

ABSTRACT

"A Hot Place. Belonging to Us": Constructions of the West Indies in Early Narratives by Women, 1804 - 1939

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This study begins with an inquiry into the supposed voicelessness of women in early West Indian narratives. A few texts exist written by regional women of color, alongside an eclectic body of unknown work by white women (creoles and residents), and the study focuses on their constructions of the West Indies between 1804 and 1939. I utilize general principles of post-colonial and feminist theory in my analysis, but insist that the heterogeneity, diversity and hybridity of the texts necessitates a corresponding resistance to exclusivist methodological paradigms. Throughout, I ground my readings in terms of the specific historical and cultural contexts of their production.

The first two chapters defamiliarize and problematize monolithic literary stereotypes of white women in nineteenth century plantation society via analysis of various textual representations and self-representations. The texts demonstrate multiple narrative positionalities, as well as disparate generic and ideological agendas. I attend to gendered concerns in the colonial context, particularly in the domestic sphere where the interdependence of black and white women's roles and identities, and the interculturalism inherent in a creole society, produce narrative depictions of shifting power relations.

The second two chapters center around the construction of "the West Indies," especially as represented by an ostensibly "objective" tourist gaze. The region emerges in terms of a number of disparate, even contradictory tropes: a disturbing site of "Otherness"; an exotic paradise; an ambivalent "home." Accounts of physical and moral degeneration in the tropics, and the ever-present taint of miscegenation, suggest a deep unease on the part of the women writers about the validity of the imperial project and its implication in slavery.

The final chapter overviews theoretical debates on the study of colonial discourse, and challenges attempts to fix women in the West Indian literary account in terms of rigid binary oppositions, such as the female "colonizing subject" or the silenced "subaltern." I conclude by pointing to some links and continuities with current regional writing by women, and suggest that careful reading of these heterogeneous early narratives can contribute to understanding of what the past meant, and revise restrictive notions of what constitutes West Indian literature and identity.

Keywords: West Indian literature; Women writers; Nineteenth and early twentieth century narratives.