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Caribbean literature in transition, 1800–1920

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REVIEW ESSAY

Caribbean literature in transition, 1800–1920, Volume 1, edited by Evelyn O'Callaghan and Tim Watson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 481 pp., £84.99 (hardback), ISBN 9781108475884

Caribbean literature in transition, 1920–1970, Volume 2, edited by Raphael Dalleo and Curdella Forbes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 420 pp., £84.99 (hardback), ISBN 9781108850087

Caribbean literature in transition, 1970–2020, Volume 3, edited by Ronald Cummings and Alison Donnell, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 468 pp., £84.99 (hardback), ISBN 9781108474009

There is a polarization that has come to characterize dominant perceptions of Caribbean literature, informed by the conflict between the only two writers of Caribbean origin to have been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature: Naipaul (1969) and Walcott (1998). The former represents the view that the brutal history of the Caribbean islands – marked by the genocide of indigenous populations, chattel slavery, indentured labour, revolutions, and migrations – stifles any attempt at a Caribbean cultural coherence. For the latter, however, a singular, monocultural conception of national coherence is unnecessary. In response to Naipaul's now infamous caustic pronouncement that "[h]istory is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (1969, 29), Walcott maintained that "if there was nothing, there was everything to be made" (1998, 4). Where Naipaul saw in the Caribbean an "absurd disorder" (1967, 166), to quote his narrative cipher Ralph Singh, who is forced out of his homeland in *The Mimic Men*, Walcott saw the archipelago as a cracked vase, its "African and Asiatic fragments" reassembled but forever showing "white scars" (1998, 69).

It is the "Walcottian" stance that reverberates throughout this impressively expansive series. The three edited collections are a welcome addition to Cambridge University Press's larger "In Transition" series that also covers British, Irish, and American literatures from the 18th century to the present day. In their introduction to the third and final volume, Ronald Cummings and Alison Donnell maintain that analysis of Caribbean literature must be driven by the region's historical "fluidity, fragments and multiplicities" that cannot be easily "resolved into cohesion" (vol. 3, 2); "the past", they say, "overlays the future and the future returns to the past" (11), generating reflections, memories, and imaginaries that are plural, partial, and migratory. This historical and cultural fluidity leads to a questioning of the volume's two central terms, "Caribbean" and "literature". As Raphael Dalleo and Curdella Forbes note in their introduction to the second volume, many of the writers under consideration had by the beginning of the 20th century moved away from the "overarching poles" of Caribbean nationalism and creolization "towards global and cross-cultural imaginaries" (vol. 2, 2). Similarly, one of the core concerns for Evelyn O'Callaghan and Tim Watson, in their introduction to the first volume, is an "opening up of the archive" (vol. 1, 5) to explore how not only novels, poetry, and plays but also propaganda, letters, life writing, and travelogues provide important insights into "the ferment of ideas about freedom, slavery, gender, and race in the nineteenth- and early 20th-century Caribbean" (8).

The many threads of inquiry that emerge from this series speak to the vibrancy of Caribbean literary studies. The expansive scope in terms of historical, geographical, and literary contexts foregrounds the significance of Caribbean creativity for studying – to name only a few of the volumes' many topics – the histories of slavery, colonialism, and anti-colonial resistance movements; revolutions rooted in abolitionist and communist politics (in Haiti and Cuba respectively) and their significance in comprehending US imperialism; the role of culture in forging counter-hegemonic categories of race and sexuality; and the relationship between colonial domination and ecological breakdown. One of the most pressing themes that these volumes centre on is a revaluation of the relationship between Caribbean literature and gender.

Since the flourishing of Caribbean literary studies, aided by the BBC's radio programme *Caribbean Voices* (which ran between 1943 and 1958), the formation of the Caribbean Artists Movement in 1966, the London-based New Beacon Books, and the Leeds-based Peepal Tree Press, the perception of a Caribbean "canon" has been dominated by male, anglophone writers who came to prominence over the course of the 20th century: these include Walcott and Naipaul, C.L.R. James, Sam Selvon, George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, and Linton Kwesi Johnson. This is despite the fact that it was Una Marson (a Jamaican social worker, journalist, poet, and activist) who, among other accomplishments, first conceptualized *Caribbean Voices*. The work of critics such as Donnell and O'Callaghan (two editors of these volumes), as well as Denise deCaires Narain and Kate Houlden, has long confronted this male-centric understanding of the Caribbean literary canon. Several contributions to *Caribbean Literature in Transition* add to this work by focusing on an impressively wide range of literary forms. Norval (Nadi) Edwards, for instance, sees Mary Seacole's mid-19th-century travelogue *Wonderful Adventures* as pre-empting the trope of migration from the Caribbean to Britain that would become so central to the work of James, Selvon, Lamming, and Naipaul. Turning to the archive of slave testimony, Nicole N. Aljoere remarks upon the significant role of female slaves who have been too often "characterized as mute figures" or "passive victims of the institution of enslavement" (vol. 1, 34). This "silence", says Aljoe, is reinforced by the availability of slave narratives that are either by or about men; yet archival evidence shows that most complaints against slave masters were made by women. By the mid-20th century, it is this paradox of silence and resistance that would become an essential part of Grace Nichols's poetry, in which the voices of enslaved women are recovered.

Elsewhere, the notion that writing by Caribbean women followed in the tracks of male pioneers is countered by Anthea Morrison's discussion of figures such as Marson, Amy Jacques Garvey (a journalist who progressed Marcus Garvey's politics), and Sylvia Wynter (a playwright and critic who co-founded the *Jamaica Journal*). This analysis refuses to silo female figures into their own category of women's writing – to do so would merely retain a male-centric canon. Instead, a forceful case is made for re-examining the prevailing assumptions about "core" Caribbean literary forms and figures whereby female writers are central to debates about pan-Africanist activism, Caribbean nationalism, the brutalities of capitalist-imperialism, and the dilemmas of diasporic belonging. Moreover, it is Wynter who emerges across the three collections as a key theoretical touchstone for contemporary Caribbean literary critics.

Wynter's writing is recognized by a number of contributors as offering a powerful account of the Caribbean plantation as the birthplace of modernity, and it is her essay "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation" (Wynter 1971) that stands out as especially significant. In this essay, Wynter pre-empts Glissant's (1990) *Poetics of Relation* in which, as Mary Lou Emery explains in her contribution to the second volume, the trans- and intercultural collisions inherent to transatlantic slavery allow modernism's

"roots in the 18th-century plantation system [to] become apparent" (vol. 2, 41). For Wynter, both the plantation and the novel form must be understood as products of a global, capitalist economy; yet both are in turn reliant on an impulse that is "directed by human needs" (97). The plantation, she says, included the space of the slave's own plot that in turn established a Caribbean folk culture, while the novel contains the writer's "critical and oppositional stance to a process of alienation which had begun to fragment the very human community" (97). In her essay in the second volume, Laurie R. Lambert notes that "[t]he novel, in its Caribbean manifestation, brings the plot – the orality of folk culture – to the public sphere in written form" (vol. 2, 184), while in the final volume, Tanya L. Shields says that the tension between plot and plantation "continues to govern political, economic, social and even creative life in the [Caribbean] region" (vol. 3, 21).

Wynter's writing is also seen as foundational for developing a Caribbean eco-poetics. For Erin M. Fehskens, Wynter's "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation" develops an anti-capitalist "discourse on the Caribbean environment" that attends to "the model of competing colonial and anti-colonial ecological relationships" (vol. 2, 29). This is a perspective that contributes to and extends Kathryn Yusoff's (2018) engagement with Wynter's creative writing in her book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. A Caribbean eco-poetics is framed in O'Callaghan's and Keja L. Valen's essays in volumes 1 and 2 respectively as envisioning a possible alternative to the profit-driven exploitation of humans and the environment that links colonialism to our contemporary climate crises. In the writing of novelists and poets such as Walcott, Erna Brodber, Wilson Harris, and Edgar Mittelholzer, O'Callaghan sees a reciprocal relationship with the land that refuses "the gaze of the planter, the developer, and the speculator" and awakens us to "the responsibility we have for this earth here and now, to land as a resource for life, not profit alone" (vol. 1, 81–82). These insights reveal that, as the climate catastrophe escalates, Caribbean literature past and present can be a valuable resource for envisioning an environmental politics that is inherently anti-colonial and anti-capitalist.

It is the plantation system that underpinned Hall's ([1991] 1999) assertion that the history of the Caribbean – alongside other colonized regions that contribute to the making of the English cup of tea – is the "outside history that is inside the history of the English" (147). This provocation points to the prominence of Britain in Caribbean literary studies as the paradigmatic imperial metropole. Several contributors to this series expand upon this existing orthodoxy to include the histories of Spanish and French imperialism. In volume 3, Daylet Dominguez, for example, demonstrates the significance of literature in establishing a Caribbean self-determination in response to the Spanish colonial conquest of the Americas, while Elizabeth Kelly explores how the rise of the novel helped forge revolutionary thought across the French colonies of Haiti and Martinique.

Similarly, Britain has often dominated discussions on the Caribbean and migration. Sarah Lawson Welsh's contribution to volume 3 brings new scholarly attention to 21st-century writers associated with the Caribbean diaspora in Britain, which is made all the more pertinent due to the continuing governmental failures relating to the treatment of British citizens of the Windrush generation. One of the many accomplishments of the series is that it also looks beyond the vistas of Britain to other routes of Caribbean migration and creativity. In volume 3, Joselyn Fenton Stitt explores the formative experience of migration to the US for Afro Caribbean and Indo Caribbean writers such as Paule Marshall and Gaiutra Bahadur, while Camille A. Isaacs looks to figures who migrated to Canada to find a diasporic corpus that includes Selvon and Edgar Mittelholzer as well as female writers such as M. NourbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, and Afua Cooper.

The new and timely perspectives on migration, gender, and the environment, amongst other topics, enable this series to bring attention to an incredibly diverse canon of writers, literary forms, and historical contexts. In doing so, the volumes invite readers to revisit established figures – with Walcott and Naipaul still looming large – whilst also re-examining Caribbean literary history to include a corpus of voices that are not necessarily anglophone or male-centric. For this reason, the series deserves to lay the foundations of new critical explorations into the heterogeneity and global scope of Caribbean creativity from its roots in the colonial past through to its many fluid and fragmentary strands in the present.

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