

*The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*

Eds. Michael A Bucknor and Alison Donnell

660 pages, 2011, \$185.00 USD (hardcover)

Abingdon and New York, Routledge

Reviewed by H. Adlai Murdoch, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This extremely ambitious compendium comprises 69 separate entries spread over six thematically separate parts. The whole arguably seeks to account for the range of historical and cultural contexts and to provide an accompanying set of analytical frameworks that will undergird and valorize the Anglophone component of Caribbean literature over the last century or so of its production.

An in-depth introduction stresses the changing material conditions of literary production in the region. While the authors are mindful of “the urgent rush for a literature that could clearly serve the decolonizing context of Caribbean independence struggles” they also urge that we pay “careful attention to the literariness of the archive” (xxvi). In this vein, the articles that populate the volume represent an impressive range of pioneering, established and ground-breaking literary critics.

Part I, “Caribbean Poetics,” provides an overview of the work of the *dramatis personae* who, in decades past, made up the vanguard of Caribbean literature and currently make up its leading lights; such figures include, *inter alia*, Dionne Brand, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Michelle Cliff, C.L.R. James, George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, and Derek Walcott. While issues of history, discourse, and gender appear here, along with discussions of the canonical struggles waged in the 1950s and 1960s to establish this literature as a separate and self-sufficient field, there is relatively little on the specificities of Caribbean history and culture that would have served to contextualize and legitimize this literature and the analytical approaches that accompany it. Indeed, in the oscillation between historico-literary contextualization and close readings of particular texts, there is too often here a tendency toward claims and arguments that tend toward the general, and, unfortunately, even the reductive. Much of the discussion of the work of Dionne Brand and Michelle Cliff takes a chronological approach, depending on autobiography for the provision of critical depth and context. While aimed perhaps at the untrained reader, much of the information provided here reads aspects of these authors’ works through various stages in their critical lives. The results thus remain somewhat superficial and incomplete. Elaine Savory’s chapter on Edward Kamau Brathwaite is something of an exception, as her exposition of the three phases of his writing highlights the ways in which his poetry “brought a connection to the history of West Africa before slavery, to the Middle Passage, and to plantation slavery, as well as the new diasporas

brought about by West Indian migration in the mid-twentieth century” (12). Mark McWatt’s essay on Wilson Harris, like Sandra Pouchet Paquet’s essay on George Lamming, provides rich close readings of these authors’ major works that frame and contextualize their major works in historical and cultural as well as stylistic terms, both as critiques of imperialism and as ground-breaking fiction.

Part II, “Critical Generations,” although comprising only three chapters, is much more tightly focused by comparison with Part I. Each chapter examines closely the implications and ramifications of a series of critical texts and interventions spanning several decades of Caribbean literary development. While on the one hand the combined role of the ‘Windrush’ migrant generation of the 1950s and the authors and scholars resident in Britain during this period is acknowledged and discussed, the importance of the decade of the 1970s is correctly pointed to in Norval Edwards’ chapter on “The Foundational Generation” as the one during which we “witnessed the gradual transfer of critical activity from creative writers to a new generation of academic critics associated with the University of the West Indies, and passionately devoted to advancing the study of Caribbean literature” (117). The publication of seminal texts by such writers as C.L.R. James, George Lamming, Sylvia Wynter and Gordon Rohlehr mediated both “the centrality of Caribbean cultural particulars” and the “emergent Caribbean critical tradition” (119), inscribing key stages in the growth and solidification of this developing literary tradition.

Part III is entitled “Textual Turning Points,” and, as its name implies, it traces a set of temporal and textual arcs that can be located in Caribbean literature. This includes a selection of texts and authors that are often overlooked or excluded from such surveys of the field; readings and analyses range from selections from the early twentieth century, through the work of such traditional leading lights as George Lamming, Wilson Harris, Samuel Selvon and V.S. Naipaul, through the surge in women’s writing later in the century, featuring readings of Bennett, Senior, Rhys and Kincaid, to examples of contemporary transnational writing from the Francophone and Hispanophone Caribbean by authors like Cristina Garcia, Edwige Danticat, and Junot Diaz. There are wide-ranging and in-depth portraits of various strata of Caribbean society here, as well as penetrating discussions of the illuminations, limitations and paradoxes unearthed by the literary explorations of Caribbean iterations of class, race, and gender. Similarly, there are cogent and illuminating analyses of the many and varied developments, influences and rivalries that together have both enriched Caribbean literature over the years and afforded direction to its development. The readings of the variations in *poesis* at work in Brathwaite and Walcott, the analyses of the recognition of West Indian diasporic writing by such authors as Paule Marshall, Jamaica Kincaid and Samuel Selvon as a separate category in Britain and the U.S., and nuanced readings of the work of poets Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior, and, especially, Louise Bennett, allows us not only to “recognize the

intimacy, complexity, and complicity of a wider range of intertextual relationships” but also enables an alternative reading of the role of creolization and the creole language as “a self-conscious rejection of inherited European poetic models” (201). In a key way, these contributions effectively expose the core of the Caribbeanness of contemporary Caribbean literature.

Part IV, “Literary Genres and Critical Approaches,” draws on a variety of analytical perspectives, a number of which arguably have not been traditionally associated with Caribbean literary criticism. Here, through such rubrics as “Migration and Diaspora,” “Ecocriticism,” “Modernism,” “Hybridity and Subalternity,” “Psychoanalysis,” and “Queer Theory,” these chapters trace the contributions made by this literature through the prism of these and other fields, bringing to light obscured histories of rupture, displacement, and victimization. Yet even as these readings acknowledge that some Caribbean writing “displays a discernibly modernist propensity for disjointed narrative structure, elliptical internal monologues, multiple narrators and styles, and ironic juxtaposition” (300), any convergences of style and technique are tempered with caveats on the risks of generalization and the assumed repeatabilities of European models. In other words, as J. Dillon Brown puts it, “[i]t is also crucial to insist that the discussion of stylistically experimental Caribbean writing should not be subsumed wholly under the category of a European-dominated modernism” (300). These readings, then, are nuanced and knowledgeable, their insight into specificities of content, form and context that frame the Caribbean literary experience providing both information and analysis.

Similar practices obtain in Part V, entitled “Caribbean Literature and...” Its deliberately open-ended approach engages with the Caribbean canon in a number of ways. Through what might be called a variably prismatic approach, one that posits such terms as “Folk,” “History,” “Nation,” “Location,” “Language” and “Indigeneity” as points of departure for interrogating the content, form, and historicity of the Caribbean canon, it surveys the work of a number of contemporary critics, from Paul Gilroy, Edouard Glissant and Stuart Hall to Brent Hayes Edwards and Robyn Kelly. Here, Carole Boyce Davies, Patricia J. Saunders and others insist that we “understand the centrality of coloniality and the history of colonization” (505) to any attempt at “the definition and re-definition of Caribbean identity” (515).

Part VI, “Dissemination and Material Textuality,” addresses issues of archiving and anthologizing: of collections of texts and criticism in the past and preserving such materials in a widely accessible format as the second decade of the twenty-first century dawns. Here, key pieces outline the importance of literary anthologies and newspapers and periodicals in the 1930’s and 1940’s; the former as a way of canonizing national literatures, the latter because “they occupy a mythical place in the telling of West Indian literary history because of their connection to the middle-class intellectuals who became nationalist leaders during the

decolonization era” (610). The volume concludes with a brief survey of the use of digital and other electronic media, including the recently launched Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC), which aims to provide access to electronic collections about the Caribbean.

In sum, then, while the depth of its critique remains at times uneven in places, the *Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature* makes a valuable addition to the available arsenal of criticism on regional literary production. Its telling analyses of authors and critics, movements and genres, history and culture, provide a wealth of welcome information that illuminates the context and continuity of Caribbean writing.