

Caribbean Writers

The title of this section, 'Caribbean Writers', itself encapsulates one of the fundamental concerns of the authors that can be included beneath the subheading: identity. If we were to ask, 'What is a Caribbean Writer?', we might think that the simple response, 'A writer from the Caribbean', would suffice. But there are two aspects of this statement that must be unraveled and complicated before a fuller understanding of these authors' literary writings and thematic preoccupations can be attained. One is geographical, the other historical.

The Caribbean, as a geographical region, is comprised of more than 7000 outcrops of land, ranging in size from islands to islets and exhibiting similar broad variation in population density. They are categorized into 30 territories -- be they sovereign states, overseas departments or dependencies -- and are split up under different groupings, from the Greater and Lesser Antilles to the Windwards Islands and Lucayan Archipelago. Furthermore, the Caribbean islands are renowned for their incredible biodiversity and variations in landscape, from flat expanses to mountain ranges, to say nothing of the seascapes that dominate the area (and that have become recurring images in Caribbean writing).

Historically speaking, the people that populate the Caribbean and the geopolitical formations that brought it into being are equally heterogeneous. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries the Caribbean was colonized by numerous European imperial powers -- British, Danish, Dutch, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish -- with regions seeking and achieving independence at different intervals throughout the last hundred years. As such, it is split into numerous linguistic areas, exhibiting a diversity of languages of which only a tiny portion is reflected here, in the section's inclusion of not only anglophone Caribbean writers but also one francophone poet and playwright, Aimé Césaire.

Perhaps the most haunting historical shadow is, however, that of slavery, with huge influxes of Black Africans arriving in horrendous conditions during the Transatlantic Slave Trade to work on European owned plantations. With the abolition of the slavery during the nineteenth century, this work force was replaced by cheap indentured labour from Asia and the Middle East, migrants that now also form a large section of the Caribbean's population. It is this mixture of peoples from across the globe that has produced what has come to be known as the 'creole' or hybrid identity of the Caribbean, a topic that is a repeated concern of its writers to this day. Nonetheless, whilst some embrace the mixed nature of this descent, all lament and engage with the founding trauma of slavery, and the devastating impact of European colonization more generally.

In just a few brief sentences, then, it is possible to see that the statement, 'What is a Caribbean Writer?', is far more complicated than it might at first appear. Indeed, it would be possible to argue that this is the central question asked and explored by many Caribbean writers themselves -- throughout the last hundred years or so, they have interrogated these geographical, historical and cultural boundaries. Some retain an adamant loyalty to their European heritage, conceiving of themselves as part of 'English' literary traditions, for example, and demonstrating this through the strict form of their poetry and prose. Others have sought identification with their African ancestry, recovering and retelling mythologies and stories from the

continent across the Atlantic, albeit in European languages. But in contemporary Caribbean writing, as well as in much that came before, it is the formation of the creole identity that has found a cultural manifestation in distinctive and exciting literary styles. These writers are concerned with carving out a new literary space from what were once the languages of colonialism, engaging with passion and enthusiasm in the complex cultural, political, historical and geographical movements in which such a project is inevitably embroiled.

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