

The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature

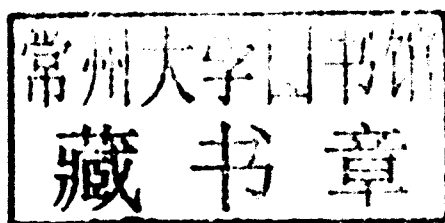


Edited by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell

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CONTRIBUTORS

Allen, Carolyn J., is an independent scholar and theatre artiste. Her research interests are in drama and pan-Caribbean theories of creolization. She has been Lecturer in English and Tutor/Co-ordinator, Philip Sherlock Centre for the Creative Arts, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica.

Antoine-Dunne, Jean, is a journalist, critic, painter, filmmaker and a Senior Lecturer, Liberal Arts, Faculty of Humanities and Education, University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago. Author of several articles on film and literature, including Irish and Caribbean literature, she is co-editor of *The Montage Principle: Eisenstein in New Cultural and Critical Contexts* (2004).

Ashworth, Rebecca, is a Ph.D. student at the University of Reading. Her research focuses on the role of emotion in African-Caribbean women's writing.

Baugh, Edward, is Professor Emeritus of English, University of the West Indies, Jamaica. His publications include: *Derek Walcott* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), his edition of Walcott's *Selected Poems* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) and *It Was the Singing* (poems, Sandberry Press, 2000).

Birthwright, Eldon, is Assistant Professor of English and African American Studies at Louisiana State University. His research interests include anglophone Caribbean literature, Caribbean religious traditions, nineteenth-century American literature, James Baldwin and postcolonial theory.

Brown, J. Dillon, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and the African and African American Studies Program at Washington University in St Louis. He is currently working on a book examining the relationship between postwar anglophone Caribbean novels and the British modernist tradition.

Brown, Lisa R., is a Temporary Lecturer in the Department of Literatures in English, University of the West Indies, Mona.

Bucknor, Michael A., is a Lecturer in the Department of Literatures in English, Mona Campus, University of the West Indies. He has published articles in *Thamyris*, *Mosaic*, *Interventions* and *The Journal of West Indian Literature*. He is currently working on a book entitled *Performing Masculinities in Jamaican Popular Culture*.

Burns, Lorna, is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. In 2007 she completed her Ph.D. thesis on contemporary Caribbean writing and postcolonial theory at the

University of Glasgow and has published articles in *Textual Practice*, *The Journal of West Indian Literature*, *Postcolonial Text* and *Deleuze Studies*.

Campbell, Christian, is the author of *Running the Dusk*, shortlisted for the Forward Poetry Prize for Best First Book in the UK. He teaches at the University of Toronto.

Casteel, Sarah Phillips, is an Associate Professor of English at Carleton University. She is the author of *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas* (University of Virginia Press, 2007) and the co-editor of *Canada and Its Americas: Transnational Navigations* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

Chang, Victor L., is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Literatures in English at the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies. He is one of the founding editors of the *Journal of West Indian Literature* and also founded *PATHWAYS, A Journal of Creative Writing* at the University of the West Indies, Mona. He has published several articles on West Indian literature.

Chariandy, David, is an Associate Professor of English at Simon Fraser University. He has published critical work in journals such as *Callaloo*, *The Journal of West Indian Literature* and *Postcolonial Text*; and his debut novel, entitled *Soucouyant*, was nominated for ten regional, national and international prizes.

Cummings, Ronald, is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of English, University of Leeds. His work focuses on queer theory, discourses of Marronage and contemporary Caribbean writing.

Dalleo, Raphael, is Assistant Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University. He is co-author of *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and author of *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere: From the Plantation to the Postcolonial* (forthcoming).

Davies, Carole Boyce, Professor of Africana Studies and English at Cornell University, is author of *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) and *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (2008). In addition to numerous scholarly articles, Boyce Davies has also published the following critical editions: *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (1986), *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990) with Elaine Savory. She is general editor of *The Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora* (2008).

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, is an Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (2007). She has co-edited, with Renée Gosson and George Handley, *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture* (2005), and *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* with George Handley (2011).

Donnell, Alison, is a Reader in the Department of English and American Literature at the University of Reading, UK. She has published widely on Caribbean writings, including *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (2006). She is editor of *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture* (Routledge, 2002), co-editor of *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (1996) and sits on the editorial board of *Journal of West Indian Literature*.

Dwyer, Dania, is a trained teacher and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree (Hons) in English from the University of the West Indies and a Master of Arts degree in English from Clark University. She currently lectures Communication at Montego Bay Community College, Jamaica, and plans to pursue doctoral studies in the near future.

Edmondson, Belinda, has published widely on Caribbean literature and culture. She teaches in the departments of English and African-American & African Studies at Rutgers University, Newark. Her most recent book is *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure Culture and the Middle Class* (Cornell University Press, 2009).

Edwards, Norval, teaches in the Department of Literatures in English at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. He is a member of the editorial collective of *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, and has published articles on Caribbean literature and criticism, travel writing and Jamaican popular culture.

Edwards, Whitney Bly, is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Tennessee State University. She received her Ph.D. in Caribbean literature from the Department of English at Howard University in 2009. Her areas of interest include Caribbean and African-American literature and comparative cultural and African diasporic studies.

Ellis, Nadia, is Assistant Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research and teaching are in the areas of African diasporic literature, postcolonial studies and queer theory.

Forbes, Curdella, is Professor of Caribbean Literature at Howard University. Her publications include *From Nation to Diaspora: Samuel Selvon, George Lamming and the Cultural Performance of Gender* (2005) and three works of fiction: *Songs of Silence* (2002), *Flying with Icarus* (2003) and *A Permanent Freedom* (2008).

Francis, Donette, is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Binghamton University. She is the author of *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature* (2010).

Griffith, Glyne, is Associate Professor of English at the University at Albany, State University of New York. He co-edited, with Linden Lewis, *Color, Hair and Bone: Race in the Twenty-first Century* (Bucknell University Press, 2008) and he is currently finishing a book on the BBC 'Caribbean Voices' programme and the development of anglophone Caribbean literature.

Gumbs, Alexis Pauline, is the founder of BrokenBeautiful Press (brokenbeautiful.wordpress.com) and the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind Educational Programs (blackfeministmind.wordpress.com). Alexis was awarded her Ph.D., 'We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism', from Duke University and has published work on Dionne Brand in *MaComere* and *Symbiosis*.

Hodge, Merle, is a former lecturer at the University of the West Indies. She has published two novels: *Crick Crack, Monkey* and *For the Life of Letitia*, short stories, a textbook for Caribbean students of English, and numerous articles. Her doctoral thesis explores the evolution of voice in the Trinidadian novel, and the specific contribution of Earl Lovelace.

Hippolyte, Idara, was born in Jamaica and studied at the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies before continuing her studies in various entertainment venues and at the University of Oxford. She has lived for a decade each in Saint Lucia and the United Kingdom. Her work on postmodern theory and Jamaican popular culture has been published in *Small Axe* and *Interventions*.

Hoving, Isabel, is affiliated with the Department of Literary Studies of Leiden University. She publishes on postcolonial theory, Caribbean writing (*In Praise of New Travellers*, 2001), ecocriticism and gender studies. She is also an awarded youth writer.

Kamugisha, Aaron, is a Lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of the West Indies, Barbados. He is the editor of a special issue of *Race & Class*, 'Caribbean Trajectories: 200 Years On' (2007), and has published in the *Journal of Caribbean History*, *Race & Class*, *Proud flesh*, and *The Philosophical Forum*. He is working on a philosophical study on coloniality, citizenship and freedom in the contemporary anglophone Caribbean.

Laughlin, Nicholas, is the editor of *The Caribbean Review of Books*. His reviews, essays, and poems have appeared in a number of journals. He edited a revised and expanded edition of V.S. Naipaul's *Letters Between a Father and Son* (Picador, 2009). He was born and has always lived in Trinidad.

Ledent, Bénédicte, teaches at the University of Liège, Belgium. She is the author of *Caryl Phillips* (2002) and of numerous articles on contemporary Caribbean and Black British fiction.

Lee-Loy, Anne-Marie, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Ryerson University, Toronto, and has a particular interest in the experience of the Chinese in the Caribbean. She has written a number of articles on this subject and her monograph, 'Searching for Mr. Chin: Images of the Chinese and Nation in the West Indies', appeared in 2010.

Low, Gail, teaches contemporary literatures in English at the University of Dundee. She is the author of *Publishing the Postcolonial: Anglophone West African and*

Caribbean Writing in the UK 1948–68 (2010), *White Skins/Black Masks: Representation and Colonialism* (1996) and co-edited *A Black British Canon?* (2006) with Marion Wynne Davies.

MacDonald, Antonia, is a Professor at St George's University, Grenada. She is the author of *Making Homes in the West/Indies: Constructions of Subjectivity in the Writings of Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid* (2001).

McWatt, Mark, is a Guyanese academic, poet and fiction writer, and Emeritus Professor of West Indian Literature at the Barbados campus of the University of the West Indies. He has published numerous scholarly articles on West Indian Literature, including several on the work of Wilson Harris.

Miller, Kei, is a poet, novelist and occasional essayist. His publications include *The Last Warner Woman* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010), *A Light Song of Light* (Carcanet, 2010), and he is presently finishing a collection of essays, *The Way We Talk Wi Talk*. He teaches at the University of Glasgow.

Nanton, Philip, teaches (part-time) Cultural Studies at University of the West Indies (Cave Hill) Barbados. Recent publications include contributions to *Caribbean Dispatches: Beyond the Tourist Dream* (2006) and a spoken word CD, *Island Voices from St. Christopher & the Barracudas* (2008).

Nair, Supriya, is an Associate Professor of English at Tulane University. She is the author of *Caliban's Curse: George Lamming and the Revisioning of History* (Michigan, 1996) and the co-editor of *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism* (Rutgers, 2005). She has published articles on African and Caribbean literature. She is editor of the *MLA Options in Teaching Series: Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (forthcoming).

Narain, Denise deCaires, is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Sussex. She has particular research interests in postcolonial women's writing and is currently working on a monograph on the relationship between 'maids and madams' and another on Olive Senior. She has published widely on Caribbean women's writing, including *Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style* (2002).

O'Callaghan, Evelyn, is Professor of West Indian Literature in the Department of Language, Linguistics and Literature at the Cave Hill (Barbados) campus of the University of the West Indies. She is author of *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women* (1993) and *Women Writing the West Indies, 1804–1939* (2004). She has also edited an early Antiguan novel, *With Silent Tread* by Frieda Cassin (2002) and is one of the editors of the *Journal of West Indian Literature*.

Pouchet Paquet, Sandra, Ph.D., taught Caribbean literature and culture at the University of Miami before retiring in 2010. Professor Paquet is the author of *The Novels of George Lamming* (1982), *Caribbean Autobiography* (2002), and co-editor of *Music, Memory, Resistance: Calypso and the Caribbean Literary Imagination* (2007).

Paul, Annie, is head of the Publications Section at SALISES, University of the West Indies, Mona. A writer and critic, she is associate editor of *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* and author of the blog *Active Voice*. Her website is: <http://www.anniepaul.com/>.

Page, Kezia, is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Colgate University in Hamilton, NY. Her book, *Transnational Negotiations in Caribbean Diasporic Literature: Remitting the Text* was published by Routledge in 2011.

Pollard, Velma, is a retired Senior Lecturer of Language Education, University of the West Indies, Jamaica. Her academic publications include *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari* (Canoe Press [1994] 2000). Her literary publications include a novel, *Homestretch* (Longman [1994] 2004).

Preziuso, Marika, has a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Birkbeck College, University of London. She is a 2010/2011 Research Fellow at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, University of Virginia, USA. Her research and teaching combine postcolonial theory and human geography with textual/paratextual analysis of contemporary literature from the Americas.

Puri, Shalini, is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, where she directs the Literature Program. She is the author of *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity* (2004), which won the Gordon and Sybil Lewis Award. She is completing a book entitled *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory* and editing a volume entitled *Theorizing Fieldwork in the Humanities*.

Ramchand, Kenneth, is Professor Emeritus (West Indian Literature) at the University of the West Indies and Colgate University (English). He was Director of the Academy at UTT for Arts, Letters, Culture and Public Affairs (2005–2009). His later publications include *Life on the Edge* (2010) (the autobiography of RAC de Boissiere) and *The West Indies in India 1948–1949: The Diary of Jeffrey Stollmeyer* (2004), both with introductions and notes.

Rampersad, Sheila, is an editor and columnist at the *Trinidad Express* newspaper. She also designs and delivers programmes for the University of the West Indies' Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business. She has researched race relations for the past 15 years. She conducted post-doctoral research in Black/Brown relations at St Lawrence University, New York, and furthered her work in race relations in East Africa.

Reed, Anthony, is an Assistant Professor in the Departments of English and African American Studies at Yale University. He is working on manuscripts on the relationship between aesthetics and politics in literature of the African diaspora, and on the relationship between improvisation and writing.

Regis, Louis, is a lecturer in Literatures in English at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine. His specialty is West Indian poetry and drama. He is an

accomplished theatre director, although now retired. His major interest is calypso. Among his publications are *The Political Calypso: True Opposition in Trinidad and Tobago* (1999) and *Black Stalin Kaisonian* (2007).

Robinson-Walcott, Kim, is Editor of *Caribbean Quarterly*, University of the West Indies, Mona. She is also Editor of *Jamaica Journal*, Institute of Jamaica. Her publications include *Out of Order! Anthony Winkler and White West Indian Writing* (2006), *Jamaican Art* (1989, 2011) which she co-authored, and the children's book *Dale's Mango Tree* (1992), which she also illustrated. Her scholarly articles, short stories and poems have been published in a number of journals and anthologies.

Rosenberg, Leah, is Associate Professor of English at the University of Florida and author of *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature* (Palgrave, 2007). She also serves on the academic advisory board for the Digital Library of the Caribbean (www.dloc.com).

Savory, Elaine, has published widely on Caribbean and African literatures, especially on poetry, drama and theatre, women's writing and literary history. She co-edited *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990). She has written two books on Jean Rhys for Cambridge University Press and is presently completing *The Quarrel with Death: Elegiac Poetry in the Shadow of Empire*. She teaches at the New School University, New York City.

Saunders, Patricia J., is Associate Professor of English at the University of Miami. She is the author of *Alien-Nation and Repatriation: Translating Identity in Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (2007) and has published essays in *Small Axe*, *The Journal of West Indian Literature*, *The Bucknell Review* and *Transforming Anthropology*. She is currently completing a manuscript entitled *Buyers Beware, Contents not Guaranteed: Epistemologies of Consumption in Caribbean Popular Culture*.

Shlensky, Lincoln Z., is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Victoria, in British Columbia, where he specializes in postcolonial and Caribbean literature and film, and Jewish studies. Dr Shlensky has recently published on colonial aftermaths in the francophone cinema, and on Édouard Glissant, Aharon Appelfeld, and Olaudah Equiano.

Simpson, Hyacinth M., is Associate Professor in the English department and the School of Graduate Studies at Ryerson University, Toronto. She is the editor of the peer-reviewed journal *MaComère* and has published articles and reviews on Caribbean literature in international journals. Her forthcoming books include *Caribbean Migrations: Essays in Transnationalism and Diaspora*.

Shields, Tanya, is an Assistant Professor, at UNC-Chapel Hill, who uses Caribbean feminist epistemologies to explore the relationship between the imagination and Caribbean belonging through literature and visual culture. Currently, Dr Shields is completing her book, *Bodies and Bones: Rehearsal, Gender, and Imagining Caribbean Belonging*.

Smith, Faith, published *Creole Recitations: John Jacob Thomas and Colonial Formation in the Late Nineteenth Century Caribbean* (2002), and edited the forthcoming anthology *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean*. She teaches at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, USA.

Taylor, Emily, is an instructor in the Comparative Literature program at the University of Oregon, where she completed the Ph.D. in 2009. Her research and teaching interests include Caribbean literature, feminisms, postcolonial theory, queer theory and globalization studies.

Thieme, John, teaches at the University of East Anglia. His books include *The Web of Tradition: Uses of Allusion in V.S. Naipaul's Fiction* (1987), *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (1996), *Derek Walcott* (1999), *Post-Colonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon* (2001), *Post-Colonial Studies: The Essential Glossary* (2003) and *R.K. Narayan* (2007).

Thomas, Charleston, is a part time Lecturer at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine, in English, Spanish and Gender Studies. He writes on same-sex desires, gendered subjectivities and identities, and the Black female artiste in the music of the African Diaspora.

Walcott, Rinaldo, is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, OISE University of Toronto. His research interests are in black diaspora studies, queer and gender theory and debates on multiculturalism and coloniality.

Waters, Erika J., is Professor Emeritus, University of the Virgin Islands, and was the founding editor of *The Caribbean Writer*. She has edited collections of Caribbean literature and published articles and reviews. A Fulbright Scholar in 2005, she teaches part-time at the University of Southern Maine. She guest edited *The Caribbean Writer* in 2009.

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INTRODUCTION

The world of Caribbean literary scholarship is immensely vibrant at the present time. 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. In choosing only to represent anglophone writing in a region where the flows and seepages between anglophone, francophone and hispanic writings and cultures are quickening, it is inevitable that we will impose limits and horizons where they may not really exist. In order to bring the works of Dias and Alvarez into conversation with those of Antoni or Mootoo, we have drawn a line that separates these works from their Hispanic neighbours. However, every anthology or companion must set its strictures and this one, sadly, is no exception. We have aimed to be as inclusive of writers, genres, critical approaches, material influences, established traditions and new directions as possible within a single publication.

The idea for this Companion came about because we perceived a shift in critical sensibilities since the beginning of the twenty-first century. At its most basic level, this shift was occasioned by the happy fact of significantly more Caribbean literary works being published or made available. The rapid changes in print technologies and the move towards digital archives have enabled an extension of the Caribbean literary archive in both chronological directions at once. The cultural milieu of the twenty-first century means that literature can, and arguably must, engage in a positive dialogue with other forms of new media. Despite lamentations about the waning appeal of the printed book, Annie Paul's contribution here argues persuasively for an energizing synergy between the book and the screen. It is certainly the case that beyond fashioning blogs and allowing for print on demand, the digital era can oxygenate transatlantic reading communities and foster a more lively literary culture. Online magazines, like the *Caribbean Review of Books* and its web blog *Antilles*, along with social networking sites like Facebook and international booksellers like Amazon, create the conditions for a far more immediate and active global reading culture. Even in the near past, it might well take more than a year for news of the publication of Jamaican Erna Brodber's new work published by New Beacon Books in London to reach academics in Trinidad or students in New York.

Although determinedly futuristic, these digital innovations have also made it easier to move backwards in time and extend understandings of Caribbean literary history. The wonderful Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC www.dloc.com) has provided a platform for instant access to a remarkable range of literary works and cultural

documents that were earlier only available to those proximate enough or well-resourced enough to make archival visits. Of course, the digital age cannot eradicate the asymmetrical access to knowledge that is always dictated by economic circumstance, but it is certainly true that the Caribbean literary past is now more open than ever before. dLoc unlocks a whole range of documents and texts that markedly enrich the print library in common circulation. Readers can access little-known early twentieth-century works, like Tom Redcam's (Thomas MacDermot's) *One Brown Girl and— A Jamaica Story* published in 1909, alongside Bajan newspaper reports of lectures given by writers and critics in the 1980s and recent Carifesta brochures. More than enabling access to individually significant items, the browse facilities of digital libraries enable a reading across archives and along an extended literary timeline that has not always been fluidly plotted, in such a way as to construct new critical and cultural connections. There are signs of a growing embrace of this technology, and other important literary resources from the more recent past are also moving to digital form, including landmark publications such as *The Jamaica Journal* and *Kyk-Over-Al*.

At the same time, there are positive indicators of a growth within print cultures too. Peepal Tree Press continues to make Leeds, not London, the new publishing capital of the Caribbean. While the tricky cultural politics of this passage into print through the motherland has been under debate since Lamming's ground-clearing 1960 essay 'The Pleasures of Exile', there is no longer any sense in which 'West Indians of [our] generation [are] born in England' (Lamming 1960: 214). Caribbean writers today have a much bigger map for self-realization and the cultural politics of the motherland weigh differently in the era of globalization and increased cosmopolitanism, not to mention the rather diffident relationship that Leeds has to London in global mappings. Whatever the status of a UK publishing hub might be, it is thanks to the long-standing efforts of Jeremy Poynting that Peepal Tree Press has managed to maintain its commitment to authors and a specialist market that many independent publishers have struggled to sustain in the present culture of multinational publishing houses. Peepal Tree's expanding profile of Caribbean literature is also, interestingly, showing an equal investment in the past and the future. Its promotion of new authors, such as Tanya Shirley, Christian Campbell, Angela Barry and Anton Nimblett remains a vital source of support for Caribbean literary culture in an age when even the most talented and prolific new writers struggle for recognition in a market desirous of celebratory biographies and crime thrillers. Yet, it is the devoted awareness of what constitutes the literary culture of the Caribbean that also informs Peepal Tree's backward glance, most recently highlighted by their Caribbean Modern Classics. This series has re-published a number of defining works by writers of the 1950s, including Jan Carew, Neville Dawes, Andrew Salkey and Edgar Mittelholzer, writers whose reputations were overshadowed in their own day by the soon towering figures of Lamming, Selvon, Naipaul and Harris. More than sixty titles are planned in the near future and the series has the future potential to unsettle and transform understandings of Caribbean literary history further through its production and dissemination of a more inclusive vision of a literary past. There have been parallel moves by other publishers, such as Macmillan

Caribbean with their Caribbean Classics imprint, which has brought even more obscured titles, such as Frieda Cassin's *With Silent Tread*, J. W. Orderson's *Creoleana* and Amon Saba Saakana's *Hamel the Obeah Man*, back into circulation and critical conversations. What these endeavors also bring to critical awareness, is that our appreciation and knowledge of the region's literature at the present time may already be inflected by loss, by what we have forgotten to remember. Some such acts of forgetting are addressed by our section on Textual Turning Points that positions certain clusters of literary works that could be seen to map particularly defining moments and shifts of literary history. Some of these moments are so commonplace to our received and cherished ideas of Caribbean literature, that we may forget to interrogate their provenance within a tradition, even mistaking the works for the tradition, such as the *In the Castle of My Skin*, *Palace of the Peacock* and *A House for Mr Biswas*. Other significant clusters may have retreated from view and yet connect productively with many of the questions that continue to engage us in reading contemporary works, such as *Jane's Career*, *Banana Bottom*, *Minty Alley* and *Pocomania*. Others still may help us to congregate the critical demands of particular genres such *Man Better Man*, *Pantomime*, *Lionheart Gal* which draws attention to the issues of interpretation for dramatic texts. The last two, on *The Agüero Sisters*, *The Dew Breaker* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, *In Another Place, Not Here* and *Cereus Blooms at Night* position important textual and critical turning points happening at the present time.

While the material conditions of literary production and dissemination provide the focus for the last section of this Companion, in many ways they are the first subject for consideration in any representation of literary history, as the availability of particular works over others has always shaped the building of disciplines and the conditions of critical possibility. It is certainly not difficult to map a correspondence between the growing availability of earlier works and an increasing critical interest in a longer Caribbean literary history. The twenty-first century has seen a small but significant body of work that argues in favor of this revised literary history, which in its backdating of literary production that can meaningfully be considered as Caribbean, also, implicitly, mounts a challenge to the close mapping of literary authenticity with a particular ethnically charged and gendered notion of literary authority (see O'Callaghan 2004; Donnell 2006; Rosenberg 2007; Edmondson 2009). Indeed, it would be naïve to suggest that many of these earlier works have remained unremarked upon in most critical discourse only because of problems of accessibility. This Companion reveals how the politics of Caribbean literary history have seldom been hushed, most particularly in those entries that focus on the different Critical Generations and map out the central contestations and controversies that have shaped the agendas and methodologies of critical enquiry.

If the pulls of the past and the future in terms of recognizing literary authorship and critical interests help to characterize the changing shape of the discipline at the moment, then another defining tension appears to be that between the strong tug towards popular cultural forms and a cultural studies methodology on the one hand,

and the return to a more evaluative, literary critical agenda on the other. Given the rise of cultural studies in recent years and the academic prestige now associated with the study of film, music and art, it is little surprise that such generic interfaces provide especially exciting and fertile scholarly grounds. Our sense of wanting to reach towards such disciplinary meeting points is reflected here in the entries on the interfaces with visual arts and film. The creative cross-articulation of literary and popular cultural forms has a longer history but is no less entangled with questions of cultural value and artistic credibility, as the entries by Saunders and Hippolyte exemplify. In particular the awkward convergence of radical and normative politics continues to make this crossroads both compelling and contested.

One interesting aspect of the critical approaches that emerged in this volume is a renewed investment in evaluative criticism. Victor Chang's reading of Victor Stafford Reid's *New Day* (1949), John Hearne's *Voices Under The Window* (1955) and Andrew Salkey's *A Quality of Violence* (1959) addresses the formal limitations and aesthetic weaknesses of these narratives that were necessarily brushed over in the rush to affirm certain political positions during the nationalist era. In a similarly candid and sympathetic manner, Denise deCaires Narain explores the interpretative limitations, as well as the continued critical possibilities, that must be confronted by the positioning of Louise Bennett as the mother figure in a Jamaican nation language and poetic tradition. Such critical maneuvers should not be taken as a paradigm shift in which the literariness of Caribbean literature is traded in for the Caribbeanness of Caribbean literature, but rather as a sign of the maturity of critical discussion in which both of these claims may be cross-referenced for the kinds of political and intellectual labour they produce. Such readings also indicate that now that the urgent rush for a literature that could clearly serve the decolonizing context of Caribbean independence struggles has passed, there is more intellectual space in which to move and a more sustained and careful attention to the literariness of the archive that may prove rewarding in itself, even though the struggles against neocolonialism remain real and pressing.

It is important, then, that in our reflection on the literary history of the region, produced in this Companion, we do not forget the struggles for change that ensued in the past. One dominant theme in this backward glance is the significance of the decolonization process. In the debates section, Kenneth Ramchand, discussing the issue of canonicity, reminds us that the great radical theorist and writer C.L.R. James was subjected to a colonial education that surreptitiously normalized cultural hegemonies. The Caribbean editor of this anthology remembers, in his secondary education in the mid 1970s, an equally surreptitious move on the part of his teachers who slipped a work by Selvon, Naipaul or Salkey in-between the books of the English canon. On the shelves of his schoolroom at Cornwall College, the works of Shakespeare and Selvon, of Chaucer and Naipaul, slept side-by-side. This illicit intermingling of Caribbean literature and the English curriculum was the beginning of a literary revolution. These subtle revolts by literature teachers were matched by the more open upheavals generated in the publications by academics at the University of the West Indies such as Kenneth Ramchand, whose *West Indian Narrative: An Introductory Anthology*