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Imagined Nations, 50 Years Later

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Like the other presenters at the closing session of what turned out to be an impressive if hectic conference, I briefly revisited the original 1977 version of Edward Baugh's crucial article, "The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History." Once again, I was struck by its prescience in foregrounding *literature* as a key resource for imagining West Indian history from another perspective. Historians and social scientists then, and for some time after, tended to dominate Caribbean discourse (as well as the leadership of the University of the West Indies), so it was refreshing to turn instead to the ways in which imaginative writing challenges, reframes and fills in the gaps in narrative accounts of these statistical and "fact" based disciplines. This consideration still motivates my teaching: imagining a different Caribbean, I tell students, *can* effect a transformation of epistemology which *can*, in turn, lead not only to social change but to a more enlightened vision of what being Caribbean actually entails.

For many of us, Professor Baugh inspires awe; during my time at UWI, Mona campus, he headed the then-English Department and years later (when I transferred to the Cave Hill campus) he took on the role of my distance PhD supervisor. In time, I hope, we have become colleagues and even friends. But I could not tell him then, in the early 1980s, that I had a quibble, if not a quarrel with the *title* of his essay, which of course had to do with the normative use of "his" for "West Indian writer." The phrasing was par for the course at the time of the essay's writing and has been addressed by Baugh himself. But reflecting on the context of my quibble *then*, led me to think about the confluence of events which sparked what I suppose I can call my career as a student and critic of West Indian writing and its history.

I was in sixth form (Junior College?) in a respectable Montego Bay high school during the early 1970s, a period (vividly recaptured by Baugh in the essay) when everyone "progressive" believed in the vision of Jamaica popularized by Michael Manley and his "Democratic Socialist" team. We students were idealistic, volunteered for community projects (I groan now about what we thought we were doing teaching adult literacy). We read and debated West Indian writers and thinkers as well as Eldridge Cleaver and Michael X, all in the belief that the old order was giving way to a new and better West Indian society. Then I went overseas for my undergraduate and postgraduate studies, and during that time disillusionment and cynicism set in. This feeling was shared by my contemporaries who left and those who stayed. Disillusionment with *everything*: the inability of charismatic West Indian politicians to effect change; the inability of self-interested groups to join the fight for justice, and of the underprivileged to assume agency in the project rather than passively insist "ah fi wi time now; we nah pay no bus-fare!"; the covert and overt intrusion of both Cuban and American interests in regional affairs; and the growing economic misery which meant that every time I came home, like everyone else I was hauling huge boxes of detergent

and cheap clothes and text books for school friends. There are so many anecdotes of how we *creatively* got essential items in (and out) of Jamaica!

No longer a student, such strategizing became tedious. Returning to Jamaica from Oxford at the start of the 1980s as a lower-than-low, minus-salaried temporary assistant lecturer (all the salary went in advance to rent furniture for the hot concrete box I lived in on campus) the idealism of the heady seventies was giving way to the violent Don culture and rampant materialism of Edward Seaga's regime. Capitalist rhetoric resurfaced: foreign goods *should* be available on the supermarket shelves; yet shortages continued and the rare circulation of chicken-backs was still fought over in the supermarket to which my new colleague Victor Chang drove me once a week to buy essentials.¹

Things were much better at work, and Baugh's essay mentions the Department's changing program which had been transformed when I joined. Yes, I was hired to teach Chaucer and some introductory survey courses, but I was in love with West Indian literature and took it as a sign that my temporarily assigned office was *right beside* that of Edward (later Kamau) Brathwaite, whom I had heard read at Oxford. Alas, he was on leave and only rarely turned up on campus; but as the offices shared a party line, I kept taking messages from all over the world inviting him to this conference and that reading. I was in awe of Brathwaite too; who wouldn't be? Yet I also had a quarrel with *his* work, specifically his dismissal of Jean Rhys from a West Indian literary canon on the basis of her race/ the race of her white creole protagonists. If Rhys couldn't belong as a West Indian writer, I thought, how could I as a critic? Chaucer and Brathwaite, Rhys and the Gawain poet, Mais and Selvon and Milton, and the literary use of Creole languages (the subject of my M.Litt): all simmering away in my new intellectual life at home.

And then came the epiphany: first, Mervyn Morris introduced me to Erna Brodber's groundbreaking novel, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980). Second, visiting professor Trudier Harris gave a guest lecture about early African American women's writing. Only thinking back have I recognized that the two trajectories that drove my work for many years were born out of that time. Having been introduced to what was happening in terms of West Indian writing by women, I determined to analyse and promote its fabulous newness (and I *met them* too, they were part of that cultural world: Olive Senior, Lorna Goodison, Erna Brodber, Merle Hodge). So my project was to read, talk about, and teach their work alongside those of Walcott and Harris, Naipaul and Selvon and Lamming. The dub version of reggae, the musical soundtrack of my 1970s, was

¹ Dr Victor Chang, a West Indian specialist and Chief Editor of the *Journal of West Indian Literature*, recently retired from the Department of Literatures in English at the Jamaican campus of the University of the West Indies.

an obvious local paradigm for inserting a complementary if counter-discursive *women's* writerly perspective on West Indian literature.

But “as you grow, you will see.” I began to realize that these women’s voices were *not* new; they had been writing for decades, yet somehow their stories and poems had not been considered of equal importance to those of their male contemporaries. In which case, there may have been *other* even earlier female-authored narratives of the West Indies, forgotten or overlooked in the version of literary historiography I had inherited. This gave rise to my other preoccupation which might be summed up in a belligerent query as to *why*, if black women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had published in the United States, were there no West Indian equivalents of this earlier material? There must be, I thought, and I *will* find it! Sadly, I didn’t, apart from Mary Prince and Mary Seacole and a few snatches of other voices. As a consolation prize of sorts, I unearthed a wealth of forgotten women’s literary representations of the West Indies that I found fascinating, accounts which brought to life versions of the colonial master narrative. Except these were by *white* women writers, and as a result nearly all had been relegated to the bin marked “of historical interest only.” How then to compare early and contemporary women’s narratives of the region and its history, and the impact of this history of women’s writing in the region on the West Indian literary canon I had absorbed? New avenues for exploration beckoned. What an exciting time!

What has sadly changed is that today, no young academic is likely to have an office beside a Kamau, or attend meetings with poets like Morris and Baugh, or chat to a Senior or a Goodison at book-launches on campus: almost all of West Indian writers, including the younger generation like Kei Miller, Marlon James, Alecia McKenzie, Curdella Forbes, are based elsewhere.² This is clearly a necessity in the business of making a living from writing, or indeed the mechanics of getting the work published and widely promoted which has, of necessity, to happen in larger and wealthier societies. Ironically, the metropolitan customers who buy and read these texts find themselves getting a reminder of their own less than salubrious involvement in the genesis and development of both the region and its literature. Nonetheless, the question is increasingly raised as to the actual degree of creative advantage offered by diaspora location, and whether or not there may be major difference (and even, perhaps, a growing rift) between post-national, postcolonial and local and located literary production.

² Miller is a reader at Edinburgh University in Scotland; James teaches at Macalaster College in Minnesota; McKenzie currently lives in Paris; Curdella Forbes is a Professor at Howard University in Washington D.C.

For writers, the choice of location is clearly important; for critics, I would argue this is less so. There are more than a few journals now that showcase West Indian writing and its scholarship both inside and outside the Caribbean: critics do not have to relocate to publish. There are options within Commonwealth/postcolonial focused organs like *Kunapipi* (until now, alas), *Ariel* and *Wasafiri*; within mainstream Black Atlantic-tolerant vehicles such as *Callaloo*: in magazines with a Caribbean feminist focus like *MaComère*; and straightforward Caribbean-literature specialist periodicals such as the *Journal of West Indian Literature*, the newly resuscitated *Bim*, the *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, *Sargasso*, *The Caribbean Writer* and of course, University of Miami's own *Anthurium*. The trouble for academics, however, is that while such peer reviewed journals are respected and valued among the academic community, they are invariably granted minor status when evaluating publication records in the United Kingdom and North America. If an article or chapter doesn't count for institutional review exercises because it concerns 'minor' texts which find no room in 'major' refereed journals, then what impetus is there to take the time to read, think about and publish on the work? Again the double standard: what is valued by and gives value to West Indian literary studies is considered marginal if not parochial elsewhere.

To wind up this Roundtable dialogue, we were asked to share some thoughts on the current state of field. My responses are tentative and impressionistic. First, I would venture that the primacy of literary theory in West Indian scholarship has diminished somewhat; or, in a more nuanced formulation, its novelty has been undermined by the recognition that the writing is *itself* frequently as much a theoretical as a fictional construct. There is far less resistance to the appropriation of, say, feminist, postcolonial or Derridean models to expand the language of analysis of *Caribbean* culture and writing; theory is no longer a suspect agent of Western imperialism. Perhaps for the best, it has reverted to the status of a tool for reading to literary texts, rather than an object of study in itself.

Secondly, there has been a push to revisit earlier and marginal archives of writers excluded from what Alison Donnell calls the key "critical moments" in West Indian literary historiography. Having seen Rhys rehabilitated, it has been rewarding for me to witness the aesthetic and political re-evaluation of narratives by authors as disparate as Elma Napier and Una Marson, particularly the openness to their contributions to a new vocabulary of raced and classed sexualities. Similarly, West Indian research has belatedly acknowledged the legitimacy, and the value, of accounts by ethnic minorities such as Indo-Caribbean or Chinese West Indians. At last, writers are representing and critics are investigating what popular discourse would term dissident sexualities, and indeed breaking down the boundaries between acceptable and taboo in literary studies. It is heartening for

me, as someone who experienced then a freedom to explore and discover new cartographies, to now witness writers and readers, researchers and commentators projecting a greater tolerance of difference, no matter how socially coded. Economically, politically, environmentally, socially, there is not a lot to celebrate in the West Indies at the current moment. But the wonderfully complex tapestry that makes up Caribbean writing still offers the possibility of a new vision of what *might* be. Might be realized, that is, once we transcend the terms of engagement of that (infinitely rehearsed) quarrel with history.