

## Perspective

# *“The West Indian Novel and its Background” — Thirty Years Later*

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*T*HE WEST INDIAN NOVEL AND ITS BACKGROUND was first published in 1970.<sup>1</sup> I wrote it at just the right time. It was influential in the creation and internationalization of an academic discipline called “West Indian Literature”; it stimulated the development of graduate studies in the Department of English of the University of the West Indies; and it was seminal in the transformation of the syllabus in “English” at the University of the West Indies.

When I arrived at the Mona Campus (Jamaica) of the University of the West Indies with the manuscript in 1968, the Department of English had long ceased to hold the view that West Indians were not fit to teach English at the University of the West Indies, but the undergraduate syllabus was still a copy of the syllabus of an English provincial university, and there was little encouragement to pursue graduate work of any kind. When I proposed a course on West Indian literature, some questioned whether West Indian literature was good enough and sufficient in quantity to deserve a full one-year course, but they were restrained by the fact that a highbrow publisher in England had contracted my book and the University of Edinburgh had granted my PhD. It helped too that I had been lecturing in English at two British universities. Such are the uses of colonial adversity.

The establishment of the first full course in West Indian literature at Mona in 1968 meant that there could be no official

resistance at the Cave Hill Campus (Barbados) or at St Augustine Campus (Trinidad). A course on the books at any one campus was automatically eligible to be taught at the other two campuses. St. Augustine followed two years later in 1970, and Cave Hill was not far behind. Thus did the Department of English begin to move to what it is today — a Department of Literatures in English<sup>2</sup> — whose core is the literature of the West Indies and whose research strengths<sup>3</sup> lie in West Indian literary studies.

I want to talk about how the book that is identified with these changes came to be written, and I want to compare its critical and theoretical concerns and practices with those of today. I recognize not only that the conditions under which scholars work have changed drastically but that these changed conditions are connected one way or the other, for better and for ill, with changes in the nature of the enterprise. Time has made it necessary to offer some explanations but these are more in defiance than in apology.

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(Benjamin Hall) Kennedy's *Revised Latin Primer* was a provoking book. V. S. Naipaul swore to it that he was getting out of Trinidad as soon as possible (*Middle Passage* 43), and I confided to its secret pages (no one would enter there), that I would be Inter-BA, BA, MA and at last PhD in West Indian literature. This was in 1952 a few weeks after my beloved English teacher Reverend Weldon Grant read out to the class from Sam Selvon's novel *A Brighter Sun* (1952) the episode in which an old man called Sookdeo sells a blind donkey to an unsuspecting neighbour who used a cutlass to obtain a refund. The Canadian teacher read enthusiastically in some Saskatchewan version of Trinidad dialect but I recognized Sookdeo, his clothes, his voice, his gestures. I knew this old Indian man, and the slightest clue from the author was enough to make me see and hear and feel and smell the world to which he belonged. I knew only too well the social milieu Selvon was drawing upon and I also saw him ennobling that world, giving shape to its body, and making real the possibilities of transformation.

I have to confess that I did not stop enjoying English literature or other literatures on discovering Selvon (my father's salvage from the American base in our village which was closing down after the War included several boxes of Armed Services Editions of American books). Reading the literatures of other countries has never been for me an exercise of desperate fantasy. Some of the English and American books I read or started to read were null and void to me but with some of them I could feel the life of the main characters, recognize the basic situations, and identify with certain emotions. At such moments I could identify almost completely with the characters experiencing those emotions.

I take the point about colonialism and the daffodils, but when I read Wordsworth's poem, I remembered how I would be startled and how I would exult when I was struck, as so often happened, by the beauty of some aspect of my village — the poui trees flowering suicidally in pink and yellow before the coming of the rains, the breathtaking sight of the sea through the mighty cedars as the taxi bringing me home from the prison of a poor people's boarding school broke around the last curve in the road. Wordsworth's poem is not about daffodils but about seeing, and about being in love or falling in love with your landscape.

When I encountered West Indian literature for the first time, however, the response was sensuous, immediate, and instinctive. I could "hear" and "see" and "feel" what was being represented realistically, and I could respond intuitively to things that were not being literally represented. (Not all exclusions are repressions or denials so I was not deconstructing or rewriting anybody's book.) With respect to social and cultural issues, I could pick up what Lionel Trilling calls "the buzz of implication" (206).

The boy in his teens was discovering that more of a literature's meanings are accessible to those who belong to the environment and community out of which the literature comes than to those who do not have such intimacy; and that a piece of writing is more evocative to those who belong to the language in which it is written than to those who do not belong.

The boy in his teens was discovering what George Lamming set down in an article of 1958, that the literature of his own country could help him to know and understand the world of his feelings, the world of his social relations, and the wide world of human beings to which he belonged, and it could do so more comprehensively and sensuously than the literature of other countries.

I continued to enjoy other literatures for what they could give, but I needed the self-knowledge and the social and cultural confidence that I now knew could come out of the literature of the West Indies. I discovered Alfred Mendes and C. L. R. James and the short-story writers of the 1930s and 1940s in Trinidad. These discoveries must have inspired Chapter 5, "The Drift Towards An Audience," of *The West Indian Novel*, which directed others to a still unexhausted field. I came upon John Hearne and Roger Mais among the books of Mr. James Lee Wah, who had graduated from the University College of the West Indies (Mona, Jamaica) and was teaching English at Naparima College (San Fernando, Trinidad). I discovered George Lamming, Phyllis Allfrey, and Edgar Mittelholzer, and found that since I belonged to Cayana and San Cristobal I belonged to the West Indies and the Caribbean.

I knew from those days that I wanted to read and own all the books written by West Indian authors, and I made up my mind that part of my life's work would be to spread the word that these books and writers existed, and to help people to enjoy them and learn from them. This led to *West Indian Narrative* (1966), an anthology for schools with photographs of the authors and a map to locate the selected authors. The wish to steep myself in the literature and make it known to West Indians was one of the ruling motives behind *The West Indian Novel*, and it remains a cardinal principle in my literary scholarship and criticism.

If as a schoolboy I was preparing unconsciously, I went into deliberate planning as an undergraduate at Edinburgh University. I was studying the major British authors for an undergraduate degree, but I had made up my mind that I would be doing my PhD on the West Indian novel. One of my tutors knew

enough to give encouragement, and we pre-empted tutorial time to talk West Indian Literature. I liked her, and felt I had found my supervisor. I began reading "Commonwealth" literatures (which were not being taught at universities then). Although "Commonwealth" literature was new and "West Indian literature" was evasive, most of the books were available in the main university library and in the Scottish National Library, disposed according to then current classifications. When the official time came, however, the rules declared that there was no one on the full-time teaching staff qualified to direct my research. The eventual supervisor, Paul Edwards, a newly-appointed lecturer, breezed in one day, introduced himself and said disarmingly, "I don't know a thing about West Indian literature. The idiots probably gave me the job because they think African Literature and West Indian Literature are the same thing. I'll look at what you write and read the books you tell me to read. I'll be able to direct if you know what you are about." I envied my good friend Eustace Palmer because resources for his research were so easily available and because he had a distinguished professor to supervise him, so I plied him with the titles of African books and the African authors Paul Edwards was opening up to me, and criticized him every time we met for doing his thesis on the English novelist Henry Fielding.

In the British system, you are given a supervisor, and then you are forgotten until you are ready to submit. I could not have invented better conditions or dreamed up a more congenial supervisor than the late Paul Edwards. He beat me at squash, drank me under the table, laughed me out of solemnity and pedantry, offered the most cogent criticisms, turned on the most brilliant insights at unexpected times and places, and knew too little about West Indian literature and too much about life to deter me from doing what I wanted to do. He was not an officer in any critical dispensation tyrannizing over graduate students who would only get jobs and be licensed to go out into the world if they conformed to the ideologies of a network of colluding graduate schools.

The dissertation probably also benefitted from the fact that I had not lived at home since 1959 and from the circumstance

that there were no grants to travel to the islands. If I was out of touch with the daily dramas I was away from the cliquism and the politics, and from the longed-for distractions of West Indian island life. There was no Internet and no E-mail. All you had was memory and imagination, the indefatigable and prompt Andrew Salkey in London, and the postal service to the West Indies. The patient and persistent Arthur Ravenscroft at Leeds did not know he was forcing me to keep up with the whole field of West Indian literature and stay in touch with the other "Commonwealth" literatures when he invited me to do the Annual Bibliography and Survey of West Indian Literature for *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*.

I can see now that experience of the literatures of countries other than my own was the source of an intertextual sense that could of course recognize the pointed tensions between one text and another but which was so subtle that it operated even when the dialogue between texts did not draw dramatic attention to itself. Those who read widely and live the books they read cannot help being intertextual in the most profound senses of the word.

The Higher Degrees Committee required that I achieve a reading knowledge of French and Spanish and ensured that I had access to distinguished historians George Shepperson, David Waddell, and Christopher Fyffe. In those days, Edinburgh undergraduates in literature did linguistics for three of their four years and were taught by the established professors as well as by new men in the field like M. A. K Halliday, J. P. Thorne, and John Sinclair. The basic and inspiring help was crucial but the fact remained that at Edinburgh I had no interaction with an intellectual community involved in related pursuits, and I was obliged to become my own historian, sociologist, economist, and sociolinguist.

As a person with "a sound colonial education," I needed first of all to explain myself to myself and to see from a native's perspective the culture out of which my literature was forming. I would also have to make it easier for my readers and examiners to understand. Removal from the site of the action forced me to concentrate on the material I was laboriously gathering in and

helped me to keep scholarly distance. The thesis was written in cold remote sections of the university library and in paraffin-heated rooms. The books aroused all the passion. I find all of these circumstances reflected in the character of *The West Indian Novel*.

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At the turn of the nineteenth century, some fifty years after the Emancipation Act and the beginnings of primary school education for nearly everyone, separate island nationalisms began to emerge in all the territories. Although these motions cannot be described as movements of the people, the spokesmen (mostly white or Coloured) foresaw the coming power of "our Black countrymen," recognized the need to redefine their own roles, and declared the imperative to create an integrated society. The formation of literary and debating clubs in all the territories at about this time links the growth of literacy in English among the Black population with the political stirrings. *The West Indian Novel* used this moment as an indisputable starting point and focused on an outstanding illustration — the attempts of the white Jamaican Thomas Henry MacDermot (1870-1933), editor of the *Jamaica Times*, to set up his All Jamaica Library which issued five volumes between 1903 and 1909 (*West Indian Novel* 51-55).

Pre-twentieth century writings by Europeans and Americans either set in the West Indies or written about the West Indies, and the literary efforts of educated black people in the islands are documented in books like Wylie Sypher's seminal *Guinea's Captive Kings* (1942). But the attempt to construct a history of West Indian Literature could not base itself on these writings. At the instigation of C.L.R. James, I read the Coloured/Mulatto Maxwell Philip's *Emmanuel Appadocca or Blighted Life* (1854), interesting for its race and colour concerns, its sea consciousness, and its father-son theme. But it did not herald the birth of the West Indian or Trinidadian novel and it could not be used in any attempt to offer a basic account of the development of West Indian writing. It would have to be put in place, along with other pre-twentieth century writings, after the necessary groundwork was done.

It was still necessary, however, to give a sense of the growth of the written word and of island attitudes to it if only to undermine the simplistic metaphor of explosion that was being used to describe the appearance of the West Indian novel in England in the 1950s. By dealing with popular education, the growth of literacy, literary activity in periodical form, partial nationalisms and certain crucial aspects of the post-Emancipation scene, one could hope to locate seed and root in the earlier period. This strategy would make for a thicker examination of the evolution of the novel from the beginning of the twentieth century up to the time of writing in 1967. The book limited itself to writing and to taking in all the twentieth-century novels the researcher could find, a comprehensiveness that would be defeated today by the present bulk of West Indian writing, not to mention the diversification of the field, the preference for segmentation, and the new dimensions added by Toronto, New York, and the academy.

*The West Indian Novel* was time consuming. It was written by a critic who still believes that you should not write about a book until you have read all of it, and that you should read it at least twice. In those days critics believed it was their duty to draw people's attention to the existence of books, to give an idea of how these books are written and what they are about, to indicate with illustrations and evidence from the text the critic's opinions and evaluation, to make sure that the quotations were long enough and rich enough to interest the reader in the book regardless of what the critic was trying to prove and show at any moment, to present information and advice that might be helpful to the reader, and to do everything possible to encourage people to read and experience the books for themselves. The response the critic hoped for was "I must read that book" or "Maybe I missed something, I must have a look at that book again." It is not obvious today that criticism is either interested in gaining readers for books or in talking for longer than it has to about the book itself, the poem itself, the entire book or the whole poem.

Criticism existed to serve books and it was not puffed up enough to claim that it was "literature," by which term we used



to mean fictions or "creative writing." The reading of criticism had not yet taken the place of the reading of novels, poems, short stories, and plays. The reign of theory had not yet commenced. So it is that in the last twenty years criticism emanating from the academy or addressing itself to the demands of the academy has done little to alter the fact that the number of people who read seriously for non-academic purposes is not increasing and is unlikely to increase.

On the other hand, there has been an important growth of serious interest in popular culture, folk culture, orality, and performance art involving the word. The accessibility of popular literature and the familiarity of its content, however, make a little harder the task of those who feel that some books which are not in the category of "popular literature" deserve to be better known and have to be worked at. Commentators on popular literature and on oral literature have contributed, perhaps unwittingly, to a growing preference for instant accessibility. With just one or two exceptions, moreover, the research is journalistic, the commentaries elaborate the obvious, and works are celebrated merely for their witty or original restatement of the familiar.

The usefulness of the oral and popular projects is further limited by the fact that the commentators do not see it as a necessary part of their work to make the raw material available. All too often, and especially with the oral material, one is at the mercy of the commentators, whose selections and interpretations are more geared to setting up a dichotomy between the oral and the written than towards equipping us to understand better the meeting of orality and writing, the multivocal character of our cross-cultural civilization, and the complexities carried by the amplifications of the new technological orality.

There are more challenges. There will always be books and readers, but reading has to share time with other attractive options for pleasure and instruction like theatre, the cinema, television, and Internet resources. To pay due respect to changes in sensibility and attitude, to escape the dead end of criticism for and in the academy, and to ensure that what literature uniquely offers is not lost to those who do not read much, literary critics

and culturally literate people who read books as carefully and as sensitively as I have implied above may have to steep themselves in the new technologies that exist for the eye and the ear as well as train themselves to recognize and respond to new and modified literary techniques related both to these and to the popular and performing arts. Appreciating the new media and how other media affect the form of the literary arts would improve criticism and equip the critics to collaborate with or serve as consultants to actors, performers, and film-makers engaged in translating books into mediums that are more likely to be accessible to greater numbers at less expense of time. Should a critic feel less proud of helping to produce a good television or movie version of a great novel than of editing the Norton Critical text?

Literary critics today have to consider the implications of the meeting of writing not only with orality but with a wide range of sounds and images from the proliferating expressive media; and not only with the orality that has no recorded scripts but with a new technological orality that has an authorized script whose methods of composition are often enhanced by the technology, and whose performances mix, amplify, and deviate from the authorized script and take it to audiences utterly different in character from the traditional community in whose presence the oral performance happened.

But thirty years ago it called for strong-mindedness in a literary critic to avoid a gross celebration of orality as and for itself and to recognize the possibilities for both orality and writing if emphasis could be placed upon the mutually enriching connections between them. *The West Indian Novel* was one of the first sustained attempts to point to the meeting between orality and writing as the most significant factor in the development of both oral and scribal literatures in the region and as a source of energy and inventiveness in the language of the West Indian writer.<sup>4</sup>

*The West Indian Novel* spelled out, moreover, the social and literary significance of the closing of the gap between the language of the more or less middle-class West Indian author and the language of the people upon whom the characters are modelled.

It placed emphasis on the articulation in literature of the ordinary and historically obscured person. It looked forward to "that imaginative fiction built around the lives of the folk towards which the present generation of West Indian writers have only just begun to move" (15).

The chapter on language is perhaps the most important chapter in *The West Indian Novel* because the concern with language is a concern with style and narrative voice, as well as cultural and social context. It is the chapter that has been most often read with a lust to misconstrue perhaps because it has stood most firmly against the self-contradicting proponents of a "nation language" supposedly free of European contamination and inaccessible to outsiders. The chapter is entitled "The Language of the Master?" and some readers have not even noticed the question mark. Instruction in the use of the English of England in post-Emancipation schools was part of the policy of mental and cultural colonization. To recognize that one is not speaking or writing the language of the master is to recognize that one has begun to charge the imposed language with a different load.

The chapter proposes that just as there is American English, Canadian English, and Australian English there is West Indian English which has island variants — Jamaican English, Barbadian English, and so on. It is possible that these island varieties will not remain mutually intelligible and may grow away from one another. And it is true that although there are fewer and fewer speakers of deep-level dialect, deep level dialect in one island can seem incomprehensible to people from other islands.

What *The West Indian Novel* proposed, however, is still true: this English has its Standard form (West Indian Standard English) in all the islands and the island Standards are mutually intelligible. Each Standard coexists with a set of dialects ranging from deep-level dialect to a dialect that is very close to the Standard in grammar and structure. Each of these Standards shares in the sound system of the dialects (each sounds like the dialects) and each is in other ways related to the dialects to such an extent that one has to begin to give up the old notion that

the dialects belong to one native or nation language and the Standards are English.

In their written forms, West Indian Standard English (WISE) and English Standard English (ESE) can look alike but they are very different when they are spoken. WISE and WI dialects are organically connected at the level of sound. They are also connected psychologically and physically in the persons of speakers of WISE who are defined as follows in *The West Indian Novel*: “[T]hey have been sufficiently educated to control the grammar and lexis of English Standard English; they may learn to pronounce in other ways but they retain ability to pronounce in their natural WI way; above all, however, they are more or less instinctive speakers of or thinkers in a West Indian dialect or dialects. The third criterion suggests that the speaker of West Indian Standard is an educated West Indian whose social origin is in the dialect-speaking group or whose social contacts make him a dialect speaker” (94).

Once this class of speaker emerged, WISE and the dialects began to close in on each other, so much so that it is now logical and linguistically correct to recognize that this English, this combination, the whole spectrum which was born in the islands and is still evolving and taking in more recent influences may be properly called the Creole. Meanwhile, ESE and the older Creole (“hard-core Creole”), like the Creole of Haiti, started to move to the periphery. It is the existence of speakers of WISE as defined that made possible the rich interaction of oral and written upon each other. This is manifested in the closing of the gap in West Indian novels between the language of the narrator and the language of the characters, and it signalled what was in fact a social revolution.

This chapter was at great pains to explain and illustrate the ways in which West Indian writers did not only claim the dialects but modified them for artistic purposes, retaining the essence of the dialect or the music of the dialect while feeding into it additional words and other grammatical structures. The use of dialect in so many different social and personal contexts released it from previous denigrations of it as the language of the clown or the pathetic person.

The chapter spoke several times about the steady reduction of obvious Africanisms in the emerging West Indian language. It also pointed out that while the lexical base was becoming more and more English, the sounds and the grammar of the emerging language were taking their own shape. The grammatical features and the sound system distinguishing WIS from ESE were attributed to the linguistic practices of the dialect-speaking persons. There was no hard linguistic evidence to support an intuition that those practices were somehow connected with the African languages, in particular the system of sounds from these languages. Support for this position seemed to come later in Mervyn Alleyne's explanation of the "order of discarding" (24), which I take to be asserting that the sound system of African languages and linguistic qualities associated with them would have been the strongest retentions.<sup>5</sup> I can see now that the repetition of the phrase "the reduction of obvious Africanisms" in *The West Indian Novel* was an attempt to hint at deep structural and essential African influences which were not obvious as lexical items would be, and which I did not have the resources to demonstrate.

It is difficult to understand how readers of *The West Indian Novel* can have failed to notice that the chapter ends by linking the linguistic argument with oral traditions:

To understand properly the certainty with which West Indian writers have turned the dialects to such literary account as I have tried to illustrate, we must remember that co-existing with the new literary growth in the West Indies, and pre-dating it, is a long oral tradition of story-telling and folk poetry in the dialect. A modern representative of this tradition is Louise Bennett of Jamaica whose dialect poems produced over the last twenty-five years have recently been published as *Jamaica Labrish: Jamaica Dialect Poems* (1967). In Trinidad, the oral tradition flourishes in the calypso whose most skilful exponent is Francisco Slinger, called "The Mighty Sparrow."  
(114)

The edition of 1970 was palpably celebrating the rich meeting of orality and writing in the West Indies. It pointed to unsuspected influences of orality on form and narration in West Indian prose fiction, as well as on the language of prose and verse, and it sought to describe the emergence of a Creole language

called West Indian English laden with many voices. I am not sure that facility with the terms "dialogic" and "multivocal" indicates a real understanding of the West Indian literary situation.

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When my thesis, entitled "A Background to the Novel in the West Indies," was presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, March 1968, the literary and cultural situation was not a free-for-all, and if there was no longer an impregnable canon there was still a notion that some texts were aesthetically superior, were more "literature" or "art" than others. The candidate was aware that the title did not give due prominence to the critical analyses of particular novels that had been carried out and that an impression might be created that a work of sociological background was being offered. When the title was modified and the book published as *The West Indian Novel and its Background*, there was nothing to hint at the book's regionalist premise of the inseparability of cultural expression from the specific context that was being called "background." The development of cultural studies in Euro-American practice, and a greater readiness since the 1980s to take social and cultural context into account tend to hide the book's challenge to critical orthodoxy.

"West Indian novelists apply themselves with unusual urgency and unanimity to an analysis and interpretation of their society's ills" (4). No West Indian critic has ever had to lament that criticism or literature in the West Indies lacks social function. *The West Indian Novel* took the social function of literature as one of the outstanding features of our literary situation. The Introduction tried to indicate the mutually influencing relationship between cultural context and artistic expression, and the ways in which language and form were emerging out of new and expanding content. Special notice was taken of the effects on the form of the conventional novel of "the preoccupation of West Indian novelists with what some see as the chaos, others as the open possibilities of their society" (4) and of the impact upon characterization of the novelists' "interest in the previously neglected person" (5).

Looking backwards through the 1980s and 1970s, it is possible to discern some of the staples of structuralism, new literary history, and cultural studies in *The West Indian Novel*. But this book insisted on the specificity of the context thus rejecting attempts and theories that lump countries together while purporting to recognize the significance of social and cultural context. In addition, *The West Indian Novel* recognized the existence of the author and the uniqueness of each text, and it believed that books and authors use language and are used by language not to illustrate meaninglessness, or the difficulty of communication or the tyrannies of logocentricity, but to say something to people about themselves, their particular society and the world that they share with all other human beings.

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*The West Indian Novel* was therefore unhappy about the disruption of the relationship that had been building up in the thirties and forties between writers and readers, and about the diminution of role of the local press in the publishing of the literary efforts of the time. Chapter 5, "The Drift Towards An Audience," describes the departure of our writers to the United Kingdom and the establishment of London as the West Indian literary capital between 1950 and 1964. Because of the book's belief in the social function of literature, this emigration is not presented as a victory. The details of the move are faithfully conveyed but the chapter regrets the phenomenon as a continuation of a long history of economic and cultural absenteeism. The vibrant literary activity in Trinidad and in all the islands in the late 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s began to bring written fiction to the lives of the people. It is described as the "nearest thing to a chance of checking the long drift to the Mother Country" (63). The chapter ends with the lament that "the departure of so many gifted men from an area whose joint population hardly exceeds three million, has only aggravated the situation they sought to escape" (74).

Using Trinidad as representative of the region, this seminal chapter drew critical attention to the newspapers, periodicals, the literary groups of the 1930s and 1940s and "the literature

of the yard." A major omission in *The West Indian Novel*, which was repeated in Reinhard Sander's *The Trinidad Awakening* (1988), was the failure to notice the existence in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s of newspapers, magazines, and literary societies dominated by persons of Indian origin. These included *The East Indian* (1919-21, 1922, and 1924), *The East Indian Patriot* (1921-28), *The East Indian Weekly* (1928-32), *The West Indian Magnet* (1934), *The East Indian Advocate* (1934), *The Indian* (1937), *The Observer* (1941-58), *The Spectator* (1948-65), and the literary magazine *The Minerva Review* (1941-43). In these and in the activities of the numerous literary and debating clubs formed by descendants of Indians can be seen the same drive towards literary expression and social transformation that has been identified with respect to the writers and artists included in the convenient term "the Beacon Group."<sup>6</sup>

In spite of this omission, the account in *The West Indian Novel* contains the germ of the argument to be developed later that the literature of the West Indies before the 1950s was a literature in the shorter forms; that this literature was in direct contact with other expressions like the calypso and some of the poetry; and that there was in that period a relationship between authors and readers such as has never existed in the West Indies after the 1950s. Since the publication of *The West Indian Novel*, continuing research has led to the conclusion that the short story is the most indigenized of the literary forms introduced to the region by Western education. The traditions of storytelling that pre-existed the literary arrivals were so entrenched that they were able to absorb the new without losing their own character, and were able to modify the new because they had their own qualities to bring to it.

The issues I have been indicating arise automatically from a concern about the social function of literature. The declaration by Terry Eagleton in *The Function of Criticism* (1984), that criticism today lacks all substantive social function really begs the question (viii). The more alarming truth is that in a self-absorbed Euro-American critical practice all thought about the social and human functions of literature are buried under layers and layers of conceptual frameworks, generic theories and



associated jargon. The exception to Eagleton's allegation is Edward Said whose books include *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983) and whose name does not appear in Eagleton's index to his book. A casual interest in the West Indian or West African literary scenes might have helped Eagleton to overcome his own predilections and turn his attention to the deeper problem of what is wrong not just with criticism but with literature in his own constituency. If criticism has no social function it can only be that literature has no social function.

But the Euro-American industry is so busy fitting other literatures into theoretical pigeon holes and making them parts of larger invented entities that no one is likely to learn anything from or about the literatures thus amalgamated. *The West Indian Novel* was critical of three large approaches that included West Indian Literature (Part II, Chapters 6, 7, and 9). Although the Commonwealth approach (Chapter 9), the "Terranglia" or English Language approach (Chapter 6), and the Neo-African approach (Chapter 7) were found to be at least bibliographically useful, they were not embraced because, like recent labellings ("Third World," "Postmodern," "Postcolonial," "Diaspora"), they by-passed the specificity of the connection between each literature and its cultural context, sanctioned ignorance, and sustained patronizing attitudes based upon the assumed superior finish and established quality of the literature of the first world countries that were inventing these approaches. The reissue of *The West Indian Novel* is re-affirmation of the importance of cultural specificity.

I come now to a major difference between the critical performance in *The West Indian Novel* and later criticism from Euro-America and the West Indies itself. I used to think that if *The West Indian Novel* had any ideology it would have to have been unconscious. But the book has an ideology and a very conscious one which clearly determined the arrangement of its content. It was an ideology of being West Indian, a legacy of the Federal era. West Indians of the late 1950s and the 1960s were inspired and ennobled by the notion that the English-speaking territories, to begin with, could unite and form a nation to stand up in the world with pride. The substantial benefit was going to be

economic but what excited many imaginations and inspired a great flowering in literature and art was a dream of national unity already embodied in music, in cricket, and in the University of the West Indies.

It was the West Indian ideology which determined that the book should conclude with a short section, Part 3, called "Precursor." The single chapter in this part is called "The Road to Banana Bottom." It is an account of a character taken up by missionaries and educated in England coming home and coming home to herself, and it implies that the self-same journey had been made spiritually and intellectually by Claude McKay. McKay had come back to a richer understanding of his West Indianness through an exploration of his Africanness, his connections with Europe and his involvement with America, white and black. The life and work of the precursor dramatize the book's ideology.

By the time I began writing *An Introduction to the Study of West Indian Literature* (1976), it was legitimate to ask whether being West Indian has been made less realizable politically with the death of Federation, the separate independence of most of the islands, the proximity and encroachment of the US, the foot-dragging by politicians and businessmen over freedom of movement for all classes, and their resistance to the establishment of a Common Market across the region. The obvious question after that is whether and how a West Indian cultural nationalism can continue to survive as a force sustaining the West Indian peoples if the political directorates do not really want a political union.

But when *The West Indian Novel* was being written, the light from the dead Federal Star was still shining. The enemy of West Indianness was ethnic chauvinism, and the real West Indian would want to demonstrate that although each of the ethnic groups that came to the West Indies brought specific qualities and properties to the meeting of cultures, it was indeed a meeting of cultures. Out of this meeting there would emerge a cross-cultural civilization above race that would be a model to the world. Ethnic identity was an important component, but national identity was everything. It is necessary to observe that the

inclusiveness of the ideology of West Indianness made it different from every other ideology that has been proposed for the region since.

*The West Indian Novel* has chapters on the descendants of Africans (in those days the respectable term was "Negro"),<sup>7</sup> descendants of Indians, the Aborigines, the early whites, the Coloureds and white West Indians, and it strives to include each of these groups in West Indianness. In each case there is either an explicit or implicit argument that the group was contributing to what was taking shape as West Indian-ness, and that each was a valid variant of West Indian-ness. The chapter on the Aborigines (Chapter 7) has as its epigraph a statement by a white character who is asserting his claims in the face of the Aborigines: "It's all so blasted silly and complicated. After all I've earned a right here as well. I'm as native as they ain't I? A little better educated, maybe, whatever in hell that means." In the chapter called "The World of a House for Mr Biswas," it is argued that Mr. Biswas is fighting to be a Trinidadian against the pull of a Hindu enclave. The white West Indian novelists in "Terrified Consciousness" are included as being West Indian too; and their works are declared to be socially relevant but tending to be neglected in the demanding contexts of black nationalism.

The ideology of West Indianness is responsible for the only section where I think the book loses its cool. Between pages 115 and 130 too many bickering paragraphs are spent fighting against the genetic neo-African theories of Jaheinz Jahn who sees West Indian literature as neo-African literature, and people of African origin as African whether they know it or not. A new edition of the book seeks to correct this and places the emphasis on pages 131 to 163 which contain an unambiguous appreciation of the place of African cultural legacies in the shaping of West Indian culture and West Indian identity.

We are all infested with unconscious ideologies and by unacknowledged conditionings of various sorts. We cannot help it. But healthy existence requires that we grow in awareness of these hidden springs and liberate ourselves from their insidious tyranny. One can be imprisoned in conscious ideology as well,

and that too has to be dealt with in appropriate ways. Criticism that comes from an ideological position may have the virtue of being focused and easy to follow, but if the ideology is narrow and the critic unwilling or unable to pay honest attention to the language of the text as a whole the critical performance may serve the ideology but not literature or the book or the author being written about. The tentativeness of a West Indian identity that is shown to be still evolving protects *The West Indian Novel* to some extent from some of the pitfalls of ideology; and the strictness of the attempt to analyze what is in the text as a whole (not just elements that prove the ideology), backed by a responsiveness to whatever is conveyed by language and style have the effect of allowing the criticism to cover ground that time sometimes turns into fashionable ideology.

*The West Indian Novel* does not take up a feminist stance, yet it cannot be criticized for excluding feminist issues. Nor would it be reasonable to fault it for neglecting books like Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970) which were published after the appearance of the critical work. As a matter of printed fact and very likely because it has an inclusive ideology *The West Indian Novel* registers not only the long history of attempts by male writers from Tom Redcam (*One Brown Girl And —*, 1909) to Wilson Harris (*The Waiting Room*, 1967) to portray the female character and female dilemmas, but it also analyzes the work of Sylvia Wynter, Phyllis Allfrey, and Jean Rhys.

The book insists on the place of Herbert De Lisser's *Jane Carreer* (1913) in the West Indian canon. De Lisser's novel is the first full West Indian novel in which the central character is black and significantly female. The discussion of McKay's *Banana Bottom* (1933) focuses on the plight of a West Indian woman whose education makes it difficult for her to fit into a community that has certain expectations of the female or to relate to so-called educated men who are not accustomed to have to treat with educated women. In Lamming's *Season of Adventure* (1960) a young woman is seen trying to find her true self, a self that must now include aspects or natives of her person that she has been taught to despise by her middle-class upbringing and education. The quest is indicated by Fola's

repetition of the phrase "Fola and other than" and the discussion in *The West Indian Novel* fastens upon this feminist motif. The discussions of Allfrey and Rhys respond to the novels' expressions of a number of staple items in the feminist agenda: complicated dependences between male and female, and problems with female sexuality; the hinting at the possibilities of female friendship; the awakening of female political consciousness and activism; liberated femininity; abuse of the female, and patriarchally-warped mother-daughter relationships. These elements are registered in the book long before the articulations of the feminist movement and without the author holding a feminist position. I believe that this kind of honesty in response is missing in a lot of recent ideologically-inspired criticism.

The West Indian ideology in *The West Indian Novel* very often runs second to an attitude that art says much by omission and by indirection and it often declares things that the writer does not know that he knows. The critic who reads like this, however, is not trying to catch out the writer in the act of deception or repression. What he is witnessing is the writer as an agent of revelation. And language is exhibiting not its meaninglessness but its mystery. What I am trying to say is that good critics have been intuiting the hidden meanings in texts and exploring the hidden order of art long before today's critics turned up with hacksaw and cutlass to deconstruct. I might as well add here that critics who have spent years doing what my generation of students called reading literature have been supreme intertextualists wearing their wide reading undemonstratively. The kind of reading I am talking about occurs again and again in *The West Indian Novel*, and I want to illustrate it with a long quotation from the end of the discussion of Michael Anthony's novel *The Year in San Fernando* (1965):

It is here I think that the astonishing originality of the Year in San Fernando lies. The image of Francis, deprived, and tethered to the Chandless house (even to having a lair below the house), in a circumscribed world of which he is trying to make sense, is an image of the condition of the modern West Indian.<sup>8</sup> But out of this distress, Anthony has created an archetypal situation. On the one hand, there is the pattern of growth and natural progression

suggested by the spontaneous metaphorical activity of the novel's language. On the other, there is the narrator's extreme openness to the possibilities of experience, marked by Francis's capacity for shock. Through the boy's consciousness Anthony induces us to make the confession of weakness, of unknowing, by which an unstable world is transformed into the flux of re-creation:

I remembered walking through the short-cut in the heat of the dry season when the tall tress among the houses had been stricken and barren-looking and had not caught my eye at all. I remembered seeing the mango — so sensitive to heat — and their leaves had been shrivelled up and their barks peeled, as if they had surrendered and could take no more. I remembered the cedar, too, one of the giant cedars, and I had even looked at it and thought how much firewood there was here. But all those trees had sprung to life again, with the rains, and were so rich in leaf now it was unbelievable. But I had seen this myself. And now I watched the great cedars sending even more branches into the sky of the town. (*The Year in San Fernando*, p. 147)

(*West Indian Novel* 222)<sup>9</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 First published by Faber, London, 1970; revised edition published by Heinemann, London, 1983. Citations are from the 1970 edition.
- 2 Within days of arrival on campus I had replaced the sign that called me "Lecturer in English Literature" with one of my own "Lecturer in Literatures in English" much to the amusement of Edward Baugh (now Professor) who asked if I was inventing my own department now.
- 3 One or two students interested in beginning research in 1969 were warned to stay away from Ramchand because "he will make you do it in West Indian literature"!
- 4 Twenty-five years after *The West Indian Novel*, this phenomenon gave a telling title to an anthology of West Indian poetry: *Voiceprint* (1995), edited by Wayne Brown, Mervyn Morris, and Gordon Rohlehr.
- 5 See Alleyne, *Comparative Afro-American*. "Africans of varying linguistic and geographical origins (but confined to West Africa) underwent language change arising primarily out of new communicative needs within their own number, and secondly out of communicative needs with Europeans (in this case, Englishmen, themselves of varying dialectical and geographical origins within the United Kingdom). It is axiomatic of all such changes arising out of language contact that there will be transmissions or continuities from the native language of the people undergoing linguistic change. . . . In many instances, these transmissions and continuities are eventually discarded, and the newly-adopted language may show absolutely no trace of the former native language. The order of total discarding of former native language elements is as follows: (1) vocabulary; (2) morphology; (3) syntax; and (4) phonology. And within phonology it seems that the native input intonation pattern continues for the longest time in the newly-adopted language" (21-22).

- <sup>6</sup> The first detailed examination of the literary and linguistic development of persons of Indian origin in Trinidad has been completed by Krishendaye Rampersad in her PhD dissertation "The Growth and Development of Indo-Trinidadian Literature 1850-1950," submitted to the Department of Liberal Arts, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, in January 2000.
- <sup>7</sup> The term has been replaced throughout to reflect current practice.
- <sup>8</sup> From another point of view, it may be seen as the technical problem of the West Indian artist operating in the shadow of the British nineteenth-century novel. Anthony's unpretentious jettisoning of omniscient authorial conventions is a feature left implicit in the argument.
- <sup>9</sup> A version of this essay was given as a plenary address at the Second International Conference on Caribbean Literature, Bermuda, 3-5 November, 1999.

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