

Editorial: Caribbean-Scottish Passages

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Making a way in the world

In Scotland you can reach Guyana by taking the A81 north from Glasgow, or the A84 then A81 from the Crianlarich turnoff on the M80 Motorway at Stirling. Either way you'll find Guyana – a garden centre in Aberfoyle, specialising in plants, garden arts and crafts sourced from around the world.^[1] Robert, the owner, has visited the country before and chose the name as a way of keeping hold of the 'rainforest connotation' once back in a more temperate climate. He also recognises the shop's curiosity value: 'It would be like finding a shop called "Aberfoyle" in Georgetown, Guyana, although you'd be surprised at how many connections people tell you about'. Driving through Aberfoyle (population 576) on a Sunday afternoon, a Trinidadian, two Jamaicans and two Britons, turned a corner and saw this shop: it was a singular form of Caribbean-Scottish connection.

What does it mean to track 'Caribbean-Scottish passages'? Who is involved in making the passage between the Caribbean and Scotland, historically, culturally and politically? How can we understand the significance of these passages between nations, histories, art-forms, languages and literatures? These are some of the questions that animate this special issue, and the questions that our contributors pose and answer in the articles, art-work and occasional papers that follow. To think about the Caribbean and Scotland in the same horizon of vision is to recognise it as part of a shared world. At times this shared world and horizon of vision might have been described in terms of plantation and Empire. Perhaps now we think in terms of the postcolonial, the transatlantic, circumatlantic, the Black Atlantic, the Commonwealth, the transnational, the post-national. To turn our attention to the networks of people and places that link the Caribbean to Scotland is to confront our conceptual mappings of nation, 'race' and identity. It is also to make space for the quiet epiphanies about culture that are no less significant.

As the recently relocated novelist and poet, [Kei Miller](#) notes in 'In Glasgow There are Plantains': 'scotch bonnet peppers, which I'd never reflected on before – these peppers I've always thought of as Jamaican peppers, but which had obviously reminded someone long time ago, about something he saw in Scotland. These connections go both ways!'

This special issue of *IJSL* is devoted to a rapidly emerging interdisciplinary area of inquiry that focuses on the (post)colonial intersections of Scotland and the Caribbean. While historiographical and archival research have over the last thirty years unveiled new areas and events of this complex and long-standing relationship,^[2] and while much 'discipline-focused' work undoubtedly is still required in order to reach a deeper knowledge of the social, political and intellectual events that shaped it, there are specificities involved in this field that call for a wider interdisciplinary practice and a respect for plurality.

Contemporary poetry offers intimations of these plural passages: John Agard's poem, 'How Aunty Nansi Singularly Widened the Debate on Plural Identity' (2000), tracks apparently random cultural connections, in the name of making identities:

What a high-brow-knitting controversy
when Aunty Nansi on topical TV show
presented herself as proof of plurality
Dressed in a side-splitting sari
a red and green necklace for Selassie
and snazzy tartan shawl for the cold^[3]

Here, the Caribbean Aunty Nansi – the West African Akan-Ashante 'spider-spirit trickster-transfigurer'^[4] turned woman – puts on an outfit that has traveled from the Indian subcontinent, Ethiopia via Jamaica, and Scotland, asking, "'Now Mr Kilroy, you tell me / Am I Afro-Celto-Euro-Indo / or just beautiful byproduct of cosmos?'"^[5] With a similar comic sensibility, Jackie Kay's 1998 'skipping rhyme' looks at the Scottish comic strip family, *The Broons*: 'Scotland is having a heart attack / Scotland is having a heart attack / Scotland is having a heart attack / The Broons' Bairn's Black'.^[6] Cultural plurality, we know, speaks of hyphenated, interconnected existence. Kay, with a confrontational wink at past and present racism, finds another relative for the Broons. Aunty Nansi – 'byproduct' of cosmic (historical, imperial, random) forces – knows that tartan worn outside the borders of Scotland, like the sari outside of the Indian subcontinent, is necessarily refashioned. Specifically, tartan, worn outside the border of Scotland and within the context of the Caribbean, can speak of histories of passages, journeys and families that have been slow to come into public focus.

Slavery, the Caribbean and Scotland

But troubling silences mark the complex history binding the two circumatlantic regions of the Caribbean and Scotland. These result in part from the suppression of voices from Africa and the African diaspora in the slavery period and also from partial archival evidence then, and in the decades following its abolition. We know, therefore, that the 'historical truth' pertaining to these chapters of colonial history cannot be reconstructed solely through primary documentation: creative writing or the visual arts, in this context, function not simply as alternative modes of historiographical representation, but become sensitive epistemological tools that allow us to imagine, albeit imperfectly, what has been erased or forgotten. Michael Visocchi's public sculpture, *Memorial to the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (2008), created in collaboration with the poet, Lemn Sissay; James Robertson's novel, *Joseph Knight* (2003); and Andrew O. Lindsay's *Illustrious Exile* (2006) are three recent examples of attempts by Scottish artists to face these complexities of slavery, representation and epistemology. [Andrew Lindsay's](#) novel imagines Robert Burns as the 'Negro-driver' he almost became, and in this issue we publish Lindsay's reflections on the process of writing – through Burns's correspondence into an imagined West Indies – to address some of 'the historical omissions in the Scottish collective memory'. Focusing on Visocchi and Robertson, [Murdo Macdonald](#) and [Michael Morris](#) in their articles both tackle what Macdonald identifies as 'the inherent uneasiness of culture'. The phrase is Freud's, but the sentiment strikes at the problem of contemporary representations of slavery. For Macdonald this problem is 'the paradox of the creativity of the human condition. All artists work within this frame. It certainly applies to Michael Visocchi's abolition memorial, a work shot through by the uneasiness of its historical context and physical place'. Visocchi's sculpture draws together Sissay's historical and contemporary vocabularies of abolition and finance, with his own search for an appropriate visual form: 'the more I looked into it, the more I realised that there was a potential poetic way into the subject matter through the idea of sugar and simply the architectural shapes of sugar cane itself. [. . .] The idea was that I could somehow use these sugar cane shapes so that they could be read on the site as figures, as anthropomorphic forms — and therefore could they not then surround a pulpit as a congregation?' Morris, in his article, 'Joseph Knight: Scotland and the Black Atlantic' outlines another kind of cultural uneasiness and search for creative form. For him, Robertson's novel charts the uneasy parallels between Caribbean and Scottish rebellion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the article opens up the possibilities and problems of refiguring a combined Scottish and Caribbean colonial history out of the silences within the archival documents of the Joseph Knight case, and in terms of an Atlantic working class.

The present collection of essays in many ways represents a new step in the direction set by *Caribbean-Scottish Relations: Colonial and Contemporary Inscriptions in History, Language and*

Literature (2007)^[7] – a collaborative project that aimed at looking “for ways that can effectively re-figure the full complexity of different national, racial, and gendered identities and the many ways in which these interrelate”,^[8] but was also based on the belief that a scholarly work in this field has not only to reply to questions but, even more importantly to raise them – questions ‘that are neither pleasant or reassuring, but [. . .] are mind-changing’.^[9] One of the main aims of this special issue of *IJSL* is thus to widen both the scope and the depth of that first interdisciplinary dialogue between Caribbean and Scottish Studies – two disciplinary fields which have had little or no opportunity to interact in the past – as well as to bring together views from different contexts such as history, art history, the visual arts, literary criticism and creative writing. We believe that such interaction, especially within the engagement in this complex and controversial territory, may prove fruitful in more than one way. As far as Scottish Studies are concerned it is worthwhile to stress that memory of the colonial encounter with the Caribbean has been ‘blinder’ in Scotland (to adapt Marcus Wood’s famous phrase) than, for example, in England.^[10] Strikingly so: both in terms of intensity and of duration. The endemic nature as well as the striking proportions of this ‘amnesia’ can be partly related to Scotland’s own problematical quest for a national identity in the modern age. In this sense investigations in these combined fields can provide a unique opportunity of re-reading Scottish culture and issues of ‘Scottishness’ from a new perspective.

Investigating not just the dynamics but also the imagination of this colonial encounter as well as its cultural and political repercussions and implications, may lead to that post-national re-construction or de-construction of national identity heralded by contemporary critics. The articles by [Karina Williamson](#), [Daniel Livesay](#) and [Corey E. Andrews](#) take up the first part of this task, dealing, in the first two, directly with Scottish lives and life-writing from the colonial West Indies, and, in the third, with the imaginary of slavery as constructed by Scottish poets. In Andrews’ article we find a survey of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry set within ‘Scottish networks in the West Indies’ – a necessary study if we are to make full sense of the rhetorical charge of slavery, abolition, empire and nation in this period. In like mind, Williamson (who has already edited the anonymously written *Marly; Or a Planter’s Life in Jamaica* (first published in 1828)) argues in ‘Mrs Carmichael: A Scotswoman in the West Indies, 1820-1826’ that more detailed biographical and literary studies ‘would provide a fuller, more nuanced picture of Scottish-Caribbean experience and Scottish identities in the West Indian colonies’. This is a direct challenge, and Williamson’s study of Carmichael – as traveller and novelist – skilfully adds to this picture. Livesay’s article, ‘Extended Families: Mixed-Race Children and Scottish Experience, 1770-1820’, begins another biographical investigation, moving us through and beyond the biographies of white migrants in the Caribbean: ‘As migration studies have helped to improve dramatically our understanding of the Scottish experience in the Caribbean, increased attention on the movement of mixed-race individuals within the Atlantic will serve to refine further our notions of that experience’. If Williamson shows how Carmichael’s autobiographical and fictional

identities are 'elaborately layered' (the narrator in *Tales of a Grandmother* is 'Scottish-bred, English-fathered, and West-Indian-domiciled'), Livesay's study destabilises this notion of national 'layering', showing a set of kinship ties between Scotland and the West Indies that cut across ethnicities and bridge the different locations.

Lines of continuity: the Caribbean and Scotland beyond slavery

The articles here prove that a dialogue between different methodologies and field of study perspectives is essential. However, we must extend our gaze beyond the slavery period, when commercial and cultural relations between the Caribbean and Scotland continued, albeit less openly, and thus acknowledge lines of continuity, as well as 'networks of reciprocal making' or simply consonances and unwitting intersections, ways of remembering or imagining the other. This hope for further investigations of period and perspective prompted a recent conference at the University of Stirling under the same title as this special issue: [Caribbean-Scottish Passages](#). The conference brought together the authors of *Caribbean-Scottish Relations* with researchers from Gaelic Studies, Geography, Social Policy, Literature, Language and History. Following the Guyanese novelist, Wilson Harris, and his understanding of the profound 'cross-culturality' of literatures and societies, the gathered researchers responded to his request to identify 'frontiers and border lines which one might sense have been crossed in ways that are not always easily recognised'.^[11]

Harris's own novel, *Black Marsden*, draws on the shared traditions of Scotland and South America, and it is their multiple languages that operate for him as a mutual border. In a note to our conference he wrote:

Perhaps I may venture to say that my many visits to Scotland, and books I have read, have given me the sensation of a tone or inner vibrancy that may be due to the languages (English, Scottish, Gaelic) that are present in the subconscious imagination of sensitive Scots. Epigraphs in *Black Marsden* partially illumine this unique tone and temper that make for the cross-culturality (not mono-cultural) that came into play in *Black Marsden*.^[12]

Harris's fictional approach is to follow the specific pathways channelled by cultural particularity (for example, a Georgetown or an Edinburgh topography), but simultaneously to search for and remain alert to obscured imaginative, spatial, linguistic, artistic and temporal connections. [Alan Riach's](#) article, 'Other than Realism: Magic and Violence in Modern Scottish Fiction and the Recent Work of Wilson Harris', continues his own research on Harris, focusing on the novelist's latest work, *The Ghost of Memory* (2006). In his pioneering 1993 article, 'Tradition and the New

Alliance: Scotland and the Caribbean', Riach argues, '[Harris] is a revisionary writer in the best sense. What he points towards, I believe, is the possibility of reciprocal creative understandings arising from the linked dynamics of the "new literatures in English" and others'.^[13] In this new article, based on a paper given at the conference, Riach sketches a set of 'reciprocal creative understandings' between Harris, Alasdair Gray, A. L. Kennedy and Robbie Kydd.

It is perhaps wise to conclude this editorial by sounding a note of caution about working between the categories of the Caribbean and Scotland, even when we seek to question them. Kei Miller, speaking at the Caribbean-Scottish Passages conference, voiced this caution in terms of personal identity negotiated between different places:

We might try, of course, to infuse our new homes in a foreign land with a 'local' aesthetic – a sense of what is beautiful that was developed somewhere else far away – from our own 'locals'. But there are parts of ourselves – the ways in which we were always other, in that other place, that can now find the space to flourish – it is our own 'foreignness', a foreignness that was always local to our hearts, that is now growing. I'm perhaps just warning myself to be careful of these categories of foreign and local, Scottish and the Caribbean, when the nature of the individual in his travels, whether actual or virtual, whether across the world or across the road, is to see things, borrow, reject and revise himself and his tastes.

In Miller's first novel, *The Same Earth* (2008), Harry (whose mother is Jamaican and father Scottish) makes his home only in Jamaica and the waters that he travels as a sailor: 'He never disembarked. Even when they dropped anchor in Scotland and the crew rushed back to tell him there was a man in the pub who had olive skin just like his, green eyes just like his, a thick curly red afro just like his, and was named Harold James Walcott IV just like him – he knew they were telling the truth, and that this must be his half-brother'.^[14] Miller's interest in a character who is not intrigued by his other Scottish life, points to both the attractions and limitations of location and history for understanding identity. That the Jamaican Harry has reason to turn away from Scotland should warn us against any easy acceptance of the explanatory power of connections drawn between the Caribbean and Scotland, but Harry's refusal should not stop our investigations. Rather, with Miller, we might focus on how individual stories of identity-in-the-making – whether in art, poetry, history or fiction – can take people 'across the world or across the road', dismantling, revising and building themselves and their homes as they go. The individual articles in this issue explore the possibilities of a comparative Caribbean-Scottish studies, and we should note that whenever we cross the Jamaica Street Bridge in Glasgow, cook

with a scotch bonnet pepper in the Caribbean, or buy a plant from 'Guyana' in Aberfoyle, we have, however briefly, already entered this process.

NOTES

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[1] See 'Guyana', <http://www.guyana.ltd.uk/>.

[2] See Richard Sheridan, 'The Role of the Scots in the Economy and Society of the West Indies', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 292 (1977), 94-106. Among the most recent publications in this field see Douglas J. Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World 1750-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) and Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery 1756-1838* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

[3] John Agard, 'How Auntie Nansi Singularly Widened the Debate on Plural Identity', *Come Down Nansi*, in *Weblines* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 75.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 6

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 75

[6] Jackie Kay, 'The Broons' Bairn's Black', *Off Colour* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 61. For a reproduction of the cover of the first annual of *The Broons*, with illustrations of the family, see 'The Broons and Oor Wullie' webpage:

<http://www.thatsbraw.co.uk/Annuals/1939bf.htm>.

[7] Joan Anim-Addo, Giovanna Covi, Velma Pollard, Carla Sassi (co-authors), *Caribbean-Scottish Relations Colonial and Contemporary Inscriptions in History, Language and Literature*, London: Mango Publishing, 2007. Project funded by the University of Trento (2005) and co-ordinated by Giovanna Covi.

[8] Giovanna Covi, 'Introduction', *ibid.*, p. 8.

[9] Giovanna Covi, 'Introduction', *ibid.*, p. 10.

[10] Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[11] Wilson Harris, 'Unfinished Genesis: A Personal View of Cross-Cultural Tradition', in *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks*, ed. Alan Riach and Mark Williams (Liege: L3 Liege Literature and Language, 1992), pp. 93-102 (p. 93). On a personal note, Harris has commented

on his education in Georgetown (then British Guiana) as an unacknowledged experience of border crossings between British Empire and nation: 'There were English masters and students, there were masters and students of African descent, Indian descent, Portuguese, Chinese, Welsh, Scottish. There were students and masters of mixed descent', 'An Autobiographical Essay', in Joyce Sparer Adler, *Exploring the Palace of the Peacock: Essays on Wilson Harris*, ed. Irving Adler (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), pp. viii-xxxiv (p. xxiv).

[12] Wilson Harris, letter to Gemma Robinson on behalf of Caribbean-Scottish Passages Conference, 13 June 2008.

[13] Alan Riach 'Tradition and the New Alliance: Scotland and the Caribbean', in *Major Minorities: English Literatures in Transit*, ed. Raoul Granqvist (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 9-18 (p. 17)

[14] p. 143.