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Interventions in Caribbean Writing

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My connection with Caribbean literature followed a pattern begun in my early teens. As a precocious schoolboy I'd explored the exciting and demotic writing of the USA (Mailer, Chandler Brossard, Baldwin, Kerouac et al – bought from a semi-pornographic little bookstore in one of the seedier parts of Manchester, where I went to school). These seemed so much more interesting than dull novels about the middle classes in the UK – though I'd liked British working class writers such as Alan Sillitoe and Stan Barstow. At the University of Leeds (1965-1968), which was then the centre for what was still called "Commonwealth" studies, the university bookshop stocked African and a little Caribbean writing. I remember buying Andrew Salkey's Faber collection of Caribbean short stories. Despite my reservations about its lingering Stalinism, I joined the Communist Party after being arrested on an anti-Vietnam war demonstration – the CP seemed the sanest and most grounded of the left organisations, and only political careerists joined the Labour Party. Outside course requirements (a mono-cultural plod from Chaucer to TS Eliot) my reading had anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist convictions. I remember finding an old copy of Cheddi Jagan's *The West On Trial* at the CP bookshop in their dusty offices above Leeds' market, which I bought along with books and pamphlets by Marx, Lenin and Plekhanov. For the record, whilst I would still describe myself as still influenced by Marx's ideas, I parted with the view that Leninist vanguards were a good thing a long time ago. These days there's a brilliant little poem called "Music," by Merle Collins that sums up how I frequently feel. It goes: "perhaps you are/lucky// when you are in/ tune// with the music that's/ playing// not so those// who want a different/ song."

The hope that things could be other than they currently are has always fed into my activities as a publisher. Whilst there are many factors that determine what we publish, I am instinctively drawn to writing that tells uncomfortable truths, that exposes the operations of power, whether at the level of the state, business corporations or in intimate relationships. I am drawn, too, to writing that is committed to the goal of Caribbean cultural distinctiveness, though a look at our list will show that this by no means excludes those who are sceptical about cultural nationalism.

My time at Leeds University was a period when not only were there no students fees and quite generous maintenance grants, but overseas students were initially not charged fees, and then only a minimum, and there were significant numbers of radical African, Arabic and South Asian students on campus. There were few or any West Indians, though Wayne Brown had been a poet in residence just before I came, and John Hearne was a visiting lecturer who I saw around, looking macho with rolled-up sleeves to display bulging biceps, but to whom I never spoke. The relationship that was most important in the route towards deeper involvement with Caribbean writing was with the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. He was doing postgraduate work on Lamming and CLR James (and detested Hearne). At the time I'd been consuming at a great rate books from the Heinemann African Writers series,

but the conversations with Ngugi led me towards Caribbean writing, to *The Black Jacobins* and seeing that the history of Europe and the history of the Caribbean were inextricably intertwined. I think, on reflection, that I found a greater sense of connection to the Caribbean.

It was, in a closer and longer-term way, an uncomfortable part of British history, a story that I could not but take some share in. What Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* had to say spoke to me directly when he wrote: "Caliban can contribute to widening that same horizon which belongs equally to him and his contemporary Prospero; for it is only when they work together in the context of that horizon that the psychological legacy of their original contract will have been annulled..." (p. 159). Lamming qualified that statement when he added, "for the meeting to reach its most creative form it was not about a conflict between Prospero and Caliban, but "rather between Prospero and Prospero: as well as between Caliban and Caliban". I saw that as the inheritor of Prospero, the meeting with Caliban had to involve deconstructing that inheritance; but that to be a useful contributor to that meeting meant remaining true to yourself. The art was to discover a different way of being British.

Full-time postgraduate research was not really an option at that point I finished my degree because my degree wasn't that brilliant (too much time spent of extra-curricular political activities – where perhaps the future publisher was present in the student who edited the CP's student branch weekly newsletter, *Penny Red* – writing most of it, printing it down at the CP offices, and selling it outside the students' union building). I'd also got married (and a child came along unplanned not too long after) so earning a living was a priority. I trained and then worked as a lecturer in Further Education for the best part of thirty years. But the interest in the Caribbean survived and grew; I assiduously acquired and bought a wide range of Caribbean novels and collections of poetry and made long-lasting friendships with John La Rose and Sarah White at New Beacon and with Jessica and Eric Huntley at the Walter Rodney bookshop.

So, in the beginning, it was books. It was Hat calling out, "What happening there, Bogart?" And Bogart turning in his bed and mumbling softly, "so that no one heard, "What happening there, Hat?"; it was the moment when "with a squeal of brakes and a racking of its tin and wood body, the conductor, a young man, almost a boy, bent down and seized Mr Biswas's cardboard suitcase, saying impatiently, "Port of Spain, man, Port of Spain", and dragged him onto the bus to begin another life; it was what that novel taught me about my unexpressed feelings about my own father; it was the startling moment in *Of Age and Innocence* when Shepherd rises from his plane seat in sudden rage and fear and the need to test the way he stands in the eyes of others, and the fisherman Rockey saying to his friend, Thief: "Everyman hides many sources... an' there's no tellin' till the lids be taken off." (p. 380) and "A man must struggle, Thief, 'cause that is what man was fashioned for, but his struggle got to keep a clear meanin' in his head an' heart, or else... (p. 415); it

was the moment in *A Brighter Sun* when “a high wind was dropping mangoes in the yard” and Urmilla feels “a movement in her stomach and she told Rita”, and Tiger’s subsequent struggles with too sudden adulthood; or the moment in *The Lonely Londoners* when “Oh what a time it is when summer come to the city and all them girls throw away heavy winter coat... and you could coast a lime in the park”; it was Kattree who “looked serene like the far-reaching plain of stunted grass and earth” of the Corentyne, and Ramgollal the old cow minder who buries his life’s memories in the money canister he hides under the floor in his hut; it was Wilson Harris’s old Amerindian woman who sits with the searching crew, with “almost an air of crumpled pointlessness in her expression, the air that a millennium was passed, a long timeless journey was finished”. It was also Louise Bennett’s “Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie, I feel like me heart gwine burs. Jamaica people colonizin. Englan in Reverse”; it was Walcott’s “All in compassion ends/ so differently from what the heart arranged”, and “Poopa da was a fete”; it was Martin Carter’s “O long is the march of men, and long is the life/ And wide is the span”; it was Kamau Brathwaite’s “The stone had skidded arc’d and bloomed into islands.” I could go on.

I replayed some of this discovery in running supplementary classes on African and Caribbean history (and some of the literature) for West Indian students at the FE college I taught in. My awareness of how that knowledge gave many of these students an enhanced sense of who they were undoubtedly fed into my approach to Caribbean writing. There were also shared delights in reggae that last to this day. These were the days when only chart breakers such as Desmond Dekker’s “Israelites” made it onto the radio; from the students I discovered so much more, including their glee in risky singles such as Max Romeo’s “Wet Dream”. It was an attraction to things Caribbean that fitted in with my feelings about cricket, never nationalistic but focused around those individuals with a particular flair and style: Freddie Trueman could sit very comfortably beside the West Indian stars I had watched as a boy on Saturdays at the Ashton cricket ground in the Central Lancashire League: the elegance of Sobers, the pantherish Clive Lloyd, the fearsome aggression of the tearaway Roy Gilchrist who began his run in from the boundary.

I remember, too, when later I taught on an Access course for mainly Black students, preparing them for higher education, how effective was Earl Lovelace’s novel *The Wine of Astonishment* in provoking some of the students to think about their position. The novel’s treatment of the spirit of warriorism meant a great deal to a group of young men who had come off the “frontline” of the street and were conflicted about whether they were in fact selling out by coming on the course.

A little later, I enrolled to do a part-time M.Phil. It was going to be on Jamaican writing at first, but it became what I think can be said to be a pioneering part-time PhD on the literary representation of the Indian presence in the Caribbean, and a more theoretical attempt to argue a position on how writing could begin to escape from ethnocentricity to say something valuable

about the complex diversity of societies such as those of Trinidad and Guyana. Apart from documenting a vast hinterland of mainly Trinidadian and Guyanese writing, the more theoretical part focused on Lamming, Harris and on V.S. Naipaul. It was a thesis that consulted classic Marxist literary criticism (Lukacs, etc.), quarrelled with Althusserian Marxism, which I thought was a blind alley, and began to take on board some at least of the insights of early feminist criticism. It was certainly a thesis written before the postcolonial, postmodernist critical theory took a grip of the subject. I suppose my simple touchstone was that you couldn't analyse, make judgements about Caribbean writing on the basis of what the novels or poems themselves told you, which is what most of the UK-based critical writing about the Caribbean (think *The Islands In-Between*) tended to do. I was certain that you had to have extra-literary knowledge to make any kind of informed judgement. How could you trust what Naipaul was telling you about the fate of Caribbean Hinduism in his novels? As well as academic studies, I became a reader of Trinidadian and Guyanese radical journals such as *Tapia*, *Moko*, *New Beginning*, *Caribbean Contact*, *Ratoon* and much else, part of what became, and still grows, a as very extensive Caribbean library.

In 1976, I went to the Caribbean for the first time, spending three months each in Trinidad and Guyana, spending a good deal of time in libraries but also experiencing the generosity of many people in making so welcome this curious (in all senses of the word) Englishman. In Guyana, in particular I had the opportunity to discover at many levels, just how Caribbean (though often not recognised as such) was the culture and sensibility of the Indo-Guyanese. Weddings, Kali-Mai and the backdams gave me access to a life that I realised many urban African Guyanese had only a limited and stereotyped inkling of. I like to think that these human experiences actually entered into the writing and shaping of the thesis.

When the thesis was finally completed and doctorate awarded in 1985 – it had been begun in 1973 and became a three-volume monster that was a kind of history of my developing ideas as well as actual research, I did think briefly about the possibility of academia, but the pull wasn't great enough and I never actually made any applications. Perhaps I was even a little influenced by Mark McWatt's acerbic and witty poem, "Application and Reply" in *Interiors* which rightly discouraged the Caribbean as a comfortable, slightly exotic destination for an English academic.

The publishing grew out of the thesis. I'd read widely in Caribbean fiction and poetry beyond the thesis and was aware even then that much important writing was out of print, though it was at that point much less expensive to find. Some had been brought back into print in the Heinemann and Longman Caribbean Writers series, and in the dreadful and insulting production standards of the Longman Drumbeats. I was conscious that neither Heinemann or Longman was doing much about new writing, and got to hear that, in parallel with the fate of the Heinemann African Writers series, that following the sale of Heinemann's owners Thomas Tilling to BTR and then

the books division to Octopus in 1985 and to Reed International in 1987, the future of the Caribbean list was at risk (as it was). There was also the positive counter-example of the small but important Black British presses and their commitment both to what was new and what needed to be recuperated. New Beacon, Bogle L'Ouverture, Karnac House, Karia, etc. all provided models of what could be done on slim resources to publish work that ran intellectually, culturally and ideologically counter to the emerging trends in the mainstream publishing industry.

Because Heinemann's and Longman's reprints of earlier fiction hung around for a while, all Peepal Tree's initial focus was on what was new, though I leapt at Kenneth Ramchand's proposal that we publish the first collected edition of Eric Roach's poetry. This pattern persisted for about the next twenty years of Peepal Tree's existence, though I remember Carolyn Cooper once rightly taking me to task for describing what we published as "new", since many of the writers were far from new to Caribbean audiences.

But what I remained convinced of was John La Rose's view that as well as the new, it was an important part of a radical publisher's role to recuperate, to pay attention to the hiatuses, the important books that mainstream publishing was quite happy to see disappear from view. The means to do something about this in a coherent way arrived circa 2006/7 when for the very first time in our existence we earned some disposable capital. This came from supplying a considerable number of books for a Trinidad government initiative to put a library of Caribbean literature in all their secondary schools. The profit we invested in buying rights to important out-of-print titles from the 1950s through to the mid 1970s. It has been very gratifying to learn of the responses of readers, writers and academics to having these books available again. Hearing how a contemporary writer felt challenged by the literary ambition of Edgar Mittelholzer's earlier writing was exactly the kind of response I'd hoped for. When the series moves into the 1980s it will undoubtedly feature many more women's titles, an absence that is currently an embarrassment. Beyond reissuing the disappeared, I also became interested in the never appeared. Roach's collected poetry was an early example, followed more recently by a compendium of Neville Dawes' writing. In progress there is a collection of Mittelholzer's poetry, short stories, plays and early fugitive writing, and a collection of Bruce St John's work. The major project here is the attempt to pull together the collected poetry of the Jamaican poet Anthony McNeill, a project further extended when earlier this year I found over six hundred pages of new material at the UWI special collection library in Jamaica. The material I possessed had come straight from McNeill's sister.

In the earlier, fraught, just-surviving years of Peepal Tree's existence, there was little scope to explore other than very spasmodically my continuing interest in trying to make some contribution to the critical discussion of Caribbean writing. There is still a substantial book on Indo-Caribbean writing completed in 1988 but never published because the publisher ran out of money

on the project that I still feel is worth bringing up to date – but can't find the time. There are books on Caribbean fiction and poetry aimed at the general reader (the style of the Rough Guides is my model) and a series that steals the idea of the old Penguin Modern Poets (120 page books that brought together the work of three related poets), that brings together a substantial survey of Caribbean poetry – the emerging new, the established and the forgotten – in some thirty collections. I know who the poets will be; there is only (only?) the task of tracing copyright holders.

At present, we are very much engaged in looking at digital options, though we remain committed to the physical book. We are also working on a commitment to develop a joint imprint with Akashic Books to publish first time writing from within the region, our contribution to the CaribLit project. There is also the task of working out how to pass on Peepal Tree as a surviving concern at the point when age makes retirement not a choice but a necessity. We are currently working on a model that extends our current position of having associate editorships. Retirement, as an option, is certainly not on the cards just yet.