Frank A. Collymore: A man of the threshold

Philip Nanton

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol26/iss1/17

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Frank A. Collymore: A man of the threshold

Abstract
Frank A. Collymore of Barbados, 1893–1980, was perhaps best known as the editor of Bim, the regional literary magazine in the English-speaking Caribbean. He was also a poet, short story writer, eminent amateur actor, school-teacher and artist. Between 1944 and 1971 Collymore published five collections of poetry and an often reprinted study of 'Barbadian dialect'. In 1991, a collection of his short stories was published posthumously. In his later years he was often described as a 'literary genius' and as 'The Grand Old Man of West Indian literature'. He won honorary awards and wide recognition in the English-speaking region for his role in the development of Caribbean literature.
Frank A. Collymore: A Man of the Threshold

Frank A. Collymore of Barbados, 1893–1980, was perhaps best known as the editor of Bim, the regional literary magazine in the English-speaking Caribbean. He was also a poet, short story writer, eminent amateur actor, school-teacher and artist. Between 1944 and 1971 Collymore published five collections of poetry and an often reprinted study of ‘Barbadian dialect’. In 1991, a collection of his short stories was published posthumously. In his later years he was often described as a ‘literary genius’ and as ‘The Grand Old Man of West Indian literature’. He won honorary awards and wide recognition in the English-speaking region for his role in the development of Caribbean literature.

The methodological dilemma posed by Collymore as a subject of research throws light on two competing paradigms of Caribbean culture that operate at different levels of analysis. These are the case study and the study of a cultural area. The former places emphasis on what is sui generis in each case. This level of analysis recognises the unique features that operate at the individual or societal level. The focus on a cultural area points rather to the broad similarities within a cultural area and differences between cultures. The problem for my research was: should the study reinforce the unique features and diverse skills of Collymore, or should it present an interpretation that consciously re-frames the many categories in which he excelled and so seek some common ground? Could I find some synthesis between the two? Two recent studies by eminent scholars of the Caribbean, Bruce King and Antonio Benitez-Rojo, illustrate the contrasting approaches.

Bruce King’s biography, Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life, offers a detailed chronology of Walcott’s 70 years in all its complexity. In the preface to his book, King claims that it is ‘a story about important moments of West Indian culture but also about American and recent international culture’. He regards as misleading the approach to biography that organises a life by topics. He considers and rejects the presentation of ‘a chapter here on poetry, a chapter there on painting, another chapter on New York. The next biography can have the privilege of simplicity, selectivity and clarity, but it will be misleading. Lives are not clear unless you take the blood out of them and reduce them to ideas and illustrations’ (viii).

While King presents a unique and complex literary case study, the reader is no nearer to an understanding of, for example, the nature of the religious drive
in Walcott’s poetry or the extent to which this theme might be fundamental to an understanding of his poetry. Perhaps one reason for this is King’s claim that while he is an admirer of Walcott’s work ‘usually I have let the facts speak for themselves’ (ix). There are, however, important moments in his text when the facts do not speak for themselves. For example, in writing about the BBC World Service radio programme, Caribbean Voices, and Walcott’s involvement with what was his first paying market, King observes, ‘[n]oticeable in the letters of Swanzy (the producer of the programme) and others within England is a touch of amusement about things colonial’ (63). Whether this involved laughing with or laughing at the colonial Caribbean writers is important but unspecified.

In contrast, Antonio Benitez-Rojo’s The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Post Modern Perspective offers the reader an approach to Caribbean culture that combines the unique complexities of the Caribbean in the form of paradox and disorder, with interpretation that also identifies common regularities in the multi-lingual Caribbean literature. He identifies a people who he claims ‘move in a certain kind of way’ (17). For Benitez-Rojo the element of repetition leads to an analysis of underlying rhythms of Caribbean literature. He suggests that the regularities in Caribbean culture are located in the public domain, in a word, in ‘performance’. Put simply, while King’s case study focuses on uniqueness Benitez-Rojo attempts to find common ground.

In the following analysis of the life and work of Frank Collymore I recognise both an element of uniqueness and Collymore’s commonality in this revisioning of Collymore’s life, but I draw more on Victor Turner’s notion of ‘liminality’. ‘Liminality’ in this context refers to a life somewhat at odds with the mainstream of society, a life lived on the edge of society in some form. Victor Turner’s groundbreaking work arose out of his observation of the rites of passage of a traditional African society. According to him, traditional rites of passage (such as initiation, birth, marriage and death) involve a movement from one state to another, with a point in-between that he called the ‘limen’ or ‘margin’, which, by its nature, is always temporary. People in this temporary state — ‘liminoid’ or quasi, rather than fully, liminal. He suggested that liminoid states typically develop outside of the central economic and political processes — in fact along their margins — and are often described as ‘plural’, ‘quirky’, ‘fragmentary’ and ‘subversive’ (Turner 1982). These states or modes of being often arise out of creative activities and open situations where anything can happen. Turner’s
definition of liminality, therefore involves paradox, marginality or in-betweenness, when ‘new combinations of cultural givens’ can be tested and formulated (1969 128). How might this definition apply to Frank Collymore and his writing?

Collymore’s work reveals numerous attributes of liminality. Several of his short stories are connected with children, who inhabit the threshold between dependency and adulthood. His menagerie of ‘Collybeast’ line drawings and paintings offer a prospect of further borderlines — ‘Strange quasi-Cubistic monsters, half ante-diluvian, half Fuseli-nightmare in appearance’, as described by Edgar Mittelholzer. His love of the stage may be construed as another mode of liminality, offering the possibility of identification with something or someone other than himself. I therefore propose to apply the notion to Collymore not in an orthodox anthropological way, so much as a metaphor for someone who is voluntarily set apart from the norms of social structure; one who both functions as the threshold (or gatekeeper) for others, while being himself on the threshold in a number of different ways.

Put simply, he is a ‘gatekeeper’ — he plays the role of cultural mentor and artistic arbitrator for a whole generation of emerging writers. An outstanding example of the recognition of his mentoring role is the edition of Savacou 7/8, January/June 1973 edited by Edward (Kamau). Brathwaite which was dedicated as a ‘Tribute to Frank Collymore’. Some fifty writers from across the Caribbean, Britain and Europe contributed, many of whom are today acknowledged as the builders of the West Indian canon, which testifies to his pivotal role in launching them, literally, across the waters. He provided introductions to Henry Swanzy and the BBC for aspiring writers on their way to England; in Barbados he afforded talented young people the opportunity to explore other worlds. As editor of Bim, he guarded the portals of one of the few avenues for publication in the 1940s and 1950s, with the power of bestowing recognition on unknown writers, and creating a dialogue between those already established.

In a traditional, non-industrialised society he might have been a shaman, a person living on the edge of society imbued with a store of other world knowledge and powers. In the conservative, evolving, urbanised Caribbean society of Barbados, he sought and found a space between its almost tangible social structures. These structures are patterned social arrangements consciously recognised and regularly operating in the society. In the Barbados of Collymore’s time these structures consisted of the white minority political power structure that was dominant in the early years of his life, but which as time went by was challenged and ultimately replaced by a new structure provided by a predominantly black political elite.

As a way of understanding just how Collymore attained a liminal status between these competing structures, I intend to look at the ways he described himself and what they reveal of his self-perception. For example, in his poem ‘Idleness’ this state becomes ‘that blessed condition’ (1959a 72) and in a letter...

Collymore’s work reveals numerous attributes of liminality. Several of his short stories are connected with children, who inhabit the threshold between dependency and adulthood. His menagerie of ‘Collybeast’ line drawings and paintings offer a prospect of further borderlines — ‘Strange quasi-Cubistic monsters, half ante-diluvian, half Fuseli-nightmare in appearance’, as described by Edgar Mittelholzer. His love of the stage may be construed as another mode of liminality, offering the possibility of identification with something or someone other than himself. I therefore propose to apply the notion to Collymore not in an orthodox anthropological way, so much as a metaphor for someone who is voluntarily set apart from the norms of social structure; one who both functions as the threshold (or gatekeeper) for others, while being himself on the threshold in a number of different ways.

Put simply, he is a ‘gatekeeper’ — he plays the role of cultural mentor and artistic arbitrator for a whole generation of emerging writers. An outstanding example of the recognition of his mentoring role is the edition of Savacou 7/8, January/June 1973 edited by Edward (Kamau). Brathwaite which was dedicated as a ‘Tribute to Frank Collymore’. Some fifty writers from across the Caribbean, Britain and Europe contributed, many of whom are today acknowledged as the builders of the West Indian canon, which testifies to his pivotal role in launching them, literally, across the waters. He provided introductions to Henry Swanzy and the BBC for aspiring writers on their way to England; in Barbados he afforded talented young people the opportunity to explore other worlds. As editor of Bim, he guarded the portals of one of the few avenues for publication in the 1940s and 1950s, with the power of bestowing recognition on unknown writers, and creating a dialogue between those already established.

In a traditional, non-industrialised society he might have been a shaman, a person living on the edge of society imbued with a store of other world knowledge and powers. In the conservative, evolving, urbanised Caribbean society of Barbados, he sought and found a space between its almost tangible social structures. These structures are patterned social arrangements consciously recognised and regularly operating in the society. In the Barbados of Collymore’s time these structures consisted of the white minority political power structure that was dominant in the early years of his life, but which as time went by was challenged and ultimately replaced by a new structure provided by a predominantly black political elite.

As a way of understanding just how Collymore attained a liminal status between these competing structures, I intend to look at the ways he described himself and what they reveal of his self-perception. For example, in his poem ‘Idleness’ this state becomes ‘that blessed condition’ (1959a 72) and in a letter...
to Swanzy he escribes himself as having been ‘born, I fear, a convinced idler’ (Swanzy Papers, 1952). In his autobiographical essay of his early years, ‘Non Immemor’, he again refers to himself as ‘being by nature lazy’ (85). A reference to his idleness appears also in his Rhymed Ruminations on the Fauna of Barbados, where he suggests that ‘Sluggards are advised to learn from the Ant/But since I’m especially sluggard, I shan’t’ (24). What might he, a dedicated teacher, actor and writer, have meant by this somewhat disingenuous claim? It may be read as a bid for liberation from the constraints of conventional society and a laying claim to an alternative space — one where his imagination and creativity could roam freely. One way that this attempt at liberation finds expression is in his desire to unite the conventionally separate notions of ‘work’ and ‘play’ in Western, non-traditional society. In his unpublished poem ‘Lesson for the Day’, written in 1944, he asks, ‘What have I learnt thus far from life?’ One answer that he gives to this question is ‘that work is only of value when/It can be converted into play’ (Barbados National Archive).

**Collymore the Gatekeeper**

* Bim was born in December 1942. By the third issue Collymore had become the editor, and he produced in all 56 editions before handing the editorship on to John Wickham in 1974. Sonji Phillips alludes to this threshold or gatekeeper role that he played for Kamau Brathwaite. From her interview with Brathwaite, for example, it is apparent that he credits *Bim* and Collymore with providing access to a larger reading public; he recounts Collymore’s civility towards him and Collymore’s willingness to include the young Brathwaite in the local community of writers. Phillips records Brathwaite’s comment about his association with Collymore: ‘I was getting this wonderful energy and education at the same time’ (Phillips 2004).

Collymore’s relationship with Henry Swanzy, the producer of *Caribbean Voices* at the BBC, enhanced *Bim* and his role as editor. Swanzy identified and developed the potential of Caribbean literature for eight years 1947 – 1954 through this important radio programme. Apart from Mrs. Lindo, who was the official representative of the BBC in Jamaica (and who unofficially shared these duties with her husband), when Collymore returned to Barbados in 1947 from his British Council-funded visit to England, he became Swanzy’s main avenue for contacts and introductions to developing writers from the Eastern Caribbean. George Lamming, Sam Selvon, ‘Shake’ Keane and Edward (Kamau) Brathwaite were all provided with introductions to Swanzy as they made their way to London. Swanzy’s commentaries on the literary development of Caribbean authors and his access to other criticism and commentaries were willingly made available to Collymore who regularly included them in *Bim*.

In 1992, *Bim’s* jubilee year, one edition contained a letter from Swanzy reviewing the magazine’s considerable achievements and demonstrating the nature of Collymore’s gatekeeping role: ‘Looking back’, Swanzy wrote:

> to Swanzy he escribes himself as having been ‘born, I fear, a convinced idler’ (Swanzy Papers, 1952). In his autobiographical essay of his early years, ‘Non Immemor’, he again refers to himself as ‘being by nature lazy’ (85). A reference to his idleness appears also in his Rhymed Ruminations on the Fauna of Barbados, where he suggests that ‘Sluggards are advised to learn from the Ant/But since I’m especially sluggard, I shan’t’ (24). What might he, a dedicated teacher, actor and writer, have meant by this somewhat disingenuous claim? It may be read as a bid for liberation from the constraints of conventional society and a laying claim to an alternative space — one where his imagination and creativity could roam freely. One way that this attempt at liberation finds expression is in his desire to unite the conventionally separate notions of ‘work’ and ‘play’ in Western, non-traditional society. In his unpublished poem ‘Lesson for the Day’, written in 1944, he asks, ‘What have I learnt thus far from life?’ One answer that he gives to this question is ‘that work is only of value when/It can be converted into play’ (Barbados National Archive).

**Collymore the Gatekeeper**

* Bim was born in December 1942. By the third issue Collymore had become the editor, and he produced in all 56 editions before handing the editorship on to John Wickham in 1974. Sonji Phillips alludes to this threshold or gatekeeper role that he played for Kamau Brathwaite. From her interview with Brathwaite, for example, it is apparent that he credits *Bim* and Collymore with providing access to a larger reading public; he recounts Collymore’s civility towards him and Collymore’s willingness to include the young Brathwaite in the local community of writers. Phillips records Brathwaite’s comment about his association with Collymore: ‘I was getting this wonderful energy and education at the same time’ (Phillips 2004).

Collymore’s relationship with Henry Swanzy, the producer of *Caribbean Voices* at the BBC, enhanced *Bim* and his role as editor. Swanzy identified and developed the potential of Caribbean literature for eight years 1947 – 1954 through this important radio programme. Apart from Mrs. Lindo, who was the official representative of the BBC in Jamaica (and who unofficially shared these duties with her husband), when Collymore returned to Barbados in 1947 from his British Council-funded visit to England, he became Swanzy’s main avenue for contacts and introductions to developing writers from the Eastern Caribbean. George Lamming, Sam Selvon, ‘Shake’ Keane and Edward (Kamau) Brathwaite were all provided with introductions to Swanzy as they made their way to London. Swanzy’s commentaries on the literary development of Caribbean authors and his access to other criticism and commentaries were willingly made available to Collymore who regularly included them in *Bim*.

In 1992, *Bim’s* jubilee year, one edition contained a letter from Swanzy reviewing the magazine’s considerable achievements and demonstrating the nature of Collymore’s gatekeeping role: ‘Looking back’, Swanzy wrote:
Frank A. Collymore

I do not know which I admire the more, his tastes (which coincided with mine!) or his magnanimity. Unlike so many literary people, he was perfectly ready to pass on the names of unknown writers, for their sake, and not his. One recalls a Jesuit saying: it is surprising what good can be done, if no credit is claimed. So there was a two-way traffic between us: cash and publicity from the BBC office in Kingston, where Cedric Lindo played a key role, and credit and permanency from him. (1992 29)

Collymore was also the threshold to wider worlds of knowledge for gifted young people. During a seminar held at the University of West Indies, Cave Hill in 1999, Alfred Pragnell, the Barbadian actor, and the author, John Wickham, described the importance to their development of his accessibility and his private library of books that he would make available when they visited his home. George Lamming has also given an account of this influential role from his schooldays:

I sort of latched myself on to him. He had a tremendous library which I literally took over. I mean I was there every Saturday morning to collect books. When I was supposed to be studying school material I was reading books from Collymore’s library. H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy were influential authors. Then I was very interested in the fifth-century Athenian culture. Collymore’s library was full of all sorts of books on the Greeks. In my discoveries from there I began to make discoveries of writers on my own. (58)

For a number of writers and aspiring writers in Barbados, then, Collymore was the gateway to a world of books and ideas that fed directly into their own writing; but he was more than a mere gatekeeper. In Edward Baugh’s estimation:

Collymore’s service to other West Indian writers lies not only in having published their work, but also in the personal interest he takes in them. What is more, because he occupies, through Bim, such a central place in West Indian literature, he is known to all sorts of people all over the world who are interested in West Indian writing, and through these contacts he has been further able, in his unobtrusive way, to promote West Indian writing abroad. (1973 15)

In 1949, Collymore wrote to Swanzy to express his excitement at the discovery of ‘such a young talent’. He stated:

Now: I think I have made an important discovery. Last Monday Harold Simmons of St. Lucia sent me a recently published volume of poems by young Derek Walcott. Have you ever heard of him? Walcott, who is nineteen years old tomorrow, writes with remarkable fervor. His literary forbears are obviously Hopkins, Auden and Dylan Thomas, especially the latter; but his work is obviously sincere and wonderfully mature. (Swanzy Papers, Collymore – Swanzy, 2:1:1949)

This gatekeeper activity involved more than simply passing on those who came to the door of his home claiming to be able to write, or the transitory encouragement of a secondary school teacher of English. As is apparent from the careers of those that he encouraged and from the letter to Swanzy about Walcott’s writing, in each instance it involved a talent of his own to be able to identify the real thing.

Frank A. Collymore

I do not know which I admire the more, his tastes (which coincided with mine!) or his magnanimity. Unlike so many literary people, he was perfectly ready to pass on the names of unknown writers, for their sake, and not his. One recalls a Jesuit saying: it is surprising what good can be done, if no credit is claimed. So there was a two-way traffic between us: cash and publicity from the BBC office in Kingston, where Cedric Lindo played a key role, and credit and permanency from him. (1992 29)

Collymore was also the threshold to wider worlds of knowledge for gifted young people. During a seminar held at the University of West Indies, Cave Hill in 1999, Alfred Pragnell, the Barbadian actor, and the author, John Wickham, described the importance to their development of his accessibility and his private library of books that he would make available when they visited his home. George Lamming has also given an account of this influential role from his schooldays:

I sort of latched myself on to him. He had a tremendous library which I literally took over. I mean I was there every Saturday morning to collect books. When I was supposed to be studying school material I was reading books from Collymore’s library. H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy were influential authors. Then I was very interested in the fifth-century Athenian culture. Collymore’s library was full of all sorts of books on the Greeks. In my discoveries from there I began to make discoveries of writers on my own. (58)

For a number of writers and aspiring writers in Barbados, then, Collymore was the gateway to a world of books and ideas that fed directly into their own writing; but he was more than a mere gatekeeper. In Edward Baugh’s estimation:

Collymore’s service to other West Indian writers lies not only in having published their work, but also in the personal interest he takes in them. What is more, because he occupies, through Bim, such a central place in West Indian literature, he is known to all sorts of people all over the world who are interested in West Indian writing, and through these contacts he has been further able, in his unobtrusive way, to promote West Indian writing abroad. (1973 15)

In 1949, Collymore wrote to Swanzy to express his excitement at the discovery of ‘such a young talent’. He stated:

Now: I think I have made an important discovery. Last Monday Harold Simmons of St. Lucia sent me a recently published volume of poems by young Derek Walcott. Have you ever heard of him? Walcott, who is nineteen years old tomorrow, writes with remarkable fervor. His literary forbears are obviously Hopkins, Auden and Dylan Thomas, especially the latter; but his work is obviously sincere and wonderfully mature. (Swanzy Papers, Collymore – Swanzy, 2:1:1949)

This gatekeeper activity involved more than simply passing on those who came to the door of his home claiming to be able to write, or the transitory encouragement of a secondary school teacher of English. As is apparent from the careers of those that he encouraged and from the letter to Swanzy about Walcott’s writing, in each instance it involved a talent of his own to be able to identify the real thing.
COLLYMORE ON THE THRESHOLD

Collymore’s liminality is also apparent from his status as an apparently white person with artistic leanings in the Barbados society of early to mid-twentieth century. I propose to locate Collymore on the threshold by situating him at the social level, as a white creole in Barbadian society, and secondly, at the individual level, by highlighting the essential ambivalence of the white creole writer.

White creole society in Barbados has been diversified and stratified for a long time. Karl Watson has traced the lines of this division from the beginning of the eighteenth century between small hold landowners and the landed elite of the island. Although these divisions appear to have been patched up in the face of the challenge for full black political participation, an element of schizophrenia has resulted. From the abolition of slavery into the twentieth century, this has involved closing ranks and giving way to black political management of the island, diversifying the economic base from landholding into commercial interests, providing scope for the upward mobility of the white working-class population, while proclaiming an apparent national and emotional commitment to the island. The development of trade unions and the militant struggles of the 1930s by the predominantly black working-class population became an important challenge to white hegemony and also encouraged the closing of ranks. It is notoriously difficult, however, to provide a clear stratification of small island societies. This is complicated, in the case of Barbados during Collymore’s lifetime, by its developing service sector, increasing urbanisation and light manufacturing industry. The resulting pattern of stratification of the society appears to have modified the previously identifiable hierarchy of colour/class boundaries. (For the analysis of the intricacies of these developments in Barbados see Karch, 1981; Watson, 1988; Beckles, 1999.)

In terms of Barbados society, Collymore was white creole (though he would not necessarily have accepted this categorisation). Although his father was a public servant working in the island’s Customs Office, Collymore clearly had distant links with elite society of which he was proud and to which he alludes in his autobiography of his early years. The title of his autobiography, ‘Non Immemor’ for example, apparently without intended irony, is the motto of the family crest. John Wickham specifies his social class while demonstrating at the same time what an unlikely, almost unique, product he was in the light of the social milieu he inhabited. Collymore came, Wickham wrote,

not from the wealthy landed class but of that larger middle or middling class which 60 or so years ago provided the hard working core of the island’s community. It is a class noted for its careful husbandry, its narrow vision. You can see the houses it built in places like Belville and Fontabelle, along the Hastings and Worthing coasts — solid coral limestone dwellings, tidy villas, the gardens flanked by poinsettia or hibiscus hedges, beware-of-the-dog signs on the garden gates. It is a class notorious for its loyalty to Barbados, generally uncomfortable in any environment which calls for the use of imagination. (12)
From this perspective Collymore appears doubly marginalised. First, in terms of his attitude, which, as discussed earlier, he describes as one of ‘idleness’. Perhaps his class background offers a further clue to the meaning of the term ‘idleness’, in contrast with the conventional class role associated with business or money-making that one might have expected him to have played in Barbados society. Secondly, he is also marginalised as one of a handful of white creoles who are active creative artists and writers in the island and the region. Wickham makes the point that ‘[b]y all reason of his background in time and place, Colly is the last man one would expect to have identified himself with a literary magazine and made it the foremost contributor to the surgent spirit of West Indian writers in the last fifteen years’ (13).

Another element, which helps to identify Collymore as ‘marginal’ or on the threshold, is, in a strange way, his variety of successes. As his life progresses in education as a classroom teacher, as an actor and as an editor he is identified by his peers or colleagues as a unique specimen, a high achiever beyond categorisation, or, put another way, removed to a category of one. This status enables the collective claim of white creole association to fade into the background so that it becomes, on a day-to-day basis, apparently irrelevant. This would appear to have suited his liberal and artistic instincts, enabling him to move freely in the society without damaging his traditional, and probably more conservative, white creole associations. In a society that was becoming increasingly vocal about its colour/class lines as the twentieth century progressed, this unique chameleon and personable ability would be an essential part of his persona.

Collymore’s threshold existence as a white creole artist, which, in the Caribbean context, can be described as ‘the outsider’s voice’ or ‘otherness’, is a second important element of his liminality. Evelyn O’Callaghan has pointed out that, ‘[t]he outsider’s voice, (then,) constitutes an important thread in the fabric of any Caribbean literary tradition’ (78). Collymore’s poetry, for example, clearly lies outside what Brathwaite has called the ‘folk tradition’. For Brathwaite this tradition represents the basis of Caribbean culture. It has become a predominant feature of Caribbean writing as the twentieth century progressed. Collymore’s themes, styles, topics and observations place him outside this tradition. Not many Caribbean poets from the mid-twentieth century, for example, celebrate, as Collymore has done in his poetry, the nanny, (‘Amanda’), the plantocracy (‘Homage to Planters’) or the business of taking tea (‘Sparrows at Tea’). In his ‘Homage to Planters’, Collymore offers to planters the following recognition: ‘I salute with gratitude/the loving care which wrings/such beauty from the soil…’

This recognition elicits Brathwaite’s acerbic comment that Collymore’s ‘gratitude rings rather dissonantly in the face of all that he ignores — the whips and scorns of slavery’ (Brathwaite 1974 33). The ‘otherness’ of Collymore’s poetry has been identified more positively by Edward Baugh who, in his review of West Indian poetry 1980–1970, locates Collymore along with A.J. Seymour, as ‘transitional poetry 1900–1970, locates Collymore along with A.J. Seymour, as ‘transitional
figures between the poetry of the pioneers and the more progressive poetry of the 1940 period’ (1972 1).

His short story writing also locates him on the threshold. Aspects of white creole society are explored in his collection, The Man Who Loved Attending Funerals and Other Stories. In many of these stories a white creole perspective dominates. They offer a rare glimpse of early- to mid-twentieth-century polite Barbadian white or white creole upper class life in which servants, along with other luxuries, are taken for granted. His stories can be located as part of the ‘other’ tradition in Caribbean prose which stretches back to the nineteenth century and which provide an exploration of white creole Caribbean society. In the context of male writers these include the three volumes of E.L. Joseph’s Warner-Arundell: The Adventures of a Creole published in 1838, and the work of H.G. de Lisser (Jamaica), Ralph de Boissiere (Trinidad), Geoffrey Drayton (Barbados), Ian McDonald (Trinidad), Lawrence Scott (Trinidad). However, my readings of Collymore’s stories, as representations of powerlessness in different guises, brings his collection closer to the themes of insecurity explored by white creole female writers, particularly Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey, than to the sense of security and authority that Geoffrey Drayton or Ian McDonald ultimately offer in their novels.

Though Collymore’s stories dramatise it in different ways, the dominant tone is fatalistic. In stories where the protagonist attempts to exercise power, it is generally thwarted or shown to be ineffective: Cumberbatch (‘To Meet Her Mother’) is prevented from realising his ambitions by a prejudice against fat people. An unscrupulous foreigner deservedly dupes Mrs. Bush-Hall and daughter (‘RSVP Mrs. Bush-Hall’) out of their upward climb. A dying man saves a drowning kitten as a last act of human feeling, only for the kitten to be blamed for his death and killed the next day (‘Mr. Baker Forgets Himself’). Another feature of Collymore on the threshold is represented by his ambivalent attitude to the metropolitan centre, England. His accounts of his visits in 1947, ‘Impressions of a Tour 1 and 2’ published in Bim in 1950, demonstrate these mixed feelings towards ‘the old country’. As one well versed in British and European culture and the arts, his reports are, not surprisingly, full of enthusiasm for museums, art galleries, and the theatre visits that he undertakes. His description of his opportunity to dine with the Dean and Faculty of Pembroke College, Cambridge contains an element of a rite of passage about it. He recollected:

As I sat there on the dais, and then afterwards in the panelled combination room by candlelight, sipping port and conversing, all the happenings of the evening assumed the nature of a sacrament, and I felt as though I had partaken of the very stuff of England. (1950 62)

Also in his travels around England, the countryside around Exeter was ‘to be gazed upon and worshipped’ (1950 165).
He both is and is not at home. Far from wishing to leave Barbados behind, reminders of the island are his constant sources for positive or negative comparison. He practices the small island attentiveness to faces, looking for reminders of friends in Barbados. In Derby he spends time looking ‘at the various faces and figures, especially those of the waiters and waitresses, and finding resemblances in them to various friends and acquaintances at home’ (1950b 168). The landscape of England also holds reminders: ‘Most of the English countryside had reminded me forcefully of that of Barbados, the countryside of Barbados refined and subjected to a softer atmosphere and a longer spell of mellowing years’ (1950a 70). At the theatre an actor’s voice in The Alchemist convinces him of the ‘authentic Englishly of our Barbadian tongue as it is spoken by some of our older planters today’ (1950a 71). In a visit to the Zoo he sees, ‘wonderful to relate, some goats, real Bajan goats’ (1950a 71).

In contrast with these positive associations, he states what has now become the clichéd West Indian’s disgust at the English bath instead of the shower. ‘How people prefer to soak in the scum of soap lather and their discarded dirt I cannot imagine’ (1950a 164). He finds the palm trees of Torquay unacceptable. They are ‘small and straggly and had such an apologetic air’ (1950a 166), and at the end of his tour, he is clearly more than ready and delighted to return to Barbados. He takes a boat back to Trinidad and on the return flight to Barbados the sight of the island is described as ‘a very precious toyland spread out beneath’ (1950a 170). Given the widespread rush from the English speaking Caribbean to Britain in the late 1940s and early 1950s, his mixture of feelings about England take on greater significance as a representation of his white creole ambivalence towards the centre. His responses to the visit suggest that he belongs both to the centre and the periphery. He remained sufficiently open to feel pride in the association with home and metropolitan culture.

Finally, Collymore is on the threshold in his attitude to language. Educated to speak and teach Standard English, Collymore’s approach to written English was to respect and encourage the formal tradition. His prose has been described as ‘self-consciously fine — linguistically and grammatically correct, aspiring to a universal rather than a local character’ (Brown xix). He delighted in the use of formal and unexpected words and phrases. In the story ‘Shadows’ he describes how the moon ‘pale and gibbous shone through the bleak mullioned windows’ (11). In the same story, hatred held by a wife ‘typified the revolt of the woman, the odalesque’ (12), and a character’s pain was expressed in the sentence ‘She suffered in the deeps’ (12). In ‘The Snag’, wasteland is described as ‘saturated in the hollow of an abrupt declivity’ (18).

At the same time, he is surrounded by other versions of English that, in the context of Barbados, were clearly different and constantly changing. Other writers were willing to respond to the language around them.1 In an interview with Sonji Phillips, Brathwaite notes, ‘I was dealing with issues such as race. He
(Collymore) didn’t feel comfortable with the historical description of the racial trauma. She also notes that he was hardly any dialect in *Bim* till 1956 and suggests that a possible reason for the late change in attitude involved taking the lead from the metropolis following the successes that Sam Selvon had with *The Lonely Londoners* which was published that year in Britain (Phillips 2004).

There is here a tentativeness displayed by Collymore that suggests an element of fence sitting. From the perspective of liminality it is also his response to the day-to-day creative use of language around him that betrays his threshold status. Unwilling or unable to shift to the creolisation of written English in his own work, yet fascinated by the language around him, consciously or unconsciously, he chooses not to use Barbadian or regional English, neither is he willing (for a time) to encourage its use creatively through publication. Instead, he records it as an amateur lexicographer, publishing *Notes for a Glossary of Words and Phrases of Barbadian Dialect* in various editions of *Bim*, and finally in four editions, the first in 1955, and the fourth in 1970. A part of his quandary appears to have been that he was caught between local meanings and those laid down by the O.E.D. The problem is illustrated in the introduction to the fourth edition of the *Notes for a Glossary*. He writes there that if a Barbadian looks up certain words, for example, ‘gap’, ‘scotch’ or ‘tot’ in the dictionary:

> This response to the local language, then, also places him on the threshold. He betrays his ambivalence to the creolisation of English by choosing, ultimately, to study the local language rather than to use it or indeed to encourage its use.

‘Literary genius’ and ‘grand old man of West Indian literature’ are two accolades often used to describe Collymore’s varied life and work. While they acknowledge his important place in Caribbean letters, by colluding in his iconic status they also inhibit closer analysis. The interpretation offered in this analysis reframes the many categories — artist, teacher, poet, story writer, editor — that he appears to inhabit, paying particular attention to Collymore the liminar, the man of the threshold.

As a gatekeeper he has a considerable role in influencing and encouraging many towards literature and the arts. He himself is also on the threshold. His writing suggests that he is a part of the ‘other’. His life and his writing give representation to Jean Rhys’ telling observation about the Caribbean: ‘There is always the other side, always’ (106 ). This ‘other’ side for Collymore comprises his ambivalence to the metropolitan centre, which he visits; to his place in the island, which he constantly negotiates to find space for his ‘idleness’; and to himself, shown most clearly in his response to what could have been, after all, ‘his’ language. In these ways he personified the ambivalence of white creole
culture in liminal form. Collymore is defined also by his position in society, that is a white creole artist coming to terms in his own way with a society that contains all the contradictions of a racialised, decolonising, conservative and hierarchical past.

NOTES
The author acknowledges that the research for this paper was kindly funded by the Central Bank of Barbados and supported by the Frank A. Collymore Literary Endowment Committee. Any errors or omissions in this essay are those of the author. ¹

¹ For example, Brathwaite has noted that Collymore was not always keen on the use of ‘nation language’, and Collymore withdrew his support for some parts of ‘Rights of Passage’ which he found ‘disturbing’ (Phillips 86).

WORKS CITED
Barbados National Archives, Frank A. Collymore Notebooks
Baugh, Edward 1972, West Indian Poetry 1900–1970: A Study in Cultural Decolonisation, No.1., Savacou, Mona
Collymore, Frank 1944, Roots and Branches and So On, Collymore Collection, Barbados National Archive.
Collymore, Frank 1945, Rhymed Ruminations on the Fauna of Barbados, Advocate, Bridgetown.
Collymore, Frank 1949a, Collected Poems, Advocate, Bridgetown.
Collymore, Frank 1953c, ‘Homage to Planters’, Collected Poems, p. 34.
Collymore, Frank 1968, Rhymed Ruminations on the Fauna of Barbados, Advocate, Bridgetown.

NOTES
The author acknowledges that the research for this paper was kindly funded by the Central Bank of Barbados and supported by the Frank A. Collymore Literary Endowment Committee. Any errors or omissions in this essay are those of the author. ¹

¹ For example, Brathwaite has noted that Collymore was not always keen on the use of ‘nation language’, and Collymore withdrew his support for some parts of ‘Rights of Passage’ which he found ‘disturbing’ (Phillips 86).

WORKS CITED
Barbados National Archives, Frank A. Collymore Notebooks
Baugh, Edward 1972, West Indian Poetry 1900–1970: A Study in Cultural Decolonisation, No.1., Savacou, Mona
Collymore, Frank 1944, Roots and Branches and So On, Collymore Collection, Barbados National Archive.
Collymore, Frank 1945, Rhymed Ruminations on the Fauna of Barbados, Advocate, Bridgetown.
Collymore, Frank 1949a, Collected Poems, Advocate, Bridgetown.
Collymore, Frank 1953c, ‘Homage to Planters’, Collected Poems, p. 34.
Collymore, Frank 1968, Rhymed Ruminations on the Fauna of Barbados, Advocate, Bridgetown.
——— 1993d, ‘Mr Baker Forgets Himself’, The Man, pp. 73–79.


——— 1993d, ‘Mr Baker Forgets Himself’, The Man, pp. 73–79.


——— 1993d, ‘Mr Baker Forgets Himself’, The Man, pp. 73–79.


