

Caribbean Literature in English

Louis James

Longman Literature In English Series

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**General Editors: David Carroll and Michael Wheeler
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Louis James

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Contents

Series List	vii
Editors' Preface	ix
Author's Acknowledgements	xi
Publisher's Acknowledgements	xiii
On the Arrangement of this Book	xv
Map of the Caribbean	xvi
Introduction	1
PART I DISTORTING MIRRORS: THE SLAVE ERA	7
1 Reflections of Europe in the New World	9
2 The Dark of the Mirror: Slave Communities	21
PART II ANANCY'S WEB: THE CARIBBEAN ARCHIPELAGO	31
3 Barbados and the Lesser Antilles	33
4 Jamaica	46
5 Trinidad	65
6 British Guiana/Guyana	76
7 'Brit'n'	90
PART III TOWARDS A CARIBBEAN AESTHETIC	97
8 Place	99
9 Ideas	106
10 Language	120
PART IV FOUNDATION	135
11 African (Re)possession	137
12 India in the Caribbean	152

PART V ON THE FRONTIERS OF LANGUAGE	159
13 Things as They Are: V.S. Naipaul	161
14 The 'True Substance of Life': Wilson Harris	171
15 From Crusoe to Omeros: Derek Walcott	179
16 The Poet as Seer: Kamau Brathwaite	185
17 The Meaning of Personhood: Earl Lovelace	192
18 From Castle to Kumbia: Women's Writing in the Caribbean	199
Postscript	211
Chronology	215
Bibliographies	219
Index	227

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The multi-volume Longman Literature in English Series provides students of literature with a critical introduction to the major genres in their historical and cultural context. Each volume gives a coherent account of a clearly defined area, and the series, when complete, will offer a practical and comprehensive guide to literature written in English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. The aim of the series as a whole is to show that the most valuable and stimulating approach to the study of literature is that based upon awareness of the relations between literary forms and their historical contexts. Thus the areas covered by most of the separate volumes are defined by period and genre. Each volume offers new and informed ways of reading literary works, and provides guidance for further reading in an extensive reference section.

In recent years, the nature of English studies has been questioned in a number of increasingly radical ways. The very terms employed to define a series of this kind – period, genre, history, context, canon – have become the focus of extensive critical debate, which has necessarily influenced in varying degrees the successive volumes published since 1985. But however fierce the debate, it rages around the traditional terms and concepts.

As well as studies on all periods of English and American literature, the series includes books on criticism and literary theory and on the intellectual and cultural context. A comprehensive series of this kind must of course include other literatures written in English, and therefore a group of volumes deals with Irish and Scottish literature, and the literature of India, Africa, the Caribbean, Australia and Canada. The forty-seven volumes of the series cover the following areas: Pre-Renaissance English Literature, English Poetry, English Drama, English Fiction, English Prose, Criticism and Literary Theory, Intellectual and Cultural Context, American Literature, Other Literatures in English.

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On the Arrangement of this Book

Conventional methods of organising such complex material by chronology or theme alone proved unsatisfactory. The following arrangement attempts to gain the benefits of more than one method.

The *Introduction* outlines the peculiar problems of defining Caribbean literature in English, much of which has been written in exile, and which has been often implicated with the writing of other cultures.

Part I examines the two parallel cultures that developed in the Caribbean in the slave era.

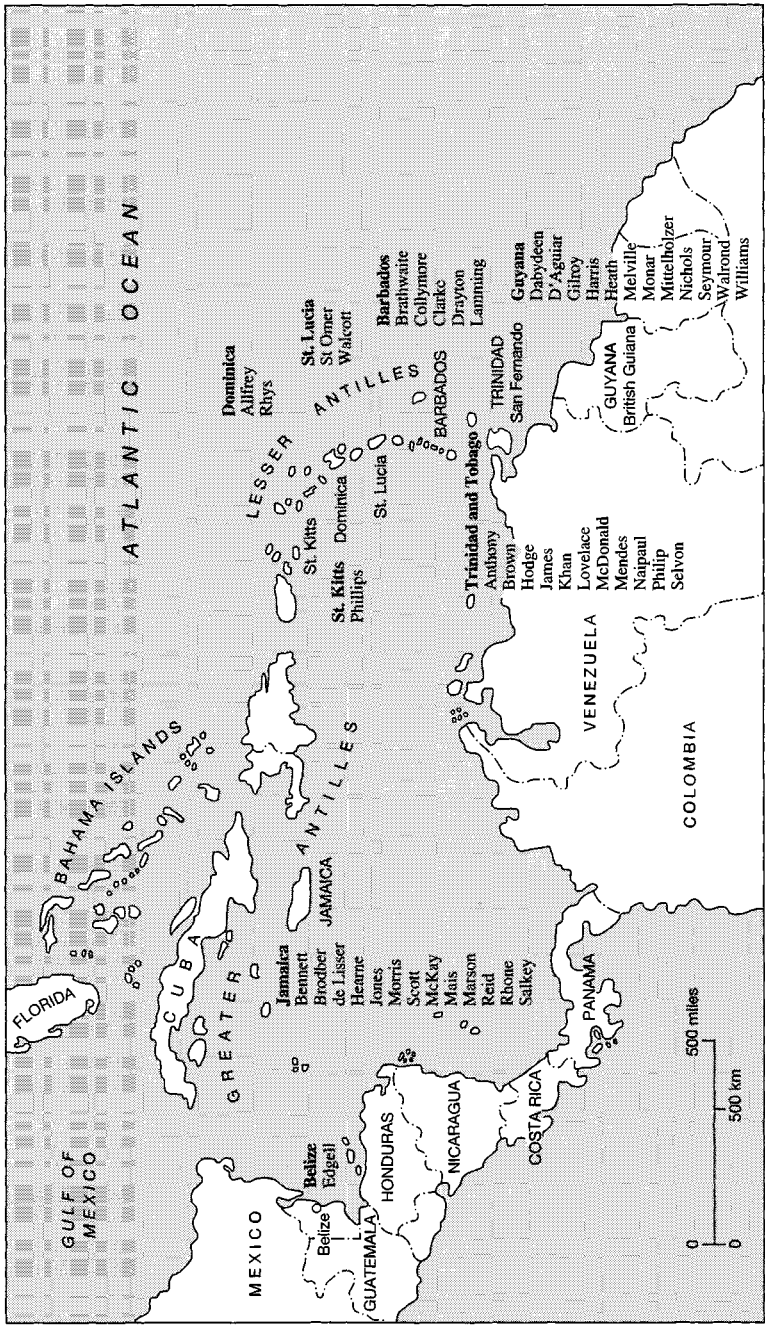
Part II outlines the emergence of a common literature from the contrasting regions of the Caribbean.

Part III considers the ways in which a distinctive Caribbean aesthetic took shape.

Part IV uses the West Indian word 'groundation' – meaning a communal discussion and meeting of ideas – to introduce the acceptance of cultures from Africa and India within national cultures.

Part V looks at some of the distinctive contributions made to Caribbean literature by individual writers.

The *Postscript* briefly surveys the role of Caribbean writing in world literature in English.



Introduction

My role, it seems, has rather to do with time and change than with the geography of circumstances; and yet there is always an acre of ground in the New World which keeps growing echoes in my head.

George Lamming¹

For it is certain that the Caribbean basin, although it includes the first American lands to be explored, conquered, and colonized by Europe, is still, especially in the discourse of the social sciences, one of the least known regions of the modern world.

Antonio Benítez-Rojo²

The Caribbean is a region in which the aboriginal communities were virtually exterminated, and replaced by peoples from Africa, Asia and Europe. Yet it has established a distinctive identity that in turn has contributed to global cultures, including those of the countries from which its peoples originally came. This introduction examines the problems of defining the 'Caribbean' and its literatures.

Definitions

'I know of no other area of the world', Janheinz Jahn once wrote of the Caribbean basin, 'where so many important writers and poets are born in so small a population'.³ Yet the region would appear unlikely ground for literature. It is rural, and economically poor. It is fragmented into islands, many of them very small, and discontinuous areas on the rim of the American continent. There is no common language. Its countries have inherited English, Spanish, French or Dutch, modified into Creole forms which are different within each area. Even in the postcolonial era, territories within

sight of each other remain locked in separate cultural traditions. In terms of topography, language and race, few if any regions of the world are so diverse.

The region has been partly defined by historical accident, and has gone under various names in its history. 'West Indies' was a notorious mistake, made in 1492 when Columbus reached San Salvador, believed he had found the Indies off Cathay, and called the folk he met 'Indians'. The term 'West Indies' became used to distinguish the islands from the 'East Indies', and until recently for English speakers it meant the British territories. The islands were also called the Antilles, and the whole area, the Caribbean. Neither name is precise. The 'Antilles' were a pre-Columbian myth, a land or islands sited somewhere in the Western Atlantic, and although Caribs lived in the area when Columbus arrived, so did Taino Arawaks and Ciboney.

Naming the inhabitants proved as slippery as defining the region. In the first two centuries of European contact the aborigines were hunted like animals, or killed off by slave labour and imported diseases. The Indian population of Hispaniola was in 1492 calculated at between two and three hundred thousand; by 1514, it had shrunk to an estimated fourteen thousand.⁴ The original peoples have remained an obstinate presence. Their blood entered the Caribbean racial mix. The last Carib war ended on St Vincent as late as 1797, a Carib settlement still survives on Dominica, and in Guyana and Belize in particular, aboriginal peoples still offer evidence of the pre-Columbian cultural roots surviving in the Caribbean. With the virtual disappearance of the original 'West Indians', however, the huge majority population became one of African descent. This remained invisible to Europe: when Richard Cumberland wrote his play *The West Indian* in 1771, the title referred only to the white planter class. With political independence this changed, and by the mid-twentieth century Kamau Brathwaite could declare that 'when most of us speak of "the West Indian" we think of someone of African descent.'⁵ But by now there was a significant presence of 'real' Indians in the south-eastern Caribbean. V.S. Naipaul, one of over a quarter of a million Trinidad Asians, wrote that 'confusion became total' as with the growth of a national identity 'the West Indian East Indians became East Indian West Indians'.⁶

Antonio Benítez-Rojo has argued that the Caribbean, with its conflicting identities, is 'a repeating island', an unstable region suspended between cultures, 'the ultimate meta-archipelago'.⁷ It is an area of flux like the 'spiral chaos of the Milky Way', held within contexts of geography, and united by a common history of slavery. The first sixteenth-century Spanish communities grew spices and coffee, and, like the first white Barbadians, farmed small areas. But sugar cane, introduced to Hispaniola in 1522, quickly dominated West Indian life and culture. Its cultivation was labour intensive, and between four and five million African slaves were imported

to work the Caribbean plantations:⁸ by comparison, the total population of England and Wales in 1701 was calculated at five and a half million. After 1834, when slavery was abolished in British territories, indentured East Indian labourers, together with large numbers of Chinese, Portuguese and Irish, were imported into the still expanding plantations of Trinidad and British Guiana,⁹ often living in conditions little better than those of slavery. But the plantation era had set the dominant pattern of subsequent Caribbean society, one in which the power was held by an élite selected not by merit but by colour, while the distinctive culture was created by the disempowered black majority.

The British West Indies by the beginning of the twentieth century comprised some twenty-two territories scattered across two thousand miles. Most lay in or around the Caribbean Sea, although British Guiana (now Guyana) stood outside it on the South American mainland, and Barbados was a flat marine limestone island lying in the Atlantic a hundred miles to the East. Between the two world wars, the British territories moved towards independence, which most achieved in the 1960s. Yet as nations they remained politically insignificant in the shadow of Europe and Northern America. Local economies have become crippled by debts to world banks. Behind the tourist images of the sunny Caribbean lies poverty, unrest and political uncertainty. Walter Rodney, the Radical Guyanese economist murdered in 1980, and Michael Smith, the Jamaican poet stoned to death in Kingston by party thugs in 1983, were but two figures who died speaking out in societies conditioned to violence. The United States, who have controlled Cuba, Haiti and San Domingo for most of the twentieth century, in 1983 invaded Grenada to oust the People's Revolutionary Government there.

Yet while politically powerless, shackled with debt and emasculated by tourism, the Caribbean has continued to produce a remarkable succession of writers, musicians and artists, although much of this has been produced outside the West Indies itself. For Derek Walcott, this weakness can be creative. He has written:

To begin with, we are poor. That gives us a privilege. . . .
The stripped and naked man, however abused, however
disabused of old beliefs, instinctually, even desperately
begins again as a craftsman.¹⁰

* * *

Context can clarify, but not define, the question, 'What is Caribbean literature?' Historically, the development of West Indian writing has been divisive, for literacy and book learning have been privileges for the élite, and for the mass of the people the profession of authorship meant separation

from their cultural roots in an oral tradition. Most West Indians who wished to be writers have emigrated to find education, publishers and a reading public. The first major West Indian novel, Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* (1933), emerged not from McKay's Jamaica, but from the New York Harlem Renaissance. Nor can West Indian literature be defined as writing set in the Caribbean. Denis Williams's *Other Leopards* (1963) places a Guyanese quest for identity in the African sub-Saharan, while in Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), an English Wiltshire village focused an Indo-Caribbean exploration of self. Benedict Anderson has argued that 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face to face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are distinguished not by the falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined'.¹¹ Indeed, as we will see, a Caribbean 'style' has emerged. But in literature there was no simple evolution. Robert E. McDowell began his *Bibliography of Literature from Guyana* with Sir Walter Raleigh's *Discoverie . . . of Guyana* (1596). The Trinidadian critic Kenneth Ramchand opened his reader, *West Indian Narrative* (1966), with examples taken from the English writers Aphra Behn, Matthew G. Lewis and Maria Nugent. As we will see, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1712) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) are among the European works that have become imbedded in West Indian writing. None of this conflicts with the fact that the basic cultures of the area are rooted in African oral traditions. For the Caribbean has been the site of continual transformation and change.

Intertextuality has been seen as a trope for the Caribbean predicament itself. The Jamaican novelist John Hearne wrote that Antoinette in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, trapped in the written framework of *Jane Eyre*, is 'a superb and audacious metaphor of so much of West Indian life'.

Are we not still, in so many of our responses, creatures of books and inventions fashioned by others who used us as mere producers, as figments of their imagination; and who regarded the territory as a ground over which the inadmissible or forgotten forces of the psyche could run free for a while before being written off or suppressed?¹²

Naipaul, in his early writing, wrote of West Indian 'Mimic Men'. In his 1967 novel of this title, Ralph Kripalsingh on his island of Isabella feels himself created by images from Europe and America. Walking along the beach, he sees himself on the technicolour island of the Hollywood film, *The Black Swan*; his African schoolfellow, Browne, is locked into a 'world already charted' by stereotypes of the black man.¹³

For other West Indian writers, however, this complicity of cultures has not been a loss, but positive and creative. Addressing the theme of Naipaul's

novel, Derek Walcott asserted that 'mimicry is an act of imagination, and in some animals and insects, endemic cunning'.¹⁴ The Guyanese author Wilson Harris has strongly asserted that the diversity of cultures is not imposed onto the Caribbean, but reflects the multiplicity of identities within the Caribbean psyche itself, and as such provides a dynamic nucleus for the creative imagination. He has written:

What in my view is remarkable about the West Indian in depth is a sense of subtle links, a series of subtle and nebulous links which are latent within him, the latent ground of old and new personalities. This is a very difficult view to hold, I grant, because it is not a view which consolidates, which invests in any way in the consolidation of popular character. Rather it seeks to visualise a fulfilment of character.¹⁵

A recurrent tone in major Caribbean writing has been not mimic, but epic. This sounds within works by St John Perse, Tom Recam and Marcus Garvey in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁶ It echoes in Derek Walcott's *Drums and Colours* (1961), the play chosen to open the Federation of the West Indies, and reverberates beneath the historical and geographical vistas of Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* (1973). African beliefs and practices survived the Middle Passage, to become the potent stock onto which were grafted the cultures of three continents. Old World rapacity met a New World humanism. The Caribbean has remained a green place, even if, as Derek Walcott has written, 'the golden apples of this sun are shot with acid'.¹⁷ Between the nightmare of the slave barracoons [barracks], and the vision of Adamic islands, have emerged the imagined worlds examined in this book.

Notes

1. George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London, 1960), p. 50.
2. Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, translated by James E. Maraniss (Durham and London, 1996), p. 1.
3. Quoted by Neville Dawes, *Prolegomena to Caribbean Literature* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1977), p. 1. George Lamming estimated the populations of the Caribbean basin as six million, of which '3,000,000 [are] under the rule of Great Britain'. Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London, 1960), p. 16.
4. Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro* (New York, 1970), p. 33. But the figure has been placed higher. See Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean: the Genesis of a*

- Fragmented Nation*, 2nd edition (New York, 1990), p. 7; William M. Denevan (ed.), *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492* (Madison, 1976).
5. Kamau Brathwaite, 'Roots' (1963), reprinted in Brathwaite, *Roots* (Ann Arbor, 1993), p. 40.
 6. V.S. Naipaul, *The Overcrowded Barracoon* ([1972] Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 36. Sam Selvon saw himself as an 'East Indian Trinidadian West Indian', 'Epilogue', *Foreday Morning* ([1979] Harlow, 1989), p. 220.
 7. Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *Repeating Island*, pp. 1–5.
 8. Franklin W. Knight, pp. 112–13.
 9. Leo Lowenthal, *West Indian Societies* (London, 1972), p. 213.
 10. Derek Walcott, 'The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?', reprinted in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, edited by Robert D. Hamner ([1974] Washington, DC, 1993), pp. 52, 57.
 11. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1991), p. 6.
 12. John Hearne, 'Wide Sargasso Sea: a West Indian Reflection', *Comhill Magazine* (Summer, 1974), pp. 325–6.
 13. V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (London, 1967), pp. 112, 134.
 14. Derek Walcott, 'Culture or Mimicry?', p. 54.
 15. Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (London, 1967), p. 28,
 16. St John Perse, *Anabase* (1924); Tom Recam, *San Gloria* (1920); Marcus Garvey, *Slavery – from Hut to Mansion* (unpublished, staged 1930).
 17. Derek Walcott, 'The Muse of History', in *Is Massa Day Dead?*, edited by Orde Coombs (New York, 1974), p. 5.

PART I

Distorting Mirrors: The Slave Era

For I am a direct descendant of slaves [the Calibans], too near to the actual enterprise to believe its echoes are over with the reign of emancipation. Moreover, I am a direct descendant of Prospero worshipping in the same temple of endeavour, using his legacy of language . . .

George Lamming¹

The Caribbean in the plantation era acted as a distorting mirror, in which Europeans imaged desires, prejudices and terrors; and where enslaved Africans dreamt of ancestral homelands. Yet at times the reflections met and melded. This section examines in turn two communities, implacably divided by race, culture and interests, yet bonded by a shared and violent history.



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