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Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical and Critical Sourcebook

Daryl Cumber Dance
University of Richmond, ddance2@richmond.edu

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FIFTY CARIBBEAN WRITERS

A BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL CRITICAL SOURCEBOOK

EDITED BY
DARYL CUMBER DANCE

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Introduction

Sailors, saltfish merchants, displaced criminals, yellow-fever victims, slaves in the canefields, Maroons in the bush: such were the men and women who laid the foundations of Caribbean societies in the 16th and 17th centuries. From such groups emerge rumor and legend, but rarely a formal literature. Indeed, the literature of the Caribbean, like that of most colonial societies, passed through the usual stages, moving from apparent silence to assimilation, imitation, and apology, and on to innovation, affirmation, and transformation. Today it is possible to chart the movement of Caribbean literature, tracing it from the derivative writings of the 18th and 19th centuries—much of it composed by visitors to the region, all of it firmly Eurocentric—to the strikingly innovative art of a Derek Walcott or a Wilson Harris.

The beginnings of Caribbean literature lie hidden in the folklore of the plantation era and in the prim, condescending travelogues, the exotic novels, and the apparently naive slave narratives—often authored by Whites—that began to appear as early as the 18th century. (Helpful reviews of this early literature may be found in Anthony Boxill, "The Beginnings to 1929," in *West Indian Literature,* ed. Bruce King, 1979, pp. 30–44; and Edward Brathwaite, "Creative Literature of the British West Indies During the Period of Slavery," *Savacou* 1 [June 1970], 46–73). Among the early writers, a few voices ring a prophetic note. Francis Williams, the classically educated Black poet of 18th century Jamaica, used conventional Augustan poetics to protest racism and assert the common humanity of mankind. The diction is of England, but the vision draws from Caribbean life. By the 19th century some Black poets (notably those of

Guyana) began to write of their own concerns and experiences. A few took the critical step of writing in the local vernacular, masking this revolutionary shift behind comic and nonserious verse forms. (For a useful review of this early poetry, see Arthur Drayton, "West Indian Consciousness in West Indian Verse," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 9 [July 1970], 66–88; for examples of some of the early poetry, see Norman Cameron's anthology, *Guianese Poetry: 1831–1931* [Georgetown, Guyana: Argosy, 1931].)

Despite the fact that there is this large body of early writings produced in the West Indies, most scholars do not consider that a corpus that can accurately be denoted Caribbean literature—a literature which reflects the themes and concerns, the language and culture, the perspective and ambience of the Caribbean and its people—evolved until the 20th century. In a 1960 publication (*The Pleasures of Exile*) George Lamming declared, "The West Indian novel, by which I mean the novel written by the West Indian about the West Indian reality, is hardly twenty years old" (p. 68). In his seminal study of West Indian fiction, Kenneth Ramchand asserts that "the earliest known work of West Indian prose fiction" that can be called distinctively West Indian appeared in 1903 (*The West Indian Novel and its Background*, 1970, p. 3). Like Ramchand, Michael Gilkes dates the beginning of "a recognizable West Indian literature" from Tom Redcam's 1903 novel, *Becka's Buckra Baby*, and considers the novels of Herbert G. de Lisser as representing "the beginning of a genuine awareness of . . . the realities of everyday West Indian life" (*The West Indian Novel, 1981, p. 11)*. Lloyd Brown, author of the definitive study of West Indian poetry, describes the first 180 years of West Indian poetry (1760–1940) as "downright unpromising" (*West Indian Poetry*, 1978, p. 19) and acclaims Claude McKay (whose first work appeared in 1912) the first major poet.

These promising beginnings came to fruition in the critical period of the 1930s and 1940s, the period of focused nationalism and political self-determination. During these decades appeared native literary journals such as *The Beacon* (which appeared in Trinidad in 1931), *Bim* (started in Barbados in 1942); *Focus* (started in Jamaica in 1943); *Kyk-Over-Al* (started in Guyana in 1945); and the *Caribbean Quarterly* (begun in Jamaica in 1949). These journals were to play a crucial role as stimulants to debate, as sources of information, and, importantly, as a literary forum for young, developing writers. In their pages appeared the first works of most of the Caribbean authors who achieved prominence during the ensuing decades. The radio series *Caribbean Voices*, which the BBC began in 1946, also helped to introduce many of the writers. Among those who began to publish during these decades were the Trinidadians Alfred H. Mendes and C. L. R. James, the White Dominican Jean Rhys, the Guyanese Edgar Mittelholzer and A. J. Seymour, the Jamaicans Roger Mais and Vic Reid, and the Barbadian Frank Collymore. The literary movement spanned the range of the area, from continental Guyana all along the island chain.

The period from 1950 to 1965 was one of such extensive and outstanding publications by West Indian writers that Edward Brathwaite has labeled it the

West Indian Renaissance ("The Love Axe: Developing a Caribbean Aesthetic 1962–1974," in *Reading Black: Essays in the Criticism of African, Caribbean, and Black American Literature*, ed. Houston A. Baker [Ithaca: Cornell University African Studies and Research Center, 1976]. During these years there appeared the first novels and volumes of poetry by writers who have earned distinguished reputations in 20th century literature, among them George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, V. S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris, and Derek Walcott.

The ensuing years, including Brathwaite's "Revolutionary Period" (1968–1972)—and beyond—have witnessed the publication of major works by a phenomenal number of exceptionally talented writers, some of whom have already established an international reputation for themselves. The poets Edward Brathwaite, Mervyn Morris, and Dennis Scott and the fiction writers Michael Anthony and Earl Lovelace have set a stamp on this period which belongs equally to the as yet lesser-known talents of Tony McNeill, Erna Brodber, and Jamaica Kincaid (it is worth noting that there is an increasing number of women among this latter group).

The most notable Caribbean writers are prominent not only within the context of Caribbean letters; a remarkable number of them are clearly among the truly outstanding writers of the world. C. L. R. James was guilty neither of exaggeration nor of nationalism when he declared, "I do not know at the present time any country writing in English which is able to produce a trio of the literary capacity and effectiveness of Wilson Harris, George Lamming, and Vidia Naipaul" (Ian Munro and Reinhard Sander, "Interview with C. L. R. James," in *Interviews with Three Caribbean Writers in Texas, Kas-Kas* [Austin: African and Afro-American Research Institute, University of Texas, 1972], p. 24). There are a number of other names that James and others would obviously insist upon adding to that list today, authors whose contributions clearly reflect the quality of contemporary Caribbean literature, names such as Derek Walcott, to whom poet Joseph Brodsky referred when he insisted, "the great poet of the English language is a black man" ("On Derek Walcott," *New York Review of Books*, November 10, 1983, p. 39).

This study of fifty Caribbean writers comes at a crucial time, for there is nothing more fascinating than studying the works of a "nation" during its efflorescence and focusing on writers who have a sense of themselves as, on the one hand, continuing a long literary and cultural tradition (largely Western and African) and, on the other hand, being a part of the beginning of an exciting new cultural development, writers who often view themselves as New Adams in a New World Eden. This fact is symbolically reinforced by Walcott's insistence that

> there are so many places that are virginal, really primal, in the Caribbean, . . . so many places in St. Lucia where there has never been a human footprint, . . . and if one can lift one's foot up sharply and put it down on that place the resonances of that are the same

as the resonances that it meant for Adam to put his foot down in Eden. (interview with Daryl Cumber Dance, Richmond, Virginia, March 3, 1981)

Like Walcott they recognize how blessed they are to inherit "a virginal, unpainted world" and to have the task, like Adam, of "giving things their names" (*Another Life* [London: Jonathan Cape, 1973], p. 152).

To appreciate fully the pleasure of "giving things their names" one must understand the special meaning that naming has traditionally in Africa and especially in the Caribbean, where, as is suggested in Walcott's statement, the West Indian's sense of himself as new man stems from the force of the *Word*, which he has inherited, and the awareness that through the *Word* he possesses the supreme power of naming and identifying and giving meaning to—in effect, indeed *creating*—his universe. In his poem "Naming" (*The Arrivants*, 1973; originally published in *Islands*, 1969), Edward Brathwaite suggests that the act of naming bestows the life force on the object: it is imperative, he insists, to name the tree, for it is the naming which "gives it fruit / issues its juices" (p. 217). The idea that the Word is their inheritance was reinforced by Martin Carter, who declared "the major art form [in the Caribbean] is rhetoric, . . . *rhetoric*!" He observed that a visitor to Guyana commented to him, "Man, all you got is *words*" (interview with Daryl Cumber Dance, Georgetown, Guyana, March 20, 1980). A similar sentiment is voiced by Walcott's Shabine in *The Star-Apple Kingdom*: "But that's all them bastards have left us: words" (1977, p. 9). That may be *all* that they've been left, but as heirs to *that* heritage, Caribbean writers assume a divine task as New World Adams. Thus, in the penultimate poem of his epic, Edward Brathwaite admonishes the Caribbean man to write on his broken ground, for it is there that the word is transformed into a god that walks among them (*The Arrivants*, pp. 265–66).

While most of these writers might agree on the significance of the Word, there is considerable controversy about the question of *which* word, for there are many language forms available to them. As Kenneth Ramchand has noted,

We have had so many different notions of what our language is: it should be Standard English or it should be some African language, or it should be Hindi, or it should be deep-level dialect, or. . . . There are so many versions of what our language should be, that it is a challenge to the West Indian writer, not to say I am choosing *one*, but what can I take from all of these. (interview with Daryl Cumber Dance, Port of Spain, Trinidad, March 18, 1979)

Novelist Jean D'Costa, who asserts that for the writer "the choice is both liberating and exacting" (letter to Daryl Cumber Dance, March 12, 1985), has written extensively about this matter of the choice of language (see her "The West Indian Novelist and Language: A Search for a Literary Medium," in *Studies in Caribbean Language*, ed. Laurence Carrington [St. Augustine, Trinidad: Society for Caribbean Linguistics, 1983], pp. 252–65; and "Expression and Com-

munication: Literary Challenges to the Caribbean Polydialectal Writer," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 19 [August 1984], 123–41). A sensitive issue in evaluating the work of writers such as Vic Reid, Louise Bennett, and Samuel Selvon has been their use of dialect, which has been variously applauded and condemned. Other writers have been accused of sacrificing the vitality and originality of the folk speech for a staid Standard English. The controversy rages; indeed Edward Baugh devotes one full section of his *Critics on Caribbean Literature: Readings in Literary Criticism*(1978) to this issue—part 4, "A Language of One's Own."

Language and identity are inseparable. The quest for identity is another prevalent concern in Caribbean literature. In this quest the West Indian author and his dramatis personae generally make three journeys, starting with the journey to England (or, more recently, to the United States or Canada), the journey, in other words, into the White Western world. This involves both the trauma of sailing away from all that is familiar and the agony of lonely exile; generally this journey reinforces the fact that the cold and alien land is not home and that the traveler must divest himself of his Europeanization or his Westernization, which is antithetical to his sense of himself as a West Indian. It is important to note that despite the fact that he grew up in a West Indian society where both worlds existed, it is generally not until he experiences exile that he becomes aware of how diverse his consciousness is, how at odds is his Caribbeanness to the metropolitan world. Second, there is a journey to Africa (or, for Naipaul, to India), where most find that the Middle Passage has irreparably severed them from their roots in the homeland. And finally, there is a return journey to the home island, a return which many find is impossible because their European trek, especially their European education, has taken them too far away from their people, their roots, and thus themselves. As Dennis Scott writes, "To travel / is to return / to strangers" ("Exile," *Uncle Time*, p. 5). Upon his return home Walcott's narrator finds nothing is the same as it was—"it was a book / you'd read a life ago"; and, disillusioned, he leaves, taking one last look "at things that would not say what they once meant" (*Another Life*, p. 113). For many of the younger writers, the journey in quest of identity takes place within the island itself, with the characters moving from the provinces into the modernized, industrialized, Westernized urban society. The challenge to maintain a sense of self and of tradition and culture is no less great in this journey, and the intra-island traveler frequently finds himself beset in the New World Babylon with some of the same problems and some of the same threats to self-realization that beset his earlier counterparts in England (or Canada or the United States).

The effects of metropolitan culture on Caribbean youth hamper, in many ways, the development of a healthy self-image. Such is the peril of constant exposure to American mass media in this generation, just as British education threatened those of earlier generations. To counter these influences, a number of novelists have set out to write for the young Caribbean audience. Writers such as Vic Reid, Jean D'Costa, and Andrew Salkey deliberately create a fictive world which

emphasizes and reinforces a positive Caribbean identity centered in Caribbean youth. Numerous other writers, although they address themselves to an adult audience, are no less dedicated to the task of leading their countrymen to a greater appreciation of their past, their heritage, their culture, their nations, and thus themselves. Notable among this group are Edward Brathwaite, Earl Lovelace, Michael Thelwell, Dennis Scott, Wilson Harris, and Orlando Patterson.

It is interesting also to observe that while a great many of this group of (often younger) writers pursued advanced degrees abroad, as did their predecessors, several of them received more of their education at home, some of them being among the first to study at the new University College of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston, the forerunner of the University of the West Indies. Mervyn Morris, like those who came before him, aspired to win a scholarship to a British university; instead, "A crucial thing happened to me which I should probably be eternally grateful for" (Interview with Pamela Mordecai, Kingston, Jamaica, December, 1983): he won a grant to the University College of the West Indies. Other budding and developing writers either studying or teaching at Mona at some point during this early period (from the early 1950s to the early 1960s) were Slade Hopkinson, Derek Walcott, Orlando Patterson, Jean D'Costa, Garth St. Omer, Velma Pollard, Pamela Mordecai, Dennis Scott, Sylvia Wynter, John Hearne, Neville Dawes, and Edward Brathwaite. Clearly, the coming together of so many bright young artists on their own turf at a period when their nations were gaining independence had an impact on their development as writers, as well as on their image of themselves as Caribbean men and women. Furthermore the younger writers enjoyed the active encouragement of established older scholars, especially John Figueroa and Philip Sherlock, who for long periods were associated with the University of the West Indies. Jean D'Costa recalls particularly their soirees, where one might meet visiting notables such as George Lamming, whom she first met at Figueroa's home.

The Mona group and several other of their peers, such as Michael Anthony and Earl Lovelace in Trinidad, tend generally more often to address themselves to a West Indian audience than to a foreign (usually British) audience to which their predecessors often addressed (and explained and justified) themselves. Their major concern seems to be helping their West Indian brothers discover themselves within the context of the West Indies.

The relatively new and fascinating body of Caribbean literature is just beginning to produce the criticism it deserves and requires. Among the early noteworthy studies of the literature are George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960); Wilson Harris's *Tradition the Writer & Society* (1967); Louis James's *The Islands in Between: Essays in West Indian Literature* (1968); and Gerald Moore's *The Chosen Tongue* (1969). These general studies were complemented in the 1970s with commentaries on distinct genres, such as Kenneth Ramchand's seminal *The West Indian Novel and its Background* (1970); and Lloyd Brown's definitive *West Indian Poetry* (1978). During the 1980s thematic analyses, in such works as Selwyn R. Cudjoe's *Resistance and Caribbean Literature* (1980),

have enlarged the scope of Caribbean criticism. Beginning with pamphlets such as C. L. R. James's *Wilson Harris—a Philosophical Approach* (1965), full-length studies focusing on individual authors and even on specific works now proliferate, especially examinations of V. S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris, Jean Rhys, Derek Walcott, Claude McKay, George Lamming, and Edward Brathwaite. With the exception of Ivan Van Sertima's pioneering effort (*Caribbean Writers: Critical Essays*, 1968), useful reference guides to the study of West Indian literature did not begin to appear until the late 1970s, including most notably Donald E. Herdeck's *Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical-Critical Encyclopedia* (1979); Michael Hughes's *A Companion to West Indian Literature* (1979); and Jeannette B. Allis's *West Indian Literature: An Index to Criticism 1930–1975* (1981).

Unfortunately, serious and intensive critical attention has tended to focus on only a handful of the Caribbean writers. Many authors whose contributions to Caribbean literature are widely recognized have received little or no extended treatment, having been accorded only general mention in broad surveys or brief commentaries in largely inaccessible, small regional newspapers and journals. Among the notables who have suffered this neglect are C. L. R. James, Martin Carter, Mervyn Morris, Louise Bennett, Michael Anthony, Jan Carew, Austin Clarke, Denis Williams, Jean D'Costa, and Earl Lovelace. Many of the newer writers have received no attention at all, save for newspaper reviews. This is the case with talented writers who have excited rave reviews with their first works, such as Erna Brodber, Jamaica Kincaid, and Michael Thelwell.

The essays included in this book are intended to introduce the reader to the wide range of important Caribbean writers, from the pioneers to the contemporaries. Each essay provides significant biographical information, an extended critical review of the major works and themes, an evaluative survey of selected scholarship, and a listing of major honors and awards. A bibliography of primary and secondary works, with full publication data, concludes each essay. Frequently cited general references are not detailed in each bibliography, but the reader is referred to the relevant item in the General Bibliography.

In addition to providing the first extended studies of several important Caribbean authors, *Fifty Caribbean Writers* significantly updates, supplements, and expands the biographical, critical, and bibliographical information available on most of those writers who have been considered elsewhere. Not only does this collection provide a convenient introduction to the authors and a handy overview of their works and critiques, such as the beginning researcher might require, but it also provides challenging and provocative critical commentaries which even the most advanced scholar will find indispensable. Furthermore the range of concerns in Caribbean literature and the varied approaches of the critics to individual authors will provide material of interest to students from a variety of fields other than literature, including politics, sociology, religion, economics, history, music, art, folklore, and linguistics.

Contributors to *Fifty Caribbean Writers* include leading scholars of Caribbean

literature from throughout the world, many of whom have produced several of the seminal and definitive studies of Caribbean literature (see Contributors). A small majority of the essays were prepared by critics from the Caribbean, including Caribbean writers themselves (some of whom are also treated separately in this volume). Within this group is represented a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences and ethnic groups. The scholars hail from a number of different islands. Although all of them have received some part of their education outside the West Indies, a large number of them have spent most of their professional lives in the Caribbean, for the most part associated with one of the colleges of the University of the West Indies. Several others are affiliated with major American, Canadian, or European universities. Racially, they include Blacks, Whites, Chinese, and Indians. The remaining essays were prepared by European, Canadian, Indian, and American scholars, a number of whom have connections with the Caribbean beyond their research interests, a few being descendants of emigrants from the Caribbean and others having taught, traveled, and lived in the area. Many of the essayists are personally acquainted with their subjects and were able to make use of interviews, correspondence, and long associations to enhance their studies and add new perspectives to their analyses.

Looking at the range of Caribbean writing treated in the following essays, the reader can begin to assess for himself the richness of this emerging literature, the uniqueness of the Caribbean experience it captures, and the fascinating promise it holds for the future. The Caribbean writer who, like Derek Walcott, "entered the house of literature as a houseboy" (*Another Life*, 1973, p. 77), has earned the right to partake freely of whatever sacraments of that sacred house he desires: indeed, Mervyn Morris, making use of a similar image in a poem which also considers the subject of the Caribbean writer educated in an alien tradition, declares, "And these are my rooms now" (*The Pond*, 1973, p. 16). Not only have the Caribbean writers appropriated what they require from their European heritage, but they seize upon their rich African and Indian traditions as well. These people who (to paraphrase Martin Carter) come "from the nigger yard of yesterday" (*Poems of Resistance*, 1979, p. 41), these "sweepers of an ancient sky" and "discoverers of new planets" (p. 33) are creating a remarkable canon that firmly enshrines them in the international arena of world literature, one that captivates, challenges, and inspires us all.