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Intellectual Formations: Locating a Caribbean Critical Tradition

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This special tenth-year anniversary issue of *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* on “Intellectual Formations: Locating a Caribbean Critical Tradition” was inspired by the 31st West Indian Literature Conference held at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, October 11-13, 2012. The 50th anniversary reflection on Independence and Federation provided an occasion to take stock of the field of West Indian Criticism: assessing old “quarrels,” highlighting key interventions, and pointing to new directions. For the final session of the conference, we convened six critics in attendance, and whose scholarship and intellectual formation represent the intersection of generations, geographies and intellectual queries that comprise a tradition of West Indian Literary Criticism: Edward Baugh, Sandra Pouchet Paquet, Evelyn O’Callaghan, Carolyn Cooper, Faith Smith and Michael Bucknor.

Professor Baugh’s 1976 essay, “The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History” served as a point of departure. In it, he lays out Caribbean writers’ “quarrel with history” and the imaginative work of literature to reconstitute a Caribbean history against the charge of historylessness. As moderator, I seized on the metaphor of the “quarrel”—as Laurence Breiner points out—as a Caribbean *condition* rather than singular historical *event*.¹ This quarrel then is the mode of engagement in which subsequent generations represented here have made their individual interventions into the field of Caribbean literary studies. The interventions came in the form of Caribbean autobiography, women’s (and white women’s) writings, popular cultural and reggae studies, sexuality, citizenship and masculinity studies. But given the Caribbeanness of the occasion other quarrels emerged immediately after the session. Was the panel too Monacentric? Not only did everyone at the table, including the moderator, spend time teaching or being educated at the Mona, Jamaica campus of the University of the West Indies—but with the exception of Sandra Pouchet Paquet, a Trinidadian, we were all Jamaicans! Did it exclude key foundational regional voices such as Kenneth Ramchand and Gordon Rohlehr? And, how might we better incorporate the perspectives of those who have been laboring in the field from early on, but from outside the region. As editor of this special issue, I have tried to address these and other concerns in the range of scholars invited to submit essays on their intellectual formation. Of course, it should be noted that many who were asked to participate could not, given the demands of their academic commitments and this serves as a useful reminder about how histories are made with its various inclusions and exclusions.

¹ “The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History” first published in *Tapia* 1977, reprinted in *Small Axe* 16.2 (July 2102) 60-74. Original issues of *Tapia* are available in the Digital Library of the Caribbean: ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00072147/00265 (the 20 February 1977 issue) and ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00072147/00264 (the 27 February 1977 issue).

In Silencing the Past, Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us that historical silences also occur in the present when contemporary historians select the questions that frame their critical inquiry.² My framing questions to the various critics first positioned their specific thematic intervention, but I also asked each critic to address the politics of place both in terms of where one works (in the region versus abroad) as well as where one publishes. Finally, I asked them to offer their assessment of the current state of the field. The presenters used these prompts as an occasion to recast their critical enterprise. As you will see, Edward Baugh's opening engagement with these questions reminds us—not only of the oppositional tensions of the period, but that my own inquiries come out of a particular, even romanticized, view of the 1960s cultural wars. He, nonetheless, takes us back to his historical moment when West Indian intellectuals returned home to teach and to develop a criticism about the region's literature and ran up against opposition from, as Baugh describes it here, "vested colonial interests." Their insistence on using the framing questions as only a prompt gives this issue its richness. I conceived of the plenary and this compilation of essays as a work of intellectual history, where we stop to reflect on the various quarrels and discern whether, and in what ways, they are still purposeful. My second goal here is to provide an emerging generation of Caribbeanist critics a provisional road map of what seems to be a very settled field with seasoned critics (and—more information than they can absorb in their graduate careers!) with a view towards new terrains. I hope it demonstrates the field's relative adolescence, its growing pains, and its opportunities for growth.

This tenth-year Anniversary Issue of *Anthurium* is presented in three parts. Part I, "First Reflections, Plenary Voices," re-stages the plenary panel as it proceeded on October 13, 2012. Part II, "The Generation of 1968,"³ attempts to capture the historical moment of the late 1960s and 1970s when historical and institutional forces come together to create an opening for the people who then go on to create West Indian criticism. This section reprints influential essays by Edward Baugh and Mervyn Morris, and closes with a contemporary interview with Gordon Rohlehr conducted by Paula Morgan. Part III, "Locating a Tradition of West Indian Criticism," turns to other voices to sketch the historical context

² *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. NY: Beacon Press, 1997.

³ The phrase is originally Paul Berman's to capture the ethos of 1960s Left social movements; I transport it to a Caribbean context to account for a dynamic period of intellectual fervor at the various campuses of the University of the West Indies in the mid to late 1960s. This includes Edward Baugh at the Cavehill, Barbados from 1966-68, and moving to Mona in 1968; Mervyn Morris serving as Warden at Taylor Hall at the Mona, Jamaica campus from 1966-1970, and then taking up an appointment in the English Department in 1970; Gordon Rohlehr goes to the St. Augustine campus in 1967. See Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.

from different geographical and temporal locations in an attempt to capture more breadth and depth of the field's formation. From the US: Laurence Breiner, Rhonda Cobham-Sander, Carole Boyce Davies, Supriya Nair and Patricia Powell; from the UK: Jeremy Poynting and Alison Donnell; from Canada: Ann-Marie Lee-Loy; from UWI St. Augustine: Paula Morgan; and from Miami—the crossroads of the Americas and the North Atlantic—my colleagues at University of Miami: Gerard Aching and Patricia Saunders. The essays follow a call and response pattern, picking up themes, figures, and/or historical moments addressed by the preceding writer. While certainly not comprehensive, these essays, nonetheless, represent the vibrant spirit of quarrel that characterizes our arguably established West Indian Literary Critical Tradition.

Whereas Part I, “First Reflections, Plenary Voices,” showcases the generative initial conversation. Part II, “The Generation of 1968,” historicizes the field by featuring three key intellectuals of this foundational period.⁴ The first voice is again Edward Baugh's; this time, a reprinting of his open letter to the Board of Chancellor, “English Studies in the University of the West Indies: Retrospect and Prospect.”⁵ Here, as the newly appointed head of the Department of English, Baugh engages multiple audiences—his department, the larger public and local politicians—to make a case for “Literatures in English” versus “English Literature.” Foregrounding that English Studies has a history of its own nationalist intellectual formation against the Classics, he convincingly demonstrates that in the 1970s that history was recent rather than the settled object of study we imagine it to be today. Furthermore, he argues that precisely because the mission of The University of the West Indies was to be relevant to “the people for whom universities exist to serve” studying the region's literature should be understood as an imperative. A reprinting of Mervyn Morris' 1997 retrospective essay “The Making of West Indian Literature” follows; it was delivered on March 13, 1997 when Morris was honored as Professor of Creative Writing *and* West Indian Literature at Mona, Jamaica. On this occasion, Morris recalls the youthful formation of the object called West Indian literature and the many writers who have passed through the UWI campuses. Laboring as both creative writer and critic throughout his career, he emphasizes the art of actually *making* an object now recognizable as West Indian literature, and the binaries he sought actively to avoid: middle class versus folk; standard English versus Jamaican creole, oral versus scribal, high versus low art, etcetera. The section closes with a contemporary interview with Gordon Rohlehr, who as a Guyanese

⁴ Of course, there are other voices—that are often more visible—that are not included here such as Sylvia Winter, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Kenneth Ramchand. Frank Barbalsingh is an important diasporic figure that is key to this narrative of the institutionalization of West Indian criticism. He is doing in Canada what these scholars were doing in the region.

⁵The article is originally published in *Caribbean Quarterly* 16:4, 1976.

national, labored at the St. Augustine, Trinidad campus for his entire career (1968-2007). Interviewed by his colleague and former student Paula Morgan, readers come to understand how the Guyanese political situation of the 1960s shaped Rohlehr's critical sensibility, his groundbreaking work on West Indian popular culture, and his role as a public intellectual: self-publishing his monographs, and publishing in regional papers to communicate to a mass audience.

Part III, "Locating a Tradition of West Indian Criticism," sums up the question of how one locates a West Indian literary tradition. One way of locating such a tradition is through the institutionalization of the annual West Indian Literature Conference hosted by the regional UWI campuses with University of Miami becoming its North American satellite in 1997.⁶ In many ways, parts I and II follow this model of locating the field. This final section both incorporates and departs from that institutional history and points to other institutional openings from which the field of West Indian criticism flowered: these include African American, British, postcolonial, feminist and Marxist cultural studies. The essays, however, do not neatly correlate into these subgroupings; instead, they follow a more organic and eclectic ebb and flow.

In the 1971 US academy, Laurence Breiner recollects, Caribbean literature was invisible at best "more often simply inconceivable" and therefore offerings were often smuggled in with African American Studies. As a Victorianist and literary historian at Boston University, Breiner often brings "Caribbean lessons to bear on the European canon," while also (in his perception) "describ[ing] quarrels rather than participat[ing] in them." Yet his quarrel with the privileging of a few voices and exclusion of others is clearly evident in the title of his recently published monograph, *The Black Yeats*, on Trinidadian poet Eric Roach—who writing formal classical poetry in the 1970s—has been excised from canonical Caribbean poetry. As a graduate student at University of Warwick in England, Alison Donnell saw Caribbean literature as her reprieve from quarrelling with a white male-dominated British literary canon. She describes finding belonging in the writings of Derek Walcott, George Lamming and V.S. Naipaul, a belonging

⁶ In many ways, this collaboration began with the Caribbean Writers Summer Institute (CWSI) housed at the University of Miami from 1991-1996. The CWSI started in 1991 under the direction of Zack Bowen, then Chair of English at UM. Sandra Pouchet Paquet arrived in August 1992 and oversaw the program from then on. Paquet recalls that Bowen received the invitation from Dr. Vishnudat Singh, head of UWI, St. Augustine, to participate in the West Indian Literature Consortium. Paquet then started attending and participating in conferences regularly and Miami's "turn" first came up in 1997; the relationship has been maintained with Paquet's editing special issues of the *Journal of West Indian Literature*, and well as through UM's Caribbean Literary Studies Program and *Anthurium*.

not governed by ancestry or location, but by the sheer “pull of words, ideas and the imagined emancipations of the literary.” Hers is a quarrel with how various critical historical moments elide what gets to matter. While her new work centers Caribbean queerness, Donnell’s scholarship has been continuously marked by a struggle against orthodoxy and received regimes of value. As publisher and literary critic, Jeremy Poynting exemplifies what it has meant to struggle against dominant regimes of values. His essay reveals the decisive role he continues to play in not only publishing new Caribbean literary voices, but in reprinting old classic novels long out of print, many of which have been marginalized or even silenced in the West Indian literary canon. In both publishing and scholarship, Poynting has been drawn to writing that as he puts it “tells uncomfortable truths.”

Where the scholarship of Rhonda Cobham-Sander can be rightly described as creating feminist interventions in Caribbean literary history, the story she tells here discloses how geographical and institutional openings provide spaces that nurtured her critical development. From Trinidad, she makes her way to Jamaica for University, and narrates what it meant to be a beneficiary of those early struggles to institutionalize West Indian literature at UWI. By the time she arrives at Mona in 1971, a West Indian literature course was firmly in place, designed and taught by Kenneth Ramchand.⁷ From Jamaica, she moves out into the broader transatlantic world armed with a network of contacts that enabled her to boldly traverse institutional settings in Scotland, England, Germany and then finally landing in western Massachusetts. This final turn she adroitly links to the global structural adjustment policies of the 1980s, which while closing down opportunities in European educational institutions, ironically, created an opening for a generation of third world intellectuals in US academic institutions. Carole Boyce Davies’ intervention around diaspora and global black women writers is first shaped coming-of-age in the US during the Black Power period, and in the very black international setting of Howard University in the mid-1970s. This Historically Black College in Washington, DC teaches her that politics is not simply about reaping the benefits of civil rights struggle; rather, one must also be an active participant in cultural transformation—for a range of black global communities. This catalytic moment and space lead her to the University of Ibadan in Nigeria to pursue graduate studies, and solidifies her ongoing commitment to the politics of the African diaspora. A generation later, Patricia Saunders also comes-of-age in the nation’s capital, and journeys through many institutional and geographic locations en route to becoming a Caribbeanist. While she has made critical interventions into studies of gender and sexuality, especially as it relates to Caribbean popular culture, her essay highlights the importance of being “in community” to get work done. Readers get a clear sense that for

⁷ Mervyn Morris, Edward Baugh and Maureen Warner Lewis were tutors for this course.

Saunders community is both about intellectual interlocutors, but also about spaces where one feels a sense of “at homeness.” Her commitment to making community manifest in the various collaborations she fosters between the University of Miami, and the broader local, national and international communities.

Serendipitous encounters also serve as a catalyst for one’s intellectual quest. Supriya Nair conveys her first understandings and engagement with “a poetics and politics of decolonization” through commonwealth literature as a student in India, which would later develop through postcolonial studies in the US academy. Precisely because her critical conversations have been informed by the need to renew south-south dialogues, unsurprisingly, her latest work turns to the decolonizing role humor plays in the novels of contemporary writers like Junot Diaz and Zadie Smith as a mode of critiquing settled shibboleths. Perhaps because she has also produced a book on teaching Anglophone Caribbean Literature, Nair entreats professors to use more genres in constructing course syllabi and graduate research projects.⁸ The scholarship of Gerard Aching spans historical and linguistic breadth with work on Spanish American *Modernismo*, Trinidad’s Carnival and 19th century Caribbean intellectual history. Here, however, he delightfully takes readers on an instructive June journey through the Louisiana bayous where he encounters a Caribbean word seemingly out of place. With this one example, he demonstrates the “countless unofficial histories about the Caribbean that could be narrated by investigating such linguistic traces.” Perhaps this out of place linguistic discovery animates his quest for history, but it also draws attention to his interest in languages—speaking and working across the new world in English, Spanish and French. But while his story is driven by making connections across the new world, he closes embracing the specificity of single island studies cautioning against a critical tendency that might “run the risk of homogenizing the region into a collection of undifferentiated, repeating islands.”

A chance encounter with postcolonial literature as a college senior would lead Ann-Marie Lee-Loy on her path to “minding the gaps” between the Caribbean and Asian America. Born in Canada to Jamaican parents, Lee-Loy begins by narrating the various cultural silences necessary to maintain one’s identity as a Canadian, with its implicit assumptions around whiteness. Initially attracted to Victorian literature since its anxieties around social mores and conduct were recognizable in her Jamaican diasporic community, Lee-Loy, nonetheless, found herself critically compelled to answer the question often put to her upon first encounter: what’s with the Chinese last name? Her critical impulse

⁸ *Teaching Anglophone Caribbean Literature*. NY: Modern Language Association of America, 2012.

not only locates the figure of the Chinese shopkeeper, stereotypically referred to in the local vernacular as “Mr. Chin” in Caribbean literature, but her scholarship comparatively recast how Asian masculinity is rendered in the Americas.

The final two essays explore how one builds balance not only into our critical enterprise, but also into our quotidian lives. Embedded within the story Paula Morgan narrates about developing her feminist sensibility at home in Trinidad under the tutelage of Gordon Rohlehr, is an alternative narrative about her commitment to practicing Christianity in a very secular academic space. Her early feminist quarrel against an emerging canonized trinity of male writers sought to make space to write a dissertation on female writers such as Jean Rhys, Louise Bennett and Paule Marshall. This early feminist work is elaborated in her more recent scholarship dressing violence against women, popular cultural studies and spirituality. In the spirit and tradition of writer-critic that exemplifies the best of Caribbean creative writing and scholarship, I give the last word to Patricia Powell who offers a careful analytical reflection on her oeuvre—one seemingly occupied with a quest for the masculine. Her retrospective slowly reveals a recognition that the quest had been a pursuit for a balance between an authentic masculine and feminine, which then taps into one’s inner spiritual power. Because new stories can change consciousness, Powell leaves us with the very provocative imperative: to “re-story change.”

As I reflect on this issue as a mid-career critic, I am incredibly grateful for all the voices that have come before, the paths they have created and the space they give my generation and those to follow to both build upon and diverge from. In this regard, we are the inheritors of Sandra Pouchet Paquet’s foundational intellectual and institutional labor. Her foundational scholarship on early Caribbean autobiographies provides a model of how to read the many recent autobiographies being published. Equally important, the institutions she built at the University of Miami such as Caribbean Literary Studies and *Anthurium* provide space and global visibility to the field of Caribbean literary studies. With the journal now celebrating ten years of online publishing, she created a model of open access and virtual publics well ahead of its time.

Because this special issue takes as its imagined ideal audience “Caribbean critics in the making,” in addition to providing an intellectual road map, I want to assure you that you are embarking upon a field that confounds boundaries; and, you necessarily have the flexibility to pursue your own paths. Yet, if on this 50th anniversary of West Indian criticism, Independence and Federation provides an occasion to give mentoring advice, I would charge you to work against empire and its multiple carved out geographic and linguistic regional borders. I encourage you to work in the multilinguistic spirit of Caribbeanist like Gerard Aching (here) and Omise’ke Natasha Tinsley, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Silvio Torres-Saillant, to name a few. While productive quarreling might rightly

constitute the condition of Caribbean criticism, a professional identity and commitment to this field provide a critical sense of community and “at homeness” wherever one finds oneself in the world.

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