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The Writers' Forum: Earl Lovelace

Earl Lovelace
University of the West Indies

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Earl Lovelace

I want first of all to introduce myself and to comment on the subject which we have at hand: the dialectics of form and content. What I propose to do by way of introduction is to read from a novel that I have written, then perhaps speak for five minutes or so about some ideas that I have in relation to my writing, expecting of course that the writing that I read would more properly express me than what I have subsequently to say. This is taken from *The Dragon Can't Dance* and this is the prologue and it's called "The Hill."

This is the hill tall above the city where Taffy, a man who say he is Christ, put himself up on a cross one burning midday and say to his followers: 'Crucify me! Let me die for my people. Stone me with stones as you stone Jesus, I will love you still.' And when they start to stone him in truth he get vex and start to cuss: 'Get me down! Get me down!' he say. 'Let every sinnerman bear his own blasted burden; who is I to die for people who ain't have sense enough to know that they can't pelt a man with big stones when so much little pebbles lying on the ground.'

This is the hill, Calvary Hill, where the sun set on starvation and rise on potholed roads, thrones for stray dogs that you could play banjo on their rib bones, holding garbage piled high like a cathedral spire, sparkling with flies buzzing like torpedoes; and if you want to pass from your yard to the road you have to be a high-jumper to jump over the gutter full up with dirty water, and hold your nose. Is noise whole day. Laughter is not laughter; it is a groan coming from the bosom of these houses—no—not houses, shacks that leap out of the red dirt and stone, thin like smoke, fragile like kite paper, balancing on their rickety pillars as broomsticks on the edge of a juggler's nose.

This is the hill, swelling and curling like a machaue snake from Observatory Street to the mango fields in the back of Morvant, its guts stretched to bursting with a thousand narrow streets and alleys and lanes and traces and holes, holding the people who come on the edge of this city to make it home.

This hill is it; and in it; in Alice Street, named for Princess Alice, the Queen's aunt—Alice—soft word on the lips, is a yard before which grows a governor plum tree that has battled its way up through the tough red dirt and stands now, its roots spread out like claws, gripping the earth, its leaves rust red and green, a bouquet in this desert place. . .⁵¹

I have read this extract to demonstrate that the language I employ not only locates me, but expresses me. That is to say it tells that I come from a place in the world and that I come out of a particular experience. It is that experience I see myself as a writer struggling to wrestle into language and by that means bring it into the world. In a way

there is nothing remarkable about that because I believe every individual writer must have his or her own experience, and seeks to wrestle that experience into language and to bring it into the world. In a way I believe that the task I have is the task of every individual writer, but also I think that because our history is not so well known—but we have some sense of its outlines—and because my experience as part of a community that has not been properly represented in the language of the world, the task is all the more compelling.

Representations by others have not been adequate either for the people ourselves or for the others who view us and who have to deal with them and have to deal with us. It is I who must bring this language and experience into the world. What is that experience? I believe that it is important to give some kind of sense of that experience, as a Caribbean person as well as a person in the world, but I am speaking as a Caribbean person for the moment. I think that our experience has had as its central theme not slavery and colonialism, as is often thought, but the struggle against enslavement and colonialism. I want to repeat that our experience is not an experience of slavery and colonialism, but our experience is the experience of the struggle against enslavement and colonialism. In that process we have needed to affirm the self, to have some sense of moral order, some sense of justice, some sense of what it is to be human, and I think it is principally an experience of struggle that we bring to the world. Hopefully, I think that the bringing of that experience into language and presenting it into the world could change the world. I say that as a writer my own struggle is to wrestle that language into the world, also to be present in the world and to claim the struggling experience in the world as well. You know, this world doesn't belong to somebody else and it doesn't belong to just me either. It belongs to me too. I say that sets the terms of my writing: I deal not particularly with a little group of people somewhere on the periphery of existence, but at the very center of existence.