

# COTCH: Lorraine O’Grady in Conversation with Catherine Lord

This text was constructed from conversations held on September 5, September 30, and October 1, 2019 in Manhattan. Audio transcriptions by Casting Words.

Catherine Lord: When did we meet?

Lorraine O’Grady: In 1995. I had a fellowship at the Bunting and had gone to a poetry reading by one of the fellows. Afterwards, you and I fell in together as we walked back to the subway.

CL: How did we get on to Jean Rhys?

LOG: Well, I must have asked where you were from.

CL: And I said Dominica. [Laughter]

LOG: So of course, I had to mention Jean Rhys. I was shocked because you were the first person I had ever met from Dominica, white or black. And you were shocked that I’d been reading Rhys.

CL: It’s not common. I always have to explain who she is, unless I’m talking to somebody who does Caribbean studies or who knows women novelists.

LOG: But the most interesting thing wasn’t that we both knew the work or liked the work—it was the *intensity* of our relationship to the work.

CL: That’s what I want to talk about.

LOG: Over the years, I’ve become more curious about *your* intensity. I can’t say I knew of Jean Rhys’ existence before 1992. I only stumbled on her because I’d been reading the black British cultural theorists, where her name comes up a lot. But now I realize that I don’t know how *you* found her, or in fact much at all about your life in Dominica. Your parents were both American?

CL: My father was American and my mother is Barbadian. Her father, who was born in Montserrat, had worked his way up from bank boy to manager at the Royal Bank of Canada. He was posted to Dominica after World War II. My father, who was probably the only guy who didn’t take advantage of the GI bill and go to college in the U.S., decided that he would move instead to an extremely poor, remote island with a miniscule white population. When I was born there were 142 white people and about 50,000 blacks. Anyway, my father decided that he would make a business cutting down tropical hardwood and selling it, which was a feckless idea

in an island without a road system or an airport or a harbor. He saw my mother at a party and announced he would marry her because she was Dominican, even though she was Barbadian, and that is a very different thing. People say now that the marriage was doomed from the start.

LOG: So you were born in Dominica, and you went to school there until they sent you to Barbados for boarding school?

CL: When I was nine. The same school where my mother had been head girl. Before that I had attended a kindergarten run by Baptist missionaries and the same convent school that Jean Rhys attended. And then I was homeschooled by my mother. We decamped to Iowa when I was 13 because my father had become a raging alcoholic.

LOG: So you wouldn’t have heard about Jean Rhys in Dominica. The kind of books she wrote wouldn’t have been read even by older high school students.

CL: I doubt they even were being sold in Dominica. My mother didn’t know of Rhys. Her references were Kipling, Tennyson, Scott, and that lot.

LOG: The islands were in such a time warp. My father had a cousin named Lucien Ivanhoe!

CL: I didn’t discover Jean Rhys until the late 1960s. I had dropped out of Radcliffe after my sophomore year and was knocking about the U.K. and Europe, lost, drifting. I discovered those early novels—*After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, *Voyage in the Dark*, *Quartet*, *Good Morning*, *Midnight*—in London. There was no biography yet. These are novels about a woman floundering in gray, cold, rainy, miserable, snowy, grimy urban settings, but every now and then there’s a dazzle of flamboyant trees and frangipane and coralita...

LOG: [Laughs]

CL: ...but Rhys never names Dominica. I knew where she was born and raised from the jacket blurbs. In my theory, she hid Dominica to protect it. At one point, she locates it by longitude and latitude. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she moves Dominica to Jamaica.

LOG: But she does talk about her island in *Voyage in the Dark*. The others are European novels, I would say.

CL: She doesn’t actually *name* Dominica in *Voyage*, and the European novels are about keeping her head above water. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the novel where she upends the whole colonial machine that underpins *Jane Eyre* by having Bertha, the Creole wife, torch the big house in England, came out in 1966, almost thirty years after the four early novels. The misogyny and racism in Bronte’s portrait of the mad Creole wife had grated on Rhys since she had first read *Jane Eyre* at 16. But she couldn’t possibly have written *Sargasso Sea* without working through being an outsider in Europe, without working through memories of Dominica, and without going back to Dominica in the 1930s. I didn’t come upon *Wide Sargasso Sea*, though, until the 1970s.

LOG: How much by her have you read? Have you read the short stories? Have you read the autobiography, *Smile Please*?

CL: And *Tigers are Better Looking*.

LOG: She tells more Dominica stories in those books, for sure.

CL: But she couldn’t have talked directly about that material in the early novels. It would have been impossible where and when she was writing—Paris and London in the late 1920s and in the 1930s.

LOG: When did you start going back regularly to Dominica?

CL: In the ’90s.

LOG: Why?

CL: I went back with Kim, now my wife, then a new girlfriend who wanted to understand where I was from.

LOG: Did you have a relationship to a particular house?

CL: Our house was no longer there. There are hurricanes in Dominica. But we didn’t live in an estate house. My family didn’t have money.

LOG: Jean came from older money. It didn’t necessarily mean you had a lot of cash on your hands but you still had traditions and the furniture and

the silverware. It’s the way the South used to be.

Do you have a birth certificate that says you were born there? With the old birth certificates, it’s all in the little lines. What your father did, what your mother did, what race you were, where you lived, all the nasty stuff.

CL: My birth certificate says that I was legitimate, white, and that my father was a carpenter.

LOG: Mine says we were colored, that my father was a waiter, none of which seemed to describe us at all. One of the general difficulties I’d been having, in terms of how to present myself to the world, was that in 1992, when I first read Rhys, I had only been living a “black” life for about 12 years.

CL: [laughs] Right.

LOG: You understand, until I entered the art world, I’d been basically living as if I were “post-black.” I’m 84, so I’ve lived my life half as...

CL: ...as post-black, and half as black.

LOG: And now as post-post-black. In 1995, when I went to the Bunting, I came up against a phenomenon I hadn’t realized before. It happened because I’d taken a faculty residency in a Radcliffe dorm to make ends meet, and this required eating dinner there, I guess as a kind of mentoring. The first night I went to the dining room, I noticed several black tables, all full, and there I was, a middle-aged woman, not wanting to impose. I looked around and saw a young woman sitting by herself. I’d seen her before on campus, mostly with Asians, Asian guys. I asked why she wasn’t sitting at one of the black tables. She said, “I didn’t come to Harvard to live the way I was living in New Orleans.” She asked me what I’d been teaching at SVA, and I spoke about having just taught Catullus for the first time, I thought I had to explain, so I described his work in quite a simplified way. Then she corrected me. This girl knew her Augustinian literature, you know?

She was the first person to alert me to the fact that there were actually three black

tables at Harvard. At one table were the Africans, at another the Caribbeans, and at the third were the African Americans. The unspoken dicta were clear: Africans are superior, Caribbeans are very smart, and the African Americans feel whatever they feel.

It only took a few meals with the African Americans to learn that they were furious. After all, their parents’ generation had fought almost to the death for the changes the outsiders were now taking advantage of. It was hard not to empathize. The Caribbean table was a mixed bag, English-speaking and French-speaking.

CL: Creole?

LOG: No, French-speaking blacks, many of whose parents had gone to the Sorbonne or Sciences Po or wherever. As you and I know, it could be hard getting to Harvard if you didn’t have something in your background that already let you imagine being there. The Caribbeans didn’t feel snobbish to me, but the African American kids thought they were.

After the Bunting year, I began to realize that it was difficult, even in the New York art world, to mention a connection to the Caribbean without having it seem as if you were somehow claiming superiority. But what if those are the problems you are dealing with? Being the child of British colonials is sometimes not a joke. Still, talking about being an immigrant kid or about having parents from Jamaica, from whatever class, can be read as divisive, as indirectly putting down African Americans and not simply describing difference.

CL: This is in the New York art world?

LOG: Surprisingly yes, and among both blacks and progressive whites.

CL: When you were describing yourself, would you say that you were Caribbean or Jamaican? There’s a difference.

LOG: So many differences! My oldest granddaughter once asked me how I refer to myself. I said it depends on the context. If I’m speaking about a larger, diasporic condition, I will often say Caribbean. If I’m talking about a specific thing, I’ll say Jamaican. But in the American context,

I always just use the word “black.” In the future, though, if I am theorizing myself, I might call myself “double-diasporan,” which is a neologism that still has to be invented because “diasporic” doesn’t refer to persons.

Caryl Phillips, in *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, Miss Ann, one of her parents’ servants, say that the Jean character “catch” between white and colored. It read to me like “cotch” and “cotch” is a word I grew up with. It means being in a precarious position.

CL: Did your parents say “cotch”?

LOG: Not so much my parents, but my parent’s siblings—my mother’s siblings, not my father’s. My mother and father came from very different social classes in Jamaica. As we know, none of the islands ever had much more than a three percent white presence. That includes Jamaica, which had the largest white presence, so it doesn’t surprise me that a tiny little fleabag island would have only 124 white people.

CL: Please, 142! [Laughter.]

LOG: One result of French-speaking, English-speaking, and Spanish-speaking slavery in the islands was that there were different flavors. But even the worst of them, the British, seems to have been milder in its effect than slavery in the U.S. Not because the British were “kinder” than the Americans but because of, among other things, the difference that an un-policeable majority can have for psychic integrity. African cultural retention was greater in the Caribbean than here, where blacks didn’t have the same density. There were two places in the U.S. where the situation was somewhat similar to the Caribbean: New Orleans and South Carolina. Even today, some of the purest Africanisms seem located in those places.

Another difference from slavery in the U.S., was that, because there were so few whites in the Caribbean, things had to be run by an intermediary class of mulattoes that had lower-level but still real power. One result, sadly, was that this intermediate class bought deeply into

narratives of European superiority so as to consolidate their own position. And of course, the colonizers manipulated those narratives to make the mulattoes identify ever more closely with those above them.

My father’s family was at the top of that pyramid for a long time. My great-grandfather was the manager of Gregory Park Estate, the third largest plantation on the island.

CL: That’s a huge job.

LOG: Huge. He also had six sets of fraternal twin daughters, if you can believe that! And he married all of them off nicely. The only one of the twelve who did not get married was my father’s mother, who somehow formed a liaison with a guy who’d been put under house arrest.

CL: Wait a minute. What year are we, and what was he under house arrest for?

LOG: My father was born in 1898, so a few years before that I think. [Laughs] It’s the same old story—the Irish. The colonies were always used as places to get troublemakers out of the way.

CL: They were penal colonies and dumping grounds for slacker sons.

LOG: Papa told us his father was sent to Jamaica because he’d been a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the precursor to the IRA. There’s been resistance to the British as long as the British have been in Ireland. He made this liaison, but he probably never planned to stay in Jamaica. As soon as the house arrest was up, he went back to fight the revolution. He left the children in psychological disarray, to put it mildly. Papa had been raised with his fancy cousins, the DeSouzas, the children of his mother’s twin sister, but he knew that he was not going to inherit anything, so he lied about his age and volunteered for the army.

CL: To the British West Indian Regiment?

LOG: Yes, The British West Indian Regiment, which by law was officered by whites. Non-commissioned officers, were, by custom, white as well. Because Evelyn, my father (they called him Jim),

was smart and well-educated— he’d been schooled privately with his cousins— he went in at 16 as a corporal. He ended as an adjutant sergeant four years later. In the entire BWI Regiment, from all the islands, there were barely a handful of black and brown sergeants.

His favorite cousin, Puckoo (real name, Gladstone DeSouza), the one he was closest to in age, had stayed home, apprenticed in his father’s horse-trading business, and later became one of Jamaica’s most famous sportsmen. Puckoo trained horses and did all the boxing promotions on the island. He also built the race-course, Kingston Stadium. So when my father comes to America, what does he do? He *gambles* on the horses.

CL: So your father was a big man in Jamaica.

LOG: He was not a big man.

CL: OK, he was not a big man, but he was connected to the big men.

LOG: When Independence came, one of his cousins became an ambassador and his daughter, who I think was my age, became his official hostess. If my father had been a DeSouza or a Rousseau instead of an O’Grady, my life might have been totally different.

My mother came to the U.S. by a whole other route. She wanted to go to university to study math.

CL: How did she know to go? How did she land in Boston?

LOG: My mother used to joke that her family would have worked for my father’s family. She came from a very small town, Old Harbour—5,000 people then, 5,000 people now. Her father’s father was a carpenter who’d emigrated from Scotland, married a Jamaican woman and trained her father to be a carpenter and builder.

In the colonies in my mother’s day, they did the British school-leaving exams. She passed almost at the top. I think she was the second-ranking student on the island, competing with the white planters’ sons. She knew she was never going to be able

to go to Oxford or Cambridge. But her brother Fred was living in New York. He was about 16 years older than she was, the son of her father’s first wife. First he’d gone to England, trained as an engineer and worked there for several years. He was very fair, you know?—perhaps because of the Scottish grandfather. He was living a pretty integrated life, he thought. Then, one day, Fred was walking down the street in London and someone called out to him. It was a guy he knew from Jamaica. Fred was so happy to see him, he brought the fellow to his pub, and everyone was shocked. It was the first time they’d realized that Fred might be black.

CL: Was he trying to pass?

LOG: He wasn’t. He just thought they all liked him. They might laugh at his Jamaican accent, but whatever.

When he found out where he really stood, he left London—that was about 1907— and went to New York, where he figured his education would give him certain advantages. And here’s the crazy part. Fred became one of the guys that founded the early version of the numbers game in Harlem. This had resulted in eight-bedroom apartments in Riverside Heights, five limos and chauffeurs, and everything to go with it. When my mother asked Fred if he would sponsor her visa to the U.S. and help her go to a university, he said yes.

So, in 1917, she leaves Jamaica for Ellis Island on the SS Hamburg. Lena is 19 and she’s gorgeous. Fred is 35 and enamored. Not sexually, but he’s so proud of the sister he last knew when she was a toddler. He also has a girlfriend who never expected to deal with anything like this. So, between one thing and the other, my mother soon has to leave the eight-bedroom apartment and go to Boston, where she knows girls from home who are part of the small cadre of pretty, well-mannered black girls working as ladies’ maids on Beacon Hill, the best job available to them at that time. Lena quickly joins them. At least she doesn’t have to cook or clean!

CL: So your mother had a place to land. Did she bring others to Boston?

LOG: Her sister comes, and her best friend from school.

It’s the early 20s now, when there’s been a lot of immigration from the British Empire. There’s even a cricket league with 18 teams in New England and Canada. My Aunt Gladys (my mother’s sister) is married to one of the greatest cricketers to play the game in this country—Thomas Norman, originally from Montserrat, now bowls for West India Cricket club in Boston. One Sunday my mother goes to see her brother-in-law bowl. My father, who’s mustered out in Kingston after coming back from Europe and has since made his way to Boston where his sister and some schoolmates live, goes to see the great Tom Norman. My mother and father meet at the tea table of the cricket match. close your eyes and you might think they are still in Jamaica. The games are the same, the accents are the same....

Fast forward to the early 1970s, I’m in Chicago. I’ve split with my husband, and I’m dating a guy who’s doing a PhD in English at UC after being a star baseball pitcher in college. He’s white, but now he’s pitching with a black semipro team and his linguistics project is a test on African retentions that he’s developed for his teammates. He brings the test to the field and I ask if I can take it too. I score higher than any of the guys on the team.

I’m as shocked as my boyfriend is. It’s hard to believe the Caribbean lives in me so unconsciously.

CL: Accent is such a thing in the colonies, as it obviously is in England. When she got there, Rhys was told she spoke like a Hottentot. She got fired from trying to be an actor in the UK because of her heavy Dominican accent. Still, when I listened to the only known recording of her voice from the ’70s, I couldn’t hear the Dominican.

LOG: But she was only 16 when she left. By the time that recording was made she’d lived 70 years in France and England. I don’t think she knew any other West Indians, anybody that would help reinforce her accent.

CL: True. She lived in a white world.

LOG: Yet you and I are both connected to her so deeply.

CL: But as artists, not scholars.

LOG: Do you remember how you felt when you first read her books?

CL: The fragments in the early novels were the only descriptions I’d ever read by somebody who loved Dominica, who was passionately attached to the place but at the same time hid it in plain sight because she was trying to survive in a European world and because she didn’t want Dominica to be destroyed by the European world.

I felt relieved that she hated the English so much. [Laughs.]

LOG: So do I.

CL: I was astonished to hear you say the Caribbean was milder than America in terms of slavery. I spent a long time in Dominica and London looking through and photographing details in the registries of slaves. The records are disgusting. The English were vicious.

LOG: Slavery is horrible. Ownership of human beings is horrible, but in addition to the differences that being in the overwhelming majority makes to being able to remember who and what one is, there are differences, it seems to me, between the chattel slavery of the U.S. and other kinds. In chattel slavery, you might as well just be a number and not even have a name. It’s industrialized slavery. I think the production of cotton in the South was a lot more difficult than the production of cane in the Caribbean.

CL: Oh, that would be a hard call. Cane has to be cut exactly at the right moment and then processed within 24 hours. It takes almost military organization, massive numbers of people, fuel, fire, and equipment.

LOG You’re right. “Difficult” wasn’t the right word. By “industrialized,” I meant assembly-line repetitive, backbreaking work, but in fields.

CL: Cotton I don’t really know about, seeing that I come from a fleabag island.



LOG: I’m so sorry I used that word. I meant it as an insider joke. You know, Cuba and Jamaica at one end and everywhere else, well.

CL: I take it, and make it, as an insider joke. Dominica is tiny and Dominica is poor. It’s not remotely as important as Jamaica. It never had as many slaves as Jamaica. Jamaica had half a million slaves at its plantation height, and Dominica’s max was about 20,000. Nonetheless, I think you are romanticizing Caribbean slavery as milder than American. Going through every page of every slave registry in the archives in Dominica disabused me of my illusions on that score.

Where was I going? I think I was trying to talk about coming from a place that is never described, except with jokes and contempt and as a savage, backward, undeveloped, rainy, hostile place inhabited by cannibals.

LOG: Is it something beyond nostalgia that you feel for Dominica? Even now, when I say I’m from Boston, I can only think how important the first eight years of my life were. I always say Boston is what I am, New York is where I live and work. Like it or not, Boston is in me. Do you feel that way about Dominica?

CL: Of course.

LOG: When you were in Barbados, how did they treat you?

CL: Like I came from a savage, backward, undeveloped, rainy, hostile place inhabited by cannibals. It was clear that I should ditch my Dominica accent and acquire a British accent as soon as possible.

LOG: Did you do it successfully?

CL: Yes. Then we moved to Iowa. Can you imagine speaking the Queen’s English in Iowa in 1961 and coming from a place that nobody has ever heard of and that they don’t believe exists?

LOG: Why Iowa?

CL: My father’s family came from Iowa. His mother rescued him and his Caribbean family after his drunken business failure in Dominica. I was illegible in Iowa. People would say to me things like—and this

happened at Radcliffe, too, when I went there—“Where are you from?” “Dominica.” “Where is that?” “Oh, you mean the Dominican Republic?” [Laughter.] Then they would say things like, “But you don’t look black.” They would look at my arm and then my face to see if they could catch me passing.

LOG: You must identify with how Rhys felt when she went to England.

CL: I do. It’s excruciating not to be able to make the muscles of your face work effortlessly in the correct cultural way.

LOG: I went to kindergarten speaking with an accent. They laughed. Five years old, right? I didn’t even know I had an accent. I got rid of it very fast. Then, I got a heavy Boston accent. I went to camp. They laughed at me there. [Laughter.] I’m sure my accent has landed someplace that is not quite identifiable, but that’s what happened.

CL: We’ve strayed. What did you recognize in Rhys when you first read her? You’d already read Maya Deren, right? And Zora Neale Hurston?

LOG: I knew Hurston as a novelist, not as a folklorist. I’d read Deren’s *The Divine Horseman: Living Gods of Haiti* closely from 1978–1982. But it was only in 2015, when I had to write a short catalog essay for the installation of *Rivers, First Draft* that I learned that Deren, after being the editorial assistant of several successful writers, met Katherine Dunham in 1941 and became her personal secretary and the publicist for her dance troupe. I thought, only in America could I have learned about Vodou from a white woman who’d learned about it from a black woman. [Laughter.]

You know who Katherine Dunham was, right?

CL: I do.

LOG: She was very big in the ’40s and ’50s. She was a choreographer and dancer and an international beauty, She’d also worked on a master’s degree in anthropology at the University of Chicago and, for her research, had gone to Haiti. Dunham was an African American woman

who became an expert in Caribbean dance. She brought Deren into that world. Maya eventually got a Guggenheim to film religious dance in Haiti and, in the course of studying the ritual, became a Vodou adept. After several trips, she came back and wrote *Divine Horsemen*. She’d become more interested in the philosophy and spirituality of Vodou than in just dance and possession and had set the film aside to write. She died before the film was edited, and her husband, who’d been the cameraman, finished it.

It was both her book *Divine Horsemen* and her film *Meshes of the Afternoon* that I thought about for almost five years. But without realizing it, I’d been obsessed with one of the primary motifs of Vodou since the mid-60s. In my dreams and in things I would try to write, I seemed always to be dealing with the “dual soul,” represented by two sisters: one is assigned good and the other is assigned evil. That’s what I was always dealing with, with my sister Devonia, in a motif that was a variation on the Vodou Marassa, or Divine Twins.

CL: When did Devonia die?

LOG: In 1961. But in 1978, when I encountered another Vodou motif in Deren’s book, the Crossroad, the pathway that enables transformation, I finally found the motif for reconciling the Dual Soul. There’s a scene in *Meshes of the Afternoon* where she walks down a road and you see a stairway hitting the road and making a crossroad, which stayed with me. In 1982, when I was looking for a location in Central Park and saw a hill hitting a stream in The Loch, I knew I had *Rivers, First Draft* on every level, metaphysical and real. The narrative structure I took from Marinetti. I’d been carrying those wonderful pictures of Marinetti’s three-ring-circus events in my mind as well.

CL: Those I’ve never seen.

LOG: The drawings where everybody is on a different part of the stage doing their different things ... I’d been teaching the Futurists, the Dadas and the Surrealists, but it was the Futurists who

most interested me. Marinetti was much more advanced in terms of performance and techniques to change culture than the others were. *Rivers* adapted his performance ideas to tell a story about a woman in her forties claiming her artistic identity. She’s been confused by her strange background, by not fitting in anywhere, by having a crazy family, by being too cute for her own good. The central action happens after the Woman in Red leaves the Debauchees she’s been hanging out with. On the bank of the stream, there’s a mother figure in a white kitchen....

CL: ...doing things with white objects, coconuts everywhere.

LOG: The Woman in Red finally separates herself from the black Caribbean woman in the white kitchen, from the Nantucket memorial statue which represents New England, unhooks herself from the Debauchees....

CL: ...and from the male African American artists who are doing various creative things...

LOG: ...but they don’t want her around because she’s a woman. She sees a white stove beside the stream and paints the stove red, *her* color. It’s not just that she’s separated from these various cultures or divided from her sister but that she’s divided from all these parts of herself. After she paints the stove red, she can join with the teenager in magenta and the little girl in a pink sash in this three-ring circus. Then they help each other. The stream in Central Park was [laughs] filled with broken glass all the way to the end. We had these jelly shoes, you know? We helped each other down the stream to the archway at the end. And when she and the two others exit through it, the Woman in Red can now become *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*.

It’s a prequel, in other words.

CL: The Woman in Red makes herself a proper outfit—a gown of used white debutante gloves and a whip.

LOG: The divisions and the inability to express my talent had lasted a long time. It felt very much like what Jean Rhys

went through. I never believed Rhys’ self-presentation for one minute. I never believed that she was passive. I always thought she was as aggressive as fuck, the way she condescended to every man and every woman that she met. I think some people come to waywardness, a sociopathology or a general rejection of almost everything around them, because they sense that they are smarter. [Laughter.] They can see through the rules. Everything that Rhys rejected in her parents’ way of doing things was the product of a mind that always knew it was superior. She couldn’t express that, so she had to be passive.

CL: Or pretend that she was passive.

LOG: What was I doing all that time?

CL: I think you were preparing.

LOG: I must have been. I was trying to find a way to become myself. I think that was one of the things that performance did for me. I didn’t have to deal with thousands of years of painting history or hundreds of years of literary history. I could create my own story or my own way of doing it. I don’t know that I would ever become who I am if I hadn’t found performance. I think that, in some ways, my finding Marinetti was like Rhys finding Ford Madox Ford. Like her finding modernism, my finding performance enabled me. Her life was so untrue to itself for so long, and so was mine. At 40, I was a rock-and-roll writer and a rock-and-roll groupie. What the fuck was that about?

CL: Indeed. Wait, I thought you’d got married before that?

LOG: Yeah. In 1965, three months after arriving at the Iowa Writers Workshop in the Vietnam era, I married a filmmaker who was hiding out from the draft. The marriage lasted just six years, But it’s lovely because, over 50 years later, we’re still best friends. And after we broke up, I met a guy I really liked. He was one of the earliest rock writers and publicists. He’d introduced David Bowie to America and when he joined Columbia in 1973, he stopped them from ditching Bruce Springsteen.

CL: Thank you, boyfriend of Lorraine.

LOG: I was trying to fit into his life by writing rock criticism. I wasn’t in love with him, and he wasn’t in love with me, but we were fine, you know what I mean? And then he met somebody. That was the point when I finally said to myself, “OK, Lorraine, you’ve got to *do* something.”

I was lucky. One of the groomsmen in my wedding in Iowa was a poet who later taught at SVA. When I moved to New York, we’d hung out together. At almost the precise moment I was splitting from my boyfriend, the poet called to say his girlfriend had broken up with him and he couldn’t concentrate on anything. Would I take one of his classes? Of course I said yes. It was cataclysmic. This was 1975, and the worldview that teaching at SVA opened up changed everything. In 1977, I made *Cutting out The New York Times*, my first artwork. Before I knew it, I was in the art world and I’ve never looked back.

CL: I’m still thinking about *Rivers*. You had been going to propose it to Judson, and then you didn’t.

LOG: That’s a whole other story about the way life can put up obstacles that almost crush you. I’d just come off a tremendously productive period. In 1982, I did *Rivers*. In 1983, I did *The Black and White Show* and *Art Is....* Then I got a call from the building in Brookline where my mother lived to say that she was behaving in a rather strange way.

CL: She would be diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, right?

LOG: Yes. Just as things were about to start happening, all I could do for five years was travel back and forth between New York and Boston.

Look at this sunset. I love sunsets in New York.

Maybe you can give me some advice, but maybe I’ve already made my decision. [Laughs.] I’ve had to think about this business of not foregrounding that I’m Caribbean. Yet in some ways, the Caribbean is going to be foregrounded in the Brooklyn exhibition.

CL: Have you ever been to the Caribbean?

LOG: No. After my first, teenage marriage broke up, my parents wanted to send me there to husband hunt. I said, “No, thank you.”

Do you think a Caribbean connection is crazy?

CL: No.

LOG: It’s at the heart of the work. It’s at the heart of my theorizing now.

CL: It weaves in and out of your work. It even weaves in and out of the Baudelaire stuff. Jeanne Duval is from Haiti.

LOG: There are a lot of experiences that you have— and you may have had this, too— that are so different it feels like only you have gone through them.

CL: I know. Somehow I landed at Radcliffe without much idea of what Harvard stood for, and without informed help from my family or school. Can you imagine going from Dominica to Harvard in four years? Sexism, misogyny, entitlement, the embodiment of the canon—the Caribbean didn’t exist at Harvard in the 1960s, except as a place from which to scrape artifacts or collect bugs. There was no reflection of my world at Harvard. I had to leave Harvard to encounter Rhys. That’s another reason Jean Rhys has haunted me. I could see myself represented in a profound, paradoxical, tenacious way.

LOG: In the end you claim something, popular or not, because it is what you are.

CL: We both know that takes a very long time.

LOG: I always understood why Rhys was able to be kept by men. She used them. There is absolutely nothing about her life that I don’t understand. I drifted a while myself. Diana Athill put her finger on something. I don’t think she understood the why, but she did understand the *what*: that it’s so difficult. There’s a passage in *Stet* where Athill says, “She ran away, she dodged, she lay low, but her gift was always there.... She said about her gift: ‘I hate it, for making me good at this one thing which is so difficult.’” A life that’s so different and a mentality that’s so

different makes it possible to lop off whole areas of experience and competence in order to be able to do the difficult thing.

CL: Yes.

LOG: The only thing Rhys really had was her gift, and this I understand. I’ve always felt my gift is about the only thing I really have. I’m not going to say that I’m a great artist, but I think I’m an original one. Everybody’s caught up now with the *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* trilogy, but that wasn’t the heart of my work. The heart of it is something much more difficult. But the *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Project* did represent me at that moment. I don’t know if it became more acute just because of *how* I added race to the mix.

CL: In a lot of ways *Rivers* seems to be about putting not only race into the mix but also different classes, different disciplines, different worlds.

LOG: *Rivers* was a literal working out of those concerns. The debauchees that I was disentangling myself from I’d actually disentangled myself from seven years earlier, when I got out of the rock world. And the business of pulling the various parts of myself together. I’d done that in a Jungian analysis two years earlier, in 1980.

But I never found a role model for what I was doing. I don’t think Jean did either.

CL: I think Jean carried the model in her own head and that she had a rare kind of memory. There’s a passage in *Stet* where Athill describes reading a galley to Jean. On about page three Jean asks her to go back to the first page and delete a comma in the second paragraph to make two sentences...

LOG: [Laughs.] She knew what she knew, but she didn’t know what she didn’t know. Do you know what I mean?

CL: Maybe that’s a definition of incompetence. Diana says nobody who hadn’t met her could understand how inept at living she was.

LOG: Jean thought that she was living a life that no one else in the world had ever lived. I thought the same. There may have been others like me out there, but I didn’t search for them because I was sure

I’d never find them. Information was so limited, we couldn’t imagine others, so we never searched for them.

These days, I find many more people that I’m like than I once did, but I still find myself feeling my difference from them is more important, that I may be on to something that they aren’t, and that’s what I should follow. I cannot imagine a more brilliant artist than Toni Morrison, but that’s not where I’m going, and I don’t regret that for one minute. I think that’s where Jean was, always. No matter how good it was, she could do something differently. She carried the desire to write a life for Bertha from the time she first met her at 16, for 70 more years. She carried the dream with her until she knew she could accomplish it. My God, the courage it needed to take on a genius like Charlotte Brontë!

I often find myself in Jean in failure. It’s amazing that I have captured as many of my possibilities as I have, but I had many more that I should have captured.

CL: I find myself in Jean in wasting time one way or another, moving through people one way or another, being passive in relation to people who were interested in me one way or another, drinking way too much, bouncing gently and in a muffled way off the walls, being generally self-destructive.

LOG: Our intensity about Jean Rhys can only be accounted for by deep psychological reflections of ourselves in her.

CL: We intersect there. I’m interested in what you said about the sociopathic edge. There’s an analytic side to whatever you would call the socio-pathic personality. It’s not about responding emotively. It’s the doubling thing, reading both sides of the situation dispassionately.

LOG: What you’re saying is present in an internal doubling.

I think Caryl Phillips gets this a bit better than Athill—like when he has Miss Ann say, “It look like Miss Gwendolen catch somewhere between coloured and white.” And when Mother Mount Calvary says to

her, “Are you trying deliberately to sound like a Negress?” and she’s not. Rhys had internalized both black and white. That makes you, at some level, without race.

This doubling makes life difficult. It also makes one feel superior, because one contains everything and can see everything. She rejected both sides equally. She may have been anti-negro, but she was also anti-white. She was anti-everything except herself. That’s what I mean by sociopathic. I don’t know that I’m that. But I wonder.

CL: One of the ways my intelligence played out when I was a kid was that I was SO bored. I could not understand how adults could talk about nothing for so long. I could not sit still. Now they would give me drugs for hyperactivity. My mind would be racing, making up stories, listening to adult drivel. I was always being told to stop fidgeting, to be respectful, to stand when grownups entered the room, that sort of thing.

LOG: The most telling moment, at least in the Caryl Phillips’ account of Rhys’ life, is when Jean doesn’t behave that way. She goes upstairs, gets into bed, and reads a book. I wish I’d been that independent. She got that from her father.

CL: Her father was a masculine model of how to be intellectual. One of the heartbreaking things in her life was that after the war she had to sell all her books. And then she lands in Devon with mushrooms growing on the walls, mice running around, and one room that’s warm enough to write in.

That kind of house is also her return to Dominica ruins—planks covered with tarpaper and holes in the roof. It interests me that she recreated that in Devon and made friends with, of all people, the rector. [Laughs.]

LOG: One thing I find interesting is that Jean could ingratiate herself to be taken care of. That was one of her skills.

CL: Up to a point, and then she would get fed up or take something as being a slight against her or her island or her life or get drunk and or turn abusive. She beat up

her husbands. She was accused of being a witch. She was sent to Holloway Prison at one point. When I read Carol Angier’s biography I was shocked by the mess she ended up in. I was shocked by how nasty she could be as an old lady.

LOG: Yeah, can you imagine? There was always, I felt, something rather bizarre in the fact that each of her husbands seemed to go to prison because they were trying to satisfy her in some way.

CL: They try to make money by some shady deal or another, trading currency or selling Russian sabers. In my jaded view, it’s exactly this sort of white carpetbagger who would end up in Dominica and whom Rhys would have known when she was younger. [Laughter]

LOG: Did you experience Dominica the way Jean describes it or the way she experienced it? I would imagine that if your mother came from Barbados and your father came from America that the relationship between the two of them might have been somewhat similar to Jean’s parents’ relationship.

CL: [Pause.] I never thought of it that way.

LOG: I would imagine that both of those men had to hang on to their women in order to be able to keep afloat in the place where they were aliens, but also they might never be able to accommodate to that dependence.

CL: My father wanted into Dominica, and out of America. My mother wanted out of Dominica, but would have preferred England.

LOG: Were your parents racist?

CL: More so my mother, and certainly her father. Not to excuse them, but it was the Caribbean in the 1950s. When my father first came to Dominica he wrote home, exultantly, that there was no color bar. Of course, he didn’t see it at first.

LOG: In Caryl Phillips’ version of Jean’s life, her mother despises Francine, one of the house servants. The politeness her mother would feign when she handed Francine a glass of lemonade registered to Jean as contempt. [Laughs] Jean was

very aware that her mother did not like the black people. On the other hand, Jean herself seemed to like only as much of them as she liked of white people, which is to say she didn’t like the whole package, she only liked parts. She certainly loved Francine’s imagination because it was freer than hers.

The experiences that Rhys had, given the extraordinarily small numbers of white people ... there would be no way to not know others in certain ways. That might mean she would not feel riven between the two, but might have felt comfortable with what she felt were differences between them. I don’t know that Jean ever really had the usual degree of racism. She seemed to feel equally with everybody.

CL: Meaning equally superior to everybody?

LOG: Exactly.

CL: She also felt betrayed. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she has the character Tia turn on her....

LOG: And in Phillips’ version, Jean feels that with Francine. After Francine left there was another girl, perhaps somebody who had gone to school with her. That girl pretended to be her friend for a while, and then didn’t have to bother pretending anymore, and so she didn’t. They call her a white cockroach. She doesn’t tell her father.

I guess I’m asking whether or not you feel there are parts of Jean’s life that you identify with. You’ve spoken about accent.

CL: I identify with parts of her life where she’s taunted for being white. I was the only white student in that convent school.

LOG: Really?

CL: Yeah.

LOG: Who were the other girls?

CL: Mostly girls from the upper middle class black and colored families in Dominica.

LOG: How did most of them look?

CL: What do you mean? In terms of skin color?



LOG: Whatever.

CL: Black-black to light skinned. In Dominica a lot of relationships had to do with money and class. If you were a light-skinned black and you had money you socialized with the whites, but it was always the same families.

LOG: How did your family fit in?

CL: They didn’t.

LOG: Would your mother, herself, without an American husband, have been able to fit in?

CL: Mm-hmm. I have a fantasy that she probably would have married Peter Dupigny. Light-skinned guy. Blue eyes. Drop-dead handsome. [Laughter.]

LOG: It surprised me to hear you say once that you thought of yourself as a spy in a house of white people. I’m trying to figure out what that means to you.

CL: It sounds naïve and perhaps self-serving, but I’ve always been shocked by the things white people say to white people.

LOG: How do they sound? Do they sound stupid? Do they sound venal?

CL: They sound venal. They sound corrupt. They sound corroded by hate. I find that truer in the U.S. than in the Caribbean. You can’t be a white racist in the Caribbean the same way that you can up here.

LOG: Caryl Phillips has Rhys’ father complain about the East Indians who have bought houses in Dominica. He says, “They don’t understand that black people do not appreciate being treated with disdain.”

CL: One of my formative moments in Dominica was after I had been sent to play with the white governor’s white daughters. They used the word “nigger.” My father came to pick me up and I parroted this back. He yanked the car to the side on the road to Canefield, on the side of the road that drops to the sea, a narrow road, and said, “You will never say that word again. I don’t care who says it here. Never again. Do you understand me?” I said, “But, she’s the governor’s daughter.” He insisted: “Only white trash use that word.”

LOG: I don’t know where this fits, but I’ve become kind of obsessed with the whole Meghan Markle story. The biggest part of my obsession is seeing how the white tabloids and the people who read them—some of them very well educated and probably leading quite successful professional lives—unleash their racism. What must it have been like in the colonies when those people were actually in charge? That doesn’t quite square with what you’re talking about, which is at least superficial respect paid.

CL: Superficial respect doesn’t run through all of Dominica.

LOG: How did you experience the difference between Dominica and Barbados?

CL: Barbados was flat and dry and full of sugarcane. Barbados called itself “Little England.” No irony. I would be sent to visit my rich American grandfather who had built a house on the beach.

LOG: What was going on? Your whole family was uprooting itself to come to the West Indies?

CL: Barbados was jet-setty in the ’50s. My paternal grandfather lived there in the winter, but America was his home, as it was for my father. Not me. When we got to America, I had to deal with the accent, catch up on comic books, and figure out television.

LOG: You didn’t understand television?

CL: Dominica didn’t have television.

LOG: Wow.

CL: I grew up without electricity.

LOG: Jean Rhys was there and she had electricity.

CL: She couldn’t have. Electricity didn’t get to Roseau until the 1920s.

LOG: OK.

CL: Anyway, I could not understand that the families these American kids were talking about were fictions coming out of a box. It took me a while to catch on the fact that the Van Dyke family lived on television.

LOG: What year was this?

CL: 1961.

LOG: What on earth? TV started in the ’40s.

CL: It was an eccentric family.

LOG: They were snobbish.

CL: Not my father.

LOG: Television became big right after the war.

CL: He wasn’t there.

LOG: Let’s just get to the nitty-gritty here. How do you become Catherine? How do you become a lesbian, intellectual, writer, artist? How did you become yourself? This is what I don’t understand. You’re a very peculiar mix of things. You’re a white person who doesn’t have the usual memories of a white person.

CL: God, I wish I could answer that question. A lot of it has to do with the misfit thing. There’s no way to line up the various family stories we’ve told each other to say, “I am a\_\_\_\_” and fill in the blank. For each of us it’s splits and fissures and doubling.

LOG: Do you think we recognized that in each other when we met? I don’t believe I did. I don’t know if I recognized it in myself.

I was serious when I asked you about what accent you got after you lost your accent because after losing my accent twice, I studied Spanish. I lived overseas. Maybe I just created my accent myself. I’m trying to say something about your accent as well.

CL: Do you think we have the same accent?

LOG: I would say the thing about you is, I can’t say that Catherine Lord is like anybody I’ve ever met. There is not a single person who comes to mind, OK?

CL: Ditto you. Definitely.

LOG: I guess I’m asking you how you got to be you because I’m still figuring out how I got to be me.