

also nicely summarises the pedagogical possibilities offered by her contributors: “These worlds,” she writes, “presuppose a heterogeneous community in which we are all participants” (xv).

Works Cited

McKay, Nellie Y., and Kathryn Earle, eds. *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison*. New York: MLA, 1997.

Jason Haslam

H. Nigel Thomas, ed. *Why We Write: Conversations with African Canadian Poets and Novelists*. Toronto: TSAR Publications, 2006. Pp. xvii, 244. \$24.95.

I remember my first year of high school in Toronto, when I met a young man on the subway who was collecting donations for an all-black bookstore. He had a comprehensive list of authors that were underrepresented by corporate bookstores, a list divided into African American and African Canadian writers. I recognized half of the Americans and I was shocked to realize that I only vaguely recognized some of the Canadians. The young man was, incidentally, a crook. The black bookstore was a scam. This young man was exploiting a need in Toronto, the need for an all-black bookstore and a need for the exposure of African Canadian writers. He made a profit on the average person's guilt over their own complicity in these matters.

Nigel H. Thomas reminds me that these issues (over a decade later) are still, in fact, relevant. Canada still has a need for bookstores that market black writers, publishers still need to seek out new and marginalized talents, and African Canadian authors are still prolific forces in literature, despite the hardships and impediments that go along with being *different* in an audience-oriented market.

Thomas' *Why We Write: Conversations with African Canadian Poets and Novelists* is an edited collection of interviews with prodigious contemporary black writers. The book considers issues that are particular to African Canadian authors, such as ethnic labelling and the stigmatization of minority voices in the Canadian publishing industry, alongside matters of importance to writers of any denomination, like the function of writing itself or the need for reviews. Thomas presents fifteen talented writers, who range from the established and foundational authors like Austin Clarke to the younger and more experimental works of those like Wayde Compton, in his

search for the “African Canadian literary aesthetic.” In reflecting the work of this book in his “Introduction,” Thomas says that “reading the corpus of the writers whose opinions are expressed in these conversations and the corpus of many whose opinions are not, I think I have a clearer notion of what could be called an African Canadian aesthetic” (x). However, Thomas warns us that essentializing the works of African Canadians is not the agenda of this collection. Rather than define an “African Canadian aesthetic,” Thomas would posit “an ethos that readers encounter in the works of Black Canadian writer” (xi). This “ethos” relies on considerations of identity, an identity rooted in resistance of essentialism and stereotyping. Thomas reminds his audience that the “preoccupations” of African Canadians “are the preoccupations of humanity everywhere; and how we employ words comes down to individual talent, preferences, and temperament. At this level we are like writers everywhere” (xi). In this way, African Canadian writers become part of the larger literary machine, like all aspects of writing (genre, form, style, etc.), the need for a disparity of voices from different backgrounds is essentially what defines the Canadian Aesthetic, and these conversations take their place within that framework as necessary and relevant parts of a national writing community.

From the title of his book onwards, Nigel H. Thomas is concerned with issues of labelling and identity. By calling the authors interviewed “African Canadian” (without the hyphen!) Thomas has made a conscious choice to parallel the heritage of his subjects (African with Canada) as he draws a direct relationship to our neighbours in the south (African Canadian immediately links to the labelling of “African Americans” in the USA). However, not all of the writers that were interviewed agree with the label: “Ayanna Black, Lawrence Hill, and Bernadette Dyer [...] expressed discomfort with the label African Canadian” (xiv). In her interview, poet and novelist Suzette Mayr says: “I think of myself more in terms of Caribbean Canadian because African Canadian seems so far away, not that I’m not part of the African Diaspora” (173). Thomas asks Wayde Compton, an experimental poet, about his term “Halfrican” in the poem “49th Parallel Psalm,” as a word used to describe those with mixed racial backgrounds. Compton replies that “Halfrican is just a pun. It’s a wordplay that I came up with. [...] I guess I grew up having to explain who I am, and it’s a good explanation” (59). Thomas does not shy away from confronting his own labelling of these authors as “African Canadian.” In fact, he embraces the different ways that people choose to label themselves, if at all. Thomas recognizes that if his “ethos” of African Canadian writing is under the rubric of identity, then he cannot choose which identities his subjects call themselves.

If there is an “ethos” of identity in the African Canadians interviewed for this book, I do have to wonder how the similar positionality of these authors works to define it. *Why We Write* is a book for, by, and about academics. The majority of these authors have graduate degrees and teach in a post-secondary institute, in either a critical or creative capacity. Thomas himself spent eighteen years teaching American literature at Université Laval. The structure of the interview questions, which range from issues of Aristotelian functions of art to postcolonial representations of nation languages, are all aimed at creating intellectual conversations between academics. In response to a question regarding defining literatures, novelist and historicist Lawrence Hill reminds Thomas: “remember I don’t come to writing from an academic standpoint. I haven’t a PhD in English literature. I am not an English scholar” (134). This is from a man with an MA in writing and who has taught creative writing, as well. *Why We Write* is aimed at a particular audience, and the subjects chosen for the project reflect this. Thomas comments that he is “especially conscious of the fact that the playwrights, dub poets, and the many authors of children’s books, memoirs, and other nonfiction works aren’t included here” (xvi). I am not disparaging the use of writing to an academic audience, but merely suggesting that Thomas consider his choices of topic and subject before he declare an African Canadian “ethos” devoid of “the playwrights, dub poets,” (xvi) and others that did not make it into this academic exploration of black authors in Canada.

The most startling aspect of this book is the absolute *relevance* of it. The interviewees of *Why We Write* range from those that have been established for decades to those who are relatively new to the writing industry. The issues discussed are both current and remembered. Cecil Foster looks to history to understand his place in Canada and says “if we look at what we might consider to be Canadian history [...] we would see something of a dialogical struggle between the vision of the rulers and the reality of the ruled” (98). Simultaneously, Foster also makes statements about issues that are extremely current, such as the movement to establish a black school (I am specifically thinking about Toronto today, though this interview took place in 2002) when he says “for me, the setting up of separate educational institutions and calling them our version of multiculturalism is a misnomer. It’s segregation.” (109). Here, *Why We Write* demonstrates its power to reinvigorate old issues, reminding us that writing is political, and that complicity is in inaction.

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