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Donnell, Alison

Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History

London: Routledge, 2006, x+278pp.

By Lara Cahill

It is just over thirty years since the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, hosted the Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literatures and Languages—the first time that West Indian literature was presented and reviewed in, for and by a community of Caribbean authors and scholars. The energetic and contentious debates regarding the value and objectives of West Indian literature that arose during this conference solidified the positions that scholars had been negotiating throughout the previous decade and accelerated the critical review of Caribbean literature within the academy. The influence exerted by key scholars present in Jamaica in January 1971, among them Kamau Brathwaite, V.S. Naipaul, Gordon Rohlehr, Sylvia Winter, and Kenneth Ramchand was such that criticism since has been an ongoing conversation that challenges, revisits and expands their collective goal to articulate the values of decolonized narratives. The history of this discussion is clear for these pioneers, who continue as active discussants, and for those among us who observe or perhaps prompt the emergence of the critical, ideological, and historical trends and counter-trends in Caribbean literary studies. However, the turn of the century inevitably marks the passing of time and forces the acknowledgement that the field has grown to such a degree that the institutional memory of Caribbean literary studies is no longer sufficient to order and promulgate its history.

Alison Donnell's *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*, published by Routledge in 2006, constructs a critical historiography of what she coins as Anglocreole Caribbean literature and criticism in order to fully engage with the pivotal challenges that the twenty-first century presents. Donnell, a reader in Postcolonial and English Literatures at Nottingham Trent University and the Joint Editor of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, organizes her study into four chapters, three of which explore the most influential critical trends of the second half of the twentieth century and a fourth that anticipates the goals of twenty-first century Caribbean literary criticism. Donnell delicately manages her critique of each of these important moments by thoroughly assessing their value and their relationship to previous debates. She not only interrogates and examines critical approaches to Caribbean literature, but she also conducts close readings of undervalued texts to illuminate new directions within and beyond these established schematics. Her point is ultimately to encourage new thinking on old subjects.

Underlying Donnell's re-reading of Caribbean literature and its criticism is her ongoing interest in the perspectives and positions that are marginalized in the process of establishing a canon and a critical practice. In each chapter she directs the reader's attention to the voices that were quieted by the dominant discussion: colonial-era writers devalued by post-colonial politics; women writers sidelined by the masculine project of nationalism; Caribbean-based writers who stayed at home while others crossed the Black Atlantic; and Caribbean women of non-African ancestry "othered" by Afro-Caribbean feminism. Without diminishing the significance of any individual author's argument, she provides alternatives to the critical practices they advance. In keeping with this awareness of what is silenced by standardized academic and political designations, she offers *Anglocreole* as an alternative term to the more widely used *Anglophone*. Modeled on Carolyn Cooper's usage of *creole/anglophone*, the term acknowledges that Caribbean literature coming from the English-speaking tradition is composed in Creole, and even, variations of Creole, as well as Standard English. It captures the range of linguistic and cultural influences that have been creolized in the literature without privileging written language and spoken language.

She initiates her discussion by raising important questions about how histories are made, particularly for literature from and about the Caribbean, where a significant aspect of the post-colonial project is countering the burden of an imposed History. The effort to establish a Caribbean literary history, she argues, has not been exempt from the limitations, oversights, and bracketing that typically accompanies such endeavors. In her first chapter, "Difficult subjects: Caribbean writing before the boom," Donnell problematizes the naturalized belief of what she calls a spontaneous literary genesis. She starts at the beginning, so to speak, by reviewing the 1950s boom in London-based Caribbean writers, such as Lamming, Selvon and Naipaul, with regards to their influence on the 1960s generation of writers and scholars who championed this literary present as a moment seemingly without a past. The chapter reviews the goals of several key anthologies from the 1960s, the previously mentioned conference hosted by the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, and brings into focus Brathwaite's influence in determining the direction of post-colonial Caribbean literature and its criticism. She presents his selective canon-formation project with a dash of skepticism regarding his exclusions at that time, his reasons for such exclusions, and most specifically, his radical banishment of Jean Rhys.

Donnell's reading of the nationalistic, anti-colonial trajectory surrounding Caribbean literature's Little Tradition, as Kamau Brathwaite described it, seeks to explain how these efforts all but erased what was considered the "juvenile, imitative, politically uncomfortable and aesthetically unworthy" writing from the first half of the twentieth-century (11). Donnell's argument in this chapter leads to a discussion of her personal interest in relatively obscure writers from the pre-boom era. Her Ph.D. thesis focused on women writers in Jamaica from 1900 to 1950, and she continues this project by recuperating additional texts that were castigated by the critical trajectory of Caribbean studies. For Donnell, these colonial texts represent an important dimension of Caribbean literary and cultural history.

Donnell's critique is sustained as an intellectual exercise; she turns Chapter One's argument about the narrow nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s into an analytical counterpoint to the universalizing tendencies of the 1990s post-colonial diasporic theory in her second chapter, "Global villages and watery graves: Recrossing the Black Atlantic." Heralded by Paul Gilroy's 1993 publication, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and the Double Consciousness*, the critical trend towards migration and diaspora was very much the product of the metropolitan academy. Caribbean criticism's preoccupation with the nation became unfashionable as the intellectual climate throughout the humanities came to favor post-nationalism, trans-nationalism, and movement. Donnell argues that such work is valuable for understanding Caribbean cultural formations and movements, but tends to move into and through the Caribbean without pause to consider what geographical rootedness inspires. She champions Olive Senior as a migratory subject whose writing has not suffered dislocation and detachment. As *Gardening in the Tropics* indicates, she remains rooted in the Caribbean, specifically Jamaica, despite the attempts by her publishers to cast the collection of poetry as a gesture to her Canadian audience.

The Caribbean local proves to be an unexplored topic—the evidence of which Donnell finds in “the existence of significant under-researched archives, and the continued emergence of new writers and new critical journals within the Caribbean region” (79). Again in this chapter, Donnell resurrects women writers from the first half of the twentieth century through her reading of the poetry of Albinia Hutton (née McKay), a Jamaican of Scottish descent. Though her poetry reflects what Donnell calls an “incomplete creolization,” it offers insight into the matrix of subjectivities that converge in the Caribbean under the Atlantic paradigm. It demonstrates that she is a colonized, transplanted subject with a problematic relationship to the local within a community where social relations were marked by race. Donnell skillfully re-constructs a genealogy of local writing and culture by juxtaposing Hutton's poetry with Erna Brodber's lesser known works, primarily the pamphlet *The People of My Jamaican Village, 1817-1948*, which focuses on the history of her home Woodbridge, Jamaica, and was published by *Blackspace* in 1999.

While the first two chapters serve as a review of critical trends that emerged from the first “boom” in Caribbean writing and criticism, the final two chapters present the critical trends inspired by the second—that of the 1970s surge of Caribbean women writers. The publication of Merle Hodge's *Crick, Crack Monkey* brought women's voices out from the silencing imposition of male-driven nationalist critical discourse. The 1990s trend toward mapping migratory Caribbean subjectivities, however, opened up the review of women's writing through feminist criticism specifically co-opted from African American feminist theory. Chapter Three, “Double agents: Gender, ethnicity and the absent women,” examines how the black diasporic critical model determined feminist scholarship on “contemporary, diasporic, African Caribbean women writers” to the exclusion of female subjectivities before and beyond this designation (131). Donnell challenges this trajectory's argument that it is the black woman's body that has

exclusively suffered a double colonization and points to the indigenous, the Chinese, the Indian, and even, the white woman that Caribbean feminism historically overlooks.

Donnell directs the analysis towards women's local experience in the Caribbean in order to illuminate efforts to carve out a shared gendered space that is respectful of social, sexual and ethnic differences. Una Marson emerges as the Caribbean's proto-feminist for composing some of the earliest poetry that politicizes race and gender. Donnell reviews the bold female subjectivity of Marson's first volume of poetry, *Tropical Reveries*, a collection "that has received absolutely minimal critical attention" since its publication in 1930. Continuing her historical and textual recovery, Donnell turns to the subject of the Indo-Caribbean woman, who has arguably suffered significant erasure. She diversifies Caribbean feminist concerns with political, social and narrative authority through her close readings of texts written by Indian women from the Caribbean and about the Caribbean's Indian community. Donnell highlights two specifically Indo-Caribbean critical paradigms, *matikor* and Shalini Puri's *dougl'a poetics*, which were first expounded in *Matikor: The Politics of Identity for Indo-Caribbean Women*, edited by Rosanne Kanhai. Donnell argues that the use of a Hindu fertility ritual to historicize and empower female identities in *matikor* and the cross-pollination of Indian and African feminist rhetoric through *dougl'a poetics* presents the possibility for radical revisions to Caribbean feminism and writing by and about women.

Chapter Four, "Sexing the subject: Writing and the politics of Caribbean sexual identity," re-engages the feminist discourse from the previous discussion of gender and ethnicity to suggest that such thinking has opened up the field to the exploration of diverse subjectivities. In her forecast of Caribbean literary criticism's future, Donnell sees a trend building toward the theorization of sexual difference. Her analysis begins on the subject of female sexuality and an assertion of a woman's entitlement to her body and its pleasure. She reads this as an important first step in writing against the negation of individual sexual identity—a negation that finds its roots in the abuses of post-colonial society's plantation history, but continues through the restraints of the conservative and predominantly Anglican Christianity of Anglocreole Caribbean society. Her predictions in this chapter are based on an emerging body of writing that reflects characterizes individual by their sexual identities—sexual identities that frequently go beyond the parameters of Caribbean compulsory heterosexuality. From here she works through the typical debate of Caribbean homophobia as it announces itself in popular culture, primarily Jamaican dancehall, and in politics, such as Trinidad and Tobago's Sexual Offenses Act, to argue that literature is the site where the representation of sexual diversity is being mapped. Her reading of the homoerotics of Lawrence Scott's coming-of-age novel *Aelred's Sin* provides an interesting counterpoint to the de-sexualized tradition of the Caribbean *bildungsroman* typified by Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*. Looking back to the diasporic model of earlier movements in Caribbean writing and the impact of such migrations on real life, Donnell acknowledges that it is not by coincidence that this work is being produced and published outside of the region. This holds particularly true in literary interventions into the issues of

homosexuality, transgender identity and a growing regional AIDs problem, such as those by Jamaica Kincaid and Shani Mootoo.

Donnell does not exclude herself from the text's emphasis on individual subjectivity, and it is through the acknowledgement of her position as a reader that *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature* implies another prediction about twenty-first century literary criticism. In her introduction Donnell explains that she is aware of the blind spots that invariably attend the non-Caribbean critic of Caribbean literature, but she also expresses the hope "that I may also have some added insights of an outsider's eye." Donnell, in spite of, or regardless of, the perceived limitations of an "outsider," produces an impressive piece of scholarship that emphasizes the value of archive-based methodology in offering dynamic readings of Caribbean literature.

Though "outsiders" have always worked in the field, Caribbean literature has become increasingly established in the academy. Universities in and out of the Caribbean now offer Caribbean literary studies as part of post-colonial literatures and in some cases, as an individual area of study available to Caribbean and non-Caribbean students. Caribbean literature's exposure to the intellectual trends of the academy has influenced its readings, as the critical trends of the 1990s indicate. Likewise, the academy's exposure to Caribbean literature is producing more varied analysis from more varied perspectives. Donnell's accomplishment is representative of Caribbean literature's expansion and thereby, the fact that more outside perspectives will be contributing to the discussion. The quality of her research, the clarity of her analysis and the bold objectivity of her arguments models a most responsible and thorough approach for anyone working through the highly politicized debates of Caribbean literature. Nevertheless, Donnell's book is by no means groundbreaking in its content. As she herself acknowledges throughout, more focused studies have already been done on the specific themes she addresses. The work of her project, and its greatest value, is the analytical review of the truly groundbreaking moments. *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature* is, rather, *foundational* for its comprehensive mapping and rigorous interrogation of Caribbean literature and its critical tradition. By recuperating pre-boom writers and pushing the boundaries of contemporary Caribbean subjectivities, Donnell expands the trajectory of Caribbean writing to encompass the entire twentieth-century and revitalizes the conversations around obscure and widely read texts. Established and emerging scholars alike will undoubtedly see endless investigative possibilities and prompts imbedded in her project. *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature* will certainly inspire further intervention into ongoing debates, and will also stand as a solid example of how that work might best be accomplished.