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## Quarrels with the Quarrels with History

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It was a recent privilege of mine to write a piece for a roundtable forum reviewing the significance of Edward Baugh's 1976 essay, "The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History" for the journal *Small Axe*. I had first read this essay as an undergraduate student at the leafy, white tile campus of the University of Warwick in England. I had taken a special option on Caribbean Literature taught by the Guyanese critic Michael Gilkes who was, by good fortune, a visiting lecturer in the English department. I read Baugh's essay alongside some of the works by Derek Walcott, VS Naipaul and George Lamming that he discusses, as well as others by Wilson Harris, Kamau Brathwaite, Merle Hodge, Nancy Moréjon and Joseph Zobel. The 1970s were not that far in the past then, indeed, the essay was exactly a decade old when I read it. Although I was not familiar with Caribbean literature, I was not surprised that it both shaped and sparked quarrels over history.

I had spent my two years of sixth form education at the remarkable Atlantic College, an international boarding school with an insistently broad curriculum and an equally insistent philosophy of international understanding infused by the teachings of its founder, the peace philosopher Kurt Hahn. I had joined the college intent on becoming a medic. However, the life stories I encountered there, the compulsory course in theories of knowledge and a truly inspirational English teacher, Catherine Jackson, who toured a small group of us round the Welsh villages, performing Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* to communities experiencing the crises provoked by miner's strike of 1984-5, collectively changed my intellectual direction. I left for university wanting to enter the fray over meaning and to discover more about the work that words could do in world. I chose Warwick because I believed it had a radical tradition of literary scholarship. I thought it would be full of feminist firebrands like Germaine Greer fighting over the power of a liberal education to liberate the silenced and marginalised, but I did not overlap with Greer or with much that could be described as radical. Most of the courses I took toward my degree in English and American Literature were dominated, sometimes entirely populated, by white male writers. I was already arguing with that history when I entered Michael Gilkes' course. Little did I know that I would one day argue with the nominal canon with which his course presented. For now, I was excited, engrossed and enlivened. I was encouraged to speak about self-representation, about race and gender, about an ethics of representation and a politics of style. I was reading books where words were carefully styled to carry social justice agendas, stories that shaped national subjects from colonial ones, narratives that wrote in hidden and repressed histories. These books shone with a creative brilliance but their luminosity was also generated by an electricity of transformative meaning, of intervening in what is at stake when we represent the lives of others.

In this context, reading Edward Baugh's essay was a moment of satisfaction and accommodation. My course on Caribbean Literature became a place where the quarrels about representation, equality and freedom that bubbled silently in my head could not only be heard but could make it into

print. As I studied the search of Naipaul's Biswas, Lamming's G and Walcott's Shabine to find accommodation, I too had a sense of belonging. I was not connected to the Caribbean by birth, by ancestry or by location but by the pull of words, ideas and the imagined emancipations of the literary. Although my desire to work a foothold into understanding these literary works and the critical debates that animated them was almost immediate, I never anticipated that I would somehow be part of the project of negotiating and communicating the meaning and value of Caribbean Literature.

The cultural revolution of the 1970s that Baugh speaks of and to in his piece had delivered a new ethics of relevance and belonging in the evaluation of Caribbean words and worlds. But it had its limits. As I embarked on my PhD study under the supervision of David Dabydeen, I was focused on the evident neglect of women's writing and on researching a curious fissure in existing interpretations. The critical accounts I read suggested that women's writing from the Caribbean before the 1980s was scant, derivative, uninteresting and yet rainy afternoons spent browsing the stacks of *Bim* were rewarded by a wealth of women's works. I worked my way assiduously through the little magazines that Warwick library housed and found writings that would draw curious, ambivalent smiles when thrown into conversations with fellow Caribbeanists. Although my tutors in the English department seemed perplexed that such a subject as Caribbean Literature really existed when I announced my migration to the Centre for Caribbean Studies, my own sense of this tradition was already of a large body of work, much of which remained critically untouched and some of which I sensed was regarded as untouchable.

This was during the late 1980s and my strange cravings for what I found in the stacks were balanced by the magnificent diet of new works being published by women. While my final PhD project centred on the poetry of the extraordinary Jamaican woman, Una Marson, my quarrel with literary history was already more substantial than her restoration alone could settle. I didn't fully appreciate then that I was engaged in multiple quarrels with history. The first one over women's writing has subsequently received a great deal of attention and from the 1990s onwards it is probable that more conference papers and published works have attended to Caribbean women writers than to male ones. Yet, while the women writers who have published since the 1980s have rightly gained prominence, very many earlier works by women remain completely obscured. Indeed, my second quarrel, over so-called early writings was, and remains, a trickier dispute as the sources are often still inaccessible and the critical yield they offer remains outside of the main agendas for cultural and intellectual interest. Researching Caribbean writings before the boom is demonstrably more demanding. It requires the patience to navigate often incomplete and uncatalogued archives and the stubbornness to niggle at the agendas of literary decolonization and nationalism. If this same research hadn't also engaged some of the brightest and nicest people I know (such as

Evelyn O’Callaghan, Denise deCaires Narain and Leah Rosenberg), I might surmise that it was suited only to the obsessive and the obstinate.

Before I had completed my PhD, which I was aware no publisher would touch, I took my first teaching job at a College of Higher Education. I was teaching sixteen hours a week, among them happily my own module on Caribbean Literature. Quietly, I brought my quarrels with the ‘quarrel with history’ into the classroom. I taught Una Marson, Elma Napier and Mahadai Das alongside the Naipaul, Walcott and Brathwaite of my own education. In my second year the copyright laws changed and I could no longer collate the photocopies of early essays, poems and stories that I had used as course materials. A corridor grumble to my then Head of Department, Roger Bromley, was to mark a step-change in my engagement with the field of Caribbean Literature. When I moaned that students would no longer be able to access all the then peripheral wonders of the Caribbean literary world, he suggested that I publish my course materials as a Reader. Working with Sarah Lawson, a former fellow PhD researcher at the Centre for Caribbean Studies, I began just that task and in 1996 the *Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* was published. It was a product of the arrogance and naivety of youth. If I had to make a selection of writings from the across the whole twentieth-century all over again I would be paralysed by the choices and by the stakes of those choices.

For the next decade, I continued to expand my knowledge of Caribbean literary and critical works through both teaching and research. I wanted to map how all the strangely diverse literary cultures that I had encountered researching my thesis and the *Reader* had conceived of themselves and how critics had interpreted and shaped narratives around them. When my monograph, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* was (finally) published in 2006, I saw more clearly that my work was demonstrably a quarrel with the ‘quarrel with history’ as Baugh had presented it. For me, the significant disputes now lay in exploring how particular versions of nationalism, womanism, diasporic criticism and sexual dissidence had informed historical and literary legitimacy (and illegitimacy). The work yet to be done involved attending to the literary works that these dominant versions could or would not accommodate. The drive of emancipatory criticism had been focused on the politics of race and class, and rightly so given the embedded inequalities of colonialism, but along the way discourses that had advocated rights had become powerful orthodoxies setting horizons on the claims to postcolonial subjectivities. If there is a proper function of criticism, it should be to intervene against orthodoxy and comfortable regimes of value, and especially to intervene in order to unsilence subjects (in both senses of that word). My own work was not a match to such a task but it tried to look those intentions in the eye.

While a monograph is by necessity a lonely and selfish endeavor, my inclinations have always been towards collaborative work and towards works that can extend the pleasures of Caribbean literature into Higher Education

curricula. When Routledge approached me to edit a Companion, I was clear that the only field I could navigate with anything like manageable trepidation was Anglophone Caribbean Literature. Working with Michael Bucknor meant that I had a coeditor of equal energy, opinion and passion. While no first run at a comprehensive critical reference work within a field can be anything but flawed, we managed to summon a wonderful cast and to showcase something of the creative and critical multitude that comprises our field. Our aim was to construct a resource for non-specialists to approach the subject and to teach Caribbean writings with an awareness of their history, their cultural contexts and the quarrels over critical meanings and moments.

My own intellectual interests and lines of enquiry were quietly working themselves into new shapes as we edited the Companion. My ongoing curiosity about the anomalous treatment of sexuality within a culture in which liquidity and syncretic forms are so celebrated has led to a book-length study of literary works that represent Caribbean queerness and reframe questions around homophobia by showing how writers from Naipaul and Salkey to Diaz and Hopkinson contest heteronormativity.

I am also committed to thinking about the Caribbean literary past in a very material way. While there has been much cause for celebration in recent years around 'developments' in Anglophone Caribbean literary culture - such as writer development programmes run by Peepal Tree Press and the launch, in 2012, of the Caribbean Literature Action Group to support the development of Caribbean writing and publishing, the literary past is not so secure. Many of our authors' papers are not located, catalogued, or preserved and very many of those that are have been deposited in metropolitan libraries where access is seriously limited for Caribbean readers. Future possibilities for interpretative communities rest on the material as well as the intellectual resources that our generation takes care over.

I guess that all of this is to say that I do not feel very intellectually formed, or at least not in the sense of being resolved to work according to a critical school or genre or period or on the writings of a single ethnic group. Indeed, I feel blessed by the ongoing potential of Caribbean literary works across all of these categories to rearrange my expectations, to challenge my skills and knowledge as a reader, to surprise and to delight me.