Supriya M. Nair (ed.)


This collection of essays reminds us that the field of Anglophone Caribbean literature may now be so large and complex that it defies definition. Part of its growth is due to the passage of time, the influences of expanded education, mobility, and opportunity for both authors and critics, the inclusion of more genres, the recovery of unknown or unavailable works, and the greater ease of publishing both in print and online. But much of it is due simply to a more inclusive definition. Over forty years ago Kenneth Ramchand, in his seminal The West Indian Novel and its Background (1970), succinctly defined West Indian novels as those that were “written by people who were born or who grew up in the West Indies—the formerly British islands in the Caribbean Sea and the South American mainland territory now known as Guyana”—and which usually had “a West Indian setting and ... characters and situations ... immediately recognizable as West Indian” (1970:3). But over the years, whether this literature has been labeled West Indian, Caribbean, Tropical, Commonwealth, World, Postcolonial, or Anglophone, our view of it has altered to the point that Supriya Nair, the editor of this volume, can imagine a course focusing not on the novels of George Lamming, Wilson Harris, and V.S. Naipaul, but instead on those of Michelle Cliff, Edwidge Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid, Zadie Smith, and Paule Marshall (who might possibly have made it into Ramchand’s book if she hadn’t been born in Brooklyn). The question of definition percolates through this work and is central to April Shemak’s “Literary and Linguistic Crossings: The Shifting Boundaries of Anglophone Caribbean Literature,” as well as to Vivian Nun Halloran’s “Anglophone Caribbean Literature in Context: A Comparative Perspective.”

This expansion of definition has occurred alongside the proliferation of “studies” programs and the refiguring of traditional departments, especially English, and has undoubtedly been influenced by it. Now there is a whole range of courses in a variety of disciplines where Anglophone Carribean literature has found a home, or at least a room. In a general education course called “Travels through Time and Space,” Mimi Pipino taught Homer’s Odyssey alongside Derek Walcott’s Omeros. In a twelve-week course called “Aspects of Literary History that focused on pastoral poetry,” Denis deCaires Narain spent one week teaching poetry by postcolonial Caribbean women. In “Beyond the Pale, Beyond the Dark: Representing Carribean Racial Realities at a US University,” Rhonda Frederick shows how Anglophone Caribbean literature can be a
tool for instruction in an interdisciplinary course and analyzes sociology texts on racial identity in the context of literary ones.

Aimed mainly at teachers of undergraduate students in American schools, this book should be useful and inspiring to both teachers and students at all levels. It is not a comprehensive guide to the authors, texts, periods, and themes of Anglophone Caribbean literature, and some of the contributors have limited experience teaching it. What distinguishes it is its point of view, which prizes inclusiveness and innovation, as it comes to terms with the complexity and multifariousness of the literature, and its insistence on giving insight into that literature through a variety of contexts.

Of the twenty-four contributors, two teach at the University of the West Indies: Carolyn Cooper, who writes on creole-anglophone literature, and Paula Morgan, whose essay is on Joy Mahabir’s *Jouvert*. (The book’s recurring theme of reader participation is, paradoxically, given fresh meaning by Morgan’s students, a “microcosm of the dizzying diversity” [p. 174] of the population of Trinidad and Tobago.) The rest of the contributors, some of whom have close ties to the West Indies, are scattered at colleges and universities across the United States except for one each in England, Australia, and Canada. One contributor, Sandra Pouchet Paquet, is emerita. Of the twenty-five people involved in this project, eighteen are women.

The essays are loosely divided into four sections—Movements and Migrations; Ritual, Performance, and Popular Culture; Interpretative Approaches; and Course Contexts—which are flexible enough to allow for a broad spectrum of topics. The most useful essay for teaching an introductory survey course is by Elaine Savory, who recommends using “a deft selection of texts” representing several genres, “a historical and geographic frame,” and some “connective themes related to major aspects of Caribbean culture” to carry students through “what might be a daunting amount of material” (p. 343). Several essays offer overviews of segments of the literature: Louis Parascandola’s on Anglophone Caribbean authors in the Harlem Renaissance, Nicole N. Aljoe’s on slave narratives, Brinda Mehta’s on Indo-Caribbean literature, John C. Hawley’s on black British writers, and Faith Smith’s on nineteenth-century texts. Others focus on only one or two works or authors or genres or literary theories—for example, Albert Braz’s on Pauline Melville’s *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, Grant Farred’s on Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Giselle Liza Anatol’s on the films *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* and *The Harder They Come*, Karina Smith’s on two plays of the Sistren Theatre Collective, Timothy Chini’s on Easton Lee’s *From behind the Counter* and Heritage Call and Patricia Powell’s *The Pagoda*, Joshua Albert Brewer’s on gothic literature, Sandra Pouchet Paquet’s on autobiographies, and companion pieces on intertextuality by Shane Graham and Alisa K. Braithwaite.