SARGASSO Interview

*Sargasso* 2001-02, I Concerning Lorna Goodison

Interview with Lorna Goodison
(Recorded in Toronto in September 2000)

Lowell Fiet:
What were your expectations when you started writing? Did you think that you were going to become a writer? What did you hope to accomplish when you first began to write?

Lorna Goodison:
Well, absolutely nothing. That's a big truth, because my sister, Barbara—I'm one of nine children. I'm eighth of nine children—and the oldest in the family is a writer, and she works on the newspaper. Early on I knew about the language of newspapers, and she always told us she was waiting for the day she got her own by-line. We were very excited about her by-line. So I always thought I was an artist from the time I was very small. I would paint and I would draw. So I thought I was a painter. And as happens, I think, in large families, you tend to think that a profession is taken if one of your siblings has that profession. So I thought I couldn't be a writer because my sister is a writer. Nobody told me this. That was what I thought. Also when I went to school if I wrote something I was always...I guess I always had some gift as a writer because if I wrote a story or something in class the kids would say, "You didn't write that. Your sister wrote it." [laughs] I thought, "I'm not doing this. This has nothing to do with me." But in spite of that I always wrote things, and I'm sure I remember when I consciously wrote a poem as opposed to when I scribbled something down. It was prompted by the appearance of the Jamaican landscape after a particularly heavy shower of rain, and I noticed—I was maybe nine, ten years old—I was very conscious of how refreshed and how green and how renewed everything looked after the rain fell. So I wrote this poem. It must have been a pretty terrible poem because it said, you know...very naíve, very... Well, I was nine years old.
Do you have it still?

Lorna Goodison-

Oh no! Thank goodness! It disappeared along with a lot of other things I wrote. But it had a refrain about after the shower, after a shower of rain or something. But definitely I was ... you know ... the inspiration came ... the point is that the first poem I ever wrote was about rain, and I still write poems about rain. So I suspect it was something that started and was going to arrive at some point to a logical conclusion. Because I think I do write poems about regeneration. I’m very concerned with themes of regeneration. So ... yes. I didn’t think I was going to be a writer, though. I thought I would just write that poem. But I always wrote poems and then I hid them. I put them away very carefully. I once built a great funeral pyre in the garden. I was living at my sister’s house in Gordon Town then, and I built quite a nice pyre in the back garden one day and I burnt them. I was fearing, and my fears proved to be quite accurate, I feared that if I became a writer that I would have a really troubled and strange [laughs] life, you know. Because by this time I guess I was reading a lot ... that’s what I was — what I wanted to do was read. That’s all I ever really wanted to do. I guess I became aware of some sort of danger that was lurking there for me if I decided to be a writer. So I got rid of them. But they always came back. And so, I started to publish my poems in the Sunday Gleaner in Jamaica, but I published anonymously, under my initials.

The first time I wrote a poem and put my name under it was when I went to Art School in New York, 1968-69. The School of the Art Students League, it’s a wonderful school. While I was there in New York I was writing more than ever. I was at art school and I was just writing a lot of poems. [laughs] I wrote a poem, which I think is in one of the anthologies, called “New York is a Subway Stop,” a very early poem. When I finished that poem I looked at it and thought, “I don’t really care if anybody knows that I’m a poet. I’ll just put my name on it, that’s all.” Because up until that point ... I remember I got a lot telephone calls from people saying, “Did you really write that? You did that?” ... because nobody knew until then that I was writing. So, I don’t know if this is a very long answer to your question, but I didn’t set out to be a writer. I did not consciously decide to be a writer.
But by the time you put your name on that poem, could you say, right at that point, “I’m Lorna Goodison, the poet?”

Lorna Goodison-
No! It took me a long, long time to ever say that, to call myself... it took me years before I said I am a poet. I don't know. I think I felt I had to earn the right to say that. I don't make those claims lightly.

Is the decision to say that a kind of milestone? Is there something that marks that... a certain poem, the publication of the first volume of poems? What marks the decision to say that you earned that right?

Lorna Goodison-
Perhaps the publication of my first volume of poems. But I also think — I remember very distinctly, the late Dennis Scott was wonderfully helpful to me. Because he believed in my talent. He would come around, wherever I was living then, and he would ask me, “Are you writing?” and if I said no he would say, “Whatever else is going on you just have to do this, remember you have to do it.”

I think one poem in Tamarind Season called “Letter to My Love,” where I think I started all this... sort of Greek myth, you know, I was incorporating some Greek mythology into this poem. I remember consciously saying, “No” — and I think Dennis agreed when I showed it to him— “I don’t want those people in here.” Because at that point I felt that we were very much able to stand on our own, that Jamaican images could stand on their own, that it didn’t need to be always seen through the lens of the Greek myths, or any other people. I felt we were real by ourselves. I didn’t need Venus’ help or Aphrodite, or somebody else. Well I think Pan is in it or something. I did let one go through, instead of a whole bunch of them. So I think at that point I became conscious of the power of the craft... of knowing what you are doing and being able to manipulate it, and do things, make things work as you want as opposed to being at the mercy of them. So, I think around that time I started thinking, “I do this. This is something that I do and can do.” Every now and again this happens to me, not a lot of times. But once or twice I have been in the middle of a reading somewhere — I remember once, maybe the first time I read in London and I was reading seriously, and I remember right in the middle of the reading standing up there and thinking, “Yes, this is what I do. I can do this.” [laughs]
And between that point and what’s happening right now... Recently you published a new volume, *Turn Thanks* [Urbana and Chicago: U Illinois P, 1999], that also seems to mark a certain kind of milestone in your career, perhaps a level of maturity in relation to craft that places you in a different position. I don’t know if that characterizes your own thought? Have we left the period we can call early Goodison, now moved into middle or...?

**Lorna Goodison—**

Laaaate?! [laughter]

No, we’re not anywhere close to that. Have you arrived at a new stage?

**Lorna Goodison—**

I hope so. I have just finished ... I’m just finishing a new collection [*Travelling Mercies*. Toronto: McClelland &Stewart, 2001.]. I think I like these poems, right now that I’m speaking to you I like them. Sometimes ... next week ... I won’t like them, but I think I can see some advancement, some kind of movement, forward movement in them. Even from *Turn Thanks* ... I think these poems have moved on some. I hope they have because that is what I always wanted. Once I had decided to surrender to it or to cooperate with it. That was it. I had to learn to cooperate with this whole enterprise. [soft laughter] I spent a great deal of time resisting it in my earlier years, and then one day I just decided to cooperate with it: “O.K. Whatever. I’ll go with you. What you want, I’ll just do.” [laughs]

It’s easier to cooperate with it now?

**Lorna Goodison—**

Oh yes. Oh yes. It is now my friend. It started off as something that was very terrifying and frightening for me, but became my friend or we became friends ... but yeah, I always hoped that was part of the pact that poetry made with me and I with it, and that I would improve, that the work would show improvement and that I would grow and it would grow. We would both grow. I was very concerned with that from the very beginning. I really had a kind of fear that I might not ... I might just do something and then keep on doing the same thing. I don’t necessarily want to write about different things, but I liked sort of ... a friend of mine once said he wished that for me: “I hope your course is enlarged. That you do what you do but that it gets wider and deeper.”
That’s true.

Lorna Goodison-
Well, I’m hoping that is what’s happening.

A technical question. A question about craft. We talked about this a little bit earlier, about the whole notion of orality and performance and the process of writing itself. Do you, while writing, speak the poems out loud as you write? Do you beat them out? Do you work meter in that way? Do you use voice in the process of composition?

Lorna Goodison-
Yes, but very much in my head. I read them out later. But … one of the things I’m very good at — I don’t say this a lot about things. I don’t have a whole lot of areas in which I say, “I’m very good at this.” — I know like a million songs, for some reason. I just know the words of hundreds … I know a lot of songs, the lyrics to a lot of songs. I think that in some bizarre way it helps me because I have in my head, at any given time [laughs] the lyrics to any number of, I think, fine songs. So I think I have a kind of foundation of music going on there all the time. So, when I work the lines they’re always, I think — I always, you know, I think I wanted to be a singer or some sort of musician. So the lines are very closely allied to my idea of writing music or making music. So if they don’t sound musical I work on them and work on them until they become as musical as I want or if I can’t I discard them. So, I don’t pound beats in my head. I don’t count all the beats, but I’m very conscious that if it doesn’t sound musical to my ear … I have some sort of way of measuring whether it’s musical or not, some kind of bizarre litmus test takes place in the mind of the writer. You know how Hemingway said that every good writer has to have a crap detector; well, I have to have that and a music detector. [laughs]

Performance is a word that gets thrown around a lot in contemporary criticism. Do you consider yourself a “performance” poet? Or are you a poet who reads your work for audiences, is that performance? Does that reading then help you reflect on those poems, perhaps help you revise those poems?

Lorna Goodison-
Actually, I consider myself less and less a performer. I never thought of myself solely as a performer, because if it doesn’t work on the page for
me it doesn’t work. And then the reading is an additional dimension. In the earlier poems maybe I didn’t pay as much attention to that as I could have. But the more I write the more I want it to work on all levels. Absolutely.

But I do like to read and that sometimes when I read — and it’s true, what you said is very true — I will read something and it comes off the page and it exists in another way, in another sphere, and suddenly I hear what I should do with the thing on the page. I have to tweak it somewhere, turn it another way because I prefer what happens when I read it out loud. But I don’t know if I’m a performance poet. I think there’ll be a day when I won’t read. So, I’m just hoping to write poems that no matter what they’ll still be poems. [laughs]

*Is that acceptable in a Caribbean context, the notion of a poet who does not read as well as write for an audience?*

**Lorna Goodison—**

You know what I love? I love when kids read my poems. I hear it when they say it and it makes me feel so happy because I just want them ... There are poems in *Turn Thanks* — that long elegy for my mother — and the first time I read that poem I was not in Jamaica, I was somewhere else, but there were some Jamaicans in the audience and I remember a woman, she came up to me and said, “Were you aware when you were doing that that you were doing it for all of us? In a sense it was about your mother, but it wasn’t really about your mother. That you were giving us a format for how to bury people, our mothers.” I don’t think about things like that. That’s a huge thing to say. But, if what that woman said is true at all, in that people have said me, “I’ve used your poem at my mother’s funeral, at my brother’s wedding.” Then good! That’s what should happen. They shouldn’t wait for my voice to activate them, to make them into something.

*You’re currently living outside of Jamaica. Is Jamaica still home?*

**Lorna Goodison—**

This is September. I’ve been, [starts laughing] I’ve been in Jamaica four times since January. [intense laughter] I just came back from a whole month ... Ted and I just came back from a whole month in Jamaica. We had a really nice month in Jamaica. [Voice lowers, speaking softly] I can’t do anything about Jamaica. Jamaica ... is just where I live. I live there all the time. No matter where I am, I live there. [Normal
But, having said that, I’m also becoming a little more conscious of the need to be gracious, to acknowledge the gifts and the places of ... you know, the watering places which have been provided for me in other countries. I would have to say that as much as I love Jamaica, and I don’t have to keep saying how much I love Jamaica, but there have been other places on this planet which have been very good to me. And I should probably at this stage of my life acknowledge that I’ve been able to accomplish something outside of Jamaica. Much of my writing now, my later writing, has taken place outside of Jamaica.

Is it as easy to write here in Toronto, or in Michigan when you lived there? Is the writing, the writing process attached to a place?

Lorna Goodison-
No. It hasn’t been that way. One of the hazards of being in Jamaica is that I don’t do very much work. I mean, in Jamaica I have friends ... I have six brothers and two sisters. I have millions of ... I have a lot of attachments. So, in Jamaica I just tend not to do a lot of work. [laughs]

But when I’m away, there’s a sort of strict routine I hold to when I’m teaching and somehow that sort of points me in the right direction. So I work and I work and I write and I write because I want to remember Jamaica, so I have to write. I’ve done a lot of writing since I’ve been here in Toronto. I’m finishing this book of poems. I think I can write because the distance is good. It’s not too far removed, maybe like Michigan is. But here I have access to Jamaican food. I have Jamaican friends here, and Miss Lou [Louise Bennett] is here. We talk a lot.

You do?

Lorna Goodison-
Oh yes! As a matter of fact she has a birthday ... she was 81 this week. She’s having people around this evening so we were thinking that if you guys were free we would have taken you over there.

And the new book, you’ve talked about it a couple of times already. Is there anything else you want to say about it?

Lorna Goodison-
It has a lot to do with travelling. Travelling in all kinds of ways. It talks about my own travels. It talks about people in the African diaspora travelling. It talks about spiritual travelling, internal, it just talks about
going ... this sort of great movement. I get very caught up in some of those poems. That's what it's about. Right now, I quite like them. I'm pretty much finished with it. I'm sort of putting the finishing touches to it. But it seems to me that ... at some point in my life I started moving. I was sort of planted in Jamaica for long while, and then at some stage I started moving and haven't stopped moving since then. So, it's a bit natural that the poems would have to be about ... so much of my life has been about moving.

You talked about being a painter. You talked about wanting to be a singer, of having music and lyrics in your head. Are there links between painting, music, and poetry that might lead you in new directions?

Lorna Goodison-

I have maybe three or four poems for my next book, the book after the one I'm finishing. Because that always happens. I'm very conscious of when a group of poems comes together, and then after that other things start happening. I think that is where I'm headed next.

The music is very, very important in these new poems. It's also a kind of response, a kind of pushing back against a strange modern notion that says that music and poetry don't belong together. A lot of modern poets to me just sound like some guy talking to me, and if I'm not particularly interested in what he has to say then I don't know if it's a poem. I am very perverse that way. My response is that my poems have to become more musical. [laughter] Does that make sense?

Technically my questions are over, we've covered the bases, but let me see if I can provoke responses on a couple of other issues. [Lorna laughs] It seems you probably do not have too much time for the theorists, the theoretical in general, and perhaps particularly postcolonial theory. That's the sense I got from the discussions we had in Puerto Rico last February. Yet, there's more theory being published now, particularly in the Caribbean and concerning Caribbean writing. Is there any point where you see the theoretical positions on Caribbean literature relating to your work?

Lorna Goodison-

I'm always grateful for any kind of enlightenment. I think a good literary critic does that. They do just that. They show me things about my work I can't possibly see. I'm too close to it, or whatever, I can't see them. I think if there was more theory that did that, it helps enlighten me, or other people about the writing itself. But some of it, I don't
know ... the thing is I’m open. I’m not going to say I don’t want to have anything to do with theory because that is not true. I welcome any kind of theory that seeks to do what any good literary critic does, which is illuminate the text, show me what is going on here, make connections for me, lead me to other things. Maybe that doesn’t happen anymore, I don’t know, I really don’t know. [laughter] One of the things I think ... I really feel — I said this to you earlier — I always felt that we were enough. What we had was enough. Not in any narrow sense that we don’t need anything from outside. That’s not what I’m saying. I never took to the idea that we needed to always be attached to some greater power in order to make ourselves into something. We didn’t need to all be seen through the African lens, the European lens, or anything else. I draw on these things constantly, but I also think there are times when I just want to talk about people in the Caribbean as people in the Caribbean in their own right.

In some of the poems in the book before Turn Thanks, To Us All Flowers are Roses, that is what I was trying to do very much there. There’s a cycle of poems in the beginning about Jamaican street people. I always felt that they were as important to me as any ... you know Wordsworth had a whole series of poems about street people of his time. I didn’t want to borrow Wordsworth’s street people. I felt that Elephant was every bit as valid as ... you know ... “The Leech Gatherer.” But I didn’t set out consciously to do that. I only set out to do that because I thought somebody should talk about these people. I’ll tell you something, maybe I’m going to write a poem about this. When we were in Kingston last month, we were strolling right downtown in Kingston, Ocean Boulevard, which is very interesting, strange sometimes, frightening thing. We went out one night and came back in, and there is a woman who feeds the dogs of Kingston. She’s a European woman who lives down there. She’s from Eastern Europe somewhere. She goes out late at night with this big thing of dog food and feeds all the starving dogs of Kingston. Now, this is just so wonderful for me. I’m saying that I come from a place that is so rich and there are characters and there are myths being made every day. That is what I want to do. I want to capture them in words. Does that make any sense?

Perfect sense. Just one last question. What do you say or what can you say to the young people who are writing or starting to write poetry in a world in which, for the most part, the audience for poetry seems to be the diminished and poetry seems to have less of a place in society than other literary or artistic forms. What can you say to young poets?

Lorna Goodison-

Well, luckily, the University of Miami used to have a writing program, a summer writing program. I did some teaching there and also I did some teaching a couple of summers ago to young West Indian writers at Cave Hill [Barbados]. People who are writing now are a little more fortunate than [earlier writers].

In some ways writing is a calling, it's a kind of vocation. I don't want to get too dramatic here and say it's holy, but I think so. In some ways, if you're called to write, if you're moved to write at all, then understand that there is something a little larger than you or maybe really, really larger [laughs] than you, if you are unlucky or lucky. So I go back to what I said. You have to cooperate with it, and by that I mean trust this gift you have been given. I think ... I believe this, I think there are things which come with it, a sort of corollary to the gift, and that somehow if you're good and doing what you're supposed to do, ways open for you that you can't foresee. You shouldn't be doing this because you think, "I want to get rich and am going to get a big prize." I don't think that should be the driving force. In some ways, what I'm trying to say is that at some point, maybe earlier on, the work itself should be the reward. Maybe this is called a consolation, but it's true. For a long time, certainly for me, the work was the reward. I had no other reward but the work: the joy of crafting a poem, the joy of receiving the inspiration for a poem, the joy of writing it down and saying, "Jesus, where did that come from." I really ... at times, I stepped back from some poems and thought, "I know there's a God because I could not have done that." Those are joys which nobody can pay you for. So, in the beginning you should never lose that. I would say if I had a lot of money, if I really came into a lot of money, one of the first things I would do is to ... there should be a really good prize, a couple of really good prizes for young West Indian writers. There should be a really good publication out of the Caribbean where people could have their work showcased. There are all kinds of good publications, but you know what I mean something that is equivalent to the best anywhere. What I would like for us to do is begin to think in these terms and maybe if enough of us think in these terms we could come together and start creating these opportunities, these openings for younger writers to showcase their work in a really big way.

Until then, I would say that ... one of my first publications was cranked out on a Gestetner machine by a friend of mine named Marie Francis. I put them in a brown paper envelope, stuck a drawing of mine on it,
and sold them for something like $10 [Jamaican]. I'm glad I did it. It was like a kind of "yogurt" culture for a book. [laughs] But now it's easier. You have opportunities to get published, but I would tell the young people do those things. Not the Gestetner machine. Now you have computers. Get them out. Don't wait until you have a big publishing contract, just self-start. Sell them in the plaza. I think it's up to the poets of our age to get people more sensitized to the role of poetry in their lives. I certainly heard that in Jamaica in the past, and I'm sure it happened all over the Caribbean. Slim and Sam and other troubadours used to print their songs and sell them in the streets for a penny a sheet or something. I don't think poets should feel bad about selling their poems in the plaza, I don't think they should.

I don't like the idea of this sort of according oneself some great special-ness. I really resist that idea a lot: that I'm so special that my poems can only be read in special places or that only I can do... I don't know what. I think of my poetry as something that's a part of my life, like my cooking, my looking after my son, my housework. When I'm doing something else I'm trying to write a poem too. So it's all sort of an integrated pattern that I want to create in my life. It's not some rare thing that happens and I separate from the earth and walk to Mount Olympus.

Whenever you get the chance, help the people around you by sharing these poems with them. They're a kind of food, a kind of nourishment. So give them away. I've been teaching at the University of Michigan for a while and I've been speaking to people who come out at the end of their M.F.A. degree, and they've done writing, really amazing. They've been given this wonderful, rarified atmosphere in which they function as poets for several years. At the end of it they say, "What am I to do? I'm to get my book published and then to...?" Sometimes that might not happen right away. I say to them things like, "Where do you live? There's a library there, right? Go to the library and offer to read for the kids who come in on a Saturday." Read wherever there's any kind of opening, [laughing] a window of opportunity as they say these days. One of the things I do when I'm in Jamaica now is that I read to kids in libraries in different parts of Jamaica. Sometimes they don't listen. They make a lot of noise. But I think I have to do that. So I end up in libraries all over strange little places in Jamaica reading these poems to kids. That's as much a part of what I do as reading in any great intellectual center.

Interview transcribed by
David Lizardi
University of Puerto Rico Cayey and Río Piedras Campuses