

Caribbean Writers on Teaching Literature, edited by Lorna Down and Thelma Baker

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Reviewed by Georgina Horrell

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3041-2404>

Cambridge University, United Kingdom

gah27@homerton.cam.ac.uk

... teaching literature is an art. (Down and Baker 2020, viii)

In 1986, in her introduction to *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, Paula Burnett describes the English-speaking Caribbean as situated at the “meeting-point between three continents—Europe, Africa and America—and between three poetic traditions—the British, the West African and the North American”. In this sense, Caribbean literature is, she suggests, “a unique cultural hybrid” (Burnett 1986, 1–2). Her anthology traces the history of poetry in and from the Caribbean, marking in particular, the shift in the “last fifty years” “from a more traditional European orientation, with the emphasis on form and a highly wrought surface, to a mode which is closer to the vernacular, influenced by the oral traditions of Africa and the dominance of modernism in the American tradition”.

In the 30 years since Burnett wrote her introduction, a number of anthologies of Caribbean poetry have been published¹ and there has been further, sustained growth in a rich and varied spectrum of work from Caribbean writers, spread—as Burnett suggests—across the globe.

¹ A small sample: Ian McDonald and Stewart Brown’s *The Heinemann Book of Caribbean Poetry* (1992), Stewart Brown and Mark McWatt’s *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse* (2009), and Kai Miller’s *New Caribbean Poetry: An Anthology* (2007).

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Caribbean literary pieces have, as editors of *Caribbean Writers on Teaching Literature*, Lorna Down and Thelma Baker suggest, been acknowledged widely and have contributed much to world literature (Down and Baker 2020, 3), as have Caribbean works of criticism and theory (Kamau Brathwaite’s theories on orality and the community seem particularly apt here²). This book tracks something of that establishment and growth within the academy—in this case most particularly contextualised, as all the “teacher-writers” live(d) and work(ed) in the Caribbean. A number of interviewees are also poets: Edward Baugh, Mark McWatt, Mervyn Morris, Velma Pollard and David Williams—but the text is restrained in its literariness, focusing on the vernacular, the conversation, the pedagogical.

Burdett describes a history of Caribbean literature as enacting an interplay of the oral and the literary. *Caribbean Writers on Teaching Literature* in many ways precisely engages with the impact of that particular literary development. The editors write that they sought to create a “living text” that acknowledged and performed the oral tradition of the Caribbean (as much as the demands of an ever-burgeoning sense of orality via social media) in its approach and appeal (Down and Baker 2020, 2). Thus, while the book engages directly with the—postcolonial—context of teaching in the Caribbean, it also explicates and offers a refreshing pedagogical methodology in its approach: the suggestion of open conversations and reflections, of intergenerational engagement (teacher to student, teacher to former teacher—indeed, interviewer as former student); the tracing of a literary pedagogical history across approximately 60 years. Each of the 18 interviewees reflects upon their experiences as a teacher, re-enacting the “literary experience in the lecture room and in the classroom”, suggesting what the editors call “a *pedagogy of connectivity*” (8; italics in original). Collectively, the interviewees represent three generations of “teacher-writers” and the text offers a pedagogical journey from a “widening student-centred vision” through a focus on “people, place and culture” to the “millennials” who offer perspectives on the “global” and “new technology” in teaching.

In her foreword, Marcia Stewart makes the point that this book is situated within the “library of books on the teaching of literature especially with respect to teaching Caribbean literature” (ix). Indeed, the interviewer uses as basis for part of the interview a reference to Elaine Showalter’s *Teaching Literature* (2002)—and the anxieties related to the practice of teaching. In this sense, the text reads as a further web of conversations: between pedagogical practices and methodologies as much as between art and pedagogy. So too, the text functions as a companion piece to *Teaching Caribbean Poetry* (Bryan and Styles 2013), to which some of the writers here contributed (Lorna Down, Aisha Spencer, Sharon Phillips, Sandra Robinson, Sam Soyer)—in this case firmly setting aside both theory and criticism, however, and allowing both teachers’ and students’ voices to predominate.

² See Brathwaite’s *History of the Voice: Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984).

What is clear through this collection of conversations is the development over the last 60 years of a distinctively Caribbean voice, not only in the literature but in the teaching thereof. Edward Baugh (poet, critic, theorist and lecturer) describes the transformation of the syllabus in the Department of English at the University of the West Indies (UWI) from the literature of England to a broader offering suggested by the renaming of the Department: Literatures in English (Down and Baker 2020, 25). Carolyn Cooper (teacher, lecturer, literary critic, newspaper columnist) speaks of the notion of the canon itself being contested and the significance of the “oral text, the popular text and popular literature”—explicated in the description of her course “Reggae Poetry” (85). Sandra Robinson (lecturer, teacher, literary critic and academic in Education), in her interview, talks about the challenge of fully interactive teaching, drawing on a wide range of experiential examples and international sources (literary and theoretical) for reference. As much as the earlier writers interviewed are (particularly) concerned with developing a passion for literature itself—often referencing English Literature—later interviewees seem to focus more on Caribbean writing and innovative, distinctively glocal approaches to teaching.

The editors and writers (notably, Down) mention ecocritical approaches and stress the notion that attention to sustainability and the environment is critical in any teaching of literature—not least in a part of the world for whom any rise in ocean level would be cataclysmic. Somewhat disappointingly, there is little substance related in terms of practice in this respect, although Down speaks tantalisingly of a course she developed: “Literature and Education for Sustainable Development” (109). Nonetheless, given that the creation and decolonisation of canon/s and the development of curricula are performed in the academy, this insight provided by Caribbean educators offers an optimistic perspective.

“Teaching literature matters”, the editors conclude. *How* to teach literature effectively is the matter of this text. Community and connectedness—both on the local and global scales—seem to be pivotal to this *how*.

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Biography

Georgie Horrell is a Fellow (teaching, research and admissions) at Homerton College, University of Cambridge. She has been involved in poetry research projects, working with teachers, poets and academics in the Caribbean and in South Africa. Her research interests continue to include poetry performance by young people as well as postcolonial and ecocritical approaches to children's literature. Her publications include a co-edited anthology of Caribbean poetry for young people, *Give the Ball to the Poet* (Georgie Horrell, Aisha Spencer and Morag Styles, Third Millennium Publishing, 2014) and articles on South African and Caribbean literature (among which is "Poetry of Oppression, Resistance and Liberation" in *Teaching Caribbean Poetry*, 2014).