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# A Conversation with Velma Pollard

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## A CONVERSATION WITH VELMA POLLARD

BY DARYL C. DANCE

Noted poet, novelist, linguist, and educator, Velma Pollard was Visiting Professor of English at the University of Richmond in Richmond, Virginia, during the fall semester of 2001 when I conducted the following interview. John Martin, my graduate assistant at the time, assisted me in videotaping and transcribing our conversation, which took place in her cottage at the University on December 3, 2001.

DD: Velma, thank you for this opportunity to talk with you. I want to start by having you tell me how it came to be that your family produced two talented and prolific writers such as yourself and your sister Erna [Brodber].

VP: Not to forget my brother Everton, who has written a number of things.

DD: Okay.

VP: I don't really know. I can only say that we grew up in an environment which I *now* realize was an artistic environment, like my father was a member of a rural drama group. And we used to get bit parts in these little

productions that were done. And my parents were always *reading*. I have said, almost as often as my sister has perhaps commented on the topic, when Vic Reid's *New Day* came out, it was being read, chapter by chapter, as it came out in the *Gleaner*. My parents would read to each other, and their *excitement* at what Vic was doing with the language! And they spoke of him as "Vic," as if they knew him—and they didn't. I came to know him later, but they certainly didn't know him, but he was like, he was a household word, like a friend, not a writer.

And my mother used to get a package from the public library, twelve and a half miles away. It would come through the mail on a Friday night, with books that she had sent to borrow and then she would send them back, and they would send another package.

DD: Did you, early on, start writing poems and stories?

VP: Poems. I got a First Prize for a poem when I was seven, I think, and they put it up in the school, you know, they put it on the wall, in what we called the Annual Eisteddfod, a sort of open day.

DD: How much of an influence have you been on each other?

VP: Not much, except as a *support*. And in the inscription to *Myal*, I think it is, my sister writes that had it not been for my confidence, she would not have become an artist. Mainly because I was the person who lifted *Jane and Louisa*.

DD: Yes, tell us about that.

VP: Well, I came and found her with this *manuscript*, and I said, well—"came" meaning I had been living in Guyana—so, after *three* years, I came home and she had this manuscript, and I said, "Well, I'm going to make twelve copies of it and send it around." Which I did. And I got some comments.

DD: Let me ask you first if she had asked you to read it, or did you just come across it?

VP: I can't remember. I was living in Guyana, but I knew, for example, that she had won Bronze and, I think, Silver Medals for poetry in the Jamaica Arts Annual. What is it called now? I think it is Annual Festival Competition. And I had sent her a page of *Karl*—the first page. She *sent* me back and said, "But you can *write!* Why don't you send this to the Festival Committee," whatever. But one of the rules was that you had to be living in Jamaica. So I couldn't do it. But in that way, we have been encouragement for each other.

I *can't* remember the first time I saw anything she had written. I do remember coming to Jamaica in 1974 and reading some great poetry that she was writing.

DD: But she never publishes poetry?

VP: No, she got the prizes for the poetry, and then she just, sort of—I don't know if she stopped writing it or if she just got caught up—

DD: But let me take you back to *Jane and Louisa*. Tell us about—

VP: Oh, it's just that I got twelve copies made and I sent them out to a *number* of people. Some answered, some didn't. But among those who answered and was *very* excited was Gordon Rohlehr. And we talked and thought that it should go to [New] Beacon [Books]. Partly because he knew John [La Rose] and I knew him. Turns out that I was going to London—I'm trying to remember what year that is, it must have been, maybe 1979—because, you know, on the campus we tend to go abroad in the summer to use libraries. Some people go to the States, but I was going to SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), because I was working on *Dread Talk*, among other things, and I wanted to find out about language in Ethiopia. And, *almost* anything you want to do about Africa—and I think I was already working on my thesis (which has to do with Jamaican Creole and African influences and ties with the languages of Africa)—you could find there. So I had a lot of work to do. I took the pack-



age myself and took it to John, and, and he read it. The rest is history.

DD: Yes, yes. Okay, earlier generations of West Indian writers were educated as minorities in exile in cold lands like England and America and Canada. You were privileged to be a part of that first large segment of talented young West Indians who did not go abroad to college, but attended the newly established University College of the West Indies in Mona. What did it mean to be a part of a community that included at one time (and I just want to list these names; you can add others), but it's just amazing to me that during a period of about ten years, in the '50s, there were people like Derek Walcott, Orlando Patterson, Jean D'Costa, Garth St. Omer, Sylvia Wynter, John Hearne, Slade Hopkinson, and Mervyn Morris?

VP: Eddie Baugh. Well, the thing is—we did not know we were artists. We did not know we were going to be spoken about or written about—I don't think. Perhaps Derek would have known that he would be written about, because by the time he came to campus he had published at least one volume of poetry that had been sold out. So *he* knew. Now, Brathwaite was not on the campus with us; he was at Cambridge.

DD: But he came to teach [at UWI].

VP: He came, yes, but that's twelve years later. He would have missed Slade, Derek, for starters. But the rest of us were there and around the place. But as I said, apart from Slade and Derek, who, when we were on campus—I think it was while we were on campus—Slade published a volume of his poetry, too. And they were doing lots of work, in *drama* as well. So *those* two, it was clear, were going to make it.

DD: But you were forming relationships with people that you would *later* collaborate with, and—

VP: Sort of, and we were, they were aware that there were little people around writing. Like I know that Derek was aware of Jean D'Costa, and *later*, *much* later, he was

aware of Lorna Goodison. We had something called "Scribblers' Group," which met—I can't remember, now, it's so long ago. Some people like Mervyn, Eddie, and some other people would meet—and I do remember Eric King getting a poem from a friend of his who was in Guyana who had not come to university, Wordsworth McAndrew, and having it read for us to talk about it. So that it, the bands, spread even further than the campus. There was no reason for it to feel, any way, until much *later*. You know, like, people keep asking me, "So, people like you and Olive—?" Well, Olive was not always on the campus, but she always lived in the area.

DD: Olive Senior?

VP: Yes, uh-huh—"How did you all get together about poetry?" And the truth is we never got together about poetry—We got together about soup, for example. (laughter)

DD: Soup?

VP: Yes, Olive Senior makes a *mean* soup! On a Saturday, you could go to her house and you *know* you would get a *wonderful* soup—and she would make, like, potato bread and pumpkin bread and so on. So we used to meet over things like that, but I don't remember us talking about literature.

DD: But those friendships have blossomed into, sort of, literary collaborations and so forth, have they not?

VP: Not really.

DD: I mean, you and Jean D'Costa did a book together.

VP: Yes, okay. Yes, but that's partly because both Jean and I were concerned with the education part. That's a different aspect of our lives, in a way, because I was teaching teachers, and Jean was on a committee for most of her time in Jamaica—on a committee that the Ministry put together; you know, you always have university people on committees responsible for curriculum change. So she and I were both very *concerned* about what was in the schools, and that's how we came to put that collection together.

DD: Let me ask you if at that time—you felt *privileged* to be studying in Kingston? Or were you disappointed that you didn't go off to Oxford?

VP: Oh, I was privileged to be studying in Kingston, and I remember Vic Reid, whose daughter Shirley Reid was on campus with me, and she had got one of the big scholarships—you know, the Jamaica Scholarship, which will take you to England or to wherever—and he said “No, you—you are not going anywhere beside Jamaica.” Later she went for further work in England, but I think as part of that group that was privileged to do at least a first degree in Jamaica—I didn't even *think* of England. Actually, I must tell you that when they interviewed me for the exhibition to go to UWI, they asked me what I would do if I didn't get it. I said, well, I'd go to America and wash dishes and put myself through school. Because that is the vision we had of America. That, you know, we thought it was a hardship post, at least people like me, because in my family, I had cousins who had gone that route, and we knew it was a hardship route. So I wasn't interested in *hardship*, right? (laughter) I was *very* happy to be on the campus, and I think we all were.

DD: Let me get out of the way two of the themes in Caribbean literature that I know you get tired of talking about—exile and the efforts to return.

VP: Well, *exile*, if by “exile,” well, I don't know how to treat the word “exile” because a lot of people consider themselves exiles. I think of “exile” as someone who has been *forced* out of a country. I think that this term now, is, is—you know, people in exile are not allowed to come back! The people who are using the term can come back every time they want.

DD: Right, but they speak of themselves as exiled, sometimes. But let's not quibble about the language. Let's talk about—

VP: You mean those who are writing outside?

DD: Exactly. And the literature that deals so often—so many of the first novels, it seems, deal with people [from the Caribbean living] in England.

VP: Right, well the first novels, and I don't think that those people—well, I was about to say that they thought of themselves as exiles. They thought of themselves, certainly, I think, they thought of themselves as people who had gone away to try to live off their writing, partly. When Brathwaite went, he went to school, he went to university. I think Lamming went as an adult to be able to write, because there is *no* way he could have made a living as a writer in the Caribbean. Certainly in England he could get a job with the BBC or whatever.

DD: Or even to get published.

VP: Well, yes, in those days—

DD: They packed their manuscript up, like C. L. R. James—

VP: Well, Walcott has his own published right here, but the older people really would have had—There was no publisher in the Caribbean then, as far as I can remember. And they really went to be able to make it, I think. I don't know whether they would have gone, had they not been writers. Certainly Michael Anthony would have, because he went, not as a writer—he went and then ended up—I remember well the story he told me—was he here at some point?

DD: Yes, he spent a semester here [at the University of Richmond].

VP: Right, I think—he said that he was working in a printery, I think, and I can't remember the story, but it was a *chance* story, you know, that he wrote something for—something he saw advertised and somebody in the printery found out that he was the person who had written it. In other words—

DD: An accidental beginning of a career. It happens. Something like Ralph Ellison started—

VP: Sort of! Yes. So it was opportunity. But I think that England meant opportunity, not only for writers, but for everybody. I mean, the 50s saw so many West Indians going to England. I mean, that's how Selvon could find so many people to write about—because they were there.

DD: Let me ask you this: so many of the writers like [Sam] Selvon and [George] Lamming and C. L. R James, and many others, for a long period, at least, were abroad. And some remain abroad, like Austin Clark and [V. S.] Naipaul. And then, of course, there are a few of the writers who, for the most part, though all of them have spent some time abroad, I think, remain in the Caribbean. What impact has this choice had on writing in the Caribbean, do you think?

VP: I haven't thought about it like that, but I think it has influenced it less than it might. As I think it through, people who are writing outside of the Caribbean continue to write about the Caribbean. And their sensibilities remain very strongly Caribbean. And those who are in the Caribbean went out of the Caribbean so often that whatever influence existed outside—they *got* it.

DD: Well, some claim that some who have been away for so long have lost the sense of the language, the rhythms of the Caribbean, and so forth.

VP: I don't know. I mean, when I read things by people like Dionne Brand, I don't feel any alienation. In fact, let us look at someone like Nalo Hopkinson, who left when she was maybe thirteen or fifteen. It is amazing the extent to which she has remained Caribbean.

DD: Jamaica Kincaid?

VP: Oh, Jamaica Kincaid. Well, Nalo first because Nalo uses the myth associated with the Caribbean and mixes it up with these people transported to Canada in such a *total* way. The only thing one might, some people might complain about is that the language that she uses—that it is not pure anything—it is not pure Trinidad, it is not pure Jamaica, it is not pure Guyana. Nalo's parents were



Guyanese and Jamaica. I can't remember whether she was born in Jamaica or in Trinidad. She was in Trinidad—I knew her as a toddler in Trinidad. Then they moved to Jamaica. So even if she had stayed in the Caribbean, that may have happened to her accent. What I am saying is that she was brought up in a Caribbean *home*—and this happens to a lot of them. And she credits Derek Walcott's *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* with the whole sensibility that she moves with in that novel.

Who was the person you were mentioning? Oh, Jamaica Kincaid—well, she writes still Antiguan—until you get to some of her later ones. So I think that these people have carried the sensibility with them. And it is also true that when you start to write, you tend to write about things that happened in your early life. It need not be autobiographical, but certainly things you're writing about are things you have been exposed to then and those are absolutely born in the environment. I have never sensed that these people write out of any kind of feeling of alienation. I'm thinking about Janice Shinebourne, whose two novels were published in England, but they are *entirely* about the Caribbean. So maybe, I mean, I haven't read enough of the literature on it, talking about this aspect of it, to know whether the claims are true or how they substantiate them. But just from thinking through as you ask me now, I think Caribbean people writing outside of the Caribbean continue to write very strongly about the Caribbean and with Caribbean sensibilities. Austin Clarke—I mean, he's talking about Caribbean people abroad, but he's *feeling* Caribbean about them.

DD: He himself has said though that sometimes he feels that, you know, that he's—

VP: He's losing it?

DD: That's right.

VP: He'll tell you when. (laughter)

DD: Okay, now the related issue of *return* to the Caribbean. And I just want to quote a couple of your favorite poets here on the idea of return. Dennis Scott writes in "Exile," "To travel is to return to strangers," and Derek Walcott writes in *Another Life* about a return home that "either the island or myself had changed," and he concludes after witnessing the dawn from the beach:

but it was not the same at dawn, it was a book  
you'd read a life ago . . .  
and I left there that morning with a last look  
at things that would not say what they once meant.

And I just want you to talk about the whole issue of return and the difficulty of return. Is it like Wolfe said, "You can't go home again?" for writers in the Caribbean. Also, please talk about that theme in *Homestretch*—where I think it is a major theme.

VP: I'll get to *Homestretch* later because I can't focus on that now, but you mention Scott, and that's what you remember—

DD: May I say something? May I say something? I know he spoke about the issue and said some very different things about "the heart's metronome insists on this arc of islands as home"—

VP: Right, that's the line I have used in *Homestretch*.

DD: I know, but I'm just using the ones that speak to the issue [of the difficulties of return] right now, and with Derek too [there are lines that contradict those I quoted].

VP: My question is, has that happened to people because they are poets or because they are *people*? Because *constantly* returnees come back to Jamaica after ten, fifteen, twenty years. It is not the same place. It can *never* be because: (A) they have grown up. You leave as a boy of twelve, fourteen, sixteen; there is *no* way it will be the same place again. Physically, it will change so much! I was in hospital for a month; and I was "out of it" for maybe six months. When I was going to go on the road again, my daughter warned me, she said: "The city is go-

ing to look different." And a particular place, she said, "They've made a *brand*-new roundabout." By the time I started to drive, now, a year later, she said, "When you reach that point, behave as if you are in a foreign country, because what they have done with it is just so strange you are not going to be able to recognize it. Just look for the traffic lights and just behave as if you are driving abroad." And she was right. And what I'm saying is that things *change* so easily. If I come back to Richmond in five years time and go to Ukrops,<sup>1</sup> I'm sure there are some stores that will not be there anymore. They may even widen the road; I don't know. So I'm saying, they're talking about specific things; but whether you're a poet or not, *any* return is not the same.

DD: Okay, but tell me, how drastic has been the influence on living in England for four years, and all that that entailed? And then coming back.

VP: And I'm saying it's not just because they're poets. Anybody who goes abroad—anybody who goes into the First World and comes back to the Third World comes back to a *shock*. We don't recognize how efficiently we do some things and how *inefficiently* we do some things until we have gone away. I mean, I put a book in the mail this morning. Tomorrow, I'm going to *phone* this girl in Washington to find out if she got it. Now, that looks like a small thing to you, but it is not a *small* thing. When you send me something in the mail—to Jamaica—it takes *two* weeks for me to get it. I frequently get things which say, "If we don't receive this by the end of the week," or I get something on Monday the 25th that says, "If we don't get an answer by the 20th (laughter)—" And I just laugh, because people who are in the First World can by no means understand that. Or when somebody sends me a message, they always want to see my sister in a hurry. She lives in the country. And they think I see her every morning. It's just forty miles away—that's *nothing*. Forty miles is Williamsburg? Is it forty miles away?

DD: A little more than that, but not much more.

VP: Exactly. And you will get down there in half an hour, an hour—now, my sister lives in Woodside. I really don't see her that often, and she didn't always have a *phone*. I might be able to find somebody who I could give a message and ask them to walk a *mile* to give her the phone message. The first time she phoned me from the telephone a mile away, she said, "I am only a mile away from home!" So, small things like that irritate people who get accustomed to living in a different way. They want to go to the supermarket and pick up a lasagna that's done—well, you *can* do that in Jamaica, now—but, you know, there are *certain* things that you would not be able to do in the Third World. There are lots of little irritants for people who go away. So, I think that—I'm not saying that's the whole story. But two things I would say is, one, they have aged, and even if they had stayed in the same place they would see things with different eyes now. And I'm really amazed at how different things are as you grow. And even my children—I took one of them to a place we had lived in 1967, '68, and she went under the house, and she said, "I *can't* even go under there—"

DD: It used to be taller!

VP: "We used to live under there!" She cannot believe it's the same space. So I believe that there is a distance that happens anyway, and the place, in hindsight, is always romantic. So when they're *away* and they look at the Caribbean, what they see is a blissful time of age when somebody was giving them three meals a day—their parents—and they had no responsibility. They go back, and it's something quite different. So, I think—all these things. I don't think in that—that poets are any different from anybody; it's just that they write about it while other people don't.

DD: Well, today we want to know about you. Velma, it was a little over twenty-one years ago—do you remember?—that I interviewed you for the first time.

VP: I remember. And that time—that was about your second time in Jamaica, if not third.

DD: At least—maybe fourth, I think.

VP: Exactly, yes. I remember exactly the corner. I had to leave you all because I think I had to go teach. But it was in Pam's [Pamela Mordecai] office downstairs, just in the corner.

DD: Exactly. I interviewed the two of you, and that was wonderful! That was the first time I did the interview with three of us talking.<sup>2</sup>

But that was twenty-one years ago; we were both relatively young, younger scholars. (laughter) You hadn't even published your first collection of creative work.

VP: No, I was only in that volume that Pam and Mervyn had put together.<sup>3</sup>

DD: Exactly. And I had not published any of my work on Caribbean literature. Our children were still in school. Now we're grandmothers—

VP: (laughter) I know.

DD: And we have a pretty long string of publications to our credit. I want to go back to that first interview and read something you said, and then I'll ask you the question. You said: "I have seen myself as a mother, as a wife, as a person who earns, and a writer, really, only as something I do for myself. So I think that it is less because of my female sex than because of my sex roles. The roles that have been important have been getting the children out of the way and all the rest of it, so in the same way that writing has had to just take a little pigeon hole out of my real life, in terms of time: *after* the children have been put to sleep, or *after* the children are gone to school and *after* you've done the groceries, *after* everything else—then you get a little moment—certainly, poetry is something you write and you enjoy it and so on, but you don't see yourself as a poet."

Your life is very different now, isn't it, Velma?



VP: Yes. (laughter) I think. The children have left. Even the job has left. I am not *pushed* to publish in criticism and language and education. Because I was working, I was teaching language and literature in education, and if I was to be promoted, it had to have to do with education. So in addition to any criticism I might write about poetry or about literature, and anything I might write about language, I had to start writing about classroom interaction. And I went into that whole area—taping in the classroom, and teachers' questions—and I have quite a list of publications in *that* area. And so my academic life, my wage-earning life, pushed me in three directions—none of which was creative. So, *indeed*, I was writing whenever I got the time; but I must say this about writing: that it provided me a *haven*. You know, I'd go home and, especially after the computer came on stream, I would be at the computer and do something—just turn on some music—and do something which had nothing to do with my job. I would have scribbled on a yellow pad—in an airport, in a doctor's waiting room, or something—and I always had something that was in the yellow pad that needed to be typed. And whenever I needed to *rest* or to just get away from it all, I didn't have to go to the beach or get on a bus or anything; I could just go and type out something that I had written earlier.

DD: And were the children still home?

VP: Yes, yes. Two of them are boys, so they always had a lot of friends. So it wasn't always quiet, you know.

DD: But you learned to work that way?

VP: Oh, yes.

DD: But is it just wonderfully free, now, and the creative juices just flowing?

VP: I *thought* that that was what would happen. But what has been happening: I'm still writing academic papers. I mean, on the *verge* of my coming to Richmond—after I said yes, I was coming to Richmond—I got this invitation to write a chapter for a book that Geneva

Smitherman—well, she didn't write me herself—Arthur Spears, who knows me, asked me to do that chapter. So you say yes; otherwise it looks so bad. They ask you, I mean, they wanted it on Rasta talk. Who else should they ask if it's a language paper on Rasta Talk? So you say yes, and you get caught up in that.

DD: And you do enjoy it.

VP: I do, yes, that's true. And I still, I'm indeed still writing on my yellow pad, and as soon as I got the new computer here in the cottage, I typed out my six poems which I had been scribbling, you see. So the pattern, the problem is with prose, really. You really need to sit to write prose. When I got to Guyana in 1972, and I got a *full-time* helper, I put the typewriter downstairs on the dining room table and I'd come home from work—imagine coming home from work and you have no responsibility, beside to yourself—So I was able to write.

DD: Which—?

VP: I started writing *Karl*, at the same time as *Cages*, at the same time as two projects that I was doing in education.

DD: Was it difficult to move from one to the other for you?

VP: Yes, it's different, and I've made the statement elsewhere that any year I have a lot of academic publications, my poetic and fiction output is very little. Because they occupy different parts of your head. Though I must say that one day I complained to Pam Mordecai that I'm writing all these papers and I'm not getting anything creative done. And if I said that to her on a Tuesday, the Wednesday my only Anansi story, "Anansi and Mongoose," came almost full-blown.

DD: Oh, really?

VP: Just as if to say: "Thou liar!" (laughter)

DD: In that same interview, Velma, you shared your enthusiasm for a project that Pamela Mordecai was working on at the time; we don't even have to note what it

was, I think it was a children's book—you were talking about her art for it. In a little aside, you said, "Now whether the metropolitan countries will like it or not, I don't know." And that's what I want to ask you to talk a little bit about—the influence of the metropolitan countries on you as artists—perhaps only personally, but maybe more generally. How big a concern was that then, or does that continue to be?

VP: I actually think that *my* generation of writers—I don't know about the other people, earlier than me—but people like Mordecai and myself, Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior—we kicked that. I really don't think—As to Brodber, I mean, if she were thinking of the metropole, she couldn't have written *Jane and Louisa* nor *Myal*, or anything like that. No, I think that my generation was writing for itself. We *knew*, by the time we came to write, there *was* a Caribbean readership out there.

DD: Okay, well let me ask you about the afterword to *Considering Woman*.

VP: Ah, well that happened because—

DD: And say a little something about what's there, I mean, what you do there.

VP: What I did there? The history of what I did will prove the point here.

DD: Okay.

VP: The publisher liked *Considering Woman*. They were going to publish it, but were suggesting that I ask—I'm trying to think of her name—Joan Riley to show me how to write the *Creole*. So, I had to—two things I had to do—When I got their letter, *luckily*, there was a Canadian woman visiting a friend of mine, visiting Vivienne [Dr. Vivienne Bryan]. So I ran over to the lady with the manuscript and I gave it to her to read because she had never lived in Jamaica; she was only visiting Vivienne. She was—she represented, foreign White readership, or whatever—English speaking. So she read it. The *only* one piece of Creole that she had difficulty with was the use of

“no”: N-O, which is negative everywhere else, but it is a tag in Jamaica that doesn’t have that negative connotation—that’s the *only* thing she had a problem with. So I wrote them a letter and I said, “In the first place, perhaps you don’t know how I make my living, but to ask me to ask Joan Riley!” (laughter) “I lecture in language education. That is what I write about. That’s my field.” I said, “Look, perhaps you don’t want to publish the piece.” They also said that the paragraphs were too long. So I said that “I don’t think that the length of a paragraph depends on how many words; I think it depends on whether you have finished dealing with an *idea*. So I wouldn’t be able to do anything about that one. But the only thing I’m *willing* to do about the language is to write an afterword to try to explain it, which I think I can do.” So that’s how— But it also means—it answers your other question [about] our reactions to the metropole. We’re not—we were not going to bow.

The collection that Jean D’Costa and I put together, *Over Our Way*, had “Ascot,” Senior’s short story—at that point Senior did not have any full collections out. Well, the publisher went and changed up some of her language. I can’t tell you the letter that I wrote to them.

DD: Who was the publisher?

VP: Longman.

DD: And these were British editors?

VP: Yes. So, *luckily*, the boss came out to Jamaica and they had a cocktail party and they invited me. So I went. I explained the *horror* that was going to take place and that I couldn’t possibly touch somebody’s manuscript. You know, he saw my point completely. I gathered that the lady who sent me the letter was not at her desk any longer, and I’m sorry, but I think *really* that, by that time, we knew that if they didn’t want it, somebody else might.

DD: Yes, yes. Let me move on to something else. In that same interview, you also talked about the lack of images

of Black people in the literature on which people were reared. Talk a little about your own experiences, the images of Black women in the literature, or the lack of them, in the literature with which you grew up?

VP: Even before I quote myself, I know, I mean, Lorna [Goodison] explains it so well. I mean, *she* had to write, she said, because she hadn't seen *herself* anywhere in the writing. So that was the *push*—influence—for her. Now—

DD: And for you, perhaps?

VP: For me, no, I don't think, I don't think I thought about whether I saw Black women in literature. I knew that I had to write and I wanted to write. That kind of influence, though, was a part more of my life as an educator. Like why I put *Anansesem* together, why I put together *Over Our Way* with Jean D'Costa. The reason for that is because I wanted literature, not just about Black women, but about Black *people*, to be there for the school children.

DD: So did you write them, knowing that they would be accepted for the school, or did you write them and offer them in the hope that they would be used in the schools?

VP: Uh, no. Well, let me just tell you how this one worked. I went to teach in Guyana. One of the projects I had was to put together short stories and poems for them to use in the high schools. So I put them together and got a grant to mimeograph them. So I had these fat mimeographed books and I had tested them in some schools. So when I went to Jamaica, I was still using them in the classroom. And, this is interesting—I hope I'm not lying—but my memory of it is that I talked to the publisher—and the next thing I knew, they asked Jean D'Costa, who was already a writer of children's books, to do it. But Jean is one of—she's a very honest person. However, it is—she would have just picked up the phone and said, "Velma, they want me to do this." And I would have said, "But Jean, they know I have a collection, so why don't we pick out some out of my collection and put



some of yours in the book." And together we did it, yes. But I think that is it. But I understand them: she was already a name out there, so—

With *Anansesem*, the same thing. I had done a collection for the lower school, and Longman came by—and they were very interested. They took it and they had it on their To-Be-Published List. Every year it was on the list to be published. And then, suddenly, one year it wasn't there, and I asked them what had happened. They'd fallen on bad financial times: something had happened in Nigeria and they hadn't said a word to me; they'd just taken it off the list. I must say, for Carlong, that that was a new company, then, taking over from Longman-Jamaica, and they said, "This will be one of the first books we publish." And they just took it over and published it. They're revising it this year, with notes. I don't like the idea, but they want it to go into the schools and for the teachers to use it. I wanted it to be a book that grandparents buy for their grandchildren, so it wouldn't have any notes.

DD: The revision includes just notes—it's not a revision of the tales themselves?

VP: No, the tales are the same, but the pictures—some of them will be different. And it will be a book for schools—so children won't like it anymore.

DD: Let's talk a little about influences and counter-influences in the United States and the Caribbean. Can you point to people or events or movements in the United States that had a big impact on Caribbean literature? Perhaps, specifically, on your own writing?

VP: I think Marcus Garvey is a part of, certainly—I don't know about Caribbean—but certainly a part of all Jamaican consciousness. So, I mean, he's the first person I would think of. I can't think of any of us who hasn't mentioned him in our writing. Can you?

DD: No, but then, of course, Marcus Garvey is Jamaican.

VP: Yes, but he spent so much of his life in America. Oh, you mean the influence of any *Americans*.

DD: Yes, yes. Movements or events or individuals.

VP: Well, I mean, the Black Power movement, though I must say to *you* that—I was thinking about that only today—that when I came up to America in the '60s, late '60s, and met all this Black Power thing. I wrote a poem which I cannot find, but I know the line. It begins:

You must be laughing now, Ras I,  
Deep in your beard,  
While the children of Babylon  
Simulate your pride.

Because suddenly what the Rasta man had been saying from the 50s, walking behind us going to school, trying to indoctrinate us, to tell us to clean all the things off your face and not to let Babylon make you do things with your hair. Suddenly, I came up and people were going on as if this is the newest thing ever—I had been hearing it for more than fifteen years!

DD: So the influences were really moving more the other way?

VP: That's what I thought. I don't know if it's only my perception, but I remember exactly where I was walking—I was going to work at Con Edison at the corner of 14th Street and something or other. And by the time I went upstairs, I was able to write out most of that poem.

DD: The same thing might be said of rap music, don't you think?

VP: Coming from Jamaica first?

DD: The DJ's in Jamaica and the dub poetry.

VP: But I think that those, because of the greater movement of music, those are, the two of them, have been influencing each other side by side. In other words, R&B has been in our—in Caribbean music for a long time. The influence of America on Caribbean music has been much longer, I think, than the influence of movements.

DD: And the influence of Caribbean music on American?

VP: I would grant you that America has been influencing Caribbean music for a long time. And another thing is, you know, a lot more movement has taken place than we know. I mean, scratch a whole lot of American musicians and you're going to find a Caribbean something, and scratch a whole lot of Caribbean musicians and you're going to find an American something. I was just *blown* away by a paper I heard in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, at a Smithsonian conference in April. They were talking about the influence of Jamaican music on West African music, and they were looking at Jamaicans who went to Sierra Leone, like hundreds of years ago. They went as policemen. Then you had the Sierra Leonian police bands; the police bands apparently influenced the music and you had Sierra Leonians who went to other parts of Africa as jobbers, like, in the lumber business and things like that. And they took this music with them. And they showed, for example, what happened to one of the drums from Jamaica, which is a drum that's like a table, and that when it went and the men had to travel, they got rid of those legs so they could just carry the drum under their arm. And I was thinking, though, they're talking about that music—Why didn't they start in Africa? How it came from Africa to Jamaica and then went back.

DD: But the interesting thing is, though—

VP: How it moves.

DD: Yes—in literature by Black Americans, the conflict is, most often, a racial one. Race is a significant factor in our literature. How significant a factor is it, would you say, in recent Caribbean literature—and your own writing?

VP: I think it is very significant, but not as race—as color. Color and hair. My time in Richmond has shown me, in case I didn't know, the extent to which Caribbean writing has to do with race—no, with color, and hair.

DD: More than you realized before you came here?

VP: Yes, because *here* I have to make it clear for people who have never heard about us. In other words, I have never taught anywhere, any people who have known so little about the Caribbean before. So, in having to explain *everything*, it has come to me. In fact, last week, I said to one of the classes, "I'm sure you hope that this is the last you'll ever hear about hair!" (laughter) I mean, whether somebody is putting castor oil—this is the last one we were doing: this woman used to brush out her hair every night and put castor oil in it and put it in these bumps that we call China bumps—now they're called Nubian knots. She did not know that her husband was sitting in the living room, a little hidden, but that he used to watch her every night. That was his greatest pleasure. She could not have known. One day, she came in with her hair cut in an Afro—the story is told from the man's point of view—and he really thought she had done it to spite him. (laughter) Anyway, what I said to the class, was, "When *last* did you see hair treated like this?" And they could remember. In "The Two Grandmothers" one grandmother was so proud of the thick, long hair of her granddaughter. And she would plait it—the same thing. And I would have passed that over, myself. And in Jamaica, I'd pass that over because that is so true everybody knows about it.

DD: But then that means these same students haven't been reading African American literature?

VP: The one, the one who'd read African American literature, she wanted to write a comparative paper, but the paper that I wanted them to write was just much narrower. I couldn't allow her to do that. It would take her forever. She saw it at once, but the others had not been reading any Afro-American literature.

But you think of it as race because it is a Black/White thing. But with us, really, you remember the multiplicity of shades that we function with—

DD: Yes, yes.

VP: And the hierarchy of shades. I don't think Black Americans write so much about the hierarchy of shades or that it exists—

DD: Oh, yes. I'm not—

VP: But you write *more* about Black/White.

DD: Perhaps more about Black/White, but still, it is such a significant issue, particularly when we come to the women. Langston Hughes has this wonderful poem, "Harlem Sweeties"—I don't know if you've ever seen it—about the hues of Black women.

VP: Yes. But also, it could be that because I, as a West Indian reading it, take it all for granted. Why I don't notice, I don't pay attention, but I note the Black/White dichotomy.

DD: I think it's time we start talking a little more specifically about some of your own work now, and I'd like to start with the first story I read by you (and I think it was the first story you published): "My Mother." Tell me a little something about the idea for the story.

VP: Well, the first thing is that I think that it is a story that is most about me as a teacher, school-teacher. When I was teaching in Knox College in Jamaica in 1970—it was '67 (?), '68 (?)—something like that. I had left Canada and I'd gone to Jamaica for a year, and I was teaching in this place and I remember now this girl who was living with her grandmother—her mother was in America. That's all I knew about her, but I remember being very sorry for her. I'm remembering the children who went to school with me who were always so smartly dressed. Oh my! They had nice clothes, shoes. You know, when tiny heels came in, these girls had these tiny heels. The fellows had all the right clothes, and those particular children—not like the ones who bring clothes from America now—they had excellent taste. So they were looking very good. But there was something they didn't have: they didn't have their parents. And I suppose they came back into my mind a lot more when I saw that lit-



tle girl, and the extent to which— She was happy with her grandmother, you know, but there was always this sadness about her. Okay, so forget that girl now—I leave her.

1972—I go to live in Guyana and there’s something called International Bars, where each country has a stall, and people come and buy curry goat and the Jamaican whatever. I went too early, as usual, and, I sat there and wrote down something that had happened in the office the day before: The Admin Assistant, who is Marjorie—and the story is “For Marjorie”—had come back from this funeral. And that part about the mother’s body— And I don’t know how that little *girl* from 1967 tied up with this thing from 1972—and I always have paper with me for some reason, and I remember sitting in the half-darkness behind International Bars looking at the bunches of bananas that we were going to peel and cook and all the rest of it, and nobody else had come. And I sat down and wrote a version of that story. I really didn’t doctor it up too much. Remember, too, that I had, by then, by ’72, I was coming from New York. So I was able to start that story on 14th Street, because I *had* indeed come on that train and I *had* felt sadness watching all those people and wondering why they shouldn’t leave and go home. It was the same way when I went to live in Canada and I saw all those brown-skin children—mixed blood—and I know that they were considered *nothing* in those societies. And I just wanted to get a big truck and put all of them on it and take them all back *home* where they’d be people, you know. (laughter) So, I think all those responses came together in that.

DD: It’s a beautiful story.

When I first started reading your poetry, it seemed so feminist to me. Now, of course, that might be because that was my feminist period as well, and I was seeing in it something more of myself. But what strikes me in some of your later work is your insistence on understand-

ing the *male* perspective. Indeed, in the prose works in particular, it seems to me there's more emphasis, more entering into, the male character than the female. Would you talk a little bit about this?

VP: You know, I'm thinking that *Karl* was written at the same time—parallel. You see, publication is a strange thing because when those pieces that are so feminist (you mean like "Cages" and the one starting with Walcott's quotation?)—all of those were written at the same time as *Karl*. Those are all in that same collection. What happened, and this is where publication is such a— I put them all in the collection because I wanted to get published. And this is one of the reasons why I would like to take out the story "Gran" and publish it in another collection, because I think it has not got noticed. I mean, the people who I want to read "Gran" are in the schools. None of them will ever read *Considering Woman*—it's just too adult a book. So I think, in doing that, I did "Gran" a disservice. So if I can—I really would like somebody to republish *Karl and Other Stories*, and I would *not* want to put "Gran" in it. Because I think that the exigencies of publication prevent things from being seen clearly. In other words, there's no way for you to know that this [Pollard picks up book] and this [picks up book] were going on at the same time. But those are, that's my Guyana writing. So, I think I have been thinking about both all the time, and I think it's partly because I was married and I never felt that any one person was responsible for things going wrong. I thought that everybody—there was some, there is a side—

DD: But you're so much more sympathetic to Karl than to the wife, there.

VP: Yes, that's true. But look at how much sympathy the *women* get in *Considering Woman*.

DD: Yes, yes, yes.

VP: And the book that I've been trying to write, for the longest time, the novel, really, it starts out with a short

story that I wrote—it was the woman's point of view—and I've never done anything more with it yet. I started trying to write a Penny dreadful—a romance. And I gave it to a friend to read (of blessed memory now—she's a linguist), and she said, "You've failed—this requires too much thought!" (laughter) So I kept it and it is the first chapter in something that I've been writing forever.

DD: So, you're working on this novel—it is a novel?

VP: Yes, and I *thought* that every Monday and Tuesday I would have been writing it here.

DD: Not too much done?

VP: I haven't been able to.

DD: Let me get back to—

VP: I hear you, and I'm thinking about that, because when I was writing *Karl*, my sister asked me, "What made you *want* to write inside the mind of a man?" Part of it is because the, sort of, model for Karl is that I came home and asked for somebody and was told that he had died; nobody could tell me what had happened, and so I had to make a story.

DD: Someone you felt really close to?

VP: Someone who'd been to school with me. He had been to school with me, and, you know, had *made* it, I thought. I mean, I wasn't in Jamaica, but from all I'd heard, he had made it. And the next thing I knew, he really had died. So, I had to make a story for him, and because he was somebody that I, you know, I thought about, I could—and also, because he's from the country—a different part of the country, too—and I really didn't know anything about him except that he came in from the country, but I could put a lot of my country experiences into that. I'm not as bad as my sister, in terms of the male, because she, even in her research, you know, she has written about the Jamaican male or the West Indian male. She's done work on that and on reclaiming the image of the male for the Caribbean. I don't think I have done that much. Until you said it, I wouldn't have

thought about it. But, I think, deep down, I feel that it takes two people to—

DD: But you know, I'm not remembering that she has these central figures who are male. She has some very positive and strong male figures—

VP: Always her male figures will be strong.

DD: They're strong and positive, but most often, though, the main character, the central figure, is a female.

VP: Well, it's only *Karl* that my central figure—

DD: Well, *Homestretch* really focuses, early on, with the man who is coming back. You have the man and his wife who are coming back.

VP: Oh, oh, oh, yes. And yet—

DD: And we see him so much more than we see her. Yes. And into him so much more than we see into her.

VP: Yes, that's so strange. And that's because when I started—that wheelchair—because I literally, in an airport, saw a man in a *wheelchair*.

DD: It's beautifully done. I love it.

VP: You think so? And what, I tell you more: I had to re-write that chapter when *I* got in a wheelchair, because my whole—I thought a wheelchair was a privilege. And that's how I'd written it. After I had gone in the wheelchair myself, you see how it is: it is not a privilege at all. It is an upsetting position to have somebody push you. So I think this is funny because that started with the wheelchair. But if she had been in a wheelchair—

DD: Then it would have been her story?

VP: I hadn't thought about it like that, but now you ask me—

DD: And really, it's about their marriage. I recognize that. It's about both of them. But even in being about that, we see it through his eyes.

VP: But the thing is, too, and the good things that I put in about their marriage are things I wanted to write about my *parents'* marriage. But my parents never went abroad—to come *back*! So all of that, it's such a mish-

mash, such a mish-mash that I put together, right? And my mother died early, so there was no chance to do all the things that I would have wanted.

DD: So you gave her some extra life. Yes, it's very interesting.

VP: That's true. I'm glad that you like it, though, I really am.

DD: Thank you, thank you. You mentioned "Gran"—and I'm probably going out on a limb, here, and I'm probably all wrong about this, but one of the interesting things for me, in reading your work, is that, unlike so many other writers in the African Diaspora, you don't seem to write what *seems* to be autobiographical work. And so many of the others seem to at least start off with this autobiographical novel. "Gran" seems to be about the only thing that I recognize as autobiographical.

VP: Yes, yes.

DD: I mean, some of the lyric poetry and so forth, I kind of think, "Maybe this is treating a certain experience in her [Pollard's] life."

VP: "Gran" is *really* the only one. And this is why I want it to be in another book. I want more people to read it because I *want* that woman that is Gran—I think she's worthy of more people knowing about her. And also, the things, like the mill and copper which people used to make sugar—those are things that Jamaican children will never hear about, will never see. If I could do it again, I would put photographs of these old things, because I want children to know how their parents and great-grandparents, you know, how old-time Jamaican people had to make it, how they made it, you know. I think people don't know. I've had to tell a helper we had, who wanted some money to help her granddaughter to enter a Miss Hayes beauty competition in Jamaica—

DD: A what?

VP: A Miss Hayes competition.

DD: And what is that?



VP: Suppose it was a Miss Woodside.

DD: Okay.

VP: She needed money for that. Also when my husband would travel, she wanted him to bring a little TV for her, and she wanted everything. His principle is: don't lend anybody more money than you know they are earning. She always said she'll pay back. He said, "I'd prefer to give you something than have you pay, because you can't pay back." And I said to her, "You know, if my grandmother had been thinking about anybody being Miss Woodside or Miss Guy's Hill—(She was a widow with seven children, the youngest of whom was nine months. And *all* of them had to go to school at some point. And she had to do it.)—you think she had any time to think about anybody being Miss anything?" (laughter) I say, "Now you want everything in the first generation. She did all of that. She baked and she did everything so that my mother could have an education so that my mother could want better for me. It has taken three generations to get what you want immediately." Now, I may be going out on a limb, but I think that if people understood that there's no quick fix: that the people you see have walked on the shoulders of some other people, everybody would—well, I'm pushing it to say they wouldn't be renting a gun to make money or whatever.

DD: But let me ask you if you think your response to that had something to do with the fact that *then* you weren't a grandmother?

VP: What do you mean? How do you mean? Yes, as a grandmother you just, we give them anything. And my grandmother did give me anything. You see all the grandchildren in that story, how they come off. They get *everything*, you know. But not the possibility to enter a beauty contest!

DD: Exactly. I have to smile as I ask you about this. In *The Best Philosophers*, you dedicate a poem, "Old Age," to Mervyn Morris. (laughter)



VP: Now, let me explain to you why. Mervyn, of all of us, has been writing shorter and shorter poems as he has got older.

DD: And so, read the poem so we'll all understand.

VP:

Our assets  
 Like out limbs  
 Shrink  
 The house  
 Becomes apartment  
 Becomes room  
 Time shrinks us  
 To the tomb

Now, I don't think Mervyn would see it—anyway, he would just, he, I think he would know immediately—because he and I are the same age, with one month between. He doesn't live in a small house. He has not got any lesser. He's better off now than when I knew him before. They have two cars, you know. So there is nothing here. This is my philosophizing about life and *my* old age. I'm *dedicating* it to him.

DD: Sort of playing on his poetry?

VP: On his poetry.

DD: Okay. I thought it might be sort of signifying on some line, because he's, of course, written some lines about aging and that sort of thing.

VP: Yes. No, it's just signifying on the fact that I've said to him, "Mervyn, you are going towards a haiku, you know." You notice that about his work. It has really been getting tighter and tighter. So tight.

DD: Okay.

VP: This had better get written so that nobody will think I am saying anything about Mervyn, because he is not even somebody who is aging badly—he is looking so lovely. (laughter) In fact, a friend of mine who came and met him, she wrote: "And that handsome man, that handsome friend of yours—" So it would never occur to me that any of that could be him.

DD: Okay. You began the essay "The Most Important Reason I Write" with the statement, "Perhaps the most important reason that I write is that I have a great desire to record aspects of life, events and experiences which I think are worth keeping." And it seems to me, certainly there's no question that that obtains everywhere. But *Homestretch* seems to be—

VP: Yes. "Gran" and *Homestretch*. And *Homestretch*, definitely, was written to, as we say in Jamaica, "big-up Jamaica." It is the only thing that I have written with an *intention* like that. Again, it is a situation where I went somewhere and heard somebody talk about Jamaica in a way that I could hardly recognize it: "It's just so terrible. Everything was bad."

DD: That's getting close to that romance you didn't like. *Homestretch*.

VP: No, because, oh, no, that romance was so melodramatic.

DD: Oh, really? Well, you know, *Homestretch* gets pretty romantic, too. I mean, this couple comes back to Jamaica, and he's in a wheelchair and he's so sick, and all of a sudden they start doing these wonderful things. And he starts getting younger, and—

VP: Yes, that's true.

DD: And the relationship starts getting better and—quite romantic.

VP: And yet one of my brothers read it and said that he can't imagine a book so long and no sex in it! (laughter) And he can't—they're accustomed—they want books that are torrid—which I can't write.

DD: You don't deal with those direct kinds of scenes, but we sort of have a feeling that they are getting back together.

VP: I think so, I think so. But he said, "What! All these pages and hours?" Anyway—oh, no, he's talking about the *young* people, the two that are going around the is-

land. He doesn't understand why they don't get into bed at some point in the story.

DD: Oh.

VP: And I didn't see that as a necessity. I told him that if I write a sequel to it, I'll make sure to put them in the bed.

DD: And have one torrid scene with the two of them! But of course, again, it seemed that more important even than their relationship there, was to give us that *tour*, almost, of Jamaica.

VP: Yes, absolutely. Yes, that's what it's about. I just needed to reclaim that place.

DD: Yes, yes. Let me ask you this question, and I'll probably try not to ask more than a couple more questions. Your work is sometimes very complex.

VP: You think so? I must tell you that when I read my sister's work I think my work is so simple that I don't know why anybody bothers to read it.

DD: Well, that comparison to Wilson Harris— (laughter)

VP: Ha, ha, yes. And he likes her stuff very much.

DD: I know, I know. And, if we're talking about complexity, of course, there's Wilson and then there's Erna. And maybe you're not *there*, but sometimes you get pretty close with some pieces. I want to read this piece from Cheryl M. L. Dash, when she's reviewing *Considering Woman*. She speaks of "the layers of meaning which are slowly unpeeled and which, by suggesting rather than stating, reveal a greater truth or allow [your] reader to find his/her own truth." And she goes on to talk about your "elliptical compression of contrasting variable emotions . . . nothing is easily grasped or revealed to the reader." And I was going to ask you—do people talk about difficulty, sometimes, in understanding your work? (I don't think this is true of *Homestretch* at all.)

VP: Well, *Homestretch*, strangely enough, somebody met me in a conference somewhere abroad, then went to Switzerland and tried to teach *Homestretch*. Well, let me

tell you, he was on email to me! The *number* of questions that he asked. I mean, I was just so *shocked* that there were so many things that could not be understood in *Homestretch*.

DD: Oh really?

VP: But of course, that's a *foreign* audience. These are people studying English. These are people whose first language is some kind of German. And he's teaching English at the university and put the book in. And *I* had to give a lot of help by email. But you see, there's a lot that you take for granted. I don't think that's a good way to judge by how much a foreign readership doesn't understand.

DD: Are you bothered by readers wanting you to explain what you've written?

VP: No, it, well—no. It frightens me a little bit! It frightens me, because when I got all those questions from him, I couldn't believe I could write anything that could be so dense.

DD: But that wouldn't strike me as a book [that is dense]—it must have been the language problem.

VP: Most of it is the language, exactly. Because of the language, it is Creole, and all the turns of phrase, if you are not accustomed to Black talk, perhaps.

DD: Do you see a large range, in terms of your style and the complexity of style, in your works, or does each one just sort of evolve?

VP: The thing is, I don't think about it in those ways. I don't think about it in those critical ways at all. I think that what happens is that whatever I'm writing, it takes on the language of whatever it is I'm writing about, and I think that is why there is such a variety, because as I write about different things, the language gets very different.

DD: You said a little something in response to this question [but] I'm going to ask it anyway. You've taught so many places, and I want to know about your experience

here in Richmond. How do you feel our students compare with those you taught in Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, Italy, Canada, England?

DD: Well, I have to admit that this is the first place I have taught where the people I'm teaching know so *little* about what I'm teaching. I've never met—I've never had to *fill* in so much infrastructure, and, um, it's true that the World Trade Center collapsed and so we couldn't finish, and in each of the courses there was one book we had to give up: *Dream on Monkey Mountain* in one group and *The Farming of Bones* in another.

DD: But this is because our students are so unfamiliar with Caribbean culture?

VP: You know, in the end, I was giving lectures on history, language. Well, I expected to do the language, and I did that from the beginning, but it was very difficult to get people to understand, for example, that the Caribbean is not just—I mean, to get people to know that if somebody turns up in Guadeloupe, they're going to be speaking French Creole and French. And if someone turns up in Dominican Republic, they're going to be speaking Spanish, I mean, those are things that I wouldn't have to tell anybody—*anybody*—in the Caribbean, because they would have done Caribbean geography in first form.

DD: And any of the students at UCLA and Hunter College—

VP: Yes, because UCLA, okay, at UCLA I was really only teaching upperclassmen; there was that, too.

DD: Okay.

VP: And I also believe—and remember, I was attached to the Center for African American Studies, so those students were taking courses in there and would already have been doing Afro-American and whatever. They would be already within that. And at Hunter, I was teaching freshman composition, but using language and literature, and most of those people were from New York,

and New York is *full* of Caribbean people. Italy was a pleasant surprise. But then, Columbus did come from Italy—so I could start with him! (laughter) I did start with him, and gave them our view of him, and so we had something in common immediately. And some of them were teachers, but half of them were university students—final year. But I have found that Europeans, well, Europeans generally know a bit more about the world, because—I don't know why—because they've lived next to other people. Wherever you are in Europe, there's a border on the left and the right, so you know that the people next door—

DD: We're so isolated here, knowing only about ourselves.  
VP: Well, yes, but maybe *you* know about the different kinds of *Americans* in different places—but it's all still America. No, I have come to terms with this, though, you know. I mean, in 1986, as I keep saying, I flew from Washington to Los Angeles, and I said this is the longest tract of land in the world that you would be able to fly in one language. And that's true, and if you think about it like that, and certainly I started being so much more patient and whatever. In Canada, I used to be *very* irritated with people who didn't know anything about anybody else, who would ask, like, my girlfriend from Malaysia, where did she learn English? She told them, "On the plane." So, I'm very humbled. When Derek Walcott came here, I said: "I don't know if you know how many people here have never heard about *you*." Which is unusual in the Caribbean. So really and truly, I'd say that the difference is how little about the rest of the "other" that people know. First I was thinking, "I'm just not getting through, here." But then, somebody saw Carnival on BET, and was able to recognize J'ouvert because of the story. Somebody else said that her housekeeper said, "If you're born to drown, you can't hang." So I think that that's the major difference. But I have enjoyed the students—they're very polite and on time, most of the time, and, you know,



I've had a good time. It's just that I *was* really feeling a little bit as if I didn't know if I was getting through, you know, the first half of the semester, really. I felt that I'm not sure what I'm doing here.

DD: I'm sure you've made an impact, and I'll probably be dropping you some emails and telling you about students dropping by later. Because so often, in teaching, it is later that the impact is made. Well, Velma, I want to close with a couple of poems. Will you talk a bit about one of my favorites, "Fly"?

VP: Well, there's really nothing to say about "Fly," except I might say that this "If I catch him, I mash him"—it is the sound of the train going up the hill. It's not original—that's why it's in italics. We say that the train says, "If I catch him, I mash him, if I catch him. . . ." Your trains go much more smoothly and they don't—I have not been on a train here going up a hill, have I? I've only been to Delaware and to Washington. So it just goes very smoothly: "Buh-dum, buh-dum, buh-dum" and stuff, right?

Our trains, yes, our trains—another says, "good conductor, bad paymaster, good conductor, bad paymaster." So we know that's what the train is saying, so this is one of them.

And I think this must be the most cynical poem I've written.

DD: Is that right? It's a beautifully done poem. I just love it!

VP: And Anansi! When I came here [the University of Richmond], I saw the Spider; I said, "They're welcoming me," because Anansi is the patron saint of insects.

DD: That's what I said in my first lecture here, that I couldn't believe I ended up at a university where the university symbol is the Spider. Made me feel right at home.

Now, please say a word or two about "Gentleman of the Waterfront."

VP: Cliff, who is a well-known, as you know, Caribbean critic, Caribbean poet—in fact, I’m trying to get a chance to put together a collection of his poetry that I’m hoping to get published at some point—and that he just died in the middle of no time. Was killed. He was murdered, quite suddenly. I mean, I wasn’t even in Jamaica at the time, and I came home, or I got a phone call from my daughter to tell me what had happened. So that was extraordinarily sad. Especially because Cliff so hated violence. It’s like Michael Smith being killed with a stone. And [Cliff] was so *careful*. He always made sure he went to the doctor whenever he needed to, you know. And, I tell you this—he’s not around to say I shouldn’t tell anybody—he bought a helmet, a crash helmet, because, you know, we have earthquakes in Jamaica, and he felt that if there was an earthquake, he really needed to protect his head.

DD: Oh really?

VP: So when we had a big earthquake—maybe ’93—I phoned him, I said, “Where were you in the earthquake?” He said he was at the physiotherapist’s. He wasn’t even at home to put on the crash helmet! So somebody like that, who ends up being *murdered*, well, he wouldn’t know that they cut up his body in pieces, really, but who ends up being murdered—clearly by somebody he knew because the person was driving his van, you know. So I was really very taken with that. It’s just—it’s just horrible. I mean, you leave Jamaica, you had been talking to him the day before because he had phoned to ask my daughter to have lunch with him because she had just done an MBA (in finance specialization); he wanted to review his finances. And he had made this appointment, and he had phoned to cancel it and I had gone to St. Croix to read *Considering Woman*. And then at the end of this week she calls, says, “I didn’t call you from Monday because I thought they might find the body, but I didn’t want to call you, he may be alive, but now there is no

hope." And so I sat down and wrote this "Gentleman of the Waterfront." His apartment was in a high-rise building. [See the poem at the end of this article.]

DD: In Kingston?

VP: Yes, near the waterfront. It overlooks Kingston Harbor. It's right next to the Oceana Hotel? He had this very very nice apartment. So that's why "Gentleman of the Waterfront."

VP: Well, the "too cruel anywhere" should be in italics, at least to my mind. And the tiger here—Cliff gave me a book of, I think it's Neruda's poetry, I'm not sure if it's Neruda's. But it's called something of the tiger. I can't remember. And that's the tiger connection. And the slender shoulders—well, he was a very small person.

DD: Yes, I knew him.

VP: Right. But he was so—you know, he would dress—

DD: Elegantly.

VP: Oh, man! The silk jacket and so. And he was chairman of a foundation and I was on the committee, and so he would have to be chairing these meetings in all these fine clothes.

DD: Well, Velma, this has been a delight. I want to thank you and I also want to thank John Martin for coming and taping this for us.

### Gentlemen of the Waterfront

For Cliff Lashley  
(February 13, 1993)

dreadful  
this time  
I cannot think  
but that I see  
your hand  
my friend  
copper bangled  
sculptured ring on left  
pinkie finger  
articulate beside the polished  
board-table  
you raw-silk jacketed

Oh Cliff  
you who so  
hated pain  
and violence  
and death  
of any kind  
to so unkindly go  
aristocrat  
so finely tailored  
gentleman of the waterfront  
you would have hated most to go  
so without style  
details unhinge my mind  
was there a ring  
still anchored to the bone?  
or did the snatchers take that too  
and desecrating sell the less  
than you could count  
in one breath?  
I see you curve your slender shoulders  
bow your head  
and not hold back the tears  
your life passing before your eyes  
in one quick blink  
I hope the blow was  
brief and hard  
not since they stoned the poet  
Michael Smith to death  
have I felt so outraged  
enraged at how the tiger lurking in our nature  
is so here  
so everywhere  
indeed too cruel anywhere

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ukrops is a popular Richmond chain of grocery stores.

<sup>2</sup> At the time I was conducting interviews with Caribbean writers, which were later published as *New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> *Jamaica Woman: An Anthology of Poems*. Ed. Pamela Mordecai and Mervyn Morris. Kingston: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980.

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