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| A term used to describe the post-World War II generation of writers from the English-speaking Caribbean who were published (and most often lived) in Great Britain. Although generally associated with postcolonial or Caribbean literary studies, many of these writers – including authors such as Wilson Harris, George Lamming, and Samuel Selvon – were seen by their contemporaries as inheritors of the tradition of modernism. Adapting the formally experimental tendencies of prewar modernism to anti-colonial critique, members of the Windrush generation were widely celebrated in the British literary world as a vibrant new group of writers along the lines of James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf. Pioneering figures in the emergence of Anglophone Caribbean literature, they also represent a lesser-known strain of late modernism, one that seized on the unruly, oppositional, and utopian energies characteristic of modernist writing and focused them more firmly on issues of race, ethnicity, and empire. |
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Pioneering figures in the emergence of Anglophone Caribbean literature, they also represent a lesser-known strain of late modernism, one that seized on the unruly, oppositional, and utopian energies characteristic of modernist writing and focused them more firmly on issues of race, ethnicity, and empire. Windrush The name Windrush derives from the symbolic inaugural moment of multicultural Britain: the 1948 arrival of the ship MV Empire Windrush in England with the first substantial group of West Indian immigrants of the postwar era. Over the next twelve years, more than a quarter of a million more people from the British Caribbean colonies arrived, decisively shifting the demographic makeup of Great Britain. Among this migrant population was an influential set of writers – the Windrush generation – popularly credited with laying the foundation of modern Caribbean literature in English. Attracted most significantly by *Caribbean Voices*, a radio literary magazine broadcast from London on the BBC’s overseas service, the Windrush authors quickly made their presence felt on the British literary scene in the 1950s, publishing a number of novels that drew attention as experimental works in the modernist tradition.  The inaugural Windrush novel is the Guyanese author Edgar Mittelholzer’s *A Morning at the Office*, published in 1950 by Leonard Woolf’s Hogarth Press. Both its multi-perspectival narrative and its focus on the events of a particular day reveal an affinity with *Ulysses* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. The novel also employs its own formal innovation in which narrative action is periodically interrupted by detailed historical accounts of everyday objects surrounding the novel’s characters, suggesting the material embeddedness of all human endeavour. Among the remainder of Mittelholzer’s prodigious literary output, the works most obviously indebted to modernism are *Latticed Echoes* (1960) and *Thunder Returning* (1961), both of which interpose intensely poetic, elliptical leitmotiv passages amongst their otherwise conventional third-person narration. The next three West Indian authors to publish novels after *A Morning at the Office* also adopted markedly modernist styles. The Barbadian author George Lamming, in particular, evoked comparisons to Joyce, due to the authors’ shared commitment to uncovering the ideological interestedness of both language and narrative form. His first novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), alternates between an introspective first-person and a deceptively objective third-person narrator in order to reveal the process by which the protagonist comes to recognize the insidious artifice of colonial discourse. Indeed, appearing throughout Lamming’s oeuvre – including *The Emigrants* (1954) and *Of Age and Innocence* (1958) –is an interruptive impulse characteristic of modernism, whereby the reader’s presumptions to interpretive certainty are resisted by a dense, allusive writing style. Lamming’s Trinidadian counterpart, Samuel Selvon (who arrived on the same boat as Lamming), also composed an array of experimental works. Selvon’s second novel, *An Island is a World* (1955), for example, offers a multi-layered narrative that makes abrupt, unmarked, and initially confusing shifts between episodes involving different characters in an effort to point up the deeply contingent, contextual nature of all interpretation. His most famous novel, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), enacts a similar, self-reflexive message in the linguistic register. By narrating in the modified creole language of its characters, the novel makes assertive claims for the legitimacy of what was thought of as a debased dialect while calling attention to the arbitrariness of language more generally. The next West Indian to publish a novel in Britain, the Jamaican Roger Mais, likewise displayed an affiliation with modernist techniques. An avowed disciple of D.H. Lawrence, Mais composed his first two novels, *The Hills Were Joyful Together* (1953) and *Brother Man* (1954), with an eye toward the affective force of word, sound, and image. In them, Mais punctuates his otherwise dispiriting portrayal of the suffering of Kingston’s dispossessed poor with a series of lyrical, incantatory sections, hoping to suggest the potential socio-political power inhering in an awakened aesthetic sense.  Although their major works appear slightly later than the initial burst of Windrush writing, the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris and the Barbadian poet Kamau (formerly Edward) Brathwaite are also important early practitioners of Caribbean modernism. Both the challengingly associative, dream-like prose of Harris and the insistently counter-conventional poetry of Brathwaite exhibit a modernist oppositionality expressed via a palpable consciousness – and subsequent manipulation – of literary form (both authors, not incidentally, pay explicit homage to T.S. Eliot in their work). Emerging at a time in British letters when the prestige of modernism was under assault by figures like Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin, the Windrush writers laid claim, in diverse ways, to the insurrectionary tendencies of modernism, solidifying the tradition of Caribbean literature in English and paving the way for later experimental writers from the region such as Erna Brodber and Caryl Phillips. Both V.S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott, though less obviously aligned with modernism at the time, began their careers during this period as well. |
| Further reading:  (Brown)  (Emery)  (Gikandi)  (Kalliney)  (Pollard)  List of works:  (Brathwaite)  (Harris)  (Lamming)  (Lamming, The Emigrants)  (Lamming, Of Age and Innocence)  (Mais)  (Mais, Brother Man)  (Mittelholzer)  (Mittelholzer, Latticed Echoes)  (Mittelholzer, Thunder Returing )  (Selvon)  (Selvon, The Lonely Londoners)  [paratextual materials]  (British Modern History)  (Portrait of Selvon)  (Windrush)  (richerhistory)  (BFI) |