

## “All Voices Belong to Me” An Interview with Neil Bissoondath

Neil Bissoondath, born in Trinidad in 1955, emigrated to Canada when he was eighteen. Since his arrival, he has built a distinguished career as a fiction writer and essayist. His first volume of short stories, *Digging Up the Mountains*, appeared in 1985; a novel set in the Caribbean, *A Casual Brutality*, was published in 1988. In these works, as well as in his second story collection, *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows* (1990), Bissoondath explored lives of dislocation, oppression, and uncertainty. *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994) attracted much attention, both positive and negative, and illustrated his interest in political debate. He has gone on to write three more novels: *The Innocence of Age* (1992), *The Worlds Within Her* (1998), and *Doing the Heart Good* (2002). Bissoondath also teaches at Université Laval in Quebec City.

I met Neil Bissoondath in Quebec in May 2001, just a month after the controversial summit on the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Bissoondath's fascination with border crossing made him a thoughtful observer of the move towards globalization and freer trade. After some conversation on the benefits and risks of this trend, we turned to explicitly literary matters.

LK I've tried to organize my questions around my main interest, which is short stories and the concept of "voice," used literally, as well as invoking larger, metaphorical meanings. I'm using the term "voice" here to suggest everything that we present ourselves as being, and our current wisdom is that we partly construct our voice, and we partly inherit it too.

Alistair MacLeod, for instance, is more on the “inheritance” side and Timothy Findley more on the “constructed” side. So I’m interested in where writers place themselves. All the writers I’ve met have resisted being pigeonholed—this is the way it should be. But they are all aware of having multiple and even contradictory identifications or affiliations—perhaps like Canada itself. Different markers of voice are important to different people. The main ones include gender difference, especially for the women . . . . But men are gendered, too, aren’t they?

NB In *Selling Illusions*, I quote Nadine Gordimer on that, and I think she’s right: essentially all novelists are androgynous. I’ve written stories, I’ve written a novel [*The Worlds Within Her*] in female voices, and I’ve always been attracted to female voices. It never seemed to me to be something that had to be considered; it simply happened in the telling of the story.

With *Digging Up the Mountains*, it was my editor who mentioned it to me: “You seem to know the voices.” And it got me thinking, if that’s so, why? And it may be linked to the fact that I grew up surrounded by lots of women, lots of strong, imposing, intelligent women. For instance, my grandmother Naipaul, who was to all appearances a traditional Hindu woman, wearing her *ohrni* [a thin head veil], dressing very conservatively and going to her temple every week, yet at the same time was the manager of a quarry! And every day she put a hardhat on top of her *ohrni* and gave orders to the 250-pound men, telling them where to place their dynamite and where to drive their tractors, and it’s one of those astonishing images. And I was surrounded by aunts who were university professors, teachers, widely read, widely travelled. They were just part of my world.

LK Would you include your mother as another example?

NB Absolutely—she was a teacher and the most widely read person I’ve ever known, actually.

My attitude towards writing stories or novels is that all voices belong to me: if there is a voice that tells a story, that voice is simply part of me. And whether that voice is masculine or feminine, young or old, white, black, yellow, brown, or green has nothing to do with me. What interests me is the *world* and the *experience* of that voice, what it’s helping me try to see, and understand.

LK I certainly notice in your second collection of stories, *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows*, that you’re ranging more widely with different

world views, different nationalities, ages. It becomes more cosmopolitan than *Digging*.

NB My own life, my own experience, has gone beyond the Caribbean. As with character, place: all places belong to me. I don't feel that I'm representative in my writing of *any* kind of label. I tend to follow my interests, and my interests vary. My favourite body of literature is nineteenth-century Russian writing. I love Japanese writing as well. None of these are choices. These are simply things that appeal to me, that speak to me in ways that I couldn't necessarily articulate.

My favourite country in the world is Spain. My favourite poet is García Lorca; I fell in love with his poetry. And many years later, 1984, when I got my first cheque for *Digging*, I bought a ticket to Spain because I had friends living in Barcelona. And I remember getting off the plane and suddenly feeling at home. There was this strange electricity at the airport that told me, "This is another place where you somehow belong."

Maybe it has something to do with the fact that I grew up in Trinidad wanting to leave. And so it seemed to me from the very beginning that the world was mine to discover. And that's the way I've essentially gone about living my life.

LK I'm interested also in the idea that you fell in love with Spain partly through reading Spanish poetry. The writer's *voice* drew you in, creating a world for you to enter. In an interview, you said: "Sometimes I hear my father's voice in myself. I don't like it, but I know where it comes from."<sup>1</sup> So how does that voice inform your writing?

NB When I start writing a short story, or a novel, like many writers, I have no idea what it's about or where it's going. It usually starts with a voice, a scene, a character taking me into a world that I'm not aware is in my head. And as I write, these things emerge naturally—I don't go in search of them—and it's at the *end* of the writing process that I can then step back and look at what I've written more consciously. I can begin to recognize things. And I can recognize that when I was ten, this particular thing happened, or when I was fifteen, somebody said this. I can hear my father in what I've written, and sometimes, of course, when I'm speaking—these voices emerge.

So all of that baggage is there—nothing is consciously sought, but nothing is consciously locked out either. And I try to allow my imagination to simply take all that, to meld things, spin things, and create a story.

LK You don't say, "I'd like this to be about"—

NB No, then I'd write an essay. Which is why I wrote *Selling Illusions*. The book was my publisher's idea, but then I thought it was a good idea and I knew what it was going to be about. With my fiction, I have no thesis. There *is* a thesis there, but I recognize it only at the end.

One of the tricks to writing for me is to in fact wait until the moment when I know in my gut that the right voice is there. There comes a moment when I know it's going to be first person or third person, present tense or past tense. And who the character is. But I don't go in search of those details; there comes a moment when they're there, and I know that's how the story is going to be writing itself.

There is a more conscious process which comes with the second draft. I'm writing a novel now<sup>2</sup>—I won't tell you what it's about—but the process is very much like that. I wasn't planning on writing this novel; I was planning on writing a book about Spain. And two, three months ago, I found myself getting agitated, saw myself going quiet at home. I didn't quite know what was happening. And then I realized that there was a character who was trying to emerge, who I'm still trying to get to know . . . from a world I've never been to, but I've read about, and I think has constructed itself because I've read enough about it. It got to the point where I simply had to start writing.

But for some reason this novel insists on being written by hand in pencil. And it's simply emerging that it's something to do with the rhythm, something to do with the pace at which the character is telling me about what's happening. My job as a writer is to find the words to be faithful to what they're showing me.

LK I'd like to quote from a critic: "Whether or not they are immigrants to Canada, Bissoondath's characters rename and reinvent themselves."<sup>3</sup> Is it your view that all identity *is* a construction?

NB I recognize that I've been lucky in the life that I've had. I recognize that there are people who don't have the freedom to construct themselves or remake themselves, but I do think it's possible to say that I will not be constrained by certain things that don't speak to me as an individual human being, and that I will reject certain things because I don't think that they are right, and I will acquire other values. That's a kind of freedom, and I've been lucky enough to have that freedom.

I came here as an immigrant of my own free will. And I think that's the primary freedom that can then allow me to move on. But if I had

been obliged to come here, fleeing a war, or some kind of economic deprivation, it would be different.

LK There are people who will say to you, “What about racial injustice, what about economic injustice, what about sexual discrimination—all these categories of oppression, means of holding people back?”

NB Yes, but I think that there’s also a certain truth to this: if you accept the chains that others will put on you, then you become their victim. I think one can make a choice, as an individual, to simply not be constrained. Those injustices exist, and they have to be fought, and fought at every level we have, democratically. But at the same time, individuals have choice.

LK “The rhetoric of victimization”—that’s another term that came up in *Selling Illusions*. At a certain point, you’re right: it can become passivity and even apathy, because when do you escape from that group identity? You can make a hierarchy of injustices, but after a while, if that’s all it is, it starts to seem like a waste of time.

NB It does. I think we are particularly lucky in Canada in that we do live in a liberal, open, democratic society, one that has made many efforts to protect the rights of its citizens. Look at Trudeau’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms; here in Quebec, we have the same thing. We live in a society that’s ruled by law.

Too often I will hear people condemn Canadian society as being racist or Quebec society as being fascist. Those are blanket statements that reduce to a kind of stereotype the society you’re speaking about. We have to recognize not just the complexities of ourselves, but also of the societies in which we live. And if you run into a racist tomorrow, there will be a hundred other people who are not racist.

LK Another Trinidad-born Canadian writer, Claire Harris, has said something interesting about origins: “I don’t think it matters where you were born—I think it matters to whom you were born. [In] Third World countries, it is the difference between life and death.”<sup>4</sup> Do you agree?

NB I think it’s probably right about most Third World countries, but it’s also true of anywhere: the life that you lead depends a great deal on to whom you were born, the parents you had, the family you grew up in, the influences they bring to bear. If I am a writer today, and if I love books and reading, it’s because of the family into which I was born. If I love travel, it’s because of my family.

LK Yet there has to be a certain financial basis of support.

NB Yes, there has to be a certain financial basis, but it doesn’t have to be huge.

- LK Coming back to what you feel you left behind in Trinidad, you've also said you feel it was a very "macho" society. In what ways?
- NB I was the only one of my generation who enjoyed reading. Everybody else wanted to go fishing, hunting, or was interested in cars—those "macho" subjects. Traditional "boy" activities. And there was very little room for someone like myself. I had to fight to make that space for myself. But I don't believe that the book, or reading, are facing imminent death. I also think there's a critical mass of readers which we'll always have.
- LK Another topic I'm interested in is family fictions—family not necessarily as the nuclear unit, but communities as well, found families, chosen groupings. A comment by you about family which intrigued me was "Leaving Trinidad at eighteen, I never really got to meet my parents as an adult. My mother died before any of that could be done."<sup>5</sup> She died when you were still quite young?
- NB No, she died when I was twenty-nine, in 1984. But you've got to remember I left Trinidad at eighteen—and I saw my parents, maybe, three times? I went back twice and then we met in New York one time. And my dream was as an adult with *Digging*, published on my thirtieth birthday, that there I would have an opportunity to reconnect with them as an adult.
- LK And it's often tricky, isn't it, sharing your writing with family, for, in recognizing incidents you've drawn on from your childhood, or your life, family members may often feel that the writing is a kind of exposure, even betrayal.
- NB Yet I knew that in *Digging* there was none—no autobiography. No one would recognize themselves.
- There was a writer who once published a novel that was very well received and said, "Oh I couldn't have published it while my mother was still alive." That was not a problem for me. I'm intrigued by other people's lives, I'm intrigued by trying to understand them, what they've lived through and how they've been shaped.
- LK I'm thinking of Alistair Ramgoolam, who appears first in "Insecurity" in *Digging*, and then again in "Security," in *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows*. There he appears in Canada, but ironically, he feels far less secure now. It's a very poignant story, and it goes deeper into Alistair, his loss of identity, authority and control, and seems to end with him losing consciousness. In "Security," the second story dealing with Alistair Ramgoolam, you've said you were dealing a bit with your father.

NB Yes, but I saw that afterwards . . . it was my father, but it was also my uncles, people I knew who were living in an unstable society, people who were doing whatever they could to secure a future, because they were afraid, certain that one day everything would fall apart, and they would have to run.

The picture of Mr. Ramgoolam is not at all my father, in fact. It was simply the idea of living with that insecurity. I think the first story “Insecurity” is very much about a man trying to *find* some control, somewhere, and then, in the end, losing it. In fact, he ends up living the kind of life that he was preparing for—except that that life *means* a total loss of control.

LK You obviously reflect, fictionally, being part of a Caribbean “family” or community in your stories, where the narrator or protagonist is often being brought along, somewhat reluctantly, in order to be introduced to a larger group, connected by that shared origin and experience of emigration. You skewer the idea of sticking together for only that reason, satirically, in several stories of people who are very unpleasant or pretentious, so that ideal of cultural community shatters.

NB Exactly. And I realized eventually that, personally, I wasn’t interested in that kind of life—being part of a community where people would get together and bemoan the fact that there were no sandy beaches outside.

LK It’s a kind of victimization, again?

NB I think it’s a kind of radioactive nostalgia. It’s poisonous. The number of times that I heard the comment, “Well, Canada’s like that—Canada’s racist, Canada’s this or that,” from people who arrived in Toronto, settled in *an* apartment, went to work in *a* neighbourhood, returned to that apartment and encountered Canada at work and then through television, but decided that they knew what Canada was about and that they felt that they could justifiably condemn Canada. . . . But returning to family, I treasure my family; I enjoy family life a great deal.

LK Have you kept ties with your other relatives—uncles, aunts, cousins?

NB No, the extended family holds little appeal for me. I had the freedom to pick and choose. There are two aunts that I’m in touch with and an uncle. There are these aunts and my uncle V. S. Naipaul, who lives in London. We’re in touch.

LK I see in *A Casual Brutality* the island custom that any relative can drop in at any time—

NB Which is precisely why I decided to pick and choose.

LK But it is the cultural norm, isn't it? Your relatives are physically close, and then they come into your space—

NB Absolutely. And they would come and suck all the air from around you. It was extremely claustrophobic. It was the kind of society where privacy was *not* valued at all. Before the demands of family and friendship, your own individual, personal life did not matter.

I'm not a joiner, I've never been a joiner. And that's part of it as well. I would never belong to a political party, and in the same way, I don't want to belong to any large extended family which will put demands on you.

LK Yet when you have children of your own, this is part of the motivation for sustaining these family ties. You'll tell your daughter about your mother, and you will create *her* voice, again. And maybe you have already brought her voice, perhaps with others, into your writing already—like the passage you read last night from *The Worlds Within Her*.<sup>6</sup> The older woman speaker, Shakti.

NB It comes from the voices of all those women I grew up with. That strength, that humour, that no-nonsense attitude. That's my mother, that's my Aunt Savi in Trinidad, my Aunt Mira who lives in Florida, my Aunt Nalla in London. It's a Naipaul voice.

LK So, what do you want your daughter to carry with her in terms of family heritage?

NB A sense that she's a very complex little girl. That she is shaped by two very different histories, two very different families. She knows the stories of my family, she knows about leaving India a century ago, and the struggles of those early generations. She knows that her grandfathers Naipaul and Bissoondath both started life in great poverty, working in the sugar cane plantations, and each of them, through their own efforts, changed the lives of their families dramatically. The sense I want to give her is that she belongs everywhere.

LK Let's talk a bit about the short story now. I'm obviously interested in what makes a short story different from a novel. It's a vexing question, because in some ways impossible to answer! Yet I think there's a closer association of story with voice, *character* voice, because there's often only one.

NB I have the same ambitions for the short story as I have for the novel. When a reader has finished a short story of mine, I want them to have the sense that they've entered a world, and they've encountered lives,



and they've come away with a sense of fullness. Not just that they've seen a snapshot, or a short documentary film, but that they've seen a movie.

I am no more or less attracted to the short story than to the novel. And that goes back to my writing process. When a character comes to me, I know in my gut whether this is going to be a short story or a novel. I sense the length of it. Even not knowing the details, there is something that tells me this is a short story as opposed to a novel. I also tend to write fairly long short stories. My short story manuscripts tend to be between thirty and thirty-five pages each, which is longer than the norm, I'm told.

LK Yes, you can compare a novel to a film, or a story to a snapshot, which sounds much more static and limited. I mean, look at Munro's short stories or Mavis Gallant's. It's fascinating what *can* be done in a short space of time or limited amount of words and usually with a single narrating voice, because in a novel, it's more do-able to have many voices. The reader's prepared for that, whereas to shift speakers in a short story—it seems there isn't enough time.

NB No, there isn't enough time in a short story to shift voice, although there's no technical reason why it couldn't be done.

LK I don't recall noting such a shift in your short stories, for instance.

NB No, but maybe I'll try it now. [laughs]

LK To go back to your first collection, *Digging*, I was most deeply affected by "Counting the Wind."

NB It's one of my favourite stories. I wrote it in two weeks. I remember it as a wonderful experience because my editor said, "I think we need one more story to round out the collection," and I said to her, "Well, I think I have something in my head."

LK And you also switched perspectives, with the same character focus, from first person to third person, without any explanation. That *was* different for you.

NB Oh, was that ever strange! Because the story wrote itself—I wrote the first section in one person, and then it came to an end. And then the other section came to me—in a different person. And I tried fighting it. I tried saying, "No, I'm going to continue as I began." But it wouldn't work. The story would not advance. And so I said, "Okay, I've got to get it done, because my editor is waiting for it. So I'm just going to do it, and at the end, I'll go back, look and see which person I should use. I'll decide later." Except that the story wrote itself as moving back and forth,

and in the end, I decided, there was no way I could change it, and so I gave it to her, and she thought it worked.

LK I found it gave an inside/outside shift, or a double perspective.

Obviously, first person is more intense and intimate. You can do a lot to create voice that way, and you've used first-person speakers in the Caribbean island dialect—that expressive, non-standard English used in “Dancing” [*Digging*] and “Cracks and Keyholes” [*On the Eve*], which reflects a whole different mindset.

NB Yes, in “Dancing,” the character would have spoken that way—that's how I heard her voice. So I did what I could to capture the rhythm.

Each story has got its own position, in which it places me, in order for me to write it. And I have to find that position, defining that position in terms of which narrative perspective, or person, or which tense. And I don't have a preference.

LK Shifting from first-person voice to third-person in “Counting the Wind” gives the reader both the feeling of being inside and then the more detached view from outside. It is jarring, of course, the schizophrenic narration, but it could be related to the whole dehumanization of the situation the man is in.

NB I think that's how it works, and I think that's *why* it works. The schizophrenia you mention, I think that's exactly it. He's got this personal situation with his wife and baby, and then he's got this other world, this other life, which is important in itself.

LK And the one invades the other. So you've never made the “mistake” where you started writing a short story, and it became a novel? Or the other way?

NB No, that hasn't happened. What has happened with *Doing the Heart Good*—that started as one short story. And then I found, as with Mr. Ramgoolam, the voice came back. What happened was that this one story was here, a fairly long story. And over a period of time, I found that the same character was telling more stories. And so I wrote them. And then he added something. These stories were written over a long period of time. He kept adding to his life. I didn't intend to write a collection or anything like that. And then, as I learned more about him, I understood where he was.

Essentially what this book has turned out to be is the same character, relating his life in a series of stories but also linking them all by means of a present tense that gives a kind of unity to the entire thing. So I think of

it as a novel, but its form is a blend of the short story and the novel.

The structure is as follows: one evening, Christmas Eve, and we start with him there, and end with him having dinner, just three or four hours in the present time. That's the present frame. And then, scattered throughout it, are these stories that he's written.

LK Your protagonist is a writer?

NB No, he's not a writer. He's a teacher, and he's written these stories because he's afraid that he's going to die and will be forgotten. And this is a desperate attempt to survive his death.

LK Did you publish any of these original stories separately?

NB No. I just put them aside, as I was working on other things. This happens to me once in a while. For instance, while working on *The Worlds Within Her*—the novel would be there, but suddenly there would be a story to write. And I would put it aside, and work on the story when I had the time. Other times, the urge would be strong enough that I would work on the story alone, which usually takes me four to six weeks. And then go back to the novel.

So I just kept these stories in a file folder, where they kept piling up, and I realized it was the same character, coming back.

LK Are there any obvious influences, or people you admire, especially in the short story—in Canada, or elsewhere?

NB The problem with a question like that is there are so many people I admire! I will tell you about a writer I've just discovered; she's well known in the United States and less well known here: Jhumpa Lahiri. She's a New Yorker and she won all these prizes, and she publishes in the *New Yorker*. And she's a wonderful short story writer. Not easy to find, for some reason, but she won the Pulitzer Prize.

Caryl Phillips is another example, an English novelist from the Caribbean who's been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. His book, *Crossing the River*, is one of the most moving I've ever read.

LK Of course, people have made much of the family connection with your uncle V. S. Naipaul.

NB Yes, they've tried. [laughs] It doesn't affect me one way or the other.

LK Except that you've had his example, his model . . . .

NB Yes, he's always been an example or a model, not as a writer but as a certain kind of lifestyle and approach to life. I mean, I'm a writer because of him; I grew up surrounded by his books on my mother's bookshelf. And that told me, "I could do that." And when I left Trinidad, he sent me a

letter, saying how wonderful the world was [and that I should] discover it. And he was encouraging with *Digging*. But I never felt intimidated by being related to V. S. Naipaul or anything like that. I never felt that I should be following in his footsteps. I think I was always aware that every writer makes his own path. The truth is, I write for myself. I wouldn't know how to categorize my work.

LK One thing you did say on this topic: "I like a page to look like a page."<sup>7</sup> What does that mean for you?

NB Well, I'm not a great fan of experimental writing. I like paragraphs, I like periods, I like commas, and I think they have important roles to play in the shaping of a story and the shaping of a page. I think not only of the rhythm of the words but also the way writing appeals to the eye. I think writing has to appeal to the eye as well—the shape of the page.

So often these experiments strike me as attempts to be clever. If you're going to be telling a story—I have a very traditional approach. I think it's partly why the nineteenth-century Russians appeal to me. In the end, you can be as clever as you want to be, but if what you are writing does not speak to the human heart and does not speak to the absolute reality of people's lives, then you're sort of doodling around with the page. This is a totally personal judgement and has nothing to do with anything except that this is what does, or does not, appeal to me. I become very impatient when I get a sense that a writer is trying to be clever. Clever for the sake of being clever.

LK Do you read your work aloud? Is that important to you?

NB To myself, yes. And I enjoy doing readings. The ear tells you a lot, but also the way it *looks*. You know, there are certain writers that I simply can't bother to read. Julio Cortazar, for example, with his pages of text with no break, no paragraphs. It doesn't please my eye. It tires my eye, and I don't think in that way. I don't think in huge blocks of text. So I suppose in the area of form, I'm a traditional writer.

LK Also, you've been very clear in saying that "Literature is literature; it's not politics."<sup>8</sup> Obviously, some writers would vehemently disagree with that. I guess maybe it comes down to how we define "politics," doesn't it? Some of your character studies, such as "The Revolutionary," "A Visit to a Failed Artist," "Kira and Anya," "Smoke," appear satiric in the Swiftian vein. The satirist's eye seems to be a political eye, in many ways.

NB Well, one of the themes that drives my writing—and I'm very interested personally in politics because it's one of those areas in which you see

human personality and the human being in its clearest form—is the effect of politics on people’s lives. I believe strongly that the individual must have as much freedom as possible within a society to create his or her own life, yet politics will influence our lives in many ways, every day. And I’m interested in that dynamic. So politics, politicians have come into my writing.

But I don’t have any ideology to sell, and if I did, I don’t think the place to sell it would be in fiction. I’ve been called, in print, fascist, communist, a feminist because of the story “The Cage.” Because of the portrait of the main character’s wife in *A Casual Brutality*, I’ve been called a misogynist because she wasn’t a very pretty woman. It was M. NourbeSe Philip who accused me, in an essay, of attacking Canadian womanhood because the portrait wasn’t a very attractive one. But she wasn’t an attractive woman. So I’m not trying to sell anything here—each character has to stand on his or her merits. Don’t try to identify what Neil Bissoondath believes politically by reading his fiction. *Selling Illusions* is a different matter.

LK I appreciate your honesty. The “appropriation of voice” controversy which you wrote about in *Selling Illusions* is, I think, over now.

NB Yes, I think it was a period that was lived through, but the inherent absurdities were so clear.

LK But I guess the other side of that debate is to make sure that all people have opportunities to be heard, to be published, right?

NB Absolutely. I remember being at a writers’ festival, and there were two Native women writers on this panel, and, quite frankly, I had read their work, and they were not good writers. But they did such a wonderful job of crying and complaining that the audience dared not object. Their point was “I should be published because I am a Native person who is trying to give voice to my people.” And my point is that, one, you weren’t elected, and two, you’re not a very good writer. Those are not grounds for demanding that you be published! I think the writing has to be, in the first place, *good writing*. And then you can have it play any role you like. You know, my uncle [V. S. Naipaul] always said he’s not a literary doctor. He’s not there to cure ills; we have people who are there to do that.

I think a novel can succeed in teaching, but I don’t think that should be the initial aim of the novelist as he sits down to try to write. If people read your book and they simply get a good cry, great; if they feel they have learned something, terrific. If they feel that they have not wasted

their time, great; if they feel that some of these characters have informed their lives in some kind of small way, that's wonderful. If they've been simply entertained, that's fine too. In fact I find it interesting that you mentioned "Kira and Anya" as being a satirical story because it's not meant as such.

LK I saw the juxtaposition of these women's opposed political positions as in some way a mockery of extremes.

NB But I think that's how extremes are. In fact, the man himself, Seepersad [the former politician being interviewed by Kira and Anya] is someone that I don't particularly like. And I don't like Mr. Ramgoolam. But there is something about both of them that I find very touching at the same time. I don't mean to skewer any of them.

"The Revolutionary" is a whole other thing, however. It *is* an attempt to write a satirical piece.

LK And there, you presumably want people to come away with something they've learned?

NB I'd like them to have a good laugh.

LK And to see what they're laughing at?

NB Sure. I fear ideology; I fear ideology of any kind, whether left-wing ideology as in "The Revolutionary," or nationalist ideology as in Yasmin's father [in *The Worlds Within Her*], or any kind of ideology. Religious ideology. Any system of beliefs that claims to have all of the answers goes counter to the true nature of human personality, which is one of contradiction.

LK I want to comment now on your last statement, at the end of *Selling Illusions*, which, as you have said, is in many ways a very personal book. Some political science reviewers have criticized it for not being theorized enough in that area; on the other hand, you have drawn from sources in the public domain, so it has a popular appeal. You were speaking as a writer, not as a member of a political party.

NB Nor as a specialist of any kind. But I wanted to do a book that was *not* by a specialist, a book that would speak to people who were living this every day, who weren't studying it, who were seeing themselves living day by day with this Multiculturalism Policy.

What's special about *Selling Illusions* is that it's nothing new; I'm not the only one to have these feelings about multiculturalism. There are hundreds of thousands of people across this country who have these feelings, except that they haven't put them together in a book. And when

I did that, it brought out the most diverse—ethnically, racially—set of people. And that’s what was gratifying about it, and that’s why I didn’t want to do an academic book. I didn’t want to be quoting too many things from sociological studies. I wanted to say, “Let’s take a look at the everyday level—newspaper articles, films, the popular media.” I wanted it at that level. And that’s what was able to speak to people, I think.

LK At the end of it you said, and this sounds to me now like your credo as a writer: “I will continue to pursue, to the best of my ability, the demystification of the Other.” I was thinking, is it possible ever to demystify the Other, entirely?

NB Ah, no—happily. That can never, ever be done entirely; human beings are much too complex for that. But that’s part of the fun, and one of our roles as human beings: to try to understand others who are so different, in the full knowledge that I may think I understand now, but, God, tomorrow, something’s going to happen and change that person in ways I can’t anticipate, and I have to try and understand that too. That’s what I enjoy doing as a novelist.

That’s why I say you can’t find the autobiography of Neil Bissoondath in his fiction. For instance, I try to put myself into the skin of Joaquin, in “On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows,” and to try to sense what his reality, daily reality, is like. To try to demystify for myself a life that is not mine, an experience that is not mine.

LK And you do this in part by reading, by researching, what it was like to be a victim of political torture, escaped to a new country? And partly imagining?

NB By imagining, yes. Reading everything from newspapers, to official reports . . . meeting people. That will kick off fiction. These are all personal interests; I’m interested in what people go through in political oppression. But for me to enter that world, it will take, usually, something that I’ve seen that doesn’t strike me at the time.

Remember the man’s hands in “On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows,” the description of his hands? A few years ago, in Toronto, there was a small coffee house on the Danforth, and there was a group of Chilean exiles who used to play there every evening. They were popular for a while. And I remember the drummer had no thumbs. They’d been removed by the secret police. And that stayed with me: the damage that could be done to hands.

LK That’s an example of an encounter with “otherness.” But you have also

said elsewhere that “every country is racist, unless it is a country that has only one race living in it.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, this is almost inevitable.

NB Racism is part of the human experience.

LK We’re always looking for otherness, then?

NB Well, there’s difference, and so long as there’s difference, there’s fear.

And that will manifest itself in various ways. We’re most at ease with the familiar; it’s a normal human reaction. How far you take that reaction, how you deal with that unease, is the question. I think it’s essential for writers to approach difference—if you don’t, what are you going to write about?

LK But also the otherness in the *self*—we change, as well.

NB Absolutely.

LK So, where do “self” and “other” overlap? There’s often an otherness we personally own but don’t want to acknowledge.

NB I think you have to acknowledge it. Unless you do that, you can’t begin to approach the other who is external to yourself.

LK Exploring characters that you don’t especially like, as well?

NB Oh, that I particularly enjoy. When I start off and I don’t like a character, the challenge is to understand enough about his life to begin to feel for him. That’s when I know a story is working.

All my characters are part of me, but I don’t love everything about myself, so I don’t love all my characters. Often, they say or do things that I don’t like, that I disagree with—but that’s who they are.

LK Does it appear that we often need to invent difference or otherness where it doesn’t exist, then?

NB Let’s face it: discovering someone else—making those connections, demystifying—takes an effort. It’s easier to say, “Well, he’s different.” Or “They’re different.” And not necessarily in a vicious kind of way, just that you don’t bother to make the effort to get through the *real* differences as well as the *apparent* differences to find out that this is a human being who has the same feelings, fears, desires, as you do. And that’s where emphasizing difference works counter to what I see as the *true* adventure in life, in fact: discovering.

Quebec City,

May 2001



NOTES

- 1 Penny van Toorn, "Building on Common Ground: An Interview with Neil Bissoondath," *Canadian Literature* 147 (Winter 1995): 132.
- 2 Neil Bissoondath, *Doing the Heart Good* (Toronto: Cormorant, 2002). It will be published later in the US.
- 3 Penny van Toorn, "Positioning Neil Bissoondath: Post-Colonial, Multicultural and National Formations," *New Literatures Review* 27 (Summer 1994): 88.
- 4 Leslie Sander and Arun Mukherjee, "A Sense of Responsibility: An Interview with Claire Harris," *West Coast Line* 22.1 (Spring/Summer 1997): 26.
- 5 Van Toorn, "Building on Common Ground," 128.
- 6 A reading at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English, held May 23–27, 2001 at Université Laval, where Bissoondath teaches.
- 7 Van Toorn, "Building on Common Ground," 132.
- 8 Interview with Aruna Srivastava, *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, ed. Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1990) 320.
- 9 Srivastava, 314.

