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Earl Lovelace's Years in Washington, DC: A Personal Memoir

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I begin in the middle. Earl is delivering a lecture in DC: “The Evolution of the Bad John in Trinidad.” His thesis is that the rural stick-fighter became urbanized, and the result was “Batman,” “Copper Head,” and a host of other borrowed monikers of so-called bad johns. Many of these bad johns ended up in jail, “with the old time cat-o’-nine” as a calypsonian put it, and some of them even had to hang, unrepentant to the end.

Earl saw the bad john as a dragon that could no longer dance, a decadent form of the old-time stick-fighter like a Parrot-Toe (in Salt). The stick-fighter, he argued, was a warrior; the kind of warrior that Uncle Bango used to dream about, a hero representing his village, and when he went to “war,” he had a trail of supporters who fended off every blow and absorbed every crack in his head with a show of shared community spirit. He had rites and ceremonies, expressed in daring songs and drum beats that would drunken the most staid school master of bygone days; he wore specially designed headgear wraps, and he carried with him a supernaturally protected weapon of wood. It was the village that was “fighting” through the skills of this brave man. HE WAS NOT A SUPERSTAR. He was a family member who had done well and expected no special honors. The village was honored and enriched by his accomplishments. He was performing a duty—“pietas” is how Virgil would describe this kind of action of which he attributed to Aeneas. To stray into a classical allusion, the stickfighter was an Aeneas not an Odysseus. The bad john was the Odysseus, the individual who brought glory on HIMSELF. At least, that is what he (the bad john) sought to do. The stick-fighter was revered, the bad john, feared.

The steps through which the stickfighter passed as he was unwittingly transformed into one of Sparrow’s “glamour boys,” defined the burden of Earl’s lecture. The rise of the “steelbandsman” and the panyard in lieu of the village and community spirit, the “tuff guy” defiance to Kitchener’s “ah go bring back the bull,” the unceremonious use of the “chooker” in place of the “mounted stick,” and so many other steps in the transformation made for a stimulating and insightful lecture.

Earl received a standing ovation. There were not many present, about ten of us, who were a group that formed an experimental program, working through a special department attached to Federal City College (now the University of the District of Columbia). Most of us were from the Caribbean, and two or three claimed personal acquaintance with some of these bad johns. Little did we, and neither did Earl, I suspect, know at the time, that we were “listening” to the seeds that would grow into Earl’s highly and deservedly acclaimed, *The Dragon Can’t Dance*.

The purpose of the experimental group was to develop an interdisciplinary curriculum for college freshman year students and to train a group of prospective teachers (recent graduates with their bachelor’s degree) to implement the curriculum. Earl was the creative writer in the group, and we worked all summer long during 1971 on curriculum development. We were, indeed, experimenting by using the new rage of the times, Set Theory as developed by the New

Math, as the basis of the curriculum. For example, we sought to use Set Theory to teach freshman English Composition and Literature.

One might want to know what the stick-fighter and the bad john had to do with Set Theory. Nothing. But it had to do a lot with our group. We wanted each person to acquaint the others in the group with some of her/his ideas. We had to become a community. And a communal family we became.

The writing component of the program particularly demanded Earl's attention. "Generative Grammar" best fitted our experimental strategy, and Earl spent time absorbing the various techniques. The long cumulative sentence, with a series of subordinating phrases and clauses, each unit taking off from a word or idea in the preceding unit, was one of the writing techniques we studied. This particular technique seems to have made a deep impression on Earl, for this style permeates *The Dragon and Salt*. One can open *Salt* at random and find, at least, one paragraph long, or, at times, a page long, sentence. Here is an example:

That time I am a child in this penitential island, in this town where every street corner is a rumshop where we have five churches, a Hindu temple, a mosque, two cricket teams and a single steelband that we make from oil drums - that is the part of the oil that we get: the steel - drums that have no use again except for rubbish, bins that we take and fire and shape and beat to make a music to coax into the daylight present those rhythms that issue from the goatskin drums and the chanting voices in the Shango palais where they kill unspotted ramgoats and wring the neck of white and red cockerels and drink their blood and cook their flesh and eat it without salt and dance till morning to gods that drag them down into a deep deep darkness where they froth and suffocate and perspire and groan and spin until their senses leave them; my mother thankful to her God that we not living next door to them, not by those drums that would giddy your head and full you up with a power African and useless that point you back to a backward people that can hardly help theyself, far more help you, can only make you shame, can only drag you down deeper into the dark. (44)

Thank the Lord for the semi-colon! And there are many sentences twice the length of the above-quoted sentence. I think that it is during the writing sessions of our experimental group that Earl honed this writing style.

His comments on students' essays were especially instructive. We shared our comments among the group. Set Theory invited emphasis on structure, the essay as a set made up of subsets (inter-related paragraphs), but Earl would not allow his students to be hemmed in. He pointed them invariably to style—word choice, sentence arrangement, and imaginative details. His students' essays, as a result, were always more lively and interesting than others that tended to be mechanically ordered and correct. In the final evaluation of our experimental curriculum, I

remember the point was made that the mathematical approach to writing often stifled the student's imagination, a flaw that Earl had instinctively avoided. Perhaps his reliance on imaginative power as revealed in style became even more embedded in Earl as author as a result of this experimental program.

The camaraderie the group enjoyed extended beyond curriculum development. Earl became a very eager tennis player, and displayed dogged determination in a football (as in soccer) scrimmage. I know members of the group often played chess after our sessions until early morning hours, and I think Earl participated in some of the late night chess matches. I am quite sure he would have been a very reflective chess player.

What I am very sure about is Earl, the poker player. He was daring and relished risk-taking. If he misread a player's hand, the features of his face would become stern for a moment, and then he would laugh out aloud. I have seen him win virtually all the money at the table during a long night of poker playing, and he would keep on playing through the following morning and lose it all. He would stand at the end of it all, and say, "Well!" He would laugh his deep laughter, stretch his arms above his head as if reaching for something outside and above this life where we smoked and drank liquor, and then he would settle down to petty talk. I think that Alford George (of Salt) would have liked Earl, or is it the other way around?

Amidst the horseplay and the serious business of curriculum development, Earl never had to say, "I have forgotten my mission." He found the time to complete a Master's Degree in Creative Writing at Johns Hopkins University; he spoke at several conferences—I remember C. L. R. James, who was part of the same panel on which Earl sat, having to hold back Earl from exploding as a "young Turk." The conference was at Howard University and Earl was now in stride. He had gained a confident voice, an independent voice. He didn't need C. L. R. comparing his (Earl's) ideas to Heidegger's or any other European philosopher's. Earl had become Guinea John with "two corn cobs under his arm pits."

But before he could extend his arms and fly, he had to spread his arms against a police car and be "tapped down." The occasion was when a slight drizzle began to fall. Earl, "like back home," as he explained it, began to run for shelter. Well, about six police squad cars, with lights flashing and sirens blaring, surrounded him within a few minutes. He didn't know then that a black man could not run on a street in D.C. without being suspected of a crime. "The policemen did not even apologize self. They just say that I fitted the description of someone they were looking for." After a reflective pause, he added, "These people up here wicked, you hear." Next day, rumor has it that, when someone went to pick him up to go on an assignment, Earl was seen walking up and down the sidewalk. "Why you walking like that, man?" Earl pointed to a sign that said "No Standing," and after yesterday's experience with the police he did not want to have "to deal with these D.C. police." Of course, the "No Standing" sign applied to vehicles. But Earl had tasted the D.C. police officers of the early 1970s.

The assignment that Earl had to keep that day was to go to prison and not as an inmate! He was participating in a college program in which our experimental group conducted for prisoners. C. L. R. James also participated in this program. This part of Earl's D.C. experience is hazy in my mind, but another member of the group recalls that Earl mixed easily with the inmates. I am sure that Earl empathized with many of these prison students.

However, the most memorable image that I, personally, carry of Earl is his sitting at a small wooden table, his back to the street window in a room bare as a poor student's cupboard, and working quietly at about 2:00 a.m., "not even a cigarette self." He did not know that I was looking through his window from the street sidewalk, and I knew then that "He have a big work to do."

I had the God-given privilege to see Eli Mannede tune a pan. I also have had the opportunity to see Earl at work. Earl reminds me so much of Eli. The way he listens to the sound of every word, feels for the rightness of one word beside another, goes back and forth re-working the entire sentence, and then, an audible "Yes" when he feels satisfied. In those days Earl smoked cigarettes, and one could almost "see" the rhythm of his writing by the way he inhaled the smoke, tapped the ashes, and placed the cigarette in the ash-tray. Yet, it is always the interior of characters that he is endlessly probing, as he did with his poker-playing friends. No matter the precise and lively descriptive details of the externals—a man placing his right hand over his left, a piece of paper flying into a room—his eye is forever fixed on the esoteric features.

So when I saw Earl's back on that early weekday morning when all sane people should be drinking before falling asleep, when I saw his back bent over a naked, wooden table, a lonely back slightly curved at work, not even in my half-drunken state could I disturb such artistic holiness. Indeed, it is sacrilegious to disturb that sacred moment when a genuine writer is struggling with the word. I thought deeply about Earl as I rode home. Months later, after he had returned to Trinidad, I would hear that Earl was secluded "in some country area writing a book." I knew. I understood. He was doing his "big work."

Works Cited

Lovelace, Earl. *Salt*. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1996. New York: Persea Books, 1997.