

RUBADIRI VICTOR

Sensory atmosphere
in storytelling

By Dr R. L. de Matas

Images © Rubadiri Victor

INTERVIEW



Rubadiri Victor is a multi-media artist from Trinidad & Tobago working across eight mediums (painting, theatre, music, film, photography, carnival arts, writing and publishing, design and curation, and lecturing). He is the founder of the Artists' Coalition of Trinidad & Tobago—Trinidad and Tobago's primary artist representative body. Many current State policies and programmes for the Creative Industries were authored or leveraged by Rubadiri and his group. His multimedia work and multiple apprenticeships with Elder Master Artists inform his art and activism, and have led him to become a scholar with new critical takes on contemporary cultural theory.

Rubadiri's areas of expertise include global storytelling and mythmaking, from the ancient to contemporary pop culture; the golden ages of the African Diaspora and their global impact; the history and modern dilemma of the Trinidad and Caribbean Carnival; the Creative industries of the Caribbean and Global South; the need for a global culture of Maroonage; heritage site activation; the role of memory in society and its crisis in the Caribbean; and an exploration and interrogation of his own work as an artist and activist.

He is the author of 'Meditation on the Traditions', a photo-essay on Trinidad Carnival's traditional masquerade, and the publisher of 'Generation Lion Magazine', the largest glossy magazine in the Caribbean. 'Passion Fruit'—an anthology of his newspaper columns from the country's two largest dailies—will be published later this year.

He is also the founder and Artistic Director of the 'Wire Bend Folklore Theatre'. The troupe combines costumes and sets created by traditional master artisans with interactive digital animation and new media onstage to depict ancestral, contemporary, and futurist folklore.

Rubadiri's books *Anansi & The 10 Dragons*, *Anansi & the Book of Night*, and *Anansi in the Land of Monsters & Other Stories* are the first parts of the 21-part series 'New Adventures of Anansi', depicting the adventures of three generations of the Anansi family. The first seven novels depict the adventures of Anansi's grandmother as a young Spider.



Victor Rubadiri, 'Sensory Atmospheres in Storytelling' (interviewed by R. L. de Matas for *Journal of Festival Culture Inquiry and Analysis*, 4.1, 18 June 2025, 298-315)

Can you tell me about the journey you took to become a storyteller?

I think storytelling has something to do with solitude and aloneness. As a child, I had a lot of alone time so my imaginative life blossomed amidst that silence. You might even say that such children are visited. The legendary calypsonian—the Mighty Shadow—talks about being in the bush in Tobago and the animals coming and teaching him songs. I had an 'imaginary' cat/lion friend as a child. Such children populate the world with dream things. They also retreat inside themselves, coming closer to their inner worlds, made up of their emotions, ideas, motivation, contemplation, regrets, and aspirations... They become comfortable with their own company as there are now multitudes inside of them... I was such a child.

I read a lot. My father was a sociologist, and my mother was a teacher. There were books everywhere. They would carry me to bookstores and I would race inside and disappear, before then reappearing with the book(s) I wanted. They would buy them for me. I devoured every single Enid Blyton book as a child, the requisite Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew and a slew of adventure books for boys. I started a Science Fiction Library and Club inside my school library at St Mary's College. But I used to read everything. I read Freud and Jung at the age of ten. Ebony, Jet, Right On, Black Music, SoulTeen magazines, The Catcher in the Rye, Naipaul, Stephen King, John Fowles, Dostoevsky, Greek mythology, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table... While studying literature at school, it was Shakespeare, Steinbeck, Faulkner, Hardy, the Romantic Poets... My mother and father were exceptional storytellers. Over lunch and dinner, they would regale us with stories of their youth in the countryside (my mother in Toco, and my father in Sangre Grande), as well as stories of their latest adventures, and stories happening in the world. They were analysing and editorialising the world, and the news, around us. The rural world of their childhood stories was more vivid than television. I could reconstruct that world from their tales.

My dad had an exceptional record collection: Big Band, Cool, Be-Bop, Free, Fusion Jazz; Blues; great players and arrangers like Quincy Jones, Bob James, Wes Montgomery, Funk Inc; classic Soul; British 60's rock—the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Jimmy Hendrix, Donovan; folk music—Dylan, Joan Baez; World Beat - Osibisa, Santana, Olatunji; classical music played by the world's top orchestras; Calypso throughout its recorded history; Ska and Reggae; comedic albums—Jerry Lewis, Redd Foxx; storytellers like Paul Keens Douglas... There was always music. My father would talk to me about music, about structure, playing, arrangement, tone colouring and so on.

I also read comics—all kinds! When I became more discerning, I began to collect, mostly Marvel and then some DC, as well as Mad Magazine, Cracked, and then Epic. I had thousands of comics. Marvel comics were more my religion than my own Catholic religion—the Mythology and Pantheon was more interesting, more real and relevant. We were truly devoted to those books, collecting them monthly. The storytelling of that

era of Marvel comics—both in writing and artwork—from the 60s, 70s, and 80s was phenomenal, ranging from the incredibly personal worlds of Spiderman to the cosmic stories of the Celestials and Galactus, as depicted in Thor and the Fantastic Four. Every month we would wait with bated breath for the next instalments. We learned to discern writers, colourists, pencillers, and inkers by their craft... Genius runs throughout these books—Chris Claremont, John Byrne, and Terry Austin in X-Men, Byrne in Fantastic Four, Walt Simonson in Thor; John Romita Sr. and John Romita Jr. in Spiderman; John Buscema's Silver Surfer; Jim Starlin's Adam Warlock; and many more.

I studied English Literature for my A-levels and then did my bachelor's degree in literature at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine Campus. I loved reading and analysis—it was not work to me.

I started drawing from a very young age, almost obsessively, creating my own stories and characters. I wrote a poem about a girl I was infatuated with, whom I shared a moment with as a teen. After that, I began keeping a journal of my writings. I wrote a love song about an older woman with whom I was infatuated at secondary school. Woman as the Muse... Something about longing, aspiration, distance, idealism, and romance... I was always writing, but it was at those two moments that I felt compelled to take these things seriously. They became a vocation. There was something about summoning those feelings out of myself in that way, transmuting them into art. That longing became an initiation. I began writing songs more determinedly from that point on, writing poetry, snatches of prose. I took on the mantle of artist...



Do you have a favourite story? And why?

My father used to tell us a folktale that I now call 'The Boy and his Dog'. It's about a little boy who lived with his grandmother in a remote village. The boy was a good boy and once did a good deed for an old man, who gifted him a puppy. The dog turned out to be magical—whenever the boy was in trouble, a bucket of water would turn to blood, and the dog would know the boy was in trouble and rescue him. There was also a forbidden forest and a witch that eats little children. Magical adventures ensue. With its bucket of water that turned to blood, the story haunted me as a child, and we would ask my father repeatedly to tell it to us again, even though it terrified us. I have never seen this story recorded in any shape or form anywhere else.

Somewhere along my journey, I took it upon myself to keep telling the story, to preserve it and see it in another more contemporary form. When I formed my troupe in 2015—the Wire Bend Folklore Theatre—we reached a point where we could have done it justice and I staged it, with a 30-foot puppet, our trademark artisan costumes and interactive animation. I even tried to create an animatronic dog. My father was there, even though he was in the throes of Alzheimer's. He said he remembered the story. To be able to stage that story that had been gifted to me by my father for him, to keep that story alive for another generation, to transmute it into another form for a contemporary audience, to be able to preserve it—this connected me to the essence of what 'legacy' might mean at its core. It made me feel viscerally that this is what it means to be fundamentally human.

Would you be able to share some knowledge about Trinidad and Tobago's folk characters?

Most of our stories have deep continental ancestral roots tracing back to Africa, India, Europe, Amerindia, etc. It is our retelling of them that gives them a different character, and every now and again we transform these ancient beings and tropes into new forms. Like nearly everywhere else, there are two types of folklore: the stories of animals; and supernatural stories. Our stories of animals are mostly populated by Anansi and the family of animals—Brer or Compere Lion, Sister Gouti, etc. Our supernatural stories centre around a handful of beings: La Diablesse, a beautiful siren of a woman with one cloven hooved leg who lures unfaithful or lustful men to their doom; the Soucouyant, normally an old woman who removes her skin and hides it under a rock and then turns into a ball of fire who sucks the blood of her victims; the Lagahoo, a shapeshifting man who practises occult magic and transforms into a large dog etc; the Phantom, a spectral, tall, ghostly figure who appears at a crossroads, demanding passage; and Douens, the spirit of children who passed before their time. They appear as bands of small children wearing large brimmed hats with their feet turned backward. They lure and lose delinquent children in the bush. Then there is Mama D'glo, a snake-like mer-woman, and Papa Bois, a hooved and horned powerful old man of the forest. Both of these figures are protectors of the forest. There is also Gang Gang Sara, the African witch blown by the wind to Tobago; she is kind and generous, and loses her power to fly because she has eaten salt. Her burial site is marked by a (now fallen) Silk Cotton tree from which she tried to make her last flight. Silk Cotton trees are also said to be portals to ancestral realms and magnifiers of magic. Then there is Trinidad & Tobago's wide range of multiethnic and festival mythologies, spanning African, Hindu, Muslim, Catholic, secular, Carnival traditions, and so on. We also have access to the pantheon of Hindu and Orisha gods, along with their vast mythologies. Then there are Christian and Muslim holy texts, as well as Chinese Whe Whe gambling mythology and numerology. Carnival, with its infinite creations in Pan, Mas, and Calypso, produces ever-changing lore each year, introducing thousands of new characters, songs, kingdoms, etc. As an oil-rich metropolitan nation, we have been intimately connected to Hollywood and global American pop culture for a century. With all these layers, a Trinbagonian storyteller has a rich well of lore to draw from.



Victor, Rubadiri, 'Sensory Atmospheres in Storytelling'. (Interviewed by R. L. de Matas for *Journal of Festival Culture Inquiry and Analysis*, 4.1, 18 June 2025, 298-315)

Is there a storyteller that sparked your storytelling passion?

The great Trinidad Theatre Workshop actor Errol Jones, who performed a radio series of Anansi stories, playing all the characters himself. That series captivated me as a child. As I said before, my mother and father were the prototypical storytellers of my life. They were both exceptional. The great Trinidad & Tobago TV producer, writer, and director Horace James and his Play of the Month series and many more on Trinidad and Tobago television have also been a great inspiration. I must also mention the great master, Paul Keens Douglas, for the sophistication of his vernacular storytelling and the way he inhabited every single layer, both comic and philosophical. John Fowles' book *The Magus* was transformative for me, as was *The Catcher in the Rye*. Bob Dylan was a foundation storyteller for me as a child and young person. His 'Highway 61 Revisited' album was constantly being played in our house. I had to wrestle long and hard to get out from under the influence of his studied impenetrability. Jim Starlin's run on Adam Warlock and Walt Simonson's run on Thor were seismic events as a young person. And how could anyone overlook the foundational influence of the Sesame Street team of the 1960s and 1970s? It was a golden era. The humour, inventiveness, humanity, imagination, and anarchy of early Sesame Street, with its social commentary and wit, were groundbreaking. By extension, the other works of Jim Henson, such as the Muppet Show and his feature experiments like the Dark Crystal, were seminal too. And looming over everything are the giants—George Lucas and the shadow that Star Wars cast over us as young people. I did not see the films until much later in life, but that lore truly inspired us all. And locally, Mas Man Peter Minshall, the calypsonian the Mighty Shadow, and the painter/poet/philosopher Le Roy Clarke, were heraldic. They were myth makers, the creators of indigenous, heroic, surreal, and epic universes. The scale of their reimagining of our landscape was truly transformative. They showed me that transformative magic was possible right here.



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Does your place of origin influence your interpretation of stories?

Yes. The multiethnic tumult of Trinidad and Tobago offers countless points of access and emergence as a human being, opening the door to multiple mythologies. Trinidad, with its metropolitan nature, is always gazing outward at the world aspirationally, while simultaneously posturing as an equal. Also, our English education and access to American pop culture gave many of us the ability to be aware of global history and modernity, with the possibility of discernment. We were granted the gift of that Trinbagonian sense of always being a citizen of the world. I must also mention the magical nature of island life, the idea that size does not matter, that the small can conquer the large. Our existence is like a split screen—with Trinidad being the urbane youthful metropole, and Tobago being the green, folk escape. Our festivals magically bind us, whilst the Carnival serves as a constant template of creativity, a reminder of what elemental Freedom feels and looks like, as an equal and alternate pantheon to any ancestral hand-over, that sense that we have our own indigenous contemporary cosmology... I could go on...



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Does carnival play a role in Trinidad and Tobago's storytelling folklore and traditions?

You cannot avoid the Carnival, even if you're a fundamentalist Christian, Hindu, or Muslim. This is particularly true if you experienced it during the golden period of Carnival in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s when it was all-consuming, hypnotic, contagious, and inevitable, and when its creativity was genius-level, democratic, and overwhelming. An infinity of sensation and imagination. A million new stories, a million new characters—gods, dragons, and demons. A million new worlds. Every year. The majestic statements of the Carnival King and Queen costumes. Grandiose storytelling. The narrative genius of the early Calypso until the mid-1980s. The transformative community magic of the steel band and Panorama at its height. And always, that reminder of what existential freedom feels and looks like. Outside the field of the West, beyond even the realm of the Old Worlds, Carnival holds both the seed and the flower. Carnival sets the vibrational baseline. This is where our storytelling begins.



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In the Caribbean, does drumming play a role in oral storytelling traditions?

Drumming was the means through which many traditions were preserved and evolved ancestrally, along both the African and East Indian pathways. But for Africans—who had perfected civilisations of sound—drum was memory. Atavistic memory.

The ancestors, the spirits, and the gods—they ride within the drums.

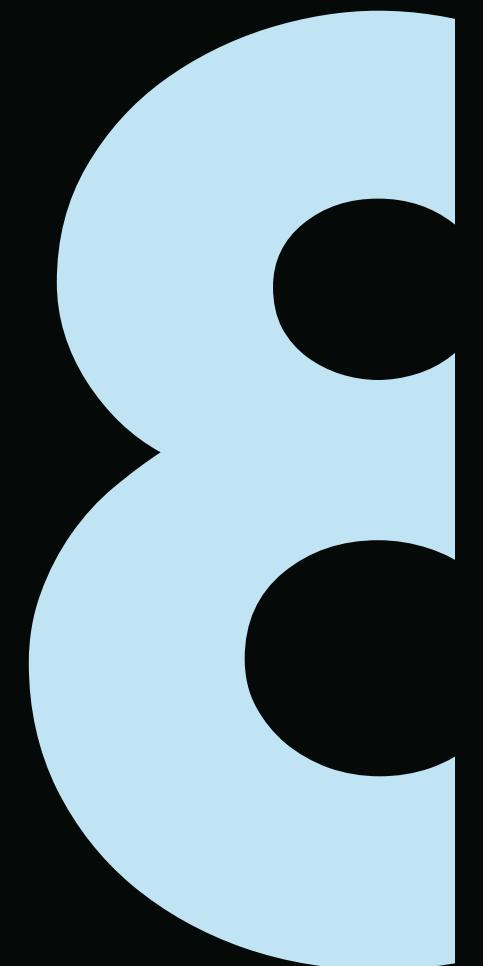
Drumming retained a connection to spirituality, ancestral religious practice, rituals, and manifestation. It serves as a direct connection to the Ancestors and Orisha, dance, movement, rhythm, and vibes. It carried African syntax and vocality, that 'other' lost landscape, and served as a connection to another cosmology. In that way, drums became the extraordinary transmitter, a memory bank, and a catalyst that ensured the survival of Soul through the first four centuries of our journey in the West. All the popular musics of the world emerge from West African drum traditions, as retained in the New World! That revolution began just decades after the ban on drums was lifted. The drums reclaimed the hemisphere, and then the world. And now, Afro Beats (note the term...) is taking its turn to imprint itself on the world. Shifts in drum rhythm have catalysed every single Golden Age of the African diaspora: Blues, Jazz, Rock, R&B, Funk, Disco, Hip Hop, Pan, Mas, Calypso, Soca, Ska, Rock Steady, Reggae, Dance Hall, Samba, Son, Salsa, Zouk, and then mid-wived Hi-Life.

Our storytelling blueprints are encoded within the retentions and evolutions invoked by the drum—the tales, the rhythm of telling, the language itself. Often, in older oral storytelling and theatrical traditions—and still in modern theatricality—drummers are used to accompany and phrase the performance. vibrationally, you can hear the difference. You can probably tell how inauthentic a society is becoming by its distance from its drumming traditions. The drum keeps you rooted to earth, blood, spirit, ancestors, and the stars. One of the characteristics of this millennial age (after the 2000s), both musically and culturally, is the stripping of African elements from popular culture—the neutering and silencing of the drum. This has had major consequences. In music today, we can witness the stripping of the elements of Blues from popular music—the neutering of live and emotional instrumentation, the restraining of Soul, the prioritisation of harmony over rhythm, the removal of ecstasy and crescendo from the music, and certain ecstatic rhythms being scrupulously removed. This means that the drum is being consciously and ruthlessly silenced in mainstream music, along with everything I have said it allows and encompasses—connection to Ancestors, Orisha, nature, the elements, and other mysteries. The machine is taking over. This new alternative music is drone music—the music of submission, narcosis, hypnosis, and numbness. It does not stir up connection or action. It is the music of disconnection and narcosis. It is the music of slavery. The drum, on the other hand, is the music of emancipation.

Which type of storytelling appeals to you most: oral, visual, written, etc.?

I'm a multimedia artist working across eight mediums so that's a hard question, a bit like the perennial cliché of 'who's your favourite child'? Oral storytelling gives me live contact with an audience—interactivity, reciprocity, and intimacy. Their direct involvement, especially in the way I perform a lot of my storytelling, becomes part of the story—their personalities, quirks, and personal stories or body language and responses. This is especially beautiful with children, because of their capacity for unbridled joy and release into the story.

Storytelling through the visual arts—painting, Mas, film, theatre, and video—enables me to communicate on a larger canvas to more people, and to 'show' them the worlds I am creating. This is a different challenge for me as a creator, with a different kind of feedback loop. I try to get the vision out of my head so it can be seen and felt by a stranger/viewer. It makes the story finite, concrete, demanding mathematical precision to maintain fidelity to the original intent and vision. As a visual artist, I also enjoy this challenge. Writing, as a form of storytelling, allows me to explore nuance, both emotional and intellectual, and to guide characters and readers into private, inner spaces of contemplation. It gives me time to construct more—the world becomes deeper and broader, partnering with the imagination of the reader. Each form of storytelling gives you access to another realm within the story and another type of connection with the audience. As a multimedia artist, it is a privilege that I have to be able to use all these strategies to reach both Story and Truth.



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What role does a sensory atmosphere play in the shaping of a story's narrative?

Sensory atmosphere affects the shaping of performance in situ, but I don't know if it affects the narrative or whether it should. It is a tool for creating mood more than narrative.

What kind of atmosphere would you like your story to create? Euphoric or dysphoric? Or could it be a combination of the two?

I am by nature a romantic and an idealist, and therefore inherently optimistic, despite how things are looking at present. Creating art, in a way, is an act of defiance to despair by its very existence. At the same time, a story is a journey—usually between two states of being. To arrive at the euphoric, it is therefore necessary to invoke the dysphoric, invoking the dystopia in order to better apprehend the utopia. Since storytelling is about 'the journey', you cannot ignore either state of being. All states of being are important; there are lessons to be learnt everywhere. But again, as I said, I am particularly interested in transcendence, in overcoming, in solutions, in the Victory of the Light. I therefore tend to paint 'the Fall' to chart the promise, the pathway, and the phenomena of the Rise..

What kinds of emotions do you want to evoke through your story?

All of them.



Some stories have a romantic or suspenseful atmosphere. Regardless of the atmosphere, how do you support the reader in making the story memorable and meaningful?

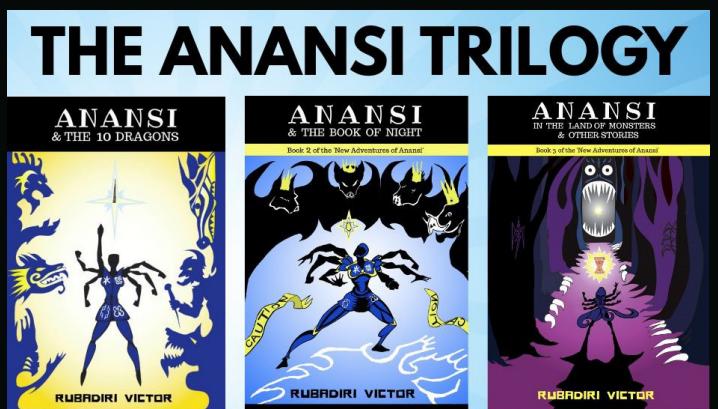
On character: I think the characters need to be compelling and memorable, both in terms of what they show and what they tell. Characters that feel, smell, sound, and taste real, who continually reveal themselves and take the audience on a journey with them.

On the question of myth: the 'myth' of the book needs to be locked in. It also has to resonate. That structure and design of the 'big story' has to be evocative and resolved. What am I trying to invoke? What part of the universal experience? What archetypes, spirits, and forces am I summoning out of myself, my audience, and the landscape? Why? Why is this story necessary now?

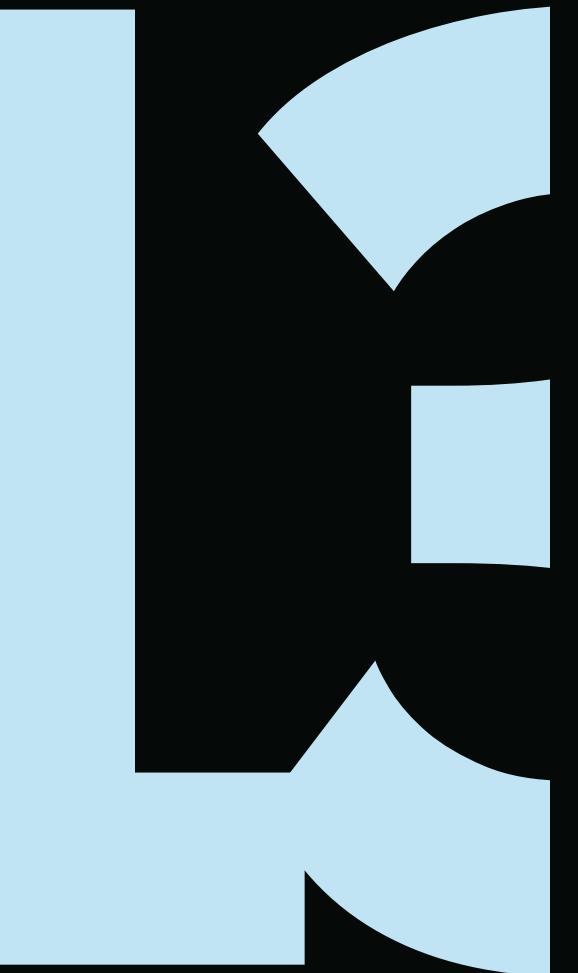
On narrative/plot: every story has a propulsion, a rhythm, or a series of rhythms of its own. Like music, the rhythm, melody, harmonies, tone colouring, and lyrics have to all work together. It's important to find 'the drive' and the music in the story, the points of causation, revelations, surprises, and internal logic that make each thing move. The narrative and plot must function with precision.

On landscape: I feel that the place in which a story happens is as much a character as the characters that populate the story. Landscapes can serve many different purposes—as symbols, historical contexts, tangible geographical facts, sources of evocation, or as contrasting backdrops. Whatever their reason, landscapes must be both accurate and compelling.

Lastly, on moments: if you are lucky, you can summon particular 'moments' in your story. Moments are the high points of stories—a 'moment' is an emotional nodule, a cluster, an exaggerated period or spike of heightened resonance and vibration. They are ineffable. A series of actions culminate in an emotional hub that conjures up something bigger than the sum of its parts. It is the moment when the character, the storytelling, the reader, the ideas, and the larger human experience become one. Often, it simply happens, but it can also be choreographed.



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In your capacity as a storyteller, is there something you would like to accomplish?

Film. I've tried at different times to shoot three films that I've written, and the budgets were just beyond the team's reach. I really would love to complete my feature film projects and get more into film production. I am working on three documentaries at the moment. At the moment, we're looking for an editor that we can work with on short- and long-form projects, documentaries, etc. On a larger level, my challenge is that *I know* the projects that *I have* to do. I've seen them, mapped them—many since I was much younger. So I am haunted by the projects still to be carried out: books, plays, paintings, albums of song. I have written over 200 songs, all parked away in notebooks and digital drives. There's a lot of unfinished business. I want for myself what I also want for more and more artists in my landscape—to fulfil all our dreams and emerge on the other side satiated, and then be able to approach art as play. I don't know of any artist in my landscape that has been sufficiently well-resourced that they have exhausted their personal catalogue and been able to reemerge into a place of play. Not even our Master Artists. I've seen many metropolitan artists achieve this. I believe we will have arrived at a mature place as a civilisation when we are able and willing to fully support our visionary class, such that they can realise all their dreams and then can profit from play.

To arrive at a place of super contented master artists our nation would finally have to implement international Best Practice 'Creative Industries enablers' like: Caribbean and National 50% Local Content Quotas for our Broadcast Industries; properly constituted arms-length Caribbean and National Arts Councils; Caribbean and National multi-media Storytelling Studios; and on a larger Civilisational level—we would have to compel the payment of Native American and African Reparations—which would include global quotas for those Storytellers, etc.

Ultimately, I want to reach a state where I have manifested and exhausted all the dreams and stories within me. I wish this for the best among us. We've had to bury too many of our Elder (and younger) Artists whose catalogues overwhelmingly consisted of frustrated ambitions and aborted works. At the same time, I recognise I have had the privilege to be prolific, to have realised things that many in my landscape have not or cannot. So yes, I am grateful. But I am not pacing myself against anyone else. I am pacing myself against myself! I have witnessed many master Western artists—filmmakers, writers, painters—who have told all the stories that they had within them, and who have moved into new spaces of play, pursuing projects on the other side of their desires, searching for and exploring new vistas. I don't know any Caribbean artists who have been able to inhabit such a space! I believe that such a state of artistic satiation among senior and Master Artists will mark the maturation of our civilisation. It will mean we have finally arrived at a place of settlement, of dream-fulfilment. This is what I wish for us.