

**Buying Books
Online —
Without
Amazon**

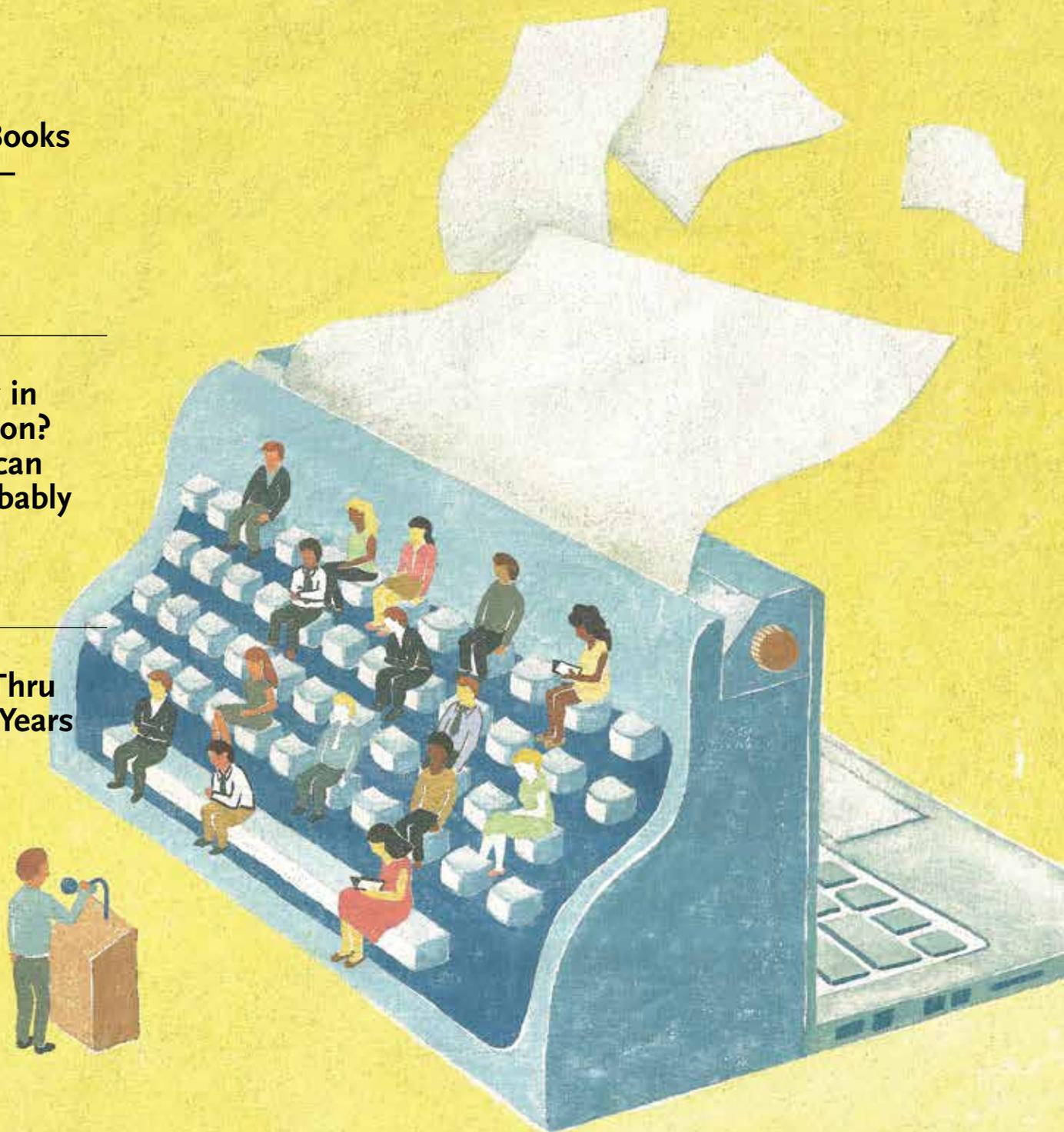
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**Diversity in
your fiction?
Yes you can
(and probably
should)**

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**Writing Thru
Race 20 Years
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TWUC NATIONAL OFFICE

Executive Director
John Degen, ext. 221
jdegen@writersunion.ca

Associate Director
Siobhan O'Connor, ext. 222
soconnor@writersunion.ca

Office Administrator
Valerie Laws, ext. 224
info@writersunion.ca

Membership Development & Fund Researcher
Nancy MacLeod, ext. 226
nmacleod@writersunion.ca

Communications Coordinator
Kristen Gentleman, ext. 223
kgentleman@writersunion.ca

Pacific Coordinator
Raquel Alvaro
ralvaro@writersunion.ca

Editor Hal Niedzviecki write@writersunion.ca

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Editorial Board Wayne Grady, Kelly-Anne Riess, Harry Thurston, John Degen

Editorial Liaisons Leslie Shimotakahara, Corey Redekop

Copy Editor Alison Lang

Write Magazine Advertising Kristen Gentleman ads@writersunion.ca

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Write is produced four times yearly by The Writers' Union of Canada, 460 Richmond Street West, Suite 600, Toronto, Ontario, M5V 1Y1
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Writing Rights

Over 2000 Opinions Served

By John Degen



In early August, The Writers' Union of Canada released its public statement concerning the Amazon.com and Hachette Book Group dispute. In it, TWUC resisted calls to pick a side between the gargantuan online retailer of all things (and sometimes books), and the giant group of imprints and publishing enterprises that make up Hachette, one of the "Big 5" companies who dominate market share worldwide. The Union, instead, carefully and deliberately chose its own members and the larger solidarity and interests of writers worldwide.

This statement was the result of weeks of industry watching, discussion, and debate by your National Council. There are thirteen unique brains on National Council. Thirteen sets of individual experience with the business of writing and the ever-changing industries that service our business, each set with its own number of years, number of books written, and number of books sold. Predictably, there were exactly thirteen different opinions to reflect in that public statement. No easy feat. Also predictably, feedback on the statement was mixed — many loved it, some hated it.

In fact, if one were to ask each and every member of the Union what they thought of Amazon/Hachette, I have no doubt we'd be left with over 2000 angles to bring into square. I don't know if I've ever seen an issue before that so divided writers from each other, and inspired so much nuance and vitriol in seeking a solution. If you've done any online reading on this topic, you're likely aware of an ugly rift opening within the writing community — or at least the grave potential for such a rift.

Many writers have already expressed allegiance for either Amazon or Hachette, and in a larger sense for either traditional "legacy" publishing or for a new world of management, publication, distribution, and sales, all self-directed through online platforms. And where sides have been chosen, sadly, the trenches are being dug, and the rhetorical weapons readied. Critics of Amazon's tactics are accused of being "New York elite" authors, one-percenters in the literary economy. Defenders of Amazon's higher royalty rates for authors are accused of selling an entire industry short for an immediate, temporary advantage.

I'm pretty sure nothing of substance is gained, industrially, when we allow our solidarity to be broken in that way, and so I remain proud of the care taken by National Council, of the respectful debate and the patient hearing of all opinions. One thing everyone on Council could see and agree on without hesitation is that writers were being hurt by the ongoing dispute, and that the longer Amazon and Hachette remained at odds, the more that hurt would continue and grow.

Was Amazon using unfair, potentially illegal tactics to pressure

Hachette into terms favouring the online retailer? Personally, I think they were. That's my opinion, and I watch with great interest the actions of TWUC's sister organization, the Authors Guild, as it applies pressure on the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate Amazon. I believe such an investigation is necessary to clear the air and reset the rules for online retailing. I don't hesitate to express that opinion, despite the fact that Amazon has been very good to me in my own writing career, shortlisting my novel for the First Novel Award years ago and asking me to serve on a jury for the same award years later.

On the other hand, we've all watched for decades now as the traditional publishing industry has changed radically, expecting ever more from authors and providing ever less (plummeting advances, the death of the midlist, etc.) We've been asking aloud for years why these changes are not reflected in the industry-standard royalty rates paid to authors, in rights reversion clauses that nimbly follow the changing logic of the marketplace instead of locking an author's work beyond her reach (and, often, her readers). TWUC first came out with its Royalty Math calculator years ago (it was developed by my predecessor, Kelly Duffin) and I have yet to hear a convincing rebuttal to its logical breakdown of costs and expected returns within the ebook market. Yes, there's more to publishing an ebook than just flipping a switch, but the numbers don't lie — a static 25 per cent ebook royalty is unjustifiable.

Publishing futurists, like Digital Book World's Mike Shatzkin, have been writing for years now that legacy publishers will inevitably have to give some ground on royalties and other contract terms. Authors are waiting. And maybe, just maybe, we won't have to wait much longer. As I write this column an industry rumour has been confirmed by a *Publishers Weekly* story. Big 5 publisher, HarperCollins, has announced that authors who choose to sell direct to readers using HC's new(ish) online storefront can earn an additional 10% royalty rate, on both ebooks and print books. That brings the print royalty on these direct sales to 20% (or higher depending on contract terms and sales levels), and the ebook royalty to 35%. A staggering coincidence... Amazon's non-exclusive, unlimited market ebook royalty rate is also 35%.

The HarperCollins news is fresh, and full details have maybe not been fleshed out enough to draw any solid conclusions about its impact on the larger market. Nevertheless, TWUC and the Authors Guild have been demanding upward movement on royalties, and one of the big five has moved upward. It's not all royalties on all sales, and it's certainly not all publishers, but it counts as a win for author solidarity.

Dispatches

NOTES ON THE WRITING LIFE

EDITING /

Chasing Your Muse: On the Writer-Editor Relationship

BY CAROLINE ADDERSON



This past February, Mary W. Walters and I presented Publishing 2.0 in Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto. We hit the road again in September, travelling to Whitehorse, Saskatoon, and Edmonton, then Toronto again in November. Early in 2015 we'll present in Vancouver and Victoria. My part in this travelling show is the traditional path to publishing.

I cover readying the manuscript, submitting it to publishers, the pros and cons of working with an agent, negotiating a contract, the steps of book production, investing in the book economy, as well as what I'd like to talk about here, the writer-editor relationship.

While publishing a book involves legions, a writer may actually have little or no contact with many of the people who work on their book. If you're lucky you'll get to know your publicist, but she (usually) only materializes at the end of your journey. Your editor is your Virgil, the one who takes your hand and leads you through the hell (often) of rewrites, through the circles of copy edits and proofs, who advocates for you with the marketers and designers, who rejoices with you over good reviews and gnashes and spits with you over the bad (or, these days, the lack of reviews).

I've been exceptionally fortunate with editors throughout my career. I began as (and remain) a writer of literary fiction. My first book, *Bad Imaginings*, was edited by the venerable John Metalf (just named 2014 Editor of the Year by the Canadian

Booksellers Association). Kind, passionate, indefatigable, his standards mercilessly exacting — a better guide for a new writer I cannot imagine. For reasons that had nothing to do with John, reasons made more agonizing, in fact, because I was so attached to him, I left *The Porcupine's Quill* and signed with Patrick Crean at Somerville House in 1997. Some months later, Somerville House went under. Patrick moved to Key Porter where my first novel was published in 1999. Key Porter has since closed shop as well, but before that, Patrick took over as publisher at Thomas Allen. I published three books with Patrick there, then last year followed him to HarperCollins. (Thomas Allen has now closed its publishing wing; notice a pattern?) My novel *Ellen in Pieces* came out in September under Patrick's HarperCollins imprint.

For two decades now I've been sticking close to Patrick Crean; I don't even shop my work around. In addition to the fact that he's a great editor, there's a reason for my abiding loyalty. That first novel, *A History of Forgetting*, was rejected by every publisher it was offered to. I only ended up (briefly) at Somerville House because Patrick, who had read my first book, heard I had a manuscript and asked to see it. He saw promise where others didn't. And while he didn't exactly teach me how to write a novel, I doubt I could have realized that first one without his support. For this, my gratitude burns eternal.

Therein lies a crucial difference between publishing in the 1990s and now. Today if you write a great mess of a narrative and shop it around the way I did, no editor is going to say, "Okay. This doesn't work at all, but I see talent so I'll sign you up and hold your hand while we descend into hell together." Not even Patrick Crean can be Patrick Crean today.

I've had other wonderful editorial experiences as well. A decade ago I began writing for children and have since settled happily at two houses, Groundwood and Kids Can Press. Draft by

Diversity in your fiction? Yes you can (and probably should)

BY DANE SWAN



As a black writer, is it possible for me to create subtle, nuanced, believable white characters? And if I did, would I receive the same kind of acceptance as, say, Kathryn Stockett, a white woman whose bestselling first novel set in the early 1960s was primarily from the point of view of Southern black domestic workers?

My answer to all these questions is “yes”. Yes, you can create characters from races and culture other than your own. Yes, you can find acceptance for works featuring those characters. But the path may not be straight and smooth. Even Stockett encountered difficulties — her book was rejected by some 60 literary agents before one agreed to send it out to publishers. Regardless, her book’s eventual success proves that in the West, the only hurdle to writing an in depth work featuring characters from another race or culture is the author’s willingness to do the research and bravely interact with members of that community with an open mind.

But still, I want you to keep in mind something very important. There will always be differences between writing from the perspective of your culture, and writing about that culture or race as, for want of a better term, an outsider. What’s the main difference? I think it’s probably nuance. If you’ve never experienced racism, how could you write about the small details? How could you fully understand the real emotional impact?

I find myself constantly telling writers, and those who wish to be writers, that the two most important things that we do are to read, and to do thorough research. It’s not enough to throw our selfish ideals on a page and hope that there is an audience for our selfish work. It’s the same with creating characters. It’s not enough to create characters of different ethnic groups that fit what we need to move a plot forward. We must read as much literature from the character’s culture as we can and then we must go to events, to cultural centres, talk to people, ask questions, silently observe, and listen.

Can nuance be faked? Well, racism isn’t as simple as most

people imagine it. On a normal day I can be accosted by someone who — for no logical reason — thinks that I can help them find drugs, I can sit on a full subway train yet find that no one will sit beside me, I can have someone ask if they can touch my hair and end my day being followed by a police car as I walk home — and that wouldn’t be a bad day. Some of these things are possible to imagine by the outsider-writer, but can they fully be understood and felt?

Perhaps the best way to imbue realism and feeling when creating a character from a culture or race is to remember that it’s all about the little things. For instance, there are still members of the local literary community who think that I am from Barbados when I have told them multiple times that I am from Bermuda. These are the same people who know that I’ve been published around the world yet think my name is Dave, or Dwayne, or Dan. There’s nothing wrong with Barbados, just understand that it would be like someone repeatedly asking you where you are from, you saying Toronto, and the person you’re speaking with crying out (again), “Oh! I’ve never been to Toledo!”

As writers it’s our job to not only live in the mind of the man who grinds his teeth as he explains for the umpteenth time that he is from Bermuda, but also to delve into the racist brain that believes Bermuda and Barbados — separated by thousands of miles, and vastly different economic statures — are the exact same island. It’s not just my job, it’s a role all writers share. All of us should write characters with depth from different races and cultures.

If we all learn to write characters from different backgrounds successfully, we are also exposing ourselves to different cultures in real life. We are opening our minds to different perspectives sans the tourist-fantasy exoticism that proliferates literature under the guise of multiculturalism. We are actually listening to people different than us. We are opening our readers’ minds to a diverse world.

Dane Swan is a Toronto based writer whose first book, the poetry collection Bending the Continuum was published by Guernica Editions in 2011. His second collection A Mingus Lullaby, is slated for a 2015 Fall launch with Guernica.



BETWEEN FEAR AND THE NATION: Writing Thru Race and the Congress of Black Writers

BY DAVID AUSTIN

For the sake of to-morrow's victories, it is imperative that we take another look at the events of yesterday[.] In the Congress, Black people will begin to rediscover themselves as the active creators, rather than passive sufferers, of history. It is only when we have rediscovered this lost perspective on ourselves that we can truly begin to speak of emancipation; it is only when we have returned to our authentic past that we can truly begin to dream about the future.

— Elder Thebaud and Rosie Douglas,
Co-chairmen of the Congress of Black Writers

Twenty years ago I was a young undergraduate student in Montreal finding my way in the world, and beginning to see myself, if not quite a writer, as someone who writes. Writers write as a vocation, something that they do, almost as if their lives depend on it. Someone who writes, on the other hand, uses writing as a means of communication, as a way of conveying ideas that, as I hoped in those days, would have some influence on how readers see and understand the world.

Of course, the distinction between a writer and someone who writes is more fluid than this description suggests, but, for me, politics superseded writing and, to this end, I worked as an editor for the *McGill Daily*, which complemented my involvement in various groups and associations on the campus — CKUT radio, the Southern African Committee, the Black Students' Network, the short-lived Friends of Haiti, and the equally short-lived Progressive Students' Association. As someone concerned about social change, politics and writing went hand-in-hand.

I attended the Vancouver Writing Thru Race conference in the summer of 1994 with this conception of writing in mind. Some of us arrived at the conference hotel in a limousine. As I remember it, we were waiting at the Vancouver International Airport for a taxi to take us to our hotel, and we jumped in an empty limo when the chauffeur indicated that he was available. I can recall my trepidation, even embarrassment, about getting into the limo, while others seemed less preoccupied. It is amusing on the one hand, but it also speaks to how important these symbols — a limo, a hotel suite, etc. — become for people who exist on society's margins and whose being and work are often unacknowledged.

Strangely, I don't have any vivid memories of the conference proceedings per se, as I spent most of my time there talking with participants and conducting interviews. As someone writing about Caribbean and British poetry, and especially the genre of dub poetry and one of its chief architects, Linton Kwesi Johnson, I was very interested in interviewing Clifton Joseph and Lillian Allen, two pioneers in the Canadian dub poetry scene. And, as a young man living in Toronto in the late eighties, Clifton Joseph was a kind of iconic figure who, in the eyes of some of us, was "doing something". In fact, Clifton and I, along with novelist Kyo Maclear, at the time a student at the University of Toronto, and UCLA professor Peter Hudson, then a young Vancouver-based literary and arts critic, spent a good bit of time simply talking.

Some of the mainstream press' reaction to the conference verged on hysteria, accusing the conference organizers of racism. This sense of dread was reminiscent of a phenomenon that Arjun Appadurai has described as a majority population's fear of their cultural-nationality being contaminated by minorities. In this case, it was a fear of people of colour organizing a conference for themselves only. Earlier that summer I had attended *Z Magazine's* first media institute in Woodshole, Massachusetts. Noam Chomsky, bell hooks, and David Barsamian, among

others, delivered workshops over the course of a week on the mass media and politics, and it was there that I first met Kyo Maclear. I mention Kyo here because she later sent me mainstream press clippings about Writing Thru Race that I used in an article on the conference for the U.S.-based *Z Magazine* shortly after the conference. This is how I summed up the conference in that article, "Oh Canada":

The recent Writing Thru Race Conference held in Vancouver brought to the surface some of the worst elements in Canadian society(ies). The conference... was designed to discuss issues of race and racism as they relate to writing in a country in which non-whites have limited access to the publishing industry. But before the conference could get its feet off the ground a controversy erupted over a newsletter printed by the Racial Minority Writers' Committee, a section of the Writers' Union. In the newsletter it was stated that the enrollment of 150 participants will be limited to First Nations writers and writers of color. This sparked accusations, with the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper, at the helm, encouraged by the Reform Party... that the Racial Minorities Committee was reinventing apartheid, practicing cultural apartheid (a sick twist and appropriation of a term that has meant misery, exploitation, and degradation for the South Africa's black majority), [and] reverse discrimination (a special kind of discrimination invented for people who are not white).

As I argued, these reactions and the Liberal government's decision to withdraw funding from the conference were "symbolic of broader issues and tendencies in Canada, the United States, and in the world." They were, I wrote in the piece, "part of the general racist, xenophobic, and fascist tendencies that are currently clouding North America and sweeping across Europe, across the world for that matter. Reform Party popularity comes at a time when anti-immigration, racist, and anti-Native Canadian sentiments are on the rise here."

That is how I recalled the conference and the controversy surrounding it at the time. I perhaps wouldn't use the word fascist so loosely today but, sadly, those remarks resonate into the present.

THE CONGRESS OF BLACK WRITERS

Twenty years ago, I wasn't consciously considering the Writing Thru Race conference in relation to the 1968 Congress of Black Writers in Montreal. But it must have lingered somewhere in my mind as I had already started writing about the Congress. Later on, and particularly in my book *Fear of a Black Nation* (which is partly devoted to exploring the implications of the Congress of Black Writers), my understanding of fear as it played out in the media and in official reactions to Writing Thru Race would become an

Almost 50 years after the Congress and twenty years post *Writing Thru Race*, and despite the post-racial predictions that inaugurated Barack Obama, race still matters.

integral part of my understanding of government, state security, and media responses to black self-activity in the 1960s. But before all that, this is how I recalled the Congress of Black Writers, writing in a journal in 2007:

The activities of the Caribbean Conference Committee, the Congress of Black Writers, and the Sir George Williams Affair were part of the dialectical development of Montreal's Black community. Symbolically, the events were like a knot in the brain, a proverbial signpost in the collective consciousness of Montreal and Canada's Black population that pointed towards new horizons... after the Sir George Williams Affair, new groups and organizations were created and older ones were resuscitated in order to meet the evolving needs of Montreal's growing Black population.

I went on to mention a number of institutions — educational, media, artistic, and cultural groups — that came into being in order to meet the changing needs of Montreal's evolving black population, and then concluded:

These groups and institutions made critical contributions to the social development and quality of life of Black Montrealers at a crucial stage in the Black population's evolution. And in so doing, they also made critical contributions to the social fabric of the wider society and, to that extent, helped to make both Montreal and Canada a more humane and livable place while, at the same time, profoundly influencing political developments in the Caribbean.

These thoughts reflected a kind of teleological sense of history on the march to victory. At that time, that was the significance of the Congress for me, an event that occurred two years before I was born. But as I prepared to write *Fear of a Black Nation* my appreciation of the importance of that moment in relation to diaspora, sex and gender, policing, race, and other areas changed

quite dramatically. History does not move in a straight line and my older narrative was cleaner and neater, and safer, both for me and in relation to the people whose narratives are interwoven throughout the book. Since writing *Fear of a Black Nation*, several people who were involved in the events of that time have corrected mistakes, or at least suggested that parts of the book do not reflect their own memories. Of course, I appreciate and respect that. It is also fair to say that a genuine comprehensive study, a history, would look very different from what I wrote in *Fear of a Black Nation*. It would be a different book, because it would be posing different questions. That book remains to be written by someone else, but for me, inspired by the maxim that the point is not to simply interpret the world, but to change it, the moment in which the Congress of Black Writers occurred speaks in the present.

I'm also thinking here about an early review of the book that suggested that in discussing differences and antagonisms among people who were politically active in Montreal, I had in fact aired dirty laundry about intraracial and gender differences that also interplayed with interracial sexual tensions. But it is precisely these contradictions and differences that bring that history to life, providing us with insight into gender, race, and power dynamics today. Rather than ignore them, the point is to engage them, understand them, and to think about them in the spirit of human freedom in the here and now. History and theory represent congealed experience that tell us something about where and what we can be in the world. We don't have to live with history as an albatross. It can — it is — a dynamic part of the present.

Two words, for me, characterize the Congress of Black Writers, the spirit of the historical moment in which it occurred, and its relevance today: "afterlife" and "biosexuality". These terms are intricately connected. The afterlife refers to the post-slavery period in the Americas, a time in which, as Saidiya Hartman informs us, the ghosts of slavery's past and its attendant de facto and de jure racial codes continue to haunt the living present. Biosexuality or biosexual politics as I write in *Fear Of a Black Nation* "refers to a primeval fear of Blacks that is based in slavery and colonialism and the recurring need to discipline and control Black bodies — to force Blacks in particular to conform to the racial codes that

govern their relations with other groups... an intense anxiety about the biological and political spread of blackness through Black-White solidarity and sexual encounters. It is about the perceived or potential threat that Blacks represent to the state.”

The Congress, and state security’s reaction to it, spoke directly to slavery’s afterlife and the phenomenon of biosexuality. It brought to Montreal some of the era’s most important black diasporic writers, thinkers, and activists — C.L.R. James, Stokely Carmichael, Walter Rodney, James Forman, Harry Edwards, among others — as it recast the lived experiences of people of African descent at the centre of history. Participants in the conference discussed what its organizers described as “histories we have been taught to forget,” narratives rooted in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and its reverberations: systemic racism, high rates of Black incarceration, and poverty, among other issues.

Hundreds of Black folks, along with members of the general public, gathered at McGill University (October 8-11) to bear witness and testify in an atmosphere that was closer to the enthusiasm and energy of a Baptist church than a conference. This was a different time, and many issues were conspicuously absent during the meeting, including gender. All of the presenters were male and, tellingly, while the great South African singer Mariam Makeba was in attendance with her then husband Stokely Carmichael, she neither sang nor spoke publicly during the gathering. Absences and silence speak, and acknowledging them is one means of helping to ensure that these kinds of omissions are not repeated. This is why history matters.

In the lead-up to the Congress, the RCMP kept close eye on the Congress organizers. As would be with the Writing Thru Race conference, the idea of blacks (or other racialized communities) organizing themselves and occupying space in the form of a public conference raised the alarm and elicited a biosexual sense of dread within the RCMP. Blacks in Montreal had always organized to humanize their existence, but in the Sixties, this organizing took on a different tenor and tone. There was the fear that Canada was becoming an international center of Black radical politics and in the wake of the Congress the RCMP was even more concerned that this militancy would spread like a contagion, threaten Canadian security and disrupt the government itself:

Although these are fairly recent organizations on the subversive scene in this area, the militant Black Power advocates and the Internationalists are indeed the most active. Their effect is being felt throughout Canadian universities and unfortunately their popularity is growing steadily at an amazing rate. It is my firm belief that the internationalists and their corporate, the Black Power organs as previously noted constitute an extreme threat to the national security and their influence in our educational institutions is presently being felt with strong consequences. If able to break down the educational area of our society within the following generation the Nation’s Government could be destroyed....

Almost fifty years after the Congress and twenty years post-Writing Thru Race, and despite the post-racial predictions that inaugurated Barack Obama, race still matters, and the sense of dread evident in these memos is clearly characteristic of a wider phenomenon of fear. In the post-slavery era, black migration within North America and between North America and other parts of the Americas have in large part been in search of employment and opportunities that are otherwise in short supply. In the 60s, Canada’s growing black population came to organize and challenge the colour bar in this country, and the Congress of Black Writers was part of this effort. Yet today, in both the post-plantation and post-plant era, many blacks have become surplus workers, occupying that precarious and ambiguous position in the margins and shadows of society.

While the recent shootings of Treyvon Martin and Michael Brown highlight the consequences of biosexuality in the US, Canada is not immune from similar incidents, and many Canadians of African descent live behind prison bars or are tied up in the judicial system. Recent data on the black incarceration rates in Canada suggests what many have known for years in this country. According to a *Globe and Mail* article, though only 2.9 percent of the population, blacks represent 10 percent of the country’s prison population. Another story covered by the CBC suggests that Canada’s black prison population has increased by 50 per cent (75 per cent for “visible minorities”) since 2000.

Blacks are not only disproportionately represented in prisons, but languish there as second-tier citizens, on the margins of the margins. According to the *Globe*, “Black inmates are more likely than the general inmate population to do time in maximum security and solitary confinement... They are also more likely to face the use of force from guards. And they are less likely to hold prison jobs — their prison unemployment rate [being] 7 per cent, while the rate for all prisoners is just 1.5 per cent. They are also less likely to be released on parole.”

Clearly, then, as the organizer of the Congress of Black Writers were fully aware, the colour-line does not stop at the U.S.-Canadian border. Moving beyond race and anti-black racism cannot simply be legislated away or eschewed by affirmative action. It also involves understanding how race and racism are deeply embedded in the psyche, informing daily attitudes and practices and mundane encounters. It involves confronting the demons of slavery and colonialism and how the afterlife of these coevals reproduces inequalities of power that eclipse the life chances of blacks and other groups. This in turn requires opening the “door of every consciousness,” to cite Frantz Fanon’s parting liturgy in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and constantly questioning alleged truths and the power and assumptions that are invested in them.

David Austin is the author of Fear of a Black Nation: Race, Sex, and Security in Sixties Montreal, a winner of the 2014 Casa de las Americas Prize, and the editor of You Don’t Play with Revolution: The Montreal Lectures of C.L.R. James. He has also produced radio documentaries on both C.L.R. James and Frantz Fanon for CBC’s IDEAS.

Poetry

Power

BY VIRGINIA PÉSÉMAPÉO BORDELEAU
TRANSLATED BY SUSAN OURIOU



The power of words of silence
standing firm beside trees,
tender on fresh moss
sharp like the ice of breakup.

Word lies on its side
offers itself to latecomers,
to poets and dreamers borne by a love
for all that pulsates and holds its peace.
Word hisses like an angered snake,
cracks like a stone riven by cold,
rumbles like the earth's entrails,
pierces the skies like a supersonic jet
and chants the song of lovelorn whales.

Never to be erased is the footprint of moccasins
from silent snow or the mud of spring on trails.

Virginia Pésémapéo Bordeleau is an artist and writer of Cree and Algonquin origin. She is the author of three novels and two poetry collections. This poem originally appeared in her collection Le Crabe Noir.

Words

BY MURIELLE ROCK
TRANSLATED BY CHRISTELLE MORELLI



There are words that stretch to the bottom of being
strike the peaks of tall mountains
mark a final stop vanish into time

There are words that return by chance, by magic
invade space multiply transform into flowers
leave a trail to better return

There are words that shake the entire planet
shift mindsets unmindful of anyone
words that urge toward the unknown's designs

There are words that attract
propel us forward faster than our limits
words to justify every movement every step

There are words that intersect in the void
Then slowly disappear
Only the gesture remains the word is no longer of use

Murielle Rock is Innu from Mani-Utenam. She is a radio producer for the Atikamekw-Montagnais Communications Society (SOCAM). This poem first appeared in Languages of Our Land — Indigenous Poems and Stories from Quebec.

Birthing/ Writing



BY MÉLINA VASSILIOU
TRANSLATED BY CHRISTELLE MORELLI

birthing
writing

writing
my future

bitterness
a custom dwindling
writing
my future
my customs
piercing the fog

writing
my future

piercing
traversing

destiny unfolding

writing
my future
to emerge
to build
to say
to say to me
to say to us

writing
my future

for consumption
no abuse involved.

Mélina Vassiliou is a multidisciplinary artist and poet who lives in the Innu community of Maliotenam. This poem originally appeared in Languages of Our Land — Indigenous Poems and Stories from Quebec.

I Breathe

BY JEAN SIOUI
TRANSLATED BY SUSAN OURIOU



I breathe Earth's great body . . .

Some say I lie with the winds.
I say I keep company with the peoples of the longhouse.

My name is He Who Carries Light.
I am born of the Rising Sun.
I am Tse8ei.
I am bear.
Sacred clown of formidable resistance.
My words commemorate the trail of tears.
Paths of life.
My poetry scatters seed in the vertigo of ages.
Words sprout in my entrails.
Sing the praises of my ancestors' country.
Smoke of stories curls before my eyes.

Pursued by the suffering of a clan I live.

Jean Sioui is Wendat from the Bear Clan (Yäniionnyer'), Nation of the Cord (Hatingënonniahahk). He has published several collections of poems and is founder, with his son, of the publishing house Les Éditions Hannenorak. This poem originally appeared in the poetry collection Je suis île.

The Land of My Language



BY MANON NOLIN
TRANSLATED BY CHRISTELLE MORELLI

I speak a red tongue
that frees its lands of despair
afflicted by conquering
so-called better languages
than my mother tongue

My language, language of my land
howls in my dreams
to keep from perishing
like the dead languages
of the old wise ones

Roots of our ancestral lands
a word, a language
that of my ancestors
bear my promised land

The language of my cradle
becomes my land
and so the territory of my tongue
remains my life's Innu-aimun

Manon Nolin, Innu from Ekuanitshit, is a poet and beader working on her first poetry collection. This poem first appeared in Languages of Our Land — Indigenous Poems and Stories from Quebec.