The garlic in the cook-up rice: An interview with Portuguese-Guyanese artist Dennis de Caires

Dennis de Caires
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INTRODUCTION

On 10th March 2025, I interviewed Dennis de Caires in London. He had flown to the UK the previous day from Barbados where he lives and works for some of the year. We had established a rapport over the preceding months via email, sharing our Portuguese-Guyanese family histories and finding points of connection. We are both descendants of the 31,628 Portuguese who arrived in what was then British Guiana under the system of indentureship between 1835 and 1882 (Collins-Gonsalves 2020: 42). My mother was born in British Guiana and, in 1969, emigrated to Britain, where I was later born. Dennis migrated to Britain as a teenager, with his parents, the following year. Although Dennis and I were not aware of each other until recently, he was friends with my grand-uncle, the late Dave Martins – songwriter, singer and guitarist of seminal Guyanese band, The Tradewinds. It was fitting that we should finally be introduced to each other by the editors of the *Journal of Indentureship and Its Legacies.* The following interview emerged when two children of indentureship finally met one spring day in London.

INTERVIEW

Clare Parfitt: Can you tell me about the young Dennis de Caires? Where were you born? What influenced you? What do you remember from that time?

Dennis de Caires: I was born in the Mercy Hospital in Georgetown, just a few hundred yards from our house in Kingston.

I had a happy childhood growing up with other children with a big gang that would play over the whole neighbourhood on bicycles with cricket games in back yards or 'under the house'. There was no television in Guyana during these years.

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Our father would go to the sea wall most days and my brothers and I invariably joined him; us to swim – him to walk.

We were one of the many big, Catholic families in Guyana so, in our own household alone, we had an extended community with nine siblings – six boys and three girls. School was important – at St. Margaret's (Mrs Hunter's) in Camp Street and then St Stanislaus College in Brickdam, an all-boys Jesuit College, now co-ed, non-denominational and government-run.

What else about childhood? Mostly outdoors. Anyone moving from the Caribbean to a northern climate always has the shock of reduced outdoor activity. We really grew up outside, outdoors. So a really happy childhood in a household that valued education. We were encouraged to study as well as play, and it was a disciplined but carefree upbringing.

Do you think that valuing of education and discipline was part of the Portuguese-Guyanese heritage?

Yes, the Portuguese in Guyana were involved with several educational institutions with both the Catholic St Stanislaus College and St Rose's High School (supported by the Portuguese congregation) producing many Guyana scholars. I think what's often overlooked with the Portuguese labour brought into Guyana, after the abolition of slavery in the mid nineteenth century, is the difference from other migrants in that they all came from a single, identifiable location: Madeira. They spoke the same language, shared a common religion and culture.

This must have given them considerable advantages compared to other migrants (slaves brought from Africa – under far more cruel terms – and Indians who came under indentureship – a system also brutal in its reality) in establishing community and identity more quickly on arrival in Guyana. Originally sourced to serve in Guyana for their expertise in sugar production in Madeira, the Portuguese soon succumbed to disease including malaria and did not last long in the cane fields. They shifted their efforts to trading where, as Sister Noel Menezes tells us, they prospered. I think the

cohesion of their shared values created a sense of discipline which fostered and valued success in education, sport and commerce. (I should add that they may also have benefitted from a colonial racism that rated levels of skin colour and tone.) We were encouraged and expected to study at school and do well in sport.

And when you were a child, how much were you aware of the history of indentureship within the Portuguese-Guyanese community?

In our family, not at all. My feeling, even today, is that the Portuguese are not aware of their history, of how they got to Guyana – they are more aware of what they created once they arrived. At one point there were two Portuguese daily newspapers in Guyana, which is quite extraordinary, and a number of shipments arrived from Madeira specifically laden with goods for the Portuguese Guyanese. I remember as a child that there was still a 'Portuguese Association' – though I have no idea what they did!

Like most migrants, anywhere in the world, they created something new which evolved to become their norm. It's extremely complicated. In my opinion, as the Portuguese prospered commercially in Guyana, they developed a culture of wanting to be like the English, to be Anglicised – partly for cultural kudos but perhaps to enable economic/business advantages. For example, even with good schools available locally, many were sent up to English boarding schools to be educated (including members of my family to Stonyhurst College in Lancashire). My father, the youngest of seven, remained in Guyana and that may have been indicative of a new generation that was beginning to value the country as a more independent state. He attended St Stanislaus College and saw himself, categorically, as Guyanese.

As independence approached (in May 1966) there was an optimism, energy and sense of identity – throughout the Caribbean I feel – with all Guyanese confident of a dynamic future. I can vividly recall the thrill and pride of learning at school the new national anthem and studying the visual significance of the new Golden Arrowhead flag and coat of arms.

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In parallel to this common national goal was an apparent contradiction in the keen ethnic awareness of each section of the population. By this I mean that, though we were all Guyanese, we were equally aware of being Portuguese, Indian, African, Chinese or Amerindian. I always saw this as a very positive aspect of life (my best friend at primary school was Muslim and he and I both attended our weekly catechism and Koran lessons as if it were completely normal – which it was) but it became much more problematic when racial differences were deliberately enflamed by local and external forces for political purposes.

St. Stanislaus College was very much representative of the Portuguese community in terms of students and its financial support. So, perhaps, while not being aware of the history of indentureship we were aware of a Portuguese ancestry.

You've mentioned a few things that came to you through this Portuguese-Guyanese heritage: discipline, religion, a focus on education. Is there anything else that you want to add to that picture of your Portuguese heritage?

Any and every Guyanese is aware of garlic pork at Christmas with people making their own version of a dish brought to the country by the Portuguese, and it's a good example of the shared culinary culture between the races. It involves soaking small pieces of pork in layers of garlic, vinegar, salt, peppers and thyme for seven days, so it necessitates a special kind of ritual. I prepare it every year – and only for Christmas Day – and my children are very keen to continue this distant and delicious custom.

In terms of what I do now, the familiarity of Western European art and my interest in studying it is related to that youthful experience in Guyana. We attended Mass every Sunday, tending to patronize the church where one of my uncles, a Jesuit, was parish priest. Sacred Heart Church (destroyed by fire in 2004) in Main Street, where I was confirmed, had the most incredible Baroque interior, and having grown up with that, I can see now that arriving in Europe a lot of the art and architecture made sense: a

sensibility that the Portuguese from 200 years ago took with them and tried to recreate in South America.

The first time I visited Lisbon, I was just blown away by all the Portuguese names: Da Costa, Da Silva, Gonsalves, Rodriguez, De Santos, Fernandes, etc. All the names from Guyana. And I kept seeing my grandmother. When my grandfather died, she sold all her properties, wore black and lived in the Park Hotel in Georgetown for the rest of her life. And I saw her everywhere in Lisbon, little old ladies in black dresses. Visiting Portugal I realized there was more Portuguese in Guyana than I had reckoned with – visually … physically – there's, there's a lot of Portugal in Guyana. Another thing that I recognized as an adult came from hearing Fado music. There's a melancholy to the Portuguese in Guyana that I think is cherished and nourished. If you ask most Portuguese how they're faring, in that general daily kind of greeting, the reply will normally involve 'holding on', or 'struggling' or being 'still here'. Something nebulous but, I think, tangible. I think you can identify it. I blame the Portuguese anyway for that … for that beautiful melancholy.

That's so fascinating. I haven't quite heard it described that way before.

I believe you came to England in about 1970. Can you tell me about that experience?

I was 14 years old, and it was a harsh adjustment. 1970 would have been around the tail end of the 'Windrush' movement of peoples from the Caribbean to the UK, and like most West Indians, what we thought we knew of the 'Mother Country' was completely different to the reality. We arrived at Southampton docks, and my parents had hired a minivan to take us to Canterbury as our eldest sister was at university and living there. On the journey, we were amazed that all the houses were made of bricks and they all had chimneys and fences or hedges. Most shocking was that we never got to 'the bush' despite driving for hours … these people had tarmac roads everywhere. Arriving at our destination, it remained alien for a long time, and a few siblings secretly planned their returns to Guyana.

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There were school places to be found for seven children, and we subsequently attended the respective boys' and girls' sections of the Simon Langton Grammar School in Canterbury. One important challenge that I distinctly remember was having to understand how the English spoke English; everything had to be interpreted. It was more what you didn't say than what you did and the manner in which you did or didn't say it. In Guyana, we were accustomed to a more direct form of oral communication.

We were called names (I endured rather a lot including 'white wog' and 'banana') but the sacrifices our parents made allowed us all to receive exceptional education at schools and universities.

One key aspect of moving as a large family was the ability to establish a community immediately, and when we decided to settle in a little village outside Canterbury, we already had the numbers! We would play cricket, for example, outside the house, and by balancing a television on the window ledge, we could watch West Indies tear through England while we played in the yard (each of us providing our individual commentary as we batted … we'd be Greenwich or Haynes or Clive Lloyd or whoever).

We managed to retain Guyana there. And I now know, I mean, as an old man, know that our experience was replicated in so many other families creating their own little worlds. So many Guyanas, Trinidads and Barbadoses! I now understand just how many West Indians living in England gained strength and pride through the great Clive Lloyd cricket team of the 1980s. Without knowing it at the time, we shared these things. We had our own little Guyana in a village in Kent with regular visitors from Guyana coming to stay with us and giving the latest updates.

And at what point in your growing up did you start to feel you might want to become an artist?

I wanted to be a priest when I was a young boy. I was an altar boy and a very holy little boy and had this abstract idea of the priesthood with something known as 'a calling'. The appeal to serve the church quickly disappeared with adolescence, and apart

from toying with architecture, I never thought about studying anything other than fine art.

Do you think those worlds were intertwined as well, religion and art?

Well, most importantly, Western European art comes out of the Church, so the connection is powerful and remains intriguing. Perhaps for me, more relevant on a personal level, was the example of my uncle who was the Jesuit priest. He took, as all Jesuits do, a vow of poverty on entering the order, and when he visited us on his occasional visits to England, he would arrive with a small cardboard suitcase (corners reinforced with metal protectors) inside which were his possessions: a few items including a bible, an alarm clock, a linen napkin, a spare white vest and a pair of underpants. It was a very first-hand example of a world where poverty – or a life without material wealth or commerce – might be a legitimate possibility. I'm not pleading poverty, but it was an insight into a world with a different purpose.

And tell me about your training as an artist. What were the things that influenced you most?

I was blessed in studying fine art in England. My three years as an undergraduate at Winchester School of Art were under the English artist Gillian Ayres, who was an extraordinary artist. I loved studying under her, and I enjoyed being in Winchester, a beautiful Cathedral city … refined and surrounded by picturesque water meadows … just wonderful. It may seem odd, but when I started there, I came across the works of V. S. Naipaul properly for the first time and, through him, my gateway to the West Indian canon of literature in the twentieth century. I went through as much as I could: Wilson Harris, Edgar Mittelholzer, John Hearne, Andrew Salkey and Samuel Selvon – just endlessly – George Lamming, just over and over reading, just reading anything I could get my hands on. My studies were thus two subject areas: Western European art and twentieth-century West Indian literature. After graduation I went to study in the Painting School at The Royal College of Art in London for three years where

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Professor Peter de Francia introduced his students to a highly rigorous approach to making and thinking about art.

I'm interested in this Guyanese literature and how that fed into your practice. What do you think its influence was?

It would be a lot of things, so hard to pull out and identify one thing. Frank Bowling once said to me that we could do anything because we were from the New World … we didn't have the same baggage. The influence on me of those West Indian writers was that they had taken on Western European literature, the great canon of European literature – Dickens, Hardy, Kipling, Conrad, etc. Naipaul had taken on Dickens, wanted to understand Dickens and get inside of it. But then finding his own voice. And I think that that was what was so powerful about the reading for me; that we could do it. You could come from another part of the world and take the grand subjects on. But then you could create something new. I think that's possibly the biggest influence. I know this idea of studying a colonizer's 'canon' is a very colonized view but, in my case, it's true.

Another aspect of West Indian literature that was important for me was the subject matter and approach. The humour in much West Indian narrative arrives through dialogue, but they're not comedies, and many of those writers disguise very painful truths within a vernacular that makes the grim approachable. After I went through as many West Indian books as I could get my hands on or could afford to buy, I started reading Zola, initially to better understand Manet and late-nineteenth-century French painting. This led to 'discovering' other writers, Flaubert, Proust, Guy de Maupassant, Gide, Sartre, etc. I would like to say there's probably more of French culture in my work than any other in terms of colour, composition, influences and intent.

That was really my next question. I think you spent a term in Paris?

The Royal College ran an atelier in Paris, and I spent a semester there. It was a powerful and moving time for me. I didn't speak

French at the time and had no money but was given passes to all the museums. I would visit them in the morning and paint in the afternoon, and in the evenings, I'd go for a meal, I think it was 10 francs, got you supper at the Sorbonne canteen, and it would be just me and a few African students getting our 10 francs worth of rice and stew, whatever it was. Unable to communicate with oral language made me adjust to looking … made it an introspective time for me and forced me to look at the world with more intelligence and purpose.

I noticed one of your paintings was titled *After Derain.* Were there particular individuals who influenced you?

My art, essentially, comes out of other art. The painting *After Derain* is based on a small painting that he made, and mine almost looks like a copy. You can see where it comes from. But Andre Derain is one of many, many artists that I look at, and it would open up too long a list to start naming them!

I title some paintings where they directly quote other artists' work or when they are painted in homage to them.

There seems to be a parallel here with what you were saying about the literature, this idea of absorbing the Western canon but then finding something within it that speaks to you or from which you can speak.

I mentioned earlier that Frank Bowling had said to me, 'We are from the New World', and in the last two years, I've completely changed my view on this. I now think we're from the Old World. I really feel South America is the Old World. We're not the New World. This is important as it helps reframe the study of the Western canon (in all the Arts) within a different time structure; we're not necessarily the new kids on the block. Perhaps we might bring a different weight of historical understanding when we approach the subject of European easel painting. It's often forgotten that Aubrey Williams spent a month of each summer visiting Europe to study art when he first arrived in England. His wife told me that he would go to Italy, France and Germany regularly. But

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Aubrey also had first-hand knowledge of the interior of Guyana – that 'bush' that stops being part of a named country and connects to the continent.

In answer to your question more directly, I think the study of that Western canon might not be as straightforward a lineage as is generally imagined.

You mentioned Sir Frank Bowling a couple of times. Can you tell me about your friendship with him and how that's influenced you?

When Gillian Ayres discovered I was from Guyana, she said, 'I know this Guyanese artist and you should meet him.' Frank came down to Winchester and he was an excellent and popular teacher. We met, and he gave me a tutorial, and we just hit it off. I think one of the reasons – I don't know I'd have to ask Frank – one of the reasons we hit it off, relates to what we were talking about earlier … about finding your experience is replicated somewhere else. I think he may have enjoyed having someone that knew where he was from. Quite literally, that private – yet shared – experience.

It's private. We were talking earlier about racial identity … I'm not really seen in England as a Caribbean painter, as a white … and the Portuguese in Guyana were never really white … you know, and I think Frank understood, because maybe he was seen as a black artist, I don't know. I've got to be very careful how I discuss this subject. But I think, for Frank, it was a private Guyanese thing. And in Guyana, you know, Wilson Harris in his novels talks about the collision, the psychic, beautiful, violent, complex meeting of all the races and cultures. Maybe Frank enjoyed having someone from that cultural mix, seeing something like that in England. After college, I started visiting his studio, and then we did a show together in Guyana, at The Umana Yana in 1989, and he remains a friend. In fact, I'm going to Paris soon, to an opening of his show there. I'm so excited about that. But in terms of influence, Frank was able to show me that we *could be* painters. We

didn't have to be painters of this or be from here; we could take on painting. Like a young writer encouraged to believe they could write. It doesn't have to be limited to being this colour or that gender. You could take on writing. And Frank, again, was amazing for me in that sense of saying, 'This is what we're capable of doing.'

Yes, having that kind of wide view, not being pigeonholed.

Ambitions and expectation. You *can* do this. Frank also spent a lot of time in the States toing and froing between London and New York in the '70s and '80s, and I would sometimes see him when he came back, and again, that was inspirational in seeing someone dealing with transnational debates on what painting could be, even before transnational became a popular curatorial approach … he was part of that defining period.

Do you think that's influenced your transnationalism? You live between different places now – Barbados and the UK.

Only in the fact that, being West Indian, we travel. Wherever you go, there will be a local person and a West Indian … we're all over the world. When I stayed in Paris that semester in 1985 (an unusually bitter and freezing winter), I had a very good Guyanese friend there. As well as my being at the Louvre and so on, one night a week we would get together, drink rum, smoke, eat curry and talk Guyana. My friend even grew Wiri Wiri peppers on his Parisian balcony to make his pepper sauce. So, the transnational bit, all West Indians travel, and growing up throughout the Caribbean, every family had somebody elsewhere, you know, Cambridge, Reading, New York, Toronto, Gloucestershire, Pennsylvania etc. They follow politics in America and in Britain with equal interest because everybody knows somebody in one of those places. And in a funny way, even a tiny island like Barbados has a very international outlook – transnational indeed. And I think that's important. In some senses – I don't want to upset anyone in England by this – but many of the English students I studied with seemed more parochial in comparison. America was seen as

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exotic … outside … foreign. It's changed a bit in the past twenty years, but I do feel the Caribbean has a different awareness of the global. That's all I can say.

You were in conversation with a lot of different places at once.

And can you tell me about the sorts of questions you're interested in through your work and whether that's changed over time?

They are nearly always formal questions about colour, composition, space in the painting and how to resolve those issues without it being entirely self-referential. One painting tends to lead to another and/or be in response to a predecessor. Even now, one of the great things of studying painting is that, being 67 or whatever, it's still exciting. Like I've just worked out a way …. I might try something else. But those original questions remain. You asked earlier about the influence of West Indian writers, and I can see one clear link in their desire for a directness in communicating … to try and find a way of communicating …. I need to think about this, because it's not about denying interpretation but more a way of communicating viscerally to an audience in some way, and I think that probably parallels with West Indian literature.

You started talking there about your artistic process. Can you tell me a bit more about that? How do ideas emerge?

Those original painting problems are perennial and will, hopefully, always be there. But obviously new things come in. I discover new artists or new problems. I'm currently trying to do some work on landscape in Barbados and Guyana. After the last show at the Barbados Museum in 2024, I started new work trying to paint landscape scenes. I've been working on it over the past eighteen months, and it hasn't been entirely fruitful as I struggle to find a new language, palette and purpose for the paintings. My long-held complaint about the reluctance of West Indian writers to take on our landscape in prose has forced me to make some kind of visual effort and part of my struggle is the lack of visual precedent. I can't find helpful paintings of the Caribbean. As this

subject develops, I'm discovering that my ideas need to emerge more from direct experience and observation.

And who do you feel you're painting for?

Oh, that's really easy. Me. Nobody else. It's for me. I've never done a commission. It's always for me although I do hope the paintings always get another audience.

I've shared my life over the last 40 years with the English painter Estelle Thompson, and she is normally the first to see my work. I value her opinion and look forward to showing her new work, but I don't paint for her. But having said that, Clare, without wishing to sound completely self-centred, I have to say that I have one aim that remains constant and that is wanting to make work that a Caribbean audience can engage with. I don't paint for a Caribbean audience, but I'm aware that I'd like them to be able to apprehend and read the work. That is important.

You now live between the UK and Barbados, and you've mentioned places quite often. Do you feel like place is an important theme in your work. Often the titles of your work refer to places as well.

I generally can't detect a connection between the location where the work is made and what's produced. But people said of the last show at the Barbados Museum (all the paintings were made in Barbados) they detected a different space and a different rhythm; they were more intense. And the studio in Barbados is obviously open doors year-round, and the external world comes in. When rain, sun, wind, leaves, monkeys … whatever … arrive, you experience more of it. Cats, dogs, you get every sound, from motorbikes to weed wackers and noisy kites in the sky … smells when something's burning. So conversely, the studio is more external.

I've painted in France, USA, England and Barbados and I often use the titles to help me identify *where* they were made. I was able to work in summer at a studio in France for many years, and something about French culture made me want to acknowledge that in the titles, but hopefully, something in the work itself suggests this. It's not a didactic exercise because the titles are

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primarily useful for cataloguing, so you don't just talk about the blue painting with a banana or whatever. I'm aware the title can also be important to the viewer (they always read them and attach significance to them) and I try to use titles as a gentle, contextualising aid. I don't want to be specific, maybe give the viewer just a little handle. For example, the painting *Neon Moon* (Figure 1) has something that looks like a moon shape in it, and maybe someone could read it as a moon. But somebody reading the title in the exhibition immediately said to me, 'That's a great song.' The song *Neon Moon*, country and western, is one I love despite its clichéd lyrics and hackneyed melody. It's a brilliant song, but stupidly, I

Figure 1 ***Neon Moon*** **by Dennis de Caires.**

thought no one but me would get the reference. Other people take those two words and connect them to something else, which is wonderful, but I really intend them to find visual connections in the painting that suggest other worlds. Little tiny nudges.

You've mentioned your recent exhibition, 'Wuh Part You Is?' at the Barbados Museum and Historical Society. Can you talk a bit about how you were asking that question within the works that were being exhibited? Is that a question that you ask yourself? What's the relevance of the question?

I regret giving that exhibition, that bloody … [laughter]. A title is important for an exhibition, especially for someone who doesn't know your work, to quickly get some idea and context of it. The origin of the title for the exhibition of that particular body of paintings came from sitting at the Barbados Water Authority Office (BWA) a few years ago, patiently waiting (with many others) for someone to deal with my query. The guy next to me was explaining to someone on his phone that he was in the waiting room at the BWA and would be late, and, obviously organising a rendezvous or a meeting, he said, 'Wuh part you is?' And I thought it was just the most brilliant question. You know, where are you? It's such a great question, and I liked the specificity of 'part', actually like, 'What's your GPS?' but also the abstract notion of where are you? As in, where are you in life? Where are you as a migrant? Did you go? Did you come back? Where are you? Where are you in this room with these twenty paintings? Where are you? Why are you looking? Why are you here? You know … but I also didn't want to explain it … not be seen as a big philosophical or metaphysical question. It was taken without question locally and I can only assume that its familiarity made it seem perfectly normal. 'Wuh part you is?' All I ever really want to do is to encourage the viewer to engage with the paintings, to look at the work critically.

Yes, it does feel like the question very much turns the focus back on the viewer. It's not on the work. Why are *you* looking at this work?

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I've got to be out of it once I complete the paintings and they're wherever they're being seen. I'm out of it. They live on their own. There's a Gauguin painting, *Where Are You Going, What Are You?* I can't remember the full title [*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897–1898], and I didn't want the title to be that overt or challenging but to encourage people to simply look and think more.

Yes, it's a question. You're not laying it out.

It's not didactic. I wouldn't like anyone leaving that exhibition to think they had worked out or addressed a set problem.

Yes. It asks you to respond.

My work is mainly about pleasure – another critical element that relates back to our earlier discussion of Fado music and melancholy. It's not contradictory that the Caribbean produces such intensely celebratory music even if it comes out of a very painful history. Many powerful calypsos with raging social criticism include a rhythm that moves hips. Sometimes people who've suffered want to celebrate and dance on their own terms. I'm not saying I've necessarily suffered but my art is celebratory. It's affirmative.

I think that really comes over in the vibrancy of the paintings.

Affirmation is complicated, and I've only found a very laboured process to make images appear spontaneous and intuitive. Affirmation may also involve belief systems which require the tacit acknowledgement of the viewer.

Can you tell me about your thoughts going forward? What are the thoughts that might be guiding the future work that you're planning?

I've started on this landscape project the last eighteen months, and one of the surprises has been the references I've found myself returning to. I'm looking more carefully at the work of the Norwegian artist Nikolai Astrup and the Group of Seven in Canada in trying to find their initial approaches to representing their land.

I'm enjoying this departure, but I develop an idea slowly and with many, many false moves and dead ends. I've recently recognized that I get more pleasure in painting now than I've done since leaving college, and that's reassuring. Frank Bowling, in his late eighties, works nearly every day in his studio. That's both extraordinary and inspiring. I would love to have a future that includes solving new/old painting problems.

The question of why and how to make landscape paintings has made my immediate studio practice focus on the artists I mentioned earlier and made me think more deeply about our relationship with the physical world around us – our connectedness and disconnectedness to it. I get into lots of arguments with academics in the Caribbean about this, but I don't think we've fully written about or painted the landscape of the Caribbean. I think there are paintings to be made about the landscape in the Caribbean and trust that it may not be entirely paradoxical looking at Norwegian or Canadian artists for help. I should also add that I swim at the same bay in the Caribbean Sea most days.

Yes, that's so fascinating. I went to a talk recently at University of London ['Kin-dread: A Multi-Sensory Celebration of Guyanese Literature', 26th November 2024], and there were a number of Guyanese writers speaking. They were talking about their writing in response to landscape and flora and fauna. They were all from different ethnic backgrounds within Guyana, and they were articulating different relationships to the land that had come through their heritages. It was fascinating to hear those points of view. But as you say, there's also a general alienation from the land. So there seems to be a lot of literary interest in this question of Guyanese landscape as well.

Yes, I think it's key, and ownership comes into it. And there's a big difference to the idea of landscape in Guyana to Barbados – almost as big a difference as there is in the topography of the two places. Barbados is a smaller, more cohesive society with the representation of the island commonly geared towards a visitor's gaze

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for its key economic product of tourism. Guyana poses a completely different set of questions (outside of the obvious matter of size and scale) where, for me, the problem of ownership is crucial. Who owns the land in Guyana? I don't mean in any legal sense; I mean in the sense of being able to apprehend it … to *see* … *feel* it.

And there was also discussion at this event of the Guyanese interior and this place that's close but yet distant and how that vastness also influences their writing.

I think there's definitely an imaginative space that is directly related both to Guyana's vastness and the completely untouched state of much of the land. Aubrey Williams, Ron Savory, Wilson Harris all had experience of going into the bush. Anyone who grows up in Guyana, born in Guyana, is familiar with some image of Kaieteur Falls. Growing up, we had a painting in our house – there's always a painting, an image of Kaieteur that shows the waterfall from the frontal view. What is shocking when you actually visit Kaieteur is the unbelievable scale of the untouched jungle beyond – stretching for mile after mile of virgin, primordial forest that no one has touched, and you're just seeing with your eyes and heart. How do you make sense of that? Water is fundamental to Guyana. It has so many rivers in which so much is reflected. What's land? What's water?

Is there anything else that you feel you'd like to add to what we've said that would fill out the picture of our conversation?

In terms of indentureship and the Portuguese, which was the focus of our conversation, I should mention conversations with three Portuguese colleagues I worked with at an American university in London. They were good friends and when I mentioned to each that I was Portuguese, they shook their heads and said there was nothing about me that was Portuguese! Me walking around Lisbon and seeing my grandmother and reading a few names making me think I was definitely Portuguese when, clearly, I am not. Although I grew up being called Portuguese I was never, in fact, Portuguese.

And so, I think in terms of indentureship – the bacchanal that the English created when they started moving people all over the planet from one colony to another, this 'cook-up rice' – as a Barbadian woman once described a Guyanese man to me in terms of his origins – we're the ones that are left. We have to sort it out. We can and do complain about it, but any real solutions will have to originate in the Caribbean. In any case, a good cook-up rice is nice, you know and it's nutritious. I think the Portuguese contribution in Guyana was an important one and they remain connected to much of the culture and commerce in the country. To continue with the analogy of cook-up rice perhaps the Portuguese in Guyana might be seen as the garlic in the cook-up rice.

Let's finish with that cook-up rice.

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