

7 December 1998

**West Indian Writing in Britain:**

**Is It True to Type?**

Professor E. A. Markham

I toyed with the idea, a few years ago, of putting on a course on West Indian Literature. A course that would take its place alongside other MA taught courses at the university. I would try to avoid the usual things: exotica; special pleading: the terms West Indian and Literature would carry equal weight. But it had to be cost-effective; that’s what made me settle for West Indian (i.e. Anglophone) rather than Caribbean literature, with no excursions into the French, Spanish and Dutch traditions. A modest enterprise, then; something cheap and easy to teach, a one-year MA at Hallam. I managed to dig out my notes at the time. Here’s how it started to shape up. Sorry about the familiar look. A historical and cultural overview. Some classic novels. Focus on two exceptional poets, one of whom, Walcott, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992.

INTRODUCTION TO WEST INDIAN LITERATURE

(Option; Exam + Dissertation)

SEMESTER ONE

WEEK ONE: THE CARIBBEAN: HISTORICAL SURVEY

WEEK TWO: THE WEST INDIES: INTELLECTUAL, CULTURAL, LITERARY SIGNPOSTS

WEEK THREE: THE NOVEL: *In the Castle of my Skin* (George Lamming, 1953*)*

WEEK FOUR: THE NOVEL: *The Lonely Londoners* (Samuel Selvon, 1956) and

*Miguel Street* (stories) (V S Naipaul, 1959)

WEEK FIVE: THE NOVEL: *Palace of the Peacock* (Wilson Harris, 1960)

WEEK SIX: THE NOVEL: *Wild Sargasso Sea* (Jean Rhys, 1966)

WEEK SEVEN: SEMINAR ON THE NOVEL

WEEK EIGHT: INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

(*Hinterland*, Ed. E A Markham & *Voiceprint*, Ed. Morris, etc)

WEEK NINE: WALCOTT

WEEK TEN: WALCOTT

WEEK ELEVEN: BRATHWAITE (and the folk tradition)

WEEK TWELVE: THE BRATHWAITE INFLUENCE

(calypso/kaiso/reggae/pop/performance)

WEEK THIRTEEN: SEMINAR

Of course I would expect you to challenge the place of this or that particular book on the list. And to argue for your own excluded favourites. There are two types of argument here; those that designed to draw attention to the arbitrariness of any such curriculum tinkering; and those designed to question the very concept of the exercise: do we need a course on West Indian Literature, sort of thing? Isn’t it in some way ghettoising the subject?

So, first to the question of arbitrariness. We can certainly trade some of these novels for others, either by the same or other writers. Not a huge problem. Why the very slight *Miguel Street* rather than the more mature achievement of Mr Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*? Good point. Except that this is an MA and you would expect the averagely curious student to read the text in question as a starting point to reading other works by that author; and therefore there might be some merit in starting with the odd text that acts as a literary taster rather than the complete meal. I know that some students who are not intellectually curious make the assumption that they are to be examined only on the texts explicitly taught or discussed in seminars. But that’s a vulgar assumption which can't be encouraged in an institution of higher learning. (And, of course, you can dredge up reasons for these choices. In Naipaul’s case, I might well have been leaving space to re-introduce him in one of his newer roles of Literary Journalist, travel writer and disturbingly elegant dissector of the post-Colonial world: he hasn’t written a recognisable novel for some time.)

Of other novels here, Lamming’s *In the Castle of my Skin* remains irresistible, not just because of the generously accurate portrait of a child growing up in rural Barbados, his ‘maturing consciousness’, but of the orchestration of the richly-textured prose of the novel. With Harris – with Wilson Harris, who is from Guyana – we break free of the island mind-set; the space created for fiction suddenly seems larger than that of his contemporaries. It’s not Guyana’s relatively large size in Caribbean terms that does it – though being part of the continent might well affect your spatial balance – it’s the fact that Harris refuses to accept empirical evidence as given: his hallucinatory technique seeking to connect fragments of history, long severed, with undisrupted time and place is new in our literature, etc.

But to other, more serious, possible objections to my list – more serious than whether this or that writer is left out: these would have something to do with coming clean about the assumptions behind what is West Indian and what, indeed, is Literature. The suggestion here (weeks One and Two) is to explore the notion of what might be West Indian relative to a wider Caribbean context. Should Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* – the story of the first Mrs Rochester, the mad wife in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* be studied in conjunction with Maryse Conde’s Guadeloupean recasting, in 1985, of Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*? This course is to be delivered in a British setting; in Britain. If we are doing it in the Commonwealth Caribbean I might well have started with novels published not in the 1950s but in the 1940s, say, with Vic Reid’s *New Day* (1949), a narrative informed by debate about nationalism; or one might have included something of the radical ‘Beacon Group’ in Trinidad – Alfred Mendes, CLR James – who made their literary mark in the 1930s.

Now we come to assumptions surrounding the term Literature. We’re trying, you know, to get at the methodology of selection. Literature seems to me, if it’s to engage us fully at this level, to be required to pass a few simple tests: it should be able to be re-read and still hold the reader’s interest; it should therefore be more than a series of messages or instructions, or injunctions; or sociological or other data, the purpose of which is to serve other ends. So my criteria are going to be aesthetic ones when I seek to argue that one book is better than another book. For shorthand, I’m very happy to acknowledge as a bench-mark some guidelines laid down by a curious organisation – the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, in 1940 – the precursor of the Arts Council of Great Britain – to provide stable, reasonably objective modes of assessment for its Literature Panel. The criteria for assessment of value in literature were: LINGUISTIC VITALITY, FORMAL INNOVATION and EMOTIONAL TRUTH. (There is an argument, raging in my own institution, about how you measure ‘emotional truth’ – but that’s for another lecture.)

Granted these general guidelines, what are the particular things that come into play when you seek to put on a course on West Indian literature in Britain? How do you mediate between the historical and literary contexts? If Caribbean books were being written and published here for the first time – and I’ll have something to say about publishing later – then access would be a very important criterion for selection. If, as I would argue, this is not the case, we might be more concerned about consolidation than about access.

And there are notions that come to you more or less accidentally, and you find them interesting; and you adopt them. A stray remark of Derek Walcott’s that ‘Most twentieth century literature is about prejudice,’ seemed interesting. If this is so, the question confronting us, then, is not that the literature is likely to be about prejudice, but how it avoids the obviousness of most literature about prejudice. How we might avoid, if you like, our own type-casting. Another notion that intrigues – this one from Wilson Harris – is that much imaginative writing in the Western tradition – the novels – comes with a sort of hidden agenda, the purpose of which is to persuade the reader. (A bad thing? Well, Harris seems to think so.) He calls those novels that tend to manipulate the reader, Novels of Persuasion. So, to recap: these notions – not to be seduced, purely (or impurely), by literature about prejudice, and to try, as a reader, to resist an ideology of persuasion – are part of my minor armory of selection. This isn’t to justify the present selection, just to reveal something of the method.

But to the novels: I remember one thing that excited me about Sam Selvon. Well, apart from the huge gallery of comic types that parade through the stories and novels: Moses Aloetta in *The Lonely Londoners*, in Bayswater (It’s 1956) reluctantly playing host to the newcomers – to Sir Galahad & Cap (short for Captain) & Bart and Tolroy. And what of Five Past Twelve? Five Past Twelve earns his name because of his impressive blackness; one of the boys seeing him, is led to reflect: “Boy, you black like midnight”. Then he takes another look and says: “No, you more like Five Past Twelve”. But what strikes you with Selvon is that wonderfully liberating sense of being on the frontier. Of language: *The Lonely Londoners* is narrated in nation language, and there are these stream-of-consciousness riffs, funny and poignant, which bring alive that early group of unlikely pioneers washed up on the shores of the Mother Country. They work unsocial hours when the city is asleep; and despite the complaints, Selvon’s image of London is that of a love-object. What to make of that extraordinary short story *My Girl and the City*? which is nothing short of a love poem. I’ve always seen this attitude as an implied rebuke to another of London’s illustrious visitors, Charles Dickens (who was born in Portsmouth) whose love-hate relationship with the city occasioned some of the most enduring images we have of the place. Remember the opening of *Bleak House* (published in 1852)?

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elphantine lizard up Holburn Hill.

Dickens goes on: ‘Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city.’ etc. Our representative, Sam Selvon, a hundred years later, has also encountered the fog, but his creation can still take heart at having first use of the day. I’ll cut this short; we’ll deal with the rest of this section glancingly, because I want to come to the current scene.

Glancing at the poetry here. Walcott and Brathwaite. With so many fine Caribbean – West Indian – poets about, it might seem odd to go back to what for some of us is a stale issue – the battle for the soul of Caribbean poetry between Walcott and Brathwaite. But this might still have implications for those of us writing verse in Britain today. Walcott, from St. Lucia, is identified with the broad Western literary tradition – not just the British and American canon, but with the literary inheritance of the classical world. You may know his great Nobel Prize-winning poem *Omeros* (Homer: that’s what the Greeks called Homer – Omeros) – Walcott’s 325 line poem taking on the Homeric myth (after all our Caribbean archipelago is five times the size of the Greek one). Not only that, but Walcott colonises (or appropriates) another great peak of European literary territory, this time Dante, the fourteenth century Florentine author of *The Divine Comedy* – Walcott takes on Dante’s verse form, the *terza rima*, as the organising principle of his own epic – a poetic strategem so well judged that Walcott manages to make his St Lucian fishermen and taxi-drivers and maids and rum-shop dwellers; and that odd, fading English-Irish couple far from home – unheroic, commonplace characters that all of us know – Walcott invites them to fill the shoes of Homer’s near-mythical heroes. Walcott’s poetic legacy tends to be down-played in black England (how many young Caribbean writers are acquainted with the work of others from that tradition – Louis Simpson, say, or Edward Lucie Smith – so it’s part of my purpose to keep it alive. He really is the finest poet that the Caribbean has produced. Martinique, in Aime Césaire, boasts an exceptional poet. And there is, of course, the other Nobel prize-winning poet from the Caribbean, St John Perse, who was from Guadeloupe; but Walcott gets my vote.)

And now to Brathwaite. Well, Brathwaite is thought to be everything that Walcott is not; and his influence is massive. In England, the most arresting of the Brathwaite poetic offspring would be Linton Kwesi Johnson – at his best, a fine poet indeed. But let’s hear Brathwaite: let’s hear why he delights some and scares the faint-hearted:

*Wings Of a Dove* by Kamau Brathwaite

Brother Man the Rasta

man, beard full of lichens

brain full of lice

watched the mice

come up through the floor-

boards of his down-

town, shanty-town kitchen,

and smiled. Blessed are the poor

in health, he mumbled,

that they should inherit this

wealth. Blessed are the meek

hearted, he grumbled,

for theirs is this stealth.

Brother Man the Rasta

man, hair full of lichens

head hot as ice

watched the mice

walk into his poor

hole, reached for his piece

and the pipe of his ganga

and smiled how the mice

eyes, hot pumice

pieces, glowed into his room

like ruby, like rhinestone

and suddenly startled like

diamond.

And I

Rastafar-I

in Babylon’s boom

town, crazed by the moon

and the peace iof this chalice, I

prophet and singer, scourge

of the gutter, guardian

Trench Town, the Dungle and Young’s

Town, rise and walk through the now silent

streets of affliction, hawk’s eyes

hard with far, with

affection, and hear my people

cry, my people

shout:

Down down

white

man, con

man, brown

man, down

down full

man, frown-

ing fat

man, that

white black

man that

live in

the town.

Rise rise

locks-

man, Solo-

man wise

man, rise

rise rise

leh we

laugh

dem, mock

dem, stop

dem, kill

dem an’ go

back back

to the black

man lan’

back back

to Af-

rica

2

Them doan mean it, yuh know,

them cahn help it

but them clean-face browns in

Babylon town is who I most fear

an’ who fears most I.

Watch de vulture dem a-fly-

in’, hear do crow a-dem crow

see what them money a-buy?

3

So beat dem drums

dem, spread

dem wings dem,

watch dem fly

dem, soar dem

high dem,

clear in the glory of the Lord.

Watch dem ship dem

come to town dem

full o’ silk dem

full o’ food dem

an’ dem ‘plane dem

come to ground’ dem

full o’ flash dem

full o’ cash dem

silk dem food dem

shoe dem wine dem

that dem drink dem

an’ consume dem

praisin’ the glory of the Lord.

So beat dem burn

dem, learn

dem that dem

got dem nothin’

but dem

bright bright baubles

that will burst dem

when the flame dem

from on high dem

raze an’ roar dem

an’ de poor dem

rise an’ rage dem

in de glory of the Lord

I was asked by the *Poetry Review* here in London to introduce a ‘classic’ poem to their readers. I chose this poem, and this is how I introduced it.

As the request is for a ‘classic’ not a ‘best’ poem, this isn’t a strenuous exercise. A choice of Kanau Brathwaite’s cameo turns would have included ‘Rites’ (the most compelling bit of cricket commentary I know – the prose version is good, too!); ‘The Dust’ (Barbados women at their ideomtic, funny, philosophical best); ‘Stone’ (the dirge for Jamaican poet, Michael Smith – painful and celebratory) or just something with a fun name (‘Ouagadougou’) etc. ‘Wings of a Dove’ is from the book-length *Rights of Passage* (1967), the first part of a trilogy tracking Africans in the diaspora, then in Africa (*Masks*), finally to the Caribbean (*Islands*) – brought together in one volume, *The Arrivants* (1973). *Rights of Passage*, read by the author at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre in 1967 (at the first Caribbean Artists’ Movement Conference), is classic in its shock of impact, in the Walcott versus Brathwaite debate it stimulated – particularly ‘Wings’ which is also representative of early Brathwaite. (Kamau, like Walcott, was born in 1930.)

What else is classic Brathwaite? Outrageous puns, word-salads more tasty than Lucky’s in *Godot*, modernist switching of linguistic registers, language stained equally by Revelation and by rastaspeak, delight in rhetoric – from a griot, a sharman, a holy fool missing pulpit and court. What else? An obsession with African jazz-folk, with nation language. Enough of that is reflected in ‘Wings’.

It’s useful to know that Brathwaite speaks (and sings) his poems well (Barbados & Cambridge, and songs learnt in Ghana), so that this act of reclamation, even at its more intellectually robust is not ‘academic’. (Let’s say he’s as playful, easily, as Zukofsky, and less puzzling than the performances of Lenny Henry or Trevor McDonald.) Brathwaite’s schema – over 19 books of poetry, plus recordings, essays, poemstories etc – can be faulted: too easy appropriation of the mother image (Africa, Barbados, Lake Chad) or a weakness for what the poet Mimi Khalvati, in another context, calls ‘global’ (larger than local) colour. But Brathwaite is a resource as well as a poet. Some have benefited directly (Linton Kwesi Johnson), the rest of us, by being made more literate about our history, indirectly.

We don’t start, when we talk about Black British Writing, with a clean slate. There is no need for us, each generation, each decade, to re-invent the wheel. That’s the point of this introduction.

So, to move on:

SEMESTER TWO: CARIBBEAN WRITING IN BRITAIN AN UPDATE

WEEK ONE: THE CARIBBEAN ARTISTS’ MOVEMENT (1966-72)

(The Struggle for visibility)

WEEK TWO: CAM FALLOUT: (The Black Book Fair, *Savacou; Artrage*; The Bluefoot Travellers

WEEK THREE: BOOKSHOPS AND PUBLISHERS

WEEK FOUR: LITERARY CRITICISM

WEEK FIVE: SHORT STORIES

(*The Penguin Book of Caribbean Short Stories*: Ed. E A Markham, 1996)

WEEK SIX: IN TRANSITION

Andrew Salkey, Caryl Phillips & Co

James Berry; Roy Health, etc

Joan Riley, Ferdinand Dennis, etc.

WEEK SEVEN: AGAINST NARRATIVE REALISM

(Jamaica Kincaid & Michelle Cliff)

WEEK EIGHT: NEW VOICES

(Andrea Levy, Mark de Britto, Marina Omawale Maxwell)

WEEK NINE: SPECIAL OPTION

WEEK TEN: DRAMA/THEATRE

WEEK ELEVEN: PAULINE MELVILLE & LAWRENCE SCOTT

WEEK TWELVE: SEMINAR ON BLACK BRITISH WRITING

WEEK THIRTEEN: SEMINAR ON CARIBBEAN WRITING

The Caribbean Artists’ Movement was organised in London, in 1966, by John La Rose, Andrew Salkey and Edward (before he graduated to being Kamau) Brathwaite. The problem was that Caribbean writers and artists working in this country were largely unknown to one another and, of course, to their potential readership or audience. This, despite the excellent work done by an earlier generation – the generation of Una Marson and those associated with the BBC *Caribbean Voices* programme, from the mid 1940s to 1958. The Movement’s task was to give these artists visibility through meetings, conferences, poetry readings, exhibitions – and by publishing a Newsletter.

CAM’s success can be measured by the literary structures that survived it: The Book Fair (The Radical Black and Third World Book Fair) which feel into abeyance only last year – and which I’m doing something to keep alive at the Hallam Literature Festival. Also, due to CAM there emerged two literary magazines, *Savacou* edited by Brathwaite back in Jamaica, and *Artrage*, here in London, edited initially by Fay Rodrigues and others. Another off-shoot of CAM, in England, was the poetry-performing troupe, The Bluefoot Travellers, organised by James Berry.

Of course you solve one problem largely to encounter another. Visibility was gained, yes, but at the cost of type-casting. We found ourselves being repackaged – from the complexity of Caribbeanness to the simplicity of being black. (When later, in the mid 1980s, I edited *Artrage* I tried to define black as a political colour.) But back to the problems of type-casting: James Berry’s poetry editions might prove instructive here. In 1976 James edited a selection of the Bluefoot Travellers; twelve entries including A L Hendriks, Cy Grant, the calypsonian, the young Linton Kwesi Johnson and myself; and with the playwright Jimmi Rand represented by a couple of pieces called, respectively, ‘Nock Nock Oo Nock E Nock’ and ‘Talk, Talk. Nigger Talk Talk’, the balance between scribal and oral material seemed to have been held. But by 1984 when James came to edit his ‘Black British’ Chatto collection the new names of Nkemka Asika (who used to be Frank John), Ebony Ajibade, Benjamin Zephaniah, Jawiattika Blacksheep and Rapp, reinforced the non-scribal tendency. (The logic of this has struck home with a vengeance. In two recent mainstream poetry anthologies, published in the last couple of months, the English, Anglo-Irish and Scottish editors have defined Caribbean and Black British poetry as oral: ie, something other than the mainstream of poetry produced in Britain; and they have tended to choose for inclusion poems that are seen to deal with certain subjects – prejudice, alienation, otherness – and with attitudes of protest or nostalgia. That seems to me to be type-casting. It seems that others are now calling our type-casting bluff. Where are the poems about the quality of water, of education, transport; where are our poems celebrating the advent of spring, the miracle of personally being alive and not incapacitated into indignity?) (i)

At this point in the story there’s usually someone demanding good news, asking me to be positive. And the situation isn’t all bleak. In the 1980s there were good first books of poems from Grace Nichols and Fred D’Aguiar. John Agard continues to rhyme with wit and verve and a new voice, Mark de Britto – whose family hails from Trinidad – is admirably enlarging the frame beyond which West Indian poetry threatens to become predictable. And I’m going to be very positive about Pauline Melville and Lawrence Scott, two of our most exciting writers of fiction from the Caribbean operating in this country at the moment.

But I haven’t finished with the poets yet. I just want to suggest that the sense of a flowering Caribbean literary culture across the board in Britain is illusory. It’s based on several misconceptions. One is that we need not measure our achievement against the best of the past. If the best of the past is Shakespeare and Dante and Homer we might be accused of over-reaching ourselves. If the best of the more recent past is Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcot, then the measure seems legitimate. The current tendency, in poetic terms, would be to measure ourselves against, well, Simon Armitage, Carol Ann Duffy, Wendy Cope. Our predecessors, who were contemporaries of Auden, Bunting and Eliot, tended not to sell themselves so short.

That’s poetry. In literary criticism the situation is worse. The generally poor standard of book reviewing in the wider culture, and the gradual disappearance of the review essay has meant that West Indian and Black British writers and readers survive in a professional climate of, at best, intellectual frivolity, where book reviews are hatchet-jobs or PR exercises; and the expectation of the writer is to be published and praised. Reviews are written by people motivated largely by malice or by political calculation. Older contemporaries (like the late Andrew Salkey) who were intellectually robust migrated, in the 1970s to North America or returned to the Caribbean leaving us, in a sense, to re-invent the wheel. The next generation of writers – Caryl Phillips, Merle Collins, D’Aguiar – have followed suit. That’s one sense, you know, in which we are in transition. Partly as a consequence of that, the occasions for literary discourse – the magazines which take our work seriously enough to criticise it – magazines like *Calaloo* in the US, *Kunapipi* in Denmark, *The Caribbean Writer* in St Croix seem not to flourish here. (The honourable exception is, of course, *Wasafiri*, well edited by Susheila Nasta).

There are so many ways of being in transition. James Berry, who came here in 1948 – I’m not sure if it was on the *Windrush* - is in transition in the sense that he brought with him certain living aspects of Jamaican folk culture which he successfully transmitted to the younger, British born generation. The novelists Joan Riley and Ferdinand Dennis are in transition, interesting in that their work is located mainly in Britain, but still waiting for the rigour that might have come from a vibrant critical culture. An example of how a critical culture might help: in 1994 both Fred D’Aguiar and the late June Henfrey published narratives about slave plantations. D’Aguiar picked up awards for his. (We are addicted to awards; this is a lottery culture.) Now, both these short works seemed in some way incomplete. Whereas D’Aguiar’s seemed overly lyrical and sketchy in turns, Henfrey struggled at times to free the material from a sociological undergrowth into the clearer space of fiction. The two writers faced the same dilemma: do you run the risk of romanticising or of simply bearing witness? Where are these central issues being discussed? Even someone like Roy Heath, with his impressive body of fiction, particularly the trilogy of novels about the Armstrong family in Guyana, suffers from neglect of critical engagement with the work, and is, in a sense, in his isolation, in transition.

But I promised you something positive. Pauline Melville.

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF CARIBBEAN SHORT STORIES: CONTENTS PAGE

(Edited by E A Markham, 1996)

PART ONE: Folk-tales, Legends, etc.

From *The Laughter of the Wapishanas* Wilson Harris (b. 1921), Guyana

Time *When Tiger Did Go Sick* James Berry (b. 1924), Jamaica

*Anancy and Commonsense* Louise Bennett (b. 1919), Jamaica

From *Island Sketchbook Narratives:* The Intentional Smell of Things; Anancy Come Up Trumps, Nuh!

Andrew Salkey (1928-1995), Jamaica

*Anancy and Jeffrey Amherst* Andrew Salkey (1928-95)

*God’s Special Mark: Easter Sermon* Wilfred Wood (b. 1936), Barbados

*Sakchulee and the Rich Gentleman* Kenneth Vidia Parmasad (b. 1945), Trinidad

*My Uncle Dalloo* Seepersad Naipaul (1907-53), Trinity

*A Working Woman* Sistren Theatre Collective (started 1977), Jamaica

*One Bubby Susan* Erna Brodber (b. 1940), Jamaica

*Dream Chad* Kamau Brathwaite (b. 1930), Barbados

PART TWO: Stories

*Mattie and Her Sweetman* Claude Mckay (1889-1948)

*The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals* Frank Collymore (1893-1980)

*Fishy Waters* Jean Rhys (1894-1979)

*The Wharf Rats* Eric Walrond (1898-1966)

*Triumph* C L R James (1901-89)

*Look Out* Roger Mais (1905-55)

*Song of Sixpence* Sam Selvon (1923-94)

*My Girl and the City* Sam Selvon (1923-94)

*The Departure* Garth St Omer (b. 1931)

*The Baker’s Story* V S Naipaul (b. 1932)

*Barbados* Paule Marshall (b. 1929)

*I Hanging On, Praise God!* Austin Clarke (b. 1934)

*A Brief Conversation* Earl Lovelace (b.1935)

*Miss Joyce and Bobcat* E A Markham (b. 1939)

*Cats in the Eyes of the Pig* N D Williams (b. 1942)

*Crow* Clyde Hosein (b. 1940)

*I-Calypso* Hazel D Campbell (b. 1940)

*Waiting for Jumbies to Cross* Wayne Brown (b. 1944)

*Country of the One Eye God* Olive Senior (b. 1941)

*You Think I Mad, Miss?* Olive Senior (b. 1941)

*Moro* Willi Chen (b. 1935)

*You Left the Door Open* Pauline Melville (b. 1941)

*Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water* Pauline Melville (b. 1941)

*The House of Funerals* Lawrence Scott (b. 1943)

*Moon* Lorna Goudison (b. 1947)

*Song of Roland* Jamaica Kincaid (b. 1949)

*Baby* Makeda Silvera (b. 1955)

*Security* Neil Bissoondath (b. 1955)

*Full Stop* Alecia Mckenzie (b. 1960)

I’m looking at the Contents page of the *Penguin Book of Caribbean Short Stories* which I edited in 1996. I want to introduce Pauline Melville and Lawrence Scott in this context – though they are very fine novelists, ineed – to emphasise my confidence in the short story form, to underline my conviction that the short story is now enjoying its finest period, and that the Caribbean contribution to it is significent.

It’s interesting, though, that in this Penguin selection of 36 writers (counting the Sistren collective as one writer), seven only are located in Britain, one is no longer alive and one is represented by a sermon. That leaves five imaginative writers out of 36. It is in this context that I celebrate Lawrence Scott (of Trinidad-German heritage) and Pauline Melville (Guyanese-melange). Here is how I introduced Melville’s story. (I must apologise for quoting myself; it’s an ill-mannered trait; something I picked up, I fancy, from George Lamming. It’s addictive, but all in all a less expensive habit than drugs or the drink.)

Melville’s story is called ‘You left the door open’. It’s a complex, complete, terrifying, emotionally draining and intellectually daring story. It invites you, it forces you to shift your moral centre of gravity, again and again. One of the points I’m making here in the introduction to the Penguin is that it challenges type-casting. I quote:

Paul Melville is an actress; and we can see her as the cabaret-artist narrator who specialises in impersonations, taking on the identity of a small-time crook called Charlie, who is too threatening to the audience, who has the same name as a man released from hospital for the criminally insane, who has the name of the man who invades her house, sexually abuses and terrorises her, who is a 19th century murderer, who was once a cabaret artist and burglar, and shot a policeman, and attempted suicide, and has taken up residence in her imagination because she has created a character with his name. All of this must reflect something of the author’s psyche, and it is a West Indian story to the extent that the author is part-Guyanese and is imaginatively fed by that aspect of her heritage. But it extends the range of the West Indian story.

That sort of total intellectual and emotional experience demonstrates the ambition of the contemporary short story. And her novel, *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, published this year, creates the space that’s incomparably larger, richer, more sensual, more magical, more possibly to live a full life in than the constructs which politicians in the region yearn to govern. Lawrence Scott is a fellow literary adventurer – in the stories, in his new novel, *Aelred’s Sin*, set partly in a monastery. There is passion there; faith; there is the play of intellect. Both writers draw on a range of narrative techniques which hint that exploring identity might be an enriching rather than a reductive exercise.

Why is all this important? My subtext all along is that it’s valuable for our writing to create space for itself, and that certain techniques, certain ways of apprehending reality militate against our creating that space; and that, in prose, if you lack the mastery of Lamming, narrative realism tends to make you describe the space you’ve been given, not to surmount it. It is obvious that part of the condition of being West Indian is the imperative to struggle for space, living space: tiny island colonies which satisfied the minimum needs of plantation settlement could never be converted, without radical realignment, into living communities where ones needs – economic, intellectual, social, psychic – were likely to be met: if you must spend your liveliest and most innovative years abroad, then that vital part of your living is done abroad. If, though you’re on the island you hanker to be elsewhere, you dream of being elsewhere, you plan to take yourself elsewhere, you educate your children for life elsewhere, then elsewhere is where you emotionally live. It is a challenge to art, almost a responsibility of the artist to refuse to accept, as a starting-point, a space that is less than an adequate living space; a space that is too small to live in. (The space exists in the Caribbean; only our political arrangements deny us that space.) By refusing to accept what is arrogantly given, by adopting writing techniques that do not validate those spaces, the artist, the writer can at least help others to see that we are, in a real sense, in a state of transition. This isn’t to use writing for other ends. It is the writing that legitimatises our present arrangement of geographical veritgo – an independent St Vincent here, a Barbados there, a Jamaica somewhere – it is *that* writing that is servicing other ends – in effect, violating our human rights. (ii)

I’ll end with a few words about the Special Option and a few words about a young British novelist who, going against the grain of all I’ve been saying, seems yet to have created a credible space here for fiction. (I’ll put my comments about the Drama in a footnote; not that that’s all the drama deserves, but when time is short you grow bold.) (iii)

The Special Option is, again, a continuing attempt to put the work studied in some sort of meaningful context; to compare what we’re doing with happenings elsewhere in the literary world. West Indian writing in Britain with Caribbean-heritage writing – in Canada, in the United States; with non-Caribbean or non-Black writing in Britain. Or with those Americans who share a Caribbean coastline with us. Or with the work coming out of the Creative Writing programmes in universities like my own. It’s natural to look across the water to see how our contemporaries are doing. I was tempted to say something about Jamaica Kincaid, the celebrated Antiguan writer who has recently become a US citizen. She established a reputation early for being the most lyrical and ‘poetic’ of the newer generation of prose writers; and her early work in extra-ordinary and liberating – the stories in *At the Bottom of the River*, published in 1983, and the ensuing novels *Annie John* and *Lucy* make her the stylist of the group. But it seems to me that Kincaid has now become a very mannered writer; her diction and idiom, always classical, seem increasingly removed from the stresses of normal speech, whether Caribbean or American. She seems to be losing something of the uniqueness of the West Indian experience. So instead of Kincaid I would introduce another remarkable writer from the Caribbean, resident in the US.

Michelle Cliff, in 1987, published a novel, *No Telephone To Heaven*. Part of the blurb informs us that this Jamaican-American writer is taking on the themes, yes, ‘of colonialism, race, myth and political awakening through the experiences of a light-skinned woman named Clare Savage’. OK, it’s a story of discovery, of her search for place and self. And, yes, the heart sinks a little (remember Walcott’s observation that ‘most 20th century literature is about prejudice’?) Hard not to be discouraged at the outset by the obvious symbolism. The name. Clare Savage. Clare, light-skinned Savage, not light-skinned enough, etc. Clare’s light-skinned father passes for white in America, where he poses as a plantation owner (Symbolism?).

The darker-skinned mother and younger daughter come to grief, etc. Clare escapes, resists her father’s attempts to whiten her, passes her exams, comes to England, does graduate work in London, and returns to Jamaica, now in her mid-30s, to reclaim the abandoned homeland. She throws in her lot with ragbag, ganga-growing revolutionaries and dies by treachery (A Quashee in the camp) when they plan a raid on an Anglo-American film set, where the Jamaican (West Indian. Caribbean.) past is being trivialised.

OK. Why do I recommend this book to British readers? Not because of its stock themes, but because of its language and structure; because of the range of its reference, and the sheer intelligence of the sensibility guiding the prose. The language plays along the whole continuum from nation language at one end through standard forms of English to something more ritualised. This seems not externally conceived but an attempt to capture and communicate the texture of the experience encountered. The non-linear structure helps. It is non-naturalistic, and that also helps.

But though abandoning narrative realism this writer manages to play close attention to detail. Clare is a credible student doing graduate work at London University. On Sundays she reads the *Observer*, visits the museums, which are more or less free – the National Gallery, the Tate, the British Museum. (She collected impressions. A pun.) I’m labouring this point for a purpose.

All the details are there. The guards at the museum checking bags for explosives; her own thought processes as displays of other civilisations at the Museum assault her own sense of identity or rightness. She is a student, she browses in second-hand bookshops; she reads George Orwell; goes to the cinema, the theatre. In passes we are told ‘She read the pronouncements of Enoch Powell, classics scholar’.

When we hear this person is studying some aspect of the Renaissance, something to do with aesthetics, we believe it (unlike, say, the portrait of the student heroine/victim in Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging* (also published in 1985) who seems not to have the sensibility of someone pursuing higher education, but is a symbol of an oppresive background and environment: when she quotes a line from Laurie Lee’s *Cider with Rosie*: “Incest flourished where the roads were bad”, that line is all there is to it. There’s no book behind that line, the line is purely symbolic in the interest of the plot. (That’s true of many of the locations in that novel.) In the other book, in Michelle Cliff, the reference to Enoch Powell, ‘classics scholar’, is potent in its understatedness, in its wit. The narrative doesn’t need to nudge the reader here into armchair sociology.

I’ll say one last thing about how this book creates the sort of living space I’m talking about. One Sunday night when Clare goes to her room, in a house which she shares with other students, a taxi pulls up. She has a premonition that it’s for her. It’s a young African man seeking lodgings. The landlady, out of sight, tells the man there are no rooms (we don’t know if there are rooms or not). She tells him to try next door. The incident doesn’t spark the predictable reflections on race, which is what you get in sociological works which pass as novels; what it does is to make Clare conscious of her own loneliness. (We realise, suddenly that in all her museum and cinema-going, she is on her own. We feel the poignancy of this; and when she subsequently gives up study, and wanders across Europe with a strange, damaged man, and then back to Jamaica to die comically, wastefully, we do not feel as if we have been manipulated by the author. (The novel’s few faults I won’t dwell on.) Let me turn now to a British-based new novelist who seems to thrive in the naturalistic mould.

Andrea Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin’* (1994) is a fine book. Halfway through I came across a sentence which struck me as being significant. The young narrator, born of Jamaican parents says: ‘I knew this society better than my parents’. It’s good to find a novel set here that is really set here. (For, of course, most people from the Caribbean who claim to live here don’t in fact live here, but circulate from little oases, half a dozen houses of friends; work, shops, doctor’s surgery, without any real knowledge of what makes one town different from another town, or for that matter than living in some place that is not a town.)

First of all, in Andrea Levy, we get a family portrait (not the solitary individual with the rest of the family elsewhere). Mother, father, four children. Living in a council flat in Highbury. (Some of them are tempted, even, to support Arsenal.) This isn’t just a convenient location for the narrative; the family, on occasion, travel as a family; they go to Pontin’s holiday camp; they have contact with the natives. The father, who came over on the *Windrush* (a bit pointed, that), works at the Post Office. The mother, a teacher in Jamaica, retrains, joins the Open University, re-qualifies and becomes a teacher here. These are people we know.

Not that the father is a new man. He is defensive, uptight and, yes, sometimes violent towards the children, but respectful to his wife; he is loving in his own emotionally-stunted West Indian way. In this novel we encounter the day-to-day battle with more or less manageable acts of prejudice and see the family, in its conservative way, straining to keep up appearances. We get detailed and convincing sketches of school, of life on the council estate (both comic and poignant), of Sunday School, and about the National Health Service. Indeed, the father’s drawn-out death from cancer is one of the most convincingly portrayed death scenes in contemporary fiction.

This is a good book; it triumphs despite the narrative convention employed. The convention doesn’t build on the possibilities of narrative realism hinted at earlier in Lamming. It’s true, also, that by eschewing the possibilities of magic realism and symbolism, Levy has cut herself off from ways of enlarging her space for fiction employed by some of her cousins overseas, or by Pauline Melville here in England. But she portrays a convincing England; at least she lives here. And she portrays it so well that we might hope that she is the last of us condemned, in literary terms, to have to invent the wheel.

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Footnotes

We might be coming round in the linguistic cycle where it’s no longer useful to dramatise the dichotomy between nation language and more standard forms of English. Most substantial writers from the Caribbean draw on their full linguistic inheritance, either explicitly, or in more subtle ways, in their rhythms, in their pronounciation and stress, in the weighting given to words used in common.

I am from Montserrat; and it’s perfectly possible to write a novel set in Montserrat, or a novel about Montserrat (I’ve just written a novel that might fit one of those categories – Edgar White has written a fine, poetic novel set in Montserrat.) It might even be possible to write a ‘road novel’ set in Montserrat’s 39 sq.km: you can break off in mid-chapter to recall friends and family, to re-explore the history of the island, the drama of its hurricanes, floods and volcano; and you can follow the main characters’ travels abroad, and dreams of elsewhere. The novel could be as vast as you like, linking this settlement of maybe 12,000 to the rest of the world. What might be reductive, though, would be to write a naturalistic novel where the town was a couple of miles from the country, where the north was maybe an hour’s walk from the south, and where there was no place to hide. For then you’d be writing not of home but of a resort. If home doesn’t afford you hiding-place, it doesn’t fulfil the minimum requirements of ‘home’.

The Drama is interesting in two ways. The failure to build on the substantial body of work by Mustapha Matura and Edgar White – and before them Barry Record, Caryl Phillips, Michael Abbensetts and others – including the radio plays by Roger Mais and Andrew Salkey & co – seems glaring. The demise of so many theatre initiatives: The Wall Theatre Co.; The Dark and Light; The Keskadee; The Caribbean Theatre Workshop, etc, needs to be explored. But there’s the positive side: Caribbean-heritage actors have found their way into the subsidised theatre; and on television. And in Notting Hill Carnival, West Indians have produced the biggest street theatre of them all. So, good luck to The Black Theatre Co-operative and to Talawa flying the flag.

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A Footnote on Publishing from p.3

The publishing situation was and is instructive. Of the mainstream publishers Longman and Heinemann carried African and Caribbean lists – and often they had extra-literary notions of what fitted into those lists. New Beacon and Bogle-L’Ouverture aspired to the dual roles of publisher and bookseller, and provided a holding operation for some years. Others came and went, undercapitalised. It must be remembered that in the 1970s black bookshops in Endland were subjected to periodic and criminal racist attacks. Looking around now, two specialist publishers that catch the eye are Peepal Tree Books in Leeds and X Press in London. Peepal Tree I must praise for its fine discrimination, as they’ll be bringing out my campus novel in April. X Press markets itself as a black press.