

Research, Repression, and Revolution— On Montreal and the Black Radical Tradition: An Interview with David Austin

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“ALL ROADS LEAD TO MONTREAL” is the title of an essay of yours on Black Montreal in the 1960s published in the *Journal of African American History*. But can you describe the road that led you to both Montreal and to the historical and theoretical work that you have done on the city over the past decades. A little intellectual biography . . .

I first arrived in Montreal from London, England in 1980 with my brother to join my family. (We had been living with my maternal grandmother in London.) I was almost ten years old and spent two years in Montreal before moving to Toronto. I went to junior high school and high school in Toronto, but Montreal was always a part of my consciousness and we would visit the city on occasion, and I also used to play a lot of basketball so I traveled to Montreal once or twice for basketball tournaments. As a high school student I would frequent a bookstore called Third World Books and Crafts and it was there that I first discovered Walter Rodney’s *The Groundings with My Brothers*. Three chapters in that book were based on presentations delivered by Rodney in Montreal during and after the Congress of Black Writers. So that was my first indication that something unique had happened in Montreal.

My older brother Andrew was a college student at the time in Toronto and one day he handed me a book entitled *Let the Niggers Burn! The Sir George Williams Affair and its Caribbean Aftermath*, edited by Denis Forsythe. At least this is how I remember it, though I may have borrowed the book from a local library in Scarborough, the district of Toronto where I lived. It was in that book that I first learned about the Black-led student protest that rocked Sir George in 1969 and the events that surrounded it, including the Congress of Black Writers. After high school I worked for a year and a half as a security

guard. During that time I travelled to Jamaica and England to spend time with family and explore the University of the West Indies and the School of Oriental and African Studies as potential places to study. I applied to McGill University, in part because Montreal always felt like another home for me, but also because, as I think about it now, my consciousness was touched by the accounts of Montreal that I had read in Rodney's book and Forsythe's anthology. Besides, I wanted to leave Toronto. The conversations that had been so important to my own political and intellectual development in Toronto as a high school student and post high school now felt as though they had become stuck and I strongly felt that if I was to grow, I needed to leave the city.

I moved to Montreal in December 1990 to attend McGill. It was a strange time to move, and I spent Christmas and New Years alone in a small apartment in what is known as McGill student "ghetto" which is adjacent to the university. I began to explore the city and discovered a bookstore, Liberation Books, owned by Michael Paris, a member of a well-known African Canadian family in Montreal. The bookstore was located downtown, close to Concordia University, and I would go there as often as I could. It didn't stay open long after I moved to Montreal, but at the time it was an important meeting ground for members of Montreal's Black community, and particularly Anglophones. It was there, I think, that I first encountered Alfie Roberts, but we did not speak then. Shortly after he was invited by an organization named AKAX (Also Known as X) to give a talk. I don't remember the exact nature of the talk but I do remember it being very insightful and part of what he discussed was the role of human personality and biography in politics and how Pierre Trudeau was very different from Brian Mulroney (both prime ministers of Canada) because the former had the kind of confidence and sense of entitlement that comes from being born into big money and privilege. I found Alfie's reasoning novel, but I don't think it was until the following school year when I became a coordinator of the Black Students' Network (BSN) at McGill that I began to work with Alfie and got to know him, and then discovered that he had been intimately involved in many of the events that had in a sense brought me back to Montreal.

You mention two institutions that played an important part in your own intellectual development: Third World Books and Crafts in Toronto and AKAX in Montreal. Can you say something about each one and the political time and space in which you encountered them?

As I mentioned, Third World Books and Crafts was a meeting ground in Toronto. Of course, this is true of Black bookstores in cities across North America. During this period some of us would cross the border to visit the Shrine of the Black Madonna bookstore in Detroit on occasion. A few years later when visiting Mariame Kaba, who had been an instrumental member

of the BSN, and was now living in New York where she had grown up, I would spend time visiting the Countee Cullen Library where she was working at the time, the Schomburg Center, the C. L. R. James Institute that was then run by the Jim Murray, and bookstores in Harlem and other parts of the city. On at least one occasion, I visited Dr. John Henrik Clarke, whom the BSN had brought to Montreal in 1992. I would also visit bookstores such as New Beacon Books in London, England. There were several Black bookstores in London then and as a young man trying to make sense of the world, bookstores were indispensable.

In Toronto, Third World exposed me to was a body of literature, most of which was written by people of Africa descent, that opened up a world of history and ideas. In addition to Rodney's *Groundings*, I read his *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, and of course everything I could get our hand on by Malcolm X—books and audio and video tapes; and books by the Senegalese anthropologist, historian and physicist, Cheikh Anta Diop. In 1996 Diop's longtime associate Theophile Obenga was invited to speak in Montreal about Diop. He was teaching at Temple University at the time and I knew his son, Da-Mboah Obenga, who was then studying at the Université de Montréal, and we arranged his visit. Ivan Van Sertima, author of *They Came Before Columbus* was a guest of the BSN during this period. At that time, the ideas, especially audio and video cassette recordings of lectures, of Dr. Yosef Ben-Jochannan especially (I later traveled to Egypt with Dr. Ben on one of his educational tours), but also Dr. John Henrik Clarke were very popular. So too was George G. M. James's book *Stolen Legacy*, John G. Jackson's *Introduction to African History*, and of course W. E. B. Du Bois *History of African Civilization*. I read many of these books while I was in high school, and often in the place of schoolwork. Molefi Asante's *Afrocentricity* was also very popular at the time and I heard him speak at an event in support of the ROM 11 in Toronto in 1990. The room was packed and overflowing with excitement, but I must say that, for me, it felt as though he had swooped in to speak in a context that he knew very little about, and while I think we need to move closer to a conception on the Americas as a geographical location, local histories are still important and are what comprise the translocal.

Frantz Fanon became very important to many of us during the period when I was still in high school, but I cannot say that I fully appreciated the depth of his ideas at the time. There were many other authors and personalities and we would exchange books, or photocopies of books, and audio and video recordings and have regular informal discussions about them, ideas and topics related to people of African descent, and politics in general. Some of us were more into some works than others. I read a lot of history, including ancient African history and about African and Caribbean politics, but I was also curious about Marxism. In those days, Norman Otis Richmond was

a central figure of the Black left in Toronto and a radio host. He is originally from California and was closely tied to the Black Panthers and other Black left groups in the sixties and seventies, and in the 1980s and 1990s he hosted two radio programs, *Diasporic Music* and *Saturday Morning Live* on CKLN. This description doesn't begin to describe his role, but *Diasporic African Music* blended Black music and commentary and *Saturday Morning Live* was and still is more of a talk/interview program. Many of us grew up listening to Norman as the voice of Black politics on the radio. He and Raymond Watts led a study group on "dialectics" in the basement of the bookstore at the time. Watts had been active in Trinidadian politics. He had been a member of the study group in London at C. L. R. and Selma James's home that included Walter Rodney, Norman Girvan, and Orlando Patterson, among others. Robert Hill also participated in these sessions before returning to Jamaica. Watts was not university trained or an academic, but an autodidact and musician. Not only was he later actively involved in the movement that almost toppled the government of Eric Williams in Trinidad and Tobago in 1970 but, though I'm not sure that I knew this then, the Congress of Black Writers was his initiative and he was actively involved in Black and Caribbean politics in Montreal in the late sixties. I didn't attend these meetings in the basement of Third World, but two close friends, Richard Sutherland and Robin Battle, did and we would often discuss Marx, Marxism, and dialectics in the bookstore or at Robin's house on occasion. Mr. Johnston had been a communist, apparently the first Black member of the Communist Party of Canada, so the bookstore carried a wide range of material—lots of books written by Marx and Lenin, and Mao and Stalin. I have never felt drawn to read anything written by Stalin, but at that time I was unaware of the differences between Stalinism and the ideas of C. L. R. James when Mr. Johnson introduced me to James's work.

At that time, genuine discussions about gender and sexuality, at least for the young men who frequented the bookstore, were few and far between and, when discussed, often reduced women to queens, princesses, or Amazonian-type warrior women who boldly stood by, or behind, their men. I remember seeing bell hooks speak in a high school auditorium not far from the bookstore during this period and, although it was my first time being exposed to feminism as an ideology or concept, her ideas made a lot sense to me. I was drawn to her ideas, but not enough to actually read her popular book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* yet. The weight of the kinds of discussion we had in the bookstore left little opening for feminism at the time. That came later as a university student.

In addition to Third World Bookstore, I used to visit Pathfinder Books, located on Dundas Street in Toronto, but I think it was located on Spadina Avenue back in the late 1980s. I would sometimes attend forums at the bookstore and I also subscribed to their newspaper, the *Militant*, and would buy

books there, including books by and about Malcolm X because Pathfinder owns the rights to many of his speeches. They also published a discussion between Leon Trotsky and James about the “Negro question.” It was always a struggle visiting that bookstore because while I wanted to quietly peruse the books, inevitably someone from the bookstore would approach me about joining their group. Much later I came to understand the nature of Trotskyist groupings and splinter groups, and their ambivalence towards James because he had left them to pursue a more independent path. I remember during the Black Radical Congress in Chicago in 1998 I encountered someone who had been very close to Raya Dunayevskaya, James’s former political associate in the Johnson-Forest Tendency who later split with James and founded News & Letters. When we got onto the topic of James and why their relationship fell apart she said that it was because James did not understand Hegel’s Absolute, the dialectic, and the true nature of spontaneous organization, and Raya Dunayevskaya did.

Also Known as X (AKAX) was an important group in Montreal in the early 1990s. It was a youth-oriented organization whose members were largely comprised of students at Concordia University and some students from McGill. One of the things that was unique about AKAX was that, even though most of its leaders were university students—people like Ariel Deluy, originally from Haiti, Michael Pintard from the Bahamas and who is now a senator, Amuna Baraka-Clarke, who is now a poet based in Toronto, and many others—it was firmly rooted in the Black community of Montreal and among youth in particular. The group organized events and protests against police brutality and the shooting of young Black men in the city by police officers. Its members were defiant and spoke militantly and gave a voice to the younger generation. They also organized weekly “rap sessions” as they were called, usually held at Concordia University. I began to attend these meetings in 1991 and it was there, as I mentioned, that I first heard Alfie Roberts speak, and later Juanita Westmoreland-Traore who, as a young lawyer, had represented the students at Sir George Williams University in 1969 (her son Bengali was a member of the Black Students Network at time), and Leo Bertley, a Garvey historian who was originally from Trinidad and Tobago. The Black Students’ Network (BSN) and AKAX would on occasion organize events together, sometimes bringing in guest speakers, including Horace Campbell who delivered a talk on Frantz Fanon during the 1991–1992 academic year. Many of us knew his book, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*, but he and Alfie Roberts were old friends and he was invited on Alfie’s suggestion.

You were an undergraduate at McGill University. What was the impact of the McGill environment on your intellectual formation? I understand

that you were in the late Richard Iton's class along with art historian Krista Thompson and historian Melanie Newton.

McGill was and remains a very conservative university. Not only is it conservative, but as a Canadian university it takes pride in being a kind of Ivy League school in Canada, much like the University of Toronto and Queen's University do, but without the resources of a major American academic institution. In fact, like Queen's and U of T, it is not uncommon to see students wearing t-shirts or to hear references to their schools as the Harvard of Canada, or something along those lines. Of course, this reflects many things—elitism, privilege, and an inferiority complex that is part of Canada's heritage of being squeezed between the legacy of Britain as a former imperial power and the fact that Canada shares a border and a continent with the reigning imperial power. Ironically, it was McGill's conservative nature that encouraged us to become active on the campus and take this work off campus. Here I have to mention Mariame Kaba first and foremost. Mariame grew up in New York to West African (Senegal and Guinea) parents and moved to Montreal to attend McGill in the late 1980s. When I met her in 1991 she was actively involved in the Southern African Committee (SAC) and at the end of the 1990/1991 semester we both were lured into the coordinating committee of the BSN. In fact, we became co-coordinators of SAC too, which circulated information and organized forums about South Africa under Apartheid and, when I was involved, the forthcoming 1994 elections and liberation struggles in Southern Africa, including Angola and Mozambique. Mariame was and remains a first-rate organizer. While others talked, she took action and made ideas concrete. Despite the fact that we were essentially the same age, I learned a great deal from her about organizing. She now lives in Chicago where she works with youth, does prison justice work, and teaches part-time at Northwestern University. She is one of most remarkable people that I know. Mariame and I, among others, including Karen Livingstone who was from an old Black Canadian family that had ties to Toronto and Montreal, and Adrian Harewood were all active in one form or another (I'm avoiding mentioning others because I don't want to inadvertently leave people out, but you are right to mention art historian Krista Thompson, who later became a colleague and friend of Richard Iton's at Northwestern). We conspired to use the institution's resources to organize activities and events on and off campus. (It would be interesting to trace what former BSN members are doing now). I would say that most of my education took place outside the classroom. I was doing a joint major in anthropology and African Studies, but after the first semester I was completely disenchanted with how both subjects were being taught, and what was being taught, and decided that my time would be better spent learning on my own and playing a more active role in the BSN and other groups. To say that

I attended 25% of my classes while I was at McGill would be a stretch, and most of the classes that I did attend were independent studies with the few professors with whom I found some compatibility.

As an active member of BSN we would bring in a range of speakers that not only reflected the interests of members of the coordinating committee, but also the interests of Black students and members of Montreal's Black community. We're talking about the early 1990s (I started at McGill in January 1991). A brand of Black Power along with Afrocentricity filled the air. It was common for Black women and men to don pendants of the African continent and the Black nationalist colors of red, black, and green. There was a particularly keen interest in African history, and particularly the history of Ancient Egypt, and the ideas of Malcolm X. It infused popular culture, including hip hop.

The BSN invited a mix, a kind of hodge-podge of speakers that reflected the varied interests of the time: Dr. Yosef Ben-Jochannan, or Dr. Ben, as he was known, Dr. John Henrik Clarke, Ivan Van Sertima, Horace Campbell, Barbara Ransby, Frances Cress Welsing, and Jan Carew, again someone who Alfie Roberts knew personally and suggested that we invite. In fact, Jan became a frequent visitor and he and I became very close. In many ways, he treated me like a son and would sometimes call me to see how things were going. Robert Hill, or Bobby, was frequent visitor to Montreal, beginning in 1993 for a commemoration of the 25 anniversary of the Congress of Black Writers. Alfie had remained in contact with him over the years dating back to their friendship and political relationship in the sixties in Canada and, again, it was Alfie that suggested that we invite him to Montreal for the Congress commemoration. We organized two days of activities. The First day was at the UNIA in downtown Montreal. This is one of the oldest existing chapters of Garvey's organization and Malcolm's Grenadian mother Louise Langdon Norton had been active in that chapter before marrying Malcolm's father and moving to the U.S. The second day of the conference was held at the Cote-des-Neiges Black Community Center and ended under strange circumstances when the police ambushed Robert Douglas (now Tiyani Behanzin), son of Rosie Douglas, and charged him with obstructing justice when someone involved in the conference was being arrested for no apparent reason. I arrived at the meeting late and found out what had happened from Bobby Hill and others who were there. Richard Iton was there and it was the first time I saw him come close to losing his cool and expressing genuine anger at the injustice of Douglas being arrested. Douglas was released and eventually acquitted of the charges during a trial in which, if memory serves me right, he represented himself.

The BSN also organized a tutoring program in elementary and high schools where there were large concentrations of Black students, and Children's Day, a day of entertaining education for elementary school children.

We also worked closely with the Palestine Solidarity Committee, setting up information tables and facilitating discussing on the university campus. This was in the period leading up to the Oslo Accord and there was some semblance of hope that there would be settlement to the Palestine-Israeli conflict. The BSN often organized events with the same guest on the university campus and then at a Black community institution. For a time, the Black Students' Network was by far the most active group on campus and our work spilled over into the school newspaper, the *McGill Daily*, and CKUT, the campus-community radio station. There was a time that people in the wider community, and not only Black people, would come on campus to pick up copies of the newspaper, including the special Black History Month issue that we put out. It was in one of those special issues of the *McGill Daily* that I wrote the first article that I ever published. I eventually became an editor of the school newspaper following what was essentially a soft coup of the previous editorial committee of the paper. Melanie Newton, along with Patricia Harewood and Ahmer Qadeer, all of whom remain very close friends—we all became editors of the paper and turned it into a paper that reflected our individual and collective political and cultural interests. Those were good days and much of our education occurred while working on the paper. Melanie and I worked closely together on the paper and had similar political interests. She studied German at McGill and speaks the language and never seemed to be on a prescribed path, but sought to pave her own way in her own way as an independent thinker. I have always respected that about her. We remained in touch when she was at Oxford. The *McGill Daily* was very influential on the university campus. Not only did students read it, but so did professors.

In the early 1990s a few of us formed a student organization, The Friends of Haiti. It was an unofficial group and it did not last very long, but it was formed amid the crisis following the overthrow of Aristide. I used to have ongoing conversations with very close friend, Astrid Jacques, and her cousin, Kathleen Jacques, both of whom were Haitian. Astrid grew up in Montreal, but Kathleen had grown up in Washington and was very skeptical of Aristide. Out of these conversations and many others a few of us decided to form this organization. We did not hold many events, but one in particular stands out. We invited Claude Moïse, a Montreal teacher and Haitian constitutional historian to speak about the crisis in Haiti from a historical perspective. Moïse is an example of the peculiar relationship between the Haitian diaspora and Haiti. Haitians can be out of the country for decades and then return to play an active role in the society, almost as if they had never left. He later became editor of the conservative and anti-Aristide paper, *Le Matin*, controlled by the wealthy Boulous family in Haiti.

In those days I followed developments in Haiti very closely. I read *Haiti Progrès*, which I used to pick up in local Haitian stores or in a store in the

Berri-UQUAM metro (subway) beside the Université du Québec à Montréal, pretty much every week. I also listened to Haitian news programs such as *Samedi Midi* which aired on CKUT, so much so that I began to develop an understanding of Haitian Creole. A close Haitian friend, Cleveland Joseph, introduced me to the Haitian community, music, Voodoo and the internationally famous Haitian group Boukman Eksperyans became a favorite. As it turned out, Boukman Eksperyans's manager, Dan Behrman, hosted a radio program called *Just Another Immigrant* on CKUT, a radio station where I co-hosted a show with Richard Iton. Dan and I would often chat about the show, music, Haiti, and other things, and one day he passed on a recording of the group's live performance during Port-au-Prince's carnival. I also listened to quite a bit of the Montreal-based Haitian group Supersonic 747 with Dieudonné Larose, especially the album *Guantanamo*. I also covered Haitian news for the *McGill Daily*.

In 1993 I became one of the founders of *Soul Perspective*, a weekly radio show that fused music and politics. Pat Harewood and Mebrat (Mimi) Beyene were also part of the original team, but the show was the brainchild of Richard Iton, who grew up in Montreal to a Jamaican mother and a Vincentian father. Richard came up with the idea after the police incident during the Congress event I mentioned. We had difficulties getting our perspective on what happened in the mainstream news and there was no radio medium through which we could communicate consistently and directly to the public, and especially to members of the Black community. It was also for this reason, again with Richard playing a leading role, that we formed the Black Bloc at CKUT, bringing together Black programmers at the station to discuss the particular needs of our programs and in order to speak with a collective voice when necessary.

Everyone involved in the *Soul Perspective* had a real appreciation for music, and music as politics, and Richard possessed a large music collection. We would finish the show at 2 am and he would drop me home in his long boat of a car that was straight out of the 1970s. We would have feature-length guest interviews on a wide range of subjects related to the Black diaspora and African and Caribbean politics, play recordings of lectures or interviews, including interviews or recordings we received from WBAI radio courtesy of Samori Marxman who, like his friend Alfie Roberts, was originally from St. Vincent, and whom I got to know through my frequent visits to New York.

The program began in January 1993, but Richard and I had met sometime in the previous year when he came by the BSN office to tell us about a course he would be teaching at McGill on African American politics. He was tentative and even nervous, I think because he was not one for self-promotion. At the time the BSN was behind a campaign to create an Africana Studies program at McGill and to push the university to hire more people of African

descent, so the course was more than welcome. I actually became a student in the class, but Richard was really feeling his way as a teacher at the time and his unassuming quiet personality worked against him in the classroom. He was forgiving, or at least silent, when I didn't attend the class and basically showed up to write exams or submit the final essay. He didn't take it personally at all and we developed a friendship that went well beyond academia. Richard was an early if not founding member of the BSN in the eighties who studied at McGill and then John Hopkins (his father had also studied at Hopkins and was an economist at McGill). He went on to teach at the University of Toronto and Northwestern and to author *Solidarity Blues: Race, Culture, and the American Left* (2000) and that extraordinary book, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (2008). *In Search of the Black Fantastic* is one of the most important books on Black diasporic politics since Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and a major theoretical contribution to the study of politics, and particular popular politics, and popular culture, a "celestial" book as Margo Natalie Crawford has described it, one that elevates our thinking and pushes us beyond conventional boundaries. It is a major book by any standard and really should be universally appreciated as such. I can honestly say that *In Search of the Black Fantastic* is one of the best books I have ever read, and I read it just in time as I was working on *Fear of a Black Nation*. He also gave me valuable feedback, both verbally and in the form of a review, on the book before I worked on the last draft. My book is a better one because of Richard's and the standard that he set in his work, and for some time to come it will be a standard to aspire to.

I'm wondering if you could reflect on your experiences as a researcher and on the nature of the kinds of archives you've encountered. I'm interested in particular in three things: first, your work as an oral historian and your approach to interviewing. Secondly, your use and encounter with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and CSIS archives. And third, your use of print culture and small press materials—I'm thinking in particular of the use of *New World Quarterly*, *International Caribbean Opinion*, and other journals in *Fear of a Black Nation*.

I'm a reluctant researcher. I love ideas and I appreciate history and how it informs the present, and I have an appreciation for theory. I don't enjoy spending a lot of time in libraries or archives conducting research, but I like the discovery process associated with archival work. As I think about this now, it reminds me of something Rinaldo Walcott once said in a conversation a few years back, something along the lines of using historical information in order to create theory, as opposed to being an empirical researcher himself. I think history and historical research can stand on its own but, for me, archival work is about retrieving the present, if that makes any sense. I began

writing about Caribbean and Black left politics as a result of my encounters with people who had been actively involved in the events of this period in Montreal. Alfie Roberts was the first among them, but through him I met many others, including people like Bridget Joseph, Celia, and Viola Daniel all of whom lived in Montreal. Bridget was the Honorary Consul to Grenada during the Grenada Revolution, but had been active in the Caribbean Conference Committee in the 1960s. Bobby Hill was a frequent visitor to Montreal in the 1990s. He was still teaching at UCLA then and we developed a friendship during this period and have collaborated on a number of projects. He wrote the preface to *A View for Freedom* and *You Don't Play with Revolution*, and he was also the key informant and the pivotal voice in the documentaries that I prepared on C. L. R. James (2005) and Frantz Fanon (2006) for the CBC. Anyone who knows him knows that, as a historian, he is equally at home in theory and philosophy, in fact both shape his work, and he is one of the few people that can do justice to the vast corpus of James's work. It is difficult to explain the kind of relationship that members of the CLRJSC had with James. It is perhaps little-known that Bobby was essentially like a son to James, and they were certainly intellectual soulmates, and this in part explains why he so ardently defends James's legacy.

There were many other women and men who came of age or who were active during the sixties and seventies in Canada. I listened to their conversations when they met together, and eventually began to interview some of them but, with the exception of an article that I wrote in a Montreal magazine called *Hour* in 1995, I did not conduct the interviews with the idea of writing in mind. In fact that article was largely based on the interview that I did with Alfie Roberts and which became the small book—an edited transcription of his narrative—*A View for Freedom: Alfie Roberts Speaks on the Caribbean, Cricket, Montreal and C. L. R. James*. The article itself became the basis of other things that I eventually wrote about Black and Caribbean politics in Montreal, so *Fear of a Black Nation* has its origins in that article in a rudimentary way. Because I was involved in radio, I often used interviews that I conducted on the air. Otherwise, I think I was simply conducting the interviews for the historical record. We're talking about the 1990s. More recently I have conducted interviews with writing in mind. I also conducted many interviews in Trinidad and Tobago, England, Martinique, and the U.S. when I was working on radio documentaries on James and Frantz Fanon, some of which, in the case of the interviews related to James and his political-intellectual legacy, also informed my understanding of events in Montreal in the 1960s. It's quite surprising how many theoretical and historical books are written that fail to draw on interviews, and particularly books that revolve around figures or members of groups and organizations who are still alive. I think this phenomenon goes back to the literary and oral divide and the idea that if we cannot find it in a document it does not exist, and the idea that

oral accounts are unreliable. It is not to say that every book that is written has to draw on interviews. But to write about a historical moment or a social movement and not interview some of its key participants or other figures who may be lesser known but who have insights to share is to miss out on a great deal.

Generally, I like to ask an initial biographical question and a question that allows the interviewee to freely situate themselves in relation to the events that they are about to recount and to speak freely about themselves and the politics of the time. I try to intervene as little as possible, but in the case of some long interviews I have done, they often require a lot more active interviewing and probing, although I think that in the interview with Alfie Roberts I may have asked three or four questions for the entire three or four hour interview. Many interviews have been done spontaneously, and I often would carry a tape recorder with me in the 1990s in the event that I encountered someone who I felt I should interview. All of this is to say that I initially inherited much of what I have written about through oral accounts from many of the people that were involved, and secondly by conducting interviews. It was later that I began to look at documentation and even later think about that moment in more theoretical terms.

In 2001 a few of us living in Montreal established the Alfie Roberts Institute. Alfie was a kind of George Padmore figure. The Roberts's home on Bedford Street in the Cote-des-Neiges district of Montreal was literally like a bureau, and he, Tim Hector, and others had formed the Caribbean International Service Bureau in the late 1960s. In his home, Caribbean women and men and Africans met to discuss politics and participate in study groups. Alfie corresponded with members of the left from across the Caribbean and its diaspora and with a range of academic and political institutions related to the Caribbean, Africa, and socialism. He also co-organized conferences, including a major conference of the Caribbean left in Montreal in 1973, "Toward the Continuing Decolonization of the Caribbean," as well as other events and activities, including African Liberation Day. He served as an unofficial advisor to several politicians, some of whom, in the case of Arnhim Eustace and Rosie Douglas, eventually became heads of state. During the Grenada Revolution he was invited there in order to help establish a Caribbean Bureau, although he did not take up the position. Alfie Roberts died in 1996 and his library and archive was sitting in a storage space. We felt the material should be made available to the public through an independent institution so we registered an organization and set up the Institute in an office space. It lasted for 10 years as a research and documentation center and we organized public forums and events on both historical and contemporary issues largely related to people of African descent. Its existence as a documentation center was largely a work in progress, but some students and researchers were able to access some of its material for their work. We

also published *A View for Freedom*. We eventually closed the center because we could not sustain it, but hopefully the final chapter of the Institute has not been written. Some of the documentation, pamphlets, conference programs, pictures, and transcribed recordings—in this case of C. L. R James speaking—and correspondence are included in the book *You Don't Play with Revolution* and I draw on some of that material in *Fear of a Black Nation*. This was my first encounter with real archival material aside from the Roy States Black History Collection in McGill's McLennan Library. Roy States was a Black lay historian from Nova Scotia who lived in Montreal. It was in Alfie's collection that I discovered *Caribbean International Opinion*, a Marxist-Jamesian assessment of contemporary and historical events. It was published in 1968, probably as a kind of Marxist complement to the Congress of Black Writers of the same year and included contributions by James himself, Alfie Roberts, Tim Hector, Franklyn Harvey and Rosie Douglas on Marxism, the political economy of the Caribbean, racism in Canada, the general strike in France in 1968, and the Vietnam War. Alfie also kept many back issues of the *New World Quarterly*, which included coverage of events in Montreal, including George Lamming's presentation at the inaugural Conference Committee on West Indian Affairs in 1965 and Robert Hill's description of the Caribbean Conference Committee, which was originally named the Conference Committee on West Indian Affairs. In other words, I did not have to go very far to begin this work, but it has taken me far into the Caribbean and its left political-intellectual history.

I cannot recall at what point it occurred to me to access RCMP state security files and that they would contain a wealth of information about Blacks in Canada and Caribbean politics. There are some books published about state security and the left in Canada, but they say very little about Blacks or people from the Caribbean. At some point I realized that the national archives would also be an important source of information, especially because Clarence Bayne, who was a professor at Sir George Williams University during the '69 protest, had deposited his papers there. He had inherited the papers of the Caribbean Conference Committee when he briefly became its chair. (Sadly, the papers of Bridget Joseph, once the group's secretary, were shredded by family friends when she became ill.) Canadian state security files provide a real window into how the state, or at least an arm of the state, and its agents understood the political and public presence of Blacks in Canada. Their understanding, or lack thereof, was often grounded in fear or what I refer to as biosexual politics. Those files are also an important resource on the Caribbean and Black diaspora in Canada because state security was often meticulous in terms of collecting publications and other paraphernalia related to the left and oppositional groups. They also collected newspaper articles and kept track of media responses to events

as they transpired, which is also invaluable, particularly given that groups generally work in the moment and often don't archive their own documents.

Essentially I tried to use available documentation and resources while trying where possible not privilege one over the other. Far too often, for example, oral accounts are dismissed as being unreliable in contrast to written documents. But as Michel Rolph-Trouillot has shown, documents lie or tell half-truths when they are available, especially when we do not account for what and whose documents and accounts might not be available. Because my friendship with Samah Affan who was a student at Concordia University's The Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling while I was writing the book I came to realize that there is a whole body of theoretical literature on conducting and making use of interviews. While I have not engaged this literature in any serious way, my interview accounts of how the people involved remember that history, the inclusions and omissions in their accounts and how the present and ideology shape recollections of the past was all an important part of how I tried to think about their reflections in the book.

I have to add that I have been lucky in the sense that many people have been kind enough to hand me, send me, or copy documents from their personal archives. This kind of generosity is perhaps not unusual when over time you foster relationships with people who are also part of narrative you are constructing, but it is not something that I take for granted. In addition to their time, people like Celia Daniel, Bridget Joseph, Martin Glaberman, Franklyn Harvey, Alfie Roberts, and Robert Hill were generous with documents and material. This said, as much as research and documents are important, we can't hide behind them, and at a certain point research material has to serve the writers own thoughts while being open to the possibility of the research process altering her pre-existing ideas. I am saying this because there is such a strong compulsion to draw on as many sources as possible in academia, a process that, without caution, an author's own ideas can be either eclipsed by details or overshadowed by the ideas of other theorists.

One of the incredible aspects of *Fear of a Black Nation* is its geographical imagination especially through your consideration of Montreal as an island: it is "a kind of composite transnational Caribbean island in which West Indians from a range of nations and territories encountered one another while adding to the existing population" (29). Can you say more about this and, perhaps, about the political possibilities or consequences of Montreal's insularity?

As someone born to Jamaican parents and having lived on both the islands of England and Montreal, as well as the flatscape of Toronto with its large Caribbean population, I have always felt part of the Caribbean and at home

when I visit the region. This is potentially a source of tension in certain circles and there is a view that people from the Caribbean diaspora often claim the Caribbean but are not of it or invested in it. There is a lot of truth to this, but it is not the entire truth. As a child, I followed Jamaican politics closely and given part of my families particular circumstances in the garrison district of Jones Town in Kingston where my grandmother, older brother, aunt, and three cousins lived—and where I would stay during visits—there are parts of Jamaica that became familiar to me in ways that were unfamiliar to other visitors, and even to many Jamaicans. This is evident in the reaction, usually shock, of Jamaicans when I tell them that I have visited and stayed in Jones Town. This said, of course there is a major difference: I could visit and then leave when I was ready, but members of my family were embedded in the middle of a war zone, a literal war zone where the army, in tanks, would venture because the police would not go there. I have experienced this part of Jamaica first hand, and it is very different from the Jamaica that most know. But what I am trying to say is that there can be layers of investment for people both living in and outside of the Caribbean, and layers of authenticity. Clearly I am not Jamaican or of the Caribbean in the same way that someone who has spent the better part of their life or their formative years there is. But I would say, albeit controversially, that Caribbean diasporic experience is not any less authentic, but it is different and relates to an extended Caribbean that is equally part of the complex of territories and peoples that make up the Americas. I have had to think about this more recently in relation to the Casa de las Americas Prize when I realized that as a winner of the prize I was listed as a Jamaican. I'm not sure how that came about, though it perhaps has something to do with the prize being a Caribbean and Latin American prize and, as someone with a complicated background, it is not easy to neatly fit me within one geographical location. I identify strongly with Jamaica and the Caribbean culturally and aesthetically, but I could not help thinking about how Jamaicans living in Jamaica might feel about me being described that way.

I think the Caribbean diaspora is a unique manifestation of diaspora because it is essentially a diaspora of a diaspora as part of what is arguably the greatest mass migration of people in world history, the slave trade of Africans to the Americas. And while we speak of the Caribbean as a region, there are many Caribbeans divided along geographic, cultural and linguistic lines. More than any other place, at least in large numbers, the lines of nationality become blurred in the Caribbean's diaspora, in places like London, Toronto, Montreal, and New York. I would argue that, in some ways, Jamaica has more in common with Haiti culturally, and even Cuba, than it does with the rest of the Caribbean that was once colonized by Britain. But I can say this as result of my frequent travel to Cuba in recent times, to Jamaica and my experience as someone born to Jamaican parents, but more importantly as

a result of my experience as someone living in Montreal among people of Haitian and Jamaican descent. What separates them linguistically is more than compensated for in terms of cultural and social similarities.

Caribbean peoples in the diaspora have been brought together in ways that are not entirely possible in the Caribbean itself. Montreal, an island, became a composite Caribbean island comprised of Haitians, Trinidadians, Jamaicans, Grenadians, Vincentians, Martiniquans, Dominicans, Cubans, etc., in the post-Second World War era. But as I try to suggest in the book, diaspora is a process and a phenomenon, and is not static. Many of the people that migrated to Montreal in the 1950s and 1960s communicated and traveled between their Montreal island homes and the Caribbean in ways that has profoundly shaped the Caribbean region as part of a constant to and fro. This gets lost when the relationship between the Caribbean diaspora and the Caribbean is reduced to remittances or when national histories are strictly limited to geographic boundaries. Also, in the case of Haiti, members of its diaspora in Montreal move between both islands with a facility, a porosity, that enables them to live outside of the country for years, even decades, and then return to Haiti almost as if they had never left. This might be peculiar to Haiti, but my point is that we need to rethink our understanding of diaspora in a way that understands it as a much more fluid experience between the complex of territories that we know as the Americas, and in a way that allows us to think of islands such as England as part of the Americas in so far as Caribbean migrants have profoundly shaped the popular, cultural, and political experience of that part of the world. There is a lot of black in the Union Jack.

Lastly, for me, the fact that Montreal is an island whose core is centered on a mountain has had significance for the political consciousness of the city. It serves as a kind of centrifugal force or cauldron for political activity (I must acknowledge the importance of Kamau Brathwaite—his reflection on the role of mountains in terms of shaping rebellion and the inward looking culture among Grenadians compared to the seascape that has shaped Barbados’s more outward looking culture—for my understanding of this phenomenon).¹ To this day, Montreal is one of the more politically interesting and active sites in North America. Popular politics tend to “spread” like a contagion as there is no great demarcation between the center of the city and the immediate urban suburbs; and as far as student politics go, three of the city’s major universities are in close walking distance from each other. The urban geography of the city, then, has profound significance. There’s a sense here that we are never too far away from the center which, when Caribbean women and men began to migrate to Montreal in large numbers, must have provided them, consciously or not, with a peculiar sense of community and geography. This would have been important when the Caribbean and Black community mobilized itself and organized conferences

and forums, including the Congress of Black Writers or in support of Walter Rodney when he was banned from Jamaica immediately after the Congress, during the Sir George Williams protest, and when the community began to create new institutions to meet its changing needs.

***You Don't Play with Revolution* has at its basis the brief period CLR James spent in Canada—in Montreal in 1966 and 1967. How did he end up in Canada, what did he do while he was there, and what was the nature of his impact on the Canadian scene?**

The short period that James spent in Canada was very important in terms of shaping the latter part of his life. It was during this period that the Caribbean Conference Committee and its kindred group, the C. L. R. James Study Circle (CLRSC), reached out to James and adopted him as their mentor.

It is perhaps not well known that James's financial situation was dire during this period, as it was during many periods in his life, and he must have been at a very low point (this is reflected in some of the letter correspondence during this period). The CCC-CLRJSC attempted to raise funds for his WFP political campaign in Trinidad, and there is no doubt that being engaged by the CCC-CLRJSC, being invited by the group to participate in a major Caribbean conference in Montreal in October 1966 and then a Canadian and U.S. lecture tour that began in December 1966 and ended in the spring of 1967, and his return to Montreal for the Congress of Black Writers in October 1968—all of this was crucial for James. It gave him a new mission, putting him into contact with members of the young Caribbean left, the Black left in Canada and the U.S., including Black Power figures such as Stokely Carmichael, Harry Edwards, James Forman, among others, and members of the Black Studies movement such as Jimmy Garrett and the North American New Left in general. James presence was without a doubt important for these groups and individuals, but was perhaps, at that particular juncture, more important for James. It put him into first hand contact with representatives of these movements; permitted him to reenter the U.S. for the first time since his forced departure in 1953, and as a result of these new contacts, eventually led to him teaching at Federal City College, Howard and Northwestern universities during a ten-year period in the U.S., perhaps giving him financial stability for the first time since his early years in Trinidad as a teacher.

CLRJSC members—Robert Hill, Anne Cools, Tim Hector, Alfie Roberts, Franklyn Harvey, and perhaps to a lesser extent Rosie Douglas—also circulated James's work, especially his more obscure work such as *Facing Reality* which he co-wrote with Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee. In collaboration with the group Facing Reality in Detroit, they published James's *Notes on Dialectics* in mimeographed form (Robert Hill took the lead in this, I think

with assistance from his wife Diane). James the legend became a contemporary living figure in North America largely as a result of the CLRJSC in and their collaboration with the Detroit group and Martin Glaberman. James's presence in Canada was crucial for members of the CCC-CLRJSC, many of whom became central figures in the emergence of the "new" Caribbean left—Robert Hill in Jamaica with Abeng, Tim Hector in Antigua Caribbean Liberation Movement, Franklyn Harvey in the New Beginning Movement in Trinidad and the Movement for Assemblies of the People in Grenada which later became part of the New Jewel movement that inaugurated the Grenada Revolution, and Rosie Douglas who much later became prime ministers of Dominica (we can also add Arnhim Eustace who was associated with the group and later became prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines). His public lectures and his private political classes with the group on Marxism, the Russian Revolution, Rousseau and the relevance of these subjects to Caribbean politics and the new Caribbean that these women and men sought to create were part of the group's education. This education included the study of James's writing, literature, philosophy, and the study of history, theory.

One of the striking features of *Fear of a Black Nation* is your mapping of the connections between Antillean, African-American, French Canadian, and Anglophone Caribbean literary and political movements. It recalls the evocation of what Brent Edwards has termed the "practice of diaspora" yet while Edwards focuses on the discursive lags occurring during cross-Atlantic acts of translation and interpretation, you present something altogether more dynamic and eminently more political. Can you talk about the challenges and difficulties you faced in writing across the Anglophone-Francophone divide? And can you say something on the role of Aimé Césaire and other French West Indian writers within the French Canadian literary and political imagination?

Quebec is such an interesting province. In addition to Indigenous peoples in the territory, it consists of migrants: the French who colonized and displaced Indigenous peoples and forced them onto reserves and residential schools, and the English who later colonized the French. The French majority is now the dominant power, but following the conquest of 1760, the British assumed power in the province and its French majority became a kind of lost tribe, disconnected from France and treated like an inferior minority by the English in Quebec. The period of the "Quiet Revolution" in the 1960s, which in so many respects was everything but quiet, began a process of making French Quebecers master "chez nous" as they put it, in their own homes. As a result, over time the English minority that once dominated Quebec economically and politically have become a lost English tribe among the

Quebec majority, a tribe that often harkens back to the good old days like in *Gone with the Wind*. But French Quebecers, or at least many among the power-elite, still project a fear of English Canada's political and cultural domination. In the meantime, Montreal Anglophone's Black community has become a lost tribe too in relation to Blacks in the rest of Canada, though it is true that Francophone Blacks (and these categories can be quite fluid) do not fair much better in Quebec. All of this, plus the contrived fear of the cultural and religious values and practices of growing numbers of people of Asian and Middle Eastern descent embodied in the Quebec Charter of Values that is being promoted by *Partis Québécois* government—all of this has made for a very peculiar, tense, and volatile situation within the current context of Quebec nationalism.

Quebec nationalism has become increasingly parochial and exclusive. Today official nationalism has assumed xenophobic forms in which the presence and authenticity of non-French Quebecers is constantly being called into question. This is not simply a linguistic issue in terms of preserving the French language in Quebec in relation to English Canada, or about preserving French Quebec culture. These are important considerations, but it is obvious that, as the French Quebec population continues to decrease in relation to the rest of the population, there is a fear, especially in Montreal, that it will both be outnumbered and be absorbed or racially mixed out of existence. In other words, Quebec nationalism also operates on the level of biology and biopolitics.

The late Hubert Aquin is arguably Quebec's most important writer, and he was very influenced by African independence movements and was involved in the production of several films on the subject in the 1960s. But in addition to African struggles, Aimé Césaire along with Édouard Glissant and Frantz Fanon played a very important role in Quebec in the sixties and seventies. This role has essentially been forgotten or omitted, and is very instructive in terms of understanding the selective nature of Quebec's recent nationalist history. French Quebecers read these thinkers in the fifties and sixties in French before their writing was widely available in English in North America. Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* was profoundly important to some of French Quebec's most important writers and poets such as Gerald Godin, Paul Chamberlain, André Ferretti, Yves Préfontaine, and Pierre Vallières. Vallières authored the famous book *Nègres blancs d'Amerique* (The White Niggers of America), a book that was very much influenced by Fanon's writing on decolonization and race. Like other members of the Quebec Liberation Front (FLQ), the leading nationalist organization of the sixties, he was also profoundly shaped by the Black Power movement in the U.S. and anti-colonial struggles in Africa and other parts of the world. Part of Fanon's appeal as Quebec attempted to free itself from control of the English elite and the Catholic Church in the province was his critical analysis of nationalist

leaders and how they betray the majority of the population once they assume power. The FLQ was also attracted to Fanon's analysis of violence and they carried out a series of bomb attacks and kidnappings of a British diplomat, James Cross, and a Quebec Liberal politician, Pierre Laporte (Laporte was eventually killed in their custody). I would suggest that the FLQ misread Fanon's analysis of violence as, although Fanon does not disavow it as part of anti-colonial struggle, he also discusses how colonial conditions make forms of violence, including fratricide, inevitable as colonialism itself is a violent process.

Glissant's influence in Quebec was different because he actually had a physical presence in Montreal and was a close friend of Gaston Miron, one of French Quebec's most important poets and literary figures. Miron was a Quebec nationalist and Glissant engaged Miron and other French Quebec Writers in discussions about the use *Joual*, French Quebecers version of Creole, in literature, comparing it to the use of Creole in literary circles in Martinique, both languages having roots in rural regions. Glissant understood French Quebecers as an oppressed group, but was fully aware of the conditions of Indigenous peoples in Quebec who had been colonized by the French and British and stopped short of referring to the French in Quebec as a colonized people. When we add this to the fact that Quebec nationalism was also very much influenced by anti-colonial movements in Africa and other parts of the world, along with the Black Power movement in the U.S., it is obvious that there clearly needs to be a new narrative about the history of Quebec and Quebec nationalism. French Quebecers came to see themselves as *nègres blancs*, or the white niggers of America. But this raises the question of the invisibility of actual *nègres* in Quebec at this time, at least prior to the Congress of Black Writers and the Sir George Williams protest.

In your introduction to *You Don't Play with Revolution* you write: "Sylvia Wynter has argued that the uniqueness of James' theoretical contributions rests in his ability to stretch and bend the boundaries of Marxism" (21). It seems like something has occurred in your own work: you've been stretching and bending the boundaries, as it were, of CLR James and other Caribbean theorists working within a Marxist and Pan-African vein. Can you address this notion—through, in particular, your use of Foucault and Agamben?

By 2007, the time that "All Roads Led to Montreal" was published, it became clear to me that my narrative of this historical moment was stuck. I began exploring the archives in the National Library in Ottawa and paid a visit to the Glaberman collection at Wayne State University in Detroit. While I had some sense of what I would find in Ottawa, the Detroit archives, and especially the correspondence that I found there, really highlighted the transnational

nature of the CCC-CLRJSC's work and its relationship to Facing Reality. Robert Hill was a member of Facing Reality and the CLRJSC and much of what the group did in relation to James happened as a result of his initiative, although Alfie Roberts and Franklyn Harvey had encountered James's work independently and before they met Hill and they were also very close to James and in communication with Martin Glaberman. I also discovered how correspondence is a particular kind of literature in so far as it allows the writer to freely express herself without the inhibitions that encumber academic writing. What we find in this correspondence is the liberal flowing of ideas between kindred souls sharing their views and at times personal concerns as they attempted to make sense of the world that they wanted to change. Without having the burden of academic proof, they expressed their thoughts and doubts without fear of sanction and with the knowledge that their ideas would be enthusiastically engaged by their fellow travelers.

Members of the CLRJSC were Marxists in the spirit of James, but Marxism is not sufficient on its own in terms of understanding what happened in Canada among the Black and Caribbean left. Iton's book opened the door to thinking about diaspora as something inherently laden with political potential by virtue of existing within, outside and between borders. While most lament this sense of homelessness, Iton questions whether we should be fighting or settling for the entitlements of citizenship in what he described as the "prophylactic state" and their "duppy" equivalents in the Global South, or whether we should be attempting to radically transform society. Giorgio Agamben's notion of the state of exception, the idea that we live in a permanent state of emergency in which our rights can be and are suspended by government decree, and his discussion of the homeless plight of the refugee complemented Iton's analysis and both were useful in terms of thinking about the way Canadian state security responded to the growing Black presence in Canada in the sixties. It was also helpful in terms of thinking about the collective Black experience in the diaspora, an experience that can be characterized as one of suspended and limited rights and entitlements going back to the history of slavery, but also characteristic of the plantation to prison trajectory that is commonly referred to today, and the gradation of limited legal existence in between those poles.

Of course, this analysis also represents an implicit critique of Agamben for whom it appears the experiences of people of African descent are invisible. The same can be said of Foucault's notion of biopolitics. I came to Foucault very late, and reluctantly, in so far as I resisted the urge to read him because everyone else was. This probably sounds a bit trite, but what I mean by this is that there was a moment not too long ago when it seemed as if you could not utter an idea without citing Foucault. This was true in academia in general, but these pressures mount when it comes to intellectuals who are outsiders both in terms of race or ideology, and I think it is often the case for

Black intellectuals. This is not to suggest that there should be some sort of theoretical apartheid, but rather an acknowledgement that some ideas and theorists are privileged over others, and the need to avoid the “epistemological imperialism” that Sylvia Wynter talks about. Foucault has drawn our attention to the relationship between power, knowledge, and the circulation of ideas, that they go hand-in-hand. He made profound contributions to our understanding of certain aspects of humanity and his notion of biopolitics is very useful in terms of understanding how discordant bodies are monitored, policed, disciplined and punished by the state prior to the twentieth century. But it is inconceivable (or is it?) that in discussing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, Foucault essentially says nothing about Europe’s relationship to the Americas, colonialism and slavery; and how slavery represented a quintessential example of biopolitics in which slave lives, including the reproductive rights of slave women, were owned and controlled by their masters. This comes across vividly in Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. These omissions are even more troubling when we consider Brady Heiner’s article “Foucault and the Black Panthers” in which he outlines how many of Foucault’s seminal ideas, including his ideas on prisons and biopolitics, were inspired by his reading of the work of Angela Davis and George Jackson, and his observation of the Black Power movement and the Black Panthers during his visit to the U.S. in the early 1970s. According to Heiner, it was his visit to the U.S. during this period that motivated his shift from a more archaeological to a more genealogical theoretical approach.² And yet Foucault says nothing about this influence on his work. Very curiously, there has been very little discussion about this important article. In fact it appears to have been greeted with silence.

You introduce the notion of biosexuality and biosexual politics in *Fear of a Black Nation*. What are these terms and how are they relevant to the discussion of black Canada in the sixties?

Biosexuality, or biosexual politics, represents my attempt to situate and insert our historical experience as people of African descent within the framework of the very processes that Foucault refers to, but does not acknowledge how these processes have impacted the lives of Black subjects. Again, this is not about being acknowledged or recognized, although that is also part of the equation too. There is something else at stake. For our humanity and experience to remain unacknowledged is to eclipse experiences that have profound implications for understanding our possibilities. Foucault offers an incomplete understanding of what it means to be human by ignoring the complexity of the global Black experience and, in this case, its direct relationship to the European history that he writes about. One person cannot

do everything, but it is hard to imagine that someone of his complexity did not know the depths of France's colonial relationship in the Americas. How can we discuss eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France without talking about Haiti, or Guadeloupe and Martinique, all of which were central to France's economy and, by extension, its political practices and policies? The answer is that we cannot, but that is precisely what has been happening and then passing for universal knowledge.

Bisexuality or bisexual politics "refers to a primeval fear of Blacks that is based in slavery and colonialism and the recurring need to discipline and control Black bodies—to force Blacks in particular to conform to the racial codes that govern their relations with other groups. It is a phenomenon intimately connected to both a fear of Black rebellion and self-activity, or self-organization, and an intense anxiety about the biological and political spread of blackness through Black-White solidarity and sexual encounters. It is about the perceived or potential threat that Blacks represent to the state." (*Fear of a Black Nation*, p. 11) For me this definition encapsulates a point that became clear to me after accessing the state security files. First, the RCMP was profoundly concerned with the public political presence of Blacks in Montreal in the 1960s and 1970s. In one file, they essentially refer to Blacks as the single most significant threat to the Canadian state. Clearly, the sight of Blacks organizing themselves on their own terms, and the fact that Montreal's Black population was closely connected to the Caribbean on the one hand, and to the Black Power figures in the U.S. on the other raised the concern that Canada was becoming a central site of Black internationalism. And given Canada's interests in the Caribbean—particularly in banking and bauxite at the time—this was both a local and international concern for the Canadian state.

The RCMP was also concerned that Black radical politics was influencing other groups and there was a fear of Black-White solidarity with the French Quebecois left and the White left in general in Quebec and Canada as a whole. But the RCMP's determination to control the growing Black political presence in Canada was tied to another fear that is not as evident: the fear of Black-White sexual encounters that comes across in the files. This anxiety over presumed and real Black-White sexual encounters and the fear that the presence of Black men in the presence of White women engendered has its roots in slavery in the Americas, and perhaps especially in North America. Black men were seen as posing a threat to the bodies of White women who were seen as representing the pure and unsullied state, and White women consorting with Black men was seen as security breach and a threat to the nation that needed to be monitored and controlled. Part of what I'm suggesting here is that race and anti-Black racism has very peculiar characteristics that make a simple analysis of biopolitics inadequate. Certainly fear plays out among different ethnicities that, phenotypically, are the same.

But in the case of Blacks, this fear is particularly pronounced in relation to people of European descent and, it is important to add, between people of African descent and other groups that are not of European descent. So biosexuality captures the sexual nature of this fear and the resulting need to discipline and punish, to order and control black bodies. And as I suggest, this fear is deeply embedded in the psyche in ways that Fanon helped us to understand, but for which I think we have yet to fully appreciate the full implications.

Can you say something about the historical impact of two Caribbean revolutions—the Cuban Revolution and the Grenada Revolution—on both your own political intellectual development and on Montreal?

Much of the book was conceived while I was frequently traveling to Cuba. I have always been interested in the Cuban Revolution and Cuba itself has been part of my consciousness for much of my life. My great grandfather migrated to eastern Cuba, perhaps in the 1930s, and never returned. My grandfather followed communism closely and my grandmother would tell me stories of how he would have to flee his home in Kingston, Jamaica because he was in possession of “illicit” books on communism and Marxism. He also closely followed the Cuban Revolution and regularly read Cuba’s *Granma* newspaper.

When I was in high school I purchased a shortwave radio (I still have it) and used to listen to news from all over the world, including Radio Beijing, Radio Netherlands International, Radio Moscow, the BBC, and Radio France International. This is before the advent of the Internet so this was essentially the only way you could pick up foreign stations. But of all of the stations that I listened to, Radio Havana Cuba was the one I listened to the most. It provided me with news from the Cuban perspective, which I could contrast with the news and views from the Voice of America. It also attuned me to Cuban music and culture. I always wanted to visit Cuba and in 1997 I attended the International Festival of Youth and Students. All of Havana was opened up to the world and the festival represented Cuba’s coming out party after the stringent times of the “special period” in the early to mid-nineties. I have traveled to Cuba frequently since then, in 2000 for the International Solidarity Conference where I first met Isaac Saney, the Trinidadian-Canadian from Nova Scotia who is currently the co-chair of the Canada Network on Cuba and author of *Cuba: A Revolution in Motion* which has become a kind of standard introduction to the Cuban Revolution; I also traveled to Cuba in January 2002 where I stayed in a Cuban household for close to month writing the book on poetry, social change, and Linton Kwesi Johnson and learning about Cuba from Cubans. Over the past three years I

have visited Cuba up to four times per year for both conferences, presentations, and for personal reasons.

My conversations with Cubans have forced me to think hard about the complexity of race in different contexts in the Americas. Today the country is grappling with a number of social question of which race is an important one, and there was a time not to long ago that people whispered about race in Cuba. That is beginning to change, and much of the debate about race in Cuba is now public. Tremendous gains were made for people of African descent during the revolution, but we are now seeing regression, in part due to remittances that are sent from exile Cubans, largely of Spanish descent, to their Spanish-origin family members, and at a time when the state is in the process of allowing the market more autonomy. This has obvious positives in so far as Cubans are now permitted to take more initiatives that allow them to exercise autonomy and creativity in order to meet their daily needs. On the other hand, the most vulnerable in Cuba are much more susceptible to problems associated with these changes and many among this population are of African descent who lack even a minimal amount of start-up capital necessary to create a space for themselves in the new economy.

This is where race and class converge in Cuba, and many Blacks in Cuba now find themselves at a major economic disadvantage. This, in addition to racial attitudes that linger and persist from the pre-revolution days, and a logic that, since the revolution, has historically downplayed the significance of race in order to promote a sense of national unity, are all part of the equation. On the other hand, Cuba is perhaps the most racially mixed country outside of Brazil, so Black and White do not always mean the same things there as it does here, or to put it another way, the colorlines are blurred. But race is part of the unfinished revolution in that country that has experienced major economic and political setbacks and is attempting to redefine what socialism can mean in the current context. It is a difficult time in Cuba in that sense, but as I said, there is perhaps more public discussion about race in Cuba today than there has been in its recent history.

In any country, leadership always trails behind the aspirations of the people. Right now the Cuban Revolution is trying to hold on to the social gains that it has made since 1959, and under today's unfavorable economic circumstances, and in what remains a hostile political context in relation to the US. What would Cuba look like without the embargo that has essentially imposed a state of exception on the country? That's an interesting question, one that Martin Glaberman posed to Alfie Roberts in the sixties, but it is one that is difficult to answer, even for Cubans. I think that that's as much as I can say as an outsider looking in.

My first and only visit to Grenada in 2000 showed me a side of that island that reminded me of a kind of a gentler Jamaica, but that impression perhaps has something to do with the number of Rastafarians there. But I

was familiar with the country long before that visit. From the age of 10 to about 16 I grew up with a Grenadian stepmother and my younger sister is part Grenadian. I also recall very vividly watching the live announcement by Ronald Reagan of the US invasion of Grenada on one of the American television networks in October 1983. When I was in high school my older brother Andrew handed me a package of documents about the Grenada 17 that he had received from a Grenadian college friend in Toronto. The papers documented the case of the 17 and what it described as the “kangaroo trial” of members of the Grenada leadership following the execution of Maurice Bishop, Jacqueline Creft and many other prominent leaders of the Grenada Revolution. I think that reading those documents at that time played an important role in helping me to keep a relatively open mind in terms of understanding the personal and political dynamics that were at play in Grenada on the eve of the collapse of the revolution. When I moved back to Montreal in 1990 I met people who had been actively involved in the revolution, including someone who had been Maurice Bishop’s personal bodyguard at one point, and another, Leonard Wharwood, who had been stationed in the OAS office in Washington with ambassador Dessima Williams during the revolution. Leonard was the first and only invitee (he discussed the Grenada Revolution) of the short-lived Progressive Students Association, another McGill group that friends Ahmer Qadeer, Azim Hussain and I had formed in the early 1990s. Today he is Canada’s Honorary Consul to Grenada. His brother, Byron “Doggies” Cameron, was in the military during the revolution and he is today a famous calypsonian based in Montreal. I did a lot of listening and at times recording of their stories and those of other Grenadians, and with time and investigation I began to develop a sense of what happened during the revolution and to think about the relationship between politics and personality and the dangers of dogmatically adopting ideologies, in this case Marxism. During my trip to Grenada I visited the prison and met and listened to several members of the former leadership of the revolution who were then incarcerated in Richmond Hill Prison, including Ewart Layne, one of the highest ranking commanders in the army and a member of Grenada’s Central Committee, and Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard. Layne is closely related to a friend in Montreal, so when I paid him a visit, it was in part to pass on a personal message from a family member. This was years before the prisoners had been released and my visit there was part of my attempt to make sense of what happened during the revolution and how and why it failed.

I have watched Bruce Paddington’s recent film, *Forward Ever: The Killing of a Revolution*, and I was disturbed, not so much by Callistus “Abdullah” Bernard, whose harrowing and eerie account of the execution of many members of the revolution’s leadership brought some to tears and/or rage as we watched during the Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano

in Havana in December 2013. Bernard's account was more than a challenge to watch, but, for me, he at least seemed to be working through and trying to come to terms with his role as one of the people that fired the shots that killed Maurice Bishop and others. But Selwyn Strachan who, dressed in military-style epaulette shirt reminiscent of the old vanguardist and militaristic leadership in Grenada, spoke in a manner and tone that ringed of the callous scientific approach to human life that contributed to the revolution's demise.

Having read parts of Shalini Puri's forthcoming book, I think it will open the door to new understandings of the revolution, the challenges it faced and was unable to overcome, how the revolution is remembered by those who were most affected by it, and the logic that informed it. I can also relate what happened in Grenada to my own experience with Marxism. I can understand the logic of many of the young leaders—and they were very young—who adopted, or you could say were adopted by Marxism, and worked with a particular conception of it as if it were the gospel in Grenada. This resulted in a gargantuan gap them and the majority of the population, and with dire consequences for the revolution. I know that this alone does not account for what happened in Grenada, but it was a very important factor. A little or too much ideology in the wrong hands can be a dangerous thing.³

Part of what I'm suggesting here is that I learned these lessons in Montreal by probing the Grenadian Revolution through Grenadians who live in Canada. This list includes people like Caldwell Taylor, former Grenadian ambassador to the UN during the revolution who resides in Toronto, but who has a close family connection in Montreal and has spoken here at the invitation of the Alfie Roberts Institute (he is also profoundly knowledgeable about the history of calypso); visitors such as Chester Humphrey and Andre Lewis of Grenada's Technical and Allied Worker's Union when they would visit Montreal, and later when I met them in Grenada along with people like Peter David who was part of the People's Revolutionary Government during the revolution, currently sits in the Grenadian parliament, and lived and studied in Canada at some point; and of course Alfie Roberts who was always full of political insight, and Franklyn Harvey who founded Movement for Assemblies of the People, which later merged with the JEWEL to form the New Jewel Movement. Had he stayed in Grenada, Franklyn would have certainly been a leading figure in the revolution and he was very close with Maurice Bishop and essentially served as an advisor to him. Hearing the accounts of these women and men, and many others, and reading and listening to the accounts of people such as Grenadian writer Merle Collins, who I have heard read her poetry or speak on a few occasions (her interview in *Calabash* is remarkably rich with insight about the revolution and our humanity, as is her novel *Angel*);⁴ and Dionne Brand, who was in Grenada during the revolution and bore witness to its fateful last days—all

of this has been important in terms of trying to understanding the Grenadian Revolution and the exigencies of social change in general.

The question of self-organizing and popular democracy recurs throughout your work, inspired by the writing and example of Alfie Roberts and CLR James and others. Two questions emerge for me from this. First, does this notion enter into your teaching—does it become a part of your pedagogical practice? Second, what lessons can the examples that Roberts and James provide us from an earlier era offer in the present moment when the terrain of participatory democracy appears co-opted and the possibilities for organizing seem constrained by the exigencies of corporate capitalism?

I think question of self-organization is crucial. The idea that we don't need big government or an overarching bureaucracy to lead the way has taken a very conservative turn in the U.S. within the Republican Party, and especially the Tea Party, but also here in Canada, not only with the Conservative Party, but also the Liberal Party. Both parties have played active roles in dismantling the welfare state as part of the ongoing neoliberal avalanche. But it is precisely at this juncture that we need to shift towards more autonomous ways of organizing in order to challenge neoliberalism and the economics and politics of madness that permit some, even many, to live a life of relative affluence while teetering on the verge of precarity, and while the entire world as we know it accelerates towards environmental catastrophe. At its core, James's notion of self-organization or self-activity was rooted in history and theory and is both historical and Hegelian, beginning with the Haitian Revolution and inspired by his observations of working class struggles in the U.S. and his understanding of Marxism and the Russian Revolution. This said, while the idea that so-called ordinary people can organize themselves for change is appealing, we also know that James had an appreciation of the role that extraordinary individuals have played historically. Toussaint and Lenin are the obvious examples in James's work. In both of these examples there is of course the additional question of what happens once a group, at times led by exceptional figures, assumes power, a question Fanon posed in *The Wretched of the Earth*. What is involved in running a state or a community organization along egalitarian lines? How is the transition made from taking power to exercising it? These are question that the Haitian Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the Grenadian Revolution and the history of decolonization in the twentieth-century pose. I think Fanon's idea that leadership must have this constant exchange and relationship with the majority resulting in mutual learning and understanding is useful. But does this go far enough? How can checks and balances be implemented in order to make this happen? To what extent do so-called ordinary people actually want to play an active

part in political processes and how can this be encouraged? Can we imagine leadership in new and different ways than the left has imagined so far?

These are issues that were raised in the Occupy Movement and in the recent student led-protests against tuition hikes and the policies of Quebec's Liberal government that gripped Montreal in 2012. Weeks of protests led to the downfall of that government, but only to be replaced by a xenophobic nationalist government that wants to use the banning of religious symbols in government institutions as a way of stifling cultural expression that does not fall in line with so-called Quebec values. So victories can bring defeats and these are real questions that the notion of self-organization by itself does not respond to. At its best it gives us something to aspire to. At its worse, it provides a false sense of possibility if we fail to consider the challenges involved in creating a new society. So, while I use the terms self-organization or self-activity pretty liberally in the book, it has its limitations. As Alfie Roberts asked about the Sir George Williams Affair, after the occupation what? He did acknowledge that it made a point about Black folks not being willing to accept oppression and it is obvious that, post the Sir George Williams affair, Montreal's population experienced a kind of renewal. But I think that any notion of success or progress needs to be examined in the long-term, and in that regard, it could be argued that, in terms of employment, incarceration, and other indices, Blacks in Montreal and Canada as a whole, or at least the Black poor and underclass, are worse off than they were and see less prospects and possibilities today than they did in the 1960s. I think change is a slippery slope and progress and regression often occupy the same time and space. So while some might argue that there has been progress in terms of Black representation within major institutions of power, it can not only be suggested that this representation has been minimal, but to the extent that this is true, it is accompanied by increasing marginalization, disenchantment, incarceration and policing, and the overall disenfranchisement of large numbers of Blacks. Perhaps a space has been opened for some, but the majority are on the outside peering in on a society that they live in but are not an organic part of, or live with the knowledge that, to the extent they are in, their fortunes can change quickly and dramatically.

In terms of teaching, I really see it as a process of self-discovery. As much as I can, I encourage students to draw on their own understanding of issues and then develop the critical skills necessary to challenge them. For me the classroom has to be a place where students can make mistakes, think through issues and question, challenge themselves and their peers, and intuit and reason their way through to new ways of seeing and understanding the world. I think it is a mistake when we attempt to impose ideas on students using didactic methods. Of course, part of teaching is to acknowledge and introduce ideas and perspectives that the students are not accustomed to hearing, which often means exposing uncomfortable truths. But in my

experience, many students are confronting the world as it is in order to change it for the better, even if this only happens in terms of developing a better understanding of the dynamics that shape the world. Part of my approach has been influenced by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but James's notion of self-organization definitely comes into play, especially in so far as it draws on Hegel's notion of self-consciousness as the path to freedom. In this sense, teachers are facilitators of learning as opposed to a lecturer who sees students as a blank slate or receptacle or an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge. This was also the approach when I used facilitate workshops at Concordia University's Institute in Management and Community Development summer program, one of which was co-facilitated with Kyo Maclear, and another Franklyn Harvey and Adrian Harewood on separate occasions some years before the program ended. But there are also Heideggerian undertones to this in terms existential crisis resulting in moments of vision which lead to profound change or an altered consciousness or understanding. Teachers often provide that crisis for students by challenging their political innocence in the classroom and encouraging them to not only see the world and how power operates within it.

Lastly, I would add that teaching for me is a learning process, and each time I teach a course I learn something from the students about how the course can be taught, and also about the issues that are raised in the class. In a seminar course on neo-liberal globalization and social movements that I have taught at Concordia University on and off over the past six years, the students, without knowing it, have challenged me to think about change in more intricate and nuanced ways. I've taught some really remarkable students whose intelligence extends well beyond academia and deep into understanding the world as it is, the need to change it for the better, and in ways that extend well beyond the typical political models and language that the traditional left has used. I also test out some of my own work in the class, sometimes anonymously at first, in order to hear their thoughts on it. This has been the case recently in a class that I teach on poetry and social change and I have consistently been impressed with how some of the students read and interpret the poems.

One of the questions we're asking all of our writers for this special issue of the *CLR James Journal* is, "What is Black Canadian thought?" Your thoughts?

It was very encouraging to see a number of young Black intellectuals during the Black Canadian Studies conference held at Brock University in Saint Catharines, Ontario in May 2013. Unlike with Black Studies programs, journals, and institutions such as the almost 100 year-old Association for the Study of African American life and History, Canada does not have many

established Black intellectual institutions. So it was very refreshing because it is rare in Canada to see Black scholars and intellectuals, sharing and engaging ideas. I think that it was a surprise for many to know that there is a sizeable Black community of young scholars who are thinking and writing here. Unfortunately, given the absence of Black or Africana Studies programs and related courses in Canadian colleges and universities, and the general indifference that Canadian academic institutions demonstrate towards Black experiences and Black academics in this country, these emerging academics and intellectuals are not being mentored in environments that acknowledge their humanity and interests or provide them with the kind of critical engagement needed to develop their ideas. When I was younger I found that kind of critical engagement among political intellectuals who were not attached to universities, and older friends who were full-time or aspiring academics in other countries. I found this political-intellectual community in Montreal, but I also found it in my visits to the U.S., the U.K., and in the Caribbean and up until relatively recently, it was rare that I attended conferences or was asked to give a talk in an academic setting in Canada. I found a political-intellectual space in those places because I knew that Canada alone was not sufficient to explain my experiences or nourish a diasporic worldview, even though Canada, and particularly Montreal is in many ways my point of departure and represents a nodal point for me in much the way someone living in New York looks out to the rest of the world from that vantage point but is not solely defined by it. If Black intellectuals rely solely on the Canadian context for intellectual nourishment, they are more than likely to go hungry.

As Black intellectuals we often limit our experiences to ourselves in ways that undermine our understanding of how we have historically helped to bring change to the world, and how we might do so today in a world that is in obvious need of it. This comes, I think, from the need to constantly assert our humanity, our existence, and our presence, a practice that is both necessary and limiting. We have been forced to invest so much in asserting our Blackness that we are often imprisoned in ways that prevent us from genuinely living and sharing our humanity from within the vibrant, dynamic, and changing politics, culture, and sociology of the Black diaspora. And, in a context in which ideas and academia are associated in ways that suggest that thinking cannot happen outside the academy, this becomes an even more critical situation because we often fail or are unable to assert ourselves in ways that promote positive social change. Meanwhile, the world that we are integrally a part of and have played such an important role in shaping is running away from us as we are outside of the discussions on many of the pressing issues of our time, even though they directly impact our lives. To state the obvious, there is no contradiction between being Black and human; it is our particular experiences as people of African descent that provides

us with a unique window into what it means to be human, and this experience has much and has had much to say about humanity and social change. I don't think this is some kind of false or abstract philosophical humanism, but a recognition of what we have and continue give to this world in term of human experience and thought, even if others, and even we, do not fully understand or appreciate this for what it is and has been. I think we are still playing catch-up with our lived experience.

Black Canadian thought is often tentative and in search of both recognition and authenticity. This is part of the legacy of living in a society in which the dominant European Canadian identity lives with the insecurity of being the child of a once powerful empire and the cousin to the existing super power, but it is also related to being squeezed between Caribbean and African American intellectual traditions. This has the potential to be a great strength and to make a unique intellectual contribution that comes from a unique place. There are important voices in this country and, with few exceptions—Lawrence Hill, Austin Clarke, and George Elliot Clarke and, at least for a moment, Afua Cooper with the publication of the best-selling *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* come to mind—their work does not receive the attention it deserves. Someone who is very important to mention here is the Haitian-Canadian writer Dany Laferrière. I think English Canada and North America in general does not appreciate his stature as a writer. He is the recipient of major awards in French literature and is one of the few Black writers based in Canada who is known internationally. In fact he is one of the select few of Canadian-based writers known around the world. Reading him affirmed what I had discovered in the RCMP state security files, that there was is underlying fear of race-mixing in anti-Black politics, policies, and practices.

Laferrière has stature in the Francophonie and Lawrence Hill and Austin Clarke have had great success with best-selling novels, but Dionne Brand, who writes from a Caribbean, Canadian, diasporic perspective is more of an outsider than insider. This is not simply because she clearly sits on the left, but also because she has been writing about gender and sexuality in ways that intellectuals and the wider public have not been willing to fully appreciate, even though she has been published by a major mainstream publisher. It is very hard to single out a few people because there are many, but the work of Dionne Brand stands out. She has been a standard-bearer for a long time, embodying many things, fluidly occupying many spaces as a poet, novelist, non-fiction writer, and filmmaker, and has been a seminal voice in terms of raising issues related to gender, sexuality, place and diaspora, race and, ultimately, the meaning of freedom. Rinaldo Walcott has quietly become an important theorist, and not just in Canada. What he is doing now is obviously an extension of what he has been doing since the 1990s, often in very public ways; but I think his most recent work has a different sense

of urgency and importance and is less known than his earlier work. Drawing on Sylvia Wynter, among others, he is raising questions about existence, citizenship and nationality, our role in social transformation, and what it means to be human.

I think there is a political question here, the relationship between politics and scholarship in terms of thinking about what social change means, how the experiences of people of African descent can inform how we organize ourselves to confront contemporary challenges, and how we have and can contribute to change. Rather than shy away from these issues, it is important to engage them because I think researchers, historians, and thinkers need to take more responsibility for thinking about how to change the world that we inhabit. In this spirit, it is important to mention d'bi young here, a formidable actress, performer, and poet who conveys this political sense of urgency in her art. She is born in Jamaica but did her last years of high school in Toronto and evolved as a poet and actress while living in Montreal and Toronto. I have seen her elevate audiences and also bring them to tears during her performances and readings. But when we look back over the years, Dionne Brand has consistently done this work, and this is what Rinaldo Walcott is doing, and their work is important, not only for people of African descent, but for our understanding of humanity and what freedom might mean.

Finally, a personal question: Much of your research up to this point has involved the excavation and recovery of the intellectual and political legacies of Alfie Roberts, C. L. R. James, and others associated with that moment in Montreal in the late 1960s. The work is, obviously, personal—and informed by your own interests and experiences. But do you feel an emotional or intellectual burden brought on by this profound debt or obligation to the past, to history?

There was a time when much of this work for me represented a burden, but not necessarily in the negative sense of the word. I mean more in the sense that I felt as though I needed to make what I had discovered available as soon as possible. But with the production of each edited book—Alfie Roberts's *A View for Freedom* which was published by the Alfie Roberts Institute, and the James lectures, *You Don't Play with Revolution*—I feel as though I have been able to meet a commitment on the road to writing and expressing my own ideas. The James book felt like an obligation by the time I finished editing it, something I had to do before I could elaborate my own ideas, but it was also part of the process in my own reflection and I tried to step back from the lectures and the history of the time when they were delivered in Montreal and think about what the lectures and that moment meant for all involved. I still feel compelled to publish the proceedings of the Congress

of Black Writers as part of an important historical legacy, and as part of the process of sharing what was shared with me. It took some time for me to be able to consciously take a step backward and reflect and critically process all of this in a way that made *Fear of a Black Nation* possible. There were many steps in this process, but I think that genuine independent thought comes with time, even if we have genuine critical independent analytical moments early in life. For me independent thought does not mean disavowing what you have learned or already know, but being able to actively discern what you think from what you have been taught or learned, especially given that our entire lives are a process of socialization of one kind or another. *Fear of a Black Nation* represents my understanding of a historical moment through the lens of the present in relation to race, sex, gender, and security while thinking about how we might arrive at the kind of substantive change for which we are in dire need. This involved a process of self-reflection and abandoning some orthodoxies in order to see where the human, archival, literary, and theoretical material would take me.

This is how I wrote about the significance of Black and Caribbean politics in Montreal in the 1960s as late as 2007:

The activities of the Caribbean Conference Committee, the Congress of Black Writers, and the Sir George Williams Affair were part of the dialectical development of Montreal's Black community. Symbolically, the events were like a knot in the brain, a proverbial signpost in the collective consciousness of Montreal and Canada's Black population that pointed towards new horizons . . . after the Sir George Williams Affair, new groups and organizations were created and older ones were resuscitated in order to meet the evolving needs of Montreal's growing Black population.

I went on to mention a number of institutions—educational, media, artistic, and cultural groups—that came into being in order to meet the changing needs of Montreal's evolving Black population and then concluded:

These groups and institutions made critical contributions to the social development and quality of life of Black Montrealers at a crucial stage in the Black population's evolution. And in so doing, they also made critical contributions to the social fabric of the wider society and, to that extent, helped to make both Montreal and Canada a more humane and livable place while, at the same time, profoundly influencing political developments in the Caribbean.⁵

For me, this conclusion was the point at that time, or at least as I wrote the article in the months before it was published. It's a kind of teleological and somewhat phenomenological understanding of the trajectory of history, and this analysis increasingly made me nervous, even as I committed it in writing. History does not move in a straight line and my understanding

of that moment in relation to diaspora, sex and gender, policing, race, and other areas has changed quite dramatically I think, but at that time the older narrative was safer, both for me and in relation to the people whose many narratives are part of what later informed the book. Intuitively it sounds like a very strange thing to say—though I don't think it should—but my understanding of Black and Caribbean politics during this period, or at least its legacy, is different from that of many of its participants. That is what happens in after-thought and by resorting to a range of narratives, archives, and ideas. Several people who were involved in that historical moment have suggested that some parts of the book do not reflect their memories. I fully appreciate and respect that, but in some ways that is the point. *Fear of a Black Nation* draws on my understanding of aspects of a historical moment and how they might inform our understanding of the present in terms power, change, diaspora, security, gender, race, etc. It is also fair to say that a genuine comprehensive study, a history, would look very different from what I have written, would be a different book because it would be posing different questions, and I think that book remains to be written by someone else.

I'm also thinking here about an early review of the book by Frances Henry in the *Literary Review of Canada* in July/August 2013. In the review she essentially suggests that I don't understand race, and in part because I don't draw on the body of work on race in Canada, including perhaps hers. She implicitly suggests that the book should have been more empirical than theoretical and that I place too much emphasis on "philosophies and radical ideas" instead of the lived experience of racism in Canada. What I think she actually means is that I don't share her conception of race and do not discuss it the way she perhaps would, particularly because the book is more diasporic than she perhaps would like as someone who writes about the Caribbean and Black population in Canada. She also highlights the fact that I talk about differences and antagonisms among people who were politically active in Montreal, perhaps hinting that I am airing dirty laundry about intra-racial and gender differences that also interplayed with inter-racial sexual encounters. But these contradictions and differences provide us with insight in terms of understanding gender, race, and power today. How do we ignore them, and particularly when it was people who were active during that period that raised these differences?

The point is not to avoid contradictions but to engage them, understand them, and to think about what they mean in terms of the challenges and possibilities of confronting similar circumstances in the here and now. As I suggested in a response that the *LRC* asked me to write, her issues by-and-large relate to the book that she would like to see, and not to the book I have written or for the reasons that I have written it. Ultimately I am trying to get at what freedom in action and thought might mean, or its many meanings, and the restraints that restrict it and how we might overcome them. History

and theory can provide us with a great deal of insight into the present, and I am much less preoccupied with history for the sake of history than I used to be, and more with history and theory as congealed experience that tell us something about where and what we can be in the world. We don't have to live with history as a burden or an albatross. It can be, it is, a dynamic part of the living present that informs our understanding of what we are and can be, but without having to be confined or constrained by what was and what is.

NOTES

1. See "Kamau Brathwaite," in Chris Searle, *Words Unchained: Language and Revolution in Grenada* (London: Zed Books, 1984), 237–238.
2. Brady Thomas Heiner, "Foucault and the Black Panthers," *City* 11.3 (December 2007): 313–356.
3. For a short account of the significance of the Grenada Revolution and the logic that informed its demise see David Austin, "Vanguards and Masses: Global Lessons of the Grenada Revolution," in *Learning from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movement and Knowledge Production*, ed. Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 176–188.
4. J. Bishop and D. N. McLean, "Working out Grenada: An Interview with Merle Collins," *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Criticism* 1.2 (2005): 53–65.
5. David Austin, "All Roads Led to Montreal: Black Power, the Caribbean, and the Black Radical Tradition in Canada," *The Journal of African American History* 92.1 (2007): 516–539 and the slightly modified version of the same article, "All Roads Led to Montreal: Black Power and the Black Radical Tradition," in *Ebony Roots, Northern Soil: Perspectives on Blackness in Canada*, ed. Charmaine A. Nelson (New Castle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 207–235.