

# THE LIBERTY OF THE IMAGINATION

NICHOLAS LAUGHLIN

(IN CONVERSATION WITH VAHNI CAPILDEO)

Vahni Capildeo is a Trinidadian writer best known for her poems, though she also writes prose fiction and non-fiction. She moved to Britain in 1991, where she read English language and literature at Christ Church, Oxford, and won a Rhodes Scholarship to pursue graduate studies in Old Norse. Her DPhil (2001) examined the medieval Icelandic *Egils saga* and its English-language translations. She has taught at several British universities, worked at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and volunteered for Oxford Rape Crisis and Oxfam. She is currently a contributing editor at *The Caribbean Review of Books (CRB)*.

Capildeo describes her first book of poems, *No Traveller Returns* (2003), as “an autobiography, moving outwards from Trinidad; from the mind that feels free to report on the world, into the mind that knows it must question itself.”<sup>1</sup> Reviewing the book in 2004, I called it “mercilessly observant, mercilessly precise” (*Caribbean Beat* 25)—qualities Capildeo herself remarks on in our conversation below, where she speaks of writing “without mercy.” Elsewhere I suggested that her poetry “demands its own kind of patience from its readers,” and is “concerned more with precision than with beauty, yet nonetheless frequently achieving beauty” (*CRB* 2004, 21)—assessments that I think her subsequent publications have confirmed.

Her sequence *Person Animal Figure* was published as a chapbook in 2005. Her second full-length book of poems, *Undraining Sea* (2009), is one of a trilogy Capildeo describes as an *ars poetica*. *Dark and Unaccustomed Words* followed in late 2011, and the final volume, *Utter*, will be published in early 2013. She has written a long prose memoir, excerpts from which have appeared in several journals and anthologies, and her critical writing is as intensely scrupulous as it is penetrating.

Reading *No Traveller Returns* almost eight years ago, I was astonished by its verve, its virtuosity, and its sheer unexpectedness. For this reader, Capildeo is the most ambitious Caribbean poet of her generation, and the one who most bracingly compels her readers to reconsider what it does and can mean to be a “Caribbean writer”—questions that led to some gentle sparring during this interview, in which I sometimes chose to play devil’s advocate. The background to our dialogue includes dozens of conversations and a voluminous correspondence stretching back to 2003, when we first met.

The interview was conducted in late October 2011, while Capildeo was visiting Trinidad. About a week and a half before, she had participated in an evening of readings and performances in tribute to Martin Carter, which I organized at the arts space Alice Yard in Port of Spain, as part of the program of the 30th West Indian Literature Conference. We met on the eve of Divali at her mother’s house, in a front room looking onto the driveway lined with flowering shrubs. From time to time, Capildeo would interrupt the interview to point out hummingbirds hovering outside the window, and while we spoke a midday thunderstorm began abruptly, then blew out to sea. The transcript below represents barely a fifth of our conversation, which continued subsequently via email, as she clarified or expanded on certain points.

**Nicholas Laughlin**

## Interview

**Nicholas Laughlin:** Can you remember writing your first poem?

**Vahni Capildeo:** That depends on what you call a poem. I always assumed that reading and writing would be what I did. So I taught myself to read and write, and I was writing since the age of two or three.

**N.L.:** What were you writing at that age?

**V.C.:** Rhyming couplets, on my mother's telephone pad.

**N.L.:** Have any survived?

**V.C.:** There's a lot of that stuff in the cupboards here. I keep intending to have a large fire. I was writing poems consistently from the age of six, in pencil in a copybook.

**N.L.:** What made you think that reading and writing would be what you did with your life?

**V.C.:** Possibly because both of my parents were unemployed. There were a lot of books in the house, and the major activity I saw around me consisted of reading and writing. And my father attempted to teach me to read Sanskrit when I was five, so I felt it had been normal for my family to have been reading and writing for 4,000 years. There was a sense of vocation apart from any employment.

**N.L.:** Was there a point when that sense of childhood vocation became a sense of adult vocation?

**V.C.:** A lot of the most important things I had learnt, and a lot of the ideas of what I wanted to be, crystallized between the ages of nine and eleven. Really I shouldn't have stayed in school after the age of fourteen.

**N.L.:** Here's another way to ask the same question. Was there a specific writer or book you read when you were very young that instigated this desire for a literary vocation?

**V.C.:** I don't think it had at all to do with a desire. My mind seems to process things into patterned language. Therefore I write.

**N.L.:** How and where do you begin a poem?

**V.C.:** Sometimes there's a rhythm without any words, and it's a question of making time to listen attentively to that rhythm. And if for some reason, such as travel, a period of employment, or people ringing you up on the phone, you don't write the rhythm down, then you lose it. At other times there is a crystallization of ideas and images. The one thing that rarely happens is that I get a series of words. The words are always secondary.

**N.L.:** At what point does the physical writing happen, the setting down of words in pen or ink, or typing? Does the poem already exist in some kind of near-full form in your brain by then?

**V.C.:** I *can* work on poems in my head for a long time. I tend to have more sense of their density and development as a series of colours and pickings-up of energy than necessarily a series of words.

Depending on where I am, I will write down a few phrases on whatever I have. So typically if I empty the pockets of one of my coats, there will be things like bus tickets with words and phrases written on them, which I then have to reconstitute into a notebook. So the notebook very seldom resembles a first draft of any kind. Some poems require more drafting than others.

**N.L.:** You describe *Undraining Sea*, your forthcoming book *Dark and Unaccustomed Words*, and another completed but unpublished book, *Utter*, as a trilogy. What is the ground they cover?

**V.C.:** I did a lot of scholarly and literary reading, without intending to write an academic book. And this, if you want to look at it in that way, is a three-volume art of poetry. I wanted to define, for me, the ground of what was possible in the art of poetry. So you'll also find a play of forms that interested me, including some invented ones.

**N.L.:** Does the order in which they are read matter?

**V.C.:** I would think so, because that's how I conceived them. It might not matter to someone else. I finished *Undraining Sea* first, in 2005, because it was the easiest to write. But that was really the middle volume. Its first section deals with time, and is set up with a fourteen-month calendar. The middle deals with space: there are overlapping cities, urban spaces, but also the sea. The last section relocates the writing in a Caribbean lyric tradition, but only as one set of possibilities. So there were three large movements in that book. That was the easiest to write, because it was very defined: time, place, lyrics. And the reading for it was quite defined. I read Dante's *Commedia* in Italian for Florence, I read William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, and also some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travel writing for the Caribbean.

*Dark and Unaccustomed Words* is the first book, but it is appearing second. The title is from George Puttenham's late-sixteenth-century *Arte of Poesie*, where he was talking about the use of obscure or recherché language—inkhorn or aureate terms—and also the incomprehensible, over-elaborate shouted language of street pageantry. And it suddenly struck me that, while he might have had a point about clarity and accessibility, those are also exclusionist arguments, because what is “dark” for one person or in one context is clear to another. So, for example, for a perfumer the elaborate code of perfume language would actu-

ally be more obvious and clearer than if they had to say something like “it smells kind of sweetish and kind of flowery”—if they could say that there was such and such a base note or such and such a heart, etcetera.

So I thought I would write without mercy, in whatever register of language occurred to me, including mixing registers in one poem, and sometimes mixing languages or traditions—Spanish or French, for example, would just go in. Then the other thing I thought of was the constituents of language itself. At one point when I was writing my book, I organized my poems into files with labels like “adjectives,” “prepositions,” “adverbs.” This wasn’t only linguistic and grammatical. It was also in a sense anthropological: What is the category of “adjectiveness”?

Creative writing courses often instruct people to take out the adjectives. But I started thinking, for example, of the adjective absolute, like Mallarmé’s “L’Azur,” where the adjective absolute isn’t really a noun, it’s more a quality pushed beyond the brink of its describable possibility. And then I thought that my adjective poems could go beyond the saturation of what’s describable. I have one blue poem which is an adjective poem. There’s another which is an adverb poem. Some people say silly things, such as that adverbs are feminine, or unnecessary, or feminine *and* unnecessary. I have a poem about swimming in the North Sea among jellyfish, where you weren’t supposed to put the base of your skull below water, because you’d sustain brain damage from the temperature. You also had to avoid swimming into the jellyfish. I thought this was very adverbial, and also preposition-like, because you constantly had to qualify the actions you were taking and define the position you were in. So I wrote a little preposition-adverb poem. That was the animating force, but if you read it, it just seems like a poem about jellyfish.

**N.L.:** How does *Utter*, the third book, close the trilogy?

**V.C.:** I finished writing it this August. Two main things went into that. One is that it gives the social contexts in which poetry can be made and received.

There are poems from the point of view of critics, or spinsters, or mock-poems that stage the kind of conversation people might have about poetry. Or poetic renderings of the kinds of characters who might turn into poems, except these poems are under the characters' control.

But also I had the idea of monolithicity, which was given to me by one of the etymologists at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where I used to work. I think he was talking about the *OED* and its monolithicity, and I started thinking about how things that appear monolithic in fact have a life of vivid and individual and ever-changing detail. So one poem apparently is about a meadow of grass near south Oxford, but in fact it uses the word "field" in many of its senses—it is a word I worked on at the *OED*—field of meaning, field of electricity, sports field.

**N.L.:** A question that every writer answers uniquely: How is writing poetry different from writing prose? You write a lot of prose poetry and poetic prose, and in your work there seems to be a continuum between the different forms, rather than a clear divide.

**V.C.:** When I write a prose poem it's definitely different from writing an essay or short story—I don't really have any kindness in my mind if I'm writing poetry. I will use language with as much rigour or energy as the language itself requires. It's the equivalent of producing something of high-quality, or being allowed to be a couturier who would make a dress entirely of feathers. With prose it's always a question of translation—I mean with essayistic or short story prose—of translation, or of trying to be fair and complete.

**N.L.:** Why do you use the word "kindness"? Do you feel you must be more kind when writing prose? Is it because of audience, or subject?

**V.C.:** The audience, and the stamina demanded both of the writer and of the reader. You need to put in redundancies and explanations and create a furnished or articulated world. Whereas when writing poetry I believe it's pos-

sible to deal with absolutes, and if anyone can't put up with it, they can move on and read something they like. And if I'm not capable of writing it, then I need to try harder.

**N.L.:** This makes me want to ask you one of those impossible questions: What is poetry for? What is the job of a poem?

**V.C.:** Would you be asking that in the context of individual writing and reading, or in a social context, or historical?

**N.L.:** What I mean is, do you have a general working theory of the purpose of poetry, as opposed to other forms of writing?

**V.C.:** I think poetry is a natural expression of humanity that has not been brutalized—which is able to take time and concentrate. I also need to be writing, not talking about writing. There is a peculiar extent to which, if I haven't been writing but I've been doing a lot of talking about writing, I stop being able to think in the way that produces writing.

**N.L.:** Writing is a mode of thinking, isn't it?

**V.C.:** Possibly. It could be just a way of making objects that seem to feel necessary, and then sending the objects out into the world and wondering where they end up and how they are used.

**N.L.:** Do you make a distinction between poems written for the page and poems written for the voice—those written for silent reading and those for public performance?

**V.C.:** Yes, definitely. There are some poems that I never read aloud, because they're intended to be read over. They are constructed more like mazes or like geographical areas, and I want people to be able to take a walk in them and then



rest and go back and look at another bit in a different way. Sometimes these might be prose poems, or they might be two stanzas put parallel on the page. Or there are poems that are written for reading out loud, but they are so much in somebody else's voice that I don't read them out loud, and I wish somebody else would.

**N.L.:** How do you feel about reading your work in public?

**V.C.:** There are several different aspects to that. One is that I don't really write in or for my own voice—it would bore me intensely. In *La Jeune Née*, Hélène Cixous (the French-Algerian writer I've mentioned elsewhere) describes reading Ancient Greek literature; the protean joy of inhabiting character after character, to have never felt the *need* to identify, say, with a woman character. She could be Achilles and then his enemy.<sup>2</sup>

I'd be much happier if other people would read my poems out loud, and in a reading I did here [in 2008], that is exactly what happened—I invited people to stand up and read poems. I like hearing my texts voiced by other people, often because they will link words or phrases in ways that are possible within the text but that I might never do because I would have been too hung up on a comma or syllable count; and of course no single person can be aware of the entire range of a text's musical possibilities.

**N.L.:** How do you think about your readership?

**V.C.:** It bothers me not to reach a larger audience, but I don't really have a message to communicate, other than the message of a form of concentration—that it is worth going over poems that might be riddling or enigmatic, and accepting that having a meaning that can be summarized isn't the be-all and end-all of human expression.

**N.L.:** I also mean the question in terms of geographical location. You were born and grew up in Trinidad, are obviously still rooted here and have an audience here, but have been living for more than half your life in England.

Where do you feel most of your readers are, geographically?

**V.C.:** Scattered. I know there are quite a few people in India reading my poems now.

**N.L.:** I'll rephrase the question more bluntly. This interview will appear in a journal of Caribbean literary studies, so there is an implicit assumption to this conversation: that you are a Caribbean writer, or at least this is one of your identities. What does that mean for you as a writer, and do you feel that part of your audience is specifically Caribbean?

**V.C.:** I think that certainly in terms of who will be able to understand more of the allusions that are wrapped into the work—certainly a Caribbean audience will get more of those, paradoxically because they won't assume that every allusion is Caribbean. I think here there is an openness to the idea that one can originate from the Caribbean but from that have a very wide range of allusions to and from anywhere in the world.

**N.L.:** Do you think of yourself as a Caribbean writer?

**V.C.:** I think that's a political and not a literary question.

**N.L.:** It's a political question that intersects with the literary. But answer it as a political question.

**V.C.:** I'll try to answer in terms of the literary imagination. It might be dangerous to apply regional and national labels, because then people might limit their minds, or apply a dangerous kindness. Because there's quite a strong family culture in the Caribbean, people don't seem to cast off their families as easily as they seem to do elsewhere. There could be a danger of having a sort of extended family guilt complex when one applies the label "Caribbean writer"—have I done right by such and such.

That would be a partial engagement with myself, if I set out with a pre-defined notion. But, if I set out with no kindness and an absolute engagement with myself, what turns out might then be overtly Caribbean, or not. But that is still the complete production of someone who was produced in the Caribbean, and therefore ought to be considered Caribbean writing.

**N.L.:** Where is your literary community?

**V.C.:** I don't feel I have one. I'm seeing this in terms of power and institutions. There seems to be a pressure in Anglo-America—where, of course, a lot of Caribbean writers now work as expats—for poets to aim at a university job and spend a lot of their time in the expository profession of teaching; and they are perhaps then pressured unconsciously to write poems that can be “analyzed” in class—that can be taught well—and to start creating a superficial belief in the manipulation of techniques, which is an external approach to a poem, a bit like turning something inside out. They ignore when they have obscure springs of inspiration. So the habit arises of looking at the achieved poem and back-projecting what must have been a process of formation of that thing, even if the formation is much more shadowy.

Along with that there's a kind of set of international festivals and workshops, and a belief in doing certain kinds of readings; these can be good in themselves, but I'm dubious about what imprimatur a poet may need to become “qualified” in the eyes of those who administer and appoint. Then this links into publishing and being reviewed. And I think by not having a university role, to some extent I'm outside that. I did not realize how much I would be an outsider, once outside what is essentially a market and ideological network. I have no intention of being a cult figure, i.e. revelling in obscurity. I did believe that it was possible to do something like bake bread or catch fish, and have the specialized languages of those things, and then be an informed reader and writer the rest of the time. But there seems to be this new oppression of having to attach oneself as a semi-public figure, “the poet,” to one of these institutions.

What I'm getting at may be a larger drift in identity politics, which is recolonizing the imaginative possibilities of Caribbean writers. Either you are an identity politics writer or you are a betraying person.

I work very hard for the liberty of the imagination. I sometimes feel that any environment in which a Caribbean writer tries to speak now is a trapped environment. It's full of landmines, either of nationalism or of identity politic<sup>s</sup>.

**N.L.:** In the November 2005 issue of *CRB* I published an excerpt from your prose memoir, in which you wrote:

When you make a choice to leave a country and to live somewhere else, on loving terms with other people who belong to that place that is new to you, you have to take the consequences, few of which you may have realised. (34)

What were those consequences for you, being a writer in a new place?

**V.C.:** What I found was peace of mind—I found necessary solitude by moving away. I also tend to think when I am in motion as well as still, and to be in a country that is physically safer, and to be able to walk around on my own at night was very crucial and created a lot of headspace. This permeates the writing—in one poem there will be several different environments, or voices from different environments.

I definitely didn't find a literary community; rather a series of shocks and incredible put-downs—such as “it's a great loss to Old Norse” that I spent time on original work. Or, “Don't write a novel. Everyone I know is writing a novel. It's misdirected energy.”

**N.L.:** Who are the key poets who have shaped your sense of what is possible in poetry?

**V.C.:** I don't think I really intended to be a poet. I still would rather be a prose writer.

**N.L.:** What have been your important literary influences generally—sources of inspiration or intellectual nourishment?

**V.C.:** Two crucial factors for me are multilingualism—I believe it’s a duty of Caribbean writers to promote multilingualism, both at the literary level and at the school level. Not to pretend, for example, that the Trinidadians who speak Spanish or French or Hindi don’t exist, because it’s historically not neat. And also to engage with Hispanophone and Francophone Caribbean literature, which to my shame I’m just beginning to do. So, to have the fluidity of mind and language and knowledge of what it is possible to do in other traditions—that’s one thing.

The other, non-literary factor is listening—listening to the shaped language that people use in everyday life, particularly people who use technical terms without being aware of it. So, for example, when I go to my sister-in-law’s house for Divali tomorrow, I will expect to hear a mixed language of Sanskrit, Hindi, Trinidad dialect, and Caribbean Standard English. This is a highly technical language in terms of festival preparation. And, being technical and needing to be remembered, it’s going to fall into rhythmic and colourful phrases, and there will be explanations to the children in the house, or to people like me who are not a hundred percent in the tradition. That is another major source of poetry: careful listening.

Another example: I was sitting in the bird sanctuary in North Ronaldsay, the northernmost island in the Orkneys. It’s the main place to stay on the island. There is a long trestle table, and the woman who lives at the bird sanctuary takes things out from the deep freeze and makes unrecognizable but mysteriously tasty substances which she then serves as food to everyone in big communal meals. Next to me was a man from a team repairing the roads. As he was explaining what he did, he started falling into iambic pentameters without realizing what he was doing. I wrote these down that night. I haven’t been able to do anything with them yet, because it’s hard to place them. It might be easier to place the poetry of the everyday if I were working in theatre.

Two influences, then, would be multilingualism and not being afraid to confront the difficult authors—especially authors who go on at length, like Wil-

liam Carlos Williams or Dante. I would trace this again to the influence of hearing excerpts of the Tulsidas *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* read—the willingness to engage at length and in detail. And another thing would be listening carefully to everyday language and realizing where it's patterned or technical, and not letting that poetry be lost. If you read the *Divina Commedia*, you get the everyday language of Florence. And if you read Dante's prose you get references to Latin but also to Arabic. So he was doing exactly the same thing.

**N.L.:** I was hoping this question would provoke you to bring up Martin Carter.

**V.C.:** I thought you were going to bring Martin Carter up much earlier.

**N.L.:** At the Alice Yard event the other week, you did a powerful and deeply moving reading of Carter's poem "After One Year," which almost made me lose my composure. I've also been rereading your *CRB* review of *University of Hunger*, Carter's collected poems, and I was struck by this:

... wherever I turned, inwards in my mind or outwards to the world, the language I lived with for conceiving world and mind, no matter how imperfectly I now make use of it, grew up not so long ago in the light of Martin Carter. (*CRB* 2006, 6)

**V.C.:** I have a sense of great complexity in Carter, even when he used very simple language. I'm not sure whether it was always to do with the poem intrinsically, or whether the reader has to be saturated in the landscape. When he speaks of a red flower, or a white road, or dust—growing up here one has a physical sense of that. It's encoded in your daily experience—exactly how the red flowers will lift or hang; what scents are released by temperature or humidity. So the poems immediately situate themselves in your mind. I'm not sure I can answer this properly. I have the impression from Martin Carter's poems that it is possible to use very simple language and a few evocative details to make a poem that hangs, as it were, in the air over a complex and dark series of thoughts, a bit like a cloud hanging over a partly eroded moun-

tain. The poem is like the cloud, then, and when you focus on the cloud you must start thinking about the mountain.

**N.L.:** In his famous (or infamous) essay, T.S. Eliot suggested that, for a writer, tradition “cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour” (22). So is Carter part of the literary tradition you’ve made for yourself?

**V.C.:** I do resist the idea of making a tradition for myself. I’m trying to get rid of any sense of implied obligation and also any sense of linear time. Because, to go back to Eliot, I think writers need to be magpies, and maybe I might have a whole year in which I wouldn’t mentally refer to Martin Carter. Not that that ever has happened! But I insist on holding open the theoretical possibility that it might happen. And also I inhabit non-chronological time at the moment of writing. In the non-writing time I would balance that with scholarship, and know roughly what was written when, and who received it when and how, because the pattern of reception of literary work is as important as when it was written, I think. But when I’m actually writing I don’t want to have to ask myself: is what I’m thinking of at the moment from 5,000 years ago and India, or is it from 30 years ago and Guyana? I want things to float up with immediate urgency and necessity—just as my subconscious mind presents them to me.

## Notes

1. Author’s note on *No Traveller Returns*, Salt Publishing website.
2. See Betsy Wing’s English translation of *La Jeune née*.

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