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## On Caribbean Autobiographies

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Thank you, Donette, for inviting me to contribute to this panel, which includes scholars whom I have admired and learned from all along the way.

To begin with your point of departure, Professor Baugh's "The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History" (1976), which was featured in *Small Axe* 38 with brilliant reviews by Larry Breiner, Alison Donnell, and Nadi Edwards and a response to all by Edward Baugh. This essay was an important point of clarification for me when it first appeared, not only because of the centrality of History, but also because his use of specific use of Quarrel, a Caribbean condition of being for generations of writers, men and women. I was a Lecturer in English at UWI, Jamaica, then, and directly engaged in the works of all the writers featured in Baugh's article. While I recognized at the outset that the Caribbean writer was locating me in my world within symbolic frameworks that were both liberating and constricting, Quarrel laid the foundation for a critical reading of historical consciousness that is still current.

In direct response to your question about what animated my work on Caribbean autobiography, I'd have to say that it began with my emotional and intellectual engagement with African American autobiography as a graduate student under the direction of Professor Donald Gibson at the U of Connecticut (1969-1974), and was informed by the work of scholars like William Anderson, Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, Charles Davis, James Olney, Francis Smith Foster and Nellie McKay. The thematic urgency and aesthetic sophistication of a genre that rewrites its parameters continually within the specific historicity of time and place, class, caste, nation and gender opened up new avenues of thought for me. Under the tutelage of George Lamming, also at the U of Connecticut, I came to understand more of the relationship between fiction and autobiography, memory and history in African American literature, African, and Caribbean Literature, and the creative power of exploiting the natural affinity of the genres to each other. Later, immersion in teaching, writing and researching Caribbean literature at UWI (1974-1977) provided untold opportunities for deepening my understanding of distinctive elements of the literature and culture.

I was at the University of Pennsylvania when William Andrews asked me to write an essay on West Indian autobiography for a special issue on 20<sup>th</sup> century autobiography for *Black American Literature Forum* (Summer 1990). I did not know where the project would take me but I knew what questions to ask. The challenge would be to identify and theorize what was distinctly Caribbean as opposed to African American but the writers made that easier than I expected. My work on Caribbean autobiography grew at every opportunity, and when I published *Caribbean Autobiography* (U of Wisconsin Press, 2002), the MS. contained about half of what I had prepared.

In regard to the geographical WHERE of my critical quest, though my original impetus came from African American literature, research and scholarship

in the USA, after publishing “West Indian Autobiography,” the impetus shifted to the Caribbean after that--at the U of Miami and the Caribbean Writers Summer Institute, and through renewed engagement with UWI in particular. Through direct engagement with established and aspiring writers and critics, I deepened my understanding of the centrality of the personal narrative to the unfolding creative project that was Caribbean literature.

Over the past few years, my primary research interest has been the transnational practices and imaginings of the Caribbean writer as nomadic subject, and the flexibility in geographic and social positioning that this suggests. It seemed a logical continuation of my work on autobiography and in fact nurtured it. That came home to me when I designed my last graduate course at UM; it was a course on Caribbean Autobiography that used *Caribbean Autobiography* as a point of departure. My description of that course has been published under the title, “Autobiographical Occasions: A Graduate Seminar in Caribbean Autobiography” in *Teaching Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (Approaches to Teaching World Literature) by Supriya M. Nair:

Caribbean Literature: Autobiographical Occasions builds on the ground established in my *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation*; that is, it is designed to generate a teaching and learning trajectory that does not simply repeat the substance of the book but rather, amplifies its frame of reference and complicates its thematic; with different readings, new theoretical frameworks, and critical approaches. There is some repetition where the texts are seminal to the twin objectives of this seminar, and there are omissions where texts are not readily available. The methodology of *Caribbean Autobiography* resurfaces in an unwavering attention to historical and cultural contexts, with an emphasis on the ideological and aesthetic values generated by an individual text. As I argue in the book, each autobiographical narrative is historically and culturally specific. In Caribbean autobiographical culture, the "self is continually reinvented in a contested literary space, and as such it lays the foundations or diverse conceptions of individual and group identity." In practice, Caribbean autobiography is a space of difference. The process of self-invention is dynamic and one of "openness and closure concealment and disclosure, recognition and non-recognition" in each of the works. (261, 258)

In another as yet unpublished essay entitled “Autobiography and Autobiographical Fiction,” I characterized developments in the genre since the 1950s. The number of women writing and writing about intimate experiences of sexuality, nomadism, community, family, childhood, race, class, culture,

inheritance, nation, nation landscape and being, has transformed the contours of Caribbean autobiography. In fact, some of the gendered differences between masculine self-fashioning and feminine self-fashioning in autobiographical writing since the 50s is a matter of some substance, as is the emergence of distinct Caribbean ethnicities in Europe and the Americas, and all this is ready for further study.

Works Cited

Paquet, Sandra Pouchet. "Autobiographical Occasions: A Graduate Seminar in Caribbean Autobiography." *Teaching Anglophone Caribbean Literature*. Ed. Supriya Nair. New York: Modern Language Association, 2012. 365-379.