology *Mojo: Conjure Stories*, I had two equal priorities that the received wisdom in this field says are antithetical: I wanted to choose stories based on the quality of the writing; and I wanted to end up with an anthology (about an African diasporic form of magic) that would actually contain a lot of stories by black writers.

It took me some hard thinking to figure out the flaw in the logic that leads people to think that antiracist diversity and literary quality are mutually exclusive. This is what I came up with: there are many steps to editing an anthology, and they have different priorities. Efforts to broaden the representation have to happen at the beginning of the process, not at the stage where you're selecting for literary quality. If I wanted black writers to send me their stories, I'd have to specifically invite them. And in an effort to right the systemic imbalance in numbers, I'd have to invite more of them than of anyone else. If I wanted the participation of non-black writers (and I did), I'd need to invite the ones that I felt were creatively up to the task.

I knew that statistically speaking, if you invite people to something, one-fifth of them will attend. I knew

that I had room for roughly twenty stories in the anthology. I multiplied that number by five, and so decided I would solicit stories from more than a hundred writers. "More than" because I knew I would reject some of the stories as unsuitable.

Then I made two lists of writers to invite who I thought could handle the material well: one of writers I knew to be black, and one of writers I knew to be non-black, or whose race I didn't know for sure; after all, some writers don't place a focus on their racial identities, and that is their right. I listed twice as many black writers as those in the second group. In a way, you could say that I deliberately did the opposite of what would have happened in our current context of institutionalised racism if I hadn't thought about who I was inviting. Some might call that reverse racism. I think it was more in the way of revers*ing* racism (grammar's so important, don't you think?), if only for a small space of time in a temporarily and very conditionally autonomous zone.

I sent out the invitations, crossed my fingers, and waited nervously until the submission deadline. There was a chance it wouldn't work. The law of averages means that efforts to even out that kind of imbalance work in the aggregate, not necessarily in every single instance. I had to take that chance, and to also take the chance that if it didn't work out, I'd face disapproval from some of the black readers in the field. Part of the job. At least I could say that I'd tried.

Once the stories were in, I read them and picked the ones I thought were strong, no matter who the writer was. Much of the time I wilfully disremembered the writer's name until I'd read their story; my natural forgetfulness

comes in handy that way. I tried to read cover letters only after I'd read the attached stories. I didn't pay much attention to who was going to be in the anthology until I'd assembled the stories I wanted in the order I wanted. I believe that in fact I didn't assess it until I'd submitted the anthology to my editor and she'd accepted it. I'd have to recheck in order to verify this, but I think that about 50 percent of the contributors to *Mojo: Conjure Stories* are black.

I'm glad it worked. It was probably my first lesson that demarginalisation has to start at the organisational/systemic level. Trying to do it person by person is starting too late in the process. Individuals are going to have a hard time making change if they're not receiving organisational support. You start as early on in the process as you can.

To certain white male writers I'd like to say, when those around you try to wrestle with issues of entitlement and marginalisation, please don't give us the tired trumpeting of "Censorship! No one can tell me what to write!" True, people *shouldn't* tell you what to write, but people will try to, for bad reasons and better ones. Your mother will try to tell you what to write or not write. Your husband will. Your editor, your government, your church, your readers, your nosy neighbour. Humans are an argumentative lot. Dealing with that as a writer comes with the territory.

Those books by my bedside? They include a book written by a white man about a white woman, one by a white man about South Asian people, one by a white woman about a black woman, one by an American about a Londoner, one by a black woman and a white woman

about, oh, everybody; I could go on. Write whatever the blast you want, and if you live in an environment where doing so doesn't endanger your life or career, count yourself blessed.

When I hear a (usually white and usually male) writer trying to shut down a discussion about representation by bellowing that no one should tell him what to write, it sounds very much as though he's trying to change the topic, to make it all about him. To him I'd say, why not try to further the discussion, rather than trying to, um, censor it? What do you think needs to be done in order to make publishing more representative? Nothing, you say? The doors are already open but we just won't come in? Women, black people (and purple polka-dotted meercats) actually "just don't write much science fiction"? Or their books are "only relevant to their communities" (which is often code for "those people are incapable of producing anything of real literary merit")?

Funny, how every one of those statements boils down to not being willing to change the status quo. You do realise that you're even drowning out the white voices amongst you that are trying to make some changes along with the rest of us? You do realise that a more representative literary field would be representative of *all* of us, yourself included?

Sure, there are people on both sides of that discussion who are full of crap. But as a smart white man once said, "Ninety percent of everything is crap." The crap doesn't invalidate the discussion.

Oy, I'm ranting again! This is what happens when you ask me to be an "outspoken author."

In Midnight Robber *the naming (and renaming) of things seems to be an important part of the story. (Granny Nanny instead of "electronic overlord" or some such.) What exactly are you "subverting" here?*

In my novel, Granny Nanny is a supercomputer that loves us. That's not new. She's like a planet-sized Tardis. The difference may be that the way in which I describe her is culturally specific. Granny Nanny is named after Nanny of the Maroons, a seventeenth-century African freedom fighter from Jamaica. She is one of our national heroes. In a West African diasporic linguistic context, Granny/Nana/Nanny don't necessarily designate a sweet, harmless old lady who bakes you cookies. It's a term of respect for a female elder, for a woman who has more years and more life experience than you do. Granny Nanny—the woman, not the A.I.—led an insurgency that fought off British soldiers and eventually gained freedom for a Maroon community in the hills of Jamaica. The soldiers were convinced that she could catch their bullets between her ass cheeks and fart them back like a machine gun. She was an Afro-Jamaican woman guerrilla strategist on horseback, and I enjoyed invoking her memory in a science fiction novel. A lot of the time, all I'm trying to do is put some of my specific ethnocultural touchstones into science fiction and fantasy. When white writers do that, it's barely remarked-upon. And sometimes it should be, because it's often wonderful.

Your literary background runs both wide and deep, from Russian lit to Shakespeare to classic SF to Caribbean folklore. How do the artist and the scholar get along in Nalo's head? Heart?

I'm not a scholar. That implies in-depth, perhaps guided study. I skim. I'm more along the lines of a knowledge geek who's been exposed to a lot of different cultures. They all get along well in both my head and my heart, but it often means that people don't pick up on all the references I'm making. I try to be aware of that when I'm writing. Sometimes I try to make sure that it doesn't matter if a reader doesn't get all the references. Sometimes I try to make it a bit of a game for the readers who don't know a particular reference, as well as a kind of in-joke for those who do.

Do you read comics—excuse me, graphic novels?

I do, whatever one calls them. My partner and I are verrrry slooooowly working on creating one. Some of my favourites are Love and Rockets, Bayou, Finder, Le Chat du Rabbin, The Invisibles, Dykes to Watch Out For, *Fun Home*, and Calvin and Hobbes. The superhero comics from the Big Two mostly make me twitchy and cranky, though I'll usually go to the spin-off movies. The films make me equally twitchy and cranky, but there's my fannish pleasure in watching impossible science and impossibly beautiful people blow impossible shit up real good. And they give me lots of food for thought and ranting about everything from bad physics (when I can pick up on the incorrect science in a film, it's *really* fucking incorrect) to messed-up gender politics. Comics thrill me. They make me wish I were a comic artist.

You are often called a magical realist. Is that just a euphemism for fantasy, like speculative fiction for SF? Or does it actually get at something?

I haven't read tons of magical realism. I don't have as informed a feel for what magical realist writing does as I do for fantasy and SF. I sometimes feel that in magical realism (in literature, not in art), the supernatural elements are conceits that don't have to be followed through as rigorously as we demand from fantasy. It seems to me that in magical realism, the story as a whole takes precedence. The supernatural elements are only one of its parts. In fantasy, the fantastical elements are as central as plot and character. I think.

I love your description of geeks as people who "know too much about too many things that other people don't care about." What then are literary snobs?

I think the main difference is that all geeks aren't snobs, whereas all snobs are snobs.

Do you read V.S. Naipaul? Do you like Naipaul?

I read his earlier short story collection *Miguel Street* over and over when I was a kid. I really liked it. I think it still holds up fairly well, but I haven't read his newer work. He is, of course, notorious amongst his fellow Caribbean writers and everyone else for his outrageously racist and sexist statements. I don't like those. But I find him easy to ignore.

What kind of car do you drive? (I ask every author this.)

I don't have a car. You don't need one in Toronto. I believe the last time I owned a car was twenty-three years ago. I don't remember what kind it was. It was red. I hated it. I don't like cars. I don't like the expense, the maintenance, the danger of driving them, what they've done to the planet. Now that I spend part of the year in Southern California, I may have to get a car. This part of the world is built around the assumption of people having cars. It's difficult to get around without one and I have fibromyalgia. I get tired.

James Joyce never went back to Ireland. Do you see yourself growing old in Canada, or in the Caribbean? (Or growing old at all?)

I don't know where I'll grow old. Perhaps moving back and forth between a couple of places. The Caribbean is the home of my heart, but no one place has everything I'd want as a permanent home. Wherever it is, it'll probably be a big, socially progressive city with lots of cultural, linguistic, ethnic and racial variety, lots of black people, a mild climate, and a large body of water nearby. I haven't yet found a city that has all those things. I do plan on growing old, and I'm simultaneously terrified of it. I'm fifty-one years old, and the past few years as I entered what may be the latter half of my life were hellish. I experienced escalating illness, which led to destitution, homelessness, and near loss of my career as a writer. Things seem to be stabilizing now. I'm addressing the health concerns that can be addressed, I'm writing again, and I now have

a professorship that is going a long way toward stabilizing my income. My primary (life) partner and I not only stayed together during those horrible years, but I think our relationship came out of it stronger. That in itself is a miracle, and unutterably precious. And yet I'm constantly aware that it's all temporary, that getting older will probably bring more and perhaps worse physical affliction to me and to my loved ones. Certainly, the longer I stay alive, it'll mean losing more and more of the people I love. I think of those afflictions and losses to come, and it makes me frantic with terror. I'm trying to remember that there will also be lots to gain in those years: new friends, new experiences, new competencies, new joys.

When you teach writing, what do you teach? What do you un-teach?

Nowadays, I'm all about architecture and integrity. A story has to be given a deliberate shape that hopefully has some structural integrity and architectural wonder, and it has to be in dynamic movement along a trajectory. Is "dynamic movement" a tautology? I mean there should be pacing. I'm also all about allowing the reader to inhabit the body of a point-of-view character and experience the physicality of her or his world. I try to un-teach the notion that a story is something told to a passive listener. I try to get my students out of the point-of-view character's head and more into that character's physical sensations. I try to model my love of words and meaning. I try to show them that editing is the fun part. It's the part where your word baby develops fingers and toes and eyes and starts looking back at you and reaching for things.

And being me, I'm now thinking about just how ableist a metaphor that is.

Did you initially see SF and Fantasy as a gateway, or as a castle to be stormed? How has that perception changed?

That's a fascinating question. As neither. I think. You can breach gateways and storm castles, or enter gateways and inhabit castles. Maybe this is trite, but science fiction is a universe.

You totally work magic with titles: "Greedy Choke Puppy," "Ours Is the Prettiest," etc. At what point in the creative process does the title come to you?

Thank you! Often before the rest of the story. The title's sort of the distilled version of what the story wants to be. Before I quite know what the story is, the title whispers hints to me.

I like that. Now here's my Jeopardy item. I provide the answer, and you provide the question. The answer is: Because they can.

Why do cops routinely brutalise people? Why do bumblebees fly? Why do humans make art?

In the postscript to your ICFA speech, you took someone to task for separating Art and Labour. True, both are work. But isn't there an important difference or two?

Both are work, and both can be art. Hopefully, you're being paid for both. (And thanks for granting me that "u" in "Labour.")

Are you a Marxist?

No.

Three favorite movies?

Quilombo, by Carlos Diegues
Pumzi, by Wanuri Kahiu
Lilies, by John Greyson

You seem to have stolen from Shakespeare (literature's master thief) in "Shift." What does a reader who hasn't read The Tempest *need to know?*

Let's see . . . in the play, Prospero is a rich white duke who's been exiled to a small island with his beautiful daughter Miranda. There he finds an ethereal fairy named Ariel who's been trapped inside a split tree by a white Algerian (African) witch named Sycorax. Sycorax had been exiled to the island earlier, while pregnant with her son Caliban. Sycorax has died, leaving Ariel imprisoned and Caliban abandoned. Prospero frees Ariel and requires her servitude in return, but promises to release her eventually. Prospero takes Caliban in and teaches him to read, but when Caliban attempts to rape Miranda, Prospero makes him a slave (as in, no promise of release). Ariel gets all the flitting-about jobs and Caliban gets all the hard labour. Prospero repeatedly ridicules Caliban. Ariel helps Prospero and Miranda get off the island, and thus wins freedom. I think we're supposed to identify with Prospero and Miranda, but I was disturbed by Ariel's servitude and Caliban's slavery, and even though Prospero eventually pardons Caliban, I had trouble with the play's relentless mockery of Caliban as a "savage."

A few years ago I was visiting Kamau Brathwaite's literature class at NYU, and they were discussing Caliban. I had the insight that Ariel and Caliban could be seen as the house Negro and the field Negro, and I proceeded to mess with the story from there.

Someone once defined a language as a dialect with a navy. Would you agree?

I don't know if I agree, but it's hilarious! Whoever it was has a point.

Do you read poetry for fun? How about science? History?

Although my father was a poet and I know much of his work, I used to think that I didn't read a lot of poetry. But then I had occasion to check my bookshelves and discovered that I owned more poetry than I thought, and had read most of it.

I'd forgotten about children's poetry ("The more it snows, tiddly pom . . ."), not to mention Louise Bennett and Kamau Brathwaite, and Marge Piercy and Homer, and Lillian Allen and Dennis Scott, and, and, and . . .

There are poems I can recite by heart, and as a kid I read *The Odyssey, The Iliad*, and Dante's *Inferno* for pleasure; read them over and over, in fact. I don't think I could struggle through Homer nowadays, but I was more persistent as a child.

I do end up hearing a fair bit of poetry, as readings or spoken word or dub poetry performances, and as music. It's rare that I'll read a whole book of poetry from end to end as fun, but in sips and nibbles, I do read it. And

I read science and history for fun as well as for research. Michio Kaku. *African Fractals*. *Death in the Queen City*. I also read critical theory for fun, and to find out what the hell it is that we writers are doing when we write. When it comes to fiction, I mostly read science fiction, fantasy and comics, plus the occasional mystery or erotica/porn piece. But my nonfiction reading is more catholic.

Do you think the World Fantasy Award should be a bust of someone other than H.P. Lovecraft?

I have one of those. In appreciation for the merit of my work, the World Fantasy Award committee has given me a bust of a man who publicly reviled people of my primary racial background and who believed that we are by nature inferior to other humans. It is way creepy having racist old H.P. Lovecraft in my home looking at me.

I don't like the fact that the bust is of him, but I love having the award. So I console myself in a number of ways: it was designed by Gahan Wilson, and how freaking cool is that? Lovecraft's own (part-Jewish) wife and his friends thought his racism was over the top. I gather his wife frequently called him to heel when he made anti-Semitic remarks; and I like imagining that Lovecraft is spinning in his grave as he's forced to view the world through the eyes of his statuettes placed in the homes and offices of the likes of Nnedimma Okorafor, Kinuko Y. Craft, S.P. Somtow, Haruki Murakami, Neil Gaiman, and me.

I think the award should represent a fantastical creature, perhaps a different one every year. (I know that's probably too expensive, but since I'm fantasizing here . . .) A kitsune. A troll. A chupacabra. Anansi. A fat, happy mermaid with fish in her hair.

Do you outline plots, or just wing it? Ever write in longhand?

Nowadays, I have to write proposals for unwritten novels in order to sell them. I don't outline, at least not whole novels at a time. I tend to do it when I get stuck. I rarely write longhand. I type much more quickly. Plus I lose paper, whereas I rarely lose my computer or laptop.

Do you have trouble with copy editors, or rely on them?

Both. Being copyedited is an occasion for taking a lot of calming breaths when I encounter wrongheaded or ignorant suggestions, but also for gasps of relief when the copy editor catches something unfortunate in my text, or makes a suggestion that lends a clumsy line grace. It also gives me an early insight into how my story is being understood, which means I still have time to make small adjustments. In my new young adult novel, *The Chaos*, I invented (I thought) the name of a pop star. The copy editor thought to Google the name, and discovered that it's the performance name of a porn star. Not an issue for me, except that she was not the character in my novel. I came up with another name.

You once described a first draft as clay. I like that. Can you describe your general procedure in writing fiction? Do you try to always sit in the same chair?

I don't. Sometimes I don't even have a desk at which to sit. I write and edit on my computer or laptop. I try to write in the early part of the day, since my mental energy peters out towards night-time. I try to start with a

solid meal before I take the ADHD meds which help my concentration. If I don't eat that first meal, the meds take away my appetite (but not my hunger), and by early afternoon my brain is so overclocked it's like bees buzzing in my head and I'm so ravenous I'm dizzy, but food tastes like ashes in my mouth. I usually need my surroundings to be relatively quiet. I generally can only go for short bursts, between fifteen minutes and an hour. I spend way more time trying to make myself sit and write than I do actually writing. It's pretty painful, but I give myself less grief now that I know it's how my brain is wired. The meds do help me to stop procrastinating and to focus. I've heard lots of people say that they fear that ADHD meds will ruin their creativity, but for me, they are creativity aids. They help me to slow my thoughts down enough to register new ideas, and they give me enough concentration to write those ideas down.

I write scenes more or less in sequential order, but if I get stuck, I'll jump ahead to a scene that feels more tasty. If required, I'll backfill the rest in later. It's interesting, how often I find I don't need to backfill.

Another thing I do when I get stuck is to step away from the laptop and go do something physical that I don't have to think about: wash dishes, go for a walk. My mind goes musing and I often come up with solutions that way. Or I'll try to describe the problem to someone. Sometimes the very act of doing so helps me solve the problem before I can finish articulating it to the other person, who's then left frustrated as I waft back to my computer in a creative trance. I use manuscript organizing software such as Scrivener. That allows me to see all the scenes at a glance, and to map out, shape, and move elements of the story

around until they click into place. When I'm in Toronto, I'll often meet my friend, writer Emily Pohl-Weary, at a local library. She's the granddaughter of Judy Merrill and Fred Pohl, and a bitchin' writer in her own right. We'll take our laptops and each work on our own stuff for about three hours. We do goof off, but I get a fair bit of writing done in her company. I miss Emily.

Clute? Delany? Steampunk? Butler? Le Guin? Each in one sentence please.

Clute's critical writing makes terrifyingly astute art.

Delany: All hail the King.

Butler: I wish more people would talk about the ways in which she messes with normative sexualities, and I miss her very much and I don't care that that's really two sentences masquerading as one.

Steampunk: Cool gadgets, cool clothes, but whose hands assemble the materials?

Le Guin can make me cry with the simplest, seemingly inconsequential sentence.

You once said, "Fiction is NOT autobiography in a party dress." Okay. Then what is it?

It's what happens after you grind up a bunch of your personally received input, everything from life experience to that book about spices you read ten years ago, compost it within your imagination, and then in that mulch grow something new. I think that could even apply to autobiographical fiction.

You claim to have grown up in a culture without strict boundaries between literatures. Really? Not even between "high" and "low" art?

Yup. You can absolutely find that kind of snobbery in Afro-Caribbean culture, but it feels mostly toothless. The borders aren't as strictly policed. It's possible to have a literary conference in which both Nobel laureate Derek Walcott and dancehall singer-songwriter Lady Saw are headliners, plus bell hooks. In North America, there's no way that what I write would be considered in the same breath as, say, Michael Ondaatje's work. In the Caribbean, genre distinctions seem less important. Part of it might be that we don't have "alternative" culture in the way that it manifests in Eurocentric cultures. As far as I know, there is no Caribbean equivalent of the hipster, or the science fiction fan, or the zinester. Perhaps that's because we're already marginalised from dominant Western culture, so we don't need or don't have the luxury of subdividing along minute genre fractures. There aren't enough publishers to have that kind of specialisation. The focus tends to be more on what each work is trying to achieve than on what genre it's in.

Your SF background seems heavily post–New Wave (1960s). Did you ever read the "Golden Age" all-guy crew like Heinlein, Clarke, Simak, Bradbury?

Absolutely, and still do. One of the proudest days of my life was when I got my mother to read Bradbury's *R Is for Rocket*. Her verdict? "But it's not about rockets and robots, it's about people!" I agreed.

You could easily (well, maybe not easily, but brilliantly) teach modern literature as well as writing. Given the choice, which would you prefer?

Thanks for the compliment. I couldn't, though. Geoff Ryman, now, he's brilliant at both.

In New York, I worked with some taxi mechanics from Guyana. Saturdays, they drank Teacher's and played cricket in the parking lot. What's the deal with cricket anyway?

Lord alone knows. My dad was a big cricket fan. Cricket to me is golf as a team sport, with better outfits, that goes on for what seems weeks. Just give me the Teacher's. Lots of it, if you're going to make me watch cricket. Yes, I am a bad West Indian.