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Interview with Fred D'Aguiar

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The following interview was conducted at the University of Miami in Fall 1997.

HYPOLITE: I know that you spent the first two years of your life in England, and the next ten in Guyana before returning to England. Is it in London that you started writing poetry?

D'AGUIAR: Yes, in the equivalent of high school. I wanted to be a poet and my English teacher encouraged me. I just kept writing through university and eventually got published.

HYPOLITE: So you didn't do any writing in Guyana?

D'AGUIAR: No, in Guyana it was just the usual nursery rhymes and calypsoes. As a kid, it was great to learn rhyming couplets that were really rude. Sparrow, for example was a great calypsonian who wrote lyrics with all sorts of adult innuendoes.

HYPOLITE: And you knew that as a kid?

D'AGUIAR: Well, it wasn't something that was totally explained to you as a kid but you would see adults laughing at them, and the way it was sung we'd say hmmm, what's he going on about? Then we worked it out and realized, my God this is about double meanings this talking about one thing but meaning another. It's a great poetic device that later I would deploy in my writing. But at the time, it was wonderful when the code was suddenly revealed to us kids.

HYPOLITE: When did you know you were going to be a poet per se? When did the poetry become primary in your life?

D'AGUIAR: I got published at university. At that time (during the Jurassic Age!), there were no MFA programs. There was one in East Anglia which Malcolm Bradbury ran but that was the only MFA program in England. As an undergraduate I got published in some magazines and then I thought Ah! This is a *vocation*. After university I signed up to do a Ph.D. at the University of Warwick on Wilson Harris and the Caribbean novel and became sidetracked into publishing my poems. I literally went off and got a fellowship at Cambridge that didn't require a doctorate so I decided that I'm not going to do that anymore. I left the Ph.D. program to write because things were actually going very well. So I wrote poetry and taught a little to pay the bills.

HYPOLITE: What do you think about the compatibility of writing and doing the kind of critical work that graduate students and professors do here in the discipline?

D'AGUIAR: You have to actually grow two heads in a way. There has to be a head and energy for theory and the language of theory (which is a lexicon unto itself requiring, as it does, a surrendering of your sense of wonder in the world), and another head that continually forgets the past and treats the mundane as extraordinary. To keep this sense alive, I have to separate these two kinds of work. To do that, I come into work and I do all my reading at seven in the morning until very late at night. For the three days I concentrate on teaching and reading around teaching

The rest of the time I go back to reading things like Lewis Carroll and other material that will encourage me to be a mad hatter. You have to connect all those things in a mysterious way.

HYPOLITE: How did you come to the United States?

D'AGUIAR: I came here as a Visiting Writer at Amherst College in 1994 and I've been here since then. I went from Amherst College to Bates College. At Bates, I taught creative writing and literature. The literature course was called Childhood in Caribbean and African Literature. It explored writers like Ngugi, Jean Rhys, and Ama Ata Aidoo--a number of wonderful books that I always wanted to pull together--some of them not very well known. Childhood, one of the great subjects of Caribbean and African literature seems a bit tired now but when I taught it two years ago, it wasn't as bad. It's hard to write "childhood" now and not take a skeptical approach.

HYPOLITE: I know in the West Indies the universities do a fair job of supporting their writers. A number of them work in English departments there. Do you find the academic system here more supportive of writers than British universities?

D'AGUIAR: Yes, it is. In the West Indies, as you mentioned, it's great but in England it's much more difficult to do what I'm doing here due to the fact that the MFA system hasn't caught on in England. Here in the States there are over 200 programs. In England, they've got a maximum ten programs nationwide with the occasional attempt at teaching literature with a creative writing component. It's harder in England where most of the poets are hustling in all kinds of ways to make a decent wage. Poetry is definitely not a career option at thirty dollars a reading.

HYPOLITE: What? (*horrified gasp*) You're kidding me.

D'AGUIAR: Well, maybe a bit more than \$30.00--\$40.00! But in some places you'll hear something like "If we have more than ten people, we'll pay you. If not . . ." So you have to get the people in the seats in order to get your money. It's horrible stuff. And after I had a really good fellowship at Cambridge, where I was allowed to teach a literature course and a creative writing course and was well paid--after that year, I had to really scramble around for the other two or three writing jobs that all the poets you know go for. And you see each other on the same short list and you get short-list fatigue. You chase the same two jobs. So when the American thing came--the fellowship at Amherst, I was so glad to get off of that treadmill.

HYPOLITE: Since you've come to the States, you've made the transition from poetry to prose with your first novel, *The Longest Memory*? How did you find that transition? Was it a difficult one to make?

D'AGUIAR: It hasn't been such a terrible break. I mean I'd always been writing narrative poems, dramatic monologue poems, and those are elements of fiction or at least elements of the earliest epic poems. Before the novel came along, long epic poems fulfilled that function. I think in Homer, for example, you have elements that you recognize as fictional elements, you know,

characterization, events, an arc in terms of story development- that sort of thing; elements of poems before they became elements of fiction. I've always written narratives and dramatic monologues so it wasn't a problem to not have a line break and just carry on to the margins. Which is actually what I did in *The Longest Memory*. A lot of it has this intensity I know I recognize from some of my poems. It turned out to be really a long poem, with a chorus of voices. Instead of the usual thing where you have a single voice doing the hundred yard dash, the poem coming to a close and it's over, at least for the writer, I just pretended it was a chorus and people would interrupt the speaker and they would go on for a long time. So *The Longest Memory* then became a series of chapters or long poems basically of people talking with varying degrees of intensity, but with fewer prepositions. In fact, I even got to the corrupt state where I was trying to get a sense to be a predominant thing in the book. I said, okay, there are 12 different chapters. In the cook's chapter, for example, I'll make sure that she paid attention to smell, rather than the usual sight-driven prose. So I tried to get a couple of things in there that would be olfactory. But I didn't tell anybody--I didn't say hey, this is really a long poem with multiple speech acts. I didn't do that. I just presented it as a novel.

HYPOLITE: When I read *Dear Future*, your second novel, and *Feeding the Ghosts*, your most recent one, those read less like poems than *The Longest Memory*. Obviously it's not the same thing happening.

D'AGUIAR: No. After *The Longest Memory* people wanted a "real" novel second time around. In *Dear Future*, I'm concerned with the subject of childhood. The year before the novel appeared, I'd read a lot about childhood, taught a course about it and realized that childhood was a well trodden area in Caribbean and African literature. I realized that this book would have to play with the form and have a conversation with, principally George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and also with Ben Okri's book *The Famished Road*--a book that I really admire. *The Famished Road* is a book about a child who keeps dying and being re born. Any literal return to childhood is really a revision of childhood experiences -a reinvention of it since the past is unrecoverable. In *Dear Future* I try to examine recent Caribbean history mediated by a childhood consciousness. It's a wonderful chance to look at history and all the big ideas through the simplifying lens of a child's eyes and also to be in a boy's fantasy. With *Dear Future*, I wanted to upset the conventions of the linear finite narrative. I'd grown accustomed to it being interrupted in my own life what with the move from Guyana to England and England to America. I became aware after changing landscapes a few times that I couldn't really write a narrative that would go from A to Z and try to be seamless. I couldn't pretend to present a world that was holistic, one that would go from young childhood to maybe the first period of sexual experience the end of childhood. There would have to be interruptions or there'd be a pretense of a unified childhood and then there'd be a showing of how it's destroyed. After Blake not even innocence can be presumed. Too many things have happened to make childhood a safe construct and I felt I had to show an awareness of it, of some of these events.

HYPOLITE: *Feeding the Ghosts*, your latest novel, is based on a historical incident, isn't it? In which an English slave ship dumped over a hundred sick slaves into the ocean to claim the insurance money? Where did you learn about this incident?

D'AGUIAR: I was in Liverpool in 1994 doing a reading from *The Longest Memory*. When I got there they showed me this museum and library in Liverpool called the Slave Gallery it's part of Maritime Museum. I went to see it and literally walked through it and came across a small exhibit about the slave ship, the *Zong*. The story left me with a feeling of deep depression and a desire to know more than the few facts conveyed. I'd originally planned a short story from the point of view of the person who climbed back on board. In the ship's log, it said one person climbed back on board without saying who it was. So I thought I'd make it a woman and once I'd done that it was hard just to make it a short story. I had to deal with what kind of journey a woman would have, and what if she survived, what if she got her freedom and other questions that came up that made it into a novel. It was a piece of history that then grew out of an absence of facts about it.

HYPOLITE: There was a similar exhibit at the Historical Museum of Southern Florida last year about a slave ship that had been recovered off the Keys, I think, and when I went to see it and looked at the bits of chain and locks, I was aware of first the gap the silenced and untold perspective and second that the gap was a voice unto itself. Like you, a number of Caribbean and African American writers have been working on this theme.

D'AGUIAR: Yes and even black people who you think would understand more still say why are you still writing about slavery? It's been over a long time. But when I listen to rap lyrics or even reggae music, there are always references to slavery as if it were last week. You have to measure the contemporary shame and the middle class desire to shake off those shackles and clean up the image a little bit, with the historical and still remnant roots of enslavement for everybody. I think the desire to forget is itself replete with some of the pain of a need for cure. You really want to move on, and it'll be easier to go about it when you try to look at the sore, the pain, the chains and imagine it out of existence until you are cured. Then maybe you'll be able to see them as just artifacts. We're not there yet. There are museums, so that's one step towards making them artifacts but the pain of slavery is not forgotten and therefore it cannot be disappeared. I think poetry and fiction is one avenue of cure. Fiction is working in a psychotherapeutic way. The writing of it is in the drama of it you feel both the hurt of the era and the memory and the recuperation of that memory. You also get the sense of *now* being fully in charge of your present because the gap that was willed away has now been bridged. I think fiction is trying to do that. A lot of writers have been engaging in it. It's a whole genre since *Beloved* and Charles Johnson's *The Middle Passage*. A few books tried it during the Harlem Renaissance and more books are trying it now and will continue until we're able to think of slavery as comedy as well. When we'll get to that stage, I don't know.

HYPOLITE: I wanted to ask you what you were reading when you were writing *Feeding the Ghosts*. Maryse Condé said once that she reads particular writers really intensely when she's writing. I wondered if that was something many writers did and how it ends up influencing the writing that's being produced.

D'AGUIAR: Well, all writers dig around and read around. They read spasmodically, or methodically, or serially, there's always something that you're dipping into. For me, when I'm writing I have to get as far away as possible from fiction. So I end up reading weird things. With *Feeding the Ghosts*, I was reading Robin Blackburn, this English Marxist historian who wrote a couple of books. One called *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* and *The Making of New World Slavery*. Both are over 600 pages with very, very fine notes and very fine print and that was good because it gave me the figures and facts about slavery, the geography, and all the contesting theories about the time and the empires that were trying to garner slavery for themselves, and what it meant.

HYPOLITE: I loved what you did with water in combination with wood in the text. There is a real intimacy that you would have with wood from having to lie against it as a slave in chains for weeks.

D'AGUIAR: I'd read a lot about water and how it stands as a metaphor for the Middle Passage and all that, but I hadn't seen it written in such a way that the water became a new geography that they write their memory into. The memory is on the land you've left and the place you're going to is the unwritten text, and everything you do in preparation for getting there is done on water. Water then becomes this shifting library of sorts. I like to think of it as a library with books that can be rewritten since it is moving, never stationary. It gives you a chance to revise yourself. It's wonderful as metaphor. As for the wood, absolutely. If you're there for ten weeks some of the voyages were that long depending on the trade routes, that's a long time to be in one place, especially if you're in shackles. So wood is actually forcing itself into your vocabulary along with a sense of water. I went after it as sort of a riff, a jazz riff.

HYPOLITE: Can I ask you what you're working on now or next?

D'AGUIAR: I'm just going over the proofs of this long poem that's about the mass suicides in Jonestown--which took place back in '78. It's driven by a character who lives in Jonestown and who has a friend in London that he left. He's writing to the friend. It's a chance to write about what was happening to Guyana during the seventies, and England and the States with the CIA and their interest in Guyana during that period. It comes out in March in London.