

**The formalist genesis of ‘postcolonial’ reading:
Brathwaite, Bhabha and *A House for Mr Biswas*¹**

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The novel was an imported form. For the metropolitan writer it was only one aspect of self-knowledge. About it was a mass of other learning, other imaginative forms, other disciplines. For me, in the beginning, it was my all.

V.S. Naipaul, ‘Reading and Writing’ (1998)²

‘FORM,’ WE ARE TOLD, is an abstraction, a ‘mischievous’ concept.³ ‘Formalism’ – the practice of reading and critical discourse that ‘form’ spawns – registers as much a ‘desire for form’ as an identification or analysis thereof.⁴ It says as much about the investments (or fetishes) of the reader as about the text in which she locates formal work, or beauty, or accomplishment. To the literary historian, ‘form’ becomes operative at moments when the discourse of formalism feeds into the self-understanding, and eventually the practice, of writers themselves. One such moment – in this case, a rather extended one – encompassed those mid- to late-twentieth-century writers and critics born into restive British colonies, or during the first years of independence. For many writers of the decolonizing world, and for the theorists of ‘postcolonialism’ who followed them, ‘form’ took on historical and spatial concreteness. It is often now posited that ‘formalism’ might be applied to these colonial, anti- or postcolonial texts, but it is not generally suggested that questions of form and formalism helped define the emergence of ‘postcolonialism’ as a mode of critique. I contend, in what follows, that they did.

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This essay describes three sites of reading. These sites exemplify reading habits that were paradigmatic of historical moments within Britain and its (former) colonies: first, that of pre-war colonialism, second that of the nationalist anti-colonial moment on the cusp of constitutional independence, and third, the later twentieth-century moment in which academic engagement with colonialism crystallized – in Britain – into ‘postcolonial theory’. The first, a fictional example, sees V.S. Naipaul’s Mr Biswas, an underemployed sign painter in colonial Trinidad, reading British magazines ‘for the letters’ before going on to read them for the ‘stories’.⁵ The second sees Edward Kamau Brathwaite, a year after Trinidadian independence and the breakdown of the West Indian Federation, present A House for Mr Biswas in the Caribbean periodical Bim as doing exemplary formal work: modelling on the level of form the exigency of participation in emerging national communities. The third sees Homi Bhabha in Thatcherite England in the 1980s – the ‘heyday of high theory and low spirits’ – return to the same novel to articulate what he would later call ‘the postcolonial perspective’.⁶ The function of ‘form’ in each case becomes a point of contention for these readers; ‘reading’ – in these examples – becomes ‘the process of contending with form’. Rather than viewing these sites of reading as discrete instances – colonial, anti-colonial, postcolonial – these debates about form constitute a thread which allows us to view them comparatively, as a genealogy.

Bhabha and Naipaul have seen their stock fall over recent years, whilst the term postcolonial that links them commands an increasingly slim constituency. Edward Said’s strident attacks on Naipaul in the late 1980s – in which he described him as a strategic, non-white mouthpiece of Western neo-imperialism – have never been refuted.⁷ And Bhabha’s critical method of intricate poststructural close-reading has been seen as politically ambivalent perhaps not least because his muse V.S. Naipaul’s politics are so obviously and irredeemably bad. This essay takes no programmatic position regarding the value of the work

of Naipaul or Bhabha (or that of Brathwaite) in contemporary critical or pedagogic practice; rather, it views the prominence of these authors in particular periods as facts of literary history. Even if less widely read or cited than formerly, these writers were nonetheless foundational figures in strands of colonial, anti- and postcolonial thought concerned with the concept of the literary and its formal manifestations. The strands of anti- and postcolonial thought for which the names Brathwaite and Bhabha (respectively) became bywords are misunderstood if not seen in terms of the literary corpus on which they draw, in which Naipaul enjoyed great prominence. The ideological contrasts between the Eurocentric assimilationist Naipaul and the Afrocentric radical Brathwaite, or between the populist public intellectual Brathwaite and the ivory-tower obscurantist Bhabha are embedded in the different theorizations of literary forms (and their functions) that emerged during the second half of the century. By describing these debates as a history of engagements with form, a problematic canon becomes legible to the literary historian.

Back in March 2000, in a special issue of Modern Language Quarterly entitled 'Reading for Form', Garrett Stewart announced an ambition to 'test out' what he called the 'formalist mandate' 'on one of those burgeoning subfields of cultural criticism, colonial and postcolonial literary studies, where such formalism [...] seems far from urgent when not downright suspect'.⁸ Fourteen years later, the editors of The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, made the case for the singularity of this new journal in similar terms: 'literature and the aesthetic at large have suffered a regrettable abeyance as prime sites for generating theoretical perspectives on the conditions of the postcolonial'. An engagement with the form and formalist criticism is at the heart of the corrective they propose.⁹ The emergence of this journal, alongside a Journal of Commonwealth Literature special issue 'Crafts of World Literature,' comes in the wake of numerous other manifestos for a 'new formalism' in postcolonial studies, including Natalie Melas's All the Difference in the World

(2007), Eli Sorensen's Postcolonial Studies and the Literary (2010). These works, though diverse and astutely theorized, attest to the idea that formal attention has not hitherto been a major part of the toolkit for critics interested in colonial or postcolonial literatures. Attention to form, they suggest, was ancillary to debates about ideology or content. I do not think this was true in March 2000, nor do I think it is true today. The suggestion that such an approach might renew or galvanize critical work on this body of literature or within this theoretical framework is not in itself unhelpful. But in failing to foreground the centrality of form in prior versions of 'postcolonial' criticism, it implicitly revives of an unhelpful binary of 'politicized' versus 'literary' reading. Moreover, it misses this crucial interrogation of the politics of 'formal' attention.

I. Three Scenes of Reading

MY FIRST EXAMPLE is colonial: both the date of its setting (Mr Biswas's days of idleness can be located somewhere in the 1920s) and the date of the novel's composition and publication fall before Trinidadian independence (though only just: Biswas was published in 1961, Trinidad gained independence a year later). Mr Biswas finds himself back in his mother's house – an informal, backyard shack – after having been expelled from his apprenticeship with the pundit Jairam. Unmarried and without a fixed job, Mr Biswas picks up work as a sign painter:

To satisfy the extravagant tastes of his shopkeepers he scanned foreign magazines. From looking at magazines for the letters he began to read

them for their stories, and during his long weeks of leisure he read such novels as he could find on the stalls of Pagotes. He read the novels of Hall Caine and Marie Corelli. They introduced him to intoxicating worlds. Descriptions of landscape and weather in particular excited him; they made him despair of finding romance in his own dull green land (B, 77).

In his times of idleness Mr Biswas's desultory reading drifts from looking at letters to reading stories. The novels of Hall Caine and Marie Corelli seem to be 'romances' primarily in the sense of 'lightweight commercial fiction deliberately written to flatter day dreams.'¹⁰ But there may be a secondary, more literary-historical definition lurking: 'romance' as a genre of narrative that was related, though distinct, from 'realism'. Biswas's relationship with these texts is presented as naïve but there is a joke in the last sentence. Gillian Beer has described how, even for early Victorian novelists, the association of romance narratives with 'exotic' southern locations (dating back to a pre-novelistic, early modern period), was already so widespread and hackneyed that the encroachment of 'realist' narrative could be characterized as a 'turn [...] to a cooler region where the dawn breaks grey and sober'.¹¹ Mr Biswas, whose personal library is made up of the stock of provincial book-stalls, is not in a position to know this. For him, the tropics are singularly unaccommodating to romance narratives, as he understands them. The joke is at his expense, and the ironic distance between the narrator and his protagonist foregrounds their unequal commands of English literary history.

Mr Biswas's reading adventures enable Naipaul to play visibly with the idea of literary form. If 'romance' as a genre denotes a way of seeing, an affective response, or an appetite that is not specific to medium, culture or time, another Naipaulian keyword, 'form,' works differently. As my epigraph suggests, and as I will outline in more detail below,

'forms' are for Naipaul the crystallizations of generic energies in specific media, places and times. 'Romance' might crystallize into medieval chivalric poems (as Naipaul would describe in The Loss of El Dorado), or, in its later encounter with 'realism', it might crystallize into the novel.¹² Naipaul's play with the concept of form is never more evident than when he satirizes Mr Biswas for his inability to tell one form from another:

He stayed in the back trace and read Samuel Smiles. He had bought one of his books in the belief that it was a novel and had become an addict. Samuel Smiles was as romantic and satisfying as any novelist, and Mr Biswas saw himself in many Samuel Smiles heroes: he was young, he was poor, and he fancied he was struggling. But there always came a point when resemblance ceased (B, 88).

Biswas's error draws a parallel between the traffic or translatability of literary forms, and that of social structures. If Samuel Smiles's libertarian 'self-help' manuals are in some sense like novels, the novel, Naipaul suggests, is therefore a bit like a Samuel Smiles book. Naipaul is parodying a familiar trope of the bildungsroman – Brontë's Jane Eyre being exemplary – in which the 'young', 'struggling' hero or heroine, rising from poverty, attains material and social success on the basis of application and good character. It is a commonplace of literary history that the bildung narrative of mid-nineteenth century Europe was related to the romance but not continuous with it. It arose – or so the broad-brush narrative runs – out of a mercantilist society and structured its version of realism in the image of that society, whose dominant trope was the subsuming of oneiric romance into a socially responsible, 'realist' ambition.¹³ Naipaul alludes to this idea as a familiar one: as a commonplace. And his point is that though these books did travel physically to the 'back traces' of the colonies, the so-called 'realism' of these narratives is rendered absurd in these places in which no 'ambitions could be pursued' or have 'meaning'. The generic codes seen to inhere in literary forms are skewed

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as the forms (the novels themselves) move from place to place. The 'realism' of the bildungsroman comes to look, to the colonial reader, much like 'romantic' fantasy.

In his accounts of Mr Biswas's reading, Naipaul uses the historicity of the novel form to make a point about how it had functioned for colonial Caribbean readers. This might seem a tenuous claim, given Naipaul's own self-presentation as uninterested in the academic study of literature and to a substantial extent an autodidact.¹⁴ But Patrick French's 2008 biography The World Is What It Is and – in particular – Naipaul's Oxford correspondence (published as Letters Between a Father and Son) provide grounds for a revision of this story. As an undergraduate, Naipaul studied English refractions of Latin and French romance narratives in Chaucer and Spenser, alongside a systematic study of the rise of the novel in the nineteenth century. His graduate work included a translation of the anonymous picaresque Lazarillo de Tormes.¹⁵ Lazarillo, as Michael McKeon notes, inaugurated a 'secular' tradition which would underpin the development of the novel: pitting the 'individualistic will of a hero' against an overarching 'civil' authority.¹⁶ Analogous accounts of the novel form are offered in Beer's The Romance (1970) and – as I will expand upon later – by Edward Said in Beginnings (1975), and have clear applicability to the bildungsroman in particular.¹⁷ A House for Mr Biswas – in which references to Hall Caine and Marie Corelli are interspersed with references to Dickens, Twain, Maupassant, Scott and Gogol – displays Naipaul's broad and systematic reading more than any of his later fictions, drawing particular attention to his engagement with the European novel of the nineteenth century.

'No literary form – the Shakespeare play, the epic poem, the Restoration comedy [...] – can continue for very long at the same pitch of inspiration. If every creative talent is always burning itself out, every literary form is always getting to the end of what it can do.'

Naipaul's better-known statements about the notion of 'form' in general, and about of the 'novel form' in particular (that it was a European 'imported form', that in its Dickensian

prime 'it gave nineteenth century Europe a certain kind of news'), come from later in his career. Yet he also notes in the retrospective essay from which I quote ('Reading and Writing') that the novel as a form had obsessed him 'in the beginning'.¹⁸ And this understanding of a form – the novel – as an historically and spatially specific crystallization of genre and topos is also evident in his writing of the early 1960s. 'The novel is of the West,' Naipaul wrote in An Area of Darkness (1964). 'It is part of the Western concern with [...] the here and now. In India thoughtful men have preferred to turn their back on the here and now and to satisfy "the basic human hunger for the unseen".'¹⁹ Beyond noting, as Harish Trivedi does, the irony of such a statement from the pen of a writer who had recently published A House for Mr Biswas, it is fruitful to consider the modality of Naipaul's mobilization of this European form in an Indo-Caribbean setting, the self-ironization that he practices, and the pathos he thereby creates.²⁰ Adapting the European nineteenth-century bildung narrative into the differently organized social milieu of colonial Trinidad, Naipaul modulates the distance between the narrator and the protagonist using an ironic third person narrator that had been paradigmatic of this earlier novelistic moment. The 'appropriateness' or otherwise of Biswas's reading matter is the subject of much scorn, yet this scorn is voiced within the narratorial conventions of the dynamic free-indirect-narrator, of the alien, imported form. For Naipaul, at the beginning of the 1960s, the novel was essentially inhospitable to any form of romantic distension that eluded, or promised to elude, the harsh, material facts of the 'here and now'. Or rather, to be more precise, the tissue of novelistic narrative formed around these sites of desultory, oneiric fantasy, but the function of novelistic narration was to restrain, to discipline, to foreclose even the possibility of their fulfilment, often proleptically, in advance. This took on a special acuity, or pathos, for colonial Caribbean readers and writers, for whom – in the absence of alternative traditions (as Naipaul saw it) – Western literary forms became the only sites of imaginative distension available. Mr Biswas's

'conscription' to this central literary form of Western modernity is foregrounded in his career as a reader and as a writer, and the governing affect is pathos, as novels fail again and again to properly compute, to properly redeem their promises in the different social structure of colonial Trinidad.²¹ It can neither offer the site of 'romance' that Biswas desires of it, nor can the social ambitions that it proposes in place of the 'pure' or disinterested fantasy, be realized.

By means of this frame, one can make sense of the most minute engagements with the fantastic, those 'moments when [Biswas] could persuade himself that romance was possible': 'When, for instance, he had to [...] work late into the night by the light of a gas lamp, excitement and the light transforming the hut; able then to forget that ordinary morning would come and the sign would hang over a cluttered little shop with its doors open on to a hot dusty road' (B, 78-9). And one can also make sense of the superstructure of the novel, a quest narrative of a sort, yet one which opens with the death of its protagonist and a hilariously pedantic account of the ways in which that quest (itself mundane, perhaps banal) was never quite fulfilled: 'On the house on Sikkim Street Mr Biswas owed, and had been owing for four years, three thousand dollars. The interest on this, eight percent, came to twenty dollars a month; the ground rent was ten dollars' (B, 1). Between these microscopic and macroscopic poles, one might also make sense of the bathos of Mr Biswas's marriage plot. He encounters Shama at a time of 'expectation', as he waits 'for the world to yield its sweetness, its romance'. Yet in the back rooms of Hanuman House – the hierarchical dynastic home which, after his marriage, he must enter – he regrets the gallant note he sends her ('I love you and I want to speak to you') only hours after he had sent it. At the baffling, hurried meeting with his future mother-in-law Mrs Tulsi, marriage is discussed only as a financial arrangement and Biswas – against his will – is strong-armed into a contract; Shama is not even consulted. As he becomes aware following the engagement that 'he would be

losing romance forever since there could be no romance at Hanuman House' he is consoled only by a pathetic, self-deluding sense of social attainment: 'He felt that he had been involved in large events. He felt he had achieved status' (B, 93-4).

Both in local instances and as a total structure, Biswas alludes to the disciplinary social functions of the European novel form. Using tags such as 'romance' repeatedly through the novel, Naipaul draws attention to the fact that he is making a point about narrative forms themselves. The promises of the bildungsroman – of the attainment of bourgeois significance or 'status' – are irredeemable for the colonial subject. Biswas's conscription to this narrative form (to which he is offered no alternative) makes his life-story a source of pathos. This is cultivated as well as described in A House for Mr Biswas: form functions here, and its function is foregrounded. Stephen Arata has suggested that for many nineteenth-century critics, the question of a text's 'formal' qualities only came into view at moments of formalist excess, or ostentation on the part of the writer.²² The excessive, multi-layered and self-advertising formal intricacy of A House for Mr Biswas has made form itself a central question in the novel's reception, from its earliest reviewers onwards. 'The problem of the problem of form,' to take the title from Gordon Rohlehr's seminal (if slightly later) essay became a topic of fierce debate among West Indian critics through the 1960s, and at the center of these debates was A House for Mr Biswas.²³

EDWARD KAMAU BRATHWAITE'S essay 'Roots' – my second scene of reading and one of the central documents in the early reception of Naipaul's novel – was first published in the Barbados-based literary magazine Bim in 1963. It forms a companion piece, or a sequel, to an earlier essay – 'Sir Galahad and the Islands' – published in the same magazine six years earlier. Both essays discuss the relationship between the novel as a form and the social

organization and cultural traditions of the West Indian islands. And both essays draw upon – or emerge in response to – an overarching question that was exercising West Indian intellectuals in this period: at a time when the British Empire was giving way to new nation states on the Indian subcontinent and then in Africa, the Caribbean islands seemed unique – in contrast to these other erstwhile colonies – in that (following the annihilation of the indigenous populations) they did not seem to have recourse to alternative models of social organization or artistic creation underwritten by non-European structures of kinship or vernacular languages. ‘We are a people transplanted into slavery to a transplanted crop,’ Eric Williams announced in an address “The Approach of Independence” (1960). ‘[W]e have remained political satellites of the metropolitan economy whose economic interests we were intended to serve. We have become in the Martiniquan saying “peau noir, masque blanc”, a black skin, a white mask, a European culture in an Afro-Asian environment [...] This is our history. This is our heritage. This is our dilemma’.²⁴ This is the same dilemma that Naipaul points to as he foregrounds Mr Biswas’s conscription to inappropriate novelistic narrative structures to which he nonetheless finds no alternative.

“Sir Galahad and the Islands” – published before Federation – criticized the increasingly existentialist, inward-looking trends of émigré Caribbean writers who, faced with the ‘poverty’ of Caribbean social and artistic traditions, had refused the imperative to imagine emergent Caribbean communities, or models of communal living and tradition. In “Roots” – published the year after Jamaican and Trinidadian independence (though before Barbadian independence in 1966) – this sense of ‘deep disquiet’ remains, though many of the writers Brathwaite speaks of have returned to the region: ‘Sam Selvon on a street in Port of Spain or standing by the Thames; [George] Lamming in England or back in San Christobel; [...] it is the same story, expressed in the same rhythms and a similar technique: frustration, bewilderment, lack of a centre, lack of faith in the society into which they were born or into

which they find themselves'.²⁵ Brathwaite's argument is that until this point, the majority of West Indian writers – often writing 'in exile' or from a detached position in relation to individual West Indian polities – had refused the social affordances of what he calls the 'old fashioned' novel form in favor of a form of prose so distant from this model that Brathwaite prefers to see it as a kind of poetry: 'The trouble with most West Indian writers of novels is that they really regard themselves as poets (in the Lawrence, Faulkner, Hemingway tradition or the folk-speech style of the Irish playwrights)'. 'With the West Indian poet-novelists,' he continues, 'the "negative capability" remains pretty well negative and large stretches of his work [...] appear to have little real meaning within the society for which (one is almost tempted to say "at which") he is writing' (R, 38).²⁶

The exception to this was A House for Mr Biswas, a novel which, 'almost overnight' had 'topple[d] the whole hierarchy of our literary values and set up new critical standards of form and order in the West Indian novel' (R, 39). This moment of confluence has puzzled critics who seek to maintain a typological distinction between Naipaul (the nostalgic colonial apologist) and Brathwaite (the anti-colonial activist, harbinger of the new). Ben Ethrington has suggested that Brathwaite is beguiled, in this passage, by Naipaul's technical 'ease' into forgetting, or ignoring, the freighted history of 'Naipaul's particular medium, the novel'.²⁷ J. Dillon Brown, whilst noting the oddity of Brathwaite's comments in the work of a writer 'so readily associated with oppositional formal experiment,' positions the work as a fleeting, erroneous phase: 'Brathwaite's endorsement of Naipaul, surely, did not last long (indeed, he would shortly turn to Mais as a much more appropriate representative of Caribbean novelistic production)'.²⁸ It did not, of course, last long – or rather, Brathwaite's admiration of Biswas would be qualified and reframed in subsequent essays, a subject to which I will return – but nor is it clear that Brathwaite was failing to engage with the novel as an historical form, or the connotations of its application in a Caribbean context in this period. Indeed, he refers

explicitly in "Roots" to the fact that Naipaul was distinguished by his engagement with 'what the novel form means'. Moreover, it is Brathwaite's contention that Naipaul's engagement with novelistic form is innovative in the Caribbean precisely because it *is* perversely appropriate, within this space, at this historical moment.

'We can see our problem,' Brathwaite writes, 'not only as one of sensibility [...] but also as one of style':

A return by our writers to a sense of responsibility to West Indian society will be reflected I think in a change of style: in a greater and more careful understanding of what the novel form means. [...] Novels are essentially the expression of a society, they reflect the individual toil within a society. The black West Indian cannot really expect novels like Biswas until he has a strong enough framework of social convention from which to operate and until his own technique is flexible and subtle enough to take advantage of it (R, 54).

Underlying Brathwaite's essay is an understanding of literary forms as fundamentally portable or transferrable. Whereas modernist, 'poetic' prose styles afforded a precise registering of individual subjectivity in isolation, the realist novel (and most clearly the bildung narrative) acted as a container to subsume 'individual toil' into communal social structures. Just as the European bildungsroman found its roots in a 'burgeoning nationalism based on the ideal of an organic culture whose temporality and harmony could be reflected in the developing personality at the core of the bildungsroman,' so these same narrative structures might carry out a similar function in the burgeoning national cultures of the decolonizing Caribbean.²⁹ Picking up on the deployment and foregrounding of this narrative architecture in Biswas, in Brathwaite's account Naipaul is deploying these 'old-fashioned'

forms not only to comprehend and 'describe' these societies in a 'whole and complex way', but to offer a model for how intellectuals must subsume individual fantasies and local cliques into the communal life of a new public culture (R, 53). In the Trinidadian case, this meant a rejection of racial agitation (in which Indo- and Afro-Trinidadian communities vied for preference) and an adhesion to a new national community. Such nationalist sentiment did not come naturally to many Trinidadians in this period, and this, for Brathwaite, is the nationalist, anti-colonial work that Naipaul's bildungsroman carries out.³⁰

JUST AS MODERNIST ALIENATION preceded Brathwaite's moment of nationalist fervor, what he saw as a more sterile, less politically radical postmodernist turn in anti-colonial thought succeeded it. My final scene of reading finds a young Homi Bhabha in a 'noisy, red-brick terraced house in Oxford' whose 'hydraulic regurgitations' (from a decrepit plumbing system) proved 'strangely appropriate to the task at hand, a thesis on V.S. Naipaul'.³¹ This thesis was never in fact submitted, but his encounter with Naipaul – and in particular with A House for Mr Biswas – is described in two essays published during his tenure at the University of Sussex: "Representation and the Colonial Text" (1984), and "The World and the Home" (1990).³² These essays offer not just an account of the novel itself, but also an account of the circumstances of Bhabha's encounter with them, and the questions or concerns that he – first as a Parsi student arriving in Oxford in the 1970s, later as an early-career academic working at Sussex during the first Thatcher government – brought to the text. These were questions about literary form: reading Biswas, Bhabha recalls Iris Murdoch's 'laudable pronouncement': "a novel must be a house for free people to live in" ('Must a novel be a house?' Bhabha asks, 'What kind of narrative can house unfree people?'). And these are questions about the vocabularies that are used to describe literary forms, literary conceits, or literary affects: 'Working on A House for Mr Biswas I found that I couldn't fit

the political, chronological, or cultural experiences of that text into the traditions of Anglo-American liberal novel criticism. The sovereignty of the concept of character [...] and the practical ethics of individual freedom bore little resemblance to the overdetermined, unaccommodated postcolonial figure of Mr Biswas'.³³

The emergence of that term, 'postcolonial,' is in this context a catachresis. Mr Biswas – as Bhabha knew – was in every sense a colonial figure, yet the slippage is revealing of the way in which Biswas as a text has slipped from its original moorings in late colonial Trinidad into a then-emerging 'postcolonial' canon. Harish Trivedi, for example, calls the novel 'one of the greatest postcolonial novels in English' in the kind of canonizing maneuver Naipaul's biographer Patrick French would describe, saying that the novel 'would come to be seen as the epic of postcolonial literature'.³⁴ Examined more closely, it transpires that the 'postcolonialism' Bhabha attaches to the figure of Biswas is a kind of prosopopoeia, a slippage in attribution from the reading subject to the subject of his reading: 'The cistern churned and burped, and I thought of some of the great homes of English Literature – Mansfield Park, Thrushcross Grange, Gardencourt, Brideshead, Howard's End, Fawlty Towers. Suddenly, I knew I had found, in the ruins of the Biswas bungalows and their unlikely, unsettled lives, my small corner of the world of letters – a postcolonial place'.³⁵ In other words, the 'postcolonial place' Bhabha finds emerges interleaved within a developmental narrative of a British literary form: the novel (Fawlty Towers apart). Mr Biswas appears as an exemplary inhabitant of this 'postcolonial place' not as an historical designation but as a literary-historical one, or rather, as a prominent example of a particular form of engagement with a British formal heritage. What Bhabha finds in Naipaul's novel is a recognizable mode of reading. Bhabha and Biswas are 'postcolonial' readers because they have been forced into a dialogue with a literary tradition that is neither wholly native to them,

nor wholly alien. The cultural anxiety that this engenders is a definitional part of 'postcolonial' experience.³⁶

Describing how Biswas functions as a 'postcolonial' novel in this sense, Bhabha picks up on the way a particular kind of narratorial 'control' mediates between two competing discourses: that of Biswas's 'individual romance' and that of 'the republic of Hanuman House' (the Hindu family structure into which Biswas must repeatedly and against his will be socialized). Bhabha recognizes that Naipaul is in dialogue here with the history of the novel-as-form: 'To the extent to which stasis and romance are in a dynamic relation, the narrative can play one discourse off against another in the manner of classical realism, generating irony and humor, conjuring up the comédie humaine'.³⁷ Where Brathwaite, however, had seen this as an elegant transposition of a European form into a new and curiously receptive context, Bhabha saw the belated recurrence of structures and techniques that had characterized the nineteenth-century metropolitan realist novel within post-war colonial texts as a source of disturbance, of negative affect. For Bhabha, this recurrent, foregrounded cycle of romance and its frustration is the vehicle of a 'much graver subject: 'the subject of madness, illness, and loss; the repetition of failure and the deferral of desire; the trauma of being always inscribed between the unwritten – Biswas's unfinished, narcissistic fables – and the endlessly rewritten – the beginning of the novel re-writes the end and in that sense it never really begins or ends'.³⁸

In these essays, Bhabha is drawing on Edward Said's Beginnings (1975): in particular, the opposition Said establishes between repetition and innovation in the act of writing. For Said, writerly 'beginning' was a perilous activity: the search for original inscription ('writing as making possible, writing-as-beginning other forms of human perception and behavior') was always – in his phrase – 'molested' by this threat of repetition, or writing as 'mere writing'. The moment of most acute threat, then, was the point at which

writing entered into formal lineages: refusing the possibility of absolute newness in order to render itself legible and comprehensible within the social world. What Said calls the 'classical' – i.e. the nineteenth-century realist – novel is the synthesis of this opposition par excellence: 'the classical novel was at once an attempt to dream the dream as embodied in the novelistic hero and a deliberate instrument for "molesting" or prodding the dream away from its privacy and freedom'. Said – writing on Dickens, Conrad, Hardy, Eliot – makes the case that in this tension or synthesis between autonomous fantasy and social responsibility both the fantasy and the responsibility are minutely altered or re-described. 'In the movement of the dream from pure authority to a jolting molestation that brings writing back to its existence as a text, there is invention'.³⁹ This is the formal work these nineteenth-century novels are doing and this – crucially – is the work that these foundational 'postcolonial' readers (Naipaul, Said, Bhabha) understood them to be doing. Bhabha's claim is that A House for Mr Biswas is itself a belated, 'uncanny' repetition of this form, and so works in a way that is different. For Mr Biswas, as we have seen, the outcome of this tension is always-already predetermined by a web of proleptic structures – large and small – designed to exclude the possibility that his fantasies might have any substantial impact on the social world. Further, his fantasies, such as they are, are always themselves referential, repetitious: they derive from the imported terms, the imported literatures, that Biswas gathers into his outdated Victorian canon. The very terms by which literature might be understood to function (either as romantic distension or as progressive socialization) is, Bhabha argues, 'jeopardized' in the colonial context, on the one hand because those apparently pure, autonomous imaginative acts of reading, writing, daydreaming are always, in the colonial context, molested, never pure, and on the other hand because the social model of elective participation in that liberal, aspirational public sphere towards which the bildung ushers its readers is unavailable for the colonial subject.⁴⁰

For Brathwaite, Biswas was an endorsement of the nationalist project that worked through a clever deployment of the 'old-fashioned' novel form. But for Bhabha the Naipaulian novel did not redefine the social or offer new paradigms of social perception or behavior. Rather, it cultivated the negative affects (like frustration, claustrophobia, or stupefaction) engendered when the tension between imaginative freedom and social responsibility breaks down, when even those arenas of life most associated with freedom or autonomy – reading, writing, daydreaming – take place, in the colonial context, under duress. Bhabha saw it as a 'postcolonial' book insofar as it was a book about fictional form and function, and entered into the discourse of the 'house of fiction' from an oblique angle.⁴¹ As Brathwaite's anti-colonial nationalism is replaced by Bhabha's postcolonialism not only do descriptions of form's function change, but formalism itself becomes more central to the project. Brathwaite's essay was primarily about the formation of a national community and drew on Naipaul's use of the novel form to articulate this. But in Bhabha's essay a description of the way literary form was inflected by colonial experience seems to be a primary ambition. Accordingly, Biswas itself is read as descriptive, not programmatic.

II. 'Postcolonial' Reading after *A House for Mr Biswas*

NAIPAUL'S 1974 ESSAY 'Conrad's Darkness' – often seen as his most detailed ars poetica – was first published in the UK under the title 'The Reality and the Romance'.⁴² 'In my fantasy,' he writes of his arrival in Britain, 'I had seen myself coming to England as [to] some purely literary region, where, untrammelled by the accidents of history or background, I could make a romantic career for myself as a writer'.⁴³ One way of telling the story of Naipaul's career describes it in terms of the constant 'trammelling' or 'molestation' of the

category of the literary under the stress of history and background. This would be a dynamic, circling story animated by Naipaul's repeated attempts – through various forms in various periods – to assert or maintain a space for literary singularity out of reach of competing discourses or ways of understanding the world: commercial, administrative, academic.

'Conrad's Darkness' is a relatively early piece in which he identifies his ambivalence towards the novel explicitly in terms of 'form'. From this point on, he would use the word more frequently in his critical writing. In interviews and essays – such as 'Reading and Writing' quoted above – he would describe his search for literary singularity as a search for singular forms. 'If you want to write serious books [...] you must be ready to break the forms'.⁴⁴

His formalist account of literary history was an important way through which Naipaul defended his conception of the aesthetic as, ideally at least, a disinterested, singular realm. As his haughty jacket-biography – he 'began to write in London in 1954[;]he has pursued no other profession' – intimates, Naipaul's romantic notion of the writer, though often interrogated, has never entirely disappeared, and became a considerable source of tension between himself and Kamau Brathwaite from the late 1960s onwards (B, n.p.). The 1971 conference of the Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies in Mona, Jamaica, at which Naipaul was heckled and subsequently departed, has become symbolic of this division; as Norval Edwards notes, 'the keynote addresses of Brathwaite and Naipaul staked out seemingly stark oppositions and irreconcilable claims: Brathwaite's socially engaged and Afrocentric vision versus Naipaul's mandarin advocacy of the writer's detachment from the burden of politics and social activism'.⁴⁵ Brathwaite was not principally a politician, as Naipaul would crudely caricature him in this period, but he did have firm ideas about the uses of literature, and its role within the socio-political fabric of the newly independent Caribbean. Where once he had seen Naipaul's engagement with form as deployed in the service of anti-colonial nationalism, he increasingly saw it as a betrayal of the

nationalist imperative: merely formalist. As the decade developed Brathwaite's account of the novel changed. Whereas in 1963 Biswas was presented as a model to emulate, in a retrospective survey from the end of that decade Brathwaite described Biswas as the culminating achievement of an outdated tradition, 'a complete novel, centred in the West Indies, and employing the techniques of the "Great Tradition" of the English novel.' This was now contrasted with the work of George Lamming – one of the targets of his earlier criticism – whose 1960 African revivalist novel A Season of Adventure was presented as the harbinger of 'an alternative tradition'. Describing a scene in Season in which an apparently Europeanized girl finds herself enraptured by a drummer during a 'vodun' ceremony, Brathwaite observed a pre-colonial, African aesthetic lineage within which lay 'the hidden and half-forgotten forces through which [a new] Caribbean society can be forged'.⁴⁶

In the late 1960s and early 1970s – era of the Black Power revolutions in Trinidad and Jamaica, as well as in the United States – essays such as 'Jazz and the West Indian Novel' (1967) and 'The African Presence in Caribbean Literature' (1974) further developed the arguments about Caribbean aesthetics and the role of the writer in Caribbean societies for which Brathwaite is now well known.⁴⁷ Though he would retain his insistence that the writer – in particular the novelist – ought to offer models of, and programs for, cultural (and therein social) integration in the newly independent Caribbean polities, he became increasingly insistent that these models ought to be a departure from those mapped by the formal lineages of European literatures: 'the hurricane does not roar in pentameter'.⁴⁸ If his early account of Biswas offered a version of the text skewed in one direction, his later accounts are skewed in the opposite direction. In 1963, he did not seem eager to engage with the ways in which – for Biswas and for Naipaul – the importation of the European bildung narrative into the Caribbean context was of a piece with the negative, non-productive affects (disidentification, failure) engendered when this attempt at a radical transplant failed, quite, to come off. Just so,

in 1970, when the idea of the formal transplant had become less attractive to him, he did not possess, or wish to formulate, the vocabulary to describe the ways in which Biswas was not merely a repetition of a European genre in a Caribbean setting, a piece of fine but retrograde craftsmanship in an era of radical departures.

Between these two accounts a space emerges – an outline in relief – for the portrait of the novel offered by Bhabha: an unhomely repetition of the European bildung ('almost the same, but not quite') which cultivated the abyssal, unfree experience of colonial subjectivity, even in its most private spaces.⁴⁹ This understanding of the psychological relationships engendered by colonialism – hybrid, ambivalent – was foundational to his definition of the 'postcolonial perspective' in The Location of Culture (1994).⁵⁰ 'It was the Indo-Caribbean world of V.S. Naipaul's fiction,' he acknowledged in 2004, 'that was to become the diversionary, exilic route that led me to the historical themes and theoretical questions that were to form the core of my thinking'.⁵¹ Seen in the genealogical perspective that I have outlined, it is clear that these were questions about what Naipaul and Brathwaite had called literary 'form'. The difference in emphasis between Bhabha's thinking and Brathwaite's is not merely temperamental or ideological. It also arises from different conceptions of the ways in which forms could travel or be taken up in new settings. And these differences, in turn, are related to the historical and geographical distance between the two bodies of work: the different contexts within which their accounts were written.

Brathwaite was critical of discourses of 'postcolonialism' represented by Bhabha. In 1994 – the year of the publication of The Location of Culture – he would describe it as a 'Prosperean' invention which denied both the ongoing material inequalities between Europe and the Caribbean, and the idea that non-European cultural production might be fundamentally different: non-continuous with, or even illegible to, those trained within European traditions of reading, writing and exegesis.⁵² Neither Naipaul nor Bhabha were

'Prosperean' in the sense Brathwaite intends. Indeed, the image of Naipaul as a 'white man behind a brown mask' is a prevalent racist trope. But the spaces in which Bhabha and Naipaul encounter one another are harbored in the institutional and intellectual frameworks established by British colonialism. If the emblematic moment of the Naipaul-Brathwaite encounter occurs at a conference in Mona, Jamaica largely populated by Caribbean intellectuals, the emblematic moment of the (figurative) Naipaul-Bhabha encounter occurs in the Victorian terrace in Oxford, where both men – at different times – read for degrees in English Literature. That the literary-pedagogic infrastructures of the (passing) British Empire constituted the frame of reference, conversation and disagreement between writers from vastly different places reveals a good deal about the affordances of the conversation that arose, or rather the conceptual vocabulary that developed.

'At bare bottom,' Simon Gikandi has argued, 'postcolonial theory is the assertion of the centrality of the literary in the diagnosis and representation of the social terrain'.⁵³ For Gikandi, 'postcolonial studies' under the influence of Homi Bhabha offered a basically deconstructive account of literary signification, in which contingent, ambivalent sites of novelty can be created by means of formal transfer or translation (which often *seem* like repetition). And this account arose only at the moment when more absolute forms of novelty – political or cultural – were seen to have remained unrealized despite the new sovereignty of postcolonial states. 'This version of postcolonial theory,' Gikandi argues, 'was premised on the belief that decolonization had failed in one of its crucial mandates – the fulfilment of the dream of modernity and modernization without the tutelage of colonialism'.⁵⁴ The dream he describes is a near fit for the dream of a Caribbean aesthetic modernity 'without the tutelage of colonialism' articulated by Edward Kamau Brathwaite; this was, for Brathwaite, a dream about singularly Caribbean forms. The reasons why thinkers across the decolonizing world became less optimistic about this vision from the late 1970s onwards is a vast question which

has been treated with thoroughness and acuity elsewhere.⁵⁵ Homi Bhabha would no-doubt reject the claim that his work inaugurates a melancholic, non-progressive turn in the study of Caribbean, Asian or African literatures. But his work has nonetheless never fully shaken the charge of being in crucial ways ambivalent, Janus-faced, and unwilling to imagine modernity in terms that are fundamentally different from the past. His reading of Naipaul – and the account of postcolonial form he developed there – was, as he later acknowledged, at the root of this broader ambivalence.⁵⁶

It is hard – as, for example, reading the 2012 debates in New Literary History on the future of 'postcolonial' critique – to escape the fact that the term itself is in bad odor, in need of defense.⁵⁷ The terms of that defense have often taken the form of a disavowal of formerly representative figures, like Bhabha and Naipaul. The work of critics such as Benita Parry and Neil Lazarus has used Bhabha's name as a metonym for the sidelining of radical, anti-colonial politics within the 'postcolonial' theory of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Meanwhile the exclusion of Naipaul – so central to Bhabha's work – among critics of Lazarus's generation is indicative of the challenge he poses to a version of 'postcolonialism' defined by its politics.⁵⁸ This is a politics that looks back to the anti-colonial activism of writers like Brathwaite as a harbinger of Marxist, anti-imperial resistance in the contemporary world. On this account writers like Brathwaite are preferred to writers like Bhabha insofar as their first concern was liberation, rather than an account of colonial and postcolonial discourse that was implicitly "merely formalist". The failure of the 'postcolonial' project can be defined in terms of its politics, but the political failure of postcolonial studies after Bhabha was that its dominant interests were formalist.⁵⁹

III. A New Formalism?

RECENT MANIFESTOS for a 'new' formalism within postcolonial studies – distancing themselves from Bhabha – have defined their terms in such a way as to reject in advance the charge of political quietude. 'A postcolonial formalist criticism takes extrinsic conditions as its point of departure,' Natalie Melas writes; it 'locates its historical engagements most acutely in an attempt to trace the grounds of its own production'.⁶⁰ These later versions of formalism focus on the material circumstances from which texts emerge, but take literary material – the linguistic, generic, formal arsenal available to writers at specific moments – as part of that historical framework. In their editorial to the 2014 Journal of Commonwealth Literature special issue, Jared Zimble and Ben Ethrington set out this position, drawing on Adorno's Aesthetic Theory, and on prominent 'formalist' theorists in the Adornian tradition such as Simon Jarvis.⁶¹ The arguments of these writers are persuasive, and the work generated by their manifestos – as found in the JCL special issue itself, or in Melas's book All the Difference in the World – is often illuminating. I want to offer two caveats, however, drawn from the argument of this essay.

The first regards periodization. It is not true to suggest – as proponents of a 'new formalism' imply – that from the advent of the sub-discipline in the mid-1980s 'postcolonial' literary studies has marginalized 'formalist' methods. Indeed, insofar as these methods were seen as 'suspect' (as Garrett Stewart contended) this was rather because critics believed that they had taken on too great an importance. This is worth emphasizing, because in assenting to the idea that 'postcolonial' criticism in its formative years was basically detached from an interest in form, we recreate or at best respond to a false dichotomy (between politicized critique and rigorous, 'disinterested' textual attention) that it would be better to do away with. Without doubt, much work in postcolonial studies does instrumentalize literary texts in crass, simplistic ways. But some of the best and most influential work in the field – such as Bhabha's essays on Naipaul – has always been interested in questions of literary form,

because this is what postcolonial critique was designed to do: to interrogate the ways in which apparently pure, a-political categories might be molested by social or communal demands. Moreover, it arose in no small part by means of readerly encounters with contemporary colonial and postcolonial writers who were – in complex formal ways – exploring these matters for themselves.

The second caveat concerns terminology. At a 2013 meeting of the English Institute at Harvard, Jarvis raised a question about the function of ‘form’ as a conceptual category, or ‘formalist’ analysis as the designation of a mode of reading. “‘Form’ and the terms that derive from it,” he argued, ‘share with other metaphysical concepts [...] a barely superable tendency to become conceptual governors. Once placed, they seem to make a whole wilderness of less overweening terms, terms such as meter, rhythm, rhyme, intonation arrange themselves as if they were examples of form’. By contrast, he suggests, ‘avoiding the use of the word has forced me [...] into discrimination and specification of the many different things often put into form’s capacious dustbin’.⁶² This raises a question about the use of the word ‘form’ that writers such as Melas, Zimble and Ethrington do not answer. They do not set out to do so, and a less ‘overweening term’, like historical poetics, would define the object of their manifesto about as well as ‘formalism’. I have suggested, however, that for many readers and writers in the colonial and postcolonial world, the notion of ‘form’ could not be atomized into its constituent parts, but manifested itself as a ‘capacious’ but conceptually clear object of anxiety and critical engagement. For Naipaul, Brathwaite, and Bhabha, the lettering and the materiality of texts were not distinguishable from particular genres or styles of writing, nor – to move out yet further – from questions about the modality or social position of texts (their ‘literariness’). Reading for the lettering, for the plot, or for a particular kind of aesthetic education were activities loaded with anxieties about cultural origin, influence and transmissibility. The object of this anxiety is comprehended by the word

'form': which describes the material object, the linguistic pattern, and the norms, assumptions and ideologies of the culture from which these first two arose. There is scope, therefore, for a 'new formalism' in postcolonial studies to entail more than just a renewed engagement with historical poetics. Rather, it could offer an interrogation of the category of 'formalism' itself, by describing a moment when this apparently nebulous concept took on concrete definition, and in which the affordances and limitations of this mode of reading were played out.

Though Homi Bhabha offered a normative account of 'the postcolonial prerogative,' it is of course reductive to describe the idea of the 'postcolonial' in terms of one theorist or intellectual lineage. In the case of Bhabha, such reductive accounts have been offered from both a sympathetic and a hostile perspective. The purpose of this essay has not been to offer a totalizing historical definition: 'what postcolonialism was'. What I have suggested, however, is that in some of its canonical articulations, 'postcolonialism' has been a formalist tradition. This version of 'postcolonialism' can be distinguished from its antinomies – for example anti-colonial nationalism, as represented by Brathwaite – by means of its different account of literary form and the different weight it gave to formalist reading. A history of postcolonial formalism in this sense has still not been written. Such an account – in the model of Angela Leighton's On Form – would describe the intellectual-historical contexts in which 'form' became foregrounded. The formal experiments of (post)colonial writers would be read in terms of the anxieties that attached to the ideas of 'form' itself. These anxieties both catalyzed such experiments and inflected how critics went on to read these writers.

My contention has also been that, viewed in this perspective, the importance of writers who have hitherto seemed hard to position within postcolonial literary historiography emerges in greater clarity. V.S. Naipaul is a case in point. His assertions of literary singularity – 'above all else, I am a writer' – can be read as a simple refusal to acknowledge the politics of his work.⁶³ But a more subtle reading – whether or not he intends it – might

intuit that Naipaul's work is notable, 'above all', as a register of how concepts like 'form' and 'formalism' take on worldly coordinates for colonial and postcolonial writers and are distorted or determined by the places and times of their enunciation. Expressed in these terms, it becomes clear that rather than being detached from the core 'political' purposes of postcolonial criticism, Naipaul's works sits amongst the central and foundational oeuvres from which it was formulated. 'Form' seems to have been the vector along which Brathwaite and Bhabha read Naipaul, and their readings form a map of anti- and post-colonial thought. Read together they tell a story about formal inheritance and formalist attention that emphasizes the mutability of the word 'form' as literary currency.

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² V. S. Naipaul, Literary Occasions: Essays (London: Picador, 2004), 20.

³ Angela Leighton, On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

⁴ Stephen Arata, "Decadent Form", ELH 81 (2014): 1013.

⁵ V.S. Naipaul, A House for Mr Biswas (London: Andre Deutsch, 1961; London: Picador, 2003), 77. Citations refer to Picador edition and are henceforth included in the text as 'B'.

⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, "'The Beginning of Their Real Enunciation': Stuart Hall and the Work of Culture". Critical Inquiry 42.1 (2015): 1; The Location of Culture 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 248.

⁷ Edward W. Said, "Intellectuals in the Post-colonial World" Salmagundi 70/71 (Spring-Summer 1986): 53. Said's objections were expanded into an influential book by his PhD student Rob Nixon: V.S. Naipaul: Postcolonial Mandarin (New York: Oxford UP, 1992).

⁸ Garrett Stewart, "The Foreign Offices of British Fiction" Modern Language Quarterly 61.1 (March, 2000): 181.

⁹ Ato Quayson, Debanji Ganguly & Neil Ten Kortenaar, "Editorial: New Topographies" Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry 1.1 (March 2014): 6, c.f. pp.1-10. Revealingly, the editors acknowledge that their account of a postcolonial studies 'plagued by a hyperpoliticization and a hypertheorization that has all but eclipsed' an interest in form or the literary may be hyperbolic. 'We note, however, that the trends that were manifested in the studies of postcolonial literatures in the 1980s and 1990s were of a piece with cognate changes in literary studies more generally'. They characterize these changes as 'poststructuralist and neoformalist' (p.7).

¹⁰ Gillian Beer, The Romance (London: Methuen, 1970), 1.

¹¹ Beer The Romance, 59. Beer is citing an 1839 entry in Charlotte Brontë's diary.

¹² Sandra Macpherson, in a lucid exploration of the topic, outlines the confused, and confusing, relationship between 'form' and 'genre' in the usage of contemporary critics. In this essay I make no attempt at a definitional distinction, but pick up on 'form' as a word that is used, and worried over, by Naipaul and Brathwaite. In other words, I am interested in the histories of the terminology, and the literary and conceptual experiments that such terminology was at the service of, and in part spawned. 'Form' seems to have worried Naipaul in ways that were fertile for his writing, and it is these 'formal' worries that were picked up on – explicitly or implicitly – by subsequent critics. This, I suggest, is interesting because of the way in which 'form' and 'formalism' have acted as traditional antinomies to the avowed (and for Macpherson self-evident) 'historicism' of 'postcolonial studies'. See Macpherson, 'A Little Formalism', ELH 82 (2015): 386, 391.

¹³ Jed Esty summarizes a canonical description of the 'bildungsroman, or the novel of education' as the novel of 'socialization'. In nineteenth-century Britain, this socializing function worked to 'reconcile narrative and closure, youth and adulthood, free self-making and social determination'. See his Unseasonable Youth: Modernism and Fictions of Development (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 4.

¹⁴ See for example his account of his literary education in 'Reading and Writing' (1998), rept. in Naipaul, Literary Occasions, 3-31.

¹⁵ Naipaul, Letters Between a Father and Son, 2nd ed. eds. Gillon Aitken and Nicholas Laughlin (London: Picador, 2009), 140, 192, 254. . Patrick French, The World is What it is: the Authorized Biography of V.S. Naipaul (London: Picador, 2008), 158.

¹⁶ McKeon, The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987), 96-97.

¹⁷ Beer, Romance, 6-7. Beer matriculated at Oxford in 1954, less than six months after Naipaul had submitted his BLitt thesis on the Spanish picaresque tradition, and her account of the formation of the novel is echoed in later descriptions of the bildungsroman specifically, such as Franco Moretti’s (1987) or Jed Esty’s (2013).

¹⁸ Naipaul, Literary Occasions, 20, 30-31.

¹⁹ Naipaul, An Area of Darkness (London: André Deutsch, 1964), 214.

²⁰ Harish Trivedi, “Love, Marriage, and Realism: the Novel in Pre- and Post-colonial India,” in Locating Postcolonial Narrative Genres eds. Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio (London: Routledge, 2014), 15.

²¹ The idea of the West Indian intellectual as a ‘conscript’ of Western modernity – and in particular of Western modes of writing – is described in David Scott’s influential Conscripts of Modernity: the Tragedy of the Colonial Enlightenment (Durham: Duke UP, 2004).

²² Arata, “Decadent Form”, 1013.

²³ The Guyanese critic Gordon Rohlehr’s essay, published in Caribbean Quarterly 31.1 (March 1985), can be seen as a continuation of an influential body of criticism whose earlier manifestations, such as ‘The Ironic Approach’ (1969) were centrally concerned with Naipaul. The 1985 essay is another notable moment in which a West Indian writer realises, somewhat retrospectively, that the debate they have been having might best be seen as a debate about ‘form’.

²⁴ cit. Selwyn D. Ryan, Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago: A Study of Decolonization in a Multiracial Society (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1972), 494.

²⁵ Brathwaite, Roots (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1993), 36. Henceforth references to this edition are included in the text as ‘R’.

²⁶ It is notable that in the original Bim publication, Brathwaite bemoans the influence of the ‘Lawrence-Steinbeck-Hemingway’ tradition, replacing Steinbeck with Faulkner in a later revision. This would seem to foreground the modernist aspect of the tradition he is criticizing, but it contrasts interestingly with Edouard Glissant’s attempt to position southern US writers, and Faulkner in particular, as in some way part of a Caribbean tradition. See Brathwaite, “Roots” Bim 37 (1963), 15. C.f., Glissant, Faulkner, Mississippi (Paris: Stock, 1996).

²⁷ Ben Ethrington, “What is Materialism’s Material? Thoughts Towards (Actually Against) a Materialism for World Literature” Journal of Postcolonial Writing 48 (2012), 545.

²⁸ J. Dillon Brown, Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel (Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 2013), 175-6.

²⁹ Esty, Unseasonable Youth, 5.

³⁰ Brathwaite clarifies this point in footnote appended to the 1993 edition of ‘Roots’ (see R, 42). Naipaul himself discusses the absence of cross-racial nationalist sentiment in Trinidad c.1960 in The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Colonial Societies (London: André Deutsch, 1962; London: Picador, 2001), 68-69.

Citations refer to the Picador edition.

³¹ Homi K. Bhabha, ‘The World and the Home’ Social Text 31/32 (1992), 141.

³² In 1991, a DPhil was finally conferred by Oxford University on the strength of what is in essence a manuscript version of The Location of Culture.

³³ Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” 142.

³⁴ Trivedi, “Love, Marriage, Realism,” 15. French, The World is What it is, 215.

³⁵ Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” 142.

³⁶ For an account of this cultural anxiety as it manifests itself in Naipaul’s later work, see Ian Baucom’s Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 165-189.

³⁷ Bhabha, “Representation and the Colonial Text” in The Theory of Reading ed. Frank Gloversmith (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), 116-7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 117-8.

³⁹ Edward W. Said, Beginnings: Intention and Method (New York: Basic Books, 1975; London: Granta, 2012), 20, 24. References are to the Granta edition.

⁴⁰ Bhabha, “Representation,” 116.

⁴¹ In her survey Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2005), Elleke Boehmer describes the ‘oblique angle’ from which Naipaul approaches the European canon. This can be seen as an indication of Bhabha’s influence in Naipaul’s reception, even among critics somewhat skeptical of his project. See pp.166-170

⁴² On the importance of ‘Conrad’s Darkness’ within Naipaul’s oeuvre, see Sara Suleri, The Rhetoric of English India (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992), 149-173.

⁴³ Naipaul, Literary Occasions (London: Picador, 2004), 170.

⁴⁴ Quoted in James Wood, “Wounder and Wounded” The New Yorker December 1st 2008.

⁴⁵ Norval Edwards, “The Foundational Generation: From The Beacon to Savacou” in The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature eds. Alison Donnell and Michael Bucknor (London: Routledge, 2011), 120.

⁴⁶ “West Indian Prose Fiction of the Sixties: A Survey” Caribbean Quarterly 16.4 (December 1970): 7-8, 15.

⁴⁷ The dating of “The African Presence” – initially a lecture delivered at Cave Hill, Barbados in 1970 – is somewhat complex, described in part in R (p.190). The first print version seems to have appeared in Daedalus 103.2 (1974).

⁴⁸ Brathwaite, Roots, 265.

⁴⁹ Bhabha, Location, 123. Italics are in the original.

⁵⁰ Bhabha, Location, 248.

⁵¹ Bhabha, Location, xii.

⁵² Brathwaite, “A Post-Cautionary Tale of the Helen of Our Wars” Wasafiri 11.22 (1995): 73.

⁵³ Gikandi, Simon, “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality” South Atlantic Quarterly 100 (2001): 647.

⁵⁴ Gikandi, “Globalization”, 636.

⁵⁵ See Neil Lazarus, The Postcolonial Unconscious (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011).

⁵⁶ On Naipaul’s ‘ambivalent’ relationship with colonial pasts, and on his disputatious relationship with academic ‘postcolonial’ criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, see Suleri, Rhetoric and Baucom, Out of Place. Both focus on work from later in Naipaul’s career. Baucom’s account of The Enigma of Arrival is notably similar to Gikandi’s account of a ‘postcolonial’ project unable to imagine a postcolonial future in terms divorced from the colonial past. For Baucom, Enigma is a melancholic memorialization of imperial architectures and social formations, which – refusing what he calls ‘futurity’: that is, any vision of a future in which these colonial residues have been exorcised – in the end becomes a memorialization of loss or grieving itself (see pp.182-4). Given the centrality of Bhabha to Gikandi’s construction of ‘postcolonialism’ in the essay I am citing, the similarity between Naipaul’s work and Gikandi’s description of ‘postcolonialism’ seems to be more than coincidental. A fuller account of how the history of postcolonial criticism is steered by its relationship with Naipaul – of which this essay forms a preliminary part – is in progress.

⁵⁷ See Robert Young, “Postcolonial Remains” New Literary History 41.3 (2012): 19-42 and responses by Ato Quayson and Benita Parry in the following issue.

⁵⁸ I am drawing here on Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse' Oxford Literary Review 9.1 (July 1987), 27-34. Parry's influential essay was a key source of Lazarus's later ideas, and an early example of the ideological critique of Bhabha also found, for example, in Aijaz Ahmad's In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures (London: Verso, 1994). Lazarus's own polemics on these topics were gathered in The Postcolonial Unconscious (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), but date in large part from the first half of the previous decade. See esp. pp. 1-20. The Postcolonial Unconscious contains no reference to V.S. Naipaul. See also Elleke Boehmer's 'Review' for an account of the way in which Lazarus makes Bhabha's name synonymous with the 'postcolonial' criticism of the late 1980s and early 1990s: Interventions 15 (2013): 589-594.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Parry, "Problems," 32: "There is, moreover, a further political question to be asked of [Bhabha's criticism]: can a practice which is predominantly concerned with the text of colonial authority, which does not address itself to imperialism's culture and neglects to engage with its heterogeneous system of knowledge, produce, as it claims, a critique displacing the West's "white mythology"?" My emphasis.

⁶⁰ Natalie Melas, All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), 37-8.

⁶¹ Ben Ethrington & Jarad Zimble, 'Field, Material, Technique: On Renewing Postcolonial Literary Criticism' Journal of Commonwealth Literature 49 (2014): 279-85. Ethrington and Zimble (p.296) describe their concept of literary 'material' as 'a notion whose scope encompasses, but is not limited to form'.

⁶² Simon Jarvis, "How To Do Things With Tunes." ELH 82 (2015): 380.

⁶³ This quotation was printed inside the back cover on the Picador paperback reprints of his work, following his Nobel Prize in 2001. See, for example, Naipaul, The Middle Passage, n.p.