“Oldtalk”: Two Interviews with Sam Selvon

Nearly every Sunday morning, like if they going to church, the boys lining in Moses room, coming together for an oldtalk, to find out the latest gen, what happening, when is the next fete...

(The Lonely Londoners)

1. Samuel Selvon interviewed by John Thieme.

Question: Sam Selvon, you did several other jobs before becoming a writer. Do you feel that these helped you very much in your career as a novelist?

Answer: Well, I think the experience during the war years, serving in the navy, did help me to collect myself and my thoughts. In terms of work after the war, I worked with the Trinidad Guardian as a journalist for five years and that did indeed help my writing. In fact it was during these years that I started writing short stories and poems.

Qn.: Were many of those published in the Trinidad Guardian?

Ans.: Quite a few were published. Some were broadcast by the B.B.C. in London, in the Caribbean Voices programme.

Qn.: Caribbean Voices must have given a tremendous boost to your career in the fifties

Ans.: It was the greatest thing that ever happened really, because the first thing that I ever sold for money was a poem that was broadcast by the B.B.C. and I got a cheque for two guineas for it, which I swore that I would never spend.

Qn.: A lot of money in those days!

Ans.: In those days it was wonderful to have a cheque and to feel, well, I have written something that has been paid for.

Qn.: I know you remember Henry Swanzy very fondly. Do you have other mentors from that period?

Ans.: Yes, I remember even in those days Henry was a very great encouragement to me, because I got several stories broadcast by the B.B.C. and when I decided to move to London, he wrote me a very encouraging letter, telling me he would do all he could to help me when I got there.
Qu. Could you tell us a little about your early upbringing? One thinks of you sometimes in connection with V.S. Naipaul, because you're both at times comic writers and you both have a kind of East Indian background, but yours seems to have been very different from Naipaul's.

Ans.: Well, yes, I don't know. I think in a way my background is pretty nondescript. I'm working on an autobiographical novel. I have got sections of it finished. You see I grew up in Trinidad as a Trinidadian and my mother's father was a Scotsman and my father was an Indian. So I'm an offspring of that and I grew up in Trinidad completely Westernized, completely Creolized, not following any harsh, strict religious or racial idea at all.

Qu.: When you began to write, were you conscious of the need to write in an indigenous West Indian form? Were you from the outset trying to create something different from English fiction or did that come later?

Ans.: No, I don't think it was as deliberate as all that. What I was trying to do was to put Trinidad on the map. People didn't know what part of the world I came from and that was something that I felt ought to be corrected. Those days in England — in the fifties and so on — the only country in the Caribbean people spoke about was Jamaica. You never heard them talking about places like Barbados, Trinidad, Tobago and so on. So I felt it wasn't a question of going into the techniques of writing. It was just a story I wanted to tell, which was set in Trinidad in the first novel.

Qu.: It seems though that when you began to write about characters in an English setting, you did begin to go into the techniques and invent a new language form.

Ans.: Yes, I feel that the language is tied up so much with the characters that it is part of them, that just through the language alone you can describe what type of people you're talking about. It's like having them speak. What I've been trying to do is convert this oral impression into a visual one, so that the page becomes a tape recorder as it were.

Qu. I've often thought that, in addition to being generally rooted in oral storytelling, your fiction owes a particular debt to calypso, with its short epistemic narratives.

Ans.: Yes, again that has not really been deliberate. My feeling is that it comes out that way, purely because of the society that I'm writing about. It's a Caribbean one and the people in Trinidad live calypso as part of their lives, their thoughts, their upbringing. And I suppose that this must necessarily come out in the writing. As you say, it's because these are the people I'm talking about and these are the people I'm writing about and this is the way the creation happens in my mind. They present themselves most truthfully in that form. So I use the form.

Qu.: You mentioned you're working on an autobiographical novel now. I've often wondered if there's an autobiographical element in the character of Tiger in those early novels.

Ans.: No. There was some feeling that maybe there was, but that wasn't really true, because I grew up in San Fernando from a middle-class background. But I know the cane villages and things like that so well that this is how I was able to write about it. Down south in Trinidad it's all sugar cane district — that's where I was born. Being so much in touch with what was happening around me. As I said, my upbringing was strictly Creolized, but I learned how the Indians thought and it wasn't very difficult for me to imagine what it must have been like for Tiger to be forced into this marriage at an early age and to go through the whole ceremony. And of course the point of the story of Tiger isn't that he's an East Indian, but that he's a young man who is facing life and growing up and the things that happen to him could happen to any young boy, the thoughts that come to him: "What should I do? I'm growing up to a man now! How should I face life? How should I face my responsibilities?" And things like that.

Qu.: Is there perhaps more of yourself in the character of Moses, who one feels at the end of The Lonely Londoners is a writer, as he stands back and looks at the world around him?

Ans.: Well, possibly — in the later books, Moses Ascending and Moses Migrating, I try to convey some of my own personal thoughts in my second novel, An Island is a World, which somehow isn't as popular as the others. Most people seem to know my work through the first book, through Tiger and through the character of Moses in the London novel, but I tried in that second novel to put down some of my personal impressions about life and there's still room for me to write such a novel. I want to write a novel set in Trinidad that really describes the society very, very closely.

Qu.: Which of your novels that are currently out of print would you most like to see reprinted? Would An Island is a World be one?

Ans.: Yes, I would think An Island is a World. Perhaps I shouldn't say that because of the quality of the writing. It's a book I would like to rewrite very much. Of all the books I have written I would like to rewrite that one, because I think that I never got to grips with what I was trying to express in that book. But when you ask me which book reflects some of my personal thoughts, I would say An Island is a World and I would say I Hear Thunder, both of which are set in middle-class society.

Qu.: You go back to Trinidad fairly frequently. How do you find the Trinidad of today compares with the Trinidad you grew up in?

Ans.: It is changing. There is more hope I think. People in the young generation are starting to think for themselves and ask questions. In that respect I think there is a great deal of hope for the people in Trinidad.

Qu.: What prompted you to move to Calgary? Moses migrated back to Trinidad, but you migrated to Calgary.

Ans.: (Laughing) Well, I lived in England for twenty-eight years, which is almost half my life-time. I had decided that it was time to get back to the West. I wanted to get back into the Western hemisphere, not necessarily the Caribbean, not necessarily Canada, not necessarily the States. I didn't decide which country, but I wanted to get back into the Western hemisphere, because I had lived so long in England and inculcated English literary values and tradition and custom and so on. I felt that I was born in the West and I ought to get back into the Western way of life. So I was going to leave England in four years from 1978, which was the actual year that I
left. But I had to leave in '78, because my wife wanted to come to Canada right away. The reason I chose Canada — it's just a domestic matter — is because she had relatives who were living there before. So when we wanted to move she said "Fine. Let's go over to Canada".

**Qu.** Do you think you might ever write a novel about Canada?

**Ans.** I certainly sincerely hope so. I would certainly be using Canada as a background to my future work.

**Qu.** Have you discovered any affinities between the Canadian experience and the Caribbean, both being in the Western hemisphere?

**Ans.** Yes. Very, very much so. Somehow in Canada I feel very, very close to the Caribbean, although strangely enough in terms of distance I am further away where I live now than when I lived in London. But there is something about the Western way of life, the Canadian way of life, which reminds me very much of the Caribbean. I find that the people from the Caribbean who live here in Canada are also different from those that live in London. They have a quicker acceptance here. They break down barriers much quicker.

**Qu.** I'd like to ask you a little about the changes between The Lonely Londoners and Moses Ascending. One feels that the style of Moses Ascending is quite different from The Lonely Londoners in some way. Would you like to comment on what you were trying to do in Moses Ascending?

**Ans.** What I was trying to do really was to try and push the language form that I used in The Lonely Londoners as far as I possibly could. When I was writing The Lonely Londoners, it wouldn't come at all in straight, standard English. Eventually I decided to try to set the whole thing down, both the narrative and the dialogue, in this form of Caribbean language. And it just shot along. The book wrote itself in about six months, just like that. It was one of the fastest novels I've ever written.

So in later years when I decided to do this sequel to The Lonely Londoners, it came back to me fine. The language worked so well with the first book, I decided I'm going to use it now, but I'm also going to show there's been some kind of development in Moses through all these years he's been living in England. I decided I'm going to use a kind of archaic English together with the dialogue format and see how the two would combine. And I think it has worked very well. The book has worked so well, and that kind of language use is what creates the book. I feel that you just cannot divorce people from the Caribbean from that language form, because it is so good that you see them instantly. So that it's like the page is talking to you.

**Qu.** Have you finished with the character of Moses?

**Ans.** I don't really know. I'm not sure. Although he is a successful character, I don't want to beat him to death. I have to think a little about this. I would like to turn my hand now to writing a novel in straight, standard English, possibly set in Trinidad, but with a wider range. I would also like part of it to happen here in Canada, perhaps in Toronto. So that the scene shifts from Toronto to Port of Spain — possibly include one or two of the other Caribbean islands — to give more of a bigger feeling of the Caribbean as a whole than just one island.
Yes, What I wanted out of London, I got. I wasn't disappointed throughout all the years. I had difficult times sometimes — jobs and things like that — but by and large I love London. I've been back recently and it has changed a great deal from the London of the fifties. It's changed for the black immigrants and I think the actual landscape of the city has changed in certain parts.

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2. Samuel Selvon interviewed by Alessandra Dotti

Question: In The Lonely Londoners the characters try to adapt themselves to the city, they are looking for a solution to their problems. In Moses Ascending your vision of exile seems to have darkened. Moses himself is less positive and more isolated from his countrymen, struggling hard for total privacy. The ambivalent feeling towards London, the love/hate relationship with the town has grown into disillusion. In an interview with Professor John Thieme you said you loved London and that you got out of it what you had hoped for. Was your recourse to and the isolation in an intimate and inner world the main reason for your love of London and your success there?

Answer: Well, I always had a feeling for London from the time I was a child going to school, learning and reading about the English countryside and the English poets — Wordsworth and Keats and so on. I had a very great love for the English countryside although I had never known it at all, I had never seen it in my whole life; and one of the things that I did when I first went to London was to go out into the country districts, trying to see the flowers and the fields and the valleys and the landscapes that I read so much about. I found a great deal of satisfaction out of that... that love of London and the English countryside as a whole; I always felt a great feeling for it; I lived in London for twenty-eight years, which is a great part of my life spent there. As for the books, the difference between the two novels is a question of time really. Moses Ascending was written maybe twenty-five or thirty years after The Lonely Londoners and, in fact, when I did write The Lonely Londoners I had no idea in my mind that I would like to write a kind of sequel to it. In fact, I don't consider Moses Ascending to be a sequel. I just felt that I would use some of the same characters, that I would use Moses and Galahad and some of the others and update the situation of what was happening with the black communities in London. So really there is a big time gap between the time and the events of The Lonely Londoners to the later periods when I wrote Moses Ascending.

Qu.: However, in Moses Ascending your vision of exile seems to be more pessimistic and bitter.

Ans.: Did you say bitter? No, I don't think it shows, you know... particularly the hero, Moses... I was trying to create a character here who was ambivalent, who wasn't quite sure about life or about anything. He is a kind of universal figure. He is a figure of a man who doesn't quite know what he is going to do with his life, what is going to happen to him and things like that. In Moses Ascending, when he kind of withdraws, as you see, he does that, but at the same time he is necessarily involved in everything. I don't believe that any person in life... when you are living in a society or a community can withdraw yourself completely, how much you want to do that. Everyone in life reaches or has certain feelings at times when they want to be alone, they don't want to be with friends or anything, they have enough of that nonsense: listening to people's troubles, you know: "my wife beat me last night, I had troubles with my wife last night", or, "I had troubles at home". This was the element that I wanted to bring out, that Moses just wanted to get off by himself a little. I also tried to show how difficult it is to do a thing like that, because he is involved, people want you to be involved. The ambivalence with Moses is that, in spite of his great desire for that, he inevitably becomes involved.
Qu.: Is there anything of your experience as a writer in exile in the character of Moses in Moses Ascending?
Ans.: Well, there is a lot of... My own feelings reflected in a way the ambivalence of what life is all about. I don't like the word exile, I feel that when someone tells you that you are exiled that means that you are banished from your land. I just feel that I am living abroad, you know; I am living abroad as a writer. You see, the character of Moses was based entirely on a true figure, an alive, real figure, who was a Trinidadian that I met when I first came to London, and it's through him... he always wanted to write a book. He was the one who took me around, sort of put myself in shoes and things like that. Most of all I got was his experiences and a great deal of them are my mind too. I mean, I was one of the boys. A great deal of what happened to Moses also happened to me. All the experiences happened to me too while I lived in England. So I associate myself with that and with Moses to that extent.

Qu.: But, is there anything of yourself as a writer in the character of Moses? I mean, in Moses Ascending, Moses tries to write his memoirs and he is trapped between his desire to write about himself and his inner world and the need to write about his people and their struggle against racial prejudices.
Ans.: You have two characters here, you have Moses and the author myself. I wanted to write about the experiences of the black community. Moses wanted to write something which is more personal, his whole life-story, which he never really wrote, as the book says. The book really says how he tries to write his memoirs but he never really got down to it; he was always involved with something else. I think that sort of is one of the aspects I wanted to bring out, that involvement with life, which is a universal thing that is very, very difficult. I don't think that Moses would have been the type of character who, even if he were completely isolated, he would have been able to do very much writing. Sooner or later he would have felt: "I wonder nobody is coming and see me", and things like that. He lives in this kind of ambivalence, trapped between things.

Qu.: Has this ambivalence of Moses influenced the structure of your novel Moses himself, in fact, says: "Naturally the whole structure of my work would have to be drastically altered if I was to incorporate these other aspects", referring to the Black Power and the Blacks' struggles in Britain.
Ans.: This is quite true. Also another thing is... what I tried to do with that particular novel too is to extend the uses of language a great deal. I thought that, if Moses had lived so many years in England, he has taken in a great deal of English ways and mannerism and things like that, but only superficially because, you see, Moses is a very enigmatic character. A lot of people have still not quite understood all the ironies and the satire that is in the book. Some people are still wondering: "does Moses really love Britain", or, "is he really an ambassador for Britain?" but he always stands for Britain, at this point or another, but he doesn't... As you know, in the later novel, Moses Migrating, where he sets himself as an ambassador for Britain and so on, I mean, to me, as the author, it's all a big joke, it's all a big ironic twist of the whole thing, because I think that Moses himself appreciates some of this irony too, but then he lives as if he were wearing a mask, a carnival mask. If you remember, in that particular novel, Moses Migrating, when his aunt tells him, at the end of the book: "Moses you are always playing carnival, you are always wearing a mask. Nobody knows what you are really thinking inside yourself".

Qu.: I have greatly appreciated your short story "My Girl and The City" where you deal with your creative process and communicate it to the reader. Was it hardwork both to write about reality as it is, without "weaving", and remain faithful to your original inspiration, that is to "what there was at the time"?
Ans.: With that particular short story, you know, I... This is more a very personal aspect of my writing. When I first started to write, that is how I wanted to write; I wanted to write in standard poetic English and things like that. It is an aspect of my writing that I wanted to show for one thing, and that I wanted to... I wouldn't say attempt, because I know that I can write like that, but being involved and coming from Trinidad myself, wanting to write about the black communities and so on... this is why I used that other kind of language for the novels, the Trinidad form of English, because I felt that this was the best way to express their feelings and things like that. And in "My Girl and The City", again in that particular story, as it shows, it comes back to your original question, my personal love, love of London too, you know, ... I love the city, I love things about it. So really myself as the author would be the counter to what I am saying, would be a very ambivalent person too, in one way or the other.

Qu.: In "My Girl and The City" as in your London novels, the traffic, the underground, the buses, the people's faces are recurrent elements of confusion and disturbance. As you say, "motion mesmerises me into immobility". I got the impression that your characters are captured in a restless and swaying movement which always leaves and fixes them on the same spot, strongly contributing to their feeling of loneliness and estrangement.
Ans.: That is true. Loneliness is a very personal thing and is a thing that so many people suffer from. I was always aware, for instance, in my living in London, how isolated I was with my thoughts and my feelings. Millions of people moving to and fro, day by day, doing their things and so on, and, if you consider each of them, they are all locked away, just like a mass movement of people, but there is no cohesion about it. When you get out of the tube station, as I did in "My Girl and The City", once you get out of the underground of London and then you reach the street, then everyone separates, they go off to their different lives. So you get this impression in the facts of life; vast numbers of black people who have settled in England, that they suffer this kind of loneliness.

Qu.: In The Lonely Londoners as in Moses Ascending there is a general want of love. Is it due to the hardships the characters must face — the lack of a house, of a permanent job —, or to a generalized inner incapacity of a deep sentimental involvement?
Ans.: Well, I don't think so. When you say love you mean something that is deep and intimate perhaps, but the way the Caribbean people live, you know, they express... they are general that way. It is not a thing that they become very personal about, but there is, for instance, a great love between Moses and Galahad; he likes Galahad, this is why he does these things for him.

Qu.: Yes, but I mean, there is a general want of love between men and women. Your "boys" never enter into a lasting relationship with the girls they meet.
Ans.: Yeah, I quite agree with you. I mean, I wasn't going to write a love story.
There were no characters that fell in love with their white girls. I think their relationship, that relationship between the black men and the English girls, the don't think that... Moses never met a girl that he became emotionally drawn to; girl that he was... There is still that difference between them, there isn't that sort of something else.

**Qu.** In your novels there are very few fully-realized female characters, while your male characters' search for identity usually merges with the simple desire to assert their masculinity. Women are seen only as sexual objects. Is there any relationship with the calypso tradition in which the male is a sort of phallic symbol?  

**Ans.** Not really. Many people had said that I hadn't written very much about women in the book, but, I mean, that would be another novel — I could write a novel like that. But while I was writing this book, I mean, this is the way that things happened, this is the way that things were. If I wanted, as a writer, if I was planning to write a novel to show also the woman's point of view, how the woman was making out in London herself and so on, the black woman, I would have written to write something that one would say is a fully-drawn novel, which depicts each and every aspect of the black community life living in a white society. I wrote it just as it happened during this time, in a natural way. This is really how it was. That is not to say that there isn't a lot of... that things were not happening with black women here and so, but, as I said, this would have been another kind of story.

**Qu.** The deep humanity of your characters has often escaped the notice of the critics. Is it due to the comic way in which you deal with them and which seems to engulf and entangle them within the limits of realism?  

**Ans.** I don't think that the humorous side of the novels has very much to do with that. That is part of the characteristics of West Indian people, you know, they like to make fun, they like to try and look at the light side of life, to offset the hardships they have undergone. A comment like that means that you are seeing life, and things like that, but that kind of commentary has never been made by black people from the Caribbean, because they understand and they see it. You were looking at it from the point of view of your culture.

**Qu.** But I found a great and deep humanity in your characters in spite of, or perhaps, because of the comic way in which you deal with them. However, the critics have too often considered them as mere caricatures.  

**Ans.** Well, I think so. What can I tell you? You know, those things are there and they are implied. It is good to me that you had been able to see that, because there are hardships and everything,... that these people still have some affection for one another, they would do things for one another, the basic things, that people from a Third World country, who had implanted into a white society, that they still hold together to some extent, that they still try to keep some value and some worth and humanity. It is good that you were able to see it, because I think all of that I tried to suggest in the novels.

**Qu.** It seems to me that there is also a great sadness underneath the humour and the comedy. Is that true?  

**Ans.** Well, that too could be. It's really a universal sadness. When you move out of your country into another one, into a strange one, into a different kind of society, into a different world completely, you know, that is so different from what you are accustomed to. There must be naturally loneliness. There would be sadness, a feeling of... a kind of estrangement away from reality, and this is a thing that you have to learn to live with. When you move out of one culture into another, you experience all these things; and it isn't only that black people experience it in a white society. I think that anyone, white or black, who moves out of his culture into another has these difficulties as well.

**Qu.** Professor John Tolleme said that though it does not include any episodes from an actual carnival, The Lonely Londoner may reasonably be viewed as the seminal West Indian carnival text either for the language or the characters' lifestyle. But carnival, which represents a healthy subversion to the British value system, becomes a means of self-assertion in a country which lacks any form of carnivalesque suspension. Is it a challenge to the system or a proud return to Trinidadian tradition?  

**Ans.** I think so. The carnival is a national part of the culture of Trinidad and that all exuberance and everything, that you say... it is something that in a steady English society they are not accustomed to... the ways and mannerism of these people who live a different kind of life; and there is a contrast. I agree with what has been said there.

**Qu.** In your novels there is no linear development; they do not proceed towards a traditional conclusion. Do you intentionally react to the usual structure of the European novel or do you rather perceive how reality does not offer positive resolutions?  

**Ans.** Well, let me too answer this one quite honestly. Well, you know, what is a novel? I never conceived of the book to take the shape of a novel. In fact most of the novels that I have started just stem out of a general idea that develops as it goes along. In that particular novel, The Lonely Londoner, the way I wanted to write it is just as it was written; I never had any feeling at the back of my mind that it was going to take the traditional form or style of what is conceived as the novel. I wrote it as it came to me. I just put it down just like that, and it could be set to be a series of episodes and anecdotes that I tried to bring all together, which haven't one character or a main character. But it certainly... it was accepted as a kind of novel in that sense, it hadn't anything to do with what I would say the traditional forms, but the way the story evolved, this is how it was, this is how it happened in my mind; I just put it down like that.

**Qu.** If you were to write another novel would you still make use of that witty and humorous mixture of standard English and creolized Trinidadian dialect?  

**Ans.** I think so. I think that if I write about people from the Caribbean in my
move from an island to another, and you move from one province to another. It’s a different kind of country. It’s a country made up of people who moved from other parts of the world and came to settle in Canada. So that the immigrant from the Caribbean who goes to Canada feels as if, well, he is also another immigrant into the country. I think that on the whole the Canadians tend to look upon one another in that way. So that there is really not that sort of blatant prejudice you would get as in England where the English would feel: ‘here all these black people are invading us, ... in the country’.

**Q.U.**: Do you find the contribution of Caribbean literature more easily accepted in Canada than in England?

**A.N.S.**: I think it has been accepted all over the world, all over the English speaking world.

**Q.U.**: Yes, but I mean, as a contribution to English and world literature, not as a second class literature.

**A.N.S.**: No, I think it is English literature. After all it is written in English — or in forms of English. I feel that Caribbean literature as such... perhaps we have started to build a tradition of literature that comes out from our part of the world, out of the West Indies and the Caribbean — the Englishspeaking part of it —, but it contributions a great deal to world literature. I think that there is on the whole a tendency for the bigger countries to learn and understand more. I think that literature is doing a very great job in helping people to understand what is happening in other parts of the world. Well, here we are, here you are interviewing me and I am from a small island, Trinidad, that nobody would have known anything about unless the writers had started to come out and write something about it.

**Q.U.**: Do you think that the concept of Third World literature, with all its implications, is deeply-rooted in England?

**A.N.S.**: I myself, I don’t like the term Third World really, you know. We have got one world to live in and they make three. I feel that says — writing from my region of the world... it comes from a part that hasn’t been... that few people have known very much about. And now people know more. I think the world is getting to be a smaller place in that sense, populations are exchanging cultures, they are exchanging literatures, they are learning more about each other and also the feeling of universality, which is what most writers try for. I think also that Caribbean writers in their way are struggling for this, in a way, that they want to be aligned with universality; they don’t want to be left apart as a separate kind of culture. I think we all have something to contribute.

**Q.U.**: In an interview with Peter Nazareth you said that in America the writing is much fresher, more dynamic and creative than in England.

**A.N.S.**: Well, I don’t know. I think that, well, ... dynamism in the sense that it is more
profitable to be writing in America. I think that in both sides, that in America too there is a great increase in order to find out more about these other countries, and about the literatures and the writers that come from these other countries. So I think on the whole that, as well as literature goes in the last twenty years or so, great strains have been made towards accomplishing this; I mean, European and other writers, they are making researches in literatures, or are visiting the Caribbean more, or are visiting other parts of the world, finding out about the cultures and these people and things like that. So I think, as I say, in that sense the writers and the literature have done a great deal to make that commensurable.

Qu.: Well, Mr. Selvon, many thanks.

Alessandra Dotti
made the interview
she publishes here while a student
at the University of Milan