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## Critical Company: *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*

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Critical Company: *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*

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Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 704 pp.

For the embarrassingly long time it has taken me to complete this review, I have been dubbing the *Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature* my lime-green monster. It has stared accusingly at me from various locations as I alternate between avid reading and avid avoidance. But despite my occasional discomfort, the truth is I am rather proud of its existence. Its neon-covered heft demands acknowledgment of Caribbean literary studies as a field now mature enough for such large-scale anthological reflection. Caribbean literature has certainly been established enough for some time now to merit anthologizing on various scales – as discussed in Erika J. Waters’s included essay – so the objective with this Companion is not to define a canon, but to define a field of study based on that canon. And in sketching the terrain of this field, editors Michael Bucknor and Alison Donnell allow for the jagged edges of paradox and unpredictable development even as they present a fairly cohesive intellectual history of Caribbean literary criticism.

For more than the obvious reasons of shared publisher and editor, this anthology reminded me of *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (1996), edited by Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh. That reader was my first real introduction to the history, variety, and canonical names of Caribbean literature. In short my first introduction to Caribbean literature as something to be *studied* as well as enjoyed. It served well as a text from which to begin a conversation in both undergraduate and graduate classes and I expect that this newest Routledge foray into the field of Caribbean literature will serve similarly well for both pedagogical and research purposes.

The power of publishers to authorize and canonize bodies of literature is evident in the Routledge branding of both anthologies. Both the *Routledge Reader* and the *Routledge Companion* mark moments of the recognition of Caribbean literature as a Literature. A relatively new venture, the Routledge Literature Companion series is described as publishing: “Field-defining volumes in new and exciting areas of literary studies. These volumes are ideal introductions for beginners, or handy

volumes for those already working in the field: summarising current scholarship, whilst pushing the boundaries of emerging trends they are must-have collections” (661). *Field defining* is a massive undertaking and requires not only a solid understanding of the historical and contemporary lay of the land, but also an almost psychic sense of shifts to come. This is, of course, near impossible with a static product such as a printed anthology – moreover one that takes some time to produce as the field itself continues to evolve. As the editors write in the introduction:

“The task of compiling a Companion to this field during a moment of [heightened] creative production and critical endeavor is exhilarating but it is also a risk. It is inevitable that we will have made exclusions from the past and the present, and that, from the perspective of the future, some of our predictions of critical trends will be mistaken, overly exaggerated or too timid” (xxiii).

So, even as it is published, the anthology becomes a map of a moment that has already passed.

This is, however, true of any such endeavor and does not diminish the *Companion’s* utility when no such map has previously existed for the breadth of Caribbean literary studies.

To extend the geographical metaphor, this definition of the field requires coverage of well-trod ground as well as a charting of the potential of newly-turned earth. Thus, although all the entries are newly published essays (as opposed to the reprints of the earlier *Routledge Reader*), not all are ground-breaking. That said, the eight-page table of contents is daunting but also exciting and promising. As a whole, the essays themselves do not disappoint. The contributors to this anthology include well-known names from Caribbean Literary Criticism as well as some new-comers who may themselves go on to define the field in years to come.

The anthology is divided into six sections and it is useful to review the text in that order. The first section, “Caribbean Poetics,” represents a different genre of article than the rest of the anthology. Given the focus on individual writers, one might expect something like an encyclopedia entry (along the lines of the articles). If these articles provided only detailed biographies like those contained in a book like *Fifty Caribbean Writers*, that would still be worth inclusion in this context of a reflection on the Caribbean literary critical tradition. But even as these articles provide some overview of the writers’ lives, they are focused on a particular aspect of their work, mostly an aspect that has not yet been covered, or not yet covered sufficiently. The editors appear to have given some thought to balanced coverage, though such a section could never be comprehensive; female writers are

represented as almost half of the fourteen entries and the figures covered range in generation from C.L.R. James to Caryl Phillips. The entries are in alphabetical rather than chronological order, which loses the sense of genealogy that a reader could gain from the latter but has the benefit of allowing for the “non-biographical” focus of the articles to shine.

The back cover of the anthology describes this first section as covering “the foremost figures of the Anglophone Caribbean literary tradition” so it is not clear why the section is titled “Caribbean Poetics,” especially when experimenters with language and aesthetics such as Louise Bennett, Lorna Goodison and Robert Antoni are conspicuous in their absence with such a section title. Also conspicuous in their absence are well-known and influential figures like Samuel Selvon, Edgar Mittelholzer, and Jamaica Kincaid. This raises the interesting question of what it means (and what it takes) to be a foremost figure in this field.

Part II – “Critical Generations” – provides much of the genealogical element that the alphabetical order of the first section avoids. This is a short section, with only three essays, and focuses on Caribbean literary criticism throughout the Twentieth Century. If the first section focused on our creative writers in this tradition, this section brings to the fore our critics. On the whole, however, the anthology blurs the lines between the two categories, reminding us that many of our writers were also critics and vice versa. As Donette Francis writes in her essay on Caribbean feminism, there is a “fluidity between the creative writer and the critic in terms of how we think the field of Caribbean literary feminism” (332). Though it includes only “critical” essays, the *Routledge Companion* indicates that this fluidity extends to the larger category of Caribbean literary studies.

While also not comprehensive, this section manages to have less visible gaps than part one. Norval Edwards writes about Caribbean literary criticism from the *Beacon* (1930s) to *Savacou* (1970s). Taking the time to zoom in on particularly seminal articles such as Edward Baugh’s “Towards a West Indian Criticism” and Gordon Rohlehr’s metacritical three-part commentary on the controversial double issue of *Savacou* (issue 3/4), Edwards gives a remarkable overview of the landscape of literary history during these decades. His essay, aptly titled “The Foundational Generation,” is followed by Alison Donnell’s essay on “The Questioning Generation” of the 1980s and 90s. Donnell examines the “interventions around gender and ethnicity” (125) made by writers and critics at the close of the Twentieth Century, interventions aimed at complexifying the work done by those texts covered in Edwards’s preceding essay. The third essay in this section is by Nadia Ellis. The title, “The Eclectic Generation,” feels a bit like “miscellaneous” but perhaps that is also appropriate for the new (and

sometimes insistently not-new) directions embraced by scholars at the beginning of the Twenty-first Century. What I mean by that parenthetical is that within a landscape of touted “new” and “innovative” approaches, there are critics who reach back to the foundational concepts of Edwards’s essay while sensitive to those inherent in Donnell’s essay, making their work not exactly new, but yet still path-breaking. I would argue, for example, that Belinda Edmondson’s work would accomplish this feat. Ellis begins and ends her essay with Edmondson, whose careful scholarship indicates that “eclectic” may not be the best word for this section.

Whilst there is a clear distinction between Parts I and II, the boundaries between the remaining sections are less obvious. I could imagine many of the articles being categorized differently. Part III, “Textual Turning Points,” covers a range of “moments” in Caribbean literary history throughout the Twentieth Century. This section is also roughly in chronological order. The entries focus on three to four texts or authors in order to discuss a “turning point” that these artists or their work reflect. Worth highlighting here are Evelyn O’Callaghan’s essay on “Early Colonial Narratives of the West Indies” and Carolyn Allen’s essay on “Moments in the Emergence of a Caribbean Theater.” These two, to my mind, bring to the fore texts not commonly discussed in Caribbean literary criticism. Other essays in this section mix canonical with lesser-known texts such as Una Marson’s *Pocomania*, and Austin Clarke’s *The Meeting Point*; or they utilize an uncommon critical perspective, such as Supriya Nair’s turn to Caribbean eco-poetics to discuss “Dwellings in *In the Castle of My Skin*, *Palace of the Peacock* and *A House for Mr. Biswas*.” With a mix of interventions that were immediately apparent and “turning points” recognizable only in hindsight, the emphasis in this section is on how what we may have come to think of as established methods and texts came to be so. This approach is especially important when considering future (and perhaps current) scholars and students for whom this anthology will be an introduction to the Caribbean literary tradition in much the same way as the 1996 *Routledge Reader* was for many of us.

The fourth section of the Routledge Companion covers “Literary Genres and Critical Approaches.” Not surprisingly, a notable feature of Part IV is the heavy usage of dense theoretical language. Such language is near unavoidable in essays on topics such as Marxism (by Glyne Griffith), Psychoanalysis (by Whitney Bly Edwards), and Modernism (by J. Dillon Brown). Even the critical methodologies that are rooted in the interventionist politics of Donnell’s “Questioning Generation” – such as David Chariandy’s discussion of diaspora, Ronald Cumming’s discussion of queerness, and Donette Francis’s discussion of feminism – must engage established rhetorics while negotiating the relationship

between these theoretical frameworks and Caribbean literature. Many of the essays in Part IV would be paradigmatic of what Kenneth Ramchand, in Part V, disdains as “useful to readers with academic purposes” but not for “ordinary people.” For Ramchand, the turn to theory leaves little space for the “close, repeated, sensuous and analytic reading” that is “signally lacking in the bulk of modern criticism including West Indian criticism” (363). While this section may represent what some critics see as “wrong” with Caribbean literary criticism today (and literary criticism more broadly), it also represents the important centering of the Caribbean in that discussion. Yes, there is rightly a suspicion of the use (or over-use) of theory in reading our literature, but we cannot let others define when and how we enter this discourse. To participate in theory-heavy criticism is to not only claim legitimate space for Caribbean writers and thinkers, but also to influence the texture of the discourse as a whole.

Part V, the largest of the six sections, is consciously built around some of these tensions of approaches to Caribbean literature. This section presents paired articles that focus on a key critical term or concept in literature, including terms familiar to Caribbean readers and scholars such as *migration*, *language*, *nation*, and *race*, as well as more recently utilized (and contested) terms such as *popular culture* and *indigeneity*. In their introduction, Bucknor and Donnell state that they aimed to pair authors from different generations in this section but though they deem it the “debates” portion of the anthology, these paired articles are not always oppositional or complementary. For example, though Sheila Rampersad’s essay on the dougla figure in Trinidadian literature may be as related to the term “ethnicity” as Anne-Marie Lee-Loy’s essay on “Chinese Characters in Anglo-Caribbean Literature,” the two essays are not quite related to each other. Regardless of the curiosities of organization (and of the strange pattern of double titling), I am quite grateful to have these and other essays available in one valuable resource.

The anthology begins and ends with a focus on the material conditions of Caribbean literature. The introduction to the volume opens with a discussion of publishing and Part VI closes this discussion with articles on the various media via which Caribbean writing has been available in the past 100 years. The essays in this section cover various forms of print publications (from “little magazines” to anthologies), radio, film, and painting. It ends, appropriately, with an essay from Annie Paul on the influence of digital media on Caribbean literature. Paul asks, “How has the advent of computers and their attendant technologies, digital and social media, impacted on literary strategies globally and anglophone Caribbean literature in particular?” (626). The question itself, and Paul’s necessarily incomplete answers, bring us back full circle to the point the editors

make in the introduction about the risk of attempting to present an accurate and comprehensive picture of a moving target.

The end product was worth the risks and attendant failings. I would have preferred the editors take a bit more of a risk and provide short introductions to each section, as was done in the Routledge Reader. In a sense, this is both a quibble and a major complaint about the anthology. Bucknor and Donnell do real work in pulling this tome together and I believe they should make some of that work visible in discussions of each section. Why are Part III's "textual turning points" important? How do we determine the key points of debate? What is it about Part I's selection of writers that best exemplifies Caribbean poetics? The anthology is already long, but some sort of entry point into how the editors conceived (and conceived of) the sections would have been a welcome addition, particularly in Part V, which needed some indication of how to think the paired essays together. Bucknor and Donnell do gloss these sections in the introduction to the volume, but they do so without any sense of the order they have chosen and the logic behind the final categorization. Granted, the reader should be prepared to read the Routledge Companion out-of-order, but as the editors *have* chosen these six sections as an organizational methodology, they should provide some *backative* for this choice in the form of section introductions that discuss the connections between the essays.

I wanted to review this anthology because I wanted to read this anthology. But this is not the kind of book you read with an agenda. It's the kind of book you go through slowly, incompletely, sometimes with purpose because you need information, other times at random because you need inspiration. It's the kind of book – and this is perhaps the highest accolade – that, even as (or even if) you finish reading it, makes you recognize that you will never know enough about twentieth century Anglophone Caribbean Literature.