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Going with the Flow

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“The easy dichotomy between “history” and “people” is surprising. As if history is a mighty river, separate and self-contained, and people are either lucky or unlucky depending on whether they are able to get into the flow. As if people are not history.”

– Edward Baugh, “The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel With History”

I entered the University of the West Indies at Mona as an undergraduate in 1971, and spent the next four years immersed in the “intellectual and political ferment,” as Edward Baugh characterizes it, that “saw the burgeoning of West Indian criticism and theorizing of West Indian literature, sharpened by debate, indeed quarrelling, about the true or desirable nature and role of both the literature and the criticism” (“Reflections” 109). Amnesia being a mainstay of Caribbean history, however, it was some time before I learnt to navigate the historical waters in which I found myself. I had observed the 1970 Trinidad Black Power revolution, albeit from behind the safe walls of Bishop Anstey High School. But I had never heard of Walter Rodney, and I knew nothing about the 1968 disturbances in Jamaica associated with his expulsion. I took for granted the momentous changes those events precipitated, especially the changes to the UWI English department curriculum, which Baugh describes in his essay for this volume, and the cultural shifts that followed the Rastafarian occupation of the Creative Arts Center at Mona, which Kamau Brathwaite describes in his essay “The Love Axe.”

Just because we do not know our history does not mean that it does not shape us. I had started secondary school in 1963, the year Trinidad gained its independence, so I benefitted from changes students a mere three years ahead of me would have considered inconceivable. Our legendary principal, Stephanie Shurland, as well as the majority of our teachers were West Indians. The young expatriates who rounded out the staff included English women like Pat Naipaul, Vidia’s wife, who had thrown in their lot, for short periods or a lifetime, with the new national order. Walcott’s perennially homeless theater company rehearsed in our school auditorium and I attended its 1970 production of *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*. Granted, our Cambridge A-level English syllabus included no West Indian authors, but there were West Indian novels on my family’s bookshelves. And in my afterschool drama group with Jean Herbert we recited a poem by Harold M. Telemaque that seemed to voice our new national pride as well as our old colonial yearnings:

In our land,
Poppies do not spring
From atoms of young blood,

So gaudily where men have died:
In our land,
Stiletto cane blades
Sink into our hearts,
And drink our blood. (*Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse* 34)

In choosing, eventually, a career as a Caribbean literary critic, I was following a course only recently charted. Kenneth Ramchand, the first person I met who had written a book I was required to read, had only just begun teaching the new West Indian literature course when I arrived at Mona. I had no idea anyone had fought to make that possible. I took it for granted that Edward Baugh always had been the head of the English department, that Gloria Lin, who taught seventeenth-century English Literature, was Jamaican, and that in my Anglo-Saxon course with Maureen Warner we compared *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* to African oral poetry. That hybridity extended beyond the classroom. On weekends at the Student Union, I learnt to dance reggae to the music by Bob Marley and Inner Circle. But I remember walking around the aqueduct one night with a bookish young man from St. Elizabeth whose afro was just beginning the transition into dreadlocks, listening to him recite Andrew Marvell's poem "Bermudas." It seemed perfectly appropriate that Walcott would take the name of his first internationally published poetry collection, *In a Green Night*, from that same seventeenth-century English poem. And though, at Dr. Baugh's suggestion, I focused my Caribbean Studies senior project on the BBC *Caribbean Voices* program, when I started work on a Master's thesis under his supervision the following year, I chose to explore questions of doubt and faith in Matthew Arnold's work. I only switched to Caribbean literature after I left Mona for the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, where it dawned on me that no one in Scotland was interested in what I had to say about the Victorians.

At each stage in my intellectual development I have had the good fortune to enter the flow of a conversation already in progress. In Scotland, I made contact with Paul Edwards, Ramchand's former dissertation advisor at the University of Edinburgh. In the course of an unforgettable twenty-four hours of non-stop carousing, he introduced me to Sam Selvon, who, at the time, was Writer-in-Residence close by at Stirling University. Selvon was pessimistic about the future, despite the recent critical success of *Moses Ascending*. Holed up in drafty, sparsely furnished temporary quarters, he missed his family and was dreading his impending relocation to Canada. He enjoyed reminiscing about the circle of writers around the *Caribbean Voices* program in 1950s London and encouraged me to focus my research on those early days. In another lucky coincidence, the English department at the University of St. Andrews hired Peter Bayley as its new Chair. Bayley had been Naipaul's tutor at Oxford in the 1950s

and was knowledgeable about Caribbean letters. He became my dissertation advisor and encouraged me to pursue my new research direction.

Armed with introductions from Selvon to George Lamming, Wilson Harris and John La Rose, I relocated to London and started reading my way through everything about early Caribbean literature that I could find in the British library. Lamming introduced me to the work of socialist critics like Raymond Williams and Georg Lukács, in an attempt, as he put it, to correct the humanist bias of my UWI undergraduate education. Harris started me thinking about classical writers and European philosophers I had not previously encountered, especially after I edited the revisions to his poem *Eternity to Season* for the New Beacon Press. Through John La Rose, Sarah White and the cultural circle around their New Beacon Bookshop, I met many people who had been part of CAM, the group of intellectuals and activists Brathwaite had convened while he was a graduate student at Sussex University in the 1960s. Conversations with them deepened my understanding of the interconnectedness between Caribbean literature and history. So did my chance encounters with elderly, working-class Jamaican immigrants, who filled me in on the details of the fights between Marcus Garvey and Norman Manley in the 1930s, as well as the later Federation debacle. My undergraduate work on *Caribbean Voices* opened other doors. Henry Swanzy, who succeeded Una Marson as editor and producer of the BBC program, welcomed me into his home. He was as delighted as Selvon had been to have someone to talk to about those heady days in the development of Caribbean writing and he became a valuable source of information about the writers' early careers, as well as about the editors at André Deutsch and Secker and Warburg who took a chance on them.

After Lamming put us in touch, Reinhard Sander who, like me, was working on Caribbean literary history, and I began a lifelong personal and professional relationship. As a student activist in 1960s Berlin, Reinhard had shifted his academic research from Russian to American literature when the Soviet socialist experiment soured. His interest in Caribbean and African literature was sparked while interviewing Lamming, Harris, and C.L.R. James, who visited the University of Texas at Austin on the invitation of his Ph.D. advisor, the Africanist, Bernth Lindfors. By the time our paths crossed, Reinhard had spent a research year in Trinidad and three years teaching in Nigeria, and he had developed a formidable network of relationships with Caribbean and African writers and critics. Our first conversation was a kind of dozens game of trading names and dates within the field, which I think each of us imagined we won. We were in full agreement, however, about the work that still needed to be done. Ramchand's *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*, while accurately summarizing earlier literary periods, maintained that West Indian literary production only became significant in the 1950s. For Reinhard and me, immersed

as we were in the earlier literature that claim seemed unnecessarily limiting and we dreamed of changing the paradigm. Reinhard's book *The Trinidad Awakening* and his successful efforts to bring works by Alfred Mendes, Ralph de Boissière and Albert Gomes back into circulation, were crucial in establishing early-twentieth-century Trinidadian writing within the Caribbean literary canon. My dissertation and the essays I spun off from it, including "Women in Jamaican Literature" in *Out of the Kumbula*, attempted, similarly, to set the early Jamaican record straight. One of the signal pleasures of recent years has been observing how the canonical parameters we aspired to reset thirty years ago have shifted once again; so much so, that today's scholars often open their studies by taking issue with our claims, in much the same way that we took issue with Ramchand's.

My five years as a lecturer and graduate student in Jamaica, England and Scotland were followed by six years as a researcher in Germany in the 1980s, where the field of African Studies was expanding in response to new political initiatives to bring European scholarship about Africa into the postcolonial era. The new University of Bayreuth had assembled a cosmopolitan interdisciplinary mix of scholars and provided us with generous funding to work on multi-year projects on modern African cultures and societies. The University also acquired part of Ulli Beier's collection of African and Asian contemporary art and hired him to direct a new cultural center at Iwalewa House. Beier, an Austrian Jew who had left Europe during the Second World War, had been instrumental in fostering the development of modern Nigerian art and literature. The irony that Bayreuth, hometown of Richard Wagner and headquarters to the Nazi's stenographic offices, had hired a Jew to promote contemporary African culture in Germany and that our African Studies program was first housed in the Nazi's former Steno Haus, did not escape us. Here, too, the river's course was shifting.

The funds allocated to Bayreuth's African research projects allowed us to travel widely in Africa and to bring colleagues from Africa and elsewhere to Bayreuth for extended stays. There was a constant flow of Caribbean and African writers and artists through our offices, homes and favorite beer gardens. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o completed work on *Decolonising the Mind* in a house across the street from us, and Nuruddin Farah wrote the better part of his Somali trilogy during his year in Bayreuth. John Agard and Grace Nichols (who had shared a house with Reinhard and me in Sussex), John Hearne and Michael Anthony, Buchi Emecheta and the late Kofi Anyidoho were among the many African and Caribbean writers who passed through Bayreuth for lectures and conferences. Maureen Warner-Lewis and Rupert Lewis visited us during their sabbatical year in Czechoslovakia. Maureen and Onibokuta, a Yoruba artist and *orisha*, whom the Beiers were hosting, spent long hours at my dining table deciphering the most esoteric of the Yoruba chants Maureen had collected in Trinidad. In my own travels in East and West Africa, Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage* acquired new meanings.

In this atmosphere of intense cultural exchange, as well as in response to the pressures of new motherhood, I developed my expertise in issues of gender, which I applied now to Caribbean and African topics. I produced a controversial feminist reading of Chinua Achebe's *Thing Fall Apart*, as well as essays that differentiated between Caribbean and North American feminist agendas, and between African and new world literary approaches to feminist issues. During my time in Germany, I also established a working relationship with the Women's Press in London, whose exiled South African editor, Ros de Lanerolle, was building upon African American women writers' popularity with Black British readers by publishing new works by women of color. I acted as consulting editor on Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging*, Merle Collins' *Angel*, Pauline Melville's *Shape Shifter*, Sistren's *Lionheart Gal*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and several other novels by Caribbean, Middle Eastern and Southern African women writers. Merle Collins and I also collaborated on *Watchers and Seekers*, an anthology of writing by black women in Britain. Its introduction showcased Una Marson, whose overlooked literary contributions I had examined in my dissertation.

My move to America in 1986 was made under duress. I was horrified by the American invasion of Grenada in 1983 and felt strongly that if I could not work in the Caribbean I would rather stay in Europe than sell out to America. Once we began to explore the possibility of moving, however, I discovered that here, too a channel had been cleared for me by a preceding generation of scholars. At the first Black Women Writers' conference, in East Lansing, Michigan in 1985, I met such leaders in the field of black feminist criticism as Deborah McDowell, Hortense Spillers, Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde and Katie Canon, among many others. The Caribbean also was represented. I listened with deep emotion to Maryse Condé speak about her decision to move back to Guadeloupe. Vèvè Clark, who worked on Haiti, became a trusted mentor. Not even in the Caribbean had I encountered so many women doing such innovative work in my field. Like Europe, the American academy had discovered black writing, especially black women's writing, and my success on the job market soon confirmed brought that scholars with my background and expertise were in high demand.

There was a troubling underside to this newfound academic visibility. By the mid-1980s, punitive financial constraints imposed by the IMF were exacerbating political instability in the developing world in ways that put personal and academic freedoms at risk. Strapped for cash, many Caribbean and African states were slashing funding for their fledgling universities. Within a few years of my arrival in America, almost every African writer and critic I had gotten to know during my travels in Africa had relocated to the United States; some, like Ngũgĩ, as a result of political persecution, others, like Biodun Jeyifo, who had helped me

navigate Nigeria, and Chikwenye Ogunyemi, my coeditor on a special issue of *Research in African Literatures*, as a consequence of activist burnout, life threatening home invasions or sharply curtailed funding opportunities. Caribbean-based writers like Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite also were on the move and in demand, in response to similar exigencies. However, the American colleges and universities clamoring to hire us rarely were prepared to embrace more than one token outsider. Many relocated writers and critics found themselves isolated in small college towns or on large University campuses, among colleagues with little understanding of what they did or how the various subfields of “Black literature,” “Postcolonial literature” or “Commonwealth literature” intersected with each other.

From this perspective, Amherst College in Western Massachusetts turned out to be a welcome anomaly. The four colleges in the Pioneer Valley – Smith, Hampshire, Amherst and Mt. Holyoke – and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst were part of a Five College Consortium that had a long history of interest in black writing in general and Caribbean and African writing in particular. One of the first Afro-American Studies departments in America had been established at the University of Massachusetts in the early 1970s. The South African writer Dennis Brutus had spent a year in the English department at Amherst at the height of the apartheid era, and Chinua Achebe had held a visiting professorship at the University of Massachusetts. On the Caribbean side, the Jamaican novelist, Michael Thelwell, had been teaching at the University since the 1970s. Andrew Salkey held a lifetime position as Writer-in-Residence at Hampshire, similar to the one that Cuban novelist and literary theorist Antonio Benítez-Rojo held in the Spanish department at Amherst. The Puerto Rican writer and critic Roberto Marquez, who previously had taught at Hampshire, was soon to join the tenured faculty at Mt. Holyoke. Hampshire hired the Guyanese writer Jan Carew in the same year Reinhard and I started jobs at Hampshire and Amherst, respectively. Moreover, a not insignificant number of our American colleagues in the Five Colleges had research interests that included Caribbean texts and authors. By the 1990s, when Amherst College hired first Caryl Phillips and then Fred D’Aguiar to help revitalize its creative writing program, the Five Colleges could boast a critical mass of Caribbean and African writers and scholars. As had been the case in Bayreuth, the constant flow of visiting authors and critics enlivened our intellectual exchanges. The Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène’s Five College residency marked his first visit to America and the Ghanaian novelist, Ama Ata Aidoo, later held a similar position. Visiting fellowships at Amherst allowed Honor Ford-Smith to complete work on her poetry collection, *My Mother’s Last Dance*, and helped Niala Maharaj make significant progress on her debut novel, *Like Heaven*. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, this literary traffic was sustaining a new cohort of Caribbeanists, including Nicole

Matos and Carole Bailey, both graduate students at the University of Massachusetts, Rachel Mordecai, who joined the University faculty in 2007, and Raphael Dalleo, whose 1999 Amherst College senior thesis research on Robert Antoni sparked his scholarly interest in Caribbean literary studies.

My own critical expertise also was expanding in response to stimulating new colleagues and the challenge of teaching Caribbean and African literature in a fresh critical context. Pioneering theoretical work by such nationally known Amherst colleagues as the queer theorist Eve Sedgwick, the Latin Americanist Doris Sommer, and the poststructuralist scholar Andrew Parker, as well as provocative new creative and critical work by such Caribbean writers as Diane Alexander, Jennifer Rahim and Dionne Brand, were making me aware of the silence around non-heteronormative sexualities in Caribbean cultural criticism, generally, and in my own work in particular. My interest in gender now expanded to include sexuality, in essays written for such volumes as *Nationalisms and Sexualities* and *Queer Diasporas*, edited by Five College colleagues. I also began to repurpose psychoanalytic theories to address the relationship between Creole linguistics and Lacanian claims about language, in essays on Jamaica Kincaid, Robert Antoni, Edwidge Danticat, and Colin Ferguson.

In recent years I have found myself returning to the themes and concerns that first drew me to Caribbean literature. New technologies in the Digital Humanities, which support such resources as the Digital Library of the Caribbean at the University of Florida at Gainesville, the West Indian collection at UWI St. Augustine and the archives at the Jamaica National Library, have made it easier for scholars to take on archival projects and to collaborate across national borders. Writers whose careers began in the 1950s have started making their personal papers available to scholars, facilitating definitive biographies, like Bruce King's on Derek Walcott and Patrick French's on V.S. Naipaul. Critical forums in venues like *Anthurium*, *JWIL* and *Small Axe* and a flood of carefully researched new monographs are changing the theoretical contours of the field. My work with Lise Winer, Bridget Brereton and others to edit and reissue four early Trinidadian novels through the University of the West Indies Press, has allowed me to contribute once more to extending the story we tell about the Caribbean literary canon. In other recent publications, I have taken that interest in a new direction, to examine how the literary giants Brathwaite, Walcott and Naipaul attempt to shape their literary legacies, by using their later work to direct readers towards specific, often revisionist readings of their relationship to the social landscapes their earlier works helped create.

The critics who carved out channels for my safe passage in Jamaica, England, Germany and America gave me the space to go with the flow, as well as to step away from the turbulent crosscurrents of ideological debate and map broader patterns of convergence among writers and between theoretical schools.

My sense of indebtedness to those who preceded me has kept me particularly attuned to questions of literary history, just as the training I received at Mona continues to underwrite my commitment to close readings of literary texts. I feel tremendously privileged to have had teachers like Eddie Baugh, Ken Ramchand and Maureen Warner; to have been able to spend countless hours listening to George Lamming and Sam Selvon, Ulli Beier and Henry Swanzy, Gordon Rohlehr and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o talk about what it was like to be at the forefront of historical changes in the creation and study of African and Caribbean Literatures.

But most of all I treasure how the themes, language and landscapes Caribbean writers invoke have helped define my lived experience. I often linger over these lines from Brathwaite's *Sun Poem*:

But heroes were in books,
and few of our fathers were heroes,
and we their sons learnt mainly to survive
although a few went out and fought
or spoke brave words from pulpits (*Sun Poem* 61)

I like to imagine that they offer me insight into the predicaments and aspirations of my own father, who fostered my love of books but died a month before I entered secondary school. Dionne Brand's description of her aunts in *Land to Light On* provides insights into the mixed messages the aunts in my family conveyed about sexuality and independence, pleasure and loss, wrapped up in memories of the smell of fresh bread and furniture polish, the taste of fried fish and of paradise plums. Each encounter with the new words Erna Brodber coins in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* to describe the painful, exhilarating process of coming of age in the midst of the political turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s, takes me back to the cultural intensity and political activism of my undergraduate days on the Mona campus; the nights circling the aqueduct, listening to a would-be radical reciting Marvell between bouts of revolutionary fervor. When one of Naipaul's characters in *The Mimic Men* tells Ralph Singh, on the eve of his departure from the Caribbean, that he will never know an elm tree or an oak in the way that he knows the slippery smooth bark of a guava tree, or understand the seasons in the way that "[h]ere you wait for the poui to flower one week in the year and you don't even know you are waiting," I experience afresh the pain of my own exile (171-2). As Jamaica Kincaid in *See Now Then* pans away from her protagonist's attempts to juggle motherhood and writing, marriage and career, in order to contemplate with us a New England landscape saturated with a history into which she must struggle to insert her story, I wonder how and when she found her way into my head.

In *The Bounty*, Walcott admonishes himself and his reader:

Never get used to this; the feathery, swaying casuarinas,
the morning silent light on shafts of bright grass,
the growling *Aves* of the ocean, the white lances of the marinas,
the surf fingering its beads, hail heron and gull full of grace,
since that is all you need to do now at your age
and its coming serene extinction like the light on the shale
at sunset, and your gift fading out of this page; (39)

Reading these lines I understand that the poet is not merely describing the heart-stopping view from the verandah of his St. Lucian home. He is also reminding those of us whose imaginations have been shaped by Caribbean writing that we should never take for granted the privilege of being surrounded by writers, teachers, students and colleagues with whom we can share what it means to be part of this history, this landscape, this language.

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