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## Intellectual Formations

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When I was an undergraduate in English at Mona in the early 1980s, I was torn between my excitement about the literature I was studying, and advice I was getting from friends that a degree in English was not viable—advice that ultimately led me to enroll in courses in Public Relations in the Extra Mural Department. Of course this is a concern that we still have about the humanities that has less perhaps to do with its inherent viability than our willingness, first, to figure out how to reveal its capacity to be continually exciting, sustainable, and irreverent to students weaned on social media, and visual and aural cultures; and then to embrace rather than be put off by our institutional dependence on the marketplace. I studied with Eddie Baugh, Curdella Forbes, Evelyn O’Callaghan, Victor Chang, Carolyn Cooper, Gloria Hull, who was visiting for a year as a Fulbright Scholar, Mervyn Morris, Maureen Warner-Lewis, David Williams, and others. My instructors were Caribbeanists who were working on the region’s writers in their research, though I was reading Chaucer, Aidoo, Pope, Eliot (T.S. and George), Ellison, Fitzgerald, Donne, Morrison, Shakespeare, and Soyinka with them. I still get goose bumps when I remember Morris’s overview of the writers we would be studying, in the first session of his West Indian literature course: Brathwaite, Bennett, Rhys, Brodber, Harris, Naipaul. I realize now that I was reading “New Critically”; I was not reading the Wynter/Ramchand debates, or Brathwaite’s literary history, for example. This is not to say other students weren’t, but I was not. I remember creeping into a symposium in the Senate building – Baugh and Brathwaite seemed to be talking about the ideological orientation of the English department – though I wouldn’t have context for making sense of this until much later. Similarly Rhonda Cobham’s archival work ~~and so on~~, I would discover later on my own. I will spend the rest of my remarks responding to the opening question put to me at this Roundtable: why did my 2002 book, *Creole Recitations: John Jacob Thomas and Colonial Formation in the Late Nineteenth-Century Caribbean*, focus on “what might feel like 1970 quarrels,” and how, if at all, was this project connected to the preoccupations of two subsequent editorial projects: a 2000 *Small Axe* special issue on “Genders and Sexualities,” and the 2011 *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean*?

In what sense would John Jacob Thomas be a “1970s” preoccupation? I imagine that this assumption has to do with the way that he has been discussed by political scientists such as Rupert Lewis and John La Guerre, and historians such as Bridget Brereton and Carl Campbell: in terms of a black intellectual tradition in the region, schoolmasters who later entered the legal and other professions, and the nineteenth-century newspapers that were sites of influence for non-propertied men. For John La Rose who had a direct and urgent political interest in asserting Caribbean histories in a hostile English landscape in the 1960s, and whose Beacon Press reissued Thomas’s books in London, Thomas’s usefulness was obvious. For Wilson Harris, who was impatient with modes of nationalist and

postcolonial protest that celebrated vindication, Thomas and others shared the same ideological terrain as his Victorian interlocutors, and that kind of conservatism could only exacerbate a kind of stasis, instead of generating productive, imaginative solutions to our regional dilemmas. In such contexts, claiming the *imperial* as productive, as someone like Thomas did, could only be seen as old-fashioned and misguided.

So what questions are we asking when we view Thomas in these ways—*was Thomas radical, or even relevant, given pressing political, cultural, ideological issues in the immediate post-independence period of the late 1960s and early 1970s?*—such that La Rose’s answer was “yes, Thomas is useful,” and Harris’s was “no, he’s really not”? While I appreciate all of this, these were not *my* questions at all, and so what would it mean to use Thomas to take up issues of intellectual formation that were of interest to me, and would these inevitably fold back into and enhance the preoccupations of others, or could something different be illuminated?

As a prospective literary critic in graduate school looking for a dissertation topic, then, Thomas could be said to be the property of historians and social scientists; for a woman who considered herself to be a feminist, he was clearly irrelevant—*right?* Who are our forbears, what are our traditions, what questions are we asking when the answer is that Thomas clearly cannot be relevant? For me, the question of intellectual formation was key, and nothing in my studies as an English major at Mona suggested that Thomas was part of my horizon. Which is not to say that this *could not have been* the case—merely that it had not been, for me. But my career as a UWI student made all of these questions *matter*, and *fiercely*. So I set about writing a dissertation on C. L. R. James, I think, and the single James chapter of the dissertation did not make it into the book but survives as an article in *South Atlantic Quarterly*. James was beginning to be taken up in the most tremendous way in the North American and European contexts while I was doing my graduate work, so any study of James was going to join all of this. I was very curious about where James had *come from*, in an intellectual sense. I just couldn’t *see* the nineteenth century, in the anglophone Caribbean context. I could see the Haitian and hispanophone writers in the region for that time period, but who were the anglophone ones? Thomas allowed me to think about all of this. I came to him through James and Naipaul, in the process of trying to understand them: where did they come from, and what kind of formation accounted for them?

How could I think of Englishness shaping rather than simply undermining their critique of colonial systems, or their assertion of mid-twentieth-century Afro- or Indo-Caribbean identities? And to ask it through Naipaul and James in particular, put me in Trinidad. A combination of what I would now call African Diaspora studies (my M.A. in Afro-American Literature) and postcolonial cultural studies (a PhD in Literature) made someone like Thomas legible to me as a way

of thinking through the *literary* writing-back-to-empire questions (*Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*, or *Guerillas* and *Wuthering Heights*) in a slightly different register. I wanted to try to narrate Caribbean pasts within that postcolonial purview, where issues of empire and Englishness would be integral to rather than hovering above and outside of what was constitutive of *Caribbean* realities.

Was it possible to narrate Caribbean and Victorian contexts *simultaneously*, for example, as a way of taking seriously insights about center and periphery, interior-national and exterior-imperial, Caribbean and European, informing and shaping each other rather than being cleanly marked off from each other? This is what Edward Said and Paul Gilroy and others were asking, and the work of Catherine Hall on the impact of the Morant Bay Rebellion on London's intellectual life was *mind-blowing* for me—I'm sure my hands were shaking when I first read her work on 1865 in my department's small library in Durham, North Carolina. At UWI I had studied West Indian literature, and I had studied also Victorian literature with a Caribbeanist (Eddie Baugh), but I couldn't see how these informed each other before working on Thomas made it clearer to me. In this sense a book I wish so much I had read thoroughly and mastered before I finished *Creole Recitations*, Belinda Edmondson's 1999 *Making Men*, was a supple analysis of how gender, Englishness, and blackness informed each other in the anglophone Caribbean context.

Thomas also allowed me to address the crucial factor of the "middle-class," which remains a very uncool and invisible category in Caribbean Studies. I couldn't *see* that category (just as you can't see Thomas as male if you keep him separated from questions of gender, or from women) because speaking *for* the working class or "the folk" always becomes speaking *as*, or at least an apology for not being "the folk." So what did it mean that Thomas was a member of an emerging middle class, and what did it mean for literary and cultural formations: how we tend to conceive of creole speech as the natural and authentic property of the working class, for instance. Thomas's study of creole languages, and francophone elites' investment in creole languages made me rethink this.

Some additional questions: was it significant that Thomas taught in a town such as Cedros that was comprised of about one-third people of South Asian descent, and could his story be narrated with that in mind? That is, could or should a *black* intellectual tradition be told with Indo-Trinidadians as critical to the narrative? What did the injunction that *Asian and Black will not mix* in the assumptions of Victorians such as James Anthony Froude and Charles Kingsley help me to understand about Thomas, and how was it still insidiously framing our assumptions in the late twentieth century? What did it mean that there were *two* white factions, anglophone and francophone, in Trinidad, and could I show that they were powerful relative to the rest of the colony, *and* differently located in relation to each other, in terms of cultural power? How did either of these white

factions shape Thomas' own loyalties or interests? Was his relationship to propertied men of color different from his relationship to non-propertied men of color; when was the distinction between black and brown men significant? How to account for Thomas's relationship to the women he and other middle-class men saw as being so crucial to the "progress of the race"? What about women who were not middle class?

So the question of considering various social actors *relationally* was absolutely crucial for me, and this shapes, for instance, my definition of "creole" in the keywords section of the book. Thomas and the Afro- and Indo-Caribbean working class; Afro- and Indo-Caribbean women as virtuous, desirable, promiscuous, in relation to each other; Thomas and white creole men; Thomas and a white creole woman; Thomas and Victorian intellectuals in their similar and different assumptions and material realities. To sum up simply: these issues did not feel like 1970s preoccupations as I was working them out.

As far as sexuality and citizenship is concerned, I think of the confluence of several factors: Caribbean-based colleagues thinking through questions of women's studies, gender and development, sexual rights; colleagues in North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, thinking about globalization, disciplinary relevance, locatedness, sexual rights; literary folks trying to absorb the game-changing Caribbean fiction of the last two decades, in terms of both sexual violence and sexual desire; and then all of us trying to work out both sexual violence in the region since the 1990s, and the discursive contexts in which such violence was defended, condemned, and used either to pathologize or justify Caribbean people; the ways in which *Small Axe* allowed me to work out these questions with both the special issue and my piece on M. Jacqui Alexander.

I think that like others I was traumatized both by this sexual violence as it was unfolding as of the late 1990s, and by what it meant to talk about it. Issues of authenticity and relevance made themselves felt very strongly at conferences, especially those held in the Caribbean. These raised very humbling issues of privilege for those of us based in North America, and rightly so, but it was also very frustrating. The challenge for me has been to connect these two strands in my work: nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century traditions and formations, on the one hand, and sexuality, sovereignty, and self-making on the other.

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