

## *Decolonizing English Literary Study in the Anglophone Caribbean*

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How have scholars and teachers of literature in the anglophone Caribbean understood the task of decolonizing the English literary curriculum? What lessons might this hold for those working both within and – as in my case – very far distant from the Caribbean today? This chapter provides an account first of the nature of English literary study in the colonial Caribbean, and then of Caribbean attempts to decolonize the practice in the later twentieth century. My aim is to analyze the evolving ways scholars and teachers have understood the “coloniality” of the practices they inherited, and the different means by which they have attempted to change them.

### **English Literary Study in the Colonial Caribbean**

Toward the beginning of Erna Brodber’s 1988 novel *Myal*, the child protagonist recites Rudyard Kipling’s “Big Steamers” to a visiting Anglican parson at her school in St. Thomas Parish, Jamaica. “The words were the words of Kipling,” we are told, “but the voice was that of Ella O’Grady, aged 13” (Brodber 5). Ella is a mixed-race child, the daughter of an Irish policeman and his Jamaican housekeeper. Growing up in a rural area, she is bullied by her classmates for her light skin and fair hair. Finding comfort in her studies, she learns from the maps and books her school provides. “When they brought out the maps and showed Europe, it rose from the paper in three dimensions, grew big, came right down to her seat and allowed her to walk on it, feel its snow” (Brodber 11). Asked to recite “Big Steamers” to the parson, she is undaunted. “She had already been to England several times” in her imagination, and “all she was doing at Teacher’s rehearsals was to open her mouth and let what was already in her heart and in her head come out” (Brodber 11–12).

Scenes like this give a picture of the colonial nature of literary education in the early to mid-century colonial Caribbean. The set text here, Kipling's "Big Steamers," was first published in *A School History of England*, a 1911 textbook written, as the authors claimed, "for all boys and girls who are interested in the story of Great Britain and her Empire" (Fletcher and Kipling 2). "Big Steamers" is a didactic, question-and-answer poem in which the child questioner learns from the adult respondent about the work of the British merchant navy, crossing the Empire and Dominions. Its message is of a vast world made tame and safe for the child by the bravery and skill of the imperial merchants. The significance of the scene in *Myal* turns not just on what Ella is reading but on how she is reading it. She has learned it verbatim and is reciting it from memory, such that by a process of "osmosis" Kipling's words have become her own (Brodber 11).

British materials, imperial values, rote learning: these are the characteristics many Caribbean writers describe when recalling the colonial literary classroom. Ella O'Grady, attending school in 1913, reads from generic textbooks produced for readers across Britain and its colonies and dominions. Alongside Kipling, she might have encountered Nelson's series of *Royal Readers* or the McDougall Readers series. Slightly later, from the mid-1920s onward, Nelson's began to produce their successful *West Indian Readers* series, written by the colonial schoolmaster Captain J. O. Cutteridge. These later textbooks include more material specific to the West Indies, including lessons on Caribbean flora and fauna, regional agriculture, and local crops. But they also contained extracts and retellings of English literary classics and lessons in art history focused on paintings by British and European artists (Low, "Empire of Print" 117). Moreover, as Gail Low has shown, the West Indian history they did tell was framed in Eurocentric terms: celebrating Columbus's "discovery" of the islands and skating over the history of slavery in their celebratory story about the region's agricultural development (Low, "Read" 107).

In the work of many Caribbean writers (as for Ella O'Grady above), the *Readers* become unwitting objects of fantasy, longing, and projection (Fraser 99). It is clear, however, that these authors, and their characters, read against the grain. In many primary schools, as Carl C. Campbell notes, English classes consisted simply of grammatical drilling and the recitation of poetry (Campbell, *Young Colonials* 89). In Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, a novel about literary formation in the late colonial West Indies, literature is studied by copying and repetition, as a route to better comportment, social capital, and exam success. In Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, the disciplinary undertone to English literary education is made

explicit when the protagonist, Annie, is “ordered to copy Books I and II of *Paradise Lost* by John Milton” as a punishment for writing satirical comments below a picture of Christopher Columbus (Kincaid 82). As Simon Gikandi has argued, colonial schooling understood the ideal student of literature to be someone who easily absorbed and replicated the insights and values of the foreign text: “A powerful mythology among young colonials was that while they could become accomplished readers, writing was alien to their experiences” (Gikandi xvii). Repetition and inculcation were valorized and tested, not creativity, response, or critique.

For most people in the colonial West Indies, secondary education was the exception not the rule. Despite receiving substantial public funding, the best schools in the British West Indies – including Queen’s Royal College (QRC) in Port-of-Spain, Jamaica College in Kingston, and Harrison College in Bridgetown – were accessible to the general public only through a small and exceptionally competitive scholarship program, and then, only for boys. These were grammar schools in the old British tradition with a deep commitment to a European humanistic and literary education. C. L. R. James’s 1963 memoir *Beyond a Boundary* gives a portrait. At QRC, he writes, “I mastered thoroughly the principles of cricket and of English literature, and attained a mastery over my own character” (James, *Beyond* 31). Among his reading, he lists Virgil, Caesar, and Horace (in Latin), Euripides and Thucydides (in Greek), all thirty-seven volumes of Thackeray held in the school library, Dickens, George Eliot, Shelley, Keats, and Byron, Milton and Spenser. “As schools go, it was a very good school, though it would have been more suitable to Portsmouth than Port of Spain,” he writes (James, *Beyond* 37). Associating literary study with “mastery” over “character,” James alludes to the idea that studying English literature might instill a British-derived, masculine-coded form of rectitude. From the later nineteenth century, school certificates were administered by the Cambridge University Local Examinations Syndicates, who adapted to allow West Indian topics and texts only slowly through the mid-twentieth century (Low, “Empire of Print” 118–19). The Caribbean Examinations Council was finally established only in 1973 (see Low, “Read” 108). This, at last, allowed syllabi and examinations to be governed solely from the Caribbean.

The University College of the West Indies was founded in 1948 in a “special relationship” with the University of London. Upon graduation, students received “External” London degrees (“UWI Timeline”). The Department of English was established two years later, in 1950, offering courses for the General degree program and offering its own Honours

(or “Special”) degree in English. As a colonial institution, the department offered four papers for the general degree: “Middle English and Early Tudor Literature,” “English Literature 1550–1700,” “English Literature 1800 to the present day” (in practice, this meant “to 1900”), and “Exercises in Critical Appreciation.” In 1963, as an autonomous university in a newly independent region, practical criticism was scrapped, and five new papers were offered. These were: “English Literature, Chaucer to Wyatt,” “Donne to Pope,” “Johnson to Byron,” “The Victorian Period,” and “Shakespeare.” In other words, very little changed. With some minor rearrangements (“Chaucer to Wyatt” became “Chaucer to Spenser”), this structure remained through the 1960s, and the Special Degree syllabus, whilst having a little more variation, followed the same pattern. “We still live under a compulsion,” Edward Baugh wrote in 1970, “to make sure that the students get a comprehensive course in the literature of England, as if we must first seek the heaven of that kingdom” (Baugh 58). A full course in West Indian Literature was made compulsory for the first time for Special Degree students in 1970.<sup>1</sup> The University of the West Indies (UWI) was significant because it was the key institution in which future teachers and professors of English in the West Indies were educated. One common view, discussed below (pp. 479–480), is that it provided institutional continuity or memory, enforcing colonial disciplinary norms and practices well into the postcolonial period. But at the same time, as Glyne Griffith has argued, it provided an institutional site for methodological reflection and critique (Griffith 295). Most of the scholars discussed in this chapter passed through the University of the West Indies as either students, professors, or both. Many published in forums housed at the UWI.

What defined English literary study in the preindependence Caribbean as colonial in nature? I would point first to the limited franchise. For social groups outside the colonial elite, primary education was not universal, secondary education was rare, and university education exceptionally so. Most of the best schools, as we have seen, were reserved for men. Literary education, at primary level, was very limited, and, despite the efforts of some reformers, emphasized the inculcation of exemplary texts at the expense of critique. At both primary and secondary level, literary study was seen to be a conduit of “conduct” (to quote C. L. R. James). At all levels, the texts studied were overwhelmingly English and European, some championing overtly imperialist views, and some containing racist representations. At university level, the rationale of the syllabus was to tell the story of a nation’s – England’s – literary development through time. All of these characteristics would be the subject of the evolving critique I will now

trace from the 1960s to the present. All would have stubborn afterlives in the institutions in which these critics worked, the syllabi that they attempted to reform, and even in their own minds and assumptions.

### From Enfranchisement to Critique

Two of the larger British Caribbean colonies, Jamaica and Trinidad achieved independence in 1962; Barbados and Guyana followed in 1966. As is well known, the last years of formal colonialism and the first years of independence saw a flourishing of Caribbean letters. The twenty years between the publication of George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) and Derek Walcott's *Another Life* (1973) saw the publication of Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956); V. S. Naipaul's *House for Mr Biswas* (1961) and *Mimic Men* (1967); Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966); Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey* (1970); Kamau Brathwaite's *Arrivants* trilogy (1967–9); and Walcott's *In a Green Night* (1962) and *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970). How did this literary flourishing influence the development of literary criticism and pedagogy in the region? One simplistic but conceptually useful distinction would distinguish nationalist approaches that aimed to enfranchise Caribbean writers within existing models of literary value from more radical forms of critique that used Caribbean experience, and Caribbean texts, to query those values. The tension between these two approaches, sometimes in the work of the same critic, and the gradual shift in critical fashion from enfranchisement to critique through the long 1960s, is a helpful map for understanding Caribbean critical trends in the period.

"Take the whole line of them," C. L. R. James wrote in a *Trinidad Guardian* magazine feature in 1965, "Jane Austen, Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson . . . even Charles Dickens. None of them at twenty-three was so much a master of the novelist's business as this young man, George Lamming, who has grown up in the West Indies" (James, "Home" 4). Just as "half-a-dozen West Indian cricketers" were now "acknowledged as people who could hold their own in any department of the game with the greatest historical figures who have ever been," so it was no longer "unduly nationalistic" to make this claim for the region's novelists. James's thoughts about literature and culture were complex and changed through his life, but this article clearly instantiates the "enfranchisement" model. James takes for granted existing understandings of what great literature is and argues that West Indian writers, though historically neglected, meet this standard and deserve attention. James's argument is that the West

Indian literature of the 1950s and 1960s constituted a major new branch in the long tradition of “Western” literature (“we are a Western people,” he bluntly states), one of singular relevance to the contemporary decolonizing world, and to the Caribbean region in particular (James, “Home” 5).<sup>2</sup> Just as “Aeschylus wrote at home in his native language for the illiterate people around him,” so writers such as Lamming ought (James believed) to express the West Indian experience authentically, that is – in Lamming’s own phrase – “from the inside” (James, “Home” 5; Lamming 37–38). Many critics of James’s generation localized the correct topic of West Indian literature onto the Romantic concept of the “folk.” The standard was international, the subject matter local, giving the West Indian (James was a federalist, after all) a national literature by which to understand themselves and present their experience to the world. At the university and in schools, this approach called for the dedicated study of West Indian literature as such. “Each nation is interested first and foremost in its own literature,” Edward Baugh wrote, quoting from Louis Dudek; at the University of the West Indies, “the study of West Indian literature should naturally have a central and increasingly important place” (Baugh 56, 59).

Even as Baugh was making this relatively modest proposal however – this essay was first given as a lecture at the P.E.N. Club, Jamaica, in April 1970 – he acknowledged that the demands of student activists on the UWI campus far outstripped the nationalist politics of a generation of scholars now viewed as part of the establishment. Speaking of the “upsurge of questioning and self-examination” now manifesting itself “in all aspects of the university’s life,” he describes the local manifestation of a wider shift (Baugh 49). The historian Kate Quinn has described the “crisis of failed expectations” that developed in postindependence Caribbean states through the 1960s. “Flag independence,” it was felt, had done little to redress the deeper legacies of the colonial era: dependence on foreign countries; racial hierarchies that still valorized White or lighter-skinned people; cultural hierarchies that valorized European norms; and social and economic divisions that continued to disenfranchise the Black poor (Quinn 2). In this climate, a more radical vision of culture and politics was offered by the Black Power movement, which called for a break with colonial patterns of government and administration, economic redress in favor of the poor, and – to quote from Walter Rodney’s famous manifesto – “the cultural reconstruction of the society in the image of the blacks” (quoted in Quinn 2).

The Mona campus of the University of the West Indies, east of downtown Kingston, played an important role in the Black Power protests.

A Black Power group had been formed on campus in 1967. When Rodney, a UWI lecturer, was denied reentry to Jamaica by Hugh Shearer's centrist government in October 1968, students marched toward the office of the Minister of Home Affairs. Although the students, in all likelihood, were not responsible for organizing or inciting the larger protests and riots that spread through Kingston, the campus was seen as a symbolic center and was surrounded by the military during the protests (see Lewis 61–67). This was the context in which the university finally moved to increase the representation of West Indian literature on the English syllabus. It also, in Rupert Lewis's words, led to "the Afrocentric reorientation of performance poetry and dance, and, most obviously, in the black-consciousness messages of the popular music of its day" (Lewis 70). These formal and thematic developments in the popular arts, including poetry, did not much impinge on the initially moderate reforms in the UWI English department. Later on, as we shall see, they would.

"The imperial way of seeing has not disappeared with the imperial flag," wrote Sylvia Wynter, then a lecturer in Hispanic literatures at UWI Mona. "Its manifestations are more subtle; because more subtle, they are more dangerous. It was easier to fight 'manifest unfreedom' in 1938 . . . than to grapple with 'seeming freedom' as we must do now" (Wynter, "We Must 1" 30). Wynter's essay "We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture" was published in the *Jamaica Journal* in two parts, in December 1968 and March 1969. A crucial expression of, and reflection upon, its cultural moment, it rejected moderate nationalist ideas in favor of a systematic critique of the definition and function of literature and criticism.<sup>3</sup> The essay is a review of *The Islands in Between* (1968), a collection of critical essays on Caribbean literature edited by the English critic Louis James, who had previously taught at UWI Mona. But as its subtitle "Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism" suggests, Wynter's essay extends into a larger meditation. The target of Wynter's criticism is what she calls the "branch plant" perspective on Caribbean literature, one which "adjusts new experience to fit an imported model" (Wynter, "We Must 1" 26). Despite its still-tiny presence in the main undergraduate curriculums, Wynter had noticed that by this point most critical writing in the English-speaking Caribbean, and specifically most criticism of Caribbean literature, was "centred at and diffused from the university" (Wynter "We Must 1" 24). In her view, the model of criticism practiced by Louis James, and modeled as exemplary to new scholars at the UWI (she uses the example of Wayne Brown) had imported wholesale from England fundamental assumptions about what literature

was, and what constituted literary value, without interrogating them, or their contemporary relevance in the Caribbean.

Wynter's essay made a distinction between what she called "acquiescent" writers and critics and "challenging" or "revolutionary" ones. In her view, the key error made by "acquiescent" critics was to view "literature" as a "fetish object," a special category of language-use to be understood and assessed by special, universal "artistic" standards (Wynter, "We Must 1" 24). The corollary of this attitude for critics was to view critical activity as disinterested in the Arnoldian sense: dispassionately evaluating literary work against a quasi-objective standard, and without acknowledging one's own stakes or investments in the judgment formed. For Wynter, this was an error that found its source in European dualist philosophies (the separation of mind and body, intellect and activity) and in the imperial-capitalist commodification of the work of art. Against this, Wynter offered a vision of literature that was purposive rather than aestheticist: literary texts, including critical essays, are means to an end, "not ends in themselves" (Wynter, "We Must 1" 24). Their purpose is fundamentally social: literary texts exist for living audiences. And the social purpose that Wynter emphasized was interpretive and epistemic. She called for literature which "*reinterpreted*[ed]" Caribbean life by drawing attention to the economic inequalities and the spurious social and racial hierarchies that permeated the region. To reinterpret the social world in this way, she says, "is to commit oneself to a constant revolutionary assault against it" (Wynter, "We Must 1" 24). In this sense, it is important that the two literary forms that most interest Wynter in this essay are the novel and the critical essay: both are seen to share a common critical and interpretive function.

A key word for Wynter in this essay is "awareness." If literary texts are social performances, speaking from person to person in specific social contexts, then it was important to ask: who is speaking, and why? "I am a Jamaican, a West Indian, an American," she wrote, "I write not to fulfil a category, fill an order, supply a consumer, but to attempt to define what is this thing to *be* – a Jamaican, a West Indian, an American" (Wynter, "We Must 1" 24). Where you were speaking from, your social position, background, and investments, fundamentally shaped the meaning of what you said. Her objection to Louis James or W. I. Carr was not that they were English but that their writing did not – in her view – reflect on and acknowledge the position from which they spoke. They replicated colonial ideas about literature and literary value unconsciously and attempted to shape readers and students in their image. Instead of this, Wynter argued,

writers and critics should understand their own writing, and the writing of others, in their total social and historical context: “Challenging criticism seems to me to relate the books discussed to the greatest possible ‘whole’ to which they belong” (Wynter, “We Must 2” 34–35). The “whole” to which both Caribbean and English writers belonged was a world shaped by imperial capitalism and Atlantic slavery. Like Rodney, Wynter saw imperialism as an evolutionary phase in the history of capitalism – “in effect the extended capitalist system” – in which divisions between capital and labor, “exploiters and . . . the exploited,” had through recent centuries been organized geographically: capital in London; labor drawn from West and Central Africa, and later India and China; the site of production in the West Indies (Rodney, loc. 584).

“With Hawkins’s first raid on Africa, his first Middle passage to the West Indies,” Wynter wrote, “the nature of being an African, the nature of Englishness had changed. In the place of African and Englishman there was now only a relation” (Wynter, “We Must 2” 30). For this reason, English, West Indian, and West African literature could only be understood in relation to one another. These observations prefigure a number of the most influential anticolonial theories of the later twentieth century, including Edward Said’s model of “contrapuntal” reading or Paul Gilroy’s writings on Black Atlantic culture. Equally important, when considering the legacy of this essay, was her focus on criticism itself as an interpretive activity on a par with the novel and sharing a common social function. This was evident in what she wrote about, moving seamlessly from novels to critical texts and assessing them both by the same standard of “acquiescent” versus “challenging”; it was evident in how she defined the tasks of writing and criticism; and it was evident in her own style. “I am a Jamaican, a West Indian, an American,” she wrote, making clear both where she was writing from, who she was writing to, and why.

### **New Forms, New Constituencies**

Radical though it was, “We Must Learn” was nonetheless an unfinished project. In that essay, Wynter championed work that, eschewing middle-class enchantment with a European myth of high art, addressed and spoke from within the living culture of the West Indian people. Yet the actual texts she studies are largely novels and essays – prestigious and accepted literary forms. Moreover, they were all by men. This need be no criticism of Wynter – her essay broadly tracks the writers discussed in *The Islands in Between* – but it does tell us something about West Indian literary culture

of the period. Most of the writers to whom literary critics – acquiescent or critical – paid attention in the 1960s were men, working in recognizable “literary” genres. One of the key developments in Caribbean literary study in subsequent decades would be to expand the object of study beyond the traditional literary genres, and to foreground the work of different constituencies of writers.

Moving beyond traditional literary genres, the work of Guyanese critic and UWI professor Gordon Rohlehr was of fundamental importance. On April 7, 1967, whilst completing a PhD on Joseph Conrad at the University of Birmingham, he had given a talk at the West Indian Student Centre in London on “Sparrow and the Language of Calypso.”<sup>4</sup> It would be published as an essay in the second volume of *Savacou* in September 1970, and the project it begins would broaden into a series of essays published over the next three decades, culminating in *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad* (1990) and *A Scuffling of Islands: Essays on Calypso* (2004). One way of articulating the originality of Rohlehr’s approach is to compare “Sparrow and the Language of Calypso” with Mervyn Morris’s “On Reading Louise Bennett Seriously,” published in the *Jamaica Journal* in 1967. Both essays are attempts to extend the purview of West Indian literary criticism to popular forms that had hitherto been seen as subliterary: the lyrics of calypsonian Sparrow and the popular performance poetry of Louise Bennett. Morris was one of the critics Wynter had called “acquiescent,” and his argument for the literary significance of Louise Bennett rests on the claim that she wrote what were in fact recognized poetic genres in the English tradition. He compares her work to the satirists of the eighteenth century (72), to the comic librettos of W. S. Gilbert (72), and – most extensively – to the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning (70–71). “I believe Louise Bennett to be a poet,” Morris had written, “and the purpose of this essay is to suggest literary reasons for doing so” (69). By contrast, Rohlehr’s essay, though noting occasional literary parallels, is not fundamentally concerned with making a claim for the literariness or otherwise of Sparrow’s lyrics, but rather with discerning the kinds of “intelligence” and verbal play that characterized Sparrow’s lyrics (89). He describes, for instance, the “essential directionless irony” in Sparrow’s lyrics, “the gift of a normless world” (91). Where Morris had positioned Bennett’s poetry in a lineage with British satirists, Rohlehr emphasizes the contrast between the “merciless invective” of “calypsos of abuse” and the “metropolitan tradition of complaint” (92). Finally, he notes that the ease with which Sparrow’s unforced, idiomatic lines realized the syncopated calypso rhythm might offer a model for a relationship between idiomatic

West Indian verse and the demands of poetic meter. Whereas Morris persuades his readers that Bennett's writing is "poetry" according to a preexisting definition, Rohlehr sees the relation between calypso and poetry as different but overlapping, and mutually porous.

A second key expansion of the object of literary study in the Caribbean has been an increased focus on constituencies of Caribbean writers underrepresented in the Caribbean canon of the 1950s and 1960s, and a new attention to the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and class in colonial and postcolonial experience. As in earlier decades, critical trends and literary developments reinforced one another. Increased attention to writing by Caribbean women, for instance, emerged at a time when writers such as Jamaica Kincaid, Michelle Cliff, and Lorna Goodison were beginning to gain international prominence. The work of Carolyn Cooper, who was a student of Morris at UWI Mona, combined an enlarged sense of what constituted literature with an enlarged understanding of who wrote it or performed it. Indeed, her work consistently makes the point that elite definitions of what constitutes literature and literary value are commonly predicated on assumptions about the class, race, and gender of readers, writers, and critics.

Cooper had written her PhD on the poetry of Derek Walcott at UWI in the mid-1970s. Yet in a series of essays written through the 1980s, many of which were published in the *Jamaica Journal*, Cooper wrote what she would retrospectively see as a both a development from and an inversion of the work she had done as a doctoral student (Cooper 13–14). Published as a book in 1993 called *Noises in the Blood*, these essays both build a connected historical argument and can be read as a record and index of an emerging critical method. Beginning with the observation that "one culture's 'knowledge' is another's 'noise,'" Cooper – as Rohlehr did with Trinidadian calypso – examines a range of Jamaican popular texts for the intelligence or "knowledge" therein (4). Beginning with transcriptions (by White historians) of bawdy songs or dramatic monologues, supposedly sung by enslaved women, *Noises in the Blood* analyzes the performance poetry of Louise Bennett, Jean "Binta" Breeze, and Mikey Smith, the oral histories of the Sistren collective, the lyrics of Bob Marley, and the dancehall lyrics of Josey Wales, Lovindeer, and Shelly Thunder. One of Cooper's most important ideas is that oppositions between "high" and "low" cultural forms, "scribal" and "oral" texts, "culture" and "slackness" (the vulgarity or indecency associated with dancehall and bacchanal) are better understood as mutually constitutive relationships. In Josey Wales's "Culture a lick," a parodic morality song calling for the deportation of "Slackness" from Jamaica, the chorus figures "Slackness in di backyard hidin', hidin' from Culture" (quoted in Cooper 147). What is

suggested by the metaphor, and the song, is that “Slackness” and its traditional spaces (the carnival, the dancehall) exist in a parodic, fugitive relationship with “Culture,” and that “Culture” in Jamaica is itself an invention of those anxious not to be associated with what was vulgar or slack. For Cooper, oral texts “contaminate” the valorized scribal texts of Jamaican literature either by drawing them closer to the verbal habits of vernacular speech, or – conversely – by inciting them to veer away, protesting too much (3).

The subtitle of *Noises in the Blood* is *Orality, Gender, and the “Vulgar” Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*. Looking at oral texts, Cooper suggests, forces us to engage with their embodied contexts, and the racialized and gendered contexts in which they are performed. “Vulgar,” for Cooper, is a complex word. It can mean common or ordinary; it can denote vernacular speech, the spoken language of the people; it can denote impoliteness; and it has connotations of sexual flagrancy or crudeness. Uses of the word “vulgar” in the Jamaican context show how poverty, vernacular speech, and sexuality have become associated with one another, as much for those who celebrate as for those who criticize cultural expressions perceived as vulgar or slack. Throughout the book, Cooper focuses on the pragmatic meaning of vulgar expression, both in the sense of nonvalorized and vernacular, and in the sense of self-expression that foregrounds crude or sexual topics. Louise Bennett’s poetry, for example, unashamedly foregrounds “the amplitude of the speaker’s body,” which in turn acts as a “figure for the verbal expansiveness that is often the only weapon of the politically powerless” (41). “The raw sexism of some DJs,” Cooper writes in her chapter on dancehall, “can . . . be seen as an expression of diminished masculinity seeking to assert itself at the most basic, and often only level where it is allowed free play” (165). Cooper repeatedly emphasizes the vernacular eloquence of invective or derisory speech, “throwing words” (6) or “tracings” (41), as an index of racial, gendered, and economic disenfranchisement. The eloquence of the vernacular and its impropriety and crudeness cannot be understood separately from one another, she suggests. In this way, Cooper’s criticism, by broadening its object of study, critiques the colonial association of literary study with rectitude and good conduct and shows the assumptions about class and gender that were implicit in it.

### Conclusion

Writing in 1993, at a time of growing interest in the literatures of the formerly colonized world, Carolyn Cooper warned of the danger that “our literatures can become appropriated by totalising literary theories that

reduce all ‘post-colonial’ literatures to the common bond(age) of the great – however deconstructed – European tradition” (15). Taking my prompt from this, this chapter has looked at the history of literary scholarship in the Caribbean itself as it addressed itself to the task of decolonization. I have shown how innovations in literary scholarship arose in response to concrete colonial legacies in the region’s educational institutions. In the process, I have offered a more detailed analysis of a number of texts that had a key influence on the process of literary decolonization, and which I have found particularly illuminating in my own reading. The story I tell is of course selective – though not, I hope, arbitrary – and readers may find much that they would add or argue about. My hope is that it offers a useful map for how the complex concept of decolonization has been parsed by scholars and teachers in practice.

While researching this chapter, three larger methodological trends became apparent that – for me, at least – seem helpful for thinking about research and teaching today. First, this chapter has shown the decolonization of English literary study in the Caribbean as a project that unfurled in conversation, through time. Asking students to compare the different and evolving critical approaches of three committed anticolonialists, such as Mervyn Morris (in “On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously”), Gordon Rohlehr (in “Sparrow and the Language of Calypso”), and Carolyn Cooper (in “Slackness Hiding from Culture”) reframes the task of decolonization not as a series of doctrines to be learned, but as practice of critique. Knowing, for example, that Morris, one of Wynter’s “acquiescent” critics, was also a valued teacher and influence for Cooper, laying the groundwork for her studies of Bennett and others, is to frame the conversation as one of collaboration. It is to foster an attitude of critical scrutiny and openness toward different viewpoints, including one’s own.

Secondly, Sylvia Wynter’s work poses a series of questions that we might ask of ourselves and ask students to reflect on. What are the largest systems or “wholes” of which the text I am reading forms a part? Where do I stand within that whole, and in relation to the text I am studying? How does attending to Caribbean literature and history inflect, alter, or expand the larger literary-historical or theoretical stories implicit (or explicit) in my research and study?

The final methodological point I would draw attention to is related to this. Through this chapter we have seen the symbiotic evolution of literature and criticism: how reading practices respond to new works, or genres,

and how critical ideas feed back into literary development. Sensitive readers are always in principle attentive to how texts, readers, and genres invite us to engage with and handle them. Yet whatever our literary background, there will always be times when, encountering new types of text, we are pulled up short. Why does this text not fit the model I was expecting or meet the expectations I unconsciously carry with me from elsewhere? As Wynter says, practices of reading and evaluation are never objective, nor universally applicable. In a literary classroom, whether we are reading the allusive metrical inventions of Walcott, or the lyrics of Josey Wales, we might ask ourselves, or our students, to make explicit the tacit expectations we have of specific authors, texts, or genres in order to understand, situate, and provincialize them. Reading the work of Rohlehr and Cooper, we see a model of a dynamic critical intelligence at work, asking itself constantly, “How is this text inviting me to engage with it?” and stretching, adapting, expanding to account for the different pragmatic worlds, the different types of verbal invention or “intelligence” (Rohlehr’s word) at play. Of course, some texts will still disappoint. Cooper’s work has great fun with the subpar performance poets who, consciously or unconsciously, “exploit the low expectations and ignorance of . . . the perversely ‘liberal,’ patronising art establishment” in the UK (71). Nonetheless, the practice of reading these critics model – flexible and responsive to the texts themselves, alive to its own assumptions and expectations – seems to me worth studying, imitating, and passing on.

### Notes

1. See Baugh 56–8 for a detailed description of syllabus changes in the period 1950–70.
2. James had offered a more detailed reflection on these issues in “From Touissant L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro,” the essay appended to the 1963 edition of *The Black Jacobins*. Here, he argues that to enfranchise West Indian literature, and historical experiences, into the narrative of Western Europe and its cultures is fundamentally to *change* that narrative, and to understand it more critically. See James, *Jacobins* 305–26.
3. A brilliantly entertaining and informative account of Wynter’s life, education, and career, her role in the founding of the *Jamaica Journal*, her relationship with the New World Group, and the prompts and ambitions of this essay can be found in a long-form interview with David Scott (see Scott 123–33, 145–48, 151–54).
4. On the context and contemporary influence of Rohlehr’s talk, see Walmsley (68–71).

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