WOMEN WRITING THE WEST INDIES, 1804 – 1939

"A HOT PLACE, BELONGING TO US"

EVELYN O'CALLAGHAN

Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures

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Women Writing the West Indies, 1804–1939

This pioneering study of previously unknown or marginal West Indian writing by women, queries the accepted wisdom that women's voices were absent from the narrative record until the late twentieth century. It demonstrates that while only a few texts by non-white women have survived, an eclectic body of work by white women – expatriate, resident and creole – does exist. Surveying a sample of fascinating material from novels, stories and homilies, memoirs, letters, travel journals and autobiographies, the book focuses on who these women were, and what kind of narratives they produced. It also asks whether these can be subsumed under a single classificatory label, "West Indian women's writing," and how the narratives construct the region, for those at home and those at the centre, during a particularly important period in the formulation of West Indian and English identities.

The first section considers how early texts demonstrate multiple narrative positions, and the interdependence of black and white female roles and identities which confound simplified reductions. The central section focuses on women's construction of "the West Indies" and how the region and its people emerge in terms of disparate, even contradictory tropes. The book concludes with an overview of theoretical debates on colonial discourse, and suggests the advantages and pitfalls of several "mainstream" postcolonial approaches.

The scope and depth of this book make it essential reading for students and academics within the fields of colonial, postcolonial, feminist and Caribbean literary history.

Evelyn O'Callaghan is a senior lecturer in English at the University of the West Indies, Barbados. She recently edited an early Antiguan novel, *With Silent Tread* by Frieda Cassin (2002).

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Women Writing the West Indies, 1804–1939

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For my father Patrick, a great traveler, who *would* have been able to read this one; and for Philip, who will.

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Quotations from *Lady Nugent's Journal* of her Residence in Jamaica from 1801–1805, are taken from the Institute of Jamaica edition (1966). *Lady Nugent's Journal* is now published by the University of West Indies Press, quotations appear here with permission.

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Introduction

The "absence" of early West Indian writing by women

> WE DON'T KNOW **WHAT** MIRANDA/Antoinette/Miss Ann IS FEELING AT ANY STAGE OF THE SLAVE/PLANTATION CONTINUUM because Prospero never wrote about her & it is only now in the 1990s that she's beginning to write about herself . . .
>
> (Brathwaite 1995: 73; emphasis in original)

In the quotation above, the poet E. Kamau Brathwaite employs a telling literary short-hand to say something about white women in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century West Indies.[1] Firstly, he notes that they came in three familiar models. There is Miranda, Shakespeare's beautiful, virginal symbol of desirable English/European womanhood. Miranda is a younger version of Miss Ann, whose respectful title evokes the plantation mistress, the pious but firm lady of the Great House. Then there is Antoinette, the disturbed white creole of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1968) who, associated as she is with black culture, occupies a more indeterminate space in colonial mythology. Secondly, Brathwaite claims that their lives and experiences formed no part of the narrative record. White men did not write them into the official discourse of colonial rule, because they had no official part in the project; and they could not or did not write about themselves until centuries later (the 1990s). I want to start with this apparent absence of white women's narrative voices from West Indian literary history, and proceed by questioning what such "silence" might in fact articulate.

This book began as a quest to establish whether any *non-white* women's writings had survived from before the twentieth century. I found only a handful. The generally agreed chronological line begins with the short histories of Methodism by (free colored) Elizabeth Hart Thwaites and Anne Hart Gilbert (first circulated 1804),[2] continues with Mary Prince's slave narrative (1831)[3] and ends with (free colored) Mary Seacole's autobiographical *Wonderful Adventures* (first published 1857).[4] There is then a gap of some seventy years until 1931, when the Jamaican Una Marson published a short story called "Sojourn" in *The Cosmopolitan*, a magazine she edited.[5] Why so few? This rate of publication must be seen in the context of a history of colonial deprivation which decreed very limited access of

women generally, and non-white women in particular, to education and even to basic literacy. During slavery, white men took some measure of responsibility for their mixed-race progeny and, especially in Jamaica and St Kitts, provided them with private primary schooling and occasionally sent them abroad for further studies; but the vast majority of such cases were free colored boys.[6] There is evidence of a few educated free blacks, again mostly male.[7] And missionaries (particularly the Moravians, Presbyterians and Baptists) tirelessly canvassed planters to allow slaves access to instruction.

Generally speaking, however, educational opportunities for most slaves in the British West Indian colonies was negligible. However well intentioned the missionaries, limited finances, lack of buildings and qualified teachers, and the limited time given slaves for attendance, mitigated against their efforts. An inventory of those in a position to write *any* kind of document in the pre-emancipation period and for some time afterwards, would include most elite white, some poor white, several free colored and a few black males. There *were* some literate black women in the Anglophone Caribbean during the slavery period,[8] largely thanks to missionary education, and it is significant that the texts of the Hart sisters and Mary Prince are produced in collaboration with liberal metropolitan missionary institutions. But in 1857, Bishop Mitchinson reported that there was hardly any provision made for the education of girls in Barbados,[9] and the ratio of girls' schools to boys' schools as well as of female to male "scholars" enrolled in mixed schools in the island in 1850, indicates woefully inadequate educational opportunities for young women.

And even if the few educated non-white women harbored literary aspirations, all outlets were controlled by the British authorities and catered to the "English" tastes cultivated by the plantocracy. There *were* several periodicals, literary magazines and newspapers in the West Indies in the nineteenth century, and embryonic local publishing facilities, but access to these was extremely restricted. Indeed, in 1821 a white schoolmistress, Eliza Fenwick, wrote from Barbados bemoaning the fact that there was no circulating library in the island and that while there were a few book societies, "One, called the Literary Association, refuse all members till their number is reduced; & the other I was deter'd from offering myself to being told one of their earliest rules was an exclusion of all *School Keepers*" (1927: 216; emphasis in original). The 1864 *Catalogue of Books* of the Colonial Literary and Reading Society in Jamaica advertised an entry fee of ten shillings and sixpence, with an annual subscription of thirty shillings, an impossible sum for the vast majority. Like the early twentieth-century literary and debating societies in the island, the focus was entirely on traditional British literature and catered to "genteel" and leisured readers.[10]

But while the records show few texts by non-white women during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this does not mean that there was *no* women's writing from the West Indies. Far from it. Brenda Berrian's *Bibliography of Women Writers from the Caribbean* (1989) cites Prince and Seacole, and goes on to list texts by white women: Pamela Smith's collection of folklore (1899), Mary Lockett's novel *Christopher* (1902), and Clarine Stephenson's poem (in the 1909

edition of the *Jamaican Times*) and novel *Undine* (1911). Digging deeper, I encountered even earlier texts, and I have no doubt this study outlines only the tip of the iceberg. So how has the claim that West Indian writing by women is a late twentieth-century phenomenon (as articulated by Brathwaite) become an orthodoxy? For instance, Erika Smilowitz (1984: 19) claims that apart from Lady Nugent's journal and a few abolitionist novels written about the region by English women in the eighteenth century, "the West Indies have . . . been a remarkably barren region as far as women writers are concerned." What I want to concentrate on here is the anomaly of supposed "barrenness" alongside the existence of scores of early texts.

Later critical studies have tended to reinforce this impression of a void. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, for example, introduce their important collection of essays on *Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990: 1) with this statement: "[t]he concept of voicelessness necessarily informs any discussion of Caribbean women and literature." By voicelessness they

> mean the historical absence of the woman writer's text; the absence of a specifically female position on major issues such as slavery, colonialism, decolonization, women's rights and more direct social and cultural issues. By voicelessness we also mean silence: the inability to express a position in the language of the "master" as well as the textual construction of the woman as silent.
>
> (ibid.)

Like Smilowitz, the assumption here is that "the woman writer's text" is missing. Boyce Davies and Savory Fido do acknowledge that "[t]here has been a long history of women writing in the Caribbean" (1990: 2), referring to Francophone texts which "appeared before the end of the nineteenth century, perhaps even earlier" (Wilson 1987: v). Further, they point to Marjorie Engber's bibliography[11] as containing references to "many unknown women writers" (Boyce Davies and Savory Fido 1990: 2) but nothing more is said about these "unknowns." So despite the apparently "barren" terrain, quite a few (unknown) women *were* indeed writing in the Caribbean from at least the nineteenth century. What this suggests, perhaps, is a matter of distinction between Caribbean women writers and women writing in/about the region, with critical ears attuned to some voices but deaf to others; after all, as Davies and Fido assert, voicelessness "also denotes articulation that goes unheard." And even among Caribbean women writers, there have been periods when some have been excised from the literary record; for example, Campbell (1982) asks why the eminent critic Sylvia Wynter names Ada Quayle as the first West Indian woman novelist, to the exclusion of Elma Napier, Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey, all of whom produced novels much earlier?[12]

Critical selectivity with regard to women's writing is not, of course, peculiar to the Caribbean. As feminist scholarship has demonstrated, female-authored texts are generally not so much missing from national archives, as ignored. "The majority

of eighteenth-century novels were actually written by women," Ian Watt observes dryly, "but this had long remained a purely quantitative assertion of dominance" (1977: 339). Until recently, the existence of hundreds of writers and thousands of texts was simply forgotten. Introducing *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, Blain et al. (1990) detail the difficulties they faced in accessing early women's writing in English, writing which has been "un- and under-represented in our literary culture" (vii) and, until very recently, generally treated with critical condescension. Determining the "absence" (or not) of early women's writing then, involves asking who are the arbiters of value at a particular time, and what ethnocentric or gendered discourses inform their judgements. Are women's novels devalued because of their "female" concerns (the home) and features (sentimental)? Are their writings excluded because of the low status of the literary vehicle they choose (the journal, for example, or the travel narrative)? Can poor literary quality be overlooked if a narrative addresses certain kinds of matter, or brings new perspectives to bear on it? How does an author's class, race and nationality impact on the reception of her work? Are early narratives now devalued because of their assumed political (retrogressive) stances, or indeed because they are badly written by our standards? Are they now valorized because of their apparently coded *progressive* stance, even if they are at the same time of dubious literary merit by our standards?

Donnell (1998: 2–3) considers that the ideological underpinnings of West Indian canon-formation in the 1970s promoted readings of earlier texts "as being in harmony with, as shaping and being shaped by a developmental history of decolonisation and emergent nationalism." This teleology, she argues, is evident in the selective attention paid to a certain core of authors:

> The canonical pathway forged by these repeated names encourages us to witness the fading allegiance to colonial culture in the works of H.G. DeLisser and Thomas MacDermot and to locate the early voices of a nationalist tradition in those of CLR James and Claude McKay. Together then these nominated few navigate a fairly smooth, if highly selective and all-male, crossing from colony to nation – a crossing in which literature and history make a happy couple . . . the exclusion or selection of pre-1950 writers becomes a means by which to side-step works which were, and perhaps remain, out of step with the prevailing politics of reading, a way to ignore those texts which never made the crossing successfully.

Let us consider this notion of the "prevailing politics of reading" in relation to what is meant by a "woman writer's text" in the West Indies. What exactly qualifies? A sample of critical studies since the 1990s suggests that race is the determining factor: that is, the West Indian woman writer's text is one written by/about black women. So Selwyn Cudjoe introduces *Caribbean Women Writers* (1990) with an implicit understanding that such writers, with few exceptions, are non-white if not black. Cudjoe's overview attempts to identify a *tradition* of women's writing from the West Indies, and his is the usual trajectory from Prince and

Seacole, through a void when it seems nothing was written by women until well into the twentieth century. Again, "there appears to be a significant gap in the recorded novelistic writings of Caribbean women after the later half of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries"(15). Yet the texts I have identified are virtually all published in the very period Cudjoe defines as a "gap," so presumably none are by "Caribbean women." More recently, Kathleen Renk (1999: 12) differentiates between "postindependence" and "earlier colonialist and nationalist writers," although acknowledging that the later group "were also assisted by the work of many earlier women writers, for example, Mary Seacole, Pamela Smith, Henrietta Jenkin, Sylvia Wynter and Merle Hodge." This lumping together of women who wrote between 1857 and 1970 is unhelpful, and there is no attempt to specify *how* the nineteenth century authors "assisted" the late twentieth-century practitioners; in fact, of the list above only Hodge's text appears in Renk's chapter notes or bibliography. Given that the book's focus is "specific textual and discursive connections between contemporary Anglophone Caribbean women's narratives and Victorian literature" (1999: 2), it is odd that the earlier writers merit so little attention.

Isabel Hoving's examination of Caribbean migrant women's writing (2001: 2–3) reiterates that Caribbean women's writing begins in the 1970s, although acknowledging earlier "silenced" voices such as Prince's slave narrative; after this "slow and sparse beginning" the literary terrain is once again painted as barren until the writing "finds a clear, exhilarating direction in the 1930s" with the dawning of an "Afrocentric focus" (4). Aligning her historical overview with Cudjoe's, she clearly perceives "a female literary tradition" in the Caribbean, which appears to be a black working-class tradition: "[f]or women have been writing, just as they were – at least as much as the men – part of the degrading slave labor, the struggles against oppression, and the struggles for independence" (3). Another study, this time devoted to contemporary Caribbean women's poetry, explains that "[t]here *was* a considerable body of writing generated within the West Indies . . . but this writing was generally dismissed as *not truly West Indian*, partly because many of these writers were English, but also because of the unquestioning mimicry of colonial forms and the inscription of colonial ideology which characterized this writing" (deCaries Narain 2002: 4; emphasis in original). Her close study of the early twentieth-century poetry of Allfrey[13] (white Dominican) and Marson (black Jamaican) queries the so-called "belatedness of Caribbean women's 'arrival' on the literary scene" (vii), in an attempt to "extend the notion of who qualifies as a literary precursor and to interrogate the grounds upon which such categories are constructed" (1). Although several critics do allude, if vaguely, to earlier texts (by women like Smith, Jenkin, Allfrey) few discuss them, and there are clearly divergent views of the history of women's writing in the region. Did Anglophone writers begin to publish at the turn of the twentieth century, in the 1930s, or the 1970s?

There are also divergent views about what constitutes a West Indian woman writer. The tendency for anthologies and critical studies of Caribbean women's writing to feature cover illustrations of exclusively black women, and

more specifically black working-class women, sets up an expectation with regard to the writing itself (deCaires Narain and O'Callaghan 1994: 625). These may be governed by marketing strategies which inevitably reflect publishers' preconceptions about race and class in the Caribbean, or indeed by simple demographics. But are these sufficient grounds for maintaining simplistic binary oppositions regarding the "authenticity" of any one group of writers? Certainly, the early white women writers, by virtue of their race and the status this generally conferred, represent an "outsider's" perspective on the black majority, and the voices of non-whites are often silenced in their accounts. However, this is not to argue for a simplistic equation of West Indian with "non-white." And yet this does seem to be the implicit view. For instance, Ramchand's pioneering study of the West Indian novel (1972: 225) includes narratives by white creoles, seeing their texts as "socially relevant" in the articulation of the "terrified consciousness" of elites in the decolonizing process. Given the "demanding context of Black nationalism," he acknowledged this inclusion to be unpopular: in the 1950s and 1960s, West Indian critics were naturally concerned with redressing the balance of centuries of colonial exploitation and racism, and with the promotion of the voice of the oppressed. Ramchand (1988: 95) seems to have been persuaded by this view, as he subsequently argues that West Indian literature is a twentieth-century phenomenon and, as for the earlier body of narratives, when it:

> was not the production of planters and planter-types, government officials, visitors, missionaries and other birds of passage writing from alien perspectives, it was the writing of a small group or class either pursuing its own narrow interests or committed to the idea of Europe as home and center.

Similar thinking informs the downplaying of critical studies of colonial discourse[14] on the grounds that deconstructing imperial representations is at the expense of the real work of privileging counter-discursive "native" productions (Brydon and Tiffin 1993: 26). Gareth Griffiths (1987: 13) dismisses such "first texts produced in a postcolonial society" as the proper subject of theoretical investigation: they represent only "the viewpoint of the colonizing centre" because the writers – "gentrified settlers, administrators . . . travelers, sightseers" – appear "to have been born hand in hand with the Imperial enterprise."[15]

Neither Ramchand nor Griffiths disqualify these narratives because of the race of their authors, but because of their colonialist vision. But for another (vitally important) theorist of Caribbean literature, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, race has been the crucial factor in the debate. "There are of course, 'white people' in the West Indies," he admits (1963: 16), "but these are regarded either as too far apart to count or too inextricably mixed into the whole problem to be considered as separate." While noting changes over time in Brathwaite's prolific critical output, Edward Baugh (1981: 113) concedes that he has fairly consistently posited "the folk" or "the broadly ex-African base" as the matrix of Caribbean culture.[16] Logically, then, white writers (those who have been "inextricably mixed" are presumably no longer a separate entity) are thus peripheral to a West Indian

literary tradition. This does appear to be the conclusion of Brathwaite's treatise on the integration of other groups into the Afro-Caribbean "norm and model":

> White creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf, and have contributed too little culturally, as a *group*, to give credence to the notion that they can, given the present structure, meaningfully identify or be identified with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea.
> (Brathwaite 1974: 38; emphasis in original)

One can debate what changes have taken place in "the present structure" since the 1970s to account for the recent literary production of "white" West Indian writers like Robert Antoni, Michelle Cliff, Lawrence Scott, Anthony Winkler and Jane King-Hippolyte, or indeed to ask whether such writers constitute "a *group*," but the focus on race as a criterion for inclusion in West Indian literature now seems to be in need of revision.[17] With reference to the earlier writers, Brathwaite's argument as I understand it is that the historical and ideological nature of colonialism raised insurmountable barriers between white West Indians (writers included) and the racial and cultural mainstream, so that the texts of the former could not constitute a truthful "recognition of the realities of the situation": white writers' texts, in other words, were irrelevant to the experience and perceptions of the non-white majority.

Implicit in this argument is a transparent model of the literary text, as well as the notion that white writers can only write about "white experience" of the region which is irrelevant to "black experience." More recently Brathwaite (1995) revisits the discussion and contextualizes his earlier assertions.[18] Yet his essay seems to end up reiterating a racially based concept of "relevance," a position increasingly interrogated by contemporary (black and white) critics and theorists. At a certain period in the consolidation of a nascent literary tradition and national identity, such a strategy may have been politically necessary; now, I suggest, we must take account of such developments as the interrogation of nationalism and the ideological overdetermination of fictive texts which it imposed. More subtle and flexible critical responses are required in the context of West Indian literature which has come of age and no longer needs to buttress identity by rigidly suppressing diversity. Indeed, there are now so many "kinds" of West Indians (and West Indian writing), both within and outside the region, that it is timely to revise and rework such a limited definition. More productively, we might embrace Brathwaite's spirit of inclusiveness, as discussed in his theory of creolization as *creative* as well as imitative acculturation. It is Brathwaite, after all, who opposes the view of Caribbean culture as a static plural entity in favor of a vision of productive friction. In art, he feels, the goal is a "meaningful federation of cultures." "[T]here will be no 'one West Indian voice' in West Indian literature," he concludes, "because there *is* no 'one West Indian voice' " (1969: 270; emphasis in original). West Indian societies have, since the beginning, been (uneasily) composed of several races and presumably any definition of the literary culture of such societies will have to take this into account.[19]

The "transparent text" model also underlies the assumption that once the woman writer's text makes it into print, we can access "a specifically female position." But consider the case of Mary Prince's narrative, for example, hailed as the first instance of the West Indian woman's voice. Prince's *History* presents itself as an autobiographical "slave narrative"; but her account, as noted, has been through two sets of mediation by the time it appears in print. Prince's narrative is dictated, her editor Thomas Pringle tells us, to "a lady who happened to be at the time residing in my family as a visitor" (1987: 185) and is further "pruned" by himself, "to exclude redundances and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible." Of course all texts undergo editorial shaping, and the very nature of the slave narrative as a genre with its own internal rules as to structure and content suggests a significant ordering and selection process which renders the term "autobiography" – that is, self-authored – somewhat problematic in the case of Prince's *History*. Hence Ferguson, editing the text much later, speculates as to the involvement of Pringle and the amanuensis in the articulation of Prince's life, and the "contending agendas of such a multi-tiered narrative" (1992: 282–3). Like Ferguson, Patricia Morton (1996: 17) points out that abolitionists, male and female, considered it necessary to portray "slave women as either helpless victims of white male sexual lust and/or as paragons of female sexual virtue." How much, then, is the "Mary Prince" encountered in the text a construct of Pringle and his avowedly abolitionist circle? And as Gillian Whitlock points out, if Pringle "desired Prince to speak as an authentic subject for abolitionist rhetoric, so Ferguson in her edition desires to . . . exhume the independent, authentic subject pursued by late twentieth-century feminism" (2000: 32). Do such considerations not to some extent compromise readings which unproblematically render her voice as representative of black West Indian womanhood? In fact, as Whitlock asks (33), how useful are terms like self and author, authenticity and experience for an understanding of "the negotiations which took place around this hybrid text"?

My intention is to suggest a more flexible critical framework – *not* a new set of definitive parameters – for conceptualizing West Indian women's writing. It appears that the compulsion to categorize in an overly restricted schema contributes to the invisibility, the "absence," the "voicelessness," of many of the early narratives. There is a need to question models of literary history which insist on rigid periodization, estimate texts according to their conformity with a "colonialist" or "black nationalist" focus, or impose prescriptive notions of "the" Caribbean woman's voice. This study offers no convenient grid for placing over an eclectic body of writing; rather, it offers an introductory survey of unknown or little-known works, and suggests some of the multiple possible readings of these gendered accounts of a vanished world.

The early narratives: problems of "categorization"

I begin my survey in 1804, the year of the Hart sisters' "Histories." It is also the year before *Lady Nugent's Journal* was completed (it was subsequently printed for

private circulation in 1839, and only published in 1907). I end with Alice Durie's *One Brown Gal* in 1939,[20] the year World War II began. This, I feel, is a fitting cut-off point for an overview of early narratives as it marks the period of consolidation of anti-colonial, pro-independence agitation in the West Indies out of which was born "modern" West Indian literature as we currently conceive of it.[21] Where relevant to particular themes or issues, I do mention slightly later texts, particularly those set during the period in question. The corpus of writing discussed in this study is largely the production of elite or middle-class white women born or resident in the West Indies which, in light of some of the critical assumptions raised above, makes it difficult to assign the blanket term "West Indian women's texts." In addition, the works are so utterly diverse – in terms of genre – as to defy categorization. Again, in terms of "quality," they vary from frankly educational, barely concealed efforts to sketch the West Indies for a foreign readership, to fine evocations of place and people that still resonate for contemporary West Indian readers. In terms of ideology, many are offensively racist and colonialist; others are sensitive to cultural and racial difference; some can be considered proto-feminist, while many reinforce patriarchal constructs. Within this group of narratives, linked here by their West Indian subject matter, one can identify subsets. Some, according to Brereton (1993: 2–3), are by British women "resident in, or visiting, the Caribbean, with family and social connections to the islands' white elite"; others – by Mary Prince, Mary Seacole and Yseult Bridges – are by "Caribbean women, representing the range of ethnic and class diversity found in the nineteenth century Caribbean." Both these groups, residents and creoles, are distinguished from women who were "simply tourists."

I want to stress from the outset the exploratory nature of my project: the diversity of the writers, and of their generic choices, literary craftsmanship and ideological orientations, makes difficult any totalizing statements about the works "as a group." Similarly, the writing does not fit easily within existing paradigms of West Indian literary development such as those sketched by Brathwaite (1978: 185):

> [W]e must recognize that our literature began on the slave plantation with imitation Euro-writing by Europeans and white creoles on the one hand, and the often unremembered sound-poems, stories and religious litanies of the slaves on the other; that after slavery (c.1838–1938) we entered into a slough of colonial despond when very little creative work was produced among the literate and the existent folk culture was attacked/submerged . . . The anti-colonial consciousness of the period from 1900 produced our first authentic novels.

What I do want to argue is that attention to the early accounts by women adds to the body of literary representations of the region in unforeseen and illuminating ways. These narratives form part of the feminist and postcolonial projects of recuperating lost or silenced voices, and comparing their insights and formal strategies with later writing by women of the region, may help to deflect us

from categorizing Caribbean women's writing in a narrowly prescriptive manner.

Accordingly, the term I have chosen to describe the selection of texts examined here, "narratives of the West Indies by women," is imposed by the material's resistance to neat authorial or generic categories. The texts themselves include a wide spectrum of narratives: novels of all kinds, travelogues, letters, memoirs, journals, autobiographies, stories, collections of folklore, educational or moral sketches, and so on. Many texts also permeate boundaries between these narrative "types." For instance, Percy Adams acknowledges the distinction between "novel" and "travel account" while noting similarities – particularly in texts from the early period – in language, tone, philosophy, "even to literary conventions and motives for composition" (1983: 278). Autobiographical theory also points up the slippery nature of the form as a literary creation of self. Journals and collections of letters, generally considered intimate and autobiographical, are severely self-censored when written for publication: this is clear in the comparison of the journals of Nugent and Carmichael. Which, if either, is really "autobiographical"? And how is one to refer to *The Youthful Female Missionary* (1839), representing itself as a "memoir" of Mary Ann Hutchins by her father, yet compiled almost entirely of her correspondence with him? If Mary Prince's voice is mediated by other (not entirely acknowledged) voices, Hutchins's memoir, which advertises the shaping hand of her father, consists almost entirely of her *own* articulation. Then there is Ethel Maud Symmonett's *Jamaica: Queen of the Carib Sea* (1895), ostensibly a novel but reading like a promotional "tour guide" of the island. Textual motivation is also relevant: given that Mrs Tonna's novel *The System* (1827), Hutchins's memoir and Mary Prince's autobiography are primarily contributions to the anti-slavery cause, while Carmichael's *Domestic Manners* (published in 1833) is a pro-planter defense of the institution, should the ideological/political concerns of a text (rather than the genre) be the chief factor in classifying it?

Various types of "narrative" are yoked into service as educational socio-histories, anti-slavery propaganda, or promotional tourist guides. Novels seem thinly disguised autobiographies or regional histories; "autobiographies" are so sensational as to appear fictions; collections of letters are structured like stories; political histories masquerade as travelogues; so-called fictions are vehicles for cataloguing native folklore and "superstitions." The texts elude categorization and call into question the usefulness of traditional generic boundaries in approaching the material.[22] It is, perhaps, possible to argue that this generic instability reflects women writers' struggle to situate themselves within discourses from which, in the nineteenth century, they were to some extent excluded. For example, to adopt a position *as a woman* within imperial discourse was fraught with difficulties,[23] as was presuming to contribute to "West Indian letters" within a male-dominated literary tradition. The writers in question, by virtue of their gender, would find it difficult to claim a hard and fast site within any one discursive or generic vehicle.

The need to problematize categories applies also to the writers themselves. As noted, some can be termed "West Indian natives" while others plainly cannot, while in the case of long-term residents, rigid criteria of nationality are unhelpful.

Ideally, I would have liked to limit my scope to the work of creole women writers – those born in the region. But the ambiguities of this approach become apparent when considering for example, Lucy Lane Clifford (*c.* 1855–1929). Granddaughter of Branford Lane, one-time speaker in the Barbados House of Assembly (Blain et al. 1990: 216) and daughter of John Lane, a well-known West Indian planter (according to Schlueter 1988), she was a prolific writer with at least fifteen novels, several plays and story collections to her credit. An innovative and exciting writer too, with progressive feminist views on marriage, who blends the macabre with the mundane in many of her stories. But – from my survey – there is nothing about the West Indies in her work. No evidence of influence by West Indian culture, language or landscape. No mention of race or colonialism. One can speculate whether such deliberate evasion/submergence of local material in literary efforts was perhaps a facet of white creole/planter culture at the time, while expatriate writers felt freer to employ "the exotic" local in their endeavors. Such speculation is complicated further, however, by considering other contemporary creole writers who did incorporate, even privilege the local in their work. Lady Mary Anne Barker[24] for example, Jamaican-born daughter of W.G. Stewart, Colonial Secretary of the island, was like Clifford packed off to England at an early age and lived abroad thereafter; but *Stories About*:- (Barker 1873) does evoke a Jamaican childhood and in her writing about the colonies "she describes with sympathy the position of women settlers and servants"(Blain et al. 1990: 61). While it is important not to conflate white creoles with native Englishwomen, nor to gloss over crucial points of differentiation in their ideologies of "home," it is nevertheless futile to expect an invariantly distinctive "West Indian voice" or perspective.

In any case, the example of Clifford contrasts markedly with that of Mrs Augusta Zelia Fraser ("Alice Spinner"), an Englishwoman who accompanied her husband to Jamaica in 1892. Her residence there informs her two keenly observed novelistic representations (of race and gender as well as the creole consciousness) which are plainly relevant here. Most of the creole writers, often the product of English schooling and very much influenced by imperial ideology, are "West Indian" in a very different sense than is currently understood; the West Indies existed very much as a part of a broader entity, the British Empire. None the less, their engagement with island society and landscape reflect a sense, however ambivalent, of attachment to the region. Therefore, I have included both native women writers and expatriates (who resided in the region for a time) as well as a few professional writers who simply visited the West Indies to gather "material" (Gertrude Atherton, for example). I also mention others for whom the Caribbean was an important trope and focus in their texts. What links these narratives together, then, is "the West Indies" in their works.

Of course the region had long been intimately "known" in Europe and North America through a corpus of traveler's tales, histories and anti-slavery texts. Carlyle, James Anthony Froude, Trollope: all these authoritative and supposedly "eye witness" commentators need to be read with an awareness "that the invention of the Caribbean as a European enterprise required little knowledge of the region and, in fact, depended upon a willed ignorance, an always already