

**V.S. Naipaul, Caribbean Writing, and Caribbean Thought in the Postcolonial  
Era 1960-1995**

William Ghosh

Exeter College

Faculty of English Language and Literature, University of Oxford

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the position of V.S. Naipaul within the intellectual history of the postcolonial Caribbean. First, it argues that throughout his career Naipaul's work has been shaped by the influence, and discursive provocation, of other Caribbean intellectuals. Secondly, it argues that the writings of these other Caribbean intellectuals emerged as part of a dialogue with the oeuvre of V.S. Naipaul. Reading Naipaul in dialogue with his Caribbean intertexts not only provides a new lens for understanding Naipaul's work, but also provides new insights into the work of writers such as C.L.R. James, George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, Sylvia Wynter, Maryse Condé, and David Scott.

The (roughly) three decades following constitutional independence in the major Anglophone Caribbean territories were a time of political upheaval and literary innovation, in which the state of the region was being described, and the futures of its communities imagined, across a range of written forms and using different scholarly methodologies. Within this intellectual culture, stylistic, generic, and formal choices were invested with great polemical significance. This thesis is structured in three chapters, examining the significance of Naipaul's work within three formal traditions: the novel and theories of the novel, historical writing and historiographical theory, and travel writing.

Across these three forms, I trace a developing preoccupation with the social history of colonialism in the Caribbean and its impact on the intellectual and imaginative horizons of postcolonial Caribbean thinkers. Further, I show how in this period Caribbean writers tried to articulate the specificity of Caribbean colonial

experience in contrast to the colonial experiences of other parts of the world (especially Africa). Throughout, I aim to show that attention to the literary history of the Caribbean, to the evolution of stylistic and formal thought and innovation, is essential to understanding the broader intellectual history of the region.

## Abbreviations

- B* V.S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* [1961] (London: Picador, 2002).
- BJ* C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Overture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn [1963] (London: Penguin, 2001) [First edn 1938].
- BR* V.S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* [1979] (London: Picador, 2002).
- CD* V.S. Naipaul, *A Congo Diary* (Los Angeles: Sylvester & Orphanos, 1980).
- CM* David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of the Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2004).
- EA* V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel in Five Sections* [1987] (London: Picador, 2002).
- FC* V.S. Naipaul, *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* (London: André Deutsch, 1984).
- LED* V.S. Naipaul, *The Loss of El Dorado: A Colonial History*, Corrected edn [1973] (London: Picador, 2010) [First edn 1969].
- LO* V.S. Naipaul, *Literary Occasions: Essays* (London: Picador, 2004).
- MM* V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* [1967] (London: Picador, 2002).
- MP* V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Colonial Societies* [1962] (London: Picador 2001).
- NS* Shiva Naipaul, *North of South: An African Journey* [1978] (London: Penguin, 1980).
- PE* George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* [1960] (London: Pluto, 2005).
- R* Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Roots* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1993).
- REP* V.S. Naipaul, *The Return of Eva Peron: With the Killings in Trinidad* (New York: Knopf, 1980).
- TS* V.S. Naipaul, *A Turn in the South* [1989] (London: Picador, 2011).
- VSF* Maryse Condé, *La Vie sans fards* [2012] (Paris: Pocket, 2014).
- WM* Sylvia Wynter, 'We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism (Part One)', *Jamaica Journal*, 2 (1968), 23–32.
- WW* V.S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World: A Sequence* [1994] (London: Minerva, 1995).

*In literary and political forms, the world at large is open to us...*

C.L.R. James, 'A National Purpose for Caribbean People' 1964.

## Introduction

In January 1956, surveying the publications of West Indian writers from the previous year, V.S. Naipaul dwelt on the figure of Roger Mais, the Jamaican novelist (b.1905) who had died six months earlier.

The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Caversham, BBC Written Archive, Caribbean Voices Scripts 1122. Broadcast 22.01.1956.

Born in August 1932, Naipaul was a young man when he wrote this. But he seems already to have attained what T.S. Eliot – in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ – would call the ‘historical sense’: that is, he was ‘acutely conscious of his place in time’, of his relation to a history of past writers, dead or dying, and of his own place in that history, which would itself be superseded.<sup>1</sup>

Naipaul’s ‘historical sense’ – his insistence that his work emerges from a unique place in historical and literary-historical time – has formed a key part of his self-presentation as a writer, and has in turn influenced his reception. ‘Literature, like all living art, is always on the move’, he would write much later in his career: ‘It is part of its life that its dominant form should constantly change. If every creative talent is always burning itself out, every literary form is always getting to the end of what it can

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), p. 38.

do.’<sup>2</sup> With its invocation of ‘tradition’ and the anxiety of influence that ‘tradition’ provokes – [ XX -----text redacted from ORA version for copyright reasons----- XX ] – this early critical fragment is characteristic, perhaps comically so, of the Naipaul who would become famous.<sup>3</sup> In another way, however, it is surprising. For while Naipaul’s historical sense most often expresses itself in terms of a fraught relationship with the history of British colonialism, and the canon of metropolitan English literature, here – somewhat unusually – he positions himself within a trajectory of West Indian writers.

Almost thirty years later, in an October 1983 edition of *La Quinzaine littéraire* published at the height of Naipaul’s international fame, the Guadeloupean novelist Maryse Condé (b. 1937) described a recent conference at the University of the West Indies. ‘Like every year, or almost every year’, she wrote, academics, critics and writers from the region ‘indulged in their favourite ritual: to dissect and denounce the oeuvre of V.S. Naipaul’.<sup>4</sup> ‘One could ask’, she said, ‘why Antillean intellectuals and academics’ indulge in this ritual so enthusiastically. ‘Could they not simply ignore him, leave him to feed off the admiration of the West, for which they accuse him of being a spokesman?’<sup>5</sup> The answer, she wrote, owed something to Naipaul’s celebrity, but more to the fact that he had come to exist as a kind of nemesis figure: bringing to light

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<sup>2</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Literary Occasions: Essays* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 30. *Literary Occasions* is a collection of Naipaul’s literary essays from throughout his career. Henceforth, references to this edition are cited in the text as *LO*.

<sup>3</sup> The idea that an awareness of literary tradition prompts an ‘anxiety of influence’ was made, famously, in Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Comme chaque année ou presque [les universitaires etc.] se sont livrés à leur rituel favori: disséquer, dénoncer l’œuvre de V.S. Naipaul’. All translations from French are my own unless otherwise stated. Passages from critical texts will be quoted in translation in the body of the text, with the original in footnotes. Passages from primary texts will be quoted in the original in the body of the text, below the translation. Maryse Condé, ‘Naipaul et les Antilles: Une histoire d’amour?’, *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, 1983, 6–7 (p. 6).

<sup>5</sup> ‘On peut se demander pourquoi les intellectuels et universitaires antillais cèdent presque une fois l’an au rituel qui consiste à dénoncer Naipaul. Ne pourraient-ils simplement l’ignorer, le laisser en pâture à l’admiration de l’Occident dont ils l’accusent d’être un avatar?’ Condé, ‘Naipaul et les Antilles: Une histoire d’amour?’, p. 6.

provocative questions that dogged the ‘collective unconscious’(‘l’inconscient collectif’) of West Indian literary culture: fatalistic ideas about cultural loss, for example, that writers such as Kamau Brathwaite and George Lamming had worked so hard to discredit.<sup>6</sup> Even more broadly, Naipaul obsessed these critics because he posed a question about the role of the writer and his or her place within a society. Naipaul contests an assumption – Condé suggests – that a writer ought to ‘comfort’ or express solidarity with colonial victimhood, instead modelling in his own oeuvre a different ‘function for the writer’: to provoke, to express dissent, and to articulate despair.<sup>7</sup> Condé gives an image of body of Caribbean writers and intellectuals demanding solidarity but receiving, and in fact feeding on, Naipaul’s provocation or dissent.

‘For whom does Naipaul write?’ she asks, citing his famous assertion from *The Middle Passage* (1962) that ‘history is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies’.<sup>8</sup> From whence ‘this rage to injure, to destroy’? If understood as directed only at a reactionary Western audience, Naipaul’s vitriolic criticism of the Caribbean is inexplicable, for he is ‘preaching only to the converted’. Instead:

He targets, precisely, Antillean society, Antilleans – intellectuals, academics, writers – his peers. It is in this context that the hatred arises, a hatred which – it has been said too many times – is only the inverse of love. In a word, the fascination which Naipaul exerts over the Antillean intelligentsia has no equal but that which the Antilles exerts over him.

She called her article, ‘Naipaul and the Antilles: a love story’.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I outline this anxiety, and the literature that emerged to contest it, below.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Il a en fin de compte assigné une autre fonction à l’écrivain. Celle non pas de conforter mais de désespérer et d’irriter’. Condé, ‘Naipaul et les Antilles: Une histoire d’amour?’, pp. 6–7..

<sup>8</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies* (London: Picador, 2001), p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Pour qui écrit Naipaul? [...] Pourquoi cette rage de blesser, de détruire? Si Naipaul ne s’adressait qu’à l’Occident, elle ne s’expliquerait pas, car alors il ne prêcherait qu’à des convertis [...] C’est que précisément il vise la société antillaise, les Antillais, intellectuels, universitaires et écrivains, ses pairs. C’est là qu’il entend faire naître une haine dont on a déjà dit qu’elle n’est que l’envers de l’amour. En un

These two episodes – Naipaul’s 1956 broadcast and Condé’s 1983 essay – contain in kernel form the motivating ideas of this thesis. Naipaul’s work has been read as an expression of ‘elective statelessness’: a disavowal of his Caribbean origin, and a disaffiliation from its literary tradition.<sup>10</sup> In turn, literary and intellectual historians of the Caribbean have increasingly come to see Naipaul as a famous anomaly, rather than as a central figure. This thesis, by contrast, shows how Naipaul’s work drew on an archive of Caribbean texts and participated in debates within Caribbean literary culture, and traces Naipaul’s influence on his Caribbean ‘peers’: contemporary or subsequent Caribbean writers. Understanding Naipaul’s role within the intellectual history of the postcolonial Caribbean sheds new light on the pragmatic and polemical force of his work. It also provides a new hermeneutic for reading a body of Caribbean texts to which Naipaul responded, or which responded to the work of Naipaul. Understanding the work of C.L.R. James, George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, Sylvia Wynter, and Maryse Condé as participating in a conversation with Naipaul brings into focus the priorities and concerns latent in the texts of each of these writers.<sup>11</sup>

Homi Bhabha has called ‘Naipaul’s people’ – his fictional characters, his non-fictional subjects, and the authorial personae he has inhabited – ‘vernacular cosmopolitans of a kind, moving in-between cultural traditions and revealing hybrid forms of life that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language’.<sup>12</sup> Naipaul’s fame, and notoriety, has for much of his career rested on his work’s ‘cosmopolitan’ portability: the impression it gives of speaking not about a

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mot, la fascination que Naipaul exerce sur l’intelligentsia des Antilles n’a d’égale que celle qu’exerce sur lui les Antilles.’ Condé, ‘Naipaul et les Antilles: Une histoire d’amour?’, pp. 6–7.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph O’Neil, ‘Man Without a Country’, *The Atlantic*, September 2011  
 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/09/man-without-a-country/308604/>> [accessed 1 May 2017].

<sup>11</sup> A detailed chronology of the major texts analysed in this thesis is included as an appendix.

<sup>12</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. xiii.

single culture but of a global postcolonial condition. ‘To understand the modern state,’ Pico Iyer writes, ‘we are often told, we must read V.S. Naipaul’.<sup>13</sup> My objective in this dissertation is to explore how Naipaul’s work is informed by his Caribbean contexts, and how Naipaul’s work might contribute to the intellectual history of the Caribbean in the second half of the twentieth century. I argue that Naipaul’s work is provoked by, and provokes, debates and anxieties about sovereignty, indigeneity, race, and diaspora in the Caribbean in ways that have not hitherto been recognized. Where Bhabha understands Naipaul’s work to reveal ‘hybrid forms of life’ in the interstices of ‘any single culture or language’, I argue that his cultural thought is concretely engaged with a history of writing and polemic in the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean. This was, predominantly, an Afro-Caribbean tradition, with which Naipaul engaged in provocative and problematic ways.

Attempting to locate Naipaul’s thought and influence in this way is a fraught exercise. The Caribbean as an intellectual world does not have discrete, self-evident borders. The writers I discuss lived and worked in different Caribbean regions, they came from different generations and had different attachments to Europe or America, and they would have identified themselves in a spectrum of different ways: for example, as Afro- or Indo-Caribbean; as Anglophone, Francophone or creole writers; as men or women; as Trinidadians, Jamaicans, *Antillais*, or West Indians. The conversations I reconstruct map how these different subject positions were articulated in relation to one another. But to read these voices in dialogue with one another, as a coherent conversation, is to attempt to articulate the specificity of Caribbean thought and writing within the intellectual history of the decolonising and postcolonial world. What common questions or concerns animated the work of Naipaul, James, Wynter,

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<sup>13</sup> Pico Iyer, ‘The Nowhere Man’, *Prospect*, 20 February 1997  
 <<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/thenowhereman>> [accessed 30 May 2017].

Condé? In what ways did these writers see their experience as regionally specific, or else as an instance of global processes, postcolonial or diasporic? In what ways was the Caribbean experience in the post-Bandung decades exemplary of, or specific within, postcolonial experience across the world?

The remainder of this introduction is structured in four parts. First, I outline the scope and methodology of my thesis, whilst surveying existing scholarship on Naipaul's relationship with the Caribbean. In the second section, I outline the principle intellectual-historical conversations in which Naipaul was participating. In the third section, I describe how, within these conversations, some of the most interesting arguments were made through generic and formal choices and allusions. Tracing this formal argumentation is a key component of my thesis, and dictates how it is structured, as I explain. In this section, I summarise each chapter and outline the shape of the thesis. Finally, in a short reading of Naipaul's late novel *A Way in the World*, I discuss possible questions that my research might raise for critics, historians, and teachers of literature.

## NAIPAUL AND THE CARIBBEAN

V.S. Naipaul was the most internationally prominent writer from the Anglophone Caribbean in what I will call the postcolonial period (that is, the three decades following the constitutional independence of its largest territories: from around 1960 to around 1990).<sup>14</sup> Though Derek Walcott (b. 1930) – the region's other Nobel Laureate in

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<sup>14</sup> The period specified in my title, 1960-1995, extends to include the publication of Naipaul's *A Way in the World* (1994). I end with *A Way in the World* because, as I argue below, it registers Naipaul's awareness that the contexts and concerns which had motivated his best-known work were in important ways no longer current.

Literature from the period – may have held comparable acclaim in literary and academic circles, Naipaul’s simultaneous interventions as a novelist, travel-writer, and political commentator brought him exposure in the British, American, and Indian print media unparalleled among his Caribbean contemporaries. By the early 1980s, at the time Condé was writing her essay, he had appeared on the cover of the American magazine *Newsweek*, and was a something like a household name among the world’s three largest middle-class Anglophone readerships (American, Indian, and British). For many readers today, particularly British and American readers now in their twenties and thirties, the kinds of claim that have been made for the influence Naipaul exerted can be hard to credit. Amitav Ghosh’s claim, for example, in a 2015 interview, that the ‘flourishing and vibrant’ literary public sphere in India ‘really began with Naipaul’: ‘he was the pioneer who created an audience for himself and for others that followed’.<sup>15</sup> Or Barack Obama’s interleaving of Naipaul’s name between those of perhaps more predictable influences (Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, Abraham Lincoln), as someone ‘whose writings are a sort of baseline for how to think about certain things’. Yet the words of Ghosh and Obama, and the vehicles of their testimony (the UK *Guardian* and the *New York Times* respectively), both testify to Naipaul’s prominence amongst intellectuals of a certain age, and suggest the reasons for his fame. Ghosh’s comment articulates Naipaul’s perceived importance, particularly in India, as a catalyst for public debate. Obama’s comments – ‘I think about his novels when I’m thinking about the hardness of the world [...], particularly in foreign policy’ – offer a window onto an aspect of his British and American reputation: that of a pessimistic ‘realist’ reporter offering what Edward Said called ‘bitter dispatches’ from the decolonising world in the

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<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Wroe, ‘Amitav Ghosh: “There Is Now a Vibrant Literary World in India – It All Began with Naipaul”’, *The Guardian*, 23 May 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/23/amitav-ghosh-vibrant-literary-world-india-naipaul-interview>> [accessed 21 April 2017].

first decades of the post-Bandung era.<sup>16</sup> Obama hedges his admiration by stressing that he does not ‘necessarily agree’ with Naipaul’s ‘politics’, suggesting one aspect of Naipaul’s fame that endures: his capacity for giving offence.<sup>17</sup>

‘If landscapes do not start to be real until they have been interpreted by an artist, so, until they have been written about, societies appear to be without shape and *embarrassing*.’ ‘It seemed impossible’, Naipaul wrote in 1964, ‘that the life I knew in Trinidad could ever be turned into a book’; ‘Trinidad was small, remote and unimportant’; ‘to us, without a mythology, all literatures were foreign’ (*LO*, 45-7). Perhaps because of his prominence within British, American and Indian literary circles, perhaps because of his long residence in England, and above all because of his well-known comments about the Caribbean as a place without a history or literary tradition, Naipaul has tended to be read either in a lineage with British writers (Charles Dickens, Graham Greene), or as rootless postcolonial writer: in Pico Iyer’s words, an archetypal ‘citizen of nowhere’.<sup>18</sup> Most of the major pieces of academic scholarship on Naipaul follow one of these two paths. For example, Rob Nixon’s *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (1992) situates Naipaul’s work – particularly his travelogues – in a lineage of Western travel writing, running from Anthony Trollope and J.A. Froude to Graham Greene and Joan Didion, and pivoting on Joseph Conrad. In the same year, Sara Suleri’s *The Rhetoric of English India* read Naipaul in a lineage of British/Indian encounter, alongside Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, and Salman Rushdie. Suleri’s account of Naipaul’s work as an act of ‘postcolonial self-definition’ –

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Transcript: President Obama on What Books Mean to Him’, *The New York Times*, 16 January 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/16/books/transcript-president-obama-on-what-books-mean-to-him.html>> [accessed 29 January 2017]. Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2001), pp. 98–104.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Transcript’.

<sup>18</sup> Pico Iyer, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 278.

in which to be 'postcolonial' was to be a liminal figure, caught between epochs (colonialism, independence) and spaces (Britain, India) – was an influential articulation of a common characterisation.<sup>19</sup> In 'Representation and the Colonial Text' (1984), 'The World and the Home' (1992), and *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha would describe Naipaul in a similar way, and situate him in a similar genealogy (again, as a point of connection between imperial writers and Salman Rushdie). In *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (1999), Ian Baucom reads Naipaul once again in a trajectory that runs from Rudyard Kipling to Salman Rushdie, in this context to understand how the imperial encounter, and the traffic of immigrants from former colonies to Britain, transformed metropolitan conceptions of 'Britishness' or 'Englishness' itself. By the end of the 1990s, Naipaul had become, according to Iyer, 'the definitive symbol of modern rootlessness':

Here is a man who was a foreigner at birth, a citizen of an exiled community set down on a colonised island. Here is a man for whom every arrival is enigmatic, a man without a home – except for an India to which he stubbornly returns, only to be reminded of his distance from it.<sup>20</sup>

The principle exponent of Naipaul's global relevance has of course been Naipaul himself.<sup>21</sup>

Whether the emphasis is placed on Naipaul's continuity with the British literary tradition (as in Nixon, and to a lesser extent Baucom), or on his revisions to that tradition (as in Suleri and Bhabha), Naipaul's place within the literary and intellectual history of the Caribbean tends not to be the focus of analysis.<sup>22</sup> Attention to his

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<sup>19</sup> Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 153.

<sup>20</sup> Iyer, 'The Nowhere Man'.

<sup>21</sup> I give evidence for this claim in chapter three.

<sup>22</sup> Rhonda Cobham-Sander notes an 'ideological divide' between readers who 'ostracize' Naipaul as a 'betrayor of the Third World,' and those who 'lionize' him 'as the consummate Hindu aesthete'. 'For both kinds of readers,' she writes, 'the essential Naipaul is a man divorced from his Caribbean roots [...] who has forgotten his family's sojourn in the cane fields of the New World.' Cobham-Sander, *I and I: Epitaphs for the Self in the Work of V.S. Naipaul, Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott* (Kingston, Jamaica: The University of West Indies Press, 2016), p. 34.

Caribbean contexts is in each of these texts parsimonious: that is, reduced to the efficient minimum in order to articulate what each critic would like to say. Some of these readings, such as Bhabha's in 'Representation', allow even Naipaul's most locally specific texts (like *A House for Mr Biswas*) to speak to a broader colonial context. At other times, such as in Nixon's reading of *The Loss of El Dorado*, the critic's slight attention to the text's Caribbean contexts leads him to misunderstand its political agenda.<sup>23</sup> In this thesis, I position Naipaul's work differently, focussing both on the range of Caribbean precursors or intertexts with which Naipaul engages, and on the contemporary reception of his books in the Caribbean itself, both in newspapers, journals, and in academic scholarship, which provides a detailed picture of the way his texts were situated, and signified, within this context. I suggest that attention to these Caribbean contexts can inform our understanding of the politics of his work, and the ways in which it has been adapted, or distorted, when it has been seen to speak to wider conversations. Understanding Naipaul's place within the intellectual history of the Caribbean does not isolate him from wider conversations, but offers an enriched picture of his significance in the history of postcolonial writing, and the genealogy of postcolonial ideas.

Naipaul's work, I will suggest, occupied a central place in the critical work of Caribbean writers as diverse as George Lamming, Sylvia Wynter, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Maryse Condé. In recent years, however, literary-historical narratives about the Anglophone Caribbean have tended to downplay the role of V.S. Naipaul, or

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Nixon's comparison of Naipaul's *Loss of El Dorado* (1969) with Eric Williams's *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (1962) is meant to illustrate a straightforward distinction between Williams's politics (anti-colonial and progressive) and those of Naipaul (neo-colonial and reactionary). But in failing to understand the ambiguities of Williams's reputation in Trinidad, the altered stakes for a book published in 1969 as opposed to 1962, and the two men's associations with different communities and political constituencies in Trinidad, he distorts the complex politics both of Naipaul and of Williams. See Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 126–27. I make this point in detail in chapter 2.

to focus their attention elsewhere. In works such as Alison Donnell's *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature* (2006), this has been motivated by a desire to offer a literary-historical narrative that moved beyond a coterie of canonical, male writers (I will return to this below). In other critical works, where similarly canonical writers such as George Lamming continue to play an important role, Naipaul may be seen as antithetical to a story of formal development being told (as in Simon Gikandi's *Writing in Limbo* or J. Dillion Brown's *Migrant Modernism*), or to sit outside the Black-Atlantic or Afro-Diasporic framework which the study adopts (such as Nadia Ellis's *Territories of the Soul*, another text that I return to below). In this thesis, both returning to the earlier archive, and drawing on recent scholarship by Rhonda Cobham-Sander, Belinda Edmondson, Malachi McIntosh and others, as well as on neglected older works such as John Thieme's *The Web of Tradition: Uses of Allusion in V.S. Naipaul's Fiction* (1987), I want to reconsider the relationship between Naipaul and Caribbean literary culture.<sup>24</sup> First, I read Naipaul as a writer who emerged from a Caribbean literary and intellectual background and who participated in Caribbean political and cultural debates throughout his career. Reading Naipaul in the context of a Caribbean literary and intellectual tradition offers a revisionary account of his work, and makes some of his position-taking explicable. Second, I argue that if the influence of the Caribbean on Naipaul has tended to be understated, it is also true that Naipaul's place within the intellectual life of the postcolonial Caribbean has been underplayed, and it is here that my thesis has

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<sup>24</sup> See esp. Cobham-Sander, *I and I*; Jennifer Rahim and Barbara Lalla, *Created in the West Indies: Caribbean Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2011); Malachi McIntosh, *Emigration and Caribbean Literature* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Alison Donnell, 'V.S. Naipaul, a Queer Trinidadian', *Wasafiri*, 28.2 (2013), 58–65; John Thieme, *The Web of Tradition: Uses of Allusion in V.S. Naipaul's Fiction* (London: Dangaroo Press, 1987). Two other single-author studies which – though their principle focus is not on Naipaul's relationship with the Caribbean – provide important contextual information are Helen Hayward, *The Enigma of V.S. Naipaul: Sources and Contexts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) and Selwyn Reginald Cudjoe, *V.S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988). Dolly Zulakha Hassan's, *V.S. Naipaul and the West Indies* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) is a documentary collation of the reception of Naipaul's early work in the West Indies that will be of lasting use to scholars.

further, and broader, ramifications. Specifying some of the ways in which Naipaul was a crucial figure in that literary culture adds an important tile to the history of Caribbean ideas in this period. It occasions new readings of both famous and relatively neglected texts by a host of other writers – including Brathwaite, Wynter, James, Lamming, Condé, and David Scott – which make up a large part of my thesis.

The work of the Jamaican anthropologist David Scott, particularly his 2004 book *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of the Colonial Enlightenment*, has been important to the thesis in this respect. In *Conscripts of Modernity*, as in his earlier book *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (1999), Scott applied Quentin Skinner's influential intellectual-historical method to the study of Caribbean texts.<sup>25</sup> Skinner's position, which drew on the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin, was that the meaning of historical documents could not be construed in the abstract (they had no context-independent 'constative' meaning), but could only be understood in the context of the debates in which they had been deployed.<sup>26</sup> In other words, they were to be understood as performances: as the answers to specific questions, or as interventions in specific discursive contexts.<sup>27</sup> Scott, following Skinner, called these discursive contexts

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<sup>25</sup> I use Skinner's name to denote a school of intellectual-historical method associated with the University of Cambridge in the twentieth century. The role of Skinner himself (as opposed to, say, Peter Laslett) within that tradition is not my concern here, nor was it David Scott's.

<sup>26</sup> See David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 5–8. Scott cites Skinner's essay 'A Reply to My Critics' in Quentin Skinner, *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* ed. by James Tully (Cambridge: Polity, 1988).

<sup>27</sup> As Skinner points out, this is not the same thing as asking what a writer *meant* (or meant to achieve) in a particular text: writers so often achieving less (or more) than they intended, whilst old texts often take on new meanings in the hands of new readerships. This specification, which is important for my purposes, is afforded by Austin's distinction between the 'illocutionary' and 'perlocutionary' force of speech acts (intended, as he puts it, to 'draw a line between an action we do (here an illocution) and its consequences' (here a perlocution). In certain cases in this thesis, I will trace what I think a writer intended (their illocutionary meaning), but more often I am concerned with what their writing achieved within specific problem-spaces, or in the hands of different readers (its perlocutionary meaning). This brings to light the question, which I address throughout the thesis, of what the perlocutionary force of these texts might be for readers today. See Quentin Skinner, 'Hermeneutics and the Role of History', *New Literary History*, 7 (1975), 209–32 (pp. 18–19); J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. by J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 111 (and, on the illocution/perlocution distinction more broadly, see pp. 95–132).

‘problem-space[s]’,<sup>28</sup> and I want to think about how situating Naipaul’s work in specific Caribbean ‘problem-spaces’ affords an enriched account of the conversations that were taking place.<sup>29</sup> Naipaul’s absence from the intellectual-historical account of the postcolonial Caribbean that is emerging in the wake of Scott’s work is a key absence.<sup>30</sup> As Condé suggests above, his influence, though oppositional and provocative, was significant.

The debates I describe, and the texts that constitute them, interrogate the ambiguities of Caribbean identity – personal, social, and political – after the end of formal colonialism: ambiguities that developed and changed in the first decades of the postcolonial era. Each of these debates turns on the relationship between contemporary Caribbean societies and (what they perceived to be) their ancestral or source cultures: in the Caribbean past, in Britain, in India, and, above all, in Africa. So, rather than taking the Caribbean as a self-explanatory space, within which specific texts can be situated and historicized, I reconstruct this agonistic debate about the nature of Caribbean identity and the existence of a coherent Caribbean culture or Caribbean public sphere. In large part, this existed as an idea or an ideal in the minds of individual writers (such as Naipaul himself in the passage with which I began this introduction). This was a perceived or imagined tradition which developed into a diachronic conversation between earlier texts and later interlocutors, who canonised these earlier texts in the process of citation, response, or revision. But this ‘Caribbean’ conversation, as I am describing it, also had a concrete material locus. Writers were able to conceive of it, and

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<sup>28</sup> David Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>29</sup> For this reason, my readings in this thesis are informed by a linguistic framework that emphasises the pragmatics of literary texts. I turn, in different chapters, to theoretical and socio-linguists, especially sociolinguists of writing, such as Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad, Deborah Cameron, and Eric Griffiths.

<sup>30</sup> A good example of this is Naipaul’s absence from Yanique Hume and Aaron Kamugisha’s, *Caribbean Cultural Thought: From Plantation to Diaspora* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2013), a reader which gathers an extensive canon of core texts, and has rightly become a key pedagogical resource.

participate in it, because of the existence of important periodicals (such as the Barbadian periodical *Bim*), radio broadcasts such as BBC Caribbean Voices, distributors, booksellers and libraries in London and the Caribbean, associations of West Indian students and artists in London and Paris, and literary and academic colloquia in London, Paris, the Caribbean, and the United States. Throughout this thesis I will tease out the relation between this imagined Caribbean or West Indian tradition and the different material vehicles which helped to constitute it.<sup>31</sup>

If this ‘Caribbean’ space was not self-explanatory, nor were its literary conversations singular. Naipaul was not unusual in speaking the three major European languages of the Caribbean region (English, French and Spanish), but there were many languages he did not speak, and substantial literatures with which he was not in conversation. Linguistic competencies, alongside physical location and other factors, inflected what individual writers, editors, or critics understood ‘the Caribbean’ to be, and the kinds of tradition with which they were in dialogue. In this thesis, I particularly track Anglophone and Francophone writers, because of the extensive conversations between the two literatures, frequent encounters between these groups of writers (at conferences and so on) and because of the perceived similarities between the two versions of colonial experience. The Anglophone writers I discuss tend to be more extensively in dialogue with their Francophone than with their Hispanophone counterparts, though I have tried not to neglect this tradition. Nor do I ignore the potentially homogenising implication of the ‘Anglophone’ umbrella when describing the work of writers who created work in various creole languages, or who used the

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<sup>31</sup> I am indebted to Raphael Dalleo’s account of a Caribbean ‘public sphere’ in this paragraph. Dalleo describes a public sphere made up of ‘actual physical spaces where information is exchanged and social relations are formed, as well as virtual spaces of print culture and publication where debates are often sparked or extended. These actually existing spaces allow writers to imagine where public debate and community building might be located even as political, social, and economic realities circumscribe the range of possibilities available.’ Raphael Dalleo, *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere: From the Plantation to the Postcolonial* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 2.

creole continuum in their work in a dynamic, and creative way.<sup>32</sup> As Belinda Edmondson explains, the term ‘West Indian’ is still used to designate ‘Caribbean’ in ‘the French- and English-speaking Caribbean, whose inhabitants are perceived as “West Indian,” as opposed to the Spanish-speaking island whose inhabitants are not’. Following Edmondson’s example, since I focus on Anglophone and Francophone writing, I ‘use West Indian interchangeably with Caribbean’ in this thesis, except where I specify a meaningful distinction.<sup>33</sup>

As I allude to above, one of the advances in Caribbean literary scholarship of the last twenty years has been a contestation of a literary-historical model that privileged a small number of so-called major writers: largely male, and writing in London. In *Making Men* (1998) (cited above), Edmondson shows how the conceptual vocabulary through which Caribbean writers and critics formulated the idea of a nationalist Caribbean canon in the years c.1930-1980 owed a debt to earlier British understandings of canon and tradition, whilst failing to challenge the terms on which these understandings of tradition or canon were built. This was, among other things, an implicitly masculine tradition.<sup>34</sup> In her *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, (2006), Donnell contested the inherited narrative that Edmondson describes by writing a synoptic book that was arranged thematically (rather than by author), which privileged

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<sup>32</sup> On the notion of a ‘creole continuum’, and its purchase on the linguistic context of the Caribbean in particular, see Ronald Wardhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* 6th edn (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) pp.73-83. On the dynamic uses of this continuum within the history of Anglophone Caribbean writing, see Kenneth Ramchand’s foundational, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), pp. 90–114.

<sup>33</sup> Belinda Edmondson, *Making Men: Gender, Literary Authority, and Women’s Writing in Caribbean Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 6–7.

<sup>34</sup> ‘My contention is’, Edmondson argues, ‘that the terms of writing “West Indian” novels for the male writers of the pre- and post-independence English speaking Caribbean are founded on the interpellated meanings of manhood and cultural authority that have passed on to them from British intellectual discourse of the nineteenth century. [...] The tropistic relationship between nineteenth-century Englishness and twentieth-century West Indianness has structured the meaning of “authorship” and “nation” in anglophone Caribbean discourse such that what is now recognized as West Indian oppositional discourse to Britain is still marked by a utilization of a specifically English vision of what constitutes intellectual production.’ I return to Edmondson’s critique in detail in chapter one. Edmondson, p.5.

work published in the Caribbean as well as in Europe, and by discussing in depth what she called the ‘absent woman’ in Caribbean literary history, and the politics of sexual representation in Caribbean narrative.<sup>35</sup>

Like Edmondson, I am interested in how ideas about culture and cultural tradition were theorised by writers and critics at the time. And I am interested in a writer’s prominence insofar as this afforded a writer a privileged platform within specific debates. But in both cases, this interest is historical and does not simply defer to these criteria of canonicity or importance. My intention is not to recuperate a ‘great man’ theory of Caribbean literary history, nor to make the case for Naipaul’s entry into such a pantheon. Indeed, one of implications of Skinner’s emphasis on historical debates (rather than historical figures) is that a distinction between so-called major and minor writers is untenable: canonised texts or oeuvres are travestied if seen as expressions of a singular, isolated mind, rather than as participants in a conversation with other writers, whose influence may now be obscured. Insofar as I wish to situate Naipaul within certain traditions of Caribbean literary or historical thought, I understand those traditions – following Scott – as ‘socially embodied arguments’ that extended diachronically (in dialogue with earlier Caribbean writers and thinkers) and synchronically (in dialogue with Caribbean contemporaries).<sup>36</sup> That is, I understand these traditions to be plural, agonistic conversations rather than *a* tradition, or a singular pantheon.

Conversations, it is nonetheless worth stating, are structured by interpersonal hierarchies, which foreground certain voices at the expense of others. The conversations I trace (like the social contexts in which these conversations took place), were in

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<sup>35</sup> Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> David Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, p. 11.

important ways circumscribed by the racial, sexual, and class-based assumptions of their participants. At the beginning of my period, as Edmondson argues, ‘the vision of what constitute[d] intellectual production’ retained associations with colonial education (and hence class-privilege), and masculinity.<sup>37</sup> Though the period I document saw a rise in the prominence of women and non-middle-class writers, the conversations I trace, through to the mid-1980s, tend to be dominated by middle-class male writers. Yet these conversations were not univocal. And though my project does devote considerable attention to interactions between Naipaul and his canonical male contemporaries, like Kamau Brathwaite and C.L.R. James, I have tried in each chapter to do justice to the heterogeneity that *did* exist in the conversation. The results not only draw attention to the assumptions about class and gender that underlie many of these texts (corroborating Edmondson’s thesis), but bring to light unexpected and fascinating interactions between these canonical writers and another group of writers whose importance has only more recently been recognised. To sum up, I argue that reading Naipaul as part of this diachronic and synchronic Caribbean conversation lessens rather than adds to his perceived singularity or exceptionalism, the myth of detachment he himself has cultivated, and the unexamined rhetoric of exceptional value that has dominated both his journalistic and academic reception. In place of this tired monument, a broader picture comes into view of the rich field of literary production from which his work emerged, and a new account of the interest and specificity of his work comes to light. For this reason, I have dispensed with the customary colon in my thesis title and replaced it with a comma. This is not a single-author study: ‘V.S. Naipaul: Caribbean Writing and Caribbean Thought’, but an attempt to think through these three things – ‘V.S. Naipaul, Caribbean Writing, and Caribbean Thought’ – side by side, together.

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<sup>37</sup> Edmondson, p. 5.

## THE PROBLEM-SPACE: A BRIEF OUTLINE

‘I do not know of any population that has the specific historical qualities of the British West Indies’, announced C.L.R. James, in Demerara, British Guiana, in June 1958. Whereas in ‘Indo-China, in India, in Ceylon, in Ghana, in Africa, the native populations have got a background and a basis of civilisation which are their own’ – ‘they have a native language, [...] a native religion, [...] a native culture’ – ‘the populations in the British West Indies have no native civilisation at all.... [t]hese populations are essentially Westernised and they have been Westernised for centuries’.<sup>38</sup> This was an assumption held by many nationalist thinkers and politicians in the years leading up to federation and independence. The first prime minister of an independent Trinidad, Eric Williams, made the same point in his 1960 address ‘The Approach of Independence’. Whereas, he argued, the relatively short span of colonial rule in the ‘Gold Coast’ and in Nigeria had ‘made it impossible for imperialist attitudes to harden and crystallize’, whereas in India ‘[t]hey had a language of their own, a culture of their own [...] a religion of their own [...] which they could oppose to Western Imperialism’, ‘[w]e in the West Indies have nothing of our own – a few artefacts and place names are all that remain of the aboriginal civilization’:

We are a people transplanted into slavery to a transplanted crop, and we have remained political satellites of the metropolitan economy whose economic interests we were intended to serve. We have become in the Martiniquan saying ‘peau noire, masque blanc’, a black skin, a white mask, a European culture in an Afro-Asian environment. [...] This is our history. This is our heritage. That is our dilemma.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> C.L.R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory: Selected Writings* (London: Allison & Busby, 1984), p. 97.

<sup>39</sup> cit. Selwyn D. Ryan, *Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago: A Study of Decolonization in a Multiracial Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 494.

As Scott notes, ‘the now familiar figure of the New World African as bereft of authentic sources of history and culture’ derived from an essentialist and Eurocentric understanding of words like ‘culture’ or indeed ‘history’.<sup>40</sup> This is audible in some of James’s phrasing: ‘anthropologists today are discovering more and more the values of these [African] civilisations’.<sup>41</sup> But the fact of this historical anxiety among Caribbean thinkers of this period is beyond dispute. The impulse to respond to it – to accept it or to reject it; to reject it on its own terms or to critique the terms of its articulation – lies behind much Caribbean writing, scholarship, and public policy from the early years of nationalist agitation through the first decades of West Indian independence. This is the problem-space in which I insert Naipaul’s writing. It was not a static problem-space. Through this thesis, I will trace how from the late 1950s (when James delivered this lecture) to the mid-1990s, the problem-space itself, as well as responses to it, changed. But at the end of the 1950s (the point at which my thesis begins), what is notable is the prevalence of this anxiety, and the extent to which its terms have become internalised even among vehemently anti-colonial thinkers. At this stage, James and Williams take not only the Eurocentric terms of its articulation for granted, but also take it for granted that it was broadly true: the West Indies did have no ‘culture’ or ‘civilisation’ of its own.

The ‘dilemma’ Williams describes sat at the heart of what Deborah Thomas calls the ‘messy relationship between culture and nationalism’ that assumed prominence not just for writers and scholars, but for politicians in the West Indies in this period. Thomas argues that, ‘British imperialism was not merely a system of economic exploitation and political domination but also one of cultural control that attempted to socialize colonial populations into accepting the moral and cultural superiority of

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<sup>40</sup> Scott, p. 111

<sup>41</sup> C.L.R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory*, p. 97.

Englishness'. 'As a result,' she continues, 'the decolonizing process involved not only an agitation for political [...] self-determination, but also a cultural reevaluation'. 'Some of the most difficult battles within anticolonial struggles', she concludes, 'have been fought within the domain of culture'.<sup>42</sup> That these statements will seem uncontroversial to modern readers owes something to the emphasis placed on 'culture', and its role in the anti-colonial struggle, by mid-century nationalist thinkers in the Caribbean and elsewhere.<sup>43</sup> The stakes of Williams's dilemma, therefore, were felt to be high.

At issue in this anxiety is the question of *what colonialism had been*: specifically, *what colonialism had been in the Caribbean*. I highlight these questions because they are the questions to which the majority of the writing I study in this thesis constituted an explicit or implicit response. James, for example, in the passage above, makes a case for the singularity of Caribbean colonial experience. Like Williams, he constructs a comparative map of the former British Empire, in which the Caribbean is compared to other former colonies in Africa and Asia. Whereas in India and Africa, both men suggest, non-European 'language', 'religion', and 'culture' had subsisted among the mass populace throughout the imperial period, in the Caribbean – where indigenous communities had been substantially annihilated ('a few artefacts or place names are all that remain of the aboriginal civilization'),<sup>44</sup> and the Afro-Caribbean population had been subjected to centuries of plantation discipline – they had not. Both

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<sup>42</sup> Deborah A. Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> The Martiniquais Frantz Fanon's essay on 'national culture', published in *Les Damnés de la terre* in 1961, has of course spawned decades of response, appropriation and interpretation across the formerly colonised world, and in the scholarly study of postcolonialism.

<sup>44</sup> Williams claims that as early as 1797 – the year of the British capture of Trinidad from Spain and the founding of the British colony – the number of Amerindians surviving in Trinidad was barely one thousand. Already, before British rule even began, the 'foundations of the colony' (population c.18,000) were made up of European colonisers and African slaves. Eric Eustace Williams, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (London: Deutsch, 1964), p. 47.

Williams and James contrast what they present as the relatively superficial colonialism of the other decolonising territories with the deep colonialism experienced in the Caribbean. For them, the Caribbean was a space in which the effects of colonialism, such as the loss of non-European languages and the imposition of European norms and racial hierarchies, had been uniquely deep-set.<sup>45</sup> In his 1960 speech, Williams had quoted from the Martiniquais commonplace – *Peau noire, masque blanc* – which Frantz Fanon had also used as the title to a key work of social criticism eight years earlier. Fanon’s analysis – particularly in the chapter ‘Le Noir et le langage’ – had described the internalisation of French norms and values among the Afro-Caribbean Martiniquais in a way that chimes with Williams’s thesis. But when Fanon promises, in this study, ‘by means of the Antillean, to target all of colonised man’, (‘par-delà l’Antillais nous visons tout homme colonisé’) he is not suggesting that Afro-Caribbeans constituted the norm or mean of colonised experience.<sup>46</sup> Rather, he is suggesting that Antillean experience gives a window through which the experience of colonial subjectivity becomes uniquely visible. What Fanon calls ‘colonial man’ is an essential concept, whose character the Antillean, of all the colonised populations, approached most nearly.

The other aspect of the crucial question concerning ‘what colonialism *had been*’ is its historical character. In linking ‘our history’ with ‘our dilemma’, Williams is representative in that he saw his dilemma as a product of colonial history. To give an account of that history, and its purchase on the present, would be to grasp how ‘colonialism’ (whatever that *had been*) might be sloughed off. The Jamaican writer Sylvia Wynter’s essays, which I discuss in chapter one, are explicit on this point.

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<sup>45</sup> The comparisons James and Williams draw here betray their Caribbean point of origin. Though James had travelled extensively in West Africa by the time he made the comments cited above – and I will describe in chapter two how travel in Africa sharpened the sense of Caribbean singularity among Caribbean intellectuals – there is no doubt that contemporary African or Indian writers would have disputed, or sought to qualify, these generalising claims.

<sup>46</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), p. 14.

‘Reflections’ (1968-9), ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation’ (1971), and ‘Jonkonnu in Jamaica’ (1971) each interrogate the historical processes through which Caribbean societies and subjectivities were formed, and attempt to model the kind of historical critique and historiographical praxis required to bring this legacy into the light, and to contest it.<sup>47</sup> Many of the texts I examine in this thesis contain latent or explicit historical thinking, and make claims about the nature of historical experience and the tractability (or otherwise) of historical legacies.

The imperative to interrogate the specific nature of Caribbean colonial history – drawing on earlier texts such as James’s *Black Jacobins* (1938) – grew in the first postcolonial decades (c. 1960-1990). In a passage from *Peau Noire* related to that quoted above, Fanon offers an important and suggestive qualification which both confirms the above reading and develops it. Originating in the Antilles, Fanon acknowledges, his observations and conclusions really speak only for the Antillean experience. Another study would be required to specify the differences between African and Caribbean experiences. ‘Perhaps I will do it myself one day’, he concludes. ‘Perhaps also it will be rendered unnecessary [inutile], an eventuality we can but hope for’ (‘ce dont nous pourrions que nous féliciter’).<sup>48</sup> Fanon’s ambivalent hopefulness, that the further study of ‘colonial man’ might one day be rendered unnecessary, points first to the purposive nature of his analysis. Colonialism is to be analysed that it might be rejected or transformed, not for its own sake. But it also points to a horizon of expectation specific to the period in which it was written (1952), as anti-colonial agitation grew, and independence in Africa and the Caribbean came definitively into

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<sup>47</sup>I frequently use ‘Reflections’ in this thesis as an abbreviated title for the two-part essay ‘We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism’, first published in the *Jamaica Journal* (and cited below).

<sup>48</sup>The quotation, as a whole, reads: ‘Etant Antillais d’origine, nos observations et nos conclusions ne valent que pour les Antilles [...] Il y aurait une étude à consacrer à l’explication des divergences qui existent entre Antillais et Africains. Peut-être la ferons-nous un jour. Peut-être aussi sera-t-elle rendue inutile, ce don’t nous ne pourrions que nous féliciter’. Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 11.

sight. It is easy now to understate the extent to which Caribbean thinkers at this time really believed (or at least hoped) that constitutional independence could prove the catalyst for much wider forms of human development and social change (and, as Fanon suggests, that the effects of this social change would transform scholarly and historiographical agendas relatively quickly).<sup>49</sup> When it became clear that many of these hopes would be disappointed, the question ‘what colonialism had been’ became if anything more urgent, because the obvious answer (the administration of territory) clearly would not suffice. The administration had been rejected, but many felt that a tangible social, economic, and cultural liberation had not been achieved. A better understanding of what colonialism had been was necessary, therefore, to understand its continuing grip, and how this grip might be cast off.

The anxieties expressed by James and Williams were characteristic of a strand of West Indian cultural and social thought of this period, but they emerged from a specific social position within Caribbean society. Williams and James in Trinidad, George Lamming and Kamau Brathwaite in Barbados each emerged from a culturally Europeanised Afro-Caribbean middle class, whose social profile was reasonably consistent across different islands in the Anglophone Caribbean, and shared much with the corresponding strata (into which Fanon and Maryse Condé were born) in Martinique and Guadeloupe. Moreover, in the Anglophone Caribbean, it tended to be men from this background who would hold leadership roles in anti-colonial political parties and in the first generation of independent West Indian governments. These were families of African origin, though as Deborah Thomas points out, many would not at the time have referred to themselves as ‘black’ (in Jamaica, as in Trinidad, lighter skin was valued as a mark of social distinction), and nor would the parental generation have identified with

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<sup>49</sup> Fanon’s native Martinique, of course, did not follow the larger Anglophone Caribbean islands to independence.

the suffix Afro- or the term African. ‘Members of the striving middle classes [...] as well as sectors of the respectable poor’ (Thomas writes) considered ‘Africa’ or ‘African’ pejorative terms at the beginning of the period I study.<sup>50</sup> In the context of Jamaica, Thomas speaks of an ideology of ‘bracketed blackness’ that underlay middle-class Jamaican nationalism (what she calls ‘creole nationalism’). This refers to a mindset that was implicitly Afro-Caribbean, drawing on the Afro-Caribbean folk past for the construction of nationalist pageantry, but which suppressed explicit references to blackness or Africa, in part because of the social stigma that was still attached to these words, and in part as an appeal to a multi-racial electorate.<sup>51</sup> The Trinidadian context, as I will outline, is slightly different, but the ‘bracketed blackness’ of Eric Williams’s People’s National Movement (PNM), a party tacitly understood to represent the Afro-Caribbean majority, is comparable.<sup>52</sup>

In the first decade of independence, the dominance of this ‘creole nationalist’ elite, and its ideology of ‘bracketed blackness’ was challenged across the Caribbean. ‘For many black people’, as Nadia Ellis summarizes, ‘not much was changing in daily life. The hopes for greater equality, shared citizenship, and cultural inclusion after British colonialism were beginning to fade’, whilst the ongoing formation of postcolonial states as political and economic entities was being ‘brokered through legislative channels with colonial elites [...] and in this way consolidating rather than diffusing oligarchical power’.<sup>53</sup> This, at least, was the perception, and the response to this perception was a swell of more explicitly racialized political mobilization among

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<sup>50</sup> Deborah A. Thomas, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Deborah A. Thomas, p. 12–13, 20.

<sup>52</sup> Yogendra Malik’s 1971 summary posits a revealingly stark division along racial lines: ‘Negroes and East Indians are the two main ethnic groups [in Trinidad], represented by the People’s National Movement (P.N.M.) for the Negroes, and the Democratic Labour Party (D.L.P.) for the East Indians. The population is mainly Negro.’ Yogendra K. Malik, *East Indians in Trinidad: A Study in Minority Politics* (Oxford University Press: London, 1971), p. xi.

<sup>53</sup> Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 157.

the non-elite black majority. The Black Power protests across the region in the late 1960s and early 1970s were a totemic sign of this movement. But the impact of this shift was not merely registered at the level of public demonstration: it also influenced a new wave of art (music, poetry, novels), cultural criticism, and historical scholarship that answered the question about ‘what colonialism had been’ differently. This focussed on the racial aspect of colonialism, specifically the systematized exploitation of people of African origin. This new wave offered a more international vision, which saw the diaspora, as much as the individual nation, as the principle collective to which membership was owed, and its historical thought focused on the period of transportation and slavery. If, for the creole nationalists, slavery had been one of the evils of colonialism, for these later thinkers it was viewed as the kernel and distillation of colonialism: the central event in which the logic of the imperial project was distilled. The racial hierarchies and inequalities formed in that period were therefore seen as the principle obstacle to be overcome.<sup>54</sup> Over the period examined in this thesis, these ideas moved from being revisionary to being increasingly normative within political and academic discourse. As Thomas notes of Jamaica: ‘by the late 1990s, a significant shift had occurred within Jamaica’s public sphere whereby the creole vision of Jamaicanness, consolidated by political and intellectual elites at the time of

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<sup>54</sup> Evidently, both the Black Power movement and the Afrocentric cultural thought of this period drew on Pan-African ideas, and figures such as Marcus Garvey, from earlier in the century. Moreover, as Brian Meeks points out in the Jamaican context, ‘it has been the constant feature of social movements [...] in the last hundred years, that while the leaders may define the movement in terms of national, class, or social goals, the people have invariably redefined it in terms of race’ (cit. Deborah A. Thomas, p. 6). My point is that the close ties between race and national identity become more explicit from the early 1960s onwards, and ideas about racial solidarity came to dominate intellectual as well as popular conversation. Thomas notes that ‘the most productive way to conceptualize postcolonial nationalisms is as dialectical contests between the hegemonic project of nationalist modernity and popular challenges to that project at various levels’. Deborah A. Thomas, p. 6.

independence, became publicly superseded by a racialized vision of citizenship that I am calling “modern blackness”<sup>55</sup>.

One of the challenges that the nationalist ideology of ‘bracketed blackness’ had encountered was that the Caribbean was a multi-racial territory. Moreover, racial constituencies were different across the different islands. This was one reason why the mid-century generation of anti-colonial, Afro-Caribbean politicians chose to ‘bracket’ blackness, creating inclusive pageantry such as the Jamaican national motto ‘Out of Many, One People’. In racially divided societies, it was always presumed (especially by non-Afro-Caribbeans) that their political campaigns were implicitly Afro-Caribbean movements with Afro-Caribbean interests at heart. The failed project of West Indian Federation brought these tensions to light on a regional scale. Guyana, for example, had a majority Indian Caribbean (or ‘East Indian’) population, and their electorate was highly reticent about entering a union in which they would become a small minority within a largely Afro-Caribbean federal population. C.L.R. James’s 1958 speech in Demerara, quoted above, can be seen as an extended and impassioned attempt to allay these fears, and to contest what amounted to a widespread assumption that racial interests always underlay West Indian political manoeuvres and that politicians of one race or another would always look out for their own, in this regard.<sup>56</sup> In terms of racial demography, Trinidad sat between Guyana on the one hand (where East Indians constituted a small majority), and Jamaica, the most populous West Indian territory with an overwhelming Afro-Caribbean majority, on the other. According to the 1960 census of the Trinidad and Tobago Central Statistical Office, which used the racial categories of the period, around 43% of Trinidad’s population was ‘Negro’, 36% were ‘East Indian’, and 17% were mixed race (which would have included large sections of

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<sup>55</sup> Deborah A. Thomas, p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> see C.L.R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory*, pp. 86–87.

the Afro-Caribbean so-called ‘coloured middle-class’ or lighter-skinned elite that Thomas refers to).<sup>57</sup> This division was largely reflected in support for the island’s two largest political parties. The PNM, led by Eric Williams, were perceived to be an Afro-Caribbean party whilst the Democratic Labour Party (the DLP) was perceived to be the East Indian Party. The PNM held power in Trinidad and Tobago from Constituent Assembly elections in 1956 until 1986. The leader of the DLP from 1960 to 1969 was Rudranath Capildeo: V.S. Naipaul’s maternal uncle.

The East Indian community in Trinidad were always sceptical of Williams’s claims that he sought a racially inclusive nation. Describing the nationalist rallies Williams held in Port of Spain, the legendary ‘University of Woodford Square’ meetings, Colin A. Palmer notes that although Williams attempted to use ‘his lectures [...] to foster a non-racial nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago, [...] his message had a far greater resonance among African Trinidadians than Indo-Trinidadian and other groups’.<sup>58</sup> V.S. Naipaul’s description of the ‘University of Woodford Square’ meetings in *A Way in the World* – ‘The people who spoke were not all black or African, but the occasion was an African one; there could be no doubt of that’ – tallies with Palmer’s account.<sup>59</sup> Selwyn D. Ryan (writing in 1972) goes further: ‘Indians in Trinidad’, he writes, ‘were never ardent “nationalists”. They were much more distrustful of the Negro than they were of creole whites and the Colonial Office, which the majority of them viewed as a form of political insurance’ (insurance, that is, against Afro-Caribbean domination).<sup>60</sup> Unsurprisingly, the increasing prominence, and vehemence, of the language of race in political agitation through the 1960s exacerbated the feeling of

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<sup>57</sup> Selwyn D. Ryan, p. 1; Malik, p. 5..

<sup>58</sup> Colin A. Palmer, *Eric Williams & the Making of the Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 263.

<sup>59</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World: A Sequence* (London: Minerva, 1995), pp. 28–29. Henceforth cited in the text as *WW*.

<sup>60</sup> Selwyn D. Ryan, p. 498.

division. Though there were attempts by labour organizations to foster African-Indian solidarity in the era of Black Power, the longstanding divisions coupled with ‘sporadic acts of arson targeting Indo-Trinidadian stores and houses’, meant that most Indo-Trinidadians, as Colin Palmer notes, saw Black Power as inimical to their interests.<sup>61</sup> At worst, it was perceived as a cloak for African-on-Indian violence.<sup>62</sup> Yogendra Malik, writing in 1971, recalls asking East Indian political leaders: ‘“Do you think the policies of the People’s National Movement government endanger the ‘national solidarity’?”’ “There is no national solidarity,” was the flat answer from many of them’.<sup>63</sup>

The speeches in Woodford Square in the late 1950s and early 1960s have become symbolic, for Williams’s admirers in particular, of a moment in which his nationalist movement enjoyed mass popular support. It is notable that the University of Woodford Square lectures were framed, and understood, as exercises in historical thinking and historical education. In these speeches, Williams ‘employed the lessons of history to serve contemporary purposes’, according to Palmer.<sup>64</sup> ‘In that square’, Naipaul writes, ‘there were lectures about local history and slavery. People were being told about themselves’ (WW, 28). One of the principle differences between Afro-Caribbean and East Indian communities in Trinidad was that their historical experiences of colonialism had been so different. Accordingly, their understanding of ‘what colonialism had been’, and their attendant visions of a postcolonial future, were always likely to vary. Whereas the transatlantic slave trade had been abolished in Trinidad in 1806, ships of indentured Indians were still arriving in Trinidad well into the twentieth century (until 1917). Accordingly, as Malik notes, Indian communities tended to view

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<sup>61</sup> Palmer, p. 291.

<sup>62</sup> This remains a controversial subject to this day. See for example Brinsley Samaroo, ‘The February Revolution as a Catalyst for Change in Trinidad and Tobago’, in *Black Power in the Caribbean*, ed. by Kate Quinn (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014), pp. 97–116.

<sup>63</sup> Malik, p. 23.

<sup>64</sup> Palmer, p. 25.

Afro-Caribbean communities as Westernized, and participating in a Euro-African Western culture of which they did not form, and did not wish to form, a part.<sup>65</sup> Retaining widespread competencies in Indian languages (predominantly dialects of Hindi), as well as religious rites and kinship structures into the mid-twentieth century (and beyond), Williams's and James's anxieties about cultural annihilation presented themselves differently to Indian communities. This is not to say that it was unimportant to them as a subject. The idea of cultural loss preoccupied the Indian community not as an object of historiographical debate, but as a process that was happening rapidly in the present. Naipaul, for example, belonged to the first generation of East Indian Trinidadians who did not speak Hindi as a first language at home, and records the generational shift from his grandparents (born in India) to his parents to himself as one of sharp discontinuity.<sup>66</sup> In this context it is unsurprising that he viewed, for example, Kamau Brathwaite's claims about the survival of African languages in West Indian speech as exaggerated and romantic (I will return to this key word). Though Naipaul's contact with Indian languages, customs, and religious observances would have been much more extensive than Brathwaite's exposure to comparable West African survivals, what loomed large in Naipaul's eye line was the rapidity of cultural loss, not the relative wealth of cultural retention.

In Naipaul's 1967 novel *The Mimic Men* – set on a fictional island much like Trinidad – the narrator, Ralph Singh, an East Indian, makes friends with an Afro-Caribbean schoolmate, Browne. Neither visits the home of the other, until one day when, following an embarrassing misunderstanding, Singh feels compelled to call on

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<sup>65</sup> Malik, pp. 8–10.

<sup>66</sup> Naipaul describes his sense of a rapidly disappearing Hindi-speaking, Indian world in Trinidad in *An Area of Darkness* (1964). This world, he writes, 'began to dissolve when I was six or seven; when I was fourteen it had ceased to exist. Between my brother, twelve years younger than myself, and me there is more than a generation of difference.' V.S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (London: Picador, 2002), p. 30.

Browne to apologise. At the door, Singh meets Browne's father wearing 'a grimy flannel vest'. 'Flannel [was] the favoured material of Negroes enfeebled by illness or old age[,] and I wished I had not seen it on Browne's father'.<sup>67</sup> The claustrophobia of the narrow front room and the possessions of the aspiring black middle-class – 'four [...] cane-bottomed chairs [...] around a marble-topped centre-table'; 'framed pictures of Joe Louis, Jesse Owens' – are registered in detail. Browne's father shows respect to Singh as a scholar; Singh makes an effort to refer to Browne by his formal name, 'Ethelbert'. But it is clear from Browne's surliness and Singh's hasty exit that a taboo has been breached (*MM*, 159-160). 'In that interior', Singh reflects, 'all the attributes of his race and class were like secrets no friend ought to have gazed upon' (162). In this scene, Singh expresses both an extended sympathy and a decisive alienation from his classmate. His response speaks of a society in which public spaces such as schools might be shared but private space was protected, and racially segregated: 'it was like opening a private letter' (160). Scenes like this – with their heightened attention to race and cultural difference, their visceral, queasy response to alien space, and their combination of sympathy and distance – recur in Naipaul's writing, including in his most autobiographical pieces.<sup>68</sup>

Naipaul shared much with the male children of the Europhile middle class, the people who would dominate the first generation of politics and letters in independent Trinidad. He went to the same Port of Spain school, Queen's Royal College, as both James and Williams, and followed Williams to Oxford, a beneficiary of the same

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<sup>67</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (London: Picador, 2002), p. 159. Future references are included in the text as *MM*. As will be evident from Selwyn Ryan's 1972 comments, quoted above, the term 'negro' was still in common usage among Afro- as well as Indo-Caribbean writers at this date (1967), and Naipaul's use of it here does not in itself imply racial condescension. As I explain in chapter three, however, Naipaul's continued use of the term later in his career would have a different, and more malicious, charge.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, his encounter with the father of another schoolfriend, a lawyer, in his late, self-referential work *A Way in the World* pp.13-16.

government scholarship. But as an East Indian, he would have been perceived (and certainly came to perceive himself) as different to James or Williams. Sanjay Krishnan has described how, in the ‘University of Woodford Square’ scene in *A Way in the World*, Naipaul’s sense of shared racial hurt sits ambivalently alongside a sense that the demonstration is not for him.<sup>69</sup> This combination of intimacy, unwilling sympathy, and a simultaneous impulse to differentiate himself, to assert his difference, remains constant throughout his work. When Selwyn Cudjoe says of Naipaul that, despite his long peregrinations in Africa, ‘he never left the Africa of his childhood’, it is this precise relation, and this complex affective cocktail, to which he refers, as well as its impact on Naipaul’s future writing, including writing that was not explicitly about the West Indies.<sup>70</sup> The social hierarchies and racial politics of late-colonial Trinidad are a key background to Naipaul’s work throughout his career. They are not more than a background: the politics of Naipaul’s work differ in some ways from that of other East Indian writers, for example, and his relationship with Trinidad would be developed by historical research and further visits. However, the politics of Naipaul’s work does tally in crucial ways with his social position in late-colonial Trinidad, as West Indian scholars like Cudjoe suggest. Returning to the West Indies for periods of months rather than years, the sense of the region he developed in this time would continue to colour his work. As with Williams, Naipaul is obsessed with exploring the nature of the colonial past – what had colonialism been? – but his answers differ from those of many of his Afro-Caribbean contemporaries according to his exposure to a different historical experience. Later in his career, writing about India, Africa, or other areas of the decolonising world, this experience – growing up in a ‘private’ Indian world, ‘its

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<sup>69</sup> Sanjay Krishnan, ‘V.S. Naipaul and Historical Derangement’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73 (2012), 433–51 (pp.438-9).

<sup>70</sup> Cudjoe, pp. 219–20.

energy of inertia steadily weakening,’ awkwardly positioned within a majority-Afro-Caribbean island – would still influence his perceptions.<sup>71</sup>

## A HISTORY OF LITERARY THINKING

The second way that David Scott’s work has influenced this thesis methodologically is in the emphasis he puts on ‘modes of emplotment’, and how these influence the argumentation taking place in a given text. In *Conscripts of Modernity*, he argues that in revising the text of *The Black Jacobins* from the first to the second edition, C.L.R. James shifted the generic emphasis of the book, what he calls its ‘mode of emplotment’, from ‘romance’ to ‘tragedy’.<sup>72</sup> These changes, Scott suggests, articulate the different challenges to which the author was responding in a postcolonial as opposed to a colonial Caribbean problem-space (the first edition of *The Black Jacobins* was published in 1938, the second in 1963).<sup>73</sup> Scott’s understanding of these ‘modes of emplotment’ is essentialist. An anthropologist, drawing on the work of Northrop Frye and Hayden White, Scott frames ‘romance’ and ‘tragedy’ as two ‘elementary modes of emplotment’ among White’s four (or six) ‘archetypal’ plot structures (*CM*, 47). Like many literary scholars, I understand concepts like romance and tragedy differently, as historical and social phenomena with traceable histories (I expand on this below). Nonetheless, Scott’s work offers a prompt, suggesting that literary and intellectual history cannot be practiced independently of one another in this context. Generic, stylistic, and linguistic choices were significant.

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<sup>71</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, p. 30.

<sup>72</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 50-51. References to this edition are henceforth included in the body of the text as *CM*.

<sup>73</sup> Whether or not Scott is right to emphasise James’s investment in tragedy – a subject of some controversy – is not pertinent to this project.

In this thesis, rather than flattening the formal and stylistic diversity of the writings I treat in order to detect the polemic ‘behind’ the texts, I want to attend to the way these formal and stylistic choices themselves signified polemically. The intellectual world I describe was one in which writers and politicians, academics and novelists, knew one another, published in the same interdisciplinary journals such as *Savacou*, and met at conferences and through associations of West Indian artists, writers, and students. Moreover, the academic, politician, or creative writer was often in fact the same person. Eric Williams, Trinidad’s first premier, was also its most prominent academic historian; Kamau Brathwaite, who will appear predominantly in this thesis as a cultural critic and historian, is better known as a poet; writers like C.L.R. James and Sylvia Wynter, now better known as social or cultural theorists, both began their lives in print as promising young novelists. Within this problem-space, then, the same animating questions were addressed in a range of written forms, by writers attuned to the potentialities and affordances of each form, and in material formats which encouraged readerly awareness of the same. Paget Henry, in his historical survey of Afro-Caribbean philosophy *Caliban’s Reason* (2000), attempts to ‘work out’ the ‘philosophical positions’ of various writers that sit behind, or prior to, ‘incorporation in[to] poetic, historical, political or economic’ texts. He calls these philosophical positions ‘subtextual’ and dedicates himself to diagnosing and ‘categoriz[ing]’ them, a project he acknowledges to have been difficult.<sup>74</sup> Correcting the critical oversight of ignoring form for content, I argue that the verbal characteristics of these texts, from minute lexical and stylistic choices to large-scale formal choices, constituted a crucial repertoire of communication and argumentation. An account of how argumentation took places through formal and stylistic choices, including experiment and innovation

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<sup>74</sup> Paget Henry, *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 6.

in different textual forms, must sit at the heart of the intellectual history of the region. My project attempts to contribute to such an account: to attempt to delineate the position of Naipaul within what might be called the ‘history of literary thinking’ in the region.<sup>75</sup>

For this reason, my thesis is structured to focus on debates within three forms: the novel, the historical narrative, and the travel narrative. The historical origins, implicit politics, and contemporary affordances of specific literary forms were, in the period I study, topics of extensive debate. Kamau Brathwaite, in ‘Roots’, called for a ‘more careful understanding of what the novel form means’.<sup>76</sup> Sylvia Wynter, in ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation’, situates ‘the novel form’ amongst ‘all other literary forms’, as ‘a product of the market economy’ and ‘a form of resistance to this very market society’.<sup>77</sup> Naipaul, as we have seen, claimed in ‘Reading and Writing’ that, ‘it is part of [literature’s] life that its dominant form should constantly change. If every creative talent is always burning itself out, every literary form is always getting to the end of what it can do’ (*LO*, 30). In each chapter, the debates I track are to some extent about the form in question: the novel, for example. But in each instance these debates also address the dominant political questions of the period: questions about what colonialism had been and what a postcolonial future might look like (as well as about the changing role of the writer, scholar, or artist in Caribbean public life). I emphasise

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<sup>75</sup> The idea of ‘literary thinking’ has been associated with Cambridge University critics such as Angela Leighton and Simon Jarvis. I draw on their ideas, but – sceptical about some of the more extreme cognitive claims that have been drawn from this work – I emphasise the idea that formal choices *communicate* or *argue* in particular ways. In this sense, like many intellectual historians, I am interested in how thought manifested itself socially, how ideas moved and changed, rather than on the mechanics of cognition itself. See Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1–33 (‘Introduction: poetic thinking’), and Angela Leighton, ‘Poetry’s Knowing: So What Do We Know?’, in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. by John Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 162–82.

<sup>76</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Roots* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 55. *Roots* is a collection of Brathwaite’s literary essays from throughout his career, taking its title from a 1963 essay, ‘Roots’. References to this collection are henceforth included in the text as *R*.

<sup>77</sup> Sylvia Wynter, ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation’, *Savacou*, 5 (1971), 95–102 (p. 97).

the word ‘form’ (as opposed to, say, genre or mode) in my thesis because it is a word the writers in my thesis are drawn to, and to which they frequently return. The literary culture I describe was self-aware about literary form as a notion, and debated the connotations and affordances of specific literary forms. However, I use the word ‘form’ inductively not deductively, according to the meaning it took on for these writers themselves, as the focal point of a range of stylistic, generic and aesthetic interventions.

Chapter one, ‘*A House for Mr Biswas* and the Theory of the West Indian Novel’, is about the theory of the novel. This was a subject which took on unexpected importance for West Indian thinkers from a range of disciplinary backgrounds at the beginning of my period. A nodal text in this emerging debate was Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961). Rather than separating reception history from the poetics of the novel itself, I examine how *Biswas* contains a theory, or theorises on the level of form, in a way that can be brought into dialogue with the criticism it generated. I document first how *Biswas* emerged from West Indian literary culture, and how it speaks back to key questions about sovereignty and colonial dependency which were animating that culture at the time the book appeared. Second, focussing on a series of essays by Kamau Brathwaite and Sylvia Wynter among other texts, I trace how the reception of Naipaul’s novel through the 1960s and early 1970s constituted a barometer of the way consensual answers to these questions were changing. Writers of an older generation than Naipaul, like C.L.R. James, had championed the creation of a canon of West Indian novels in the image of, though in place of, the English novelistic canon. But in the text of *Biswas*, and in changing responses to it, a contrasting consensus emerges, in which the novel itself (in its dominant iterations: realist, modernist, and so on) is seen as being a problematic colonial inheritance.

Chapter two, ‘*The Loss of El Dorado* and “Colonial” Historiography’, is about the form of the historical narrative. Debates about the character of the colonial past, and its formative influence on the postcolonial present, catalysed a rich field of historical writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this chapter, I read Naipaul’s *Loss of El Dorado* (1969) in dialogue with contemporary works of historical writing and historiographical theory, including work by Elsa Goveia, Orlando Patterson and Kamau Brathwaite. As well as examining Naipaul’s position within this historiographical field, I examine the specificity of this historical period within a longer trajectory of West Indian historical writing, from C.L.R. James to David Scott himself. In this chapter I suggest that *The Loss of El Dorado* examined the salience of historical writing and the role of the historian in the West Indian public sphere. Positioning this body of historical writing from the late 1960s and early 1970s into a longer trajectory of West Indian historical thought about the relationship between race, slavery, and colonial experience, one can observe the ways in which the colonial past is being characterised, and the implied role of the historian, change.

Chapter three, ‘Caribbean Eyes: V.S. Naipaul and Other Traditions of Travel’, is about travel writing. A significant number of Caribbean writers used travel to Africa as a form of historical and genealogical exploration, as a way of better understanding the relationship between Caribbean and African culture and scrutinising received ideas about cultural loss within Afro-Caribbean communities. Naipaul’s African travelogues of the 1970s and 1980s, including ‘A New King for the Congo’ and ‘Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro’, have tended to be read in a tradition of metropolitan travel writing. In this chapter, I explore how they entered into dialogue with contemporary Caribbean travel writing. Naipaul’s criticism of standard ways of understanding diasporic inheritance has echoes in the work of George Lamming and other contemporaries. Both

Naipaul and Lamming can be seen to focalise Ghana and the Ivory Coast according to a vocabulary honed in Trinidad, and in this sense the differences between the texts can be read as a continuation of debates the two had had in and about the West Indies. Finally, I compare these texts with Maryse Condé's retrospective work *La Vie sans fards*, published many years later.<sup>78</sup> In this late memoir about Condé's life in Africa in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, which revises tropes from the travelogue form as used by Lamming and Naipaul, we see the generic and historical limitations of Naipaul's project and of the frame of reference he shared with Lamming.

A major Caribbean contemporary whose relationship with Naipaul I do not discuss in detail is Derek Walcott, though I describe his ideas, and his influence on the Caribbean problem-space throughout the thesis. This may seem surprising, given the well-known antipathy between the two men. I choose not to focus on Walcott's relationship with Naipaul in part because Walcott was only a peripheral commentator, rather than a central creative force, in any of the three forms – the novel, the historical narrative, or the travelogue – which occupied most of Naipaul's creative career, just as Naipaul has a peripheral role in the development of Caribbean poetry. Secondly, like Rhonda Cobham-Sander (whose chapter 'For Naipaul' provides a summary of the Walcott/Naipaul relationship), I believe the dichotomy to have been as much a strategic creation as an expression of fundamental aesthetic differences (such as the differences that come to divide both Walcott and Naipaul from Brathwaite). As Cobham-Sander notes, 'it is hard to miss the undercurrent of hysteria in Walcott's rebuke[s of Naipaul]. Naipaul's alienation is never far away as Walcott struggles with his own demons'.<sup>79</sup> As (arguably) the region's two most internationally prominent writers, the relationship between these two men will continue to attract scholarly attention. In this thesis, in the

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<sup>78</sup> I discuss the meaning of this title, 'Life without pretence' or 'Life without make-up', in chapter three.

<sup>79</sup> Cobham-Sander, *I and I*, p. 144 and see pp. 133-166.

interest of foregrounding formal and generic conversations whose role in the development of Caribbean writing was at least equally important, though less frequently discussed, I analyse the Walcott-Naipaul relationship only parsimoniously, and where relevant.

Across the three chapters of this thesis, I argue that one of the key dramas of Naipaul's work was his performance of 'conscription' to European formal exemplars and representational idioms. For David Scott, C.L.R. James exemplified a position occupied by a number of twentieth-century Caribbean intellectuals in that he was a 'conscript of Western civilization'.<sup>80</sup> These 'conscripts' were people who, like James, opposed the colonial imposition of Western power, ideas, educational norms and categories on the non-Western world (including, for the purposes of this exercise, the Caribbean). But they were also the products of these colonial processes: having grown up in the colonial Caribbean they had been inculcated into these imposed ways of thinking and arguing. Moreover, the whole problem-space in which they hoped to intervene was framed according to Western norms; the questions they sought to answer were phrased in a vocabulary underwritten by European assumptions. Thus, Scott describes how questions about the annihilation of 'culture', the absence of 'tradition' or native 'civilization' in the Caribbean – the anxiety that I describe in detail above – presumes European notions of 'culture', 'tradition', or 'civilization' to be normative and universal. To contest these, often racist, claims about the Caribbean, to participate in the debate at all, one was 'virtually obliged' to enter into this Western vocabulary, to provide ethnographic or historical counter-evidence according to Western models of scholarship.<sup>81</sup> For many writers of James's generation, no alternative vocabulary or

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<sup>80</sup> Scott adapts the title of his *Conscripts of Modernity* from Talal Asad's 1992 essay, 'Conscripts of Western Civilization'. See *CM*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>81</sup> David Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, p. 111.

methodology seemed to be available. Scott refers to Naipaul very rarely in any of his books, but Naipaul staged this conceptual and imaginative ‘conscription’ across his oeuvre, looking back to but also reimagining and developing the cultural predicament of C.L.R. James in Naipaul’s own postcolonial present.<sup>82</sup> Naipaul drew attention repeatedly to the historical origins, and representational limitations, of the written forms he had inherited: the novel, the historical narrative, the travelogue. Both individual works, and his oeuvre as a whole, are animated by an ideal – that is continually frustrated – of a genuinely novel representative form, fashioned from the conceptual, literary, and linguistic material bequeathed to him as a product of a colonial society. This continued cycle of attempted innovation followed by frustration dramatizes, on the level of form, this experience of conscription, and (what Naipaul saw as) the always-already futile and hence repeatedly frustrated attempts, in the postcolonial West Indies, to fashion a future that truly departed from the colonial past. This performance was at times strategically deployed to contest what Naipaul saw as romantic or utopian ideas about authentically Caribbean idioms of cultural expression, which often drew on the region’s connection to Africa. This deeply pessimistic outlook, as well as the politics that were seen to underlie it, proved provocative – often in creative ways – for his Caribbean contemporaries.

Two key terms through which Naipaul draws attention to this performance in his work are ‘romance’ (or ‘romanticism’) and ‘realism’. These are terms which Naipaul for the most part uses strategically, rather than with reference to any one pre-existing definition. ‘Romance’ denotes any received or inherited (and hence implicitly false)

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<sup>82</sup> Sara Suleri describes Naipaul’s attachment to European culture as a performance of ‘excessive anachronism’, whilst Ankhi Mukherjee and Baidik Bhattacharya both describe it as a performance of ‘belated[ness]’. By reading his work as a performance of ‘conscription’, its position within a Caribbean intellectual-historical lineage is foregrounded. Suleri, p. 149; Ankhi Mukherjee, *What Is a Classic?: Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 70; Baidik Bhattacharya, ‘Naipaul’s New World: Postcolonial Modernity and the Enigma of Belated Space’, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 39.2 (2006), 245–67 (p. 248).

representative strategy. This stood in opposition to ‘realism’: the horizon of truthful representation which he continually sought after, but at which he never arrived.<sup>83</sup> Naipaul was not referring to a single, pre-existing definition, but he did not choose these terms, which recur with remarkable frequency throughout his oeuvre, naively. Behind these terms hover a number of connotations and implications. Narratives which posit a meaningful, submerged relation between African and Caribbean cultures, waiting to be discovered, are ‘romantic’ for Naipaul, primarily because they are false, but also, more precisely, because they are fanciful in the sense ‘romance’ is fanciful, because they are in fact inherited (primitivist in the tradition of European romanticism), and because, like the structure of the romance plot, they promise a kind of resolution that does not map onto lived experience.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Naipaul presented himself as a ‘realist’ in the sense of someone who wanted to present the world truthfully, as it really was. But in tension with this realist ideal, Naipaul shows an awareness of ‘Realism’ (with a capital R): a pragmatic or conservative mode, no less inherited than romanticism.<sup>85</sup> His adoption of Realist technique, those moments in which he is most explicit about his relationship to European Realist predecessors, are also, paradoxically

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<sup>83</sup> Barbara Fuchs has described these ‘instrumental’ uses of the word ‘romance’ within literary-historical narratives. ‘Romance, she writes, is ‘often defined relatively rather than absolutely, and retrospectively rather than contemporaneously. That is, texts are read as romance primarily in relation or comparison to other texts – as in the opposition between epic and romance – or in order to distinguish them from their successors – as in the distinction between romance and the novel. The frequent controversies over romance that involve questions of definition and scope, and of its value for readers, may, I conjecture, teach us as much about the dynamics of literary theory and history as about romance itself’. Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 10–11.

<sup>84</sup> Beer describes this perception of ‘romance’ as ‘wish-fulfilment literature’, which ‘absorbs the reader into experience which is otherwise unattainable’. Gillian Beer, *The Romance*, Critical Idiom 10 (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 1, 3. On the relationship between ‘romanticism’, primitivism, and inherited European nationalist narratives see Boris Gasparov and Matthew Scott, ‘Romanticism’, in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* ed. by Roland Green et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1219–25 (p. 1220). Naipaul was not the only person to see this trend within Caribbean thought as ‘Romantic’ and hence ‘primitivist’: Walcott makes the same connection, in equally critical terms, in his 1970 essay, ‘What the Twilight Says’. See Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber, 1998), pp. 6–9.

<sup>85</sup> I describe this in detail in chapter one.

moments of resignation, as he watches another form of ‘realism’ – realism with a small r: representative accuracy – disappear from view.<sup>86</sup>

In her 2015 book *Territories of the Soul*, Nadia Ellis gives an account of African diasporic thought in this period as predicated on the idea of a utopian horizon: continually reached *for* though never quite attained. Ellis’s book tries to move beyond a longstanding division in diasporic thought and criticism, which read authors either as instantiating successful returns to Africa, or as producing work which emphasised the ‘irrecuperability’ of the African past. Emphasising that this was a ‘dialectic’ – a productive mode of discursive thinking – Ellis identifies in these debates ‘a form of diasporic affinity that is intense and intimate precisely because it is agonistic’. Disagreement looms large in her book, and the texts that loom largest are, indeed, those which focus on irrecuperability and lost connections, and hence articulate a sense of difficulty and loss. But emphasising dialectic, a productive mode of thinking, over division, she creates a vocabulary for describing ‘a form of diasporic affinity that is intense and intimate precisely because it is agonistic’. Moreover, focusing precisely on those texts which articulate ‘misprision’ and missed connection – as well as on moments of painful debate – she shows how expressions of dissatisfaction with the here and now (of twentieth-century America, of the postcolonial Caribbean) always looked implicitly towards the future, towards a utopian horizon. Emphasising the emancipatory potential of this critique of the present, she argues that ‘diasporic consciousness is at its

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<sup>86</sup> George Levine eloquently describes this prevalent tension between realism as an almost-utopian ideal of representative accuracy, and realism as a received – and quietist – form which takes for granted in advance the way the world is, throughout his *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). I discuss these ideas in more detail in chapters one and three.

most potent when it is, so to speak, unconsummated': that is, when the productive tension between scepticism and utopianism is maintained.<sup>87</sup>

Ellis eschews genealogical historicism, but it is notable that the writers and artists who dominate her work – C.L.R. James, George Lamming, Andrew Salkey, Burning Spear, Erna Brodber – were all West Indians active in the period I am studying. Her characterisation of this agonistic space, occupied both by those emphasising continued connection and those emphasising loss, characterises a key aspect of the problem-space I have tried to define. It is notable that she calls these thinkers African-diasporic thinkers, and focuses on the ways they (implicitly or explicitly) tried to move past trends of reactive, nationalist thought formed in the image of metropolitan nationhood. Her argument that the work of these thinkers always imagined itself to be productive, future-orientated, 'potent', even in those moments when it articulated failure and loss, is a persuasive characterisation of the work of James, Lamming, Brathwaite, Wynter and others.

Naipaul shared a social background, in many respects, with the writers Ellis analyses, but he was also, as I have argued, detached from them. He was provocative, superficially, because, although thrust into a kind of association with them by an accident of history, he insisted on his difference from them, and refused for the most part to show solidarity. His challenge to these writers, however, ran deeper than that. Naipaul refused this utopian horizon in his analysis of the Caribbean, seeing the Caribbean colonial experience as irreparably damaging, and those formed by it as irreparably damaged. This damage, I will argue in this thesis, was locked in time, unavailable to subsequent witnesses, and travestied in the attempt to render it in any way politically useful, or to formulate from it a different future. He was a writer with no

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<sup>87</sup> Ellis, pp. 5, 2.

vision of futurity, who contested the social purposes of writing, criticism, and historiography that writers like Lamming took for granted; he called into question at a foundational level the purpose of the ongoing, agonistic conversation. An alternative title to this thesis might have been ‘V.S. Naipaul and Afro-Caribbean Thought’: a quixotic project indeed. Yet a collocation that was occasioned by the history and social formation of the colonial Caribbean, by the all-too-concrete colonial processes of human trafficking, resettlement, and remapping with whose influence these diasporic thinkers were attempting to come to terms. Architects of the new West Indian nations would succeed or fail insofar as they succeeded in managing such collocations as these, and in this apparently unlikely collocation, the birth pangs of the postcolonial Caribbean are registered.

#### SUPERANNUATION: ‘A MAN AS OLD AS THE CENTURY’

If most of the existing scholarship on Naipaul’s relation to other Caribbean writers tends to focus on his earliest work – the years in which he edited and presented *Caribbean Voices* offer a particularly rich archive – one late text in which he is evidently in dialogue with his West Indian literary precursors is *A Way in the World* (1994): an unorthodox series of historical and literary reflections, passing itself off variously as a ‘sequence’ or a ‘novel’.<sup>88</sup> In the character ‘Lebrun’, he created a figure who, as Caryl Phillips saw immediately, was at least in part a cipher for C.L.R. James.<sup>89</sup> Lebrun’s career – a labour activist in the oilfields strike of the 1930s, a nationalist agitator at the University of Woodford Square who would afterwards be disowned by

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<sup>88</sup> The British edition was published with the subtitle ‘a sequence’, whilst the American edition bore the subtitle ‘a novel’. See Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V.S. Naipaul* (London: Picador, 2008), p. 464.

<sup>89</sup> Caryl Phillips, ‘The Voyage In’, *New Republic*, 210.24 (1994), 40–45 (p.43).

the nationalist elite, and later still (as the first generation of nationalist politicians lost popular support) a celebrated champion of global black liberation – is intended both to allude to the changing place of James in Trinidadian politics and to sketch the shifting trends in Afro-Caribbean liberationist activism through the twentieth century. Lebrun is in this sense a representative figure, a man whose life tracks the currents of twentieth-century Trinidadian history. But what does this life story signify? What does Naipaul achieve in telling it?

Naipaul foregrounds this question by a *mise-en-abyme* scene in which Lebrun tells a story of his own to a dinner party, at which the narrator himself is present. Later, the narrator describes Lebrun repeating the story to different audiences in different settings. One thing to which Naipaul returns repeatedly is Lebrun's verbal felicity. 'He spoke in complete sentences', Naipaul observes more than once, and for much of the dinner party scene Naipaul describes Lebrun's speaking voice rather than quoting it (rather, that is, than showing or dramatizing it) (*WW*, 105, 112): 'I thought his spoken language was like Ruskin's on the printed page, in its fluency and elaborateness, the words wonderfully chosen, often unexpected, bubbling up from some ever-running spring of sensibility' (112-3). On one level, Naipaul is being not entirely complimentary: suggesting that Lebrun's speech was more like a prepared address than chatter, that he held forth rather than inviting the give-and-take of conversation. But he is also focusing the reader's attention in a specific way: foregrounding not what was said, but the arresting, enchanting effect Lebrun's speech had on its listeners. The subject of the sentence, indeed, becomes the listener: '*I thought* his spoken language was like Ruskin's...'.'

When, after this long introduction, Naipaul does, at last, quote Lebrun, the effect is bathetic. Whereas the narrator's descriptive language – the circumlocution with

which Lebrun's speech is framed – does approximate the rich, Victorian style to which Naipaul alludes ('some ever-running spring of sensibility'), Lebrun's style, or the way Naipaul approximates it in print, is relatively matter-of-fact. The sentences are short, sometimes elliptical; the lexicon is simple and repetitive: 'I'm going back a long way now. I'm going back a hundred years' (*WW*, 113). Such writerly phrases as there are – 'my own political resolution' – belong to a Marxist dialect distant from Ruskin (115). How to explain the disjunction between Naipaul's insistence on the rapturous quality of Lebrun's speech, and the underwhelming evidence he presents of its verbal quality? Naipaul is having fun at the expense of James here, and perhaps at the expense of his own younger, impressionable self: as if to say, this passed for great literature in the 1960s, but hear how different it sounds today. But something else is also going on.

One of the major ideas in *A Way in the World* concerns the profoundly historical and historically delimited character of the perspective, and hence the work, of every writer. One way of describing this formally and generically unusual literary construction would be to say that it is a record of how, through time, different eyes have seen Trinidad, and different voices and pens have tried to describe it. These traveller-writers range from Sir Walter Raleigh in the sixteenth century to the (fictional) hack journalist Foster Morris in the twentieth, and from the Venezuelan revolutionary Francisco Miranda, writing to his wife from Trinidadian exile, to the revolutionary historian Lebrun. 'Over four centuries', Naipaul writes, 'the vision constantly changes' (*WW*, 102). What Naipaul is emphasising, in the bathetic gap between Lebrun's speech and Naipaul's description of that speech, is the ephemerality or perishability of verbal meaning. To his audience, at the time, this speech was urgent; what Trilling called the

‘buzz of implication’ was alive in it and immediately audible to its listeners.<sup>90</sup> This experience can be described, but not itself transmitted. The transcription of the words (that is, the text that is passed down) will seem denuded, and in part illegible, when the social context of their utterance no longer pertains.

The story Lebrun tells is about a coachman, his mother’s uncle, born in the middle of the nineteenth century. At one time, accompanying his employers on a trip to England, he was treated kindly by the English servants he met. Afterwards, he spoke about the ‘old days’ when (in his words) ‘black people and white people was one’. For a long time, Lebrun says, when he thought about this story he was full of ‘shame’ (WW, 114-5). It is not impossible, or even difficult, to intuit why Lebrun tells this story. He is talking about the dawning of his political consciousness, the point at which he realised that the British myth of benevolent coloniality was at odds with the slave history of the island. The shame he feels, remembering the coachman, prompted his political action, which eventually dispelled his sense of shame. Naipaul, however, does not offer a single, literal explication; rather, he describes the impact of the speech on the different audiences to which it is delivered. This, for Naipaul, is where its more substantive meaning resides. The first time Lebrun delivers the speech, on the platform in Woodford Square in the 1950s, he transfixes his audience, ‘I could feel them listening in a new way’ (115). Repeating the story at the dinner party thrown by a ‘common West Indian acquaintance’, what is understood is understood tacitly, and the speech is followed by a silence ‘as though everyone was being given time to examine himself’

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<sup>90</sup> Trilling’s famous description of ‘a culture’s hum and buzz of implication [...] the whole evanescent context in which its explicit statements are made’ comes from ‘Manners, Morals, and the Novel’ in Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), p. 206. The phrase was drawn to my attention, in the context of the present thesis, by Kenneth Ramchand. Contemporary readers of Naipaul, he said in conversation, don’t get the tenor of the jokes, the ‘buzz of implication’ available to Trinidadians of Naipaul’s own generation (which is also Ramchand’s). I take this both as a prompt for the project I am attempting, and a salutary warning as to the possibility of doing it in a more-than-exploratory, or provisional, way.

(110, 115). Later, when he is ‘very old, and famous among people who were interested in colonial and post-colonial history’ he is asked to repeat the story every time he gives an interview: ‘Lebrun told the story again and again. Towards the end of his life, he sometimes forgot the point of the story [...] For the interviewer or the television producer it was enough, a text for today’ (155-6).

In this thesis, I emphasise the way texts took on meaning within historical and social settings and evolving reading publics. In the scenes cited above, which focus on the reception of Lebrun’s story in different contexts, Naipaul emphasises this also. What is notable is his interpretative reticence. The narrator does not explain the story, no final meaning is offered, and in the end even Lebrun himself loses his grasp on what it means, or once meant. In each setting, the story’s effect is described not in terms of what was understood, but in terms of how the audience was affected: they sympathised, or they were silenced, or they carried blithely on. This is one of few places in which Naipaul makes reference to students of ‘post-colonial[ism]’, in which he gestures to this international academic readership. His insistence on the difficulty with which conversational implicature translates from local, historically situated contexts to retrospective, international publics might be read as defensive or overstated, but it is also salutary. The scholars of ‘colonial and post-colonial history’, he writes:

couldn’t really understand [Lebrun]. They had grown up in another world, and were simpler than he was. The profile-writers and the television interviewers, who promoted him with self-conscious virtue [...] had no means of understanding or assessing a man who had been born early in the century into a very hard world, whose intellectual growth had at every stage been accompanied by a growing rawness of sensibility, and whose political resolutions, expressing the wish not to go mad, had been in the nature of spiritual struggles, occurring in the depths of his being (*WW*, 155-6).

The point of the story is not its meaning, but its passing into oblivion: the loss of the shared contexts in which it had once been comprehensible. Texts take on meaning,

Naipaul suggests, in social spaces and at historical moments. Afterwards this meaning is lost, and restoration is partial and difficult. A complete historical reconstruction, as Naipaul suggests in the prologue to the book, is itself a chimera, a utopian horizon. Stories take on new meaning to new audiences in new contexts. Yet to seek cognisance of the social world in which stories are written or told, and of the world from which the author or speaker emerged, is to avoid the solipsism of the students, ‘promot[ing] [Lebrun] with self-conscious virtue’. It is necessary to the process of ‘understanding’ and ‘assess[ment]’.<sup>91</sup>

Naipaul was sixty-two the year *A Way in the World* was published. As Caryl Phillips notes, it is a book coloured by the idea of death.<sup>92</sup> Lebrun is a cipher of James, who had died five years earlier, but, as Rhonda Cobham-Sander notes, Lebrun is also a cipher of Naipaul himself.<sup>93</sup> Naipaul’s references to Lebrun’s great historical work – a story of South American revolutionaries, and their passages through the Caribbean islands – blur James’s *Black Jacobins* with Naipaul’s *Loss of El Dorado* and constitute one of a number of ways Naipaul alludes to Lebrun’s dual identity. Writing about the passage of time, the illegibility of Lebrun’s stories to future generations, Naipaul expresses a fear of his own superannuation that clouds and complicates much of his late work. There is a stoicism, but also a defensiveness, in the question he asks about Lebrun, ‘how could one enter the emotions of a [...] man as old as the century?’ (*WW*, 129), and in the way he insists on Lebrun’s opacity to people who had ‘grown up in another world,’ without the ‘spiritual struggles’ that Lebrun had known. More than

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<sup>91</sup> In the prologue, crystallizing the central ideas of the book, Naipaul discusses both the importance of ‘hunt[ing] up the story’, ‘learning [...] how we all came to be where we are’, and the limits of this endeavour. ‘We go back and back, forever; we go back all of us to the very beginning’: we glimpse only ‘a fragment of [our] inheritance, a fragment of the truth’ (*WW*, 8-9).

<sup>92</sup> Phillips p.44.

<sup>93</sup> Cobham-Sander notes how the ‘Lebrun’ figure in *WW* functions both as a cipher for James and as a ‘foil and mirror’ for Naipaul himself. In this way, Naipaul’s ‘epitaph’ for Lebrun/James becomes in effect an epitaph for the author himself: a strategic way of pre-emptively framing his historical legacy. I return to this idea in my conclusion. Cobham-Sander, *I and I*, p. 31 and see pp. 7-17.

twenty years on, this self-reflective aspect of the book is more poignant. Naipaul can seem more and more Lebrun-like: a figure from the past, quoted more than read, born into a ‘very hard world’ in the now very distant past.

Nadia Ellis speaks of ‘territories of the soul’ in black diasporic thought: spaces expressing the idea of a utopian ‘*elsewhere*’ – variously articulated in terms of a the pre-colonial past, an abstract ‘African’ homeland, a non-racist state of the future – that were attractive because they were imaginary and could not be proved chimerical, and potent because they were ‘unconsummated’, their fruits to be worked for, still to come.<sup>94</sup> Naipaul, by contrast, speaks of the ‘regions of the spirit’ which Lebrun inhabited (*WW*, 129). These were not imaginary, but nor were they locatable on a map: to speak of ‘regions of the spirit’ was to speak of a world construed and felt by an interpellated racial subject in a colonial dispensation in the Caribbean past. One of the spaces in which Ellis’s ‘territories of the soul’ are made real (or at least imagined materially, made public and tangible) is in the material artwork, the text or the canvas. The ‘regions of the spirit’ that Lebrun inhabited are not made present in *A Way in the World* (that would be, according to their nature, impossible to fully achieve). Rather, through its formal arrangements, the book gestures towards this inarticulable space.

In *A Way in the World*, Naipaul offers a historicist apologia for his own work, emphasising its provenance in ‘regions of the spirit’ which have now passed. This thesis follows this prompt, arguing that to understand a text’s social meaning and influence it is necessary to attend to the ‘regions of the spirit’ in which it arose, and to its reception at that time and afterwards. In this sense, the early reception history of a text is a revealing mirror of its context. For modern students of postcolonial history and literature (such as those the narrator alludes to in *A Way in the World*) Naipaul may not

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<sup>94</sup> Ellis, p. 2.

be a fashionable figure (as ‘Lebrun’ was or James is). But his work has had a formative influence on postcolonial Caribbean literature and cultural thought. It played a central part in the problem-space in which James, Brathwaite, Wynter and others wrote, and thus has an important place in the Caribbean literary archive from which modern writers and thinkers continue to draw. To understand Naipaul’s influence is to see this literary and intellectual inheritance more clearly.

‘History was [...] a fairytale’, Naipaul writes of his colonial education in *The Loss of El Dorado*, ‘not so much about slavery as about its abolition, the good defeating the bad. Any other version would have ended in ambiguity and alarm.’<sup>95</sup> Naipaul does not offer us this ‘fairytale’ vision of history. The stark vision of the colonial past he does present is not utopian, nor is it visionary or productive of any kind of happy ending. Indeed, his insistence on the irreversibility of colonial history, the impossibility of retroactively transforming its impacts by means of a ‘fairytale’ moment of liberation, has been misread as a defence of the colonial project.<sup>96</sup> Naipaul’s work isolates the past as past, and colonial experience as irreparably damaged; it does not offer the raw material for a re-imagined or different future. Naipaul does this in a particularly dispiriting way because this damage, this collapsing of critical or creative capacities, is not just described but enacted on the level of form, and embodied in the narratorial voice (sometimes even in the authorial figure). As Condé notes, he provokes readers and writers by offering a different vision of the function of a writer, which is not to effect change, but to record damage, to articulate despair.<sup>97</sup> This was the principle

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<sup>95</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Loss of El Dorado* [1969] (rev. ed. London: Picador, 2010) p.353. Henceforth all references are to this edition, cited in the text as *LED*.

<sup>96</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, for an example, gives a portrait of a Naipaul ‘who pined for the glamour of empire’ in her ‘Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 23 (2008), 191–219 (p. 207). Stoler does not in fact list any text by Naipaul in her bibliography to this essay (she relies on secondary criticism and citations). Returning to the texts themselves, this thesis attempts to show that her portrait of Naipaul is at best incomplete, if not misleading.

<sup>97</sup> Condé, ‘Naipaul et Les Antilles: Une histoire d’amour?’, p. 7.

impact of his work on the West Indian public discourse of his time: it provoked writers to justify, to themselves and to others, how their historical or literary work really did contribute to the construction of a future that departed substantially from the colonial past.<sup>98</sup> Many of the most influential manifestos for the creativity or originality of West Indian artists and societies, such as those by Kamau Brathwaite, were made in direct response to Naipaul.

Though Naipaul may be less widely read now than he was in the 1970s and 1980s, his influence is still with us. Indeed, the breadth of his influence on subsequent writers is consistently surprising. In his 2012 essay ‘Natives on a Boat’, the Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole describes having dinner with Naipaul in Manhattan. The encounter took place in 2010, shortly after the publication of *The Masque of Africa*, which Cole speculates may prove to be Naipaul’s final book. There is a sense, not least from Cole’s amused descriptions of Naipaul’s attempts to patronise him, that the public importance of this ‘old and famous’ writer may now be declining. Nonetheless, Cole portrays himself as, involuntarily, in thrall to Naipaul; his repeated descriptions of Naipaul as ‘the master’ present Naipaul’s as an oedipal father. Cole finds himself reaching for erudite anecdotes ‘to show off a little for the master’; he tries to chase down Naipaul’s literary allusions, ‘ever the eager student’. At dinner, Cole offers an encomium to Naipaul which is formal but sincere. He acknowledges the impact of Naipaul’s work on the ‘entire generation of post-colonial writers’ who came after him. ‘I don’t agree with all your views,’ Cole tells Naipaul, ‘and in fact there are many of them I strongly disagree with’. But Naipaul’s work, he says, has prompted him to be

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<sup>98</sup> Baucom describes how Naipaul’s ‘accomplished narrative of Englishness [...] has no place for the future’. In this thesis I examine how Naipaul’s ‘refus[al of] the future’ (in Baucom’s words) impacts upon the narrative about the Caribbean that he, and his interlocutors, construct. Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 183, 186.

‘productively disagreeable’.<sup>99</sup> A narrative of the global influence of Naipaul has yet to be written. This study attends only to the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean. But Cole’s essay articulates a foundational idea for this thesis. Naipaul’s legacy will not be located in his own work, read in isolation, but in the ‘productive disagreement’ it prompted in ‘generation[s]’ of readers and writers.

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<sup>99</sup> Teju Cole, ‘Natives on the Boat’, *The New Yorker*, 11 September 2012  
<<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/natives-on-the-boat>> [accessed 26 September 2017].

## 1.

***A House for Mr Biswas* and the Theory of the West Indian Novel**

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) (*LO*, 20).

There were, for Friedrich Schlegel, 'three great tendencies of [his] age'. These were: the French Revolution, the philosophy of J.G. Fichte, and the emergence of the novel in the publication of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.<sup>100</sup> A century and a half after Schlegel's famous 1798 aphorism, George Lamming made a similarly structured – and similarly famous – claim in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960): 'There are, for me, just three important events in British Caribbean history' – 'the discovery' of the West Indies by Columbus, 'the abolition of slavery', and 'the discovery of the novel by West Indians as a way of investigating and projecting the inner experiences of the West Indian community'.<sup>101</sup> Both Schlegel and Lamming make large claims about the emergence of the novel form, its social impact, and its relation to large historical and philosophical movements which the authors understood to define the contemporary state of their respective societies. Like Schlegel in the German context, Lamming sees the novel as –

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<sup>100</sup> cit. Marshall Brown, 'Theory of the Novel', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Marshall Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5: ROMANTICISM, 250–71 (p. 258).

<sup>101</sup> George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), pp. 36–37. References to this edition are henceforth quoted in the text as *PE*. There is no documentary evidence that Lamming was alluding to Schlegel in this passage, though it is not improbable.

in Marshall Brown's words – the 'signature poetic form of [West Indian] modernity'.<sup>102</sup> Lamming's statement, though hyperbolic, was not unrepresentative, but speaks to a wider spike in West Indian novel-writing and novel criticism in this period. For writers and social theorists from the West Indies at this time, the novel became a subject and site of debate through which visions of West Indian modernity were articulated and debated.

The importance of the novel as a subject for West Indian thinkers from the 1950s onwards owed a lot to the flourishing of West Indian novel-writing in the fifteen years since the end of the war. These were the years of landmark novels, like Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) and Sam Selvon's *A Brighter Sun* (1952), and of the growing prominence of their authors in both the West Indies and London. These were also years of great constitutional and social change in the Caribbean: the establishment of the University College of the West Indies in 1948, the extension of the franchise in Trinidad and Jamaica in the mid-1950s, the rise of nationalist political leaders like Eric Williams and Norman Manley, and the formation of the West Indian Federation in 1958. The coincidence of these two phenomena meant that the novel became a subject through which wider questions about culture, nationalism, and aesthetics were debated. Recent criticism has emphasised the fact that many important West Indian novels from this period were written in London, and address, at least in part, a British audience.<sup>103</sup> But, as Kezia Page argues, what is striking about much of this work is its investment in Caribbean politics and social change.<sup>104</sup> Diasporic or Caribbean-based media such as the Barbadian periodical *BIM* or the BBC Colonial

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<sup>102</sup> Brown, 5: ROMANTICISM, p. 256. Brown is referring to Schlegel in this phrase, not Lamming.

<sup>103</sup> See, for example, McIntosh, pp. 1-21.

<sup>104</sup> Page describes the 'doubleness' of address in Caribbean literary texts in this period, which spoke both to metropolitan audiences, and also, in some cases obliquely, to Caribbean publics, or intellectual coteries. She calls these texts, accordingly, 'remittance texts'. Kezia Ann Page, *Transnational Negotiations in Caribbean Diasporic Literature: Remitting the Text* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 10.

Service's *Caribbean Voices* broadcast were key organs of reception for novels by Lamming, Selvon and others (who were themselves often contributors to the periodicals or radio shows). It was in these critical forums, as well as in the novels themselves, that the debates about the theory of the novel took place.

In 'Conjectures on World Literature' (2000), Franco Moretti offered the hypothesis that novels from the non-European 'periphery' necessarily constituted a compromise between imported form and indigenous materials. For him, this was a '*law of literary evolution*': the first fruits of a new movement towards 'distant' or 'serial' reading required to conceive of texts as operating within a literary world-system.<sup>105</sup> But in the context of the West Indian novels and novel theory I discuss, Moretti's claim obscures what was in fact a changing understanding of the novel form and its cultural locations. In my introduction I discussed how anxieties about cultural loss – the slim repertoire of non-European cultural resources on which decolonising movements could draw – had presented themselves to West Indian thinkers on the cusp of independence, and increased (or rather motivated an increasingly vehement and urgent rebuttal) in the first postcolonial decades. But in the case of the novel, at least, the concept of cultural indigeneity and the idea that literary forms like the novel were foreign or imported, became important to writers and theorists only gradually through the late 1950s and 1960s. An earlier generation of nationalist thinkers (such as C.L.R. James) had championed the creation of a canon of novels by West Indian authors, with West Indian subject-matter, to sit alongside, or in place of, the European canon. But through the 1960s, the European origins of the novel form itself, and the question of what an indigenous West Indian novel might look like, become dominant. This change

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<sup>105</sup> Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 44, 50.

dovetailed with the disappointments that followed the failure of Federation and the achievement of constitutional independence in the early 1960s.

Changing ideas of the novel form both drew on and fed into the practices of West Indian novelists. Rather than separating novel criticism from the literary argumentation, speculation, and polemic taking place within the novels themselves, I read these two bodies of texts as operating in dialogue, participating in a cross-genre conversation about the theory of the novel.<sup>106</sup> V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) was, I argue, a crucial text on which debate about the theory of the novel turned. *Biswas* picks up on, and responds to, questions about the novel that were being posed in the critical and novelistic writing of the 1950s. And critical responses to *Biswas*, and debates about the formal and political achievements of the novel, dominated the ongoing conversation about the theory of the novel as it evolved through the 1960s. It was itself an intervention, a catalyst for critical debate, and a bellwether for changing trends in West Indian cultural theory.

*Biswas* departs from earlier ideas which had seen the adoption of the novel for nationalist purposes as unproblematic and non-contradictory. Instead, like criticism published in its wake, *Biswas* shows a heightened sensitivity to the geographical origins of cultural forms: figuring the novel, and especially the *Bildungsroman*, as comically and tragically inappropriate in the West Indies, creating expectations and desires that are unrealisable in colonial contexts. It offers a pessimistic view of the West Indian writer as a 'conscript' (in David Scott's terms) of a colonial idiom, a delimited repertoire of imaginative forms through which no liberating or sovereign thought could

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<sup>106</sup> In the pattern of Angela Leighton's, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), I am less interested in offering a normative or essential account of the novel form in this period than in examining the way in which ideas and conversations about form amongst writers and theorists worked symbiotically, feeding into subsequent theoretical and novelistic production.

be articulated. This position was developed in dialogue with other Caribbean writers and thinkers, and *Biswas* addresses Naipaul's Caribbean contemporaries in subtle ways. It was received with deep admiration by writers such as Kamau Brathwaite and Sylvia Wynter, as a landmark articulation of the predicament of Caribbean people in the era of decolonisation. But as critical priorities continued to shift – as the project of imagining a cultural idiom that was demonstrably non-European became more urgent – Brathwaite and others would grow critical of *Biswas*, which self-consciously adopts European models in its own formal arrangement, and envisages no prospect of redress for the Caribbean subject. *Biswas* continued to play a dominant role in critical essays well into the 1970s. But later criticism sought novels that moved beyond the impasse explored by *Biswas*: brave new novels that acknowledged the problem of the inherited form, but constructed in its place an authentic and original West Indian novelistic idiom.

While 'British and American commentators are liable to single Naipaul out as "unarguably the most brilliant interpreter in English (perhaps in any language) of the maelstrom of the Third World,"' Rob Nixon writes, 'the viewpoints of Caribbeans, South Asians, Arabs, Africans, and Latin-Americans offer, on the whole, quite contrary testimony'.<sup>107</sup> Nixon is writing with reference to Naipaul's later work, but the picture he presents of Naipaul as detached from his Caribbean origins, writing for a Western audience, and as acclaimed in London and New York as he is reviled in the formerly colonised world, has crystallised into received wisdom, particularly outside the Caribbean.<sup>108</sup> *A House for Mr Biswas*, and its subsequent reception, reveals the inadequacy of this picture. *Biswas* was seen by Brathwaite as a landmark text in the

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<sup>107</sup> Nixon, *London Calling*, p. 4. Nixon is citing an anonymous *New Yorker* review from May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1980.

<sup>108</sup> McIntosh alludes to this caricature in McIntosh, p. 1. Belinda Edmundson describes how in Caribbean criticism, despite his political disagreements, Naipaul has consistently been read alongside James Lamming and Walcott as a writer 'centrally concerned with the question of how to represent Caribbean national identity', and one who was deeply influential in this tradition. See Edmundson, p. 1.

history of West Indian literature even after he no longer put it forward as a model to be emulated, and Brathwaite was not alone in this assessment. At the same time, the history of *Biswas's* composition and reception, which shows Naipaul's evolving place within the field of West Indian letters, also gives a clue as to how this image of Naipaul emerged. Through the 1960s, as Naipaul was increasingly portrayed as an oppositional or reactionary figure within West Indian literary culture, his own writing increasingly emphasised his distance from the politics of Brathwaite and others. One way he articulated this distance was by cultivating a pose of detachment or political disinterest, at a time in which Brathwaite was emphasising the instrumental political value of Caribbean literary work. But the emergence of these increasingly opposed positions should not be seen as the coming-to-light of antecedent essences: as if earlier admiration for Naipaul's book had been the result of some collective confusion or amnesia. Nor should Naipaul's pose of detachment be accepted uncritically. The positions of Naipaul, Brathwaite and others emerge dialogically through the course of the 1960s, in response to one another, and to the changing positions of the participants in a mutable political landscape.

The remainder of this chapter is structured in four parts. In the first I describe the debates about the novel form in the years preceding, and immediately after the publication of *Biswas*. Whilst attention to novelistic form and its social affordances in the contemporary West Indies increased in this period, I show how later ideas about literary forms as culturally located conduits of colonial ideology were not yet dominant. In the second part, I read *Biswas* as a transformational text, which did frame the novel form in this way. In the third, I describe how Brathwaite – who had earlier championed the book – would later argue that, despite its acute diagnosis of a West Indian cultural anxiety, in failing to offer an alternative vision for West Indian creative writing it could

not be viewed as a progressive text. And I show how Naipaul reacted against this attempt to instrumentalize literary texts in his writings from the later 1960s, as postcolonial Trinidadian politics, and his position within Caribbean literary culture, began to change. In the final part, I suggest that Sylvia Wynter's essays, and her writing on Naipaul, constitute a model for understanding the position and role of his work in West Indian letters and public debate.

### MODERNISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS: JAMES, LAMMING, BRATHWAITE

How did nationalist intellectuals of the generation before Lamming celebrate the rise of the novel in the West Indies and conceive of the nation-building work that it did? In a *Trinidad Guardian* article highlighting in the importance of the new West Indian novelists, C.L.R. James (born in 1901, a quarter-century before Lamming) draws an analogy between West Indian writing and West Indian cricket. When he had arrived in England, James writes, he had found his friend Learie Constantine's claim that the West Indian cricket team, if properly organised, could compete with England and Australia 'unduly nationalistic'. But over time James had 'lived to see half-a-dozen West Indian cricketers acknowledged as people who could hold their own in any department of the game with the greatest historical figures who have ever been'. 'Learie was right all the time and I, who have very good judgement about cricket, was wrong.' He makes the 'nationalistic' case for West Indian novelists in similar terms:

Take the whole line of them, Jane Austen, Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, William Makepeace Thackeray, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence – and even Charles Dickens. None of them at twenty-three was so

much a master of the novelist's business as this young man, George Lamming, who had grown up in the West Indies[.]<sup>109</sup>

James's argument is that young West Indian writers can compete: they can contribute to the development of the English language novel, just as its cricketers had proved to be masters of that most English game, cricket. The novels produced would be of the same order as the English-language novels before them – he positions Lamming as part of a developing 'line' or tradition – though their subject matter would be West Indian. It is notable that the 'long line' he names is not a nationalistic one – Twain and Faulkner sit alongside Austen and Fielding – but represents what were for him simply the landmarks of the English-language novel. For James, the imperative was not to critique the inherited form, but to show that West Indians could use it as well as anyone else.

James's argument here is in fact consistent with his vision of West Indian people as a 'Western people'. His version of nationalism aimed to enfranchise West Indian people *within* the 'Western civilization' to which he believed they belonged; it did not attempt to move outside that cultural superstructure (though James did believe that the West Indian contribution would enrich and modify it).<sup>110</sup> The creation of a West Indian national culture and novelistic tradition mattered profoundly to him. But he would not have seen it as contradictory that the cultural forms he champions as sites of West Indian nationalist self-expression are historically Western ones. A younger generation of West Indian writers, such as Lamming, would grow uneasy with the idea of the West Indian people as Western. But they would continue to champion the West Indian novel in a similar way. They saw the adoption of the novel by West Indian writers as an important development in the history of nationalist self-expression. And writers and critics in the late 1950s and 1960s begin to explore how different styles of

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<sup>109</sup> C.L.R. James, 'Home Is Where They Want to Be', *The Trinidad Guardian*, 14 February 1965, Magazine, pp. 4–5 (p. 4).

<sup>110</sup> C.L.R. James, 'Home Is Where They Want to Be', p. 5.

novel writing might be more or less appropriate for describing West Indian societies and speaking to or for West Indian audiences. But in these texts the European origins or colonial history of the form (or of specific novelistic styles, such as modernism) are not focussed on, or seen to influence the use-value of the novel in the nationalist project.

Lamming's manifesto for the novel in *The Pleasures of Exile*, and his description of 'the discovery of the novel by West Indians as a way of investigating and projecting the inner experience of the West Indian community', is a famous example of this. Unquestionably, he was less comfortable than James with the idea that the West Indies were a Western space. He thought that the West Indian novel gave privileged insight into the life of the West Indian 'peasant' (*PE*, 39). His claim for the centrality of 'peasant' experience in West Indian literature was synonymous with growing calls for a literature which described the 'folk'. Lamming used this idealised notion of the 'peasant[ry]' or the 'folk', as other West Indian intellectuals were beginning to do, to stand for 'a piece of Caribbean culture largely untouched by colonial influence'.<sup>111</sup> But his ideas about the novel form have structural similarities to those of James. He thought that West Indian folk communities were different from European ones; and he thought that this different experience needed to be testified to in writing. But he did not call for a new mode of writing to communicate this different experience. For him, the novel was the perfect vehicle for this interior, local experience, and so in the end – like James – what was important for Lamming was its 'discovery' or deployment *by* West Indians.

Lamming's understanding of the novel form, like his novelistic practice, derived from an understanding of the novel as a vehicle of interiority and subjective experience that he had gleaned from modernist writers in London. Contrasting the novelist, whose

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<sup>111</sup> Edmondson, p. 9. For a longer account of the importance of 'the folk' as a concept in West Indian writing, see Edmondson pp.58-77.

task was to ‘relate [...] West Indian experience from this inside’, with the ‘travel books’ and anthropological treaties which looked from the outside, ‘like old-fashioned cameras,’ he draws on a commonplace of modernist thought that the novel was a privileged site of interiority (*PE*, 37-38). Like the young Virginia Woolf, he positions the novel in opposition to cinematographic representation (which for Woolf provided only a ‘surface vision incapable of suggesting interiority’)<sup>112</sup> as a vehicle for interior, subjective experience.<sup>113</sup> Lamming’s account of the novel emphasises its affordances, not its history (and does not see the former to be substantially affected by the latter). The novel was for Lamming the ideal technology for commuting the internal experience of a society: European countries had enjoyed this technology for generations, and now it was the turn of the West Indies. Novels communicated interiority; West Indian novels communicated West Indian interiority. In this way, they spoke back to colonial descriptions of Caribbean people, revising the accounts imposed upon them from the outside.

Criticism of Lamming’s thesis did not initially question this basic presupposition: that there was no tension in using the novel for this anticolonial purpose. At the same time, many West Indian critics were sceptical of the claims he was making about the novel, and its ability to speak for the West Indian ‘folk’ (whoever they might be). Around Lamming’s work – both his novels and his treatise – a body of critical writing emerged which interrogated how contemporary West Indian novels

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<sup>112</sup> Laura Marcus is paraphrasing Woolf’s characterisation of cinema here, in Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 103.

<sup>113</sup> Rachel Bowlby describes the common modernist idea that subjective experience – ‘the mind’ – was ‘the novel’s reality’. Rachel Bowlby, ‘Foreword’, in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers), pp.xi-xviii (p. xvi). The emergence of Lamming’s ideas about the novel (in theory and practice) in post-war London, in dialogue with metropolitan modernist writers has been discussed in J. Dillon Brown, *Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), pp. 73–102. As Brown notes, cursory attention to Lamming’s writings from the period show his later claims ‘that in the 1950s he was not paying attention to English writers and critics’ to have been a retrospective fiction (p.189).

related to the wider society. The question was not, at this point, what an indigenous West Indian novel, outside of the tradition of European writing, might look like, but rather what kind of novel, what narrative structures and styles, might be appropriate to the West Indian setting. This conversation often resolved itself onto the debate between realism and modernism.

Lamming's *Pleasures of Exile* articulates excitement about the rise of the West Indian novel, and its role in the development of West Indian national consciousness. Yet for many critics, the novel Lamming outlined in *The Pleasures of Exile* – speaking for the experiences of the West Indian peasantry from the inside – did not bear much resemblance to the majority of West Indian novels that were actually being written and published. Prominent novelists, including Lamming, were mostly writing from London, and rather than speaking about the West Indian peasantry ‘from the inside’ the subject of their work was predominantly the emigrant experience: that of middle-class West Indian travellers alienated from the ‘folk’ back home. As a result, descriptions of ‘the folk’ tended to be abstract, nostalgic, and romantic.<sup>114</sup> As Simon Gikandi has argued, this ‘modernist aesthetic’ seemed well suited to articulate the ‘primary themes’ of novelists like Lamming: ‘the alienation of subjects and the fragmentation of communities’.<sup>115</sup> But in order to do the nation-building work that Lamming wanted it to do, it had its limitations. Lamming's own *In the Castle of My Skin* (1955), for example, does offer a retrospective account of the narrator's adolescence in Barbados, but its

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<sup>114</sup> Supriya Nair notes that ‘the paradox of asserting the primacy of the Caribbean novel from the literary mecca of London in 1960 was precisely what led Lamming to inflate its status’. Triumphant accounts which positioned ‘the novel of decolonization [...] as a self-conscious act of collective rehabilitation’ were given the lie by ‘the many bleak, uncertain, or stalled endings of the project of rehabilitation as represented in the novels’ own conclusions’. Supriya Nair, ‘The Novel and Decolonization in the Caribbean’, in *The Novel in Africa and the Caribbean Since 1950*, ed. by Simon Gikandi, The Oxford History of the Novel in English XI (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 55–68 (pp. 56, 65).

<sup>115</sup> Simon Gikandi, ‘Introduction’, in *The Novel in Africa and the Caribbean Since 1950*, ed. by Simon Gikandi, The Oxford History of the Novel in English XI (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), xv–xxviii (p. xxv).

highly literary, referential prose foregrounds the writer's separation from the Barbadian 'folk' rather than integration within that community. Accordingly, as in Naipaul's *Miguel Street* (1957), the plot of the novel builds towards the narrator-protagonist's eventual departure.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, there was a consistent accusation that the 'difficulty' of these novels made them accessible only to an elite or foreign readership, familiar with European modernist conventions.<sup>117</sup>

Edward Kamau Brathwaite's essays 'Sir Galahad and the Islands' (1957) and 'Roots' (1963) – both published in the Barbadian periodical *BIM* – are the best known critical works to dissent from the kinds of claim Lamming was making for the novel in this period. In 'Sir Galahad', Brathwaite criticised the widening gulf between novelists living in London who purported to speak for or to West Indian communities, and the communities they purported to represent. Brathwaite believed that the geographical dislocation between writer and subject had had two effects. First, it had led to 'the dislocation of the old, folk personality' within the work of emigrant writers. Their relationship with West Indian communities was remote enough to have reduced their writing about that community to a satirical or sentimental caricature, and in place of an authentic social consciousness had grown a literature of 'disorganization' or 'misunderstanding'; these novels were 'cul-de-sacs' (*R*, 24). Secondly, the absence of

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<sup>116</sup> Malachi McIntosh gives a detailed account of the 'unique conceptual locus' of highly educated, middle-class writers like Lamming 'bred from a junctional position between classes and nationalities'. 'In practice,' McIntosh notes, instead of offering a direct access to the 'thoughts and feelings of his peasant countrymen', as Lamming promises in *Pleasures*, Lamming's work 'displays a range of sympathies and antagonisms [...] and [a] striking ambivalence about personal identity, and [...] houses frequent, likely unintended, exaltations of the detached, separated intellectual over the peasant collective'. McIntosh, pp. 16, 55.

<sup>117</sup> James, for example, in the essay quoted above, offers a scarcely veiled criticism of Wilson Harris: 'Passage after passage of Harris' latest novel seems to come directly from Heidegger who is, perhaps, the most difficult and idiosyncratic of Western philosophers [...] Harris is a difficult writer [...] He is absolutely untroubled by any concern that he may or may not be fully understood. [...] I am certain that the difficulty which so many readers find in Harris would be diminished and in time would disappear if Harris were living and writing and being printed at home for the West Indian audience.' James, 'Home is Where They Want to Be' pp. 4-5. J. Dillon Brown offers a defence of Lamming's 'difficulty' in his chapter 'Engaging the Reader: the Difficulties of George Lamming' in Brown, pp. 73–102.

these emigrant writers deprived writers who had remained in the Caribbean of ‘the whole living support of an indigenous tradition’ (*R*, 19).

In ‘Roots’, written six years later, Brathwaite returned to the subject of ‘Sir Galahad’. In the wake of a concerted effort by politicians and cultural administrators at the beginning of the 1960s, a number of West Indian writers had travelled back to the West Indies, and published work at least partially set in the islands.<sup>118</sup> Brathwaite acknowledged this, noting that many of the writers he had written about in ‘Sir Galahad’ had ‘returned home[,] if not to work at least to travel among the islands on assignments or extended stays’ (*R*, 29). Despite this, he was not positive about the outlook for the Caribbean novel, sensing a continued preoccupation with rootless and alienation. He wrote:

Sam Selvon on a street in Port of Spain or standing by the Thames; Lamming in England or back in San Christobel; [Neville] Dawes at Oxford or in Orange Town, 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 [*sic*]’ (*R*, 36).

If ‘Sir Galahad’ broached the topic of emigration, and the themes it foregrounded, ‘Roots’ dwelt on the residual ‘rhythms and techniques’ – ways of writing and framing experience – which arose from the experience of migration, and had continued to dominate West Indian letters even after many authors returned home. Lamming’s *Of Age and Innocence* (1959), which describes the return of emigrant West Indians to their native island ‘San Christobel’, is representative of this. As in the ‘disunified rhythms and forms’ of Lamming’s London-set novel *The Emigrants* (1954) (*R*, 21), it ‘had done no more than raise to life those frustrations its author [...] sought (presumably) to exorcise’, despite its topoi of return and re-engagement (*R*, 37).

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<sup>118</sup> Eric Williams’s commission for Naipaul’s *The Middle Passage* (the Trinidadian government paid for Naipaul’s Caribbean journey) was part of a wider trend in Caribbean cultural policy of the period. I return to this subject below.

The exception to this trend, and the book Brathwaite believed showed a way forward for the West Indian novel, was V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, first published in London in 1961. With *Biswas*, Brathwaite wrote, Naipaul had completed a series of novels which had come, 'almost overnight, to topple the whole hierarchy of our literary values and set up new critical standards of form and order in the West Indian novel' (R, 39):

In *A House for Mr Biswas* we have at last a novel whose central character is clearly defined, who is really trying to get *in* rather than get *out*. We have too, I think, the first West Indian novel which has clearly defined boundaries – a house, a district, a family clan, a specific group. And so in *Mr Biswas* one comes face to face with a faith (or conscious lack of it), a way of seeing and believing – a culture, in other words (R, 42-3).

For Brathwaite, *Biswas* was at last a novel about an individual who was integrated in a 'folk' community. Moreover, Naipaul's novel represented not just an innovation in subject matter but in the 'form' of the West Indian novel (R, 54).

Naipaul's first innovation, for Brathwaite, is stylistic. 'Most, if not all West Indian writers' with the exception of Naipaul were 'under the influence of the Lawrence-Faulkner-Hemingway tradition of folk-talk and rhythmic prose' also associated with the 'Irish exiles' (i.e. Joyce). 'But very few of our writers', Brathwaite writes, 'are really "of the people"'. Rather, they were 'middle class' writers using modernist styles – including primitivist, caricatured 'folk rhythms' – as a 'sign and symbol of their rejection' of a complex, multi-faceted society. By contrast, as Naipaul had shown, 'any attempt to describe society in any whole and complex way calls for technically a *prose* style which can catch the varying shifts and shades of narrative, action and speech' (R, 52-3). In contrast to the modernist idea of the novel as a record of interior vision and often singular perspective, Brathwaite champions an older tradition of prose-writing associated with realist writers like Balzac. The '*prose style*'

that Brathwaite reaches for is analytic and mundane (perhaps in contrast to the somatic experience of poetry) and can ‘catch’ the nuances and changes in a whole society; it is a record of social analysis, not of interior consciousness. Making explicit the historical coordinates of the style of novelistic writing that he is championing, Brathwaite writes, ‘To write really well about a living society [...] one has simply to be an “old fashioned” writer like Hardy, Dickens, George Eliot, or Jane Austen. This is what Naipaul is’ (*R*, 53). As James had with Lamming, Brathwaite positions Naipaul in a ‘Great Tradition’ of English-language novelists. But in contrast to James (and indeed F.R. Leavis) he strips out modernist writers like Lawrence or Faulkner, and retains only a list of nineteenth-century novelists in the English realist tradition.<sup>119</sup>

Ben Etherington, perhaps seeking to defend the consistency of Brathwaite’s cultural thought across the span of his career, has suggested that Brathwaite is beguiled, in this passage, by Naipaul’s technical ‘ease’ into forgetting or ignoring the historical significance of ‘Naipaul’s particular medium, the novel’.<sup>120</sup> But Naipaul’s engagement with the novel – not just on the level of sentence-style but on the wider level of plot, structure, and organization – is precisely what interests Brathwaite in ‘Roots’. ‘A return by our writers to a sense of responsibility to West Indian society will be reflected’, he writes, ‘in a greater and more careful understanding of *what the novel form means*’ (*R*, 54; my emphasis). Declaring that ‘[n]ovels are essentially the expression of a society, they reflect the individual toil *within* that society’ (*R*, 54), Brathwaite is drawing on an understanding of the European realist novel as a social form which – by exploring the

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<sup>119</sup> Peter Kalliney – in an essay on the debt owed by Brathwaite to Leavis – notes that the ‘short list’ of writers to whom Brathwaite compares Naipaul ‘effectively reproduces Leavis’s enumeration of the great nineteenth-century novelists’. He does not note that Brathwaite pointedly removes Henry James and Joseph Conrad from Leavis’s canon. Peter J. Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 96.

<sup>120</sup> Ben Etherington, ‘What Is Materialism’s Material? Thoughts toward (actually against) a Materialism for “World Literature”’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48 (2012), 539–51 (p. 545).

tension between individual fantasy and social reality – expressed and attempted to resolve the ‘formal tension between what might be called the individual life and the overarching [social] pattern’.<sup>121</sup> This characteristic was most clearly expressed in the *Bildungsroman* – what Jed Esty calls the ‘novel of education’ and ‘socialization’ – a genre to which Naipaul makes extensive allusion in *Biswas*.<sup>122</sup> Timothy Brennan, following Benedict Anderson, has shown the formative role the realist novel played in the European nationalist thought,<sup>123</sup> and how anti-colonial twentieth-century writers attempted to draw on this tradition.<sup>124</sup> For Brathwaite, the realist novel was an appropriate form for describing the contemporary Caribbean situation. At this time, Caribbean communities were seeking independence from Great Britain, but were also marked by severe internal divisions across class and racial lines, by waves of outward migration to the colonial centre, and by the breakdown of the West Indian Federation in 1962. In this context, Naipaul’s deployment of the ‘old fashioned’ novel offered not just a prose style that could ‘describe’ the society in a ‘whole and complex way’ but a model, a structural narrative, for how different visions of sovereignty or freedom

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<sup>121</sup> Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 90.

<sup>122</sup> Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 4.

<sup>123</sup> It is worth recalling that Anderson’s theory of the relationship between the novel and the formation of national ‘imagined communities’ relied on a similar understanding of the novel as an (avowedly) realist representation of a complex social structure. The novel he imagines takes place in ‘a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside’. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 35.

<sup>124</sup> Brennan’s essay emphasises the difficulties and contradictions inherent in this search in a manner that parallels many of the anxieties felt by West Indian novelists. The ‘paradox’ of the ‘new novel’, he writes, was that ‘under conditions of illiteracy and shortages, and given simply the leisure-time necessary for reading one, the novel has been an elitist and minority form in developing countries when compared to poem, song, television, and film. Almost inevitably it has been the form through which a thin, foreign-educated stratum (however sensitive or committed to domestic political interests) has communicated to metropolitan reading publics, often in translation. It has been, in short, a naturally cosmopolitan form that empire has allowed to play a national role, as it were, only in the international arena.’ Timothy Brennan, ‘The National Longing for Form’, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 44–71 (p. 56).

(different fantasies of the future) might be guided towards, or reconciled with, consensual alignment within emerging national polities (*R*, 53).

In their writings of the 1950s and early 1960s, Brathwaite and Lamming have different ideas about ‘what the novel form means’. For Lamming it was a technology that gave access to interiority, to the lived experience of the West Indian peasantry. For Brathwaite, it afforded the description of a wider social totality, and the integration of individuals within that. Each emphasises a different affordance of the novel form, and each makes the case that one kind of novel – realist or modernist – is particularly suited to the needs of the West Indian community at this time. This fretting about the appropriateness of literary forms or traditions to the West Indian context, and their shared insistence that the West Indian novel must authentically represent West Indian experience, prefigures much of Brathwaite’s later thinking, in which he would ask what an indigenous West Indian – as opposed to derivative European – novel would look like. But at this stage, the derivativeness of the novelistic styles that Lamming and Brathwaite were advocating does not trouble them in itself. Quite the opposite, in the case of Brathwaite, who was happy to acknowledge the Great Tradition of the English novel into which Naipaul (he believed) had inserted himself. Rather than admonishing Naipaul for this, at this stage he thinks it admirable and worthy of imitation.

As David Scott notes, Brathwaite’s essays of this period are written in response to the ‘Eurocentric or colonialist construction of [...] the New World African as bereft of authentic sources of history and culture and as parasitic on Europe’.<sup>125</sup> For Brathwaite, the creation of a West Indian national literature – written by, for and about West Indians – was a necessary antidote to this. What he had not yet arrived at was the idea that literary forms were also located, that a West Indian literature required a West

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<sup>125</sup> David Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, p. 111.

Indian form, idiom, and – in his famous phrase – ‘nation language’ (*R*, 259). This would become a dominant strand of thought in the later 1960s, and Brathwaite himself is the figure most associated with this movement. The absence of these ideas in ‘Roots’ is not an error or an oversight, but rather an index of its moment of writing. The essays of Brathwaite and Lamming discussed in this section can be seen as occupying a middle position or interregnum. They did not understand the West Indies as a culturally ‘Western’ space, in the way that James had. They wanted to think about alternatives to this, and were in fact – as I will come onto – beginning to search for these alternatives in Africa (as a physical and imaginative space). But this search was not, at this point, accompanied by a critique of the inherited forms of European writing. In the next section I will argue that such a critique of inherited form was in fact latent – though unacknowledged by Brathwaite at this time – in *A House for Mr Biswas*.

## CONSCRIPTS OF COLONIAL FORM: *A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS*

### (a) Naipaul before *Biswas*

‘And, now,’ Naipaul wrote to his parents in September 1951, ‘about my magnum opus: *The Shadow’d Livery*. This morning, at half past eleven, I wrote the end of what has turned out to be a 277 page thing in typescript’. ‘The man at the Ashmolean Museum’ he reported, ‘thinks it highly readable’. At this time, Naipaul was a student, just returned to England from a holiday to Paris. His tone is in thrall to the Bright Young Things and to Oxford (‘Well, aren’t we all quite, quite mad!’); he is amused by his

parents' attempt to send him cigarettes concealed in a sugar-tin; he looks forward to the publication of his novel; he is nineteen years old.<sup>126</sup>

Naipaul's letters from his time at university (1950-53), not least their affected style, corroborate a story about his beginnings as a writer that he will return to in retrospective accounts like *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*. In *Enigma* he describes the 'roman[ti]c' fantasy of the sophisticated metropolitan writer that he entertained about himself when he arrived in Britain, and his disastrous attempt at an English society-novel, 'Gala Night', in the style of Evelyn Waugh (*EA* 133-5). In *A Way in the World*, he describes another juvenile novel: a 'farce with a local setting' about an Afro-Trinidadian who had 'given himself the name of an African king' (*WW*, 83). This recalls, and may be a nod to, the plot of Waugh's *Black Mischief* (1932). In both cases, the books are failures, as 'The Shadow'd Livery' had proved to be in real life. In Naipaul's retrospective accounts, this failure prompts the narrator to see for the first time that his true subject was his own experience: a 'double inheritance, from my story-telling Hindu family, and from the creole street life of Port of Spain' (*WW*, 87). These narratives tell the story of the genesis of Naipaul's early novels, such as *Miguel Street* published in 1959 but written in 1955. In this story, which seems to be based on fact, Naipaul came of age as a writer by dispensing with metropolitan affectation and subject matter, and speaking instead about his own West Indian experience. His writings from the mid-to-late 1950s contain many similar ideas to the work of Brathwaite and Lamming from this period. They each call for, and seek to instantiate,

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<sup>126</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Letters between a Father and Son*, updated edn (London: Picador, 2009), pp. 173, 175.

West Indian writing that – turning to Caribbean ‘material’ – creates a body of West Indian literature that is authentic, singular and new.<sup>127</sup>

Naipaul’s criticism and radio commentary from the mid-1950s give a window onto his very early ideas about literary form and the novel. The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Caversham, BBC Written Archive, *Caribbean Voices* Scripts 1163 (16.09.1956).<sup>128</sup> Naipaul attacks the fashion for European modernist aesthetics, what he calls the ‘pretentiousness of borrowed technique’, within the work of Caribbean writers. And his prediction that an affiliation to the ‘brittle unloveliness of the moderns’ will end up ‘isolat[ing] the Caribbean writer from his society’ recalls C.L.R. James’s criticism of Wilson Harris (cited earlier in this chapter) and prefigures the argument Brathwaite would make in ‘Roots’.<sup>129</sup> J. Dillon Brown is correct to note the hints of ‘Caribbean cultural nationalism’ in such statements, and is surprised by them, given Naipaul’s later reputation. But it is too simple to dismiss the apparent incongruity with the claim that for Naipaul ‘West Indian literature *is* British’.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, in the same September 1956 broadcast cited above (a review of the past year’s submissions to *Caribbean Voices*), Naipaul tries to be explicit on this subject.

The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Caversham, BBC Written Archive, *Caribbean Voices* Scripts 1163 (16.09.1956).

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<sup>127</sup> McIntosh has argued that calls for ‘authenticity’ by Caribbean writers from this period – and claims for their own work’s singular ‘authenticity’ – were also motivated by the desire to carve a space for themselves in the British literary marketplace (as distinctive spokespeople for a distant, exotic world). I find this argument convincing, but – tracing the development of this debate in both metropolitan *and* Caribbean media spheres – I show that the positions these writers took were very much intended to signify within a West Indian public sphere also. See McIntosh, p. 54. Naipaul refers to the writer’s ‘material’ repeatedly in *EA*, for example on pp.131-3.

<sup>128</sup> The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Caversham, BBC Written Archive, *Caribbean Voices* Scripts 1163 (16.09.1956).

<sup>129</sup> cit. Brown, pp. 172–73.

<sup>130</sup> Brown, p. 173.

Perhaps if Naipaul had distributed the emphasis differently – The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Caversham, BBC Written Archive, *Caribbean Voices* Scripts 1163 (16.09.1956) – this passage might have been read as an aestheticist manifesto. But distributed as it is – [The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Caversham, BBC Written Archive, *Caribbean Voices* Scripts 1163 (16.09.1956)]– and in the context of the rest of the passage and Naipaul’s other commentaries from the period, it becomes clear that Naipaul is articulating what was (I have suggested) a common idea.<sup>131</sup> The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Caversham, BBC Written Archive, *Caribbean Voices* Scripts 1163 (16.09.1956).

The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Caversham, BBC Written Archive, *Caribbean Voices* Scripts 1163 (16.09.1956). In his creative work from the period Naipaul experiments with different styles. *Miguel Street*, written ‘from the level of the street’ (WW, 87), foregrounds subjective, interior vision, recalling Lamming. The next book Naipaul wrote, *The Mystic Masseur*, begins to move towards a third-person narrator, giving voice to a shared or communal consciousness.<sup>132</sup> Naipaul’s criticism from the period also offers tentative answers. The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Caversham, BBC Written Archive, *Caribbean Voices*

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<sup>131</sup> Naipaul’s scripts, which he prepared himself and corrected in his own hand, are preserved in the BBC Written Archive in Caversham. Emphasis is marked on the typescript by a typed underline rather than italics.

<sup>132</sup> In *The Mystic Masseur*, the narrator is a part of the diegetic universe of the novel, but is not its protagonist. The story he tells is one that he has partly seen first-hand, and partly heard, and hence draws on the idea of a story held in common by a village (or indeed, ‘folk’) community.

Scripts 1023 (2.1.1955). But Naipaul's prescriptions are not creative: The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Caversham, BBC Written Archive, *Caribbean Voices* Scripts 1023 (2.1.1955). Brown notes the influence of British Movement writers in his call for a stylistic 'rigour and pungency entirely free from affectation'.<sup>133</sup> The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Caversham, BBC Written Archive, *Caribbean Voices* Scripts 1023 (2.1.1955), his analysis is only a more basic version of Brathwaite's in 'Roots': he is searching not for a local West Indian style but for a technique appropriate to (what he perceives to be) the task in hand.

The theory of the novel Naipaul subscribes to in his early criticism is similar to that of his West Indian contemporaries. They are all searching for novels that speak to a singular, local West Indian experience, and there is considerable debate as to what style of novel-writing might allow that. But the idea that specific novelistic styles – or even the novel form *per se* – might be culturally located conduits of colonial ideology is not yet dominant or fully articulated. In his non-fiction writing from the mid-1960s onwards, however, Naipaul will make this idea explicit. 'The novel is of the West', Naipaul would write in *An Area of Darkness* (1964): 'it is part of the Western concern with [...] the here and now' with the immediate and visible.<sup>134</sup> These comments are echoed in later statements: 'The novel was an imported form' (*LO*, 20); it 'gave nineteenth-century Europe a certain kind of news'; the twentieth century, 'surfeited' by imperial collapse and mass migration, requires another kind of news, and another form

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<sup>133</sup> Brown, p. 172. Brown is quoting Naipaul here, speaking in a March 1955 *Caribbean Voices* broadcast.

<sup>134</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, p. 230.

of literary representation. ‘But the novel, still (in spite of appearances) mimicking the programme of the nineteenth-century originators, still feeding off the vision they created, can subtly distort the new reality’ (*LO*, 30-31). This is a concretely historical and spatial understanding of literary form. Forms arise in a specific time and place and bear the traces of the social formations and ideologies which provoked their creation. To transplant an old form into a new society is to ‘subtly distort’ that society’s reality. This is the crucial idea that Naipaul arrives at and explores in *A House for Mr Biswas*.

In ‘Roots’, Brathwaite recognizes that the nineteenth-century realist novel is a form Naipaul is engaging in *Biswas*, and that its engagement in a West Indian setting is significant. But the theorization of the novel that takes place in *Biswas* itself goes far beyond the ‘documentary writing’ that Naipaul’s early, realist manifesto had called for; and it shows a less happy view of formal transplant or adoption than Brathwaite, in ‘Roots’, chose to emphasise. Indeed, *Biswas*’s subject is not just material sovereignty – the search for housing or accommodation – but conceptual and literary sovereignty: the ability to imagine or articulate one’s own experience and aspirations in an idiom that is not imposed from the outside. Or rather, it is about the failure of this search, the dependency of the West Indian imagination on colonial ways of writing and thinking. Naipaul explores this in two movements, which correspond loosely to the two ‘parts’ into which *Biswas* is divided. In the first, he focuses on Mr. Biswas as a reader of colonial texts, to show how colonial literatures and literary forms shaped West Indian subjectivities and their dreams of the future. In the second, he focuses on Mr. Biswas as a writer, frustrated by the gap between colonial written idioms and his own experience, yet unable to imagine alternatives.

#### (b) Biswas as Reader

As Baidik Bhattacharya notes, *A House for Mr Biswas* scrutinises ‘a particular mode of “subject formation” [...] that draws its provenance from colonialism as a cultural project’ in the British West Indies.<sup>135</sup> The novel takes place exclusively in colonial Trinidad: its characters find their successes and failures playing out within the unique architecture of Trinidadian society between c.1900 and 1950. Benedict Anderson’s famous description of the novel-which-imagines-a-nation might be applied to *Biswas*: its ‘*tour d’horizon* – hospitals, prisons, remote villages, monasteries, Indians, Negroes – is nonetheless not a *tour du monde*. The horizon is clearly bounded.’<sup>136</sup> Yet in this case the boundary established is permeable. The cultural horizon is established by material – television, cinema, but first of all and most importantly books – that arrive from the outside, mainly from London.

Describing the immense volume of colonial printed material in the mid-century British colony, the novel shows how the narratives and narrative structures that travel to the colonies go on to shape the imaginative lives of colonial subjects, that is, colonial readers. For this reason, the novel repeatedly stages events of reading,<sup>137</sup> and precisely what Mr Biswas is reading is described in detail, ostentatiously so. Among his favourite reading we find the Stoics, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus (*B*, 20, 128, 189, 241-2, 337, 389, 464), works of spiritual instruction from Jacob Boehme to contemporary American evangelists (189, 337), the self-help books of Samuel Smiles (78, 163, 165, 189, 337, 402, 464), and above all a plethora of popular (largely, though not exclusively middle-brow) Victorian and Edwardian novels, and American pulp fiction titles. To name only the novelists, the reader will find references to Warwick Deeping (363), Marie Corelli

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<sup>135</sup> Bhattacharya, p. 247. Bhattacharya is quoting from Foucault here.

<sup>136</sup> Anderson, p. 35.

<sup>137</sup> Neil ten Kortenaar details this phenomenon in *Postcolonial Literature and the Impact of Literacy: Reading and Writing in African and Caribbean Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 107–34.

(77, 316, 337), Hall Caine (77, 316, 337), and Max Brand (Frederick Faust) (489), as well as Walter Scott (519), Mark Twain (331, 337), W. Somerset Maugham (580), and Charles Dickens (368, 394, 416, 550). These names, and passages from the novels themselves, are the subject of frequent reference through the novel. One of Mr. Biswas's newer brothers-in-law becomes known as 'W.C. Tuttle' (423). 'I feel like Oliver Twist in the workhouse', Biswas's son Anand proclaims when his mother fails to provide ice-cream at Christmas (416).

Rather than being an elite, intellectual, or bourgeois activity, Mr Biswas's reading – and the reading matter he chooses – begins as a response to boredom and scarcity. In an early scene, Mr Biswas finds himself back in the 'back trace' of his mother's house (an informal shack) having been expelled from his apprenticeship with the pundit Jairam. 'During his long weeks of [enforced] leisure he read such novels as he could find on the stalls of Pagotes', a fictional market town in the sugar-belt of Trinidad:

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).

The ubiquity of popular English nineteenth-century novels, like the romances of Marie Corelli, in twentieth century British colonies has been attested to by Priya Joshi. And Joshi is right that the popularity of such texts among colonial readers, like Mr Biswas, complicates the 'bland and familiar narrative of imperial zealots such as Thomas Babington Macaulay on the one end and silent and compliant natives on the other'.<sup>138</sup> But Naipaul, in this passage, is also making a point about the paucity of alternatives available. Mr Biswas is part of a cusp generation in which basic literacy is becoming

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<sup>138</sup> Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) p.5.

more standard.<sup>139</sup> But though Port-of-Spain intellectuals might plausibly have had access to early Trinidadian novels or literary magazines (Mr Biswas begins to encounter these when he moves to the city and becomes a journalist), for most people English books – school readers, elocution guides, Bibles, and occasionally novels – were the only texts available.<sup>140</sup>

Insofar as this passage shows novels creating unrealistic expectations of the world for Mr Biswas, this might not be a phenomenon exclusive to the West Indian context. The novels Biswas is reading are ‘romances’, in the sense of ‘lightweight commercial fiction deliberately written to flatter day-dreamers’.<sup>141</sup> The idea that such ‘sub-literary’ fodder created outsized or fantastic expectations was a commonplace in the European novel also. Madame Bovary, like Mr Biswas, believes she has been born into the wrong landscape – ‘Does not love, like Indian plants, need a special soil, a particular climate?’ (‘Ne fallait-il pas à l’amour, comme aux plantes indiennes, des terrains prepares, une temperature particulière?’).<sup>142</sup> The ‘climate’ or ‘soil’ of romance and adventure had often been situated by European writers in an exoticized tropical island, and Naipaul nods to this, with the quip that for Biswas it is the tropics that are mundane and dull. But the larger joke, and the point at which Naipaul departs from his European predecessors, is that for Mr Biswas, in Trinidad, *everything* is ‘romantic’ in

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<sup>139</sup> Kenneth Ramchand's landmark study *The West Indian Novel and its Background* notably begins with an account of the slow spread of popular literacy on the island (pp.19-31). Mr Biswas is not a-typical in receiving ‘more zealous than competent’ instruction at a Canadian mission school, and the development of his reading-habit – first nourished by combination of pedagogical texts, popular magazines, and marketing copy – reflect the book-historical reality of the period. Ramchand, p.20.

<sup>140</sup> Ramchand describes how the paucity of printed material, and the strong association of reading with formal schooling, created two attitudes towards reading easily discernible in *Biswas*. On the one hand, the ‘unrelieved factualness’ of pedagogical approaches to reading gave readers a strictly utilitarian view of the activity; at the same time, low levels of literacy led to ‘awe’ toward ‘the power of the written word’. Ramchand, pp. 24-5. For a detailed account of the role of ‘School Readers’ in the West Indies, with specific reference to *Biswas*, see Robert Fraser, ‘School Readers in the Empire and the Creation of Postcolonial Taste’, in *Books Without Borders*, ed. by Robert Fraser and Mary Hammond (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), I, 89–106.

<sup>141</sup> Beer, *The Romance*, p. 1.

<sup>142</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: moeurs de province* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 113.

this sense: the whole economy of print which surrounds him participates in the creation of unrealizable fantasies.

In a retrospective passage in *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul recalls the proliferation, in wartime Trinidad, of advertisements for British goods that were no longer available, or which had ‘never been available in Trinidad and were now (because of war[...]) no longer being made’. As a child, he writes, ‘these advertisements – for things doubly and trebly removed from possibility – never struck me as odd’. ‘So I was used to living in a world where the signs were without meaning, or without the meaning intended by their makers’ (*EA*, 142-3). The way cultural forms lose meaning in their transit from Britain to the colonies is perhaps best expressed, in *Biswas*, in an early scene in which Mr Biswas, back at home in his mother’s ‘back trace’, reads Samuel Smiles: the Victorian evangelist of the gospel of ‘Self-Help’:

He had bought one of his books on 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*, 78).

In the ‘back traces’ of rural, colonial Trinidad, where no ‘ambitions could be pursued or have ‘meaning’ (‘apart from opening a shop or buying a motorbus, what could he do?’) (78), it is not just romantic pulp-fiction, but the supposedly practical, ‘Smilesean’ idea that people could “‘improve” themselves by personal effort and initiative’ that is fictitious (‘Smilesean’ *OED*). After reading Samuel Smiles, Mr Biswas buys ‘seven expensive volumes of *Hawkins’ Electrical Guide*’ in an attempt to become an inventor. But not knowing ‘where in Trinidad he could find the equipment mentioned so casually’, he cannot progress beyond making compasses and doorbells (78). Even *Hawkins’ Electrical Guide* is a ‘romantic’ text for Mr Biswas.

But Mr Biswas's error – mistaking a Samuel Smiles book for a 'novel' – establishes a simile that also makes a more subtle, literary-historical point. If Samuel Smiles's libertarian self-help manuals are in some sense like novels, then the novel, Naipaul suggests, is a bit like a Samuel Smiles book. And the manner in which Naipaul characterises the novel in this passage does not call to mind the romantic intrigues of Marie Corelli, but more mundane narratives of development and self-making. For Biswas, Samuel Smiles is a quintessential novelistic protagonist because he is 'young', 'poor' and 'struggling', yet with 'rigid ambitions', living in a society where these 'ambitions could be pursued and *had a meaning*' (B, 78; my emphasis). Naipaul is alluding to the *Bildungsroman* here: the same narratives, of individual growth and integration 'within a society', that Brathwaite had spoken of in 'Roots'. Brathwaite had read this as a realist literary genre which *Biswas* itself participated in. Here Naipaul directly alludes to the *Bildungsroman* as an ideological structure, with a distinctive social function: to reconcile 'youth and narrative, free self-making and social determination'.<sup>143</sup> But Naipaul's point is that these narratives are only 'meaningful' (or realistic) in societies where people are free to imagine and make their own future, and have the opportunity to realise these ambitions.

In these passages, Naipaul is making a point about narrative forms: that their meaning is 'distorted' as they move from the metropole to the colony. In particular, he is making an argument about the novel. Not just the exotic fantasies of the 'sub-literary romance' but the promises of the supposedly-realist *Bildungsroman* are irredeemable for the colonial subject. They are themselves romantic fantasies. For enchanted readers like Biswas they create expectations of a life that he will not be able to realise. Later in the novel, Mr Biswas learns the poem 'Paddle Your Own Canoe' from *Bell's Standard*

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<sup>143</sup> Esty, p. 4.

*Elocutionist* and quotes it to his extended family, calling it his ‘motto’ (B, 108). But its aspirational, individualistic message – of a piece with a Samuel Smiles book – contrasts comically with his own destitution, and his ‘motto’ becomes a source of mockery used by his family to belittle him. He is co-opted into a marriage which neither he nor his wife desires and consoles himself only with a pathetic sense of imagined social attainment: ‘He felt he had been involved in large events. He felt he had achieved status’ (93). The idea of *bildung* haunts the novel, the bourgeois ideal of free self-making symbolized by the house which Biswas seeks but will never truly own.<sup>144</sup> Arriving at the offices of the *Sentinel* at the beginning of his career as a writer, the newspaper editor asks Mr Biswas about his addiction to the English novel. ‘You read those for pleasure?’ he asks. ‘No,’ Mr Biswas says: ‘for the encouragement’ (337).

### (c) Biswas as Writer

One way of describing *A House for Mr Biswas* – though not the most appetizing for the casual reader – would be to say that it plots the emergence of a literary culture in Trinidad through the first half of the twentieth century. If the first half of the novel (very broadly) describes the subject-forming effects of imported, nineteenth-century British texts on young Trinidadian readers, the second describes the consequences of this colonial formation when readers became writers in the 1930s and 40s.

‘Why is it’, Simon Gikandi asks, ‘that in spite of the existence of the conditions that are considered to be ideal for novelistic production – the rising rates of literacy, an emerging middle class, and the introduction of the printing press’ (all phenomena

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<sup>144</sup> Fawzia Mustafa’s reading of *Biswas* identifies the symbol of the ‘house’ as a ‘nuclear unit of bourgeois ideology’. Fawzia Mustafa, *V.S. Naipaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 77. Similarly, Helen Hayward argues that ‘the house is both a reality, and a metaphor at the center of the book’. Hayward, p. 25.

described or touched on in *Biswas*) – relatively few novels emerged in the British Caribbean during the ‘nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century?’ One explanation, he writes, ‘was that colonial institutions impoverished the imagination’: ‘colonial subjects were educated to be consumers of literature imported from abroad. A powerful mythology among young colonials was that while they could become accomplished readers, writing was alien to their experiences.’<sup>145</sup> Numerous critics have drawn attention to the parallels between the character of Mr Biswas and Naipaul’s father, the journalist Seepersad Naipaul. They point to the close textual echoes between Seepersad’s journalism, stories, and letters, and the text of *Biswas* itself.<sup>146</sup> Kris Rampersad reads the plot of *A House for Mr Biswas* as tracing the emergence of a sphere of Indo-Caribbean writing that first flourished in Trinidadian newspapers and little magazines in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>147</sup> In this sense, it tells the story of the social change that enabled its own creation as a novel. But rather than telling a triumphant story about a once-enchanted subject breaking free into creative self-expression, the novel both describes, and registers in its own stylistic and structural characteristics, the difficulty of creative singularity among people educated to be ‘readers and learners’ (*B*, 458): ‘consumers of literature from abroad’, brought up reading texts in colonial genres which, in Naipaul’s opinion, ‘distorted’ rather than reflecting the ‘reality’ of their society and experience.

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<sup>145</sup> Gikandi, XI, p. xvii. Edmondson has shown how a similar anxiety pertained among Caribbean woman writers from a later generation. Where for Naipaul, the image of the ‘author’ figure was definitively British, for writers like Marlene Nourbese Philip, the image was of a man in the tradition of a British man of letters. Philip notes of Naipaul: ‘He was a writer, but it meant nothing to me; furthermore, he was Indian’: ‘books there were, but others wrote them, I read them’. cit. Edmondson, p. 81 and see Edmondson pp. 81-4.

<sup>146</sup> Thieme offers a particularly detailed account of the analogues between the text of *Biswas* and Seepersad’s writing. See pp. 57-65.

<sup>147</sup> Kris Rampersad, *Finding a Place: Indo-Trinidadian Literature*. (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2002), p. 163.

Even in small instances – whether it is Anand, asked to describe a trip to the seaside for a school assignment, or Mr Biswas’s essays for the ‘Ideal School’ correspondence course from London, acts of writing in *Biswas* are habitually framed as comically inappropriate. (‘Autumn is with us again!’ Biswas writes from scorching Trinidad, “‘Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness,” as the celebrated John Keats puts it so well’) (*B*, 361). This phenomenon is explored in more detail when Biswas attempts to write stories of his own. In an unhappy marriage, and with responsibility for four children, Mr Biswas, in his free time, writes repetitive stories, all called ‘Escape’.

Sometimes his hero had a Western name; he was then faceless, but tall and broad-shouldered; he was a reporter and moved in a world derived from the novels Mr Biswas had read and the films he had seen. None of these stories was finished, and their theme was always the same. The hero, trapped into marriage, burdened with a family, his youth gone, meets a young girl. She is slim, almost thin, and dressed in white. She is fresh, tender, unknissed; and she is unable to bear children. Beyond these meetings, the stories never went (*B*, 362-3).

Repeatedly, Mr Biswas tries to write an original story. Each time, all he can do is recycle tropes from romance, erotica, pulp. In the socially and sexually conservative world of colonial, East-Indian Trinidad, the impulses he expresses are unrealizable. Moreover, they are themselves inherited clichés. Mr Biswas is an early version of a character Naipaul will return to throughout his career (Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men* is a famous example). He is unsatisfied with his life, and is repeatedly made aware of the false promises that his education and reading have made to him. In *Beginnings*, his 1975 meditation on the theory of the novel, Edward Said speculates that the authority of the author is always compromised (or ‘molested’) both by the historical world in which they live, and by the forms and genres of written expression which they inherit. ‘Free writing[,] words conceived aside from any [generic] demands made upon them’ is for Said, ‘a scarcely realizable dream’. Yet he takes the optimistic view that in the process of writing, the labour of grappling with a past archive and achieving one’s own

inscription, however familiar, ‘invention’ can take place, and newness is born.<sup>148</sup> Naipaul, in *Biswas*, is less optimistic, and his pessimism is related to the second-hand, colonial textual world in which Biswas lives. The dream of ‘free writing’ may be the driving desire of Mr Biswas; yet every time Naipaul describes the act of writing in *Biswas*, this desire for writerly freedom can never escape ‘molestation’ from its material-textual archive, or from its own imbrication in the history of colonial genre.

As well making a wider argument through the story of its protagonist, *Biswas* also contains references to specific trends and figures within the world of Caribbean letters. The portraits of ‘George’ the builder and his assistant ‘Edgar’ seem to be caricatures of Lamming and Edgar Mittelholzer (*B*, 248, 265).<sup>149</sup> Christian Højsberg sees the ‘negro boy of astonishing size’ (this is Naipaul’s phrase, not Højsberg’s) – ‘he had a phenomenal knowledge of English country cricket scores throughout the nineteen-thirties’; ‘his homework was reinforced by a passionate devotion to P.G. Woodhouse’ – as a portrait of C.L.R. James (515-6).<sup>150</sup> Such allusions add weight to the argument that, beside a British trade readership, Naipaul is aware of a smaller, almost coterie audience among Caribbean intellectuals and acquaintances. It is clear from his letters that Naipaul’s books were ‘remitted’ in this way (to use Kezia Page’s phrase, cited above), and that the veiled personal allusions he made caused his family considerable anxiety.<sup>151</sup> Both Lamming and James certainly did read, and respond to, the novel, and it will be a consistent argument of this thesis that Naipaul was aware of, and in dialogue with, this readership in his writings, though he only occasionally alludes to them directly (his mode of address, in other words, is consistently passive-

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<sup>148</sup> Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (London: Granta, 2012), p. 24.

<sup>149</sup> Patrick French identifies this allusion in French p. 198.

<sup>150</sup> Christian Høgsbjerg, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 19–20.

<sup>151</sup> see French, p. 200.

aggressive).<sup>152</sup> The most extended example of such an allusion in *Biswas* occurs when Mr Biswas is invited to join the pretentious ‘literary group’ convened by an ‘English judge’. This is a reference to a Port-of-Spain literary circle – orbiting around a certain ‘Judge Hallinam’ – which included Lamming, Mittelholzer, and Seepersad Naipaul.<sup>153</sup> Lamming recalls the importance of these meetings,<sup>154</sup> and Alison Donnell has suggested that coteries like this were notable (though limited) incubators of local literary talent.<sup>155</sup> But in *Biswas*, emphasising the patronage of the ‘English judge’, Naipaul portrays the group as a site of colonial pretention and fawning affiliation to (now somewhat dated) metropolitan taste. Biswas, delighted to be invited, finds himself ‘out of depth’ at the meeting: ‘the only poems he knew were those of Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Edward Carpenter’; he returns home with the names of ‘Lorca and Eliot and Auden’ ‘ringing’ in his head (*B*, 505-6).

The apotheosis of Biswas’s career as a writer comes when he is invited to read his own work to this literary circle. In a 1976 essay, Naipaul mentions that Seepersad had himself been asked to read to the ‘Port of Spain literary group’ and had chosen to write an autobiographical sketch about his mother. ‘My father’, he writes, was obsessed by the circumstances of his birth and the cruelty of his father [...] I heard again and

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<sup>152</sup> Lamming reviewed *Biswas* in George Lamming, ‘A Trinidad Experience’, *Time and Tide*, 5 October 1961, p. 1657. James quotes extensively from *Biswas* in ‘From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro’, the 1963 appendix to *The Black Jacobins*. See C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Overture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Penguin, 2001) pp. 324-5. References to this edition are henceforth cited in the text as *BJ*.

<sup>153</sup> In *A Writer’s People*, Naipaul recalls being sent a booklet by Mittelholzer which, ‘printed in Trinidad in the late 1940s’, ‘contained work that had been read to a local writing group. This writing group was the idea of an Irish judge who had arrived in the colony not long before [...] There was a story by Edgar in this booklet; a piece by George Lamming, I believe; and a story by my father.’ V.S. Naipaul, *A Writer’s People: Ways of Looking and Feeling* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 27.

<sup>154</sup> In *PE* Lamming recalls ‘a small group who met once a month under the sponsorship of Judge Hallinam, a connoisseur of the arts, at the British Council’ including Mittelholzer, Ernest Carr, and ‘Farrell, a lecturer in English at the Queen’s Royal College’. Though he says he ‘never went’ to one of Hallinam’s meetings themselves, he had contact with the group through Carr. ‘I often went to Carr’s house at the edge of some magnificent forest in Belmont, and those conversations were among the best things that happened to me in Trinidad’. Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, p. 39.

<sup>155</sup> Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, p.15.

again the forty-year-old stories of meanness and of the expulsion of his pregnant mother from his father's house; and I remember taking down, at my father's dictation, a page or two of a version of this sketch' (*LO*, 113). The story the young Naipaul 'takes down' at his father's dictation is in fact rewritten as the first episode – after the short prologue – of *A House for Mr Biswas* itself. In this 1976 reminiscence, Naipaul tacitly positions *Biswas* as a work prompted by his father and describing his father's development as a writer. This moment in Seepersad's career – in which he arrives at a place where he can articulate the singularity and difficulty of his own experience – might fittingly have been the culmination of the plot of *A House for Mr Biswas*, and the development which enables the son's future authorship of the novel itself. Naipaul gestures towards this happy conclusion, but in the end refuses it.

At first, when he is invited to write for the group, Mr Biswas does not have a subject. He tries to re-write the 'Escape' story, but is ashamed of what he has written, and remains unable to write the ending.

He still could think of no satisfactory end, but he had read enough of modern prose to know that a neat end might offend the group. He couldn't make his hero the faceless 'John Lubbard', who was 'tall, broad-shouldered, handsome'; he would be laughed down. He had to be ruthless. His hero would be Gopi, a country shopkeeper, 'small, spare and shrunken' (*B*, 506).

Here, Naipaul is continuing his satire on the West Indian literary intelligentsia: perhaps, more precisely, the modernist pretensions of Lamming and Wilson Harris. As Brathwaite does in 'Roots', he frames the West Indian writer (Biswas) as choosing between two imported genres, one outdated, the other supposedly modern, but both in fact a kind of mimicry. Then, there is an interruption in the narrative: the death of Mr Biswas's mother. Biswas now rejects both versions of the imported story, and is compelled instead to record the truth: to write an elegy for his mother that is not borrowed but authentic.

The elegiac piece which Biswas eventually writes recalls an episode in which, following his expulsion from the service of Pundit Jairam, he had returned to fall back on the support of his destitute mother, Bipti. Within the proleptic structure of the novel, the event – and its transformation into elegy – is described twice, some five hundred pages apart, at alternate ends of the book. At the beginning of the book, Naipaul writes that Biswas ‘had expected [Bipti] to welcome him with joy [...] But as soon as he entered the yard [...] he knew that he was wrong’. They kiss ‘perfunctorily’; Bipti’s ‘fury rose and she shouted at him’; when she does calm down, her kindness is hurtful to him. It is too late and no longer ‘sweet’:

He did not see at the time how at the time how absurd and touching her behaviour was: welcoming him back to a hut that didn’t belong to her, giving him food that wasn’t hers. But the memory remained and nearly thirty years later, when he was a member of a small literary group in Port of Spain, he wrote and read out a simple poem in blank verse about this meeting. The disappointment, his surliness, all the unpleasantness was ignored, and the circumstances improved to allegory: the journey, the welcome, the food, the shelter (*B*, 56).

At the beginning of the book, Naipaul looks forward to Biswas’s elegy as an act of distortion, pruning, formal mediation. But at the other end of the book, when the event is retold, it will be framed entirely differently. Here, at the end of the novel, Biswas writes ‘to do her honour’, and ‘without thinking of rhythm’. ‘He used no abstract, cheating words’:

But awake, one night, looking at the sky through the window, he got out of bed, worked his way to the light switch, turned it on, got paper and pencil, and began to write [...] He wrote of a journey he had made a long time before. He was tired; she made him rest. He was hungry; she had given him food (*B*, 511).

This is a strange and revealing passage because here – for perhaps the first time in the book – the narrator frames the act of writing as occasioned by raw experience, and hence opposed to both the romance-infused ‘John Lubbard’ stories and to the trivial modernism of the identikit ‘Gopi’ story he believes he is expected to construct. His elegy is framed as authentic and unmediated (as opposed to derivative and abstract).

The tropes of the ingénue writer – waking at night, staring at the sky, finding a pencil and beginning, unselfconsciously, to write – are paradigmatic tropes of the romantic artist, breaking through mediating conventional forms to reach a truth that is authentic and pure. Yet the original event, Biswas’s arrival, Bipti’s fury, Biswas’s disappointment, have not been articulated newly, but have been written over, transformed into the sentimental terms of allegory and romance.

In a 1997 essay, Gregson Davis described Derek Walcott’s poetics of ‘disavowal’ in *Another Life*: both citing and then rejecting a set of metaphors from classical epic in order to establish the impression of an authentic speaking voice.<sup>156</sup> This is superficially similar to what Naipaul is doing in this passage: inviting two sets of aesthetic ideas – the sentimental romance of ‘John Lubbard’, the fragmentary, small-man Gopi story without neat endings – in order to present Biswas, in the face of overwhelming experience, bursting through to an authentic speaking voice. Michael Gorra has claimed that, notwithstanding its ‘highly literary nature’, this is a moment in which Naipaul portrays Biswas doing precisely this, breaking through the web of convention to an unmediated reality below (‘It is [...] as if [he had] looked into [his] heart and written’).<sup>157</sup> Yet this misses the crucial point. The voice which Mr Biswas finds, looking into his heart, is not the truth, but another exterior, ‘allegor[ical]’ discourse, another frame within which to hang his ideas, one in which there *are* neat endings, plenitude, improbable satiation in the face of hunger and fatigue. In other words, a ‘romance’ plot, a piece of ‘wish-fulfilment’ literature, not far from the kind of book he might have picked up on the stall in Pagotes. Naipaul’s description of Mr Biswas’s prose style – ‘he used no abstract, cheating words’ – closely echoes his own

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<sup>156</sup> Gregson Davis, “‘With No Homeric Shadow’: The Disavowal of Epic in Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*”, in *Derek Walcott*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003), pp. 135–48 (p. 139).

<sup>157</sup> Michael Edward Gorra, *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 90.

earlier prescriptions for unadorned, simple ‘documentary’ writing, and might be said to describe the stylistic mantra of the novel, *Biswas*, itself. Yet this is not, Naipaul suggests, an arrival at the genuine authenticity or newness for which Biswas searches, but rather a palliative substitute for this: a repetition, a form of ‘housing’ which will – in Wallace Stevens’s forlorn term – ‘suffice’.<sup>158</sup>

#### (d) Naipaul as Writer

*A House for Mr Biswas* articulates a theory of the novel form that begins to approximate the theory Naipaul expresses in his later criticism. In texts like ‘Reading and Writing’, Naipaul speaks of the novel ‘form’ as an historically specific crystallization of particular generic tropes and plot structures (the *bildung* narrative, for example). The tropes and plot structures crystallised within the novel – which repeat across the body of novels produced in a demarcated space and time – are predicated on the social arrangements, the horizons of expectation and possibility, of the society that produced them. In *Biswas* he shows what (in his view) happens when these forms travel in time and space and are imposed, as the principle literary material, on distant societies. The poverty of indigenous material and the blanket imposition of printed matter from outside, are for him phenomena singular to West Indian colonial experience.<sup>159</sup> *Biswas* offers a cynical view of the emergence of the novel in the West Indies: attachment to this form bespeaks a kind of mimicry or imaginative conscription. It expresses scepticism about the capacity of the novel to register West Indian

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<sup>158</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, Library of America 96 (New York: Library of America, 1997), p. 218.

<sup>159</sup> Needless to say, comparative accounts which read Naipaul’s writings on this topic with those of his African contemporaries – such as Neil ten Kortenaar’s *Postcolonial Literature and the Impact of Literacy* – qualify this sense of Caribbean singularity.

experience in a true, un-distorted manner. Yet, the book also insists on its own status *as* a novel. As I have shown, Mr Biswas is constantly positioned as an enchanted, imitative *bildung* protagonist. The narrator makes not-so-subtle allusions, situating Biswas as a pathetic iteration of other novelistic heroes ('he felt he had achieved status'). Moreover, amidst the great wealth of generic and formal terminology that lace the book, Naipaul returns repeatedly to 'novel' (a word which, alongside 'novelist', appears nineteen times), as if consistently nudging the reader to attend to the kind of book they are reading. Few critics miss that 'the repertoire of traditional novelistic skills' in Naipaul's novel – its focus on the development of character, its 'relentless accumulation of realist particulars', its free-indirect narration – repeat the 'pattern' of a 'nineteenth-century English novel'.<sup>160</sup> A dramatic irony is created, therefore, in which the narrator of the text is positioned as a product of the social and textual world that the novel describes, bearing the same imaginative limitations.

A number of Naipaul's critics attend to what Bhattacharya calls Naipaul's 'stakes in narration': the dynamic way narrative voice and authorial personae complicate purely 'representation[al]' readings of Naipaul's text, and focalise attention not on what is being spoken about, but on the sensibility, subjectivity, and epistemic horizon of the speaker.<sup>161</sup> *Biswas* is an early, and relatively subtle, instantiation of an idea that Naipaul would explore further and more explicitly in subsequent writing: for example in *The Loss of El Dorado*, as I discuss in chapter two. Gamini Salgado calls these self-referential narratorial performances in Naipaul's later work 'masochistic', noting how 'writer figure[s]' in Naipaul's books are repeatedly 'punished' for their 'pretensions to detachment and understanding', and how this draws attention to the

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<sup>160</sup> Ramchand, pp. 5, 7-9.

<sup>161</sup> Bhattacharya, p. 254. I discuss the critical response to this phenomenon in detail in the final part of this chapter.

‘pretensions’ and performances of Naipaul’s narrators.<sup>162</sup> This would also be a good description of what is happening in *Biswas*. Here, Naipaul criticises the novel form as distorting, a mode of conscription. But he also performs that conscription. He both describes and models its contours, propositionally and on the level of form. But he cannot at this stage articulate or model any alternative.

‘The quest for unmediated experience’, George Levine writes, ‘becomes central to the dramatic tension of most realist fiction [...] The fate of realism [...] [is] intimately involved with the writer’s and the culture’s capacity to believe in the accessibility of experience beyond words’. In *The Realistic Imagination*, Levine defined ‘realism’ not as a set of techniques or stylistic features, but as a motivating idea or imperative: the always-evolving project of cutting through received or conventional idioms to represent the world itself, in its singular novelty, and not just some inherited description of it. Its consistent, unifying feature is its ‘rejection [...] of traditional forms’.<sup>163</sup> This idea about realism echoes Naipaul’s later statements about his own literary project in ‘Conrad’s Darkness’ (I discuss this essay in detail in chapter three). And it is a motivating idea – or rather an *ideal*, a kind of utopian ambition – which attracts him from very early in his career.

In *A House for Mr Biswas*, Naipaul’s immature calls for ‘documentary’ writing in the West Indian novel are replaced by an interrogation of what realism, in the West Indian novel, might look like. It is clear that the realist ideal is not commensurate with the technologies of ‘realism’ inherited from the nineteenth-century European novel. In fact, Naipaul suggests, for the West Indian writer these inherited technologies are

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<sup>162</sup> Gamini Salgado describes the ‘quasi-masochistic punishing of the writer figure’ in Naipaul’s novels, ‘for his pretensions to detachment and understanding’. Salgado, ‘V.S. Naipaul and the Politics of Fiction’, in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, ed. by Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 8: THE PRESENT, 314–27 (p. 325).

<sup>163</sup> Levine, pp. 11–12.

themselves clichés, romantic abstractions which ‘distort’ the truth. Naipaul’s explicit and self-aware deployment of these technologies – his affiliation to the novel in its most canonical, realist instantiation – is therefore a source of pathos. As a reader, Biswas is constantly disappointed by the failure of the *bildung* narrative he imagines for himself, yet unable to develop an imaginative vocabulary outside it. As a writer, the plot trajectory in which he will finally arrive at a singular, truthful, or genuinely realistic idiom is proleptically undercut, shown to be false from the outset. ‘What the novel achieves by its end’, Homi Bhabha writes, ‘is denied by its opening and there is, within [the] novel, a real problem of beginning, originating, creating’.<sup>164</sup> This frustrated or compromised dream of narratorial (or authorial) freedom, originality, or representative accuracy is the most important, and last, iteration of these cycles of expectation and disappointment, and constitutes the frustrated, compromised conclusion of Naipaul’s own frustrated *Bildungsroman*.

Following his mother’s death, and cursory treatment by a passing doctor, Mr Biswas is ‘oppressed by a sense of loss: not of present loss, but of something missed in the past’ (*B*, 507). He chooses to write an elegy out of the sense that the doctor’s carelessness with his mother’s body – and behind that, the carelessness with which the world had treated her, its refusal to accommodate her or afford her dignity – was ‘an error,’ ‘locked away in time’, and ‘not a part of the truth’. ‘He wished this stated’, Naipaul writes, ‘and he wanted to do something that would be a defiance of what had happened’ (511). This has also been read as the motivation for Naipaul’s book, *A House for Mr Biswas*: a testimony to his father’s life, and the frustration of his father’s

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<sup>164</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Representation and the Colonial Text’, in *The Theory of Reading*, ed. by Frank Gloversmith (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), pp. 93–122 (p. 96).

ambition to be a writer in colonial Trinidad.<sup>165</sup> Naipaul openly acknowledged the relationship between Mr Biswas and his father, which would always have been legible to readers such as Lamming, who knew them both. In his commentaries and forewords to the book Naipaul has framed the book as personal to him, a record of his own past that retains the ‘power to hurt’ (*B*, 615).<sup>166</sup> Even without drawing the biographical link between Mr Biswas and Seepersad Naipaul, readers consistently scrutinise the authorial voice of *Biswas* in light of the fact that the East Indian, late-colonial Trinidadian world it elegises is also the author’s own.<sup>167</sup> Naipaul’s ‘stake’ in the narration of *Biswas* rapidly became a part of the text’s social, public meaning (I will expand on this later in the chapter). As a personal elegy for this Trinidadian world, it is clear that there is a link between *A House for Mr Biswas* and the novel Lamming had called for in *The Pleasures of Exile*, and with the kind of writing ‘from the West Indies’ that the very young V.S. Naipaul had sought. That original idea or ideal remains discernible in the novel’s project, and viewed in this way, there is a defiance and a sense of triumph in the famous valedictory passage: ‘how terrible it would have been [...] to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated’ (*B*, 8). Naipaul does

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<sup>165</sup> Ten Kortenaar, for example, notes that Naipaul ‘received his original subject matter from his father, who had urged him to take his, Seepersad’s, life as the theme for a novel. That novel became *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), which tells how a man utterly without a story nevertheless fashioned his life into a story by making his son into the writer who could write it’ (p.107). It is worth noting, as ten Kortenaar does, that Seepersad’s ‘frustrations’ as a writer were considerably less consuming, and more productive, than those of Mr Biswas (see p.130).

<sup>166</sup> In his foreword to the 1983 Knopf edition, for example, Naipaul writes that: ‘of all my books this is the one that is closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child’. Further, he claims that he avoided the book between its publication and 1981, when he heard, by chance, a radio adaptation of the novel. ‘In no time, though the instalment was comic, [...] I was in tears, swamped by the emotions I had tried to shield myself from for twenty years’ (*LO*, 128-9).

<sup>167</sup> Ramchand’s ‘The World of *A House for Mr Biswas*’ (a chapter of *The West Indian Novel and its Background*) gives an account of ‘the outer socio-historical situation upon which the novel draws’ – that is the East Indian Trinidadian world in which Naipaul grew up – to show that the Mr Biswas’s hard-won glimpse of ‘the possibility of order’ within this changing world (achieved by purchasing a house) is also the ‘precarious achievement’ Naipaul achieves on the level of narration. Ramchand, pp. 189, 204. Alan Sinfield, in a contrasting reading, notes that ‘in effect [...] the narrator’s is the voice of the son, Anand, who is successful in the school system and escapes to England’; drawing a link between Anand’s biography and that of Naipaul himself, Sinfield notes that the narrator presents *Biswas* with a ‘mixture of sympathy and satire, inwardness and distance’. Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 130–31.

accommodate Mr Biswas; the elegy is written, just as Biswas completes the elegy for his mother. But always undercutting this achievement, or in tension with it, is the failure to imagine an idiom for this great revisionary statement that is not itself ‘erroneous’, ‘untruthful’, borrowed: a borrowing which finds its correlative in the symbol of the irretrievably mortgaged house.

## THEORIES OF THE NOVEL AFTER *BISWAS*

### (a) Brathwaite and the Rise of African Survivalism

At midnight on the morning of the 31<sup>th</sup> August 1962, after the collapse of the West Indian Federation, Trinidad declared full independence from the United Kingdom. In the Red House, Port of Spain, Eric Williams and Rudranath Capildeo addressed Mary, the Princess Royal. There were fireworks over Fredrick Street, a parade on the Queen’s Park Savannah, and an Independence Calypso contest, in which the lesser-known Lord Brynner beat Sparrow to the coveted prize. The pageantry of independence expressed the hopes invested in the moment.<sup>168</sup> ‘Cipriani start the ball rolling’, Brynner sang, ‘Now the Doctor [Williams] doing the bowling’; and the ‘real hat-trick’ that ‘Uncle Eric’ would achieve would be the growth of democracy, prosperity and racial equality in independent Trinidad.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> The *Trinidad Guardian* collated memories of independence celebrations – and the hopes attached to them – in a fiftieth anniversary commemoration: ‘Memories of Our Independence’, *The Trinidad Guardian*, 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2012 <<http://www.guardian.co.tt/lifestyle/2012-08-31/memories-our-independence>> [accessed 8 August 2017].

<sup>169</sup> The text of Lord Brynner’s calypso is reproduced at: ‘Lord Brynner, 1962 Independence Calypso King’, *The Trinidad Guardian Newspaper*, August 31<sup>st</sup> 2013 <<http://www.guardian.co.tt/entertainment/2013-09-01/lord-brynner-1962-independence-calypso-king>> [accessed 8 August 2017].

The disappointment of these hopes – at least, relative to lofty expectations – in Trinidad and across the Caribbean through the 1960s is a familiar story. As Denis Benn notes, the marginalisation of socialist movements in Trinidad and Jamaica through the 1950s ‘as a result of the developing Cold War ideological pressures’, had already, by this point, pushed nationalist movements towards the Puerto Rican ‘pattern of economic development’. This meant a legislative programme ‘granting concessions to foreign investors with a view to stimulating local manufacturing/industrial developments’.<sup>170</sup> In practice, this led to the perpetuation of old economic injustices, and the perception that the nation was still, tacitly, governed from abroad. ‘By the early 1960s,’ Benn writes, ‘with self government a reality,’ attention had shifted away ‘from the issue of political decolonisation’.<sup>171</sup> The continued ‘dispossession among lower socioeconomic classes’ after independence, and the sense that the key instruments of the national economy still lay in foreign hands provoked ‘an increasing radicalisation’ of West Indian social thought.<sup>172</sup> Sylvia Wynter expressed a common sentiment when she wrote that: ‘the imperial way of seeing has not disappeared with the imperial flag. Its manifestations are more subtle; because more subtle, they are more dangerous. It was easier to fight “manifest unfreedom” in 1938 [...] than to grapple with “seeming freedom” as we must [...] now’.<sup>173</sup> This prompted an era of self-scrutiny and systematic social critique – in economic theory (notably, through the ‘New World Group’), and also in the sphere of

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<sup>170</sup> Denis Benn, *The Caribbean: An Intellectual History, 1774-2003* (Kingston, Jamaica ; Miami: Ian Randle, 2004), p. 87.

<sup>171</sup> Benn, p. 122.

<sup>172</sup> Benn, p. 247. This ‘radicalisation’ did not begin from scratch at the beginning of the 1960s. The shift of West Indian nationalist movements away from socialist policies and the teething problems of partial self-government (including Federation), combined with a rise in global black-diasporic thought (related to the independence of Ghana in 1957) had created germs of these movements through the 1950s. Nonetheless, the concerns they voice became more concrete after independence, and these radical ideas, accordingly, became more visible and dominant. See David Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, pp. 111–12 on the rise of diasporic thought through the 1950s.

<sup>173</sup> Sylvia Wynter, ‘We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture (Part One)’, *Jamaica Journal*, 2.4 (1968), 23–32 (p. 30). References to this essay are henceforth included in the text as *WM*.

art and cultural theory.<sup>174</sup> Race – in this case, the assertion of African origins, Pan-African solidarity, and the idea of black identity – had, as Deborah Thomas notes, surfaced cyclically in the history of Afro-Caribbean ideas, as a way of understanding, and contesting, disenfranchisement and deprivation.<sup>175</sup> In the 1960s once again, in Benn’s words, it became a ‘focal point for the elaboration of political ideas concerning social change’.<sup>176</sup>

We have seen that, back in 1960, nationalist thinkers like C.L.R. James would argue that ‘West Indian uniqueness consists in this, that of all [the] hundreds of millions of formerly colonial coloured people, West Indians are the only ones who are completely Westernized, they have no native language, no native religion, no native way of life’.<sup>177</sup> And we have seen how, in that period, nationalist intellectuals responded to this anxiety by calling for – and in James’s case attempting to contribute to – a burgeoning tradition of West Indian literature in the image of, though in the place of, the British tradition they had inherited. As David Scott notes in *Refashioning Futures*, Brathwaite’s cultural criticism throughout the 1960s and 1970s responds to this anxiety or ‘problem-space’.<sup>178</sup> But the *way* in which Brathwaite contests the image of the culturally rootless West Indian subject changes through this period. In step with what Scott calls a ‘broad swell of cultural and political upheaval in the English-speaking Caribbean, in the black diaspora, and indeed in the Third World more generally’, Brathwaite’s essays on the novel focus less on changing the constituency of the

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<sup>174</sup> The ‘New World Group’ was a collective of West Indian intellectuals, largely affiliated with the University of the West Indies, who attempted to address the social and economic challenges of the newly independent region. Their key project was to examine how, rather than applying existing hermeneutic models (such as Marxism) to the West Indian situation, the novelty of that situation might transform existing models for understanding regional and global political economy. The group published the *New World Quarterly*, which became a key organ for West Indian political thought. See Benn, pp. 122-151.

<sup>175</sup> Deborah A. Thomas, p. 11.

<sup>176</sup> Benn, p. 231.

<sup>177</sup> cit. Malik, p. 8. Malik is citing from James’s 1960 pamphlet, *Federation: How We Failed Miserably and Why*.

<sup>178</sup> David Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, pp. 111–12.

narrative (who or what is represented, and from what point of view), and more on the forms and idioms through which representation takes place.<sup>179</sup> His argument is that Caribbean forms or idioms should bear the stamp of the African origins of Caribbean societies; new idioms and forms, a new repertoire of authentic self-expression, will reveal itself through an engagement with Africa.

In ‘The African Presence in Caribbean Literature’, published and delivered in various forms between 1970 and 1974, Brathwaite gives a famous summary of where his ideas have arrived by the end of the first tumultuous postcolonial decade. ‘Now there is a persistent, established theory’, he says, ‘which contends that the Middle Passage destroyed the culture’ of Afro-Caribbean people:

But modern research is pointing to a denial of this, showing that African culture not only crossed the Atlantic, it crossed, survived, and creatively adapted itself to its new environment. Caribbean culture was therefore not “pure” African, but an adaptation carried out mainly in terms of African tradition (*R*, 191-2).

Alongside his emphasis on the ‘surviv[al]’ of African cultural forms, and its place at the core of Caribbean society, it is worth noting that, for Brathwaite, the myth of cultural annihilation arises from ‘mistaken *notions* of culture’ (*R*, 193). That is, the myth of cultural annihilation derives in part from a Eurocentric understanding of what constitute ‘cultural’ forms, and hence to contest this myth is to contest this fundamental assumption, to revise the received definitions of ‘culture’ and its formal manifestations. Equally important is Brathwaite’s historical claim that these African cultural survivals in the Caribbean were most at threat of erasure not during the period of slavery, but during the first years of emancipation. It was at this point, he argues, when formal violent coercion was no longer available to the dominant white plantocracy, that cultural forms of social control (by means of education and missionary activity, for

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<sup>179</sup> David Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, p. 112.

example) became the plantocracy's preferred means of extending its influence.<sup>180</sup> Brathwaite's account of a people who 'became literate in a language which was foreign to them, "liberated" into a culture which was not theirs' speaks as much to his own time, as to its putative historical referent (*R*, 196). In 'On National Culture' – written by a Martiniquais, doubtful of seeing independence in his native country, or in Algeria where he was currently engaged – Fanon describes 'the movement of men of culture' in Africa 'toward the Negro-African culture' as an expression of 'despair' or powerlessness.<sup>181</sup> For Fanon, this movement will become outdated at the point of, and through the struggle for, constitutional independence. For Brathwaite by contrast, writing in the independent Anglophone Caribbean, the assertion of the African presence in Caribbean literature is urgent in a specifically postcolonial moment: a moment in which, for Brathwaite, independence had been achieved but the economy was controlled by foreign, white investors, and Western influence was still perpetuated by the persistence of white European cultural norms.<sup>182</sup>

*A House for Mr Biswas* was a key interlocutor-text for Brathwaite in this period, and many of his key ideas are expounded in his engagements with Naipaul's novel. Tracing these engagements, the rapid development of Brathwaite's ideas from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s becomes evident. Predating *Biswas*, in 'Sir Galahad and the Islands' (1957), Brathwaite had described in Naipaulian terms how cultural 'poverty',

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<sup>180</sup> In the sub-chapter 'Emancipation' of 'The African Presence' (*R*, 194-200), Brathwaite explains how 'this African culture, focussed upon a religious core which survived and flourished under slavery, came under very severe attack at emancipation' (*R*, 194). The notable similarities between Brathwaite's argument and that of Sylvia Wynter, cited above, suggests that this was a common idea in the first years of independence.

<sup>181</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 175.

<sup>182</sup> This explains his scorn, in this essay, for Eric Williams: once author of a 'radical antimercantilist dissertation' but now – in his policies, and continued indifference toward 'African culture' – revealed to be the product of 'the European establishment' after all. As Deborah Thomas argues (I discuss this in the introduction) the fact that nationalist leaders like Williams were black had always been important to their credibility. But 'bracketed blackness' was no longer enough; it was important that he become culturally 'African' (*R*, 198-9).

‘this shortage of material on which the spirit is sustained[,] becomes a famine in the soul of the West Indian artist’ (R, 9). Looking for a vocabulary to describe how this situation might be ameliorated, Brathwaite was still relying solely on the concept of ‘the folk’. Indeed, on the one occasion where the idea of Africa is mentioned, Brathwaite describes the poet Eric Roach’s attitude to Africa as ‘romantical’, and translates Roach’s African tropes into the terms of his own argument: ‘Roach uses “Africa” to reinforce his folk structure’ (R, 16, 18). By contrast, in ‘Roots’, published six years later, Brathwaite writes from a more explicitly Afro-Caribbean perspective. Here, he re-describes cultural ‘poverty’ as cultural dislocation. This is ‘an almost physical inheritance from Africa’: ‘from slavery and the long story before that of the migrant African moving from the lower Nile across the desert to the Western ocean, only to meet the Portuguese and a history that was to mean the middle passage, America, and a rootless sojourn in the New World’ (R, 29-30). Though *Biswas* is for Brathwaite the realisation of the *type* of novel for which he called in ‘Sir Galahad’, Brathwaite does not now see it as the realisation or fulfilment of the West Indian novel he was requesting as such. Rather, it is now described as a novel arising from a ‘minority’ (i.e. East Indian) culture: it offers a formal model which Brathwaite encourages the Afro-Caribbean novelist – his implied audience in this essay – to learn from and aspire towards (R, 42). So ‘Roots’ arises from a middle stage in the development of Brathwaite’s thought, in which the idea that African inheritance is the defining feature of West Indian folk society has surfaced, but in which the idea of a corresponding Afro-Caribbean aesthetic or set of formal exemplars has yet to emerge.

Although Brathwaite’s enthusiasm for *Biswas* would remain constant, over the next decade, the way he situated its achievement within narratives about Caribbean cultural development would change. This change must be situated in the context of the

emergence of ‘post-Independence [...] blues’ (discussed above), and the increasingly oppositional attitude to European and American cultural influences that was growing in Caribbean cultural criticism.<sup>183</sup> In ‘We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture’ (1968-9), Sylvia Wynter had complained about what she saw called the ‘branch-plant’ mentality in the criticism of West Indian literature, in which West Indian literature is seen as a ‘branch’ of the ‘plant’ of metropolitan English literature (*WM*, 24).<sup>184</sup> Like Wynter, in his 1969 essay ‘Caribbean Critics’, Brathwaite would take issue with the idea that ‘West Indian literature is simply the latest extension of the long honourable and well-documented line of the “great English tradition”’ (*R*, 111). Accordingly, he gives a more ambivalent reading of *Biswas*. Drawing on Naipaul’s developing reputation as ‘the (apparently) Eurocentric novelist *sans pareil*’, Brathwaite describes *Biswas* as ‘the literary expression of a deeply rooted cultural dichotomy’: ‘Naipaul’s is the one body of work that has so far been able to agitate the West Indian reader into a defence and hence a re-examination of his West Indian situation’ (*R*, 123-4). So whereas in 1963, *Biswas* was seen as an exemplary use of the novel form (albeit from a minority community), by 1969 it is seen to be of value insofar as its apparent Eurocentrism functions provocatively within the problem-space, articulating an internalised myth, and useful as a prompt to critique and opposition.

The last years of the 1960s – as the three volumes of his *Arrivants* trilogy were published – are also marked by the development of Brathwaite’s well-known notion of ‘creole aesthetics’. In *Contradictory Omens*, outlining this idea, he writes that ‘the Caribbean environment demands its own style, vocab, its own norms’. ‘Creole’

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<sup>183</sup> cit. Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 282. Donnell and Lawson Welch are quoting from Brathwaite’s foreword to *Savacou* 3&4 (1970/71).

<sup>184</sup> The target of Wynter’s criticism in this essay was largely the work of English-born or educated critics working in the West Indies. Louis James’s edited collection *The Islands in Between* (1968) is a principle object of attack.

language, style, and form was the ‘norm’ Brathwaite proposed for Caribbean artists and writers.<sup>185</sup> Despite his acknowledgement of other ethnic groups (such as East Indians) on some of the islands, Brathwaite’s argument is that creole aesthetics arise from the encounter between European and African cultures. Of these, ‘Africa’, he wrote, constituted the ‘submerged mother of the creole system’.<sup>186</sup> As Glynne Griffith’s notes, Brathwaite’s pronouncements in this period constituted a renewed ‘assertion of Afrocentricity in the West Indies’.<sup>187</sup> The gradual emergence of these ideas had been discernible in his recategorization of *Biswas* as the expression of a ‘minority’ culture. By December 1970, Brathwaite’s description of Naipaul’s work as definitively non-creole – both in its chosen subject matter and, more importantly, on the level of language and style – had crystallized. In ‘West Indian Fiction of the Sixties’, Brathwaite describes *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’. The work of George Lamming, by contrast, is no longer positioned as a successor to European modernism, but as an ‘experimental work’ suggesting ‘the outlines of an alternative tradition’. *A Season of Adventure* (1960) is described as ‘moving away from the European tradition of the “House” towards a different and more “Caribbean” form altogether’. Describing a scene in *Season* in which an apparently Europeanized girl finds herself enraptured by a drummer during an African ‘vodun’ ceremony, Brathwaite sees Lamming engaging an African aesthetic

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<sup>185</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*, Monograph No. 1 (Mona, Jamaica: Savacou Publications, 1974), p. 5.

<sup>186</sup> Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens*, p. 6.

<sup>187</sup> Glynne A. Griffith, ‘Kamau Brathwaite as Cultural Critic’, in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. by Stewart Brown (Bridgend: Seren, 1995), pp. 75–85 (p. 77).

lineage within which lie ‘the hidden and half-forgotten forces within which [postcolonial] Caribbean society can be forged’.<sup>188</sup>

My intention, in drawing out this trajectory, is not to suggest that Brathwaite’s critical writings were ad hoc or contradictory. Rather, it is to show how his work evolves within a problem-space that is changing very quickly. Literary works, like *Biswas*, are verbal performances that themselves respond to, and signify within, contemporary debates about form, style, and their social or political significance. Critical responses, such as Brathwaite’s participate in the same conversation, but often at different moments, in which the terms, and stakes, of the conversation have altered. The way Brathwaite categorises, or canonises, different writers at different times reveals as much about the critical moment, the moment at which Brathwaite was writing, as it does about any formal or ideological properties inherent in the works themselves. This is an obvious point, but an important one. The Brathwaite/Naipaul distinction, which the writers themselves establish through their personal disagreements in the early 1970s (discussed below), has been reified by subsequent critics.<sup>189</sup> But a

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<sup>188</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, ‘West Indian Prose Fiction in the Sixties: A Survey’, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 16 (1970), 5–17 (pp. 7–8, 15). A different, and more singular attempt to forge an ‘alternative’ Caribbean ‘tradition’ through the 1960s is found in the work of Harris. Where Brathwaite and others turned to Africa, Harris turned to the Amerindian people and to the shifting populations in the Guyanese landscape as a way of articulating his conception of the Caribbean as a site of creative encounters between diverse people. Similarly, in his essay ‘Tradition and the West Indian Novel’ (first given as a lecture in 1964), he defines his work in contrast to *Biswas*. For Harris, Naipaul’s affiliation to the European ‘novel of persuasion’ makes *Biswas* merely an iteration of what he calls the ‘comedy of pathos’. It fails to ask ‘revolutionary or alien questions of spirit’. Wilson Harris, *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 140, 147. Michael Niblett, in his book *The Caribbean Novel Since 1945* (2012) describes Harris’s writing as ‘explod[ing] the conventions of what he identifies as conventional realism’ in order to explore ‘a past that did not come to fruition’ and to make it visible and concrete in his postcolonial present. Michael Niblett, *The Caribbean Novel since 1945: Cultural Practice, Form, and the Nation-State* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 65.

<sup>189</sup> J. Dillon Brown’s otherwise excellent *Migrant Modernism*, for example, returns to this tired binary in its conclusion, using the rise of Naipaul as a writer in thrall to mid-century English realist technique (‘documentary writing’) in contrast to the experimental modernist tradition, which would spawn the later ideas of Kamau Brathwaite. To make this case, Brown reads Naipaul’s early criticism from the 1950s as an expression of his aesthetic theory throughout his career (i.e. he doesn’t cite any of the major texts on which Naipaul’s reputation in the Caribbean and elsewhere rested). Nor does he emphasise the profound

granular account of the engagements of these two men reveals not an essential, cross-temporal distinction – between the indigenous and the assimilated, the colonial apologist and anti-colonial nationalist, the conservative and a radical – but rather different understandings of the politics of form and its relation to culture and Caribbean identity emerging in dialogue with one another, through time.

The programmatic, creative aspect of Brathwaite's criticism from this period, responding to the changing intellectual currents of the West Indies in the late 1960s, is nowhere more evident than in 'Jazz and the West Indian Novel', which may be his best-known essay on the novel. In 'Jazz', Brathwaite gives an account of a West Indian novelistic form which, as he himself acknowledges, does not yet exist. Here, even Lamming, despite his gifts, is too solipsistic a writer to embody the communal 'Jazz' aesthetics for which Brathwaite calls (*R*, 92-3). Roger Mais's *Brother Man*, has been the 'most successful' attempt at the Jazz novel, but is nonetheless 'very flawed' (*R*, 107). And rather than limiting itself to novels, 'Jazz' includes extended quotations of, and allusion to, music and poetry. This is a criticism, Brathwaite writes, of 'not of description [...] but of *explanation*', a manifesto and not a taxonomy, and a further response to the 'post-Independence [...] blues' that had been provoking him.<sup>190</sup> It is in this increasingly 'creative' criticism – discussed in this sub-chapter – as much as in his poetry that the singular Caribbean aesthetic he calls for is achieved: an aesthetic which could be 'complex, paradoxical, uncertain [...] but never negative' – 'not negative

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ambivalence, and shifting cache, of 'modernism' as a concept within Caribbean criticism of the 1960s. Brown, pp. 169–83.

<sup>190</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'The Love Axe (1): Developing a Caribbean Aesthetic', in *Caribbean Cultural Thought: From Plantation to Diaspora*, ed. by Aaron Kamugisha and Yanique Hume (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2013), pp. 354–76 (p. 370).

because the aesthetic expectations of an emerging culture cannot be that in the same way that a growing child, or planet or constellation cannot be'.<sup>191</sup>

As Brathwaite began, through the sixties, to differentiate his aesthetic project from that of Naipaul, he began to articulate in more detail the self-aware, performative aspects of Naipaul's technique as a novelist. We saw this in 'Caribbean Critics', and we see it also in 'Jazz.' Here, reading *The Mimic Men* alongside *Biswas*, Brathwaite describes how Naipaul's narrators express the 'complex, paradoxical' position of the Caribbean artist, and links these narratorial performances to the persona (or person) of the author. The positions they express are 'faithfully and painfully gained'. 'Naipaul, as always, is [...] complex', he concludes (*R*, 109). In a further essay from this period, 'The Love Axe (1)', Brathwaite situates himself as one of a number of 'creative critics' – including Sylvia Wynter, Gordon Rohlehr and Lloyd Best – 'who are no longer concerned with colonial despair, with our having "nothing"' – a reference to Naipaul's *Middle Passage* – 'but with a total roots-directed (re-)definition of ourselves: an aesthetic: word, act, vision, value system'.<sup>192</sup> Brathwaite's aesthetic in this period, his embrace of the 'complex, paradoxical, uncertain' – not as a cause of pessimism, but as a sign of youth and the possibility of growth – emerged in dialogue with the more 'negative' response to the position of the Caribbean artist that he came to find in the work of V.S. Naipaul.

I have suggested that the way Brathwaite comes to understand literary or novelistic form through the course of the 1960s ('the Caribbean environment demands its own style, vocab, its own norms') makes articulate an idea Naipaul had expressed in *A House for Mr Biswas*. And in fact, these same ideas would become a staple of

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<sup>191</sup> Brathwaite, 'The Love Axe (1): Developing a Caribbean Aesthetic', pp. 371, 362.

<sup>192</sup> Brathwaite, 'The Love Axe (1): Developing a Caribbean Aesthetic', p. 371.

Naipaul's later criticism.<sup>193</sup> The distance between the two men arises from their responses to this diagnosis. In contrast to the creative, programmatic criticism that Brathwaite develops through the 1960s, Naipaul would continue to mine what he saw as the paradox of the Caribbean artist: aware of the distorting force of inherited aesthetic forms, yet unable to imagine an idiom of his own. The question this invites, which I turn to in the next section, is why Naipaul's work follows such a different trajectory to that of Brathwaite as the 1960s wear on.

### (b) Naipaul in the 1960s

Winston Mahabir, at that time a PNM politician, wrote to Naipaul in 1959, promising 'First-class return passage by boat for yourself and your wife', and 'the salary of a Queen's Royal College Master while you are in Trinidad' if Naipaul agreed to a 'refreshment fellowship': giving talks and public lectures. There would 'be no political strings attached'.<sup>194</sup> Vidia Naipaul and his wife Patricia (Pat) made the trip in Autumn 1960, immediately after Vidia had finished *A House for Mr Biswas*. Pat took a job as a teacher in a Port of Spain secondary school. Vidia met Eric Williams, who commissioned a book about the contemporary West Indies. The Trinidad government would pay for the travel, and 'purchase 2,000 copies of the resultant book'.<sup>195</sup>

The resultant book, *The Middle Passage* (1962), is a cusp text. Parts of its commentary on race and cultural politics belong to the period before the re-emergence

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<sup>193</sup> Compare Brathwaite's comments, for example, with Naipaul's apparently banal statement in *A Writer's People* that: 'There is a specificity to writing. Certain settings, certain cultures, have to be written about in a certain way. These ways are not interchangeable; you cannot write about Nigerian tribal life as you would write about the English Midlands. Shakespeare when he borrowed was exchanging like against like.' V.S. Naipaul, *A Writer's People*, p. 23.

<sup>194</sup> cit. French, p. 206. Mahabir uses the phrase 'refreshment fellowship' Winston J. Mahabir, 'West Indian Artists in UK', *The Nation* (Port of Spain, 22 July 1960), n.p.

<sup>195</sup> French, p. 207.

of affirmative Afrocentric nationalism. Reviewing George Lamming's *Of Age and Innocence* in the *New Statesman and Nation* in 1958, Naipaul had spoken of the scorn that Afro-Caribbean Trinidadians had for all things 'African': 'Africa has been forgotten, films about African tribesmen excite derisive West Indian laughter'.<sup>196</sup> And in *The Middle Passage*, he notes that in Trinidad, calling someone 'African' 'will cause deep offence'. This forms part of his larger thesis about cultural loss: 'The Negro in the New World was, until recently, unwilling to look at his past. It seemed to him natural that he should be in the West Indies, that he should speak French or English or Dutch, dress in the European manner or in adaptation of it, and share the European's religion and food. [...] Africa was forgotten' (*MP*, 61). But the parenthetical insertion, 'until recently' is important. For a parallel narrative in the book – running alongside and often in tension with Naipaul's thesis about cultural loss – recounts his dawning awareness of an emerging Afrocentrism across the region. Leaving Trinidad, Naipaul sees an 'orderly procession of Negroes' demonstrating following the killing of Patrice Lumumba: 'they were singing hymns, which contrasted with the violence of their banners and placards. These were anti-white, anti-clerical and pro-African'. 'I had never before seen anything like it in Trinidad', Naipaul notes. 'But soon [...] I came to see that such eruptions were widespread, and represented feelings coming to the surface in Negro communities throughout the Caribbean' (*MP*, 82).

For some time prior to this, Naipaul had seen the Trinidadian political landscape as split sharply on racial lines. His 1958 novel *The Suffrage of Elvira*, a parody of communitarian politicking in rural Trinidad in the run-up to the 1956 General Election, records a moment in Trinidadian political life in which the Afro- versus Indo-Caribbean division is rapidly widening. Naipaul had in fact travelled with his uncle Rudranath

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<sup>196</sup> V.S. Naipaul, 'New Novels', *New Statesman and Nation*, 6 December 1958, pp. 826–27 (p. 827).

Capildeo on the campaign trail. According to his biographer, the violent clashes he saw, between East Indian and Afro-Caribbean communities, provoked an escalation of ‘Vidia’s instinctive Indian, or Hindu, exclusivity’. ‘Like Trinidad itself,’ French writes, ‘V.S. Naipaul went through a hardening of racial attitudes in 1956’.<sup>197</sup> Naipaul’s claims, in *The Middle Passage*, that ‘there was no national feeling; there could be none’ echo Selwyn Ryan’s observation that the East Indian community was fundamentally ‘unassimilated’ in nationalist movements at this time, and with Yogendra Malik’s claim, quoting an East Indian community leader, that ‘there [was] no national solidarity’.<sup>198</sup> The evolution of African survivalist thought, its growth in prominence in both popular and more elite cultural practice in the years after independence, provoked a continued, and in fact exacerbated, refusal of ‘solidarity’ or ‘assimilation’ among the East Indian community. As I discuss in the introduction, most East Indians felt alienated, or even intimidated, by the burgeoning ‘Black Power’ movements, which Brathwaite saw as an expression of his project of ‘creole’ cultural regeneration.<sup>199</sup> As Aisha Khan wryly notes: ‘perhaps one of colonialism’s most significant triumphs in the Caribbean was the legacy of race as an organizing principle in these societies’.<sup>200</sup>

In a retrospective essay, describing the early work of Derek Walcott, Naipaul describes Walcott’s work emerging alongside a dawning idea among ‘middle-class people’ in the 1940s about the ‘emptiness they were inheriting’. ‘Before black people claimed it all’, he writes, ‘they longed for a local culture, something of their very own, to give them a place in the world’.<sup>201</sup> It is a revealing phrase, pointing to the ideas of ‘emptiness’ – particularly strong among Seepersad Naipaul’s generation – that had

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<sup>197</sup> French, p. 170.

<sup>198</sup> Selwyn D. Ryan, p. 493; Malik, p. 23.

<sup>199</sup> Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens*, p. 6.

<sup>200</sup> Aisha Khan, *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity among South Asians in Trinidad* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 9.

<sup>201</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A Writer’s People*, p. 24.

motivated not just Walcott's but Naipaul's early work, including *Biswas* and elements of *The Middle Passage*. (It is remarkable how few scholars note that *The Middle Passage*'s most quoted line 'nothing was created in the West Indies,' draws on, or at least closely parallels, a similarly famous line from Césaire's 1939 *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*: 'Eia pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien inventé'; that is, 'Hooray for those who never invented anything', or 'who invented nothing' (*rien*)).<sup>202</sup> But Naipaul's phrasing also suggests that for him, with the rise of 'black' consciousness, the validity of this cultural anxiety was prematurely and wrongly denied. The word 'black' – a racial slur in the Caribbean reclaimed by 'Black Power' movements in the 1960s – narrows the object of Naipaul's critique to pro-African activists and intellectuals of that period. The phrasing, 'before black people claimed it all', alludes to what Naipaul saw as racial chauvinism in West Indian cultural politics in this period. But it also bespeaks the author's own resentment, and Naipaul's participation in the racial fractures of this public sphere.

Naipaul's rejection of Brathwaite's cultural programme in the later 1960s cannot only be attributed to identity politics. Like a number of his Afro-Caribbean contemporaries, he was sceptical of the intellectual premises of the enterprise. Brathwaite, at an earlier stage in his career, had seen Eric Roach's allusions to Africa as 'romantical', and writers such as Walcott would come to see Brathwaite's later Afrocentrism in this way also: as a romantic, primitivist idiom that was European in origin, and Eurocentric in a profound and self-defeating way.<sup>203</sup> C.L.R. James, speaking in 1964, made a related point, linking the 'African' metaphors of the French *négritude*

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<sup>202</sup> 'Aimé Césaire, *Poésie, théâtre, essais et discours* ed. by A. James Arnold, Planète libre, 4 (Paris: CNRS/Présence africaine, 2013), p. 87. As I discuss in chapter two, Naipaul plays in this passage on the two senses of 'to create nothing': on the one hand, 'not to create anything', and on the other 'to create nothing[ness]', that is, to mine absence as a creative resource (*MP*, 20).

<sup>203</sup> See Walcott, pp. 8–10. I will return to Walcott's ideas about what he called 'the "African" phase' (p.8) in Chapter 3.

poets to the exoticism of ‘Rimbaud and Baudelaire’, and quipping that ‘even the Rastafari when they discovered that the Emperor of Ethiopia was God had to go to the English Bible to prove it’.<sup>204</sup> Naipaul gives a scathing version of this argument in his novella ‘A Flag on the Island’ (1967). On a fictional Caribbean island, the writer ‘H.G.B. White’ (formerly ‘Mr Blackwhite’) turns from writing English pastoral romance to a passionate espousal of African origins and ‘the tribal subconscious’. He writes a book, much admired by the American liberal intelligentsia, titled *I Hate You: One Man’s Search for His Identity*.<sup>205</sup> Blackwhite’s postcolonial atavism is presented as in every sense the creation of outside forces: relying on Primitivist ideas of the ‘tribal subconscious’ to attract funds from American patrons. In creating him, Naipaul is responding to an emerging phenomenon of the 1960s that post-dates *A House for Mr Biswas*. But Blackwhite is, in effect, a later Mr Biswas-figure, searching through inherited idioms in the absence of one that is securely his own. This shows the consistency of Naipaul’s thinking, and its staunch resistance to Brathwaite’s ideas through the 1960s: it presents writers like Brathwaite as Biswas-figures themselves, whose belief that they have found a new, non-European aesthetic shows their ‘constriction’ to Europe more visibly than ever before. But it also shows the stasis and claustrophobia of Naipaul’s fiction in this period, unable to expand substantially on what he had achieved in *Biswas*. One of Blackwhite’s mournful admissions might be applied to the Naipaul of 1967: ‘The artist in the post-colonial era is in a position of peculiar difficulty.’<sup>206</sup> In *The Mimic Men* – Naipaul’s major novel of the mid-1960s, published in the same year as ‘A Flag on the Island’ – this ‘peculiar difficulty’ was thematised explicitly. Naipaul’s subject in this book is the absence of creative or novel

<sup>204</sup> C.L.R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory*, pp. 146, 143.

<sup>205</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Nightwatchman’s Occurrence Book and Other Comic Inventions* (London: Picador, 2011), pp. 529, 465.

<sup>206</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Nightwatchman’s Occurrence Book and Other Comic Inventions*, p. 528.

visions for a Caribbean social future among postcolonial Caribbean political elites: those who ‘long to be the first men in the world,’ but who – ‘handling books’ and ‘relying on goods’ printed or manufactured far away – become only imitative repetitions: ‘mimic men’ (*MM*, 78, 157).

But if Naipaul’s rejection of Brathwaite’s project was not only identity-political, his writings of the 1960s nonetheless betray a sense of disenfranchisement – as an East Indian – in the increasingly dominant, increasingly Afrocentric cultural politics of the Anglophone Caribbean in that period. It is notable that the caustic, often grandiose or epigrammatic narration of *The Mimic Men* is voiced by an East Indian, and the East Indian-African conflicts on the island of Isabella (a version of Trinidad) are a central theme of the novel. Indeed, as John Thieme has argued, Singh’s vulnerability as an East Indian politician in a predominantly Afro-Caribbean island is not separable from his pessimistic vision of its prospects in the postcolonial world. If, for Kamau Brathwaite, the creation of a ‘creole society’ was occasioned by the ‘juxtaposition of master and slave’, Ralph Singh feels himself a belated, insecure arrival within this relationship.<sup>207</sup> In Thieme’s words, ‘he is an intruder in the “slave island” politics of Isabella, a “picturesque Asiatic born for other landscapes” who is destined always to be excluded from the “mutual and complete comprehension of master and slave”’.<sup>208</sup>

In Ralph Singh’s journey from the seat of government in decolonising Isabella to a faceless boarding-house in London, Naipaul’s book describes the experience of becoming, politically, surplus to requirements. A notable feature of Naipaul’s fiction in the 1960s is his increasing emphasis on the act of writing as a private activity. Ralph Singh begins his memoirs – the text of *The Mimic Men* – only after his exile from

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<sup>207</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. xvi.

<sup>208</sup> Thieme, p. 122. The quoted passages are *The Mimic Men* itself.

Isabella, as part of his retreat from the world. It is no accident that he frames this retreat in a Hindu trajectory: ‘the fourfold division of life prescribed by our Aryan ancestors. I have been a student, householder, man of affairs, recluse’ (*MM*, 274). In an instructive essay, comparing Naipaul’s novel with a real Caribbean political autobiography from the period – Cheddi Jagan’s *The West on Trial* (1966) – Helen Hayward writes that, ‘while an account of Jagan’s political career is at the centre of his book, and his personal life is afforded only an occasional mention, the emphasis is reversed in *The Mimic Men*: the private life is all, and political events – “the period in parentheses” – are relegated to its periphery’.<sup>209</sup> In neither *The Mimic Men* nor ‘A Flag on the Island’ is the retreat of the act of writing into the realm of the private life shown to be a triumphant or liberating conclusion. Rather, as John Hearne suggests, ‘this is not art for art’s sake,’ but ‘art as anodyne, as aspirin’: a numbing response to social turmoil, rather than an effective, transformative solution.<sup>210</sup>

At a time when the notion of ‘culture’ as a private, bourgeois form was being systematically critiqued by Wynter as an imperial inheritance, Naipaul’s positioning of the novel as precisely that: a private, inherited, bourgeois consolation which ‘created nothing’ seemed provocative and perverse. The dispute between Naipaul and Brathwaite at the January 1971 Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature (ACLALS) conference in Mona, Jamaica has, in Donnell’s words, ‘become something of a legend in the history of Caribbean criticism’.<sup>211</sup> 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

<sup>209</sup> Hayward, p. 69. Hayward is also quoting from *MM*.

<sup>210</sup> John Hearne, ‘The Snow Virgin: An Inquiry into V.S. Naipaul’s “Mimic Men”’, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 23 (1977), 31–37. p.32.

<sup>211</sup> Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, pp. 29–30.

of politics and social activism'.<sup>212</sup> Yet by reassessing Naipaul's fiction from the late 1960s in the light of Caribbean critical trends with which he was in dialogue, it becomes clear that Naipaul's 'mandarin detachment' was itself an engaged, polemical position. The offense he takes at the instrumentalization of literature – in Brathwaite's criticism – is at least in part a criticism of the *way* texts were being instrumentalized (Brathwaite's 'Afrocentric vision'). In *The Mimic Men*, the construction of writing as a private, disinterested act can be read as a response to his disenfranchisement from the dominant public project of West Indian letters in the period.

Through the 1960s, Naipaul staunchly opposed the programme for cultural regeneration offered by Brathwaite. He believed that, rather than resolving the anxieties about cultural loss and cultural mimicry, it perpetuated them in a different form. His belief in the intellectual bankruptcy of Brathwaite's project is not separable from his sense of personal disenfranchisement from what he understood to be its stated aims: the assertion of the supremacy of Afro-Caribbean culture in the West Indies. In defiance of Brathwaite's manifestos, Naipaul's fictions of the 1960s continue to articulate ideas about mimicry and cultural loss first explored in *A House for Mr Biswas*. His insistence on the disinterested singularity of writing as opposed to political engagement, in the later years of the 1960s, was a further act of mimicry. But yet again, rather than affording bourgeois or aestheticist liberation *from* political pressure, in *The Mimic Men* it is framed as an ineffective response to social marginalization and powerlessness.

In 1950, as he writes in my epigraph to this chapter, Naipaul had seen the novel as *the* form through which he would carve a space in the world, and articulate the singularity of his Caribbean experience. But by the end of the 1960s, it is clear that his

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<sup>212</sup> Norval Edwards, 'The Foundational Generation: From The Beacon to Savacou', in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Alison Donnell and Michael Bucknor (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 111–23 (p. 120).

confidence in the novel as a vehicle for creative innovation, professional advancement, or meaningful public intervention was fading. From this point, Naipaul turns to travelogue and – at the end of the decade – to historical writing. His writing and thought in these forms constitute the subject of subsequent chapters.

### WYNTER'S NAIPAUL: INVOLVEMENT

Sylvia Wynter's accounts of *A House for Mr Biswas*, in her essays from 1968-70 ('Reflections' and 'Novel and History, Plot and Plantation'), can be read as a barometer, showing Naipaul's altered reputation among West Indian readers and critics by the end of the decade. They make explicit many of the arguments Brathwaite was beginning to gesture towards in his essays of the later 1960s. But they also extend these arguments, and prefigure the ways Naipaul, and other critics, would later look back on his novel. Moreover, they provide a key window into Wynter's own writing and critical project at that time. I end this chapter with a brief account of Wynter's writing about Naipaul. To explicate Wynter's essays, and to show how her writing on *Biswas* participated in her larger critical project, I use the influential work of discourse-analysts Douglas Biber and Susan Conrad. Their work post-dates that of Wynter, but provides a useful vocabulary for describing Wynter's style, and her understanding of language and text. Biber and Conrad's work is particularly helpful for reading Wynter because their vocabularies and hers are, at crucial points, the same. Their work gives a framework for understanding the significance of a crucial concept in her theoretical oeuvre: involvement.

Biber and Conrad, drawing on large corpora of spoken and written texts, made the distinction between 'involved' and 'informational' registers of language-use.

Impatient with the idea that there was a ‘great divide’ between written and spoken language, they wanted to show how stylistic variation in both spoken *and* written language responded to the pragmatic circumstances of each utterance.<sup>213</sup> ‘Involved’ discourse – ‘foreground[ing] the speaker or writer’s opinions, attitudes and feelings, and the relationship between the addressor and addressee’ – had historically been associated with spoken discourse. First and second-person pronouns, hedges and emphatics (‘maybe’, ‘really’), verbs like ‘think’ and ‘feel’, and deictic markers (‘here’, ‘tomorrow’), were prominent in spoken discourse, because they anticipated immediate response (affirmation or disagreement), and acknowledged or negotiated the relative positions of speaker and listener in a shared social world. But when writers wanted to emphasise these characteristics of their writing – that it was socially situated, expressed attitude rather than fact, and participated in a personal conversation – they used similar techniques. ‘Informational’ discourse, by contrast, preferred propositional phrases to communicate sometimes-abstract referential content, ‘with little overt acknowledgement of the thoughts or feelings of the addressor or addressee’.<sup>214</sup> The prestige of ‘informational’ style in written texts, especially in formal, professional or academic writing, has historically been preserved by pedagogical prescription (like, ‘avoid the first person’).<sup>215</sup>

One aspect of Sylvia Wynter’s importance was her role in the reclamation and assertion of African inheritances in Caribbean social life, and her expansion of the notion of ‘culture’ to include those religious or social practices in which African

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<sup>213</sup> Deborah Cameron and Ivan Panovic describe the ‘involvement versus informational’ thesis in Deborah Cameron and Ivan Panović, *Working with Written Discourse* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014), pp. 24–26. The same authors describe the idea of a ‘Great Divide’ between speech and writing – associated with anthropologists of language-use like Fr. Walter J. Ong SJ – on pp. 17-20.

<sup>214</sup> Cameron and Panović, p. 25.

<sup>215</sup> Theresa Lillis offers an account of how stylistic norms and conventions are disseminated by mediating institutions like universities and schools in Lillis, *The Sociolinguistics of Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 100–123.

inheritances survived. Another, related project was a critique of the protocols and language of writing and criticism through which what she saw as colonial, narrow and elitist definitions of culture had been sustained. This was a critique which took place on the level of style; her writing is a dynamic instantiation of the arguments for which she has become known. Throughout her most famous essay, ‘Reflections’, the stylistic markers of ‘involvement’ are prominent, foregrounding her writing not as a portal of abstract knowledge but as a situated social practice:

I write, and writing is the impulse of my life. I am neither writer nor critic, neither playwright nor novelist. I am a Jamaican, a West Indian, an American. I write not to fulfil a category, fill an order, supply a consumer, but to attempt to define what is this thing to *be* – a Jamaican, a West Indian, an American. I believe that this definition is the beginning of awareness [...].

Wynter believed that the way literature was taught, the way criticism was written, and the way creative writing was institutionally promoted in the West Indies promoted a vision of artworks as ‘fetish objects’ ‘to be deified under the concept of ‘Art for Art’s sake’ (WM, 24). The aesthetic value of literature was seen to be independent of its social existence, by a critical discourse that presented itself as objective and universal. Criticising the English-born critic Louis James, who was at that time working at the University of the West Indies, she writes that he described Caribbean literature and history ‘from an Archimedian point of view’. Yet as an English critic in the West Indies at a time of rapid social change, he did not stand outside the processes of historical change and literary development that he described. He spoke from a specific position within that society. He was, in Wynter’s word, ‘involved’ (WM, 26).

The ‘involve[ment]’ of writers within the stories they tell is a key idea in Wynter’s essay. This is why her own style emphasises its own situation and commitments: ‘I write’, ‘I am a Jamaican’, ‘I believe’. Wynter believed that what Biber and Conrad would call ‘informational’ writing – and the claims to objectivity that it

made – disguised (but did not in practice alter) the ideological stakes and social position of the author. Indeed, ‘informational’ writing was only another form of ‘involvement’: it made tacit claims about the writer’s (authoritative) relation to the reader and (detached) relation to the social world the reader inhabited. When she says that ‘I am neither writer nor critic, neither playwright nor novelist’, Wynter is not making a claim about the genre of her writing (she wrote in all these genres, and distinguished one from the other quite explicitly). Rather, she is outlining a theory of literary utterance in which writing in any form or genre is expressive of a wider project and subjectivity (‘an attempt to define what is this thing to *be* – a Jamaican...’), is performative (intended to intervene discursively in a social conversation or debate), and is inflected (her word is ‘mediated’) by the writer’s location, or point of enunciation, within the social world which they describe (*WM*, 27).

‘The validity of Naipaul’, Wynter writes, ‘comes from his own personal *involvement* in the “horrors” which he describes’. This was true of his personal, non-fictional pieces, like *The Middle Passage*, and it was evident in his novels. *Biswas*, Wynter writes, ‘is essentially a tragedy of dispossession’ (*WM*, 28-9; my emphasis). ‘A profound indictment’ of a ‘deprived world’, *Biswas* describes the failed *bildung* narrative of an enchanted subject in a colonial society ‘distorted by phantasmagoric circumstances’: ‘the individual, dreamt of in the liberal-market economy, as being now totally sovereign and free, is shipwrecked by the later developments of this structure which prohibits his fulfilment’.<sup>216</sup> But Naipaul’s singularity was to register dispossession ‘through his own being’ – as a writing persona, on the level of narration – and not only to ‘describe it’ in his characters (*WM*, 28). Its adherence to the conventions of the European realist novel sat in dynamic tension with its knowing allusions to the

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<sup>216</sup> Wynter, ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation’, p. 97.

European novel itself, the version of realism it had imposed on colonial readers, and the false-promises this had engendered. The effect of this narrative tension was the ‘sense of unreality’, the critique of inherited, ‘enchant[ed]’ ways of viewing the world that Wynter saw as the role of ‘revolutionary’ art (28). ‘Aware of the unreality of the inauthenticity of the so called real’, *Biswas* commuted through its own poetics the ‘terrible enchantment’ of its protagonist (24, 28).

Sylvia Wynter describes *A House for Mr Biswas* as a book that engages the traditions of nineteenth-century novelistic realism and the *Bildungsroman* as a register of colonial ‘enchantment’ and a critique of the myth of liberal individualism. This portrait draws on but goes further than Kamau Brathwaite’s reading of *Biswas* in ‘Roots’ (Brathwaite had seen that Naipaul was addressing ‘what the novel form means’, but had not shown, in the way Wynter does, how the novelistic performance of *Biswas* was situated, performative, or ‘involved’). Brathwaite, later in the decade, had begun to understand Naipaul’s technique in terms of its ‘involvement’, in this sense; Wynter’s essays develop this idea as part of her emerging theory of West Indian writing and the West Indian novel. Her readings also prefigure later discussions of Naipaul by critics associated with the emergence of postcolonial critique in the 1980s and 1990s. Sara Suleri’s argument that ‘Naipaul’s most significant work has little to do with definitive statements about postcolonial history and more with a perception of the writer’s guilty involvement in the construction of his own plots’ is consonant with Wynter’s thesis.<sup>217</sup> Homi Bhabha’s reading of *Biswas* in ‘Representation and the Colonial Text’ shows how Naipaul’s uncanny recreation of the European ‘*comédie humaine*’ reveals colonial anxieties over repetition and creativity both by thematising the act of writing, and as a

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<sup>217</sup> Suleri, p. 150.

verbal, novelistic performance.<sup>218</sup> Here, as in ‘The World and the Home’, Bhabha shows *Biswas* to be, intentionally or otherwise, a critique of the latent ideology of the European novel: ironizing the idea that ‘a novel must be a house for free people to live in’.<sup>219</sup> Again, this has strong similarities to Wynter’s argument.

Bhabha’s essays, which I draw on in my own reading, have, like Suleri’s work, become central documents in the international reception of Naipaul’s writing, and can be read as the testing ground for the arguments about intellectual mimicry and the fraught question of ‘newness’ in the postcolonial world that Bhabha would expand upon in *The Location of Culture* (1994).<sup>220</sup> In this chapter, I have shown how what Bhabha sees as the ‘postcolonial place’ *Biswas* inhabits in the history of the Anglophone novel can in fact be positioned more locally in space and time.<sup>221</sup> The narratorial anxieties of *Biswas* spring from West Indian anxieties of the mid-twentieth century, not just about being a colonial polity as opposed to a metropolitan one, but about being a *singularly* colonial polity, a people ‘transplanted to a transplanted crop’ with no ‘culture of their own’, in contrast (as they saw it) to India or Africa. Bhabha used *Biswas* to show the limits of what he called ‘stereotype-analysis’: the nationalist project of replacing European canons with local ones; replacing exterior, racist representations of colonised people with positive images produced internally, by the subjugated people themselves.<sup>222</sup> Bhabha thought that this ‘stereotype-analysis’ both played down the extent to which the positive, nationalist texts were themselves inscribed within colonial representational and epistemic regimes, and underplayed the extent to which the

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<sup>218</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Representation and the Colonial Text’, p. 118.

<sup>219</sup> Homi Bhabha, ‘The World and the Home’, *Social Text*, 31/2 (1992), 141–53 (p. 142). Bhabha is quoting Iris Murdoch here.

<sup>220</sup> see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 148–153. Bhabha articulates a question that runs throughout *The Location of Culture* – ‘how newness enters the [postcolonial] world’ – on p.303 (it is the title of chapter 11).

<sup>221</sup> Homi Bhabha, ‘The World and the Home’, p. 142.

<sup>222</sup> **Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Representation and the Colonial Text’, p. 224 [Incorrect].**

exploration and performance of this inscription (the partial, often unconscious incorporation of metropolitan tropes within colonial writing) could itself, as Wynter puts it, carry a ‘revolutionary’, critical, or subversive charge. *Biswas* was an appropriate tool for this project, because – I suggest – it emerged at a transformative moment in the history of West Indian novel-writing and criticism, in which the desire for a canon of West Indian novels to replace or sit alongside their European predecessors was giving way to new understanding of the novel form itself, and its various representational idioms, as (in Bhabha’s sense) culturally ‘located’. It was a crucial text in the history of this transformation because it was a novel that both thematised and performed this process of inscription.

Sylvia Wynter described *Biswas* as ‘a tragedy of dispossession’. V.S. Naipaul, in his later career, has used a related word to describe its theme: dependence. In a 2003 BBC World Book Club interview, an American listener asked him if the narrative of Mr Biswas was ‘in a sense’, the story of ‘postcolonial Trinidad’: ‘in a world without a protector and armed with the wrong knowledge’. Where one might have expected hostility to this reading as reductive or schematic – one thinks of the stormy response to Fredric Jameson’s related thesis about national allegories – Naipaul acknowledged, in a moment of rare plainness: ‘it’s so obvious now that I didn’t think about it at the time’.<sup>223</sup> It was only afterwards, reading a review by Francis Wyndham in *The London Magazine*, that the true subject of the novel revealed itself to him. Wyndham had described it, Naipaul said, as ‘a study in dependence, in every kind of dependence: man on family, family on economy, and economy on the larger economy, the colonial dependence’. He had not, he said, articulated this to himself in his plan for the novel.

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<sup>223</sup> Jameson’s famous thesis, presented in ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’ (1986), was that novels from the ‘Third World’ always constituted allegories about the nation. For an account and rebuttal of the hostile response this thesis received, see Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 89-113.

But ‘I find things out as I write’. ‘Dependence’ – the immanent subject – emerged in and through the process of writing.<sup>224</sup>

Wyndham’s review survives, and does indeed describe *Biswas* as ‘a study of *dependence*’.<sup>225</sup> But the 2003 BBC World Book Club interview is not the only place in which Naipaul describes such a revelation about his work. A decade earlier, in *A Way in the World*, Naipaul had described reading a review of his early novels by the C.L.R. James-figure, Lebrun:

He said I was writing about people impoverished in every way, people on whom history had played a cruel trick. My characters thought they were free men, in charge of their own destinies; they weren’t; the colonial setting mocked the delusions of the characters, their ambitions, their belief in perfectibility, their jealousies (WW 109).

‘It was a miraculous piece of writing,’ Naipaul says of Lebrun’s essay, transforming the narrator’s ‘ground level’ perspective on his own work to reveal the historical processes which had created it, in which the narrator was himself involved. ‘The revelation of Lebrun’s article’, Naipaul writes, ‘became a lasting part of my way of looking’ (WW 110). The real-life James called *A House for Mr Biswas* ‘a great masterpiece’ in 1964, and made reference to it in his writings throughout that decade.<sup>226</sup> But no single review survives that matches Naipaul’s description.<sup>227</sup> Putting these words in the mouth of Lebrun, however, suggests a late, subtle acknowledgement by Naipaul that besides a British readership, there was always a readership of West Indian intellectuals – a West Indian public sphere – who reviewed and responded to his work, and which he himself read and responded to. Naipaul did not always make this explicit, and without historical

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<sup>224</sup> ‘V.S. Naipaul: A House for Mr Biswas’, *BBC World Book Club*, BBC World Service, January 4<sup>th</sup> 2003. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02r7g6c>> [accessed 14 August 2017].

<sup>225</sup> Francis Wyndham, ‘Selected Books (4)’, *The London Magazine*, October 1961, 90–93 (p.91).

<sup>226</sup> C.L.R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory*, p. 148.

<sup>227</sup> Indeed, at this point in *A Way in the World*, it may be that Lebrun is supposed to be reviewing Naipaul’s work which preceded *Biswas*. Rhonda Cobham-Sander describes the elusive status of this review in *I and I*, p. 250.

reconstruction, the stakes, the *involvement* of Naipaul's novels in evolving West Indian cultural theory and public debate are less visible. In this chapter, I have reconstructed this Naipaulian involvement, to show how his West Indian intellectual contexts motivated the literary thinking in his early fiction, and how his fiction provoked and catalysed the rich field of West Indian novel-theory.

## 2.

***The Loss of El Dorado* and ‘Colonial’ Historiography**

History was a fairytale not so much about slavery as about its abolition, the good defeating the bad. It was the only way the tale could be told. Any other version would have ended in ambiguity and alarm. The slave was never real. Like the extinct aboriginal, he had to be reconstructed from his daily routine.

V.S. Naipaul, *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969) (*LED*, 35).

The years encompassing the composition, publication and revisions of *The Loss of El Dorado* – 1966-1973 – mark a definitive change in Naipaul’s work and reputation. To divide his oeuvre into two halves – before and after *LED* – is not tendentious. In 1966, following the critical and commercial failure of his English-set novel *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, Naipaul continued to be perceived primarily as a Caribbean novelist, one of a number who had, over the past decade, enjoyed a minor vogue.<sup>228</sup> By 1973, when the second, substantially revised edition of *LED* was published by Penguin, he was a recently-crowned Booker laureate – the first non-white winner of the award – and had begun the series of travel essays for the *New York Review of Books* which

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<sup>228</sup> ‘Isn’t it time we killed off V. Selvon Mittelholzer?’ Ronald Bryden asked in *The Sunday Telegraph* in a review of *Mr Stone*. ‘West Indian novels have been appearing in Britain for over 10 years now. Yet you could never tell from their reviews that they aren’t all the work of a composite Caribbean author writing sunnily of quaint brown lives in the sugar-fields, with occasional passionate excursions into the jungle.’ ‘One Foot in the Grave’, *The Sunday Telegraph* (London, 26 May 1963), p.19.

would come to define his later reputation as a metropolitan ‘postcolonial mandarin’. In other words, he had become one of the earliest non-white writers to be institutionalised within British and American literary culture: an inaugural member of an elite canon of ‘Commonwealth’, later ‘postcolonial’ writers whose canonicity would solidify (by means of institutions such as the Booker Prize) over the next three decades.<sup>229</sup>

But the shift that took place was not only reputational; at least, not according to Naipaul himself. And here, the change cannot just be tracked across a loose period, but is localised specifically onto *LED* itself. No other Naipaul book receives as much attention in his subsequent oeuvre as *The Loss of El Dorado*. In ‘Prologue to an Autobiography’ (1984), *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), ‘Reading and Writing’ (1999) and in his Nobel lecture ‘Two Worlds’ he revisits the process of composition and research in detail. Each of Naipaul’s major retrospective accounts of his career put *LED* at the centre, as a transformative work in his development as a thinker and writer. Naipaul’s growing frustration with the novel form (explored in the previous chapter) led him, through the 1960s and 1970s, to explore and prioritise other forms of writing. The form that would gain particular prominence in his later reputation would be the travelogue. But dominating his intellectual life of the late 1960s was his attempt to write history.

*The Loss of El Dorado* constructs a historical account – vast in scale and exhaustive in detail – of the formation of colonial society in Trinidad. It is a genealogical account of the formation of Naipaul’s own society, and subjectivity. *LED* historicises the ideas about the disappearance of the indigenous past and the absence of non-European social and artistic traditions that are latent in *Biswas*. But it does not

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<sup>229</sup> For an account of the changing use of the terms ‘Commonwealth’ and ‘Postcolonial’ see Lazarus, pp. 10–12.

present a programme for social innovation or creative development. Indeed, the other way that Naipaul describes the book's significance is in terms of the creative, professional, and psychological catastrophe it brought about. 'By 1968,' Patrick French writes, with his 'finances in a mess' and '*The Loss of El Dorado* [...] unwieldy and unfinished', 'Vidia was falling apart'; the years of its composition and early reception were to be years of 'floundering, professional exhaustion and a fear [...] that his best work might be behind him'.<sup>230</sup> Naipaul himself describes his sense of reaching a creative and intellectual impasse in more a vivid, bodily vocabulary, recounting – in *The Enigma of Arrival* – his persistent 'dream[s] of [an] exploding head'.<sup>231</sup> '*The Loss of El Dorado* was a prodigious piece of research and recreation, but it was not the sort of book that marked a way forward for Vidia,' French writes, and *LED* does mark a terminal point both in Naipaul's writing and in his critical reception.<sup>232</sup> Nonetheless, as both a granular history of the evolution of literary and aesthetic ideas in the Americas, and as a narrative performance in its own right, its richness as a document in the history of twentieth-century Caribbean historiography has yet to be recognised. Despite, or rather because of its anxieties about creative innovation, it becomes a singular and affecting experiment in literary and historiographical thinking. The pivotal text of Naipaul's middle career, it is a record both of his psychological frustrations, and of the fraught postcolonial moment at which it emerged.

In his later work, Naipaul frames *LED* as a narrative that is unwritten or unwriteable. In *A Way in the World* (1994), Naipaul revisits the narratives of Sir Walter Raleigh and Francisco de Miranda, culled from the pages of *LED*, to offer another (in this case, fictional) meta-historical reflection on the impossibility of narrating West

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<sup>230</sup> French, pp. 266, 276.

<sup>231</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel in Five Sections* (London: Picador, 2002), p. 111.

<sup>232</sup> French, p. 265.

Indian history, speculating that he had once thought to turn the stories about these men into ‘a play or a screenplay’, but that in the event they remained (until *A Way in the World* itself) ‘unwritten stories’ (WW, 157). In this way, Naipaul retroactively erases *The Loss of El Dorado* – in which these narratives *were* written (though perhaps not satisfactorily) – from his bibliography. Moreover, in *The Mimic Men* (1967), written immediately before *LED*, he proleptically disavows what was shortly to become something like his historiographical project. Here, the politician-protagonist Ralph Singh describes his unfulfilled desire to ‘give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, [...] the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples[,] [...] [and] to the restlessness which this great upheaval has brought about’. If historical writing about Empire has become, for Singh, ‘the pamphleteering of churls’, he had once hoped to ‘sketch a subject which, fifty years hence, a great historian might pursue’. ‘But this work will not now be written by me; I am too much a victim of that restlessness which was to have been my subject’ (MM, 32).

Ralph Singh, failed politician, views the act of writing as an alternative to political engagement; the myth of ‘calmness and order’ that he attaches to it is the opposite of the ‘restless’ activity of political life (MM, 32). It occurs, of necessity, at moments of withdrawal from life, as ‘an ascetic emptying out, a renewal of perception’.<sup>233</sup> Yet the myth of historical writing-as-asceticism, as-detachment, is undermined by his own victimhood to the ‘restlessness which was to have been my subject’. This last sentence sheds light on the peculiarity of the task Naipaul set himself in *The Loss of El Dorado*. On the one hand, *LED* is the historical narrative Singh believes it would be impossible to write, at least for him. As Selwyn Cudjoe has noted,

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<sup>233</sup> Francis Mulhern, *Figures of Catastrophe: The Condition of Culture Novel* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 99.

despite the demarcation of its temporal and geographic horizons (Trinidad, 1592-1813), *LED* presents itself as metonymic for ‘the restlessness, the deep disorder’ by which Singh characterises the experience of British colonial subjects as a whole.<sup>234</sup> ‘The colony’ Naipaul writes in the epilogue to *LED*, ‘became an imperial amalgam, the Empire in little’ (*LED*, 352). And Naipaul’s subsequent understanding of ‘colonialism’ – a key word to which I will return – in important senses derives from the discoveries he made whilst researching *LED*. Yet at the same time, in choosing Trinidad as the sole lens through which to view this, and by framing the narrative as concerning the creation of the society in which he himself had grown up, Naipaul also implicated himself as a product of the social and epistemic structures of that same colonial experience whose formation he is describing. The community of Indians in which he grew up was ‘a new human dereliction, in the pattern of what had gone before’ (*LED*, 352). The rules of the society, ‘the colony’, had been created ‘long before’ their arrival (*LED*, xviii). So *The Loss of El Dorado* is an account of the historical creation of its author’s ‘colon[ial]’ subjectivity, but it is also a creation of that same subjectivity it describes.

*LED* emerged not just at a junctural point in Naipaul’s career, but at a junctural point in the history of West Indian historical writing. Through the later 1960s and early 1970s, the sense of disappointment in the social progress made following the acquisition of constitutional independence brought about a flowering of historical inquiry into the social, psychological, and cultural practices of Caribbean colonialism, whose impacts and legacies still seemed to pertain. Important texts within this conversation include Elsa Goveia’s *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (1965), Orlando Patterson’s *Sociology of Slavery* (1967), and Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s *Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820* (1971). These

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<sup>234</sup> Cudjoe, p. 112.

works drew on classics of anti-colonial historical writing from earlier in the century, such as Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) and C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938). But they also insist on their difference from these earlier texts, which (in a story familiar from chapter one) are tacitly seen to have relied too heavily on colonial conceptions of what constituted a historical narrative or historical significance. The revisions James made for the second edition of *BJ*, published in 1963, also – it has been argued – show signs of this this epochal shift.<sup>235</sup> In its suspicions of the historical categories of West Indian historians of the 1930s and 40s, *LED* is clearly a text of this postcolonial moment; yet, much as he had in the context of the novel, Naipaul refuses many of the alternative historiographical models developed by his contemporaries. Regarding *Biswas* and *The Middle Passage*, writers like Brathwaite and Wynter had described this characteristic Naipaulian double-bind (both analysing and instantiating colonial subjectivity) as 'an essential part of his talent' and of his importance in the West Indian public sphere (*WM*, 28-9). But Caribbean critical response to *LED* (which postdates Wynter's 'Reflections') was markedly more muted and ambivalent. Naipaul's writing of the later 1960s increasingly struck critics like Brathwaite as futile and unproductive, and the evolution of his historical ideas played a central role in this shift. In this sense, Naipaul's professional and creative crisis is also a moment in which the future value of his work within Caribbean public debate is called into question.

Though its accuracy as an account of James's intellectual development has been disputed, David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity* once again provides a vocabulary for the problems Naipaul explores in *LED*.<sup>236</sup> I engage Scott's ideas throughout this thesis,

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<sup>235</sup> Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity* makes this influential argument, as I discuss below.

<sup>236</sup> Critics such as Kamugisha – who I discuss below – believe he vastly overstates the change in James's thinking from the 1938 text to the 1963 text. It is plausible that a younger, definitively *postcolonial* Jamaican writer (Scott) would exaggerate the definitively postcolonial conundrum he finds in James's

but as a crucial work of Caribbean historiographical theory in its own right, I examine *Conscripts* in particular detail in this chapter. *Conscripts of Modernity* puts James's *Black Jacobins* at the centre of a story about how historical writing functions as form of forward-looking cultural criticism. Scott's idea of a 'conscript of modernity' draws on Talal Asad's suggestion (in 'Conscripts of Western Civilization' (1993)) that non-Western responses to Westernising processes (such as colonialism or globalisation) are always premised upon, or conditioned by, the terms established by those Westernising processes themselves. These moments of cultural contact 'involve the reformation of subjectivities and the reorganization of social fields' in such a way that the choices individuals make will afterwards always be a response to the new (Western) arena of election, and thus 'Western' choices (whether intending to assimilate with or reject the 'Western Civilization' of Asad's title).<sup>237</sup> Scott was interested in the ways this idea became operative for James after the constitutional independence of Trinidad and Jamaica. Focussing on the changes James made to the 1938 text for the 1963 second edition, Scott perceives a generic shift in the way James presents his protagonist, the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture. Whereas the first edition of the text – published substantially before independence in the West Indies and Africa – framed the story of Toussaint as a 'romance' of anti-colonial revolution, the second edition re-describes Toussaint's story as, in some senses, a tragedy. Written for a new postcolonial audience, James's interest was now in Toussaint's conflicted position as a foundational 'postcolonial' intellectual: formed within the European 'cognitive universe' yet trying to imagine a future independent of the racial and economic structures that such a universe imposed (C, 155-6). The postcolonial intellectual, in other words, was a

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work. Scott's ideas may well describe the work of Naipaul (who is closer to Scott in age) more accurately than they do that of James.

<sup>237</sup> Talal Asad, 'Conscripts of Western Civilization?', in *Dialectical Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Stanley Diamond*, ed. by C. Gailey (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), I, 333–51 (p. 337).

‘Conscript of Western Civilization’. ‘Tragedy’, for Scott, is the ‘mythos’ or mode of emplotment that can comprehend or communicate this double-bind, which Wynter – a propos of Naipaul – prefers to describe as masochism, ‘ugliness’, or ‘horror’ (C, 47-8, and see 23-57 passim; WM, 28-9).

Scott takes his two modes of ‘emplotment’ – ‘romance’ as opposed to ‘tragedy’ – from Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973). White had argued that all historical writing must necessarily tell its story according to one or other ‘essential’ plot structure, of which romance and tragedy are two. No one structure, or mode of emplotment, is more or less realistic than another, and therefore ‘the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological’. ‘In approaching the historical record,’ Scott writes, quoting White, ‘we are [...] “indentured to a choice”’ (C, 47-8). The choice the historian makes, for Scott, is illustrative of their moral or political imperatives. In this instance C.L.R. James, shifting his mode of emplotment from romance to tragedy had therefore made a strategic choice. Believing that after the acquisition of constitutional independence the imperative for the historian had shifted, it no longer seemed necessary to tell the romantic story of revolutionary overcoming. Instead (so the argument runs) he wished to explore the difficulties and ambiguities that postcolonial subjects might face after the disappearance of colonial governments. Hence the generic shift from romance to tragedy. But the phrase ‘indentured to choice’ is loaded, in the context of Caribbean history, and for Naipaul in particular. If the processes of French colonialism created the arena of political choice for Toussaint and the tragic conflict he faced, British colonialism in the Caribbean – furnishing writers like James and Naipaul with the narratorial and historiographical machinery of the British literary tradition – also created the arena of choice for them as historians. In other words, it indentured them to

a choice not between genuinely essential plot structures – cross-temporal and cross-cultural (as Hayden White, following Northrop Frye, would have it) – but to particular, historically specifiable, generic traditions which had crystallised at particular moments into recognisable forms of (in this case English) historical writing.

At least, this seems to be a closer definition of the problem encountered by Naipaul. In chapter one, I described a version of this ‘indenture to choice’ in which Naipaul – making a point about the impossibility of imaginative and personal freedom within colonial Trinidad – found that the form of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* did not in the end provide a more realistic alternative to fantastical, inappropriate fictional romances. In this chapter, I describe Naipaul’s exploration of historical ‘romance’ in *The Loss of El Dorado*. As I say, Naipaul seems to have invested in something like Scott’s idea of ‘conscription to modernity’ or at least the double-bind of the postcolonial intellectual who was ‘too much a part’ of the ‘restlessness’ he or she simultaneously hoped to gain critical historical purchase upon. Yet, whilst acknowledging that the categories for understanding and writing history are Western categories, that they cannot comprehend forms of indigenous or slave experience, there is for Naipaul no alternative mode, Western or non-Western, that communicates this elided experience. There are only gaps and silences, and the examination of such silences does not lead to comprehension and retribution but stupefaction or stasis. This is why, I suggest, Naipaul presents the narrative of *LED* as unwritten or unwriteable, before and after the fact, and why the text itself – so interested in illusion, fantasy and cognitive frustration, without positing any models of verity, authenticity or clarity – has proved so difficult for subsequent critics to read or understand. Like James’s Toussaint (according to Scott’s account), it presents the experience of the postcolonial intellectual as complex and troubled, but unlike James it does not communicate this by means of

explicit affiliation with an alternative Western genre (tragedy). Rather, it is interested in the ‘futility’ of colonial experience, and its incompatibility with ‘history’ (understood as a tradition of European writing) per se.

The remainder of the chapter is divided into four parts. In the first part, I position *LED* within an evolving trajectory of twentieth-century historical writing and theory, from C.L.R. James’s 1938 *Black Jacobins*, through to the methodological debates between Elsa Goveia and Eric Williams of the 1960s. In the second part, I show how *LED* responds to these debates by providing a history of ‘romance’ as an aesthetic concept and descriptive strategy in the Caribbean. I argue that the failure or exhaustion of ‘romance’ as a way of narrating Caribbean history is used to indicate the difficulty (or necessary impossibility) of describing colonial experience in the narrative tradition of metropolitan historiography. In the third part, I show how Naipaul alludes to the absences of indigenous or slave experience in the historical archive, and compare his response to this with that of contemporary Caribbean historians such as Kamau Brathwaite and Orlando Patterson. I conclude by describing the anxieties both found in and provoked by the text about its critical, social or epistemic value.

#### WEST INDIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE 1960S: WILLIAMS, GOVEIA, JAMES, NAIPAUL

The 1960s were a turbulent period in Trinidadian history and in Trinidadian historiography. In 1962 Eric Williams’s *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* was published, not as a ‘work of scholarship’ but ‘as a manifesto of a subjugated people’. Originating from a ‘personal conviction that it would be an unfortunate handicap [...] if Trinidad and Tobago were to enter on its career of Independence

without a history of its own, without some adequate and informed knowledge of its past', the first premier of the new nation created a book 'designed to appear on Independence Day, August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1962': 'it is the Declaration of Independence of the United People of Trinidad and Tobago'.<sup>238</sup> Two years later, Williams published a further book, *British Historians and the West Indies*, an attempt to 'emancipate' his compatriots from those colonial historians who had 'sought to depreciate and to imprison' them in their writings. 'The historical field', he wrote, 'provides the battleground on which imperialist politics struggles with nationalist politics'.<sup>239</sup> Williams's bullish anti-colonial rhetoric establishes a clear set of distinctions and responsibilities. He condemns the West Indian who 'uncritically accept[s] the satellite position which he has enjoyed throughout the ages', who has 'evaded, and underestimated the importance of his historical antecedents', as well as the intellectuals who have failed to remedy such a lack.<sup>240</sup> These antecedents are understood to be defined nationally, pioneering exemplars of agency among the colonially oppressed. Williams' binaries at the beginning of the decade are 'Caribbean vs. English', 'Colonial vs. Metropolitan', but not – he emphasises – racial: 'division of the races was the policy of colonialism. Integration of the races must be the policy of independence.'<sup>241</sup>

Williams's historical writing of the 1960s occupied a different place in his schedule and priorities to earlier works such as *The Negro in the Caribbean* (1942) and *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), which had been written when he was a full-time academic historian. These later writings now receive substantially less attention than the early works, and a modern critic's assessment of his work from the 1960s onwards as

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<sup>238</sup> Williams, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, pp. ix–x.

<sup>239</sup> Eric Eustace Williams, *British Historians and the West Indies* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1966), p. 12, 233–4.

<sup>240</sup> Williams, *British Historians and the West Indies*, p. 12.

<sup>241</sup> Williams, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, p. ix.

‘polemical, boastful, and idiosyncratic’ is not unique among West Indian responses to these works.<sup>242</sup> Not only is the quality of Williams’s scholarship understood to have declined, but the reputation of the books becomes tied to Williams’s increasingly controversial reputation as the first president of Trinidad and Tobago. These books, which declare themselves to be a central part of Williams’s nationalist project, suffer reputationally from the road-blocks that this project encountered in a way that *Capitalism and Slavery* does not. An important criticism of these later works was Elsa Goveia’s essay ‘New Shibboleths For Old’, published in the *New Beacon Review* in 1968 and reprinted in *Caribbean Quarterly* (a journal based at the University of the West Indies) in 1969. This dual publication is indicative of Goveia’s position within West Indian letters: she was involved in the transatlantic periodical conversation (for example, as an advisory editor of *Savacou*, the journal of the Caribbean Artists Movement), but she was also, throughout her career, a university professor; she believed that academic research had a specific and singular importance and championed the role of the University of the West Indies (formerly the University College of the West Indies) in West Indian intellectual life. This distinguishes her from other professionally trained historians, such as Brathwaite and Williams, who saw their principal intellectual impact as extra-mural, as well as from historiographical autodidacts or men (in this case) of letters such as James or Naipaul. Goveia’s argument in ‘New Shibboleths’ is that between the publication of Williams’s early work of the 1940s and his later work of the 1960s, the state and stakes of West Indian historical writing had changed. Williams’s work of the 1940s, she suggests, was pioneering in ‘the professional study of West Indian history’, contesting a British historical narrative with the methodological tools of the British academy itself. For this reason it was a

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<sup>242</sup> Aaron Kamugisha, ‘C.L.R. James’s “The Black Jacobins” and the Making of the Modern Atlantic World’, in *Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire*, ed. by Antoinette M. Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 190–215 (p. 198).

product of its time. Drawing out the implications of Williams's own description of himself as 'a rebel against the British historical tradition which Oxford has done so much to develop', she suggests that Williams has remained to an extent trapped within this pose, ignoring the development of a West Indian historical tradition of which his own work formed a foundational part.<sup>243</sup> 'Oxford' had therefore 'develop[ed]' not only the 'British historical tradition' but also the pose of rebel, revisionist, outsider, which Williams adopted and maintained, and which was no longer appropriate within an independent West Indian state of which he himself was the premier. 'What seemed revolutionary in the Oxford of the 1930s was already orthodox at the U.C.W.I [University College of the West Indies] in the 1950s'. 'The intellectual isolation which has plagued him since he was a rebellious undergraduate at Oxford continues to make itself felt in his work, and he still writes like a man who finds himself the only voice crying out in the wilderness of an alien and hostile historical tradition.'<sup>244</sup>

For Elsa Goveia, Eric Williams was using now-superannuated capital as an anti-colonial 'rebel' to disguise a failure to engage with or propose new West Indian traditions of historiography for the 1960s. Fairly or unfairly – and this debate far exceeds the scope of the present thesis – analogous criticisms dog Williams's post-independence career not just as a scholar but as a politician. The remedy that Goveia proposed was institutional: she wanted Williams to recognise the scholarship taking place at the (recently re-named) University of the West Indies, and to support the dissemination of this scholarship in the West Indian media and into state schools. A different, though not-unrelated ideological corrective, which extended beyond historical writing into the wider arena of cultural thought, concerned a new engagement with

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<sup>243</sup> Elsa V. Goveia, 'New Shibboleths For Old', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 54 (2008), 141–48 (pp. 142–43, 146).

<sup>244</sup> Goveia, p. 146.

African inheritances and with African or Afro-Creole experiences and cultural practices during the time of slavery. I describe the broader contexts of this turn in chapter one. Needless to say, however, given that its concern was with historical phenomena, the sphere of historiography was a primary site in which these debates took place. Crucial historical texts in this tradition of enquiry – which came into prominence in the mid-1960s – were Goveia’s own *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (1965), Orlando Patterson’s *Sociology of Slavery* (1966), Brathwaite’s 1971 book *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820* (which was heavily influenced by Goveia’s work), and Patterson’s later comparative study *Slavery and Social Death* (1980).

It would be wrong to present these subsequent trends as detached from or unrelated to the historiographical tradition that preceded them, in which Williams’s earlier work had been prominent. Aaron Kamugisha describes *Capitalism and Slavery* as ‘the most debated and controversial historical study by an Anglophone Caribbean intellectual’, sitting it alongside James’s *The Black Jacobins* as twin heads of the later twentieth-century West Indian historiographical tradition.<sup>245</sup> Barry Higman, in his book *Writing West Indian History*, ‘establishes a network of dedications by Caribbean historians to their past colleagues in which C.L.R. James, Elsa Goveia, and Eric Williams occur most prominently and regularly’.<sup>246</sup> Nonetheless, it is important that these projects – that of the early Williams and James, and that of, say, Brathwaite – are seen, in their historical context, as different in their methods and priorities. To borrow R.G. Collingwood’s well-known formulation, they arise at different moments as answers to different questions: these were questions about historical representation, and

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<sup>245</sup> Kamugisha, p. 197.

<sup>246</sup> cit. Kamugisha, p. 197.

about race and slavery in the culture at large.<sup>247</sup> *Capitalism and Slavery* had responded to an historiographical tradition and a British colonial administration that controlled the narrative about slavery and abolition at a time when that narrative was still officially operative in the colleges and schools of West Indian colonial territories. Williams had responded to them in the professional academic discourse of the British. His book, Williams wrote in 1943, was ‘first a study in English economic history and second in West Indian and Negro history. It is not a study of the institution of slavery but of the contribution of slavery to the development of British capitalism.’<sup>248</sup> The contribution of slavery to the development of British capitalism had not, of course, become an outdated question by the late 1960s, and indeed continues to animate historical debate today. But for writers such as Brathwaite, during the early years of independence, the ‘institution of slavery’ itself and its social impacts upon subsequent generations of West Indian and Afro-Caribbean communities were of primary rather than secondary importance.

The republication of James’s *The Black Jacobins* in New York in 1963 occurs at a curious time. This first edition, published in 1938, had been temporally close to *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), and in fact both James and Williams – who were personally close in this period – participated in the composition of the other’s texts. C.L.R. James seems to have been influential in helping Williams outline the thesis of what would later become *Capitalism and Slavery* at an early point in its gestation, while Williams worked as a research assistant for James during his research for *The Black Jacobins*, accompanying him on research trips to France.<sup>249</sup> Both books belong to a

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<sup>247</sup> An idea outlined in R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>248</sup> Eric Eustace Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p. ix.

<sup>249</sup> This relationship is described in detail in Kamugisha, pp. 198–201 and Høgsbjerg, pp. 172–77. In the bibliography to *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams writes that *The Black Jacobins* ‘advanced’ a version of his thesis about the ‘relationship between capitalism and slavery’: ‘as far as I know, for the first time in English’. Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, p. 268.

similar historiographical moment. Like Williams's book, James was interested in contesting what he saw as colonial, racist norms of metropolitan historiography from (broadly) within the same methodological paradigm in which these norms had been established.<sup>250</sup> His ambition, in the 1930s, bluntly stated, had been to promote the cause of national liberation, above all in parts of Africa: the Gold Coast, for example, which would not gain constitutional independence until 1957.<sup>251</sup> By 1963, however, Williams and James had split decisively, following James's short tenure as editor of the PNM party newspaper, *The Nation*. The split – which would be described with animosity in Williams's autobiography *Inward Hunger* and James's *Party Politics in the West Indies* – has generated a large amount of subsequent analysis. To summarise broadly, it concerned the positions of the intellectual and the politician in the post-independence West Indian state. Whereas Williams presented James as an irresponsible intellectual who has 'deserted' a concrete nationalist project in favour of the theoretical abstractions of 'World Revolution' (i.e. Marxism),<sup>252</sup> James presented Williams as 'a leader who propagandizes the masses rather than mobilizes them, facilitating a political culture where demagoguery replaces a thoughtful presentation of the political alternatives'.<sup>253</sup> Kamugisha reads a much earlier review by James of Williams's *Negro in the Caribbean* as a neat proleptic definition of his future position on the prime minister: 'He is a sincere nationalist and a sincere democrat', James wrote, 'but [...] [he] displays an extreme naiveté in his forecasts for the future'. 'Federation, national independence,

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<sup>250</sup> Høgsbjerg, on p. 183, notes that 'For Western scholars, before *The Black Jacobins* and for some time afterward, the Haitian revolution, when it was mentioned at all, was essentially portrayed as Froude had portrayed it, simply as a bloodthirsty and savage race war, without reason or rhyme.' He also describes, however, James's debt to the historiographical tradition spawned by the French Revolution – in particular Michelet (see p.181).

<sup>251</sup> See, for example, Kamugisha, p. 191: '*The Black Jacobins* looks back to slavery and the mechanics of empire in anticipation of future decolonization – indeed James identified the book as being less about the Caribbean than about Africa and its coming freedom struggle'.

<sup>252</sup> cit. Kamugisha, p. 198.

<sup>253</sup> Kamugisha, p. 199.

political democracy [...] are admirable [demands], but he commits a grave error in thinking, as he obviously does, that these will end or even seriously improve West Indian mass poverty and decay.’ ‘The future’, James argued, ‘demands more than Williams has’.<sup>254</sup>

While the 1938 edition of *The Black Jacobins* was written with an African audience in mind, it was the 1963 edition that – according to Stuart Hall – was read by, and circulated among, Caribbean students and writers from the mid-1960s onwards. ‘Although of course I knew of [BJ’s] existence’, Hall writes, ‘I’m pretty certain I didn’t read it until the paperback publication of 1963, and [...] as far as I remember it wasn’t prominent in public discussion. So for me, and for many others, it is in fact a text of the sixties.’<sup>255</sup> This account is corroborated by subsequent scholarship: both Kamugisha and Scott see the 1963 edition of *BJ* as the primary influence on West Indian intellectuals after Eric Williams.<sup>256</sup> Yet, notwithstanding the addition of the seven paragraphs to the last chapter, and the postscript (‘From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro’), the structure and methodology of the text remained on the whole that of an earlier, anti-colonial moment. In comparison with subsequent models of West Indian historiography (those of Brathwaite, for example) which would contest the focus on ‘big events and institutions’, the mode of historical writing which had been adopted by anti-colonial thinkers like James served to canonise pioneering nationalists in terms of their similarity to the so-called great men of European history; *The Black Jacobins*, as its title suggest, had first been written in something like this earlier, Eurocentric mode.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> cit. Kamugisha, p. 200.

<sup>255</sup> Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz, ‘Breaking Bread with History: C.L.R. James and “The Black Jacobins” Stuart Hall Interviewed by Bill Schwarz’, *History Workshop Journal*, 1998, 17–31 (p. 22).

<sup>256</sup> See *CM*, pp. 10–11; Kamugisha, pp. 204–5.

<sup>257</sup> See Priya Gopal’s account of ‘subaltern history’ in which she cites Ranjit Guha, who saw European historiography (largely Hegelian and implicitly male: ‘Big events and institutions’) as aligned with the ‘bourgeois-nationalist’ historiography that arose in response among colonial intellectuals. Priyamvada Gopal, ‘Reading Subaltern History’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed.

James, Hall notes, was ‘formed by Europe’ and felt himself to be ‘a European intellectual’.<sup>258</sup> The terms in which James establishes Toussaint’s significance often manifest themselves in terms of claims for his attachment to – indeed, centrality in – European historical processes. ‘In a fundamental sense,’ Christian Høgsbjerg writes, ‘*The Black Jacobins* was a pioneering work in the tradition of “history from below”’.<sup>259</sup> But in what fundamental sense? As David Scott has noted, the legacy or importance of James in Caribbean thought is habitually framed in terms of the ‘unresolved tension between a revolutionary politics and an elitist poetics’ (*CM*, 17).<sup>260</sup> Indeed, speaking in 1971 – the year of the publication of Brathwaite’s *Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* – James would himself acknowledge that, were he to rewrite *BJ* entirely at this later historical and historiographical moment, he would ‘search harder for perspectives of the enslaved persons on their own condition’, and theorise leadership in terms of this broader, ‘subaltern’ perspective.<sup>261</sup> *The Black Jacobins* was enormously influential in contesting racial stereotypes, and shifting historical attention towards a tradition of great black leaders and intellectuals, and this continued (and continues) to animate historical writing and research long into the period of independence. But the implicit Eurocentrism of his methodology – which was entirely of its time – required working through, or working against, rather than adoption by a subsequent generation of Caribbean historians. Both Brathwaite and Naipaul would read this Jamesian

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by Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 139–61 (p. 139,141). ‘Subaltern Historiography’ is primarily associated with the study of South Asian history, but there are analogies to be drawn between its methodology and that of West Indian historians such as Brathwaite and Erna Brodber. See Leah Rosenberg and Annie Paul, ‘The Prose of Creolization: Brathwaite’s “The Development of Creole Society” and Subaltern Historiography’, in *Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2007), pp. 246–62.

<sup>258</sup> Hall and Schwarz, p. 24.

<sup>259</sup> Høgsbjerg, p. 184.

<sup>260</sup> See *CM* pp.101-4 for a more detailed discussion of this point.

<sup>261</sup> Kamugisha, p. 202.

Eurocentrism in a similar way, but it would be their differing responses to it that would define their historiographical projects.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1960, the same month in which James resigned membership of the PNM, Winston Mahabir published an article in *The Nation*, the PNM organ which James had – until shortly before that – edited. Mahabir was an important member of Eric Williams’s cabinet before independence, not least because he was Indo-Trinidadian in an overwhelmingly Afro-Trinidadian party. One of Mahabir’s key tasks was to foster the impression that the PNM represented Indo- as well as Afro-Trinidadian interests – out of office, he would subsequently deny that it had done so, in any meaningful sense – but in 1960, writing an article about ‘West Indian Writers in the UK’, he focussed in on V.S. Naipaul and his possible utility for the emerging federal nation.<sup>262</sup> Naipaul’s work, he writes, describes ‘the humour and the pathos of the Indian community in Trinidad’. Yet he ought not, Mahabir continues,

be allowed to write only of the Indian community that he knew a few years ago. The winds of change are blowing as fiercely in the West Indies as they are in Africa and India. He must hear these winds and observe their effects upon the community which he has selected for his particular type of scrutiny. We must, therefore, offer Vidia Naipaul a “refreshment fellowship.” He must return at our expense to pick up the threads whose colours, textures and dimensions have undoubtedly changed in his absence.<sup>263</sup>

Mahabir’s article has echoes of Brathwaite’s ‘Sir Galahad’ in its thesis that émigré writers had a social responsibility to subject their communities to a ‘particular kind of scrutiny’ and ought to return to the Caribbean to exercise that scrutiny in the service of their emerging societies. But it is also an attempt to co-opt Naipaul, as James had been co-opted, into the official nationalist project of the PNM. Unsurprisingly – this article is in essence a press-release of PNM policy – Naipaul shortly would be offered such a

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<sup>262</sup> At this point, of course, Trinidad formed part of the West Indian Federation. On Mahabir see French, pp. 170, 206.

<sup>263</sup> Mahabir n.p..

‘refreshment fellowship’, and, as I have said, would return to the Federation at the expense of Eric Williams. The book that would emerge, scrutinising the ‘colours, textures and dimensions’ of a society altered in his absence, would be as far from the affirmative, cultural-nationalist account that Mahabir no-doubt expected as can be imagined. Naipaul’s hopes for the book are suggested in his correspondence with C.L.R. James. ‘I wonder what you will make of my book about the West Indies’ he wrote to James from Kashmir in Autumn, 1962. ‘Attack I wouldn’t mind; but if it fails to arouse among West Indians some discussion about their situation, then I will have to think it a failure.’<sup>264</sup>

‘I don’t think any of the writings about James have come anywhere close to understanding the complexity of his feelings about Europe’, Stuart Hall claimed in 1998. ‘He’s formed by Europe, he feels himself to be a European intellectual [...] But because Europe stands for him as the advanced location of modernity, I don’t think that he felt that this was a kind of sell-out or capitulation. Who could not be interested in Europe, because it was in Europe that history was breaking?’<sup>265</sup> If James ever responded to Naipaul’s letter – ‘I wonder what you will make of my book about the West Indies’ – it does not survive either among the Naipaul papers in Tulsa, or the James papers in U.W.I. St. Augustine. What does survive of the Naipaul-James correspondence, however, closely relates to Hall’s account of James’s ‘complex feelings about Europe’. One seam of letters was sparked by Naipaul’s admiring review of *Beyond a Boundary* in *Encounter*, September 1963. Here, Naipaul had focussed on James’s description of West Indian society as the product of another country, ‘transplanted as a hot-house flower is transplanted’. Whereas subjects of African and Asian colonies had

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<sup>264</sup> cit. French, p. 228.

<sup>265</sup> Hall and Schwarz, p. 24.

recourse to alternative cultural ‘systems’ on which to build a nationalist movement, the West Indies, Naipaul says, had none.<sup>266</sup> In *Beyond a Boundary*, James had described this ‘transplanted’ European culture as formative of his consciousness.<sup>267</sup> In an autobiographical move in his review, Naipaul suggests that this shared European culture is in fact what links him and James, despite their ethnic differences. Naipaul – describing their shared passage through the Queen’s Royal College – describes himself as following ‘in [James’s] path step by step’, after a thirty-year interval. Positioning James’s book in dialogue with Nirad C. Chaudhuri’s *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951), as an account of the impact of metropolitan education on the colonial intellectual, he suggests that this form of ‘cultural boomerang’ might in fact give ‘solidity’ to the West Indian literary tradition.<sup>268</sup>

This idea that West Indian society had been born in the cradle of colonial modernity (and did not have its defining roots in the pre-colonial past) was at the centre of the revisions James would make to *The Black Jacobins* in 1963.<sup>269</sup> A letter to Naipaul from September 1963 – referring back to *Beyond a Boundary* (and Naipaul’s review) and forward to the new edition of *BJ* – draws together the two projects. ‘You recognize’, James writes, that ‘we are a unique people. There is nothing like us in the development of the modern world. That is what I emphasize over and over again in the [new] appendix to *The Black Jacobins*’ (‘From

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<sup>266</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Overcrowded Barracoon, and Other Articles* (London: Deutsch, 1972), p. 20.

<sup>267</sup> C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Yellow Jersey, 2005), p. 55.

<sup>268</sup> Naipaul, *The Overcrowded Barracoon, and Other Articles*, p. 19 - 22.

<sup>269</sup> In ‘From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro’ he wrote: ‘The history of the West Indies is governed by two factors, the sugar plantation and Negro slavery.’ This had created an ‘original [social] pattern, not European, not African, not a part of the American main, not native in any conceivable sense of that word, but West Indian, *sui generis*, with no parallel anywhere else. [...] When three centuries ago the slaves came to the West Indies, they entered directly into the large-scale agriculture of the sugar plantation, which was a modern system [...] The Negroes, therefore, from the very start lived a life that was in its essence a modern life. That is their history – as far as I have been able to discover, a unique history.’ *BJ*, pp. 305-6.

Toussaint L'Overture to Fidel Castro').<sup>270</sup> In what survives of these exchanges, both men attempt to co-opt each other, or to re-describe each other's point of view as in crucial ways amenable to their own. So, in his review, Naipaul emphasises James's distance from PNM nationalism and James's status as – like him – a detached, London-based intellectual: 'in *our* absence the static society *we* knew has altered [...] With the new nationalism and confidence, the public-school code has become as anachronistic as the masters who taught it'.<sup>271</sup> James, in turn, represents Naipaul as sharing his opinion about the structural legacies of colonialism in the West Indies, believing that his tendency to localise these structural critiques onto the cultural vacuity of the colonies is above all a failure of emphasis or articulation. 'Believe me, my dear Vidia, it is with no idea of propagandizing you', he writes, but 'I believe that, effective as *we* are in stripping the wrappings from the underdeveloped countries, we will be more effective if [...] we indicate that we are ready to strip or have already stripped the wrappings from Western civilization itself'.<sup>272</sup> In his work of this period – in particular *Beyond a Boundary* and the appendix to *BJ* – James had begun to depart from the rhetoric of anti-colonial nationalism to a new consideration of the colonial structures that underwrote West Indian society, and the challenges this posed in the wake of Federation and then independence. Naipaul's project, he suggests, is not in this period too distant from this. Naipaul's tendency to centre in on colonial failings can make the work seem antithetical to his project, which was affirmative rather than nihilistic and looked to describe the grounds of a future West Indian cultural identity. But James saw this as merely a more pessimistic or one-sided

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<sup>270</sup> rept. in C.L.R. James, *A Majestic Innings: Writings on Cricket* (London: Aurum Press, 2014), p. 131.

<sup>271</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Overcrowded Barracoon, and Other Articles*, p. 22. My emphasis.

<sup>272</sup> C.L.R. James, *A Majestic Innings*, p. 133. My emphasis.

version of the point he was making about western cultural legacies. In the letter quoted above, James is talking about ‘Jamshed into Jimmy’, an article Naipaul had recently published about India. But his account of Naipaul’s work could equally apply to *The Middle Passage*, which James would certainly have read, and sat at the centre of Naipaul’s reputation in the Caribbean in this period.

*The Middle Passage*, though not itself a work of history, is nonetheless best known for its comments on history and historical writing. Particularly controversial were Naipaul’s citations of the imperial historian J.A. Froude, who is used in the text as a metonym for metropolitan historiography more broadly, and perhaps ‘historical’ writing per se.<sup>273</sup> ‘If ever the naval exploits of this country [England] are done into an epic poem’, Froude had written in *The English in the West Indies: Or, The Bow of Ulysses* (1887), ‘the West Indies will be the scene of the most brilliant cantos’.<sup>274</sup> Naipaul uses Froude to exemplify the idea – which he does not contest – that ‘history’ as a genre of writing is synonymous with ‘the record of “great” events’. For Froude, historical actors are English and male and their deeds necessarily imperial – founding colonies, fighting battles and ‘spread[ing] [their] race over the planet to leave a mark upon it which time will not efface’. ‘Leaving a mark’ is the crucial idea: a ‘mark’ constitutes a monument, or a document, the individual textiles from which the historical record is quilted. The West Indies, for Froude, attain significance only as the site of this English national epic, and the heroic actors who perform this historical epic are set in contradistinction to the passive critics of imperialism who, in Froude’s phrase, ‘produce nothing of their own’.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Naipaul uses quotations from Froude’s *Bow of Ulysses* for example, as the epigraph to the book (*MP*, xi), and to the first chapter (*MP*, 1).

<sup>274</sup> James Anthony Froude, *The English in the West Indies: Or, The Bow of Ulysses* (London: Longman’s, Green, 1909), pp. 9–10.

<sup>275</sup> Froude, p. 31, c.f. pp. 12–13.

This last phrase, along with the conception of history that underwrites it, receives a strong echo in the famous lines from *The Middle Passage*: ‘History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies’ (*MP*, 20). Yet it is also clear that the modality of Naipaul’s statement, a citation of Froude in effect, is different from that of Froude’s original, Victorian text. For Naipaul, unlike for Froude, the statement emerges not as a triumphant assertion of imperial prestige, nor as a criticism of Gladstonian liberalism (in which the retention of hardly-profitable colonies in the West Indies was not seen as self-evidently a good thing) but as a historiographical question to which he has no answer: ‘How can the history of West Indian futility be written?’ (*MP*, 20). *If* history is the record of ‘achievement’ and ‘creation’ (defined in imperial terms), then how can a ‘history’ of these islands be written at all? Naipaul’s question rests on a supposition that Froude was in one respect correct: that historical writing is structured by narratives of ‘achievement’, ‘creation’, or ostentatious change performed by powerful men, in the way Froude suggests. But it also rests on the assumption that Froude was in one crucial respect wrong: that the West Indies did not function for the British primarily as a site of historic conquests and naval triumphs, but as a fundamentally mundane annex of commodity production which became less and less important as the sugar trade yielded to the cotton trade as the principle driver of the British economy: ‘In the West Indian islands slavery and the latifundia [plantation system] created only grossness, men who ate “like cormorants” and drank “like porpoises”; a society without standards, without noble aspirations, nourished by greed and cruelty’ (*MP*, 19).

As Kamau Brathwaite notes, the historiographical question Naipaul poses is one that would exercise him not just in *The Middle Passage*, but also, and at greater depth, in *The Loss of El Dorado*, and his engagement with historiographical method develops

significantly in the eight years between the two texts.<sup>276</sup> Already in 1962, however, Naipaul was interested in questions of tone and affect – ‘How can the history of West Indian futility be written? What *tone* shall the historian adopt?’ [my emphasis] – and he attempts to describe the limitations of existing models:

Shall he be as academic as Sir Alan Burns, protesting from time to time at some brutality, and setting West Indian brutality in the context of European brutality? [...] Shall he, like the West Indian historians, who can only now begin to face their own history, be icily detached and tell the story of the slave trade as if it were just another aspect of mercantilism? The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told (*MP*, 20).

As his reference to Eric Williams (‘tell[ing] the story of the slave trade as if it were just another aspect of mercantilism’) suggests, Naipaul finds himself and his predecessors in a compromised position: trying to answer a West Indian question with the conceptual arsenal of a British historiographical tradition in which the West Indies were an incorporated but necessarily marginalised part. One advance that the West Indian historian could make – and had made – from within this cramped space was to fix on an exemplary or totemic instance in which the drab maintenance of plantation economies *had* been interrupted by the heroic exploits of a non-white Caribbean slave. Naipaul’s engagement with the ideas of C.L.R. James – insofar as it is traceable through correspondence, autobiographical excerpts and by the reviews and essays that each man wrote on another – is a product of the 1960s, sitting in that pivotal period between *The Middle Passage* and *The Loss of El Dorado*, but it is notable that even in the earlier text he is careful to delineate the object of his diatribe to the ‘British West Indies’. In contrast to Froude, for whom the mention of the word ‘Hayti’ is assumed to be shocking enough to convert those lily-livered readers who might have regretted Eyre’s brutality in 1865 (or, worse, might question the utility of the colonial project in the

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<sup>276</sup> Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820*, p. 267.

West Indies entirely),<sup>277</sup> for Naipaul the ‘great revolution’ in ‘Haiti’ is precisely the kind of ‘historical’ event which in the annals of the ‘British’ West Indies was notably, and regrettably, absent (*MP*, 19).<sup>278</sup>

Loosely, the phrase ‘nothing was created in the West Indies’ diagnoses a similar cultural situation to that which James diagnoses when he speaks of West Indian communities being absolutely novel in the world. Insofar as West Indian societies had come into existence (following the annihilation of Amerindian communities) as commercial outposts, necessary yet ancillary ‘peripheries’ to a metropolitan ‘centre’ in the global-capitalist system, they had no precedent, no national history or (written) ‘marks’ of indigenous creation. Yet the conclusions that each man drew from this diagnosis, and the prospects for future action, were markedly different. For James, the West Indian situation said something important about the formation of British culture, and ought to function as part of a structural, Marxist critique of imperialism; secondly, despite the challenges it posed, the ‘transplant’ (a word he, Williams and Naipaul all use) at the heart of West Indian culture was itself what was new and unique about that culture.<sup>279</sup> In *The Middle Passage* however, Naipaul does not seem interested in how imperialism affected British society – this is not part of his remit – and in his examination of Caribbean societies, he finds the legacies of the colonial past (the absence of ‘history’ in his sense of the term) as debilitating, leading nowhere. On the one hand, its object of scorn is the Eurocentric middle class that Naipaul would have

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<sup>277</sup> Froude, p. 86.

<sup>278</sup> Conveniently, for his thesis, Naipaul saw the 1865 Morant Bay Revolt as basically an example of exaggerated British brutality, rather than as a popular uprising of historical significance. He writes, in an *NYRB* review of Bernard Semmel’s *Jamaican Blood and Victorian Conscience*, that Eyre’s officers, ‘exaggerated their beastliness: they not doubt felt, after the bloodlust of the Indian mutiny, that it was expected of them.’ V.S. Naipaul, ‘Black Man’s Burden’, *The New York Review of Books*, October 31<sup>st</sup> 1963. <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1963/10/31/black-mans-burden/>> [accessed 2 March 2016].

<sup>279</sup> In a 1964 speech, James makes the familiar assertion that ‘we have no native civilisation of our own; we have no native language; we have no native religion’. But the conclusion he draws is markedly optimistic: ‘in literary and political forms, the world at large is open to us. It is a difficulty, but it is also an advantage’. C.L.R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory*, p. 143.

known from his childhood, and finds parallels in Lamming's 'The Occasion for Speaking', a slightly earlier text from another writer in 'exile'. On the other hand, however, the text is punctuated by references to the increasingly prominent proto-Black Power movements across the Caribbean: 'the Negro's rejection of the guilt he has borne for so long [...] the closing of accounts this side of the middle passage.' Both of these responses, Naipaul suggests, are different responses to the same problem: one adaptive, the other reactive. Both, in his mind, were 'barren': the claim to be African was no better than to claim to be European, neither offered a future direction for an authentic West Indian culture (*MP*, 82, and see 61-82).

Through 'the break-up of the colonial system,' Naipaul wrote in *The Middle Passage*, 'the animosity that might have been directed against the whites has been channelled off against the Indians'. 'Trinidad [...] teeters on the brink of racial war' (*MP*, 76-7). As I describe in chapter one, Naipaul, like many Indo-Trinidadians, believed that in the late 1950s and early 1960s Eric Williams's PNM traded on racial antagonism.<sup>280</sup> This was distinct from the early stirrings of the Black Power movement that Naipaul would note in *The Middle Passage*, and that would grow throughout the 1960s. By 1970, as reviews of *The Loss of El Dorado* appeared in the American press, Williams's government was requesting international military assistance to control the snowballing Black Power 'February Revolution'. But in his retrospective, semi-fictional account in *A Way in the World*, Naipaul would conflate the earlier 'racialism' of the PNM with its later attempt to placate an electorate sympathetic to the Black Power movement:

The almost religious exultation of the early days of the black movement had given way very quickly to the simplest kind of racial politics. In Trinidad that meant

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<sup>280</sup> see Palmer, p. 266.

anti-Indian politics and constant anti-Indian agitation; it was how the vote of the African majority was to be secured (WW, 355).

Naipaul's animosity towards the Black Power movement of the later 1960s would be recorded in his 1973 essay 'Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad', and in *Guerrillas* (1975). The degree to which Williams traded on these racial antagonisms before, during, or after Black Power, and the degree to which the Black Power movement in Trinidad targeted members of the Indian community is debated. But it is clear that members of the community, including Naipaul, felt that he and it did. Rob Nixon, setting *The Loss of El Dorado* in 'illustrat[ive]' contrast to Williams's *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* has suggested that Naipaul's book 'took on a reactionary aspect' at a time when there was an imperative among intellectuals to 'confront the future by reconceiving the past through the language of nationalism'. Nixon's argument – that Naipaul ought to have been supporting Williams's version of nationalism 'just a few years after Trinidad had achieved its formal independence' – fails to see the different priorities of 1962 as opposed to 1969, of Naipaul as opposed to Williams, and in this sense offers a model for comprehending postcolonial intellectual production that is homogenizing, programmatic, and a-historical. Yet he does pose a provocative question: what 'future force' did Naipaul's return to the colonial past and to colonial historiographic method carry in 1969?<sup>281</sup> From *The Middle Passage*, through *The Mimic Men* to *The Loss of El Dorado*, Naipaul seems to grapple with the idea of a mode of writing which establishes no new paradigm, which fails to imagine a future fundamentally different from the past, indeed, which refuses to engage with the idea of futurity at all. I will expand on this point below.

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<sup>281</sup> Nixon, *London Calling*, pp. 126–27. Taking a passage from *The Enigma of Arrival* somewhat too literally, Nixon goes on to assert that the Black Power revolution occurring months after the publication of *LED* was 'a quirk of history' (p.128) rather than part of the same process Naipaul had been describing over the last decade.

A second comparison that has been drawn pits Naipaul's project in *LED* in simple opposition to that of C.L.R. James's project in *The Black Jacobins*. Helen Hayward has suggested that *The Black Jacobins* 'may be seen to represent an aspect of the intellectual background of *The Loss of El Dorado* in contradistinction to which Naipaul's views are defined', whilst Nixon has argued that the 'textual subversion of European categories' in *The Black Jacobins* 'contrasts instructively with Naipaul's approach' in *LED*.<sup>282</sup> Again, Nixon is not attuned to the strand of Caribbean thought which sees *BJ* as precisely not a subversion of European textual categories. Instead, like Hayward, he constructs simplistic distinction between the two men and their contributions to the history of Caribbean ideas. Naipaul's loosely fictionalised account of his relationship with James, who appears as the character 'Lebrun' in *A Way in the World*, has in this regard received substantial critical attention. Here Naipaul elides Lebrun's historical masterpiece of the 1930s (*The Black Jacobins*) with his own *Loss of El Dorado*. Lebrun's 'purpose' Naipaul writes, had been 'to link the revolutionary stir of the 1930s to the stir caused in the region by the French Revolution'. This suggests *BJ*, yet the purported subject of the book – the role of Trinidad as a 'base' for revolution in Spanish America – in fact shares much with *LED* (*WW*, 127-8). As Rhonda Cobham-Sander suggests, Naipaul associates himself with the historical figure of James by 'foreground[ing] a number of similarities between himself and a historical figure who many consider his nemesis'.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Hayward, p. 103; Nixon, *London Calling*, pp. 125–26.

<sup>283</sup> Rhonda Cobham-Sander, 'Consuming the Self: V.S. Naipaul, C.L.R. James, and *A Way in the World*', *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, 5.2 (2007), 1-22, pp. 6–7 <<http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol5/iss2/5>> [Accessed 02 October 2017]. Hayward (p.103) has discussed how 'by ascribing to Lebrun the authorship of a book which closely resembles *The Loss of El Dorado* and *The Black Jacobins*', Naipaul 'points to similarities between the character of Lebrun and himself'. Presumably, given her reading of the distance between *LED* and *BJ*, Hayward is not persuaded by this assertion of similarity.

Williams and James, alongside Goveia, constitute the most influential West Indian historians of the mid-twentieth century, and their anti-racist, anti-colonial historical writing remains powerful and important to this day. Criticism about Naipaul's historical writing – which constitutes a small part of the wider body of Naipaul criticism – tends to set his work in opposition to that of James and Williams. In this section, I have offered a more nuanced account of this picture. Naipaul's work shares a crucial intellectual-historical background to that of James and Williams, and Naipaul shares many assumptions with James, with whom Naipaul strategically aligns himself at different times. Both James and Naipaul, I have suggested, resisted being co-opted into the nationalist project of Williams, and in their historical and discursive writing of this decade identify similar problems which the new nation will have to overcome. James's historical writing and cultural criticism explores the complex relationship between European colonial pasts and postcolonial futures in this period, and – in *Beyond a Boundary* – James describes himself as a product of this complexity. Naipaul, whose formal, colonial education, followed James 'step by step', thought about his own experience in a similar way. But even if we grant Scott's thesis that James explores the profoundly Naipaulian idea of postcolonial 'conscripted to colonial modernity' in his work of the 1960s, it is clear that this is an addition, a crucial nuance, to an older and wider project of anti-colonial critique. As James's letters to Naipaul suggest, his interest in attacking the colonial structures that had brought about these psychological conflicts amongst colonial subjects always outweighs his criticism of the conflicted, conscripted subject. For Naipaul – a much younger man whose adult life had largely been spent during the years of decolonisation and independence, yet whose imbrication in the

British educational system was if anything greater than that of James – this was not the case: his interest in ‘conscription’ was dominant.<sup>284</sup>

In his historical writing from *The Middle Passage* to *LED*, Naipaul consistently engages the questions that are animating the West Indian historiographical field in this period: about the distinction between anti-colonial and postcolonial historiographical demands, and the superannuation of anti-colonial models of historical writing. Emphasising his ‘conscription’ to outdated, colonial historiographical models in an era of historiographical innovation, he was both drawing on and magnifying ideas latent in the historical writing of James, but also deploying them in a new context, and with different polemical force. Rather than emphasising the ‘tragic’ conflict of a foundational postcolonial intellectual, *LED* – written at a moment of self-doubt, creative anxiety, and of dissatisfaction at both Eric Williams’s government and the burgeoning Black Power movement – foregrounds the conflicted, self-defeating, or even futile nature of postcolonial intellectual production as such. Ironically, these anxieties gave rise to one of the most formally innovative texts in the West Indian historiographical tradition, a text in which Naipaul’s literary thinking – both his engagement with the history of narrative forms and aesthetic concepts, and his thinking on the level of form and through the cultivation of tonal affect – is at its most complex. As a product of this moment in Caribbean history, and as a work of creative historiography, *LED* constitutes both an important historical document and a fascinating experiment in poetics. But it is unsurprising that Naipaul’s contemporaries could not find a productive social programme in the text, or that it proved, in Naipaul’s own writing career, to bring about a moment of crisis.

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<sup>284</sup> In this sense, rather than merely instantiating the phenomenon of ‘conscription’ to colonial modernity that Scott finds in James, Naipaul’s historical writing allows us to nuance and buttress the claims Scott makes about this phenomenon, and its importance in postcolonial Caribbean intellectual history.

## ANTONYMS OF COLONIALISM: ROMANCE AND THE NEW WORLD

*The Loss of El Dorado* describes ‘how a colony was created in the New World’ (*LED*, xviii). Put differently, *The Loss of El Dorado* constitutes Naipaul’s answer to the question: ‘what is a colony’ and ‘how did the experience of “colonialism” – cognitive and affective – interact with, compete with, and come to replace the experiences of novelty and cognitive expansion that came with the discovery of the Americas’? Naipaul tried to answer this question through the surviving ‘documents’: the British and Spanish imperial documents and court papers, the accounts of the conquistadors and later settlers, and subsequent historical narratives from Spain, France and Britain, as well as the West Indies and South America (*LED*, v). His interest in these documents might be called archaeological: that is, he is interested in them as human textual creations – as often-fantastic and always-positioned accounts – which have accrued (or been collocated) to structure the historical record in particular ways, eliding some sets of human experience (for example, indigenous or black experience) at the expense of others. Nonetheless, he is a positivist (or, if you prefer, a pessimist) in that he believes that the documents, the historical record, are all there is. History (for him) is not to be understood as the totality of facts and experiences that happened in the past, but the record of those events, the written ‘marks’ that have been left. As a result, the experience of historical research (and more broadly, of historical awareness) is the experience of an encounter with an archive, a set of documents. It can be baffling, disturbing, or cognitively disruptive not least at moments when it seems most clearly to be eliding the totality of facts (for example, indigenous experience) to the point of narrative incoherence. This is not reparable, however: it can only be analysed or

described as an experience of reading. This description, registering the encounter between reader and archive, is an account of both the record and the subjectivity of the reader, which will itself have been formed by the processes that the record describes or elides. Naipaul's book frames itself as an origins story about his own colonial subjectivity. It describes the acquisition and consolidation of Trinidad as a British colony between 1592 and 1813. 'Indians from India began to arrive in 1845; but the colony was created long before that' (*LED*, xviii).

The two narratives that Naipaul focusses on in this account of the 'creat[ion]' of the 'colony' are two moments in which Trinidad is 'touched by history': that is, moments in which dominant European narratives touch, tangentially, on Trinidad (*LED*, xviii). These are: first, the period in which Trinidad was used as a base for the El Dorado expeditions by Walter Raleigh and others, and secondly the late eighteenth-century moment when British diplomats hoped to use Trinidad as a base to foster a Spanish American war of independence, and thus obtain access to trade freely with these territories. Neither of these two narratives represent, in themselves, the colonial experience that Naipaul is interested in. They are merely the documents that remain. They describe the imperial project which left the colony in its wake and the imperial pageantry that sustained it, and it is only in their elisions, distortions, or moments of palpable falsity that the obverse of these imperial romances – that is, the 'slow[er] violence', the 'attritional' daily mundanity of colonial experience – can be discerned.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' helps define the distinction between imperial and colonial experience that Naipaul is outlining here. 'Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant, sensational visibility', Nixon writes. By contrast, he defines 'slow violence' as 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight [...] an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all[,] [...] a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales'. In *LED* Naipaul contrasts the 'spectacular' violence of imperial arrival with the 'slow' violence of colonial consolidation. In so doing, he 'engage[s] the representational, narrative [...] challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence'. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 2.

Ronald Bryden, calling to mind the relationship between Naipaul and Froude, describes the subject of the book as ‘those colossal, neglected tracts of colonial tissue between imperialism’s epics’, yet he acknowledges that for the most part ‘Naipaul leaves the reader to see the pattern for themselves’.<sup>286</sup> The ‘colonial tissue’ is visible to Naipaul only as the ‘areas of darkness’ given form by the epics themselves: this may be, in the first instance, the despoliation of the islands that was inherent in, but not primary to, the search for El Dorado, and later the creation of a British slave colony that followed in the wake of the British conquest of the territory. Early reviewers identified that the true subject of the book, the creation of colonialism, appeared only in relief: that it was not directly narrated, and perhaps not directly narratable. Derwent May describes how the ‘cultural history of colonialism’ is visible in the text only as a ‘refle[ction]’ in ‘some broken, half-buried scrap of mirror’.<sup>287</sup> Graham Greene was baffled by the way in which the text seems to fetishize the incommunicability of its subject. The ‘style’ he wrote, ‘falls more and more like a net curtain between author and reader [...] [W]e can see nothing from our side of the curtain except a portentous, ill-defined “Thing”’.<sup>288</sup>

What Naipaul means by ‘colonial’ experience is not, as I say, plainly stated. His understanding of ‘colonialism’ is linked to common usage, but is not the same as it. Bryden, distinguishing between ‘colonial tissue’ and ‘imperial epic’ gestures towards a common distinction described by Elleke Boehmer: imperialism, she proposes, concerns the assumption of authority ‘by a state over another a territory’ (suggesting an active project of expansion) whereas colonialism denotes ‘the consolidation of imperial power, the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources’.<sup>289</sup> On

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<sup>286</sup> Ronald Bryden, ‘Between the Epics’, *New Statesman* (London, 11 July 1969), pp. 661–2 (pp.661-2).

<sup>287</sup> Derwent May, ‘A Black Tale’, *The Times* (London, 11 January 1969) p.v.

<sup>288</sup> Graham Greene, ‘Terror in Trinidad’, *The Observer* (London, 26 October 1969), p. 34.

<sup>289</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

this account, coloniality would be experienced over a long duration (in contrast to the shock of imperial arrival) and would lend itself to stasis – consolidation and exploitation – rather than a differentiated narrative. Similarly, Nicholas Dirks draws attention to the etymology of the word – *colonia* as ‘farm’ or ‘settlement’ – to suggest that colonialism is ‘associated with the settlement and cultivation of territories’. Furthermore, ‘colonialism’, he argues, ‘directs attention towards the colonies themselves, whereas the rubric of “imperialism” typically directs attention to the metropole’.<sup>290</sup> This is a helpful starting point. For Naipaul in *LED*, colonialism and the implementation of the plantation system are linked: colonialism operates as something like the static state of peripherality in perpetuity left behind after the moment of imperial expansion: ‘People who write about Raleigh usually have to hurry back with him to the tower of London; they pay as little attention as Raleigh himself to what was left behind. An obscure part of the New World is momentarily touched by history [...] [T]his was how a colony was created’ (*LED*, xviii).<sup>291</sup> But to explore in more detail the way in which colonialism is described or suggested it is necessary to explore the structure of *LED* itself, and its engagement with narrative genres which are antithetical to colonial experience and are used to outline colonialism in relief.

The principle generic term Naipaul uses in *LED* to describe European narratives about the Caribbean is ‘romance’ (the word occurs fifteen times in the text). As I say in my introduction, ‘romance’ is a key word in Naipaul’s work. It is used principally to denote inherited and clichéd ways of describing the world, and the fantasies that these inherited descriptions create. But Naipaul’s use of the word is occasional and strategic: it has a subtly different inflection, and refers to distinct local targets, across different

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<sup>290</sup> Nicholas Dirks, ‘Colonialism’, in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, ed. by Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), pp. 42–45 (pp. 42–45).

<sup>291</sup> Naipaul spells Raleigh’s surname ‘Raleigh’ throughout *LED*.

books (and at different moments in individual books). In *Biswas*, ‘romance’ referred to misleading metropolitan ‘wish-fulfilment literature’ (and it turned out that a good deal of metropolitan literature was misleading in this sense). In *LED*, and collateral essays such as ‘Columbus and Crusoe’ (1967) in which he sketches out ideas for the book, he would go back to the late-medieval and early-modern Spanish and English ‘romance’ tradition, to investigate its unhappy relationship with the discovery of the Americas. He describes the ‘El Dorado’ quest as a ‘New World romance,’ and elsewhere the phrase ‘the El Dorado romance’ becomes metonymic for the early European fantasies about the Americas, imaginative and commercial, more broadly (*LED*, 17). This usage draws on historical referents. As Barbara Fuchs notes, ‘in the New World, Spanish conquerors resorted to chivalric romance as they searched for a way to describe the marvelous sights that they encountered’. Medieval ‘romance’ tropes – such as those found in the works of Chrétien – became a key idiom through which the experience of imperial encounter was narrated; in turn, the idea of the ‘marvellous New World’ animated the romance tradition in the early-modern period.<sup>292</sup> *The Loss of El Dorado* traces the increasingly false or distorting purchase that ‘romance’ – in the hands of European writers – had on Caribbean historical experience as the moment of discovery or imperial conquest gave way to the *longue durée* of colonial management of the territories. As the book’s title suggests, it attempts a historical account of the failure or exhaustion of ‘romance’ as a way of understanding the Caribbean and the tropical Americas.

The most common word that is used alongside ‘romance’ in *LED* is ‘wonder’ (the word occurs fourteen times). Tales of ‘wonder’ can be near synonyms for ‘romance’ narratives; elsewhere, ‘wonder’ is the aesthetic experience that romance

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<sup>292</sup> Fuchs, pp. 81–82.

promises, or even the ‘marvellous possession’ (gold) that constitute the object of ‘romance’ quests. In the wake of Stephen Greenblatt’s *Marvellous Possessions* (1991), the cultural history of ‘wonder’ as an aesthetic response to the New World has been the subject of critical scrutiny. Here, Greenblatt distinguished between two possible uses, or abuses, of the ‘wonder’ of European explorers in their first contact with new territories. Greenblatt was above all interested in the way ‘wonder’ (‘a primary or radical passion’) was described, textually.<sup>293</sup> One response, that of Columbus, was to use the ‘explanatory powers of writing’ to ‘tame the opacity of the eye’s objects’. This response, assimilating what was unknown into the categories of the known, travestied the new territories and their subjects, making ‘renaming, transformation and appropriation possible’. The second response, however, which Greenblatt associated with Mandeville or Montaigne, led to a recognition of ‘radical alterity’: ‘to a sense of dispossession, a disclaimer of dogmatic certainty, a self-estrangement in the face of the strangeness, diversity, and opacity of the world [...] It stood for all that could not be securely held, that resisted appropriation’.<sup>294</sup>

In *LED*, and in collateral essays such as ‘Columbus and Crusoe’ (1967) in which he sketches out ideas for the book, Naipaul acknowledges that the appropriative, imperialist sense of ‘wonder’ goes back to the moment of discovery. Columbus’s ‘belief in wonders’ furnishes a pre-ordained way of seeing in which newness is (in Greenblatt’s words) ‘tamed’ or ‘appropriated’ into that which Columbus had hoped to find (above all, gold). It also precludes what Naipaul calls ‘anthropological interest’: ‘self-estrangement in the face of strangeness, diversity’. Similarly, Columbus seeks to curry interest among Spaniards in the commercial possibilities of the Americas by

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<sup>293</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 17.

<sup>294</sup> Greenblatt, p. 74, 88, 135.

trying to ‘awaken wonder’ in ‘the idea of the New World’ in ‘the tradition of travel-romance’. These ‘travel-romances’, borrowing from the writings of Marco Polo, are trivial and generic, evoking ‘the idea of the New World’ rather than the New World itself (Polo, of course, had never been to the Americas).<sup>295</sup> But whereas the textual residues left by the Spanish conquistadors were largely formalized and generic – ‘in these Trinidad documents, the sea was the sea, climate was absent [...] landscapes were formal[;] Columbus had seen gardens like those of Valencia in March, and no one had seen more’ (*LED*, 31) – Naipaul insists that at first, these responses coexisted with the response of ‘self-estrangement’. Indeed, these responses may even once have been communicable through romance. In 1594, one ‘Captain Wyatt, of whom nothing else is known’, had sailed to Trinidad under the command of Robert Dudley. Wyatt, ‘full of the London plays he had seen [...] set out to write romance’. In contrast to the predominantly banal, generically stagnant ‘travel narratives’ of the Spanish conquistadors, Wyatt’s narrative, ‘aiming at a style that matched’ the ‘chivalr[ic]’ ‘romance’ in which he understood himself to be participating, ‘catches the excitement of an Atlantic crossing to Trinidad [...] the twenty-two day journey; the flying fish rising from the sea like a flock of frightened larks; the new climate’. ‘Wonder’, Naipaul writes, admiringly, ‘burst[s] through [Wyatt’s] words’ (31). At moments, Naipaul’s wordplay – ‘believing in wonders, [Columbus] had no gift of wonder’ – acknowledges the same ambivalence in the word ‘wonder’ that Greenblatt points to (5). But in Naipaul’s concluding remarks about Wyatt – ‘in his relishing of the natural world, wonder bursting through his words, the New World as medieval adventure can be seen coming to an end’ – the built-in obsolescence of ‘wonder’ as a response to the New World, and ‘romance’ as a means for describing it, are foregrounded (31).

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<sup>295</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Overcrowded Barracoon, and Other Articles*, pp. 204–5.

In *Marvellous Possessions*, Greenblatt emphasises the elective or temperamental difference between two kinds of ‘wonder’: travellers either adopted one, or they adopted the other. Naipaul, in *LED*, makes different historical and teleological claims. The historical claim is a simple one: whether the initial records of wonder bespeak attempted mastery or self-estrangement, over time the consolidation of romance as the principle genre of European narrative about the Caribbean would offer a more and more distorted picture of the region, as the moment of marvellous discovery gave way to the mundanity of colonial settlement. The teleological claim – latent in his quote about Wyatt – is more subtle. Naipaul suggests there is a built-in obsolescence, a self-exhausting character to wonder itself: such that even the most humble travellers, those most open to self-estrangement, will over time, as novelty fades, come to assimilate new experience into the pattern of the old.

The most extended example of this is the narrative of Walter Raleigh. Again, what Naipaul is interested in is the generation of a textual record, in this case, Raleigh’s *Discovery of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guyana*. The *Discovery*, we are told, derives from a six-day sojourn with an Amerindian tribe at the mouth of the Orinoco. Raleigh ‘longed for the new but was nervous of the unknown’. ‘The sight of the falls on the Caroni River from twenty miles away was good enough for him’ (*LED*, 48-9). What emerges, nonetheless, is a book about ‘Arcadia’ (91). Raleigh’s narrative:

suggests mines and gold, spaciousness, enamelled forests, a world in which the senses, needs, life itself, can be extended. The book is part of the world’s romance. But its details are precise and true. It catches part of the New World at that moment between the unseeing brutality of the discovery and conquest and the later brutality of colonization. It was the swiftly passing moment when romance could be apprehended (91).

The idea of ‘Arcadia’ is one that Raleigh carries with him from Europe. What Raleigh’s text ‘suggests’ to Naipaul – note his emphasis on what texts ‘suggest’, rather than what

they say – is on the one hand ‘mines and gold’: an antecedent, European myth of riches, commodified ‘wonders’. But in the second half of the sentence, the emphasis shifts: Raleigh’s narrative suggests his perception of a ‘world in which the senses, needs, life itself, can be extended’. This is something like Greenblatt’s ‘self-estrangement in the face of diversity’. For Naipaul, the two responses (assimilation or self-estrangement) emerge from the same process. What had ‘begun as a search for gold’ becomes briefly ‘something more’: ‘a New World romance, a dream of Shangri-la, the complete, unviolated world’ (17). But this mind-expanding, life-enhancing wonder is visible only for a fleeting moment before the process of assimilation begins to take hold.<sup>296</sup> In his history of ‘wonder’ as an aesthetic concept, Philip Fisher takes the need for radical novelty in the experience of wonder to be self-evident, but less so the inherent implication of this: that wonder is fragile. Wonder, Fisher notes, is born out of an impulse to make sense of the unknown; once sense is made, or imposed, the wonder is lost.<sup>297</sup> In the long passage from *The Loss of El Dorado* quoted above, ‘romance’ and ‘wonder’ are near synonyms. The idea that ‘romance’ might be ‘apprehended’ in a text makes it sound less like an inherited genre and more like an affective state, like wonder. This is a rare use in Naipaul’s work in which ‘romance’, rather than describing a distorting, generic category, describes what might for a moment have been an intuitive, unwilling response to marvellous experience. But this was only true of the interstitial moment between encounter and comprehension, when the new was registered as new,

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<sup>296</sup> Simon Cooke’s celebratory reading of ‘Wonder’ in Naipaul’s later work – predominantly *The Enigma of Arrival* – pays scant attention to the fraught history of ‘wonder’ as an aesthetic concept associated with the European discovery of the Americas. ‘Wonder’ in *The Enigma of Arrival*, which is equated in broad, humanistic terms to ‘concern’ and ‘a recovery from exhaustion’ is described by Cooke as a ‘vital ethical discovery’ and is seen to discredit portraits of Naipaul as the “supreme author of disenchantment”. Simon Cooke, *Travellers’ Tales of Wonder: Chatwin, Naipaul, Sebald* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 91, 127. The quoted phrase belongs to Helen Hayward, cit. Cooke, p.9.

<sup>297</sup> Taking the paradigmatic trope from ‘classical literature’ (and, it might be added, of its subsequent redactions in vernacular romance) of the apparition of a beautiful woman in the forest, Fisher suggests that ‘wonder’ can only attach to the first sight, the moment of contact: ‘she can only out-leap all our categories of experience once’. Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 17–18.

before the assimilative, acquisitive instincts, always present in the exploratory project, once again took hold. In *LED*, both ‘wonder’ as an aesthetic category, and the ‘romance’ narratives in which it is situated are seen to be self-exhausting categories, bringing about the end of their own use-value as ways of comprehending what was only momentarily, and only for some, the ‘New World’.

Two hundred years later, when the revolutionary Francisco de Miranda arrives in Trinidad, romance remains the dominant genre through which the space is described and understood by foreigners. But the reality of what is now a slave-colony has long since cleaved from the marvellous world that romance presents. Miranda, Naipaul writes, ‘dealt in romance’. In Trinidad, he searches for the ‘noble’ ‘Indians’ – ‘descended, in his fantasy, from the legendary Incas’ – but ‘prefer[s] not so see the Negroes. They formed no part of his revolutionary romance, no part of his vision of a world made classically pure and beautiful’ (*LED*, 295). What links Raleigh and Miranda, for Naipaul, are their illusions: Raleigh and his lieutenants, like Miranda, ‘saw themselves as actors in great events, classical figures [...] and [believed that] their quest was heroic’ (91). What separates them is historical distance. Naipaul finds in Miranda no sense of the ‘wondrous’ novelty which Raleigh, perhaps despite himself, could not help communicating in that ‘swiftly passing’ moment ‘between the unseeing brutality of the discovery and conquest and the later brutality of colonization’ (91). By Miranda’s time, the brutality of colonization – the implementation of plantation slavery and the destruction of the indigenous communities – has made Trinidad totally unsuitable for his ‘romance’: which is now outdated, clichéd, and inaccurate. Yet the transformation that has taken place was a part of that same initial contact and appropriation. Fuchs describes how the romance-inspired quests of the early explorers – always both exploratory and mercantile; always in search of both gold, and Arcadia – ‘exhibite[d]

very real historical effects'. They 'both provide[d] the impetus for exploration and le[ft] [their] mark on the landscape.'<sup>298</sup> For Naipaul, the world of Raleigh and his followers 'was as small as the classical world, and the world was changing by their own efforts'. The 'Indians' they encounter are 'dulled by defeat and disappointments,' and Miranda finds 'no trace in their stupefied descendants [...] of that intelligence and quickness which attracted Raleigh' at first (91). Raleigh brings about this stupefaction, and Miranda can only 'lament' their 'degradation' (295). 'The New World as medieval adventure had ended; it had become a cynical extension of the developing old world, its commercial underside. No one would look at Trinidad and Guiana again with the eye of Raleigh or Robert Dudley, or Captain Wyatt' (91).

'El Dorado', Naipaul writes, 'which had begun as a search for gold,' was at one point 'something more': 'a New World romance. A dream of Shangri-La'. This 'complete, unviolated world' had existed, he writes, but the discovery itself had 'violated it' (*LED*, 17). 'Shangri-La' is one of a number of terms Naipaul uses in *LED* to denote an idyllic, but also unreal, space. It entered English usage via James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, in which it denoted a 'Tibetan utopia': a place of bliss detached from the world of work and struggle.<sup>299</sup> As we saw in chapter one, the European romance tradition located its marvels, wonders, and paradises in 'exotic' lands. In the early-modern imagination, this might have been referred to as 'India': 'a catch-all term spanning a vast area from the subcontinent to the Spice Islands' (including, presumably, both Tibet and Trinidad).<sup>300</sup> These 'distant' lands were used however in no small part because of their distance. Their discovery would frustrate the miraculous, Edenic object of the quest: not just in the banal sense that they could not

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<sup>298</sup> Fuchs, p. 82.

<sup>299</sup> 'Shangri-La', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press) <<http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2355/view/Entry/177475>> [accessed 28 April 2016].

<sup>300</sup> Jonathan Gil Harris, 'Alien Heat', *London Review of Books*, 17 March 2016, pp. 31–32.

measure up, but because they would cease to be utopia, literally ‘no place’, at all. In the event of real contact, the fantasy made in the European image as its sought-after obverse – what could not be; what did not occur – would be replaced by a real space whose goods and ills fell along entirely different vectors. Literally, Naipaul suggests that the Europeans ‘violated’ the New World itself: despoiling it, plundering it. But the syntactic mirroring – ‘violated’ echoing with the ‘complete, unviolated world’ of the European ‘dream’ – may suggest that the violation is as much enacted upon the dream as upon the world. The ‘dream’ of ‘romance’ had been violated in the impossible attempt to locate a ‘utopia’ on the physical globe. This is the self-defeating nature of the ‘New World romance’ itself. What occurs, in the encounter between these writers and the ‘New World’, is the frustration of romance as a descriptive category, in a world which is being despoiled by their efforts to chart and describe it.

In *Dreams of Modernity* (2014), Laura Marcus speaks of the genesis of modernist modes of representation ‘in the “intermediate zone” of urban experience’. The phrase ‘intermediate zone’ refers both to a historical moment (a period in which the experience of city-dwelling was transformed) and a mode of (modernist) representation: which ‘might move to seize the sense-impressions of the city at the moment of their fleeting unity, but in such a way as to capture their energies without thereby petrifying them’ – in Woolf’s phrase, ‘before they become “works of art”’.<sup>301</sup> This concept of an ‘intermediate zone’ is helpfully suggestive in defining the use of ‘romance’ in the *Loss of El Dorado* both as a response to novel experience and as a mode of literary representation which ‘petrif[ied]’ this wondrous response into a generic, banal narrative mode which becomes recognisable as a ‘work of art’. David Scott understood ‘romance’ to be a *mythoi*, a universal narrative structure, but for Naipaul, though it was

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<sup>301</sup> Laura Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 94. The phrase ‘intermediate zone’ is taken originally from Tony Pinkney.

not solely a literary category, it had been ‘petrif[ied]’ as a form of literary representation with a geographical and historical location. A form of cognitively expansive ‘wonder’ in these narratives had been apprehensible – often despite their authors’ intentions – in that they arose in the ‘intermediate zone’ ‘between the unseeing brutality of the discovery and conquest and the later brutality of colonization’. But by the time it was re-approached, re-appropriated by revolutionaries, anti-colonial ‘liberators’ such as Francisco de Miranda, it had crystallised into ‘art’ or artifice. What was what was left was the ‘illusory’ quality that had characterized romance as a narrative genre. This idea of romance as self-exhausting derives in part from the characteristics of romance itself, which – like wonder – was fuelled by the desire for the alien, the unseen, the no-place, and for this reason in its every iteration (making the unseen seen) burned its material up. But it also chimes with the way in which Naipaul would later talk about literary forms more broadly, which arise at moments of cultural or social novelty, but which – in their very expression as art-works – begin to crystallise into the banal and the generic. ‘Every literary form is always getting to the end of what it can do’ (*LO*, 30).

J.A. Froude, writing in 1888, had claimed that imperial history in the West Indies provides the setting for an ‘epic poem’: ‘and since the Iliad there has been no subject better fitted for such treatment’.<sup>302</sup> Ronald Bryden, it will be recalled, described the subject of *LED* as ‘those colossal, neglected tracts of colonial tissue between imperialism’s epics’. Bryden was right to note that Naipaul’s subject is the inability of the spectacular imperial narrative championed by Froude to comprehend the slow, dull violence of colonial experience. But he is, forgivably, loose with his terminology. For Naipaul characterises this imperial narrative not as ‘epic’ but as ‘romance’. ‘Romance’,

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<sup>302</sup> Froude, p. 10.

in *LED* is the genre of writing associated with what Naipaul calls in another essay from this period ‘the drama of imperial conquest’, and is defined in opposition to the ‘subsequent brutality of colonization’. A crucial idea in ‘Black Man’s Burden’ (the essay from which I quote) is the degradation of the British imperial project from this ‘drama of conquest’ into what he calls a ‘suburban’ management of territory, sustained by the pageantry of ‘High’ (i.e. late) imperialism (the narratives of Froude), and by racism.<sup>303</sup> The word ‘suburban’ anticipates Naipaul’s description of colonial Trinidad in *LED* as a subordinate extension of the European metropolis, ‘its commercial underside’. The drama of romance, then, and the drama of imperialism are linked in *The Loss of El Dorado*. The colonial, by contrast, is visible only in the documentary record only as that *longue durée* experience that romance fails to capture, in the seams of imperial romance, at those moments, as in the writing of Miranda, where its fantasy is most palpable. In its flatness, its ‘suburban’ banality, it resists dramatization or transformation into narrative.

#### ANTONYMS OF ROMANCE: COLONIALISM, SLAVERY AND WEST INDIAN SUBJECT-FORMATION

In the epilogue to *LED*, Naipaul draws the narrative to a close by situating it within his own experience of living in Port of Spain, and the way he was taught history as a child. It is here that he distinguishes ‘history books’ from ‘the past’ (a more capacious concept), and makes explicit his understanding of ‘history’ as an archive of texts which comprehend little of this ‘past’ and which constructed its narrative according to generic convention:

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<sup>303</sup> V.S. Naipaul, ‘Black Man’s Burden’.

Port of Spain was a place where things had happened and nothing showed. Only people remained, and their past had dropped out of all the history books. [...] History was a fairy-tale about Columbus and a fairytale about the strange customs of the aboriginal Caribs and Arawaks; it was impossible now to set them in the landscape (*LED*, 353).

What links the annihilation of the indigenous communities with the subsequent annihilation of black lives in the era of plantation slavery is its historical redaction in this same genre, ‘the fairytale’:

History was also a fairytale not so much about slavery as about its abolition, the good defeating the bad. It was the only way the tale could be told. Any other version would have ended in ambiguity and alarm. The slave was never real. Like the extinct aboriginal, [he exists] only in the imagination. In the records the slave is faceless, silent, with an identification rather than a name. He has no story (353-4).

The closeness of ‘fairy-tale’ (or ‘fairytale’) to ‘romances’ – what Fredric Jameson calls ‘magical narratives’ – is not hard to see: both in terms of the constituent features (the fantastic) and in terms of its narrative structure (desire provoked and fulfilled).<sup>304</sup> The comment ‘history was a fairytale not so much about slavery as about abolition’ refers to the British ‘myth of abolition’ promulgated in British schools and official pageantry throughout the post-Emancipation period. This was the idea that direct British rule of the West Indian colonies in the form of Crown Colony Government (as opposed to more devolved, ‘home rule’ type arrangements) had in fact protected the rights of the black population, in that it curbed the power of the local (white) plantation owners or plantocracy, who had a financial interest in maintaining the institutions of slavery and the abuse of black labour. In fact, across the British Caribbean, ‘Abolition Day’ was celebrated as a triumph of British governance, and as a justification for its ongoing importance. This was one reason, as Deborah Thomas suggests, why the constitutional nationalist movements in the West Indies often dissociated themselves from narratives

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<sup>304</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre’, *New Literary History*, 7 (1975), 135–63.

of slavery and abolition (in Jamaica, for example, Abolition Day celebrations were formally replaced by Independence Day pageants after 1962).<sup>305</sup>

So this ‘fairytale’ about abolition – which had also spurred the writing of both Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery* and James’s *Black Jacobins* in the 1930s and 40s – is one ‘fairytale’ to which Naipaul alludes. But it is not the only one and, in contrast to James and Williams, the idea that structures this passage as a whole is not any one ‘fairytale’ but the narrative structure of ‘fairytale’ itself through which the narrative of West Indian history had been narrated, and which in its emphasis on triumphant overcoming failed to find narrative form for the slow violence of slavery, indigenous destruction, or post-emancipation subjection that were the constituent experiences of colonialism. This ‘fairytale’ structure was used by the British, but also by anti-colonials such as Miranda, and even by James in *The Black Jacobins*, which is itself, in part, a narrative of triumphant overcoming. As I have suggested, this scepticism was not in fact unique to Naipaul, though the conclusions he draws from it are specific. The Black Power movement can be read as voicing a dissatisfaction with the teleological narratives of the constitutional nationalists, in which the acquisition of formal independence was seen as a justification in perpetuity – the good having defeated the bad – rather than an in-the-end merely representative moment in a continuing history of black subjection. Beyond the specific, historically dubious myth of abolition, then, this passage makes a point about the superannuation of romance or fairytale narratives, and can be seen as in some sense a critique of *BJ* as well as of British historiography. Indeed, its suggestion is that all of this historiography, participating in a basically ‘romantic’ narrative of what ‘history’ itself is, is participating in the same project, which cannot comprehend colonial experience, of which the experience of plantation

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<sup>305</sup> cit. Ellis, p. 12.

slavery will become the kernel.<sup>306</sup> In this respect, it is entirely of its time. As I say above, West Indian historical works from the late 1960s onwards – texts by Brathwaite and Patterson, for example – display a marked shift of emphasis away from the concerns of ‘romantic’ pre-independence historiography, and towards the examination of colonialism as a process of social engineering with profound and long-lasting social, cultural, and psychological effects. But whereas historians such as Brathwaite would respond to this challenge by means of redrawing historiographical methodology to encompass or comprehend this communal, *longue durée* experience, Naipaul focusses on the impossibility of retroactive repair; of finding new models. ‘In the record, the slave is faceless, silent,’ and the record is all that remains.

Naipaul, like Brathwaite, is making claims here about the formation of contemporary West Indian communities and subjectivities, including his own, through the historical process of colonial administration. But where Brathwaite emphasises the survival of alternative forms of testimony, Naipaul emphasises their absence from the surfaces of the archive. For Naipaul, the enormity of the absences – the fact of this suppression – was more important in the formation of modern West Indian communities than the things that did survive. The elimination of subaltern experience from the documentary record, and its constitutive effects on West Indian communities, is what he focusses on in the second half of *The Loss of El Dorado*. Two examples illustrate this. The first pertains to Amerindian experience, the second to the experience of the slaves themselves. In both cases, the treatment of these subjects is extremely limited, to the extent that it could be said without gross exaggeration that these are *the* examples, rather than merely a representative selection. The first example concerns the

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<sup>306</sup> I use ‘romantic’ here as the adjectival form of ‘romance’. Scott explores the relationship between James’s use of ‘romance’ and the philosophical movement ‘romanticism’ in *CM* pp. 58-98. I explore a different aspect of West Indian thought regarding romanticism in the following chapter.

disappearance of indigenous peoples and the experience of stupefaction or cognitive rupture occasioned, for modern West Indians, at those brief moments when the falsity of the historical record, the gaping absence of indigenous presence, becomes apparent. The second example is a vanishingly brief reference to the interior life of slave communities, and their modes of resistance to their masters. It suggests the success of the colonial administration in delimiting the expressive repertoires, the modes of speech and behaviour, of slave resistance. In this way, Naipaul suggests that the historical archive, which reveals a pattern of colonial ways of seeing and administering the colony and its subjects, has been constitutive of West Indian subjectivity, even at its most resistant moments.

The first example occurs towards the beginning of the book, after Captain Wyatt describes how a pursued Amerindian “so hardly escaped us that he was driven to leaving his victuals seething on the fyre”:

The seething supper, the war-pipes in the night, the empty houses and the cooking bowls: it is as close as we will get to Indian life. When next these high woods are visited by someone open to the natural world – Charles Kingsley in 1868 – those Indian villages, that thick silent population continually on the move between Guiana creek and Trinidad forest path will have disappeared. It is the absence of the Indians that distorts the time-scale in these parts of the Indies (*LED*, 41).

In this passage, Sandra Pouchet Paquet is right to detect a rhetorical softening towards the indigenous peoples in *The Loss of El Dorado* as compared to *The Middle Passage*, but it is difficult to credit the ‘compelling portrait of Amerindian resistance’ that she finds in the later work.<sup>307</sup> Here, as elsewhere, the Amerindians themselves are present only in the amassing of details described by colonial explorers: ‘the seething supper, the war pipes in the night, the empty houses’. Naipaul does not flesh out the fragments, he

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<sup>307</sup> Sandra Pouchet Paquet, ‘V.S. Naipaul and Interior Expeditions’, in *Created in the West Indies: Caribbean Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, ed. by Jennifer Rahim and Barbara Lalla (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2011), pp. 153–64 (p. 160).

merely collects them. Parataxis governs, both minutely – in the first sentence – and structurally in the leap from 1595 to 1868 (‘the next time these woods are visited’). Recreating the sequence and sequential elisions of the archive with dispassion, Naipaul builds into his prose something of the stupefaction he feels at the suddenness and absoluteness of the Amerindian erasure. The tone is not angry but bewildered, as the last sentence acknowledges. By the time of his birth, Naipaul writes, the names of Amerindian tribes will survive as ‘place name[s], no more’, and his refusal to expand upon Amerindian life registers a shock at the fragility of their survival, and the ease with which it can be archivally effaced (xvii). Naipaul registers the absence of the Amerindians from the colonial archive as – in Gayatri Spivak’s phrase – a ‘repeated tearing of time’, ‘that cannot be sutured’, responding not with rebuttal but by tracing the temporal and, by implication, epistemological, rupture it has caused.<sup>308</sup>

The second passage – a seven-page interruption in the main narrative towards the end of the text – again serves to draw attention to what the vast majority of the text has suppressed. And again, it describes, or performs, the inability of recovering this suppressed experience. ‘So much was written about Negroes. But the Negroes of 1800 remain as anonymous as the Indians of Las Casas three centuries before. It is the silence of all serfdom’ (*LED*, 272). According to the archival logic established throughout the book, in which the physical archive is ostentatiously made to delimit the discursive parameters of the narrative, the slave population are silent presences. All that is noted about them – their punishments and mutilations – are things done to them, not by them. This is perhaps most clear in this brief excursus, in which Naipaul examines the surviving documentation – predominantly the Trinidad Papers in the Public Record Office (now the National Archive) in London – for a sense of the moments of their lives

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<sup>308</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 280.

supposedly unregulated by their owners. ‘What comes to the surface’, he writes, ‘suggests a whole underground life of fantasy’ (272). In subsequent paragraphs, he describes the ways in which the black community – at night time, outside of working hours – formed elaborate social structures that were (in Naipaul’s own words) ‘mimic[ies]’ of white society, law, heraldry, and entertainment: ‘a dream beyond labour and more real than labour, of power and prettiness, of titles, flags and uniforms, kings and queens and courtiers’ (272).

The metaphors Naipaul uses to describe his reading practices are telling: he is interested in the ‘surfaces’ of the archive. In Natalie Zemon Davis’s term, he is not, ‘peel[ing] away the fictive elements’ in order to ‘get at the real facts’; rather, he is interested in the ‘fantas[ies]’ themselves.<sup>309</sup> But it is unclear if ‘what comes to the surface’ of the colonial documents reveals how the colonisers comprehended, described, and responded to slave behaviour, or the reality of the slave behaviour itself. In other words, who are the authors of these ‘dreams [...] of power and prettiness’: the colonial clerks, or the slaves? The ambiguity is notable first for Naipaul’s refusal to resolve it, as if to say, whatever the truth of the matter, this is the only model of resistance that the Caribbean reader finds in the historical record today. But it also carries a second implication: which is that the ways the slaves were seen, and the way they came to behave, were in fact hard to separate. That is, that the discursive parameters of the written archive, the preconditions of the discursive regime on which it was founded, determined the discourse of resistance: in Foucault’s terms, what ‘can be said’.<sup>310</sup> A causal link is suggested, between the surfaces of the archive and the depths

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<sup>309</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>310</sup> Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 146. Foucault was interested in how the social architecture of a given society, including cultural, legal

of slave experience, in that the conceptual and perceptual vocabulary of a slave-owning society dictated the terms in which slaves could imagine their freedom.

Naipaul's description of these pageants contrasts with those of other Caribbean historians from the same period. It is worth pointing out that the existence of this kind of 'mimic' pageantry is not in question. What historians from this period disagree on – and where methodological difference becomes evident – concerns the relative importance of mimicry or imitation within a wider ecosystem of pageantry and performance, and the role of such pageantry in helping the slaves towards enfranchisement in various forms. Kamau Brathwaite, in *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, published two years after *LED*, saw this 'carnival' pageantry as one part of a much broader slave culture that was predominantly constituted by surviving African cultural practices and social norms. Moreover, he suggests that after emancipation this kind of mimicry cleaved to the 'middle class' or 'educated' West Indian black society, which was – as we have seen – the root constituency of bourgeois constitutional nationalism and did not now (because it never had) represented the plurality of black West Indian interests.<sup>311</sup> Brathwaite is insistent that black culture also influenced white culture in discernible ways. Orlando Patterson in *The Sociology of Slavery* (1967) takes a middle path. Again, he stresses the co-existence of cultural performances (including dances and theatre) of African and European origin in the lives of the slaves. Like Brathwaite, he describes the syncretic unification of these practices over time. For Patterson, this form of mimicry acted at times as a mode of opposition: travestying the hierarchies of British society, and reversing the racial hierarchy of slave and master. Yet it was often permitted by slave-owners because it functioned as a tacit

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and administrative practices, shaped the conceptual and linguistic repertoire available to people living within that society (even those who opposed the dominant forces therein).

<sup>311</sup> Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820.*, pp. 230–31, 299–300.

participation in the institution of slavery itself: performing an ‘essentially cathartic function’ which discharged frustrations while leaving the specific hierarchies, as well as the idea of an hierarchical master/slave structure, intact.<sup>312</sup> Both Brathwaite and Patterson construct their accounts in substantial part from histories of the period written by European planters (that of Edward Long being the most famous). But both are insistent that these are not the only things that constitute the historical record, and attempt to read-around, corroborate, or disprove these European accounts by suturing them with other sources. The anthropological work of Melville Herskovits, which aimed to describe the survival of African cultural practices in modern Caribbean communities, was prominent among these sources.

In contrast to Brathwaite and Patterson, for Naipaul these ‘carnival’ practices serve only to assimilate and normalise the masters’ brutality within the social lives of the slaves. He describes the ‘formalities’ of the night-time meetings: ‘Old Michael, the Grand Judge, punished offenders by beating them like a plantation overseer [...] [He] made them kneel for two hours, knocking stones together’ (*LED*, 277). In a passage from the postscript (appended to the 1973 edition of *LED*) he would draw out the role of this assimilation in forming the Trinidadian community of his childhood. ‘The severe judicial whipping of children continues to be one of the solemn dramas of Trinidad backyard life.’ The whipping of children, an important trope in *A House for Mr Biswas* among other texts, is now imagined to be formative, an occasion (counterintuitively) of unity: ‘A badly-whipped child is said to be “blessed”. This is from the French *blessier*, to wound; but the word is spoken as an English word and has associations of church, sacraments, awe.’ This whipping, he writes, was the ‘man-child mimicry’ of the

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<sup>312</sup> Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1969), pp. 247–48.

‘master-slave reality’: ‘the drama of the plantation whip, transplanted into a dream of community’ (365).

Naipaul’s interest in the ‘surface’ of the archive is selective: the manner in which he draws sporadic, paranoid archival references to slave fantasy into one incongruous and jarring passage of his own work suggests that he is not only recreating but exaggerating the fragmentary, paranoiac archival surface that he describes, and perhaps trying to recreate some of its affective force in his own work. Finally, as he later makes explicit, this mimicry is described as providing the formative prehistory of the ‘dream of community’ in which he himself grew up. Naipaul’s participation within the ‘restlessness’ that he himself describes is again prominent. Notably, within the same passage, Naipaul draws a parallel between the conscripted, mimic-imagination of the slave, and the conscripted performance of the narrator. In a recursive gesture, he refers to the conditions of writing in a slave community:

Everyone who joined [the ‘fantasy regiments’] got a title [...] When Scipio joined the Carenage regiment he was offered the title of ‘My Lord St John’. He said no; he just wanted to be “Secretary”; and at gatherings he made a show of scribbling. He belonged in real life to the Attorney-General who was not really an attorney-general: one make-believe mingling with another (*LED*, 276).

In the context of the recursivity that characterises the passage, and the book as a whole, it is tempting to read this scene as a *mise-en-abyme*: a portrait of the artist within the text itself. The abyssal recursivity that this device affords is brought out in the passage, in which a reference to ‘real life’ is undercut by the spiralling layers of mimicry that underlie it. In his own description of mimicry in *Development of a Creole Society*, Brathwaite makes explicit the relationship between this ‘mimicry’ and the oeuvre of V.S. Naipaul. ‘It was one of the tragedies of slavery and of the conditions under which creolization had to take place’, he writes, that in subsequent generation it should have

produced ‘this kind of mimicry; should have produced such “mimic-men”’.<sup>313</sup> Brathwaite’s work tried to theorise the way in which Afro-European contact in the Caribbean had brought about a new community, a new culture, which might be revived by a renewed focus on the African contribution to Caribbean life. The *mise-en-abyme* created by Naipaul suggests a conception of writing – including the author’s own efforts – as the repetition of a repetition, producing nothing new, to no purpose.

### ARCHIVAL STUPEFACTION

Among the unappetizing cluster of phrases with which Naipaul frames *The Loss of El Dorado* in the prefatory materials appended at various points in the life of the work – he describes the composition as ‘a kind of horror’, ‘a state of torment’ arising from a ‘grisly fascination with the unknown past’ – ‘wonder’ stands out as unusual and unlikely: ‘Wonder came later, with my own sense of being cut off from a past; and wonder grew during the writing of this book. One day, in the British Museum I learned about the name of my birthplace [...]’ (*LED*, vi-vii, xvii). Naipaul grew up in Chaguanas, ‘a mainly Indian settlement’: ‘many Indians turned it into “Chauhaan”, a Hindu caste-name’. During the research for *LED* he discovers a document from 1625, among the Spanish imperial correspondence, ‘about a certain nation of Indians called Chaguanes’ who are said to be of a ‘bad disposition’. ‘Wonder came’, he says, with his ‘own sense’ of being ‘cut off from a past; and wonder grew during the writing of this book’ (xvii-xviii). Discovering the reference to the ‘Chaguanes’ in the Spanish letter, Naipaul’s perspective shifts, the time-scale is distorted in a way that also distorts the perspective of Naipaul himself. Having grown up with one idea of his own ancestry and

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<sup>313</sup> Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820.*, p. 300.

place on the island, he is brought into an unlikely relationship with another, older ‘nation of Indians’ (xviii); he becomes himself a kind of ‘stupefied descendant’ (91). ‘Wonder’, I have suggested, is a multi-faceted word in this book, denoting both a moment of newness, the promise of cognitive expansion and, simultaneously, the moment in which the novel becomes incorporated into pre-existing descriptive vocabularies, the category of the known. For the fifteenth-century traveller, it arose at a ‘swiftly passing moment’ when it seemed that ‘the senses, needs, life itself, can be extended’. For the modern Caribbean reader, these archival glimpses of an alternative, precolonial world produce a related, yet different affective arc. A glimpse of this alternative world – and hence the promise of cognitive expansion, a new vision of the island – is suggested in the interstices of the archive each time they return to it. But the shape of the archive, its material existence and organizing logic, will always prevent this world coming into full view. The archive is experienced as a repeated cycle of promise and frustration. In the aftermath nothing is altered, the old paradigm returns: ‘An obscure part of the New World is momentarily touched by history; the darkness closes up again; the Chaguanes disappear in silence’ (xviii). Wonder and stupefaction are collocated, and are related to states of ‘horror’ and ‘torment’. This is the state of mind he will describe in *The Enigma of Arrival* as characterised by his ‘dream[s] of [an] exploding head’.

It is tempting to reach for the vocabulary of the sublime to describe this moment – or the *mise-en-abyme* scene described above – but the affect is closer to bafflement or frustration. At least, this seems to have been how Brathwaite read it, and these are terms close to those Naipaul himself uses. As Sianne Ngai points out, the Kantian sublime at least requires that affective states which are ‘at the outset negative, involving a failure of the imagination that threatens the mind’s sense of its own capabilities’ are overcome

by the expansion of rational capabilities that follows. This has something in common with Philip Fisher's account of 'wonder', but it assumes a state of pleasurable overcoming, of cognitive expansion which is entirely absent in *LED*. In a reading of Stein's *Making of the Americans*, Ngai explores the concept of 'stupefaction' because it offers a different kind of sublime experience, one in which the state of cognitive bafflement – 'distortion' in Naipaul's term – is ongoing, unpleasant, and unproductive. She calls this 'stuplidity', a concept that has some purchase in the text and reception history of *LED*.<sup>314</sup> The book is 'airless' (Graham Greene); its vision is 'crabbed and confined' (Alistair Hennessey);<sup>315</sup> at the point the exhaustively accumulated detail should fall into 'illuminating detail' the reader is required to read from 'a scrap of broken mirror' (Derwent May);<sup>316</sup> 'the Thing' (Greene again) remains oblique and undefined. Among Caribbean intellectuals, then and afterwards, J.A. Carnegie's response in *Savacou* was far from singular. First, he alluded to the recursivity of the portrait (Naipaul as a product of the phenomenon he described); secondly, he questioned the future value of this recursive, backward looking, masochistic performance.<sup>317</sup>

Between the 1969 and the 1974 edition, the subtitle of *LED* changed from 'A History' to 'A Colonial History'. The ambiguity in the new title – does it mean 'a history of colonialism', 'a history from the perspective of the colonised', or something else? – is acutely and deliberately judged. In the same period, Naipaul also gave *The Middle Passage* a new subtitle, 'Impressions of five colonial societies', a provocative name for an account of the Caribbean on the cusp of independence. 'A Colonial

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<sup>314</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 266, 277.

<sup>315</sup> Alistair Hennessey, 'The Failings of Empire', *Times Literary Supplement* (London, 25 December 1969), p. 1471.

<sup>316</sup> May, p.v.

<sup>317</sup> cit. Hassan, p. 217. See Hassan pp.216-7 for further examples of West Indian reviews.

History' is, according to the logic of *LED*, a generic contradiction in terms: it is an impossibility and as such (as Naipaul will later make clear) 'unwriteable'. 'Historical' discourse as Naipaul constructs it is unable to comprehend colonial experience. The colonial is manifest only in the frustration of 'historical' narrative structures – imperial themes, great events – of which 'romance' becomes a metonym. The lost presence of the Chaguanes distorts the cognitive world of the colonial subject, but as it made no mark on the documentary record it is historically 'unimportant': 'part of nobody's story'. *This* 'is how a colony was created' (xviii).

Comments such as these – 'The disappearance is unimportant, it is part of nobody's story' – have dominated the academic reception to *LED*. 'Naipaul's text', Nixon notes, 'recovers scarcely any details about the cultures of the colonised and enslaved people'.<sup>318</sup> Fawzia Mustafa has similarly criticised Naipaul's 'reinscript[ion]' of 'silence[d]' voices, arguing that Naipaul's 'choice to write a European history of Trinidad [...] is historically skewed'.<sup>319</sup> Drawing on the alternative historiographical models of Brathwaite, with whom he is broadly in sympathy, Selwyn Cudjoe has suggested that Naipaul draws 'too heavily on the written rather than the oral tradition': 'Naipaul concludes that the slaves had no story to tell. Perhaps [he] was looking in the wrong place'.<sup>320</sup> And in her synoptic book *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (1998), Nana Wilson-Tagoe sets Naipaul's 'determinism' in opposition to writers like Brathwaite and Harris – whose creative reinvention of Caribbean history required 'perceptions and transformations more suited to the arts of the imagination than to the conventions of historiography'; she structures her book around the requirement that the West Indian artist-historian should expand the

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<sup>318</sup> Nixon, *London Calling*, pp. 125–26.

<sup>319</sup> Fawzia Mustafa, *V.S. Naipaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 113.

<sup>320</sup> Cudjoe, p. 118.

archive beyond the ‘thin scraps of recorded history’.<sup>321</sup> These criticisms correspond to a common demand that critics make of postcolonial historical writing. This is what Ato Quayson calls a ‘subjunctive’ engagement with the past, involving ‘work which even though seeming to be steadfastly engaging with the past, is actually providing models of agency for the present’, through the unearthing, reconstruction, or speculative recreation of hitherto suppressed voices.<sup>322</sup>

A contrasting school of thought bears a theoretical debt to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would call a ‘deconstructi[ve]’ approach to historiography which, notwithstanding its commitment to relocating the ‘agency of change’ in ‘insurgent or subaltern’ perspectives, seeks to perform this revision by means of an analysis of the concept of the colonial subject, as mediated by both language itself and, specifically, the colonial archive.<sup>323</sup> This model imagines that the creation of a singularly postcolonial idiom arises from an ironized – and creolized – revision of imperial epistemes and narratives either on the part of writers, or on the part of the (subsequent) critic. This approach has been characterised as coming after the previous, ‘subjunctive’ approach – it might be associated, in the Caribbean region, with Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004) rather than Nana Wilson Tagoe’s *Historical Thought and Literary Representation* (1998) – though, as the closeness of these dates suggest, there is substantial chronological overlap. Sara Suleri’s essay on Naipaul in *The Rhetoric of English India* was an early and influential attempt to read his work through this lens. ‘Naipaul’s most significant work has little to do with definitive statements about

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<sup>321</sup> Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (Gainesville FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), pp. 25, 32, 56.

<sup>322</sup> Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice, or Process?* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000), p. 48.

<sup>323</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography’, in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 3–32 (p. 3).

postcolonial history and more with the writer's guilty involvement in the construction of his own plots.<sup>324</sup> Yet despite Suleri's emphasis on 'history', similar approaches have not attempted to revise the more prominent 'subjunctive' critique of *The Loss of El Dorado*. 'Deconstructive' arguments, like Suleri's, tend to draw on his much later work – *The Enigma of Arrival*, *A Way in the World*, and the travelogues – rather than on *LED*. There is scope for them to return to this earlier text. In Sanjay Krishnan's account of *A Way in the World* there is 'no alternative', for Naipaul, 'to the forms of representation that are imported from the imperial metropole':

Because historical reflection and critical practice are necessarily underdeveloped in the plantation colony, Naipaul attends to unbidden, prerational affective reactions that repeat the ideological distortion at the level of form [...] In this light Naipaul's infamous lack of sympathy with the postcolonial world may be recast as an excavation of the epistemic fracturing in which he is implicated. His work obliquely serves as a call for styles of reasoning and institutional forms required for the emergence of cultures that work through, rather than suppress, their deranged pasts.<sup>325</sup>

This account – foregrounding formal distortion, and Naipaul's sense of impoverishment given the writerly materials (formal, linguistic, conceptual) made available to him – has some things in common with my account of *LED*, though an immediate difference to note is that Krishnan's argument is itself in a sense 'subjunctive'. It envisions this site of 'epistemic fracturing' as an 'oblique' 'call for a style of reasoning' that is to come, unspecified by Krishnan, located somewhere in the future.

In this chapter, my interest has not been to re-theorise (perhaps in a more deconstructive, Spivakian manner) the 'subjunctive' value of Naipaul's work, but rather to situate it in relation to an historical field in which the 'subjunctive' value of historical writing – in various historiographical modes – was seen to be paramount. Contra Krishnan, 'historical reflection and critical practice' was far from 'underdeveloped'

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<sup>324</sup> Suleri, p. 150.

<sup>325</sup> Krishnan, pp. 447–51.

among Caribbean intellectuals at the time Naipaul was writing. His work positions itself within an evolving lineage of Caribbean historiography from the mid-century onwards, strategically aligning itself with the ideas of C.L.R. James, but deploying these ideas in a new context, and in the process changing their emphasis and polemical force. Emphasising the increasingly outdated aspects of Jamesian thought – his prioritising of European historical categories, and his emphasis on the European character of Caribbean intellectual formation – Naipaul also positioned himself in opposition to contemporaries such as Brathwaite, who came to see Naipaul's historical writing as recalcitrant and unproductive. Brathwaite, Goveia and Patterson drew on different resources, to different ends. Naipaul's own text, and the cluster of collateral historical writings from *MP* to *LED* arise at a moment of great uncertainty in the Caribbean region and in Trinidad in particular, in which the moment of independence had passed and visions for the future direction of Trinidadian society were being reimagined in the political and academic spheres, in the periodical press and the newspapers, in official and unofficial settings, in ways that were often internally disputatious, vastly at odds with one another. In Trinidad, 1969 marked a moment of both great energy (the ferment of Black Power thought), but also paralysis for Williams's nationalist project. Naipaul saw his text as arising at a moment of flux, between the exhaustion of the anti-colonial paradigm and the emergence of something new. It provides a remarkable, and relatively neglected, document in the canon of Caribbean historical writing in the complexity of its formal engagement with norms and methods of historiography, and in its evocation of the cognitive stupefaction of intellectuals in this milieu at this time. However, to make the case for its use-value or otherwise in modern historiographical or critical debates would seem self-defeating without also engaging with the questions of futurity

and futurelessness that it itself poses. It is anchored – legible within, but perhaps also un-removable from – its position within West Indian history.

David Scott, writing in 2004, looked back to C.L.R. James's 1938 text (and its 1963 revisions) as a way of positing, implicitly, an intellectual lineage from one moment to the next, and from James to himself. Implicit throughout his argument is his self-identification as a descendant of James, as a 'conscript of modernity'. He makes explicit his desire to envisage 'postcolonial futures' in ways which (to quote Krishnan) 'work through, rather than suppress, their deranged pasts'. His argument centres on a moment in Caribbean cultural thought in which the paradigm shifts: the 'revolutionary Romanticism' of the early James morphs into a negotiation of postcolonial complexity, of which he is an inheritor (*CM*, 96). The 'subjunctive' imperative of this moment, he suggests, calls for an archaeological account of the histories of privation in its various forms: a form of criticism that reads 'the past in the present' as a way of envisaging difference in the future. As Stephen Best has pointed out, this idea has become paradigmatic in African American cultural criticism in recent decades, and the trend is common to Caribbean and postcolonial studies (Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* being a key text, uniting the two bodies of work).<sup>326</sup>

*The Loss of El Dorado* is broadly equidistant – chronologically – between these two texts (*BJ* and *CM*), and postdates James's 1963 edition of *BJ* by only a few years. Much of what Scott would later write about conscription to Western modernity is legible in *LED*, and indeed Naipaul would make a similar point about his own formation in his attempt to position himself and James in an intellectual lineage. But *The Loss of El Dorado* is provocative to Scott's account because – emerging from the

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<sup>326</sup> Stephen Best, 'On Failing to Make the Past Present', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73 (2012), 453–74 (pp. 253, 262–63).

very ferment, the plastic moment between paradigms that he describes – Naipaul intimates that this conscription may not afford critical perspectives or the imagination of different futures, but may afford rather a ‘stupefied’, uncreative, repetitive relation to colonial pasts. ‘Futile’ historical writing (‘how can a history of West Indian futility be written?’) is distinct from ‘tragic’ historical writing, in that it offers no catharsis or sense of communal purging. ‘What is damaging remains damaging’, as he wrote in an admiring essay on Jean Rhys. Nothing is ‘exorcise[d]’, nothing is ‘explaine[d]’.<sup>327</sup>

In prominent places, Caribbean writers reach for metaphors of reproductive damage or infertility to describe Naipaul. Lamming refers to his ‘castrated satire’.<sup>328</sup> Brathwaite, in ‘Timehri’ – published the year after *LED* and the year before his *Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* – describes the work of Naipaul and Patterson with an agricultural conceit:

The seed and root of our concern had little material to nourish it. Patterson’s view was that we should accept this shallow soil (we begin from an existential absurdity of nothing) and grow our ferns in a kind of moon-dust. Fertility would come later; if not, not. Naipaul refused to plant at all.<sup>329</sup>

Brathwaite is not explicitly referring to *LED* here. He has quoted from *The Mimic Men*, a text which Brathwaite believed crystallised in advance the central ideas expressed by *LED*, and betrayed the psychological anxieties which had prompted Naipaul to write it.<sup>330</sup> Yet Brathwaite’s engagement with Naipaul’s historical thought is clear in this essay. Brathwaite positions himself in relation to Naipaul and Patterson, a triumvirate of writers who constitute the spectrum of Caribbean historical thought in this period, and he compares the way each writer understood the social history of the Caribbean, the

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<sup>327</sup> V.S. Naipaul, ‘Without a Dog’s Chance’, *The New York Review of Books*, 18 May 1972 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1972/may/18/without-a-dogs-chance/>> [accessed 5 May 2015].

<sup>328</sup> Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, p. 225.

<sup>329</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, ‘Timehri’, *Savacou*, 2 (1970), 35–44 (p. 42).

<sup>330</sup> Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820.*, p. 300. I describe Brathwaite’s reaction to *LED* in *Development* above.

‘material’ from which they ‘beg[a]n’. Naipaul’s inability or unwillingness to participate in the search for new paradigms of historical engagement is framed by Brathwaite in terms of biological barrenness, a refusal of what Lee Edelman calls ‘reproductive futurism’.<sup>331</sup> The future, to paraphrase C.L.R. James, demanded more than Naipaul had. As I have suggested, Naipaul’s inability to envisage a productive future at this date was not only social and analytical but also personal and professional. Ironically, this state of emptiness would provide the setting and context for the work that would bring him a global audience in the second half of his career. It provides the spine of his 1987 autobiographical fiction *The Enigma of Arrival*, and – as he describes there – furnished the intellectual and emotional background to a new novel ‘about Africa’.<sup>332</sup> ‘Having depleted his savings and emotionally depressed, homeless Naipaul returned to England to write *In a Free State*.’<sup>333</sup>

### 3.

## Caribbean Eyes: V.S. Naipaul and Other Traditions of Travel

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<sup>331</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>332</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel in Five Sections* (London: Picador, 2011) p.v. I quote from the author’s preface to the 2011 edition.

<sup>333</sup> Bruce King, *V.S. Naipaul*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 85.

I concluded chapter two by describing V.S. Naipaul's sense of professional and creative exhaustion following the composition and publication of *The Loss of El Dorado*. Naipaul's unwillingness to imagine a new paradigm for telling the story of the Caribbean past, and his sense of himself and the Caribbean society in which he grew up as 'conscripted', constrained to repeat the violence and banality as well as the literary forms of the colonial past, seemed to have led him to a creative dead-end. Yet in fact the ten years that followed *The Loss of El Dorado* proved to be the most productive, celebrated, and controversial period of his career.

Through the 1970s, beginning with his Booker-Prize-winning sequence *In a Free State* (1971), Naipaul wrote a celebrated series of travelogues – on Trinidad, Zaire, India and Argentina – for prominent British and American newspapers; drawn from these travelogues, two further novels, *Guerrillas* (1975) and *A Bend in the River* (1979) would contribute to his burgeoning celebrity. On the 18th August, 1980, the American magazine *Newsweek* ran a cover story on Naipaul, calling him the 'Master of the Novel', quoting V.S. Pritchett's claim that he was the "greatest living writer in the English language", and speculating the he was 'a strong contender for this year's Nobel Prize in Literature'.<sup>334</sup> This was also the decade in which the image of Naipaul as a 'Postcolonial Mandarin' – a conservative, nostalgic figure exaggerating the problems of the decolonised world for a metropolitan audience – took shape. As Neil Lazarus has suggested, metropolitan liberal enthusiasm for anti-colonial nationalism was on the wane through the 1970s, giving way to a new scepticism towards increasingly indebted, dependent but nonetheless despotic regimes in the 'Third World'.<sup>335</sup> For his critics, Naipaul's work in this decade played a central role in fostering this scepticism,

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<sup>334</sup> cit. French, p. 395.

<sup>335</sup> Lazarus, pp. 5–10. This account dovetails with Samuel Moyn's history of the shifting concern in America from anticolonialism to the discourse of human rights. See Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

presenting troubled postcolonial societies to Western audiences as ‘Hobbesian anarchies, built on violence’.<sup>336</sup> So this period marked the apogee of Naipaul’s productivity and fame not simply as a writer but as a global public intellectual. By 1980, his corpus had become a site of contest in which the state of the decolonised world – and metropolitan attitudes to the same – were atomised and debated.

The work Naipaul produced in this period, the reception it received, and the personal reputation he developed, are tied to what he presents as a moment of creative transformation, when the despondency he had felt following *LED* was overcome, and a new mode of writing presented itself to him. In the *Enigma of Arrival*, recalling this period at the beginning of the 1970s shortly after he had moved to Wiltshire, he gives a retrospective account of this moment:

In the ancient heart of England, a place where I was truly an alien, I found I was given a second chance, a new life [...] And in that place, where at the beginning I had looked only for remoteness and a place to hide, I did some of my best work. I travelled; I wrote. I ventured out, brought back experiences to my cottage; and wrote.<sup>337</sup>

What is it that Naipaul discovers? What is the revelation that affords this creative unblocking, that allows Naipaul once again, and without his earlier anxieties, to ‘write’? The clue is in the sentence: ‘I travelled; I wrote.’ The collocation of these two simple phrases points to the interdependence of travel and writing for Naipaul in the second half of his career. Travelling, and the writing it spawns, gives Naipaul new ‘material’: new subject matter to address, and a new generic and formal arsenal on which to draw.<sup>338</sup> This new sense of creative freedom is permitted by his movement beyond the Caribbean, and the epistemic and expressive dead-ends to which it had led him. In this

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<sup>336</sup> Imraan Coovadia, *Authority and Authorship in V.S. Naipaul* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 11.

<sup>337</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, pp. 111–12.

<sup>338</sup> As I say in my first chapter, Naipaul refers to the writer’s ‘material’ repeatedly in *EA*, for example on pp.131-3.

extract from *Enigma*, he describes living in England and travelling to Africa; the Caribbean is absent as a third or mediating space.

Naipaul's 1974 essay 'Conrad's Darkness' has rightly been read, by Ankhi Mukherjee among others, as a revealing window onto Naipaul's 'own understanding of himself as a writer' in this new phase in his career.<sup>339</sup> In this essay, Naipaul sketches some of the ideas about narrative and narrative forms that would underlie his work in the 1970s and early 1980s. He does so by means of a meditation on his relationship with Joseph Conrad, and as Selwyn Cudjoe has noted, Naipaul's essay draws extensively on Conrad's preface to 'The Nigger of the *Narcissus*'.<sup>340</sup> For the artist, Conrad had argued in his preface, it was imperative to reject inherited and calcified ways of viewing the world, such as 'Romanticism', 'Naturalism' and so on. In place of received modes of representation, Conrad implores the true artist to examine novel, sensory experience in a disinterested, unmediated way: to 'snatch [...] from the remorseless rush of time, a passing fragment[:] to show its vibration, its colour, its form, and through its movement, its form, its colour, reveal the substance of its truth'.<sup>341</sup> Whereas the key discovery of the first half of Naipaul's career had been to return to the Caribbean, to atomise the society in which he had grown up and his own intellectual formation, through Conrad Naipaul describes the key discovery of the second half of his career, which leads him in a new direction. What Conrad showed him, he suggests, was how being external to a society – being a traveller – enabled a disinterested vision of that society, grounded in immediate, first hand perception.<sup>342</sup> Conrad thus allowed

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<sup>339</sup> Ankhi Mukherjee, p. 68.

<sup>340</sup> Cudjoe, pp. 144–45.

<sup>341</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Collected Works of Joseph Conrad*, 20 vols (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1995), III, pp. x–xi.

<sup>342</sup> Conrad, Naipaul writes, knew many societies by their 'externals' and few in 'depth'. But being an outsider – dependent on his own vision and not on preconceptions or received wisdom – made his work (for Naipaul) more, not less truthful. 'His achievement derives from the honesty which is part of his difficulty, that "scrupulous fidelity to the truth of my own sensations."' *LO*, p. 173. These idealistic terms

Naipaul to expand his conception of the novel. Rather than seeing it as a form deeply embedded in the social mores of particular societies, Naipaul comes to see it as, more simply, a writer's meditation on a changing world.<sup>343</sup> In this way, the form is disburdened of the definitive characteristics Naipaul had explored in *Biswas*, and becomes more plastic and permissive: continuous with travel writing or life writing.

Naipaul drew on Conrad because his work provided a model for something Naipaul had idealised but failed to find throughout his career. Conrad's preface calls for a mode of representation that dispenses with inherited structures or tropes to represent the reality of a place or society. Conrad's manifesto had named 'Realism' (with a capital R) as one of the inherited dogmas to be dispensed with, but it was at heart a realist manifesto in the sense (I have suggested) Naipaul valued. To paraphrase George Levine's definition of 'realism', Conrad's 'Preface' called for an attempt to 'dismiss previous conventions of representation' in order to describe 'directly not some other language but reality itself (whatever that may be taken to be)'.<sup>344</sup> Naipaul lights on Conrad *now*, at this stage in his career, because Conrad shows him – or allows him to articulate – how being outside a society rather than inside it, how being a traveller rather than an inhabitant, might offer a means by which to arrive at this idealised realistic destination. Conrad's 'external' disinterestedness is attractive to Naipaul because it contrasted with the examinations of his own Caribbean societies which had by this point come to seem repetitive, claustrophobic, and exhausted as a source of creative material. Rather than reading it as an *ars poetica* which speaks to his whole

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– 'scrupulousness', 'fidelity', 'honesty' – would come to be characteristic of Naipaul's later self-presentation as a writer.

<sup>343</sup> Timothy Weiss reads this 'exilic' perspective as the key source of interest in Naipaul's work. Exile, he writes 'offers what Todorov terms the "epistemological privilege" of being a stranger: one is surprised by the new; one examines things more closely because one looks at them in a new way. The exile exercises, potentially, what Bakhtin calls an "exotopy," a vision from the outside through which he or she can see what those "inside" (at anchor, at home) cannot.' Timothy Weiss, *On the Margins: The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 12.

<sup>344</sup> Levine, p. 8.

career, ‘Conrad’s Darkness’ outlines Naipaul’s response to a specific creative problem at a specific time. Comparing himself to Conrad, Naipaul evacuates the specificities of his Caribbean background and positions himself as simply an outsider and a traveller. ‘Conrad’s Darkness’ can be read as a definitive statement that – as a writer and a person, after the failure of *El Dorado* – he had left the Caribbean behind.

Of the many ‘external’ sites that Naipaul visited and wrote about in the period from 1970 to roughly 1985, Africa is a conceptual and physical space to which he repeatedly returned. *In a Free State* draws on his time in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda) in the late 1960s. A travelogue, ‘A New King for the Congo’, was written following a trip in early 1975 to Mobutu’s Zaire, on commission from the *New York Review of Books* and the *Sunday Times*. This same trip would provide the inspiration for Naipaul’s 1979 novel *A Bend in the River* – his most commercially and critically successful novel to this date – and would be followed a year later by the publication of *A Congo Diary*, an edited transcript of his holograph notebook from the 1975 journey (in this sense, the first composed though last published of these texts). *Bend* draws, in close textual detail, on the *Congo Diary* and ‘A New King for the Congo’ and is in this sense genetically related to them (as Naipaul had suggested the new novel, afforded by travel, might be). In November 1982, Naipaul travelled to West Africa, to Senegal and the Ivory Coast, to research ‘The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro’, a near book-length travelogue about Félix Houphouët-Boigny’s Ivory Coast. ‘Crocodiles’, first published in the *New Yorker* later formed part of the diptych *Finding the Centre* (1984). Much later in his career, in 2008-9, Naipaul made further trips to Uganda, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Gabon and South Africa to research *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief* (2010), his most recent book.

These African writings seem to emerge at a time by which Naipaul has left the Caribbean behind. This is how he frames them: both in contemporary texts like ‘Conrad’s Darkness’ and in retrospective accounts like that in *The Enigma of Arrival*. And this is how critics have tended to read these works. Sympathetic readers, taking his claims to disinterest at face value, stress his objective, stoic realism: his ‘sense of the world as a physical fact’ in Joan Didion’s phrase.<sup>345</sup> Irving Howe, reviewing *A Bend in the River* in the *New York Review of Books*, uses a similar vocabulary to describe the ‘austere and brilliant’ way in which Naipaul ‘holds fast to the bitterness before his eyes’. ‘He is free of any romantic moonshine about the moral charms of primitives or the glories of blood-stained dictators.’<sup>346</sup> Critics of Naipaul’s work – like Edward Said and Rob Nixon – contested this pose of disinterested realism.<sup>347</sup> They aimed to show how Naipaul’s African travelogues in fact recycled tropes about Africa and Africans from earlier imperial travel narratives. Drawing on Naipaul’s self-advertised affiliation to Conrad, Nixon reads Naipaul – alongside André Gide, Graham Greene, Alberto Moravia and Patrick Marnham – as offering belated repetitions of the *Heart of Darkness* trope to a Western audience nostalgic for Conrad’s fin-de-siècle imperial world.<sup>348</sup> But a key supposition that underlies the arguments of Said and Nixon is the idea that Naipaul is by this point detached from the Caribbean both in terms of the audience he speaks to, and in terms of the arguments he is making. While in the 1950s and early 1960s, Nixon writes, it might have been plausible to speak of Naipaul’s ‘angular relation’ to England – a separate intellectual orientation that inflected his

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<sup>345</sup> Joan Didion, ‘Without Regret or Hope’, *The New York Review of Books*

<<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1980/06/12/without-regret-or-hope/>> [accessed 12 February 2017].

<sup>346</sup> Irving Howe, ‘A Dark Vision’, *New York Times Book Review*, 13 May 1979

<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/07/specials/naipaul-river.html?mcubz=0>> [accessed 6 September 2017].

<sup>347</sup> A key precursor to Nixon’s *London Calling* (Said was in fact Nixon’s PhD supervisor at Columbia), Said’s well-known critiques of Naipaul include his ‘Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World’, *Salmagundi* 70/71 (1986), 44–64, from which I cite below.

<sup>348</sup> Nixon, ‘Preparations for Travel: The Naipaul Brothers’ Conradian Atavism’, *Research in African Literatures*, 22.2 (1991), 177–90 (pp. 177–78).

writing – by the 1970s (the period on which Nixon’s work focusses), Naipaul had become totally assimilated within ‘mainstream British literary culture’, expounded centre-right English values, and wrote for an English audience.<sup>349</sup> Expanding this British/Caribbean polarity to encompass a broader ‘First’ versus ‘Third’ world split, Said said: ‘Naipaul writes for Irving Howe and Joan Didion, not for Eqbal Ahmad or Dennis Brutus or C.L.R. James’.<sup>350</sup> Insofar as his non-Western origin continued to signify at all, these critics suggest, it did so only as a convenient, and strategically used, mask: tricking Western readerships into believing that Naipaul offered an insider or non-aligned view of postcolonial societies, when in fact the ideas he expounded were of purely Western origin.<sup>351</sup>

Naipaul's African travelogues, and the novels that spring from them, played a central role in the development of Naipaul’s reputation, and became key sites of debate about the author’s politics.<sup>352</sup> As texts produced and consumed within a metropolitan marketplace, concerning a region about which the author was a visitor, they seemed to evidence a wilful affiliation into an Anglo-American tradition of representing the non-Western world (in this case, Africa) for a ‘home’ audience. That is, they seemed to enter into a tradition of (often imperial or neo-imperial) writers who had done this, *and* they seemed to do so by imitating the representative protocols of those earlier Anglo-American or European writers.<sup>353</sup> ‘There is no such thing as a *direct* experience, or

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<sup>349</sup> Nixon, *London Calling*, pp. 38–39.

<sup>350</sup> Edward W. Said, ‘Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World’, (p. 53).

<sup>351</sup> See Nixon, *London Calling*, p. 18.

<sup>352</sup> Critical accounts of Naipaul’s deployment of the *Heart of Darkness* trope in his Congolese writing – above all, attention to its ideological implications as an interpretation of ‘Africa’ – are legion, not just within author-specific studies, but within wider surveys of the travel writing of the period. see, for example, Tim Youngs, ‘Africa / The Congo: The Politics of Darkness’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 156–73 (p. 168); Patrick Holland, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), pp. 73–74.

<sup>353</sup> The best known account of the ideological underpinnings of imperial ethnography and travel writing, published in the same year as Nixon’s *London Calling*, is Mary Louise Pratt’s, *Imperial Eyes: Travel*

reflection of the world in the language of a text', Said writes; imperial travellers presented 'ideologically saturated' versions of Africa, not a 'photographic, [...] "reflection" of it'.<sup>354</sup> These are the 'traditions of travel' to which Nixon refers in *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin*, and his project, like that of Said in 'Intellectuals in a Postcolonial World' is to disabuse the purported 'disinterest' of Naipaul's travel writing and to reveal the ideology that underlies them.<sup>355</sup> Naipaul, writes Said, 'allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution'.<sup>356</sup>

Naipaul's integration in the publication networks of London and New York is in this period impossible to dispute. Moreover, I admire the work of Said and Nixon in showing the falsity of the pose of disinterested veracity that Naipaul adopted in his work of the 1970s in particular. Naipaul's representations of Africa and Africans in 'A New King for the Congo' and *A Bend in the River*, for example, do reuse racist colonial stereotypes and were adopted by the American centre-right, and Naipaul enabled that appropriation wilfully and strategically. These are polemically situated texts, within which claims to 'realism' are strategic rhetorical manoeuvres. Nonetheless, there is more to say about the polemical context in which they were situated. Naipaul frames his affiliation to Conrad as – in Nixon's words – 'neither an invented nor a chosen starting point, but a natural one'. 'I found [that] Conrad', Naipaul writes, 'had been everywhere

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*Writing and Transculturation* (I cite from the 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008)). Pratt's ideas (which had appeared in earlier journal articles) about the way travel writing 'by Europeans about non-European parts of the world created the imperial order for Europeans "at home" and gave them their place in it' (Pratt, p.3), and her suggestion that contemporary travel writers like Paul Theroux and Joan Didion were inheritors of that ideologically suspect tradition, was influential for Nixon. Theroux was, famously, an acolyte of Naipaul, and his travel writing, whilst Didion, as I cite above, was a prominent admirer. Naipaul, however, is prominent by his absence from *Imperial Eyes*: perhaps signalling Pratt's sensitivity to the different position from which Naipaul, in contrast to his American followers, wrote. See Pratt pp. 224-243 and Nixon, p.32.

<sup>354</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 79–80.

<sup>355</sup> Nixon, *London Calling*, p. 44. "For the native," Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, quoting Frantz Fanon, 'such a European value as "objectivity is always directed against him"' (p.196).

<sup>356</sup> Said, 'Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World', p. 53.

before me' (*LO*, 170). But Naipaul's *pretence* of 'natural' filiation invites further questions. Because the two writers are not in fact biographically similar at all. They speak from different places and to different audiences: separated by more than half a century, by their race, by their first languages, by continent and so on. Put bluntly, Conrad was a colonial administrator, and Naipaul, well into his adult life, a colonial subject. This last distinction is also a crucial divide that separates Naipaul from British and American contemporaries like Paul Theroux, Joan Didion or Graham Greene.

In this chapter, I position Naipaul's African travelogues alongside an alternative tradition of travel to, and writing about, Africa. In the first half of the twentieth century, prior to African and Caribbean independence, many anti-colonial solidarity movements had been facilitated by encounters between African and Caribbean people on European or American soil.<sup>357</sup> The encounter between Una Marson and Haile Selassie in Geneva in 1935, during protests against the Italian occupation of Abyssinia, is a well-known example of this.<sup>358</sup> In the late 1950s, C.L.R. James travelled to Ghana for the new nation's independence celebrations; fellow Trinidadian George Padmore had been an advisor to Kwame Nkrumah in these years.<sup>359</sup> From c.1960 onwards, a number of prominent Caribbean writers – George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, Denis Williams, Maryse Condé and Simone Schwarz-Bart, alongside many others – travelled to Africa with a different purpose. Though a number of these writers, such as Lamming, were involved in anticolonial solidarity movements, the work of these later writers tends to

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<sup>357</sup> On African-Caribbean solidarity springing from the Abyssinian crisis, see Erna Brodber, *The Continent of Black Consciousness: On the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day* (London: New Beacon Books, 2003), pp. 131–32.

<sup>358</sup> Alison Donnell, "'The African Presence in Caribbean Literature' Revisited: Recovering the Politics of Imagined Co-Belonging 1930–2005', *Research in African Literatures*, 46.4 (2015), 35–55 (p. 40). A more detailed account of the relation between travel and Marson's anti-colonial activism can be found in: Imaobong Denis Umoren, 'Becoming Global Race Women: The Travels and Networks of Black Female Activist-Intellectuals 1920-1966' (Unpublished DPhil Thesis: University of Oxford, 2015).

<sup>359</sup> James's important biography of Nkrumah – *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* – would not be published until significantly later, in 1977.

suggest that the encounter with decolonising African countries sheds a comparative light on the specific challenges that the Caribbean – in contrast to Africa – would face in the postcolonial era. In other words, these narratives participated in the ongoing debate about the relationship between the Caribbean and Africa that I have discussed throughout this thesis. They tended to voice scepticism towards what they saw as romantic claims of deep imaginative connection between the two regions, and to articulate the singularity of Caribbean, as opposed to African, colonial experience. By means of travel and comparison, they suggest, the particularity of Caribbean colonial experience, and the difficulties of moving beyond it, come into focus.

‘We have had travel books,’ George Lamming wrote in *The Pleasures of Exile*:

We have had the social and economic treatises. The anthropologists have done some exercises [here]. We have had Government White papers as well as the Black diaries of Governor’s wives. But these worked like old-fashioned cameras, catching what they can – which wasn’t very much – as best they could, which couldn’t be very good, since they never got the camera near enough (*PE*, 37-8).

Lamming’s famous manifesto frames ‘travel books’ as an external representative mode associated with anthropology and imperial surveys (‘Government White papers’) and contrasting them (as we saw in chapter one) with the West Indian novels, which represented West Indian ‘folk’ experience from the ‘inside’ (*PE*, 37-8). Lamming’s concerns about the distanced, ethnographic mode of the travelogue prefigures influential later critiques of the genre by Edward Said and Mary Louise Pratt, among others; and it prefigures critiques of Naipaul’s travel writing specifically. Lamming mistrusts a mode of writing that – where the West Indies had been the subject matter – had spawned such texts as Froude’s *Bow of Ulysses* or Trollope’s *The West Indies*. This concern would have been shared by his West Indian contemporaries. Few of the travel narratives I describe advertised themselves as ‘travelogues’ in the sense Lamming implies. They were often published as loosely fictionalised novels, as memoirs, as

'journals'. Nonetheless, it is significant that in the same collection in which Lamming makes this well-known critique of 'travel books', he also suggests (as I go on to discuss) that West Indian accounts of travel to Africa would be useful and necessary, and offers a fragment of the very account he proposes. (Lamming's own narrative is embedded in a generically diverse book of essays, and is presented as a fragment from an (unfinished) book of 'experiences' (*PE*, 224)). External investigations, journeys to Africa, were, for Lamming and many others, a necessary complement to the internal investigations of West Indian communities that novels and historical scholarship afforded in the search for a full account of the relationship between the Caribbean and Africa.

Throughout his career, Naipaul had been fiercely invested in debates about the African presence in Caribbean culture. This investment would continue through the 1970s, in texts such as 'Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad' (1973) and *Guerrillas* (1975), which both scrutinise Caribbean 'Black Power' movements, their relationship with Afrocentric thought, and the support they received from solidarity movements in London and New York. Though Naipaul publicised the idea that he and his writings were detached from the Caribbean context by the 1970s, though he was increasingly alienated from Caribbean communities in London, and though his writings seem targeted increasingly at metropolitan periodical audiences, it would seem unlikely that Naipaul's writings about Africa would not be inflected by this long history of Caribbean polemic about Africa in which he was deeply invested. Contextual and textual evidence suggests that they were inflected in this way. Though embedded in different publication networks, and often taking very different polemical standpoints, Naipaul's African travelogues share many concerns with these parallel, Caribbean texts, as well as many formal features. I document these parallels in order to suggest that

these texts by Naipaul and other Caribbean writers all emerge from the same discursive problem-space. Moreover, I suggest that the fact that Naipaul's texts were predominantly published in British and American periodicals does not mean that they do not signify polemically within this Caribbean discursive arena. Naipaul saw his predominantly western audience as powerful actors in supporting liberationist movements in Africa and the Caribbean, and used his prominence, often in sly ways, to persuade his readers of the validity of his perspective.

The remainder of this chapter is structured in three parts. In the first, I read V.S. Naipaul's Zairois texts from the 1970s – *A Congo Diary*, 'A New King for the Congo' and *A Bend in the River* – alongside Lamming's 1960 travelogue, Shiva Naipaul's *North of South* (1978), and a number of other related texts. I argue that realist tropes were central in Caribbean travel narratives of this period: the texts present themselves as cutting through (what they perceive to be) the romanticism of received ideas about Caribbean-African relations. Naipaul's realist rhetoric, I suggest, performs this function. The communitarian violence he witnesses in Zaire – like that which Shiva observes in East Africa – is paralleled with African-Asian tensions in Trinidad, and (for him) reveal the dangerous romanticism of African survivalist discourse in the Caribbean, and within solidarity movements in Britain and America. In the second half of the chapter, I turn to a slightly later travelogue, 'Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro', in which Naipaul describes his own Caribbean origin, the experiences of Caribbean expatriates in Africa, and the relationship between Caribbean and African experiences of coloniality and postcoloniality, in explicit ways. 'Realism' is a trope which Naipaul strategically adopted in the 1970s, and the rhetoric of realism, exteriority and objectivity (drawn in large part from Conrad) remain central to 'Crocodiles'. Here, however, Naipaul explores a different aspect of 'exteriority': emphasising different

affordances of the travelogue form, and in the process drawing attention to the form's colonial, ethnographic history. As the urgent communitarian concerns of the 1960s and 70s become increasingly distant – and in a West rather than Central or East African context – Naipaul focuses instead on the constraint of vision that the traveller's exteriority creates, drawing attention in this way to the illegibility of the Ivory Coast to Caribbean eyes. This emphasis on the untranslatability of Africa returns Naipaul to a familiar set of ideas about the totality of Caribbean integration into colonial ways of seeing, and the tone of the text is mournful, in contrast to the overt hostility of the 1970s travelogues. Reading 'Crocodiles' alongside Maryse Condé's later, retrospective memoir about the lives of Caribbean expatriates in West Africa, *La Vie sans fards* (2012), I show that the observations Naipaul made in the earlier text were in some ways characteristic of the discourses of expatriate Caribbean communities in West Africa at the time he was writing. But Condé's text also reveals the specific temporal horizon in which Naipaul's ideas emerged, and pertained. I finish with a brief conclusion in which I reflect on how reading this constellation of travel narratives reveals how a generation of Caribbean intellectuals thought about the specificity of their colonial experience and the particular kind of epistemic and cultural violence that it had done to them.

#### AFRICAN SURVIVAL AND THE 'REALISTIC SHOCK': LAMMING, SHIVA NAIPAUL, V.S. NAIPAUL

##### (a) Lamming in Ghana

The African Survival hypothesis was a crucial idea for Caribbean writers and theorists in the 1960s and 1970s. This hypothesis posited that pre-colonial African culture –

kinship structures, belief systems, and languages – had survived the ‘social death’ of the Middle Passage and the mechanisms of plantation slavery and still, in a submerged form, underwrote the culture of the contemporary Caribbean.<sup>360</sup> It emerged in response to a prevailing idea that the West Indies were irredeemably Westernized, that they ‘had nothing of their own’ with which to replace European culture in the post-independence period. Scholars and creative writers explored this hypothesis using different methods, and written explorations took different literary forms. I explore novels and historical narratives about Caribbean societies themselves in chapters one and two of this thesis. The travel narrative, in which a Caribbean writer described physical travel to Africa, was a third site in which this hypothesis was explored. It was a crucial mode of enquiry and writing in that it promised to offer first-hand ratification of the African survivalist claim: to travel to Africa is figured by these writers as a way of testing out the scholarly or imaginative ideas formulated at home in the Caribbean. But it was also an ambivalent mode. To champion the ‘African Survival’ hypothesis was, as Alison Donnell notes, a ‘consistently troubled as well as [a] valuable vocation’.<sup>361</sup> Few of the writers discussed so far in this thesis subscribed to it naïvely, and writers such as George Lamming and Maryse Condé used the travelogue form to qualify naïve ideas and articulate the limitations as well as the scope of African survivalism.

Travel narratives, for these writers, were a space in which illusion was disabused, and what Derek Walcott had called the ‘romantic’ aspects of African survivalism were winnowed down. The ‘romanticism’ Walcott alludes to is a key idea: alluding to the tendency among African survivalist writing in the Caribbean to construct a fantastic ‘Africa’ in the image of the authors’ desire – allowing it to be seen as a ‘responsive

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<sup>360</sup> This phrase ‘social death’ was famously used in this context by Orlando Patterson in his *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>361</sup> Alison Donnell, “‘The African Presence in Caribbean Literature’ Revisited: Recovering the Politics of Imagined Co-Belonging 1930–2005’, p. 36.

mirror of the [Caribbean] soul'.<sup>362</sup> This romantic 'Africa', Walcott suggests, was itself a European inheritance: 'exotic' and primitivist: 'another minstrel show'.<sup>363</sup> These anxieties were shared by both proponents and opponents of African survivalism. In this context, travel to Africa itself took on a particular urgency, and travel narratives became a site through which this romanticism could be corrected and the African Survival hypothesis refined. This was not unproblematic: to travel is not the same thing as to expand one's cognitive horizon, as Walcott continued to insist.<sup>364</sup> For this reason, the authors of these travel narratives use a number of formal, dramatic, and rhetorical devices to insist on the realism of their work: that is, on the way in which their romantic fantasies were stripped away, and their horizons of expectation qualified.

In the last chapter of *The Pleasures of Exile*, in which he discusses future prospects for West Indian writing, George Lamming recounted a conversation he had had with Sam Selvon before going to Ghana in 1958:

I was persuading Sam to go to India, because I would have liked to see on paper what he, as a descendant of Indians, would make of India in the light of his experience as a West Indian. I had contemplated a book in which I would put beside his experience of India my own experience of West Africa. Sam hasn't yet got to India, but that book may still take place. It will be valuable for the West Indies; and for obvious reasons (*PE*, 224).

Given the value Lamming saw in 'interiority' – the writer writing from within, and for, their own local community – Lamming's enthusiasm for travel narrative is not necessarily logical. Lamming was interested in West Indian subjectivities in West Indian places, in the way *felt* affinities and connections manifested themselves in West

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<sup>362</sup> I am quoting from the entry 'Romanticism' in Chris Baldick's *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) pp.294-6 (p.295).

<sup>363</sup> Walcott, p. 8. Walcott's scepticism towards the hypothesis is extensively articulated in this 1970 essay 'What the Twilight Says' (see Walcott pp. 3-35).

<sup>364</sup> Walcott's argument, in fact, was that the link between Africa and the Caribbean was *necessarily* imaginative, and ought to be scrutinized and refined as such. C.f. Gordon Rohlehr, *Pathfinder: Black Awakening in The Arrivants of Edward Kamau Brathwaite* (Gordon Rohlehr: Port of Spain 1981), p. 114. Ankhi Mukherjee has traced the articulation of this strand of Walcott's thought in Ankhi Mukherjee, pp. 79–108.

Indian cultural practice. Whether or not these connections would be borne out by travelling to India (in Selvon's case) or Africa (in his own) might be seen to be beside the point. It is fitting, then, that he stresses the word 'experience', which occurs three times in his proposal. Rather than intending to represent India or Africa itself, the work would be of interest as a portrait of West Indian subjectivity as it came into contact with a source or ancestral culture. Nonetheless, Lamming's interest in travel and travel narrative suggests that he was in fact uneasy with what Seamus Perry has called the 'striking' but 'airless' romantic idea that 'the world is how you think it': that 'experience' could be conceived of in isolation from the external world (the world outside the mind of the subject).<sup>365</sup> 'Africa' for West Indians like himself, was not, simply, whatever they took Africa to be. It was also a real place: a site of intellectual activity with which West Indian intellectuals might share agendas, and a region whose different but related history of colonisation might shed a comparative or contrasting light on West Indian cultures. Travelling to Africa or India, registering the experience of recognition or alienation in the form of a travel narrative would be 'valuable for the West Indies' because it would allow preconceived, personal, perhaps 'romantic' ideas to be seen 'realistically': as if – paradoxically – from the outside.

The book that Lamming proposes did not, in the end, appear (Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* has something in common with the travelogue Lamming proposes Selvon write). But the brief passages in *The Pleasures of Exile* itself in which Lamming describes his experiences in West Africa in the late 1950s offer an early sketch of some of the issues faced by West Indian writer-travellers in Africa in the subsequent two decades. Arriving in Ghana in 1958 – a year after Ghanaian independence, but some

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<sup>365</sup> Seamus Perry, 'Against the Same-Old Same-Old', *London Review of Books*, 3 November 2016, pp. 32–38 (p. 32). Perry is paraphrasing a commonplace of New-Critical thought about romanticism. Writers like Walcott (and, I suggest, Lamming) seem to have characterised romanticism, and its dangers, in a similar way.

years before the full independence of Trinidad, or Lamming's native Barbados – Lamming describes the experience of watching a troop of schoolchildren greet a boy-scout master from England. 'It was a profound experience,' Lamming notes of the parade, 'for I was seeing myself in every detail' (*PE*, 161). By means of this pageant, which does indeed recall the Barbadian 'Empire Day' scene in Lamming's semi-autobiographical debut novel *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Lamming points to the similarities between West Indian and West African experiences of colonialism.<sup>366</sup> But moments later, as the pageant breaks up, the scene – on his reading of it – breaks into incoherence. 'The boys forgot their uniform and turned the whole place into their own jamboree [...] They were all talking at the same time. The voices clashed like steel':

What were they quarrelling about? Or what were they rejoicing about? For it was difficult to distinguish which noise was war and which was peace. I turned to ask my West Indian friend what it was all about. He smiled; and suddenly I realised the meaning of that smile and the fact about the invading noise. Neither of us could understand a word of what those boys were saying (*PE*, 162).

The hyperbolic description of Lamming's feeling of alienation, of what he calls the 'terrifying chorus of discord' that surrounds him, is punctured by a bathetic realisation: he is alienated, primarily, because he does not speak the local language. Yet by dramatizing his realisation in this way, foregrounding the sense of chaos and the alienation that attended it, Lamming draws attention to the importance of this linguistic difference; language, indeed, becomes a synecdoche for the wider differences between Africa and the Caribbean. Despite the apparent similarity of their experiences of colonisation, an experience exemplified in the pageant itself, what happens when the pageant *ends* points to the way that the postcolonial experiences of the two regions will diverge. The Ghanaian students break into 'their own jamboree', illegible to the European outsider. Their reversion to Fanti and Ga bespeaks their access to a wider

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<sup>366</sup> c.f. George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (London: Longman, 1986), pp. 28–31.

cultural reserve from which postcolonial life in Ghana will be underwritten. They ‘owe [...] Prospero no debt of vocabulary’, Lamming says (unlike the Caribbeans, who – to extend this metaphor – are constrained to dependence in perpetuity) (*PE*, 161-2).

‘Your [...] surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun.’ George Eliot’s famous metaphor for the contrast between realism and providential romance is writ large on Lamming’s scene. The Ghanaian children – to borrow Eliot’s words from the same passage – go ‘everywhere impartially,’ and it is only Lamming’s mind’s ‘exclusive optical selection’ – lighting on the brief moment of colonial pageantry – which persuades him, for a moment, that the children are familiar to him, that he can read their behavior.<sup>367</sup> In *Middlemarch*, Rosamund Vincy must learn the realist lesson that the world is *not* ‘as she thinks it’, and in this passage Lamming, narrating from within, registers how that realization might be experienced.<sup>368</sup> The subjective view, in this case the view that the shared experiences of colonialism make the experience of Ghanaian students legible and familiar to a Caribbean observer, is revealed as an illusion, a mirror image of the fantasy of the colonial ‘pageant’ itself. This is contrasted with the irrupting sense of ‘chaos’: of an illegible external world beyond the subject’s grasp.<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 248.

<sup>368</sup> It might further be specified that Lamming dramatizes this realisation as a temporal experience, one optic being replaced by another in time. His sketch transposes Eliot’s synchronous metaphor into an experience which takes place in the time-sequence, and plot-sequence of travel itself.

<sup>369</sup> Realist works in the tradition of Eliot, George Levine notes, characteristically allude to the idea of an ‘unattainable, unmediated reality’, an ‘absence beyond the conventionality of language and representative modes’. See Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley*, pp. 7–8, 11–12 (and c.f. Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 31).

The significance of this dramatic scene is expounded by Lamming himself in subsequent pages. In one sense Lamming sees Ghana as an exemplar, some steps further down the road to sovereignty than a West Indian region newly embarked on the frustrated project of Federation. “‘Ghana is Free,’ I was thinking, ‘a free and independent State’ [...] And as we had our first drink, both N.[eville Dawes] and I agreed that it was Ghana which helped to reduce our feeling of disgrace’ (*PE*, 162-3). But in another sense, Lamming sees in advance – by means of the contrasts between Ghana and the West Indies – the difficulties that West Indians will have following in the path of Ghana.<sup>370</sup> And he characterises these difficulties in fairly essentialist terms: springing from the revelation about the African languages, and the children’s ‘own jamboree’. The West African ministerial and administrative class, coming from a society which has experienced less long-lasting or deep colonisation, is not cut off from ‘that organic relation to his own way of life which is also the life of his people’. The West Indian political vanguard, by contrast, has been more successfully and thoroughly inculcated (by language and social conditioning) into the values of a ‘watch-dog middle class, the kind of middle class which have [*sic*] been used to kennel West Indian aspirations in every direction’ (*PE*, 179). It is important to stress that *Pleasures* is a pre-independence manifesto, and Lamming emphasises the extent to which constitutional independence will repair much of the damage that he believes has been done to the West Indian psyche. Lamming was an advocate for Pan-African anti-colonial activism; he saw the experiences of African and West Indian migrants in London as connected, and he believed in the possibilities of harnessing a shared anti-colonial rage.<sup>371</sup> This

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<sup>370</sup> Lamming, on p.173, intimates an awareness of the problems post-independence Ghana will itself face, but the body of his account emphasises the *achievement* of the first years of Ghanaian independence, an achievement that it will be difficult for the West Indies to emulate.

<sup>371</sup> For an account of Lamming’s involvement in pan-African anti-colonial networks in the late 1950s, see Mary Chamberlain, ‘George Lamming’, in *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, ed. by Bill Schwarz (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2003), pp. 175–95 (pp. 178–84).

realist rhetoric, however, qualifies the connection, separating the times when solidarity can be willed into existence from the times when it cannot. The limits of African survivalism, and the potential future problems that West Indian societies will encounter after independence, are suggested by the moments in which Lamming describes his alienation as a traveller in West Africa: the linguistic, social and historical differences between West Africa and the West Indies that his fragmentary travelogue records.

The fears Lamming articulates in 1960 were taken up by Caribbean writers in the post-independence period. In the 1960s and 1970s a significant number of Caribbean writers – including Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Denis Williams, and Francophone writers Simone Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé – travelled extensively or lived in Africa. A body of fictional travel narratives was written, in which these writers drew on their experiences in Africa, including Williams's *Other Leopards* (1963), Oscar Dathorne's *The Scholar-Man* (1964), and Condé's *Heremakhonon* (1976). Perhaps the most famous literary text to emerge from this travel was Kamau Brathwaite's long poem *Masks* (1968). In many of these texts, and in their reception among Caribbean intellectuals, the tension between realism and its opposing terms (romance or romanticism) was prominent. As in Lamming, realist tropes were often invoked to articulate disconnection or alienation. Guyanese writer Oscar Dathorne, speaking of *The Scholar-Man*, described what he called the paradigmatic 'realistic shock' encountered by Caribbean travellers on their arrival in Africa.<sup>372</sup> Realism, in

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<sup>372</sup> O.R. Dathorne, 'The Theme of Africa in West Indian Literature', *Phylon*, 26.3 (1965), 255–76 (p. 275). I have mentioned Walcott's scepticism about the romanticism of African survival literature. Writing in the *Trinidad Guardian* in 1964, he had acknowledged that the 'West Indian sensibility' struggled to 'define itself' until it 'retraced [...] as a *mental* traveller, the lines of a triangle whose other points are Africa or Asia or England.' Walcott's comment comes from his review of *An Area of Darkness*, entitled, 'Mr Naipaul's Passage to England', and is cited by Gordon Rohlehr in Rohlehr p. 110. Walcott viewed this process of 'retracing' as necessarily imaginative, internal to the West Indian mind. According to Rohlehr, Walcott 'allow[ed] that one may choose to treat of race, return and reversion to pre-history so long as this is undertaken as an inner journey and not as a romantic return to an identifiable tribe'. Rohlehr, p. 114.

Dathorne's phrase, impinges on Caribbean travellers. It is not an elected mode but one which irrupts upon them when alternative dialects for narrating their experience fail. This does not in fact contradict the idea that Lamming had earlier had that certain kinds of realism were a formal heritage of colonialism. These travellers seek a different form, but are resigned, at crucial moments, to realism. This is, of course, to focus on only one aspect of these texts, which are often celebratory of the possibilities afforded by Caribbean-African encounter. But the repeated idea of 'realistic shock' illustrates how physical travel honed (or was presented as honing) the conceptual valences of 'Africa' within Caribbean cultural thought. In *Masks*, for example, Gordon Rohlehr identifies the way in which the speaker moves beyond 'illusions' about a return to a spiritual homeland:

He has found neither ancestors nor an easy entry into a lost coherence [...] [H]e could not understand its speech. What he does "remember" is the "fever of quick sales" for which the various tribes were prepared to exterminate each other, the involvement of the African ancestor in the slave trade, which makes him ask the crucial question "Whose brother, now, am I?"<sup>373</sup>

(b) Shiva Naipaul in East Africa, V.S. Naipaul in Zaire

In the ten years following Lamming's *Pleasures of Exile*, Afro-Caribbean writers travelled to Africa, producing literary accounts of their experience which often contained the trope of 'realistic shock'. The emergence of these texts dovetails with the rise of African survivalist thinking in the Caribbean through the 1960s and into the 1970s. As I describe in chapter one, this period also marked the rise of a populist version of African survivalism, whose emblematic moment would be the 'Black Power' demonstrations in Trinidad and Jamaica between 1968 and 1970. V.S. Naipaul was not alone, among Indian Caribbeans, in viewing this development with hostility, or even

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<sup>373</sup> Rohlehr, p. 144.

fear: seeing it, as Sue Thomas notes, as an importation of American ideas, a romantic, atavistic movement aided and abetted by liberal solidarity movements in London and New York.<sup>374</sup> Naipaul's own travel writing about Africa has not traditionally been read in a lineage with Lamming's earlier travelogue, or with the trope of travel and 'realistic shock' that was emerging in Caribbean letters at this time. Naipaul does not seem to be writing for a Caribbean audience: he is publishing in British and American periodicals. Yet, extending Malachi McIntosh's claim that, despite his increasing integration within metropolitan circuits of publication and circulation, Naipaul's work was inflected by his status as a Caribbean émigré intellectual, I suggest that it is helpful to read his African travelogues of the 1970s and 1980s within the genealogical context I am laying out.<sup>375</sup> The existence of this tradition of scepticism within the literature of African survivalism calls into question Naipaul's construction of it as naïve and romantic. But Naipaul employs his own version of the 'realistic shock' trope for his own ends, which are related. The argument I make is threefold: first, that Naipaul's writing on Africa was always implicitly comparative, drawing attention to the gap between Africa and the Caribbean; secondly, that Naipaul's accounts of African political developments (especially the rise of Mobutu and Amin) were intended to show, by analogy, the dangers of African survivalist thought in the Caribbean. Thirdly, I suggest that his writing in the British and American press was supposed to function as an intervention into Caribbean political debates, above all because of Naipaul's ideas (in part paranoiac, in part factual) about the collusion between the metropolitan left and Caribbean émigré activists in this period.

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<sup>374</sup> Sue Thomas, 'V.S. Naipaul', in *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, ed. by Bill Schwarz (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2003), pp. 228–47 (p. 238).

<sup>375</sup> McIntosh, p. 104. McIntosh applies this observation only to Naipaul's earliest works; in this chapter I make the case for its continued pertinence to his work of the 1970s and 1980s.

To make these arguments, before examining Naipaul's own work, I turn now to his brother Shiva's 1978 travelogue *North of South: An African Journey*. *North of South* provides contextual evidence for these claims: making explicit what in Vidia's work is only gestured towards – about political developments in East and Central Africa at this time and about the way Shiva's personal background positioned him in relation to his subject matter. It expands on the points Lamming had made about the relationship between Africa and the Caribbean – sharing all of Lamming's pessimism and little of Lamming's optimism – but it also makes clear how the fears Lamming expressed were felt if anything more acutely by non-African Caribbean communities, such as the Naipauls' own, at this time. Lamming's use of the 'realistic shock' trope expressed doubt about, and served to qualify, a thesis towards which he was basically sympathetic and committed. V.S. Naipaul, repeating this trope in a caricatured and exaggerated way, uses it to contest the very basis of the African survival thesis Lamming was exploring: in particular, he wishes to articulate the dangerous nature of this thesis in the contemporary Caribbean. Shiva's travelogue gives a window into where Vidia's ideas emerged from, their spatial and historical coordinates, and the urgency of their polemical thrust.

*North of South* describes a journey undertaken in Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia in the mid-1970s. It speaks extensively about Indian diasporic communities in East Africa, which had come to global attention following Idi Amin's expulsion of the Asian community from Uganda in 1972. Ethnic tensions between Indian and African communities were also prevalent in other East African states such as Kenya and Tanzania in the decades following independence. Although Shiva figures himself in the 'Prelude' as distanced from the communitarian tensions he describes, he qualifies this later in the book. Describing a refugee camp for Asian refugees from Uganda – which

he had visited before embarking on the book project – he describes how ‘[b]y the time I left the camp [...] I could no longer take myself for granted. I could not separate myself from what I had seen.’<sup>376</sup> Though *North of South* purports to offer a holistic impression of the societies it describes, the status of the Indian community (and Shiva’s own relationship with it) is a subject to which he returns with marked frequency.

A crucial idea that Shiva encounters in different guises is that the diasporic ‘Asian’ or Indian community in East Africa constituted an in-between or middle class of person that sat between the more clearly defined roles of the European coloniser and the African colonised. In Nairobi, Shiva describes the stereotype of ‘Asians’ as a mercantile and acquisitive people, and there is a suggestion that this mercantile activity in some way oiled the cogs of the economic exploitation of Africa in the colonial period (see *NS*, 106-8). In this way, there is a relationship between the ‘middle class of person’, and the middle-class person. Shiva alludes to this relationship when he describes a book in a radical publishing house in Tanzania: ‘*Class Struggles in Tanzania* by Issa Shivji promised to discuss “...the emergence of contradictions between workers and peasants and the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, and the decline of the Asian dominated commercial bourgeoisie”’ (*NS*, 264). Shiva’s tone here is humorous, but it will be noted that the ‘the decline of th[is] Asian dominated, commercial bourgeoisie’ in Africa – the plot Shivji outlines – is in essence the narrative of V.S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*, published just a year after *North of South*. In post-independence Kenya and Tanzania, Shiva argues that the Asian community have not been party to the pageantry of reconciliation between ‘European’ and ‘African’, and

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<sup>376</sup> Shiva Naipaul, *North of South: An African Journey* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 100. References are henceforth included in the text as *NS*.

have become a scapegoat for the difficulties facing the newly independent states.<sup>377</sup> In part because of their failure to integrate within the mainstream Kenyan or Tanzanian societies, they have become belated figures, human reminders of the traffic of people that the British colonial project occasioned.

The belated, colonial status of this diasporic community is exemplified in a comic scene, in which Shiva joins the Goan Club of Arusha (Northern Tanzania) on an expedition to the Ngorongoro Crater: a haven for wildlife. The Goan Club – populated by Asian-Tanzanians – and the author are accompanied on this trip by a Mr Mukherjee and his family, Indian nationals from the subcontinent itself. Immediately, the distinction between Mukherjee, the Indian national, and the diasporic ‘Goans’ becomes evident.<sup>378</sup> Mukherjee refers to the Goans as ‘damned colonials’, and, recounting a dispute with his employers, he is at pains to emphasise the chasm that separates him from the diasporic ‘Asians’:

“Their trouble was that they [the Tanzanian employers] didn’t know the kind of man they were dealing with. They thought I was another spineless Asian who they could kick around like a football.” He waved his hands contemptuously at our Goan companions. “They must have thought I was like one of those. But I’m not an *Asian*. Not by a long chalk. I’m an Indian national, and I showed them what a nasty customer I could be” (*NS*, 222-4).

In post-independence Tanzania, Mukherjee suggests, the unassimilated Asian community are being ‘kicked around like footballs’. And it is clear that ‘Asian’ here has become a term of art. Shiva professes to ‘dislike the term’ – he shows no such reservations with ‘African’ – but acknowledges its use as a ‘peculiarly East African political category’, and Mr Mukherjee uses it in this sense to denote a ‘damned

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<sup>377</sup> The terms Shiva uses are loaded, and uncomfortable, couching this relationship in the language of psychology: ‘The European starts with an immense advantage: the African’s longing to be absorbed, to lose himself in the white man’s world. Out of this has been forged the black-white alliance in post-Uhuru Kenya; the forgiving and the forgetting. [...] Between oppressor and oppressed there exist profound psychological bonds. (Never come between a master and his slave: the slave will surely kill *you* first!) Beyond all else, the slave yearns to be like the master’ (*NS*, 116).

<sup>378</sup> The contrast is underlined by Shiva’s repetition of the Brahmin name, ‘Mukherjee’: the sense of Brahmin casteism which Shiva caricatures draws attention to their sense of superiority.

colonial' community that has been cast adrift: collateral damage of the nationalist movement in Tanzania (*NS*, 107).

But for Mrs Mukherjee (Mr Mukherjee's wife) this phenomenon of diasporic communities cast-adrift is not only an East-African phenomenon. For her, Shiva himself is a 'colonial', and not just in the sense that, like the Arusha Goans, he forms part of an 'Asian' community outside Asia. 'You people from the colonies are very old-fashioned' she tells Shiva, figuring Trinidad itself as a 'colonial' place, though it has been independent for more than a decade. At Shiva's protestation that 'Trinidad is not a colony', Mr Mukherjee 'laugh[s] outright' (*NS*, 225-6). Its constitutional independence is meaningless. There is a suggestion in this passage that in some sense Trinidad, or the Caribbean, is to the majority of the newly-independent world what that 'Asians' are to Tanzania: that is, a demographic relic of colonial human traffic that has no indigenous nationalist cultural project on which to fall back. Its constitutional independence, in this sense, is for Mukherjee laughable: for him it is inexorably and essentially 'colonial'. This is a much more pessimistic version of the fear we saw Lamming express earlier in the chapter – that Caribbean decolonisation would face different challenges to those faced by India or Africa – and of the challenge that animated the nationalist project of Eric Williams. And it shows the link between Lamming's ideas about West Indians as in a sense 'middle' figures, caught half-way between Africa and Europe, and the middle-class mercantile Asian bourgeoisie in Africa. Both are, for Mukherjee, 'colonial' communities, or at best postcolonial communities, defined by the colonial processes that created them, rather than by the new independent states of which they are nominally members. To be a diasporic 'colonial' minority within this paradigmatically 'colonial' space – to be an Indian Trinidadian – is to experience coloniality in an acute, exaggerated, even laughable way.

As a member of an Asian minority community, albeit in far-away Trinidad, Shiva is interpellated in the East African societies in which he travels.<sup>379</sup> Non-Asian officials, such as the District Commissioner he encounters in chapter three, address him as if he were associated with that Asian community. Through this address he is ‘transformed into a spokesman for my race: one more specimen of a dangerous breed’ (NS, 98). ‘How is it’, he is later asked on revealing that he is from Trinidad, ‘that *you people* get everywhere?’ (99). Asians themselves address Shiva in a similar way – as someone bound to them in solidarity – and although he expresses dissatisfaction with this association, it is not possible for him to ‘separate himself from what he sees’. This is most visible in implicit ways: the way in which the book circles round repeatedly to the questions of Asians in East Africa. In fact, it begins and ends with East African ‘Asians’ addressing Shiva in search of solidarity, such that the extensive accounts of East African Asian experience he provides in the body of the book become almost an inevitable theme (c.f. 17-20, 309-312). “Will you refuse to listen to your blood brother?” a drunk Asian seeking money or an exit visa asks him: “Will you turn your back on him? Same colour, same skin...” (309). In one sense Shiva does turn his back: he cannot help the man escape and he refuses to give him money. In another sense, recounting this story in his text, Shiva clearly does listen, and transcribe, what is being said to him. “‘Karim Lalji’” the man shouts after Shiva as he turns to leave “‘That’s me. That’s my name. Write it down...write it down. Remember it’” (NS, 311). And Shiva does. The manner in which Shiva is addressed by the people he meets – it is suggested – cannot but elicit a particular response. It directs his attention towards the plight of the

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<sup>379</sup> I use ‘interpellation’ in the Althusserian sense, defined by Cindy Nguyen as ‘the constitutive process where individuals acknowledge and respond to ideologies, thereby recognizing themselves as subjects’. ‘Interpellation’, *The Chicago School of Media Theory* <<https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/interpellation/>> [accessed 17 February 2017].

Asian community, for which he becomes, ironically, and under protest, a kind of spokesperson.

Shiva Naipaul's *North of South* was published just a year before V.S. Naipaul's eighth novel *A Bend in the River*. *Bend* drew on a journey to Zaire that Naipaul undertook in early 1975, on commission from *The Sunday Times* and *The New York Review of Books*.<sup>380</sup> The text of *Bend* is genetically related to that of 'A New King for the Congo', the travelogue Naipaul wrote for the *NYRB*, and – behind that – to *A Congo Diary*: a version of Naipaul's travel notebooks from the trip, published in a small collectors' edition in Los Angeles following the success of *A Bend in the River*. The embeddedness of these texts within British and American publishing networks and readerships is clear. It has been the subject of frequent comment and, as I describe, has meant that these works have predominantly been read as participants in an Anglo-American lineage of representations of Africa (for which the figure of Conrad has become metonymic). But there is another context, and another lineage into which the texts fit, which has received less attention: that is, their position within the history of Caribbean representations of Africa. Literary texts, McIntosh has argued, 'always owe something to the space occupied by their producers'.<sup>381</sup> Shiva's *North of South*, itself published in London, shows how the plural spaces occupied by the Naipauls in this period led to complex collisions of personal, political and material contexts in their work.

V.S. Naipaul's relationship to the Congo, and its link to Naipaul's position within and political opinions about Trinidadian society, is first suggested in a vignette with which he ends the 'Trinidad' chapter of *The Middle Passage* (1962). In this scene,

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<sup>380</sup> see French, p. 368.

<sup>381</sup> McIntosh, p. 104.

he describes Trinidadian responses to the political and military strife in the newly independent Congo in the early 1960s. At first, he says, ‘with the Congo occupying the headlines for weeks on end’, the response was playful: ‘Anyone in authority, particularly foremen and policemen, became Mobutu: “Look out boys. Mobutu coming”’ (MP, 81-2). This kind of burlesque, Naipaul suggests, indicates a felt distance between Trinidad and the postcolonial African state. Its comic refraction speaks to class and workplace politics, not racial division (‘*Anyone* in authority’) and is a precious example of the carnivalesque, cosmopolitan Port of Spain of his childhood.<sup>382</sup> Later, however, the response of the community changed. ‘Comedy turned to tragedy’.

Some weeks after the news of [Patrice] Lumumba’s death I came upon a procession in one of the main streets of Port of Spain. It was an orderly procession made up wholly of Negroes. They were singing hymns, which contrasted with the violence of their banners and placards. These were anti-white, anti-clerical and pro-African [...] I had never before seen anything like it in Trinidad.

This scene stands as a metonym: events in the Congo are no longer detached and distant, but become the occasion for a new and racially exclusive form of Caribbean populism. ‘The policeman who was Mobutu stood for the Old Trinidad. This hymn singing procession was the new.’ And it is an ‘eruption’ of racial sentiment that he will encounter ‘throughout the Caribbean’ on this journey: ‘it represented all that was barren in Negro racialism’. Naipaul is unequivocal in his condemnation of this, and of who he sees to be an implicit target of these demonstrations in Trinidad: they are not just anti-

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<sup>382</sup> Homi Bhabha quotes from this chapter to outline what he calls Naipaul’s ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’. ‘Vernacular cosmopolitans’, for him, are singularly resistant to the idea of having ‘a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language’. See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. xiii.

white but anti-Indian.<sup>383</sup> ‘In the Negro-Indian conflict each side believes it can win. Neither sees that this rivalry threatens to destroy the Land of the Calypso’ (*MP*, 81-2).

At the beginning of 1975, on commission from *The New York Review of Books* and *The Sunday Times*, Naipaul travelled to Zaire. In *A Congo Diary*, a text drawn almost verbatim from Naipaul’s handwritten notebook from the trip, Naipaul consistently compares the Zaire he is witnessing to Trinidad and the Caribbean. A ‘leafy’ suburb is ‘Trinidad-like’ (1); a café looks ‘like a Trinidad caff’ (2); the ‘magnificence of the women’ compare to ‘Port of Spain or Kingston’ (3); ‘the climate is [...] more humid and more sapping than Trinidad’ (12), the slums ‘vaster’ than the ‘shanty town of Port of Spain’ (13); the Congo river ‘does not move through primeval forest, as in the highlands of Guiana’ (37); shrubs ‘flourish in the courtyard: [...] the flowering bush we used to call in Trinidad the Queen of Flowers’ (26).<sup>384</sup> Naipaul describes Africa in terms of its likeness or unlikeness to his own memories of the Caribbean; this is the implicit point of view of the narrator and the lens through which he documents his travels. The most interesting example of this is Naipaul’s description of the presidential ‘domain’: a newly built complex or vanity project at N’sele which would provide a model for the ‘domain’ setting in *A Bend in the River*. ‘The bungalows,’ Naipaul begins, in the paratactic style of the *Diary*:

the lights like the lights of an airport, the air-conditioning, the great halls, the VIP *toilette*, *salon*, etc. Yet the sadness of the place: I think of Christophe and the Citadel at Haiti: Africa insisting on dignity and luxury. On the tower, the symbol of the government party: the black hand holding the torch of revolution (*CD*, 17-18).

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<sup>383</sup> In NS Shiva talks about a parallel tendency among Indian Trinidadians – ‘I have come across one or two examples’ – of an ‘atavistic assertion of Indianness [...] that turns young men into “pundits” and Negro-haters’ (p.105)

<sup>384</sup> References are to V.S. Naipaul, *A Congo Diary* (Los Angeles: Sylvester & Orphanos, 1980), and are henceforth included in the text as *CD*.

The parataxis – collocating discrete phrases without connectives – invites attention onto the question of what the connections *are* between these ideas or images. The domain is first described in terms of its modernity: air-conditioning, VIP lounges, airport lighting. Then it is described as recalling a much older image: Henri Christophe, self-proclaimed ‘King’ of Haiti in the years following the Haitian Revolution, and of his citadel (today the Citadelle La Ferrière), which seems for Naipaul to have monumentalised Christophe’s isolation and paranoia in a divided, post-revolutionary Haiti. As I argued in chapter two, the Haitian Revolution was a key trope in Caribbean nationalist thought, and – in the same passage from *The Middle Passage* quoted above – Naipaul describes the rise of Afrocentric populism as related to this: a ‘delayed’ revolt, ‘more radical than,’ though in the lineage of, that of ‘Toussaint L’Ouverture’ (*MP*, 82). Moreover, Henri Christophe: the successor to the revolutionary heroes Toussaint and Dessalines, had become a key figure through which Caribbean writers articulated the challenges for newly independent countries following decolonisation. In a 1961 interview, accompanying the *Présence Africaine* publication of the first act of his *Tragedie du roi Christophe*, Aimé Césaire said of his drama that:

the frame – at once mythic, historical and political – seemed favourable for the introduction of the problem which was posed to Africa in 1961: decolonisation. The period of decolonisation will be more difficult for the black world, because we no longer have to stand up against a common and easily discernible enemy, but to struggle between each other, against ourselves.<sup>385</sup>

Like Césaire, Naipaul is describing the internecine violence of a decolonising African nation according to the frame (*le cadre*) of Haiti, the first postcolonial Caribbean state. Naipaul’s phrase ‘Africa insisting on dignity and luxury’ follows a colon: it glosses the

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<sup>385</sup> ‘Le cadre, à la fois mythique, historique et politique me paraît favorable à l’introduction du problème qui se pose à l’Afrique de 1961, la décolonisation [...]. Le temps de la décolonisation sera plus difficile pour le monde noir parce que nous n’avons plus à nous dresser contre un ennemi commun aisément discernable, mais à lutter en nous-mêmes, contre nous mêmes’ Aimé Césaire, *Poésie, théâtre, essais et discours* ed. by A. James Arnold, Planète libre 4 (Paris: CNRS/ Présence africaine, 2013), p. 990. My translation.

image not of Mobutu's Zaire but of Christophe's Haiti. In this sense, the 'Africa' Naipaul speaks of is a Caribbean phenomenon, the same phenomenon which had become central once again in Caribbean cultural and political thought in the 1960s and early 70s. So there is a suggestion that it is this 'Africa', an Africa of Caribbean origin, that Naipaul sees when he looks at the 'domain', and the pageantry and ideology of Mobutu's 'King[ship]' in *A Congo Diary* and 'A New King for the Congo'.

In the *Middle Passage*, Naipaul's first nonfiction work, which narrates his travels in Trinidad and other Caribbean states, Naipaul had spoken of the renaissance of this Afrocentrism as contributing to his own sense of alienation in Trinidad. The synecdoche for this was the 'procession made up wholly of Negroes'. In the *Congo Diary* – in yet another act of comparison – Naipaul sees the people on a Kinshasa street as 'like Trinidad negro crowds'. This gives a clue as to the way Naipaul positions himself in relation to the Congolese, as does the racist term itself that he uses to describe them. It is hard to be precise, but turning to the writings of Afro-Caribbean writers of the same period it seems clear that whereas in 1962 (the time of the *Middle Passage*) the term was still in fairly wide (though not uncontroversial) circulation, it becomes more and more of an ostentatious lexical choice towards the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s.<sup>386</sup> Naipaul's retention of the term forms part of his strategy of racially differentiating himself from the scene he observes. His condemnation of Afrocentrism as a racist idea, and his cosmopolitan appeals, are both related to and problematised by his own involvement in the increasingly hostile African/Asian dyad of late colonial and early postcolonial Trinidad. As Selwyn Cudjoe argues, Naipaul 'never

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<sup>386</sup> Afro-Caribbean writers of the early 1960s, such as Lamming in *The Pleasures of Exile* use the term with particular reference to people of African descent in the Americas (see Lamming p.34 for an explicit differentiation). C.L.R. James's essays of the mid-1960s use the term in a similar way; but an essay of 1970, delivered to an American audience, notably, does not. Compare 'Black Power' (1967) (pp.362-74) with 'Black People in the Urban Areas of the United States' (1970) (pp. 375-8) in *The C.L.R. James Reader* ed. by Anna Grimshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

left the African world of his childhood, the Africa of his society, and therein lay the continuing problem'.<sup>387</sup> The *Diary*, and 'A New King' are strongly inflected by racist ways of seeing, often expressed in terms of pre-rational responses like 'disgust' ('the incessant reaction to Africa,' as Naipaul calls it) which the narrator at times acknowledges, but never successfully sloughs off (*CD*, 12).

The way Naipaul sees Zaire is filtered through his experiences of Trinidad. But it is more than just a reflux, the return of an outdated and inappropriate visceral response. Rather, Naipaul sees Zaire as in important ways *analogous* to the Caribbean situation, and in both cases he is engaging with contemporary concerns. In the years before his trip to Zaire, he had returned to Trinidad for an extended period to research his long essay 'Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad', research that would form the backbone to his 1975 novel *Guerrillas*. Whilst in Trinidad, he gave interviews to the national press about the 1970 Black Power uprising in Trinidad, and the 'Michael X' essay, alongside *Guerrillas* can be read as articulations of his predictably hostile response to what he saw as the retrograde racial millenarianism of the Black Power movement. 'Black Power in the United States was the protest of an ill-equipped minority', Naipaul had written. 'In Trinidad, with its 55 percent black population, with the Asian and other minorities already excluded from government, Black Power became something else, added something very old to rational protest: a mystical sense of race, a millenarian expectation of imminent redemption.'<sup>388</sup> It is not hard to see the connection between this context, and Naipaul's interest in the emergence

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<sup>387</sup> Cudjoe, pp. 219–20.

<sup>388</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Return of Eva Peron, with The Killings in Trinidad* (New York: Knopf, 1980), p. 39. References to this edition are henceforth included in the text as *REP*. Timothy Weiss has justifiably questioned this construal of Black Power in the Caribbean: 'Whether the United States constitutes the source of the Black Power movement seems debatable; the Caribbean, with Marcus Garvey and others, can lay a strong claim of its own. But that is not Naipaul's interpretation.' *On the Margins: The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 142.

of racist essentialism in postcolonial central and east Africa (which Shiva would write about in *North of South*).

In ‘A New King’, Naipaul describes ‘the African cult of authenticity’ that for him underwrote Mobutism, in which ‘the dream of an ancestral past is allied to the dream of a future of magical power’:

The confusion is not new, and is not peculiar to Zaire. Fantasies like this animated some slave revolts in the West Indies; and today, in Jamaica, at the university there are people who feel that Negro redemption and Negro power can only come about through a return to African ways. The dead Duvalier of Haiti is admired for his Africanness; a writer speaks, with unconscious irony, of the Negro’s need for a “purifying” period of poverty (unwittingly echoing Duvalier’s “It is the destiny of the people of Haiti to suffer”); and there are people who, sufficiently far from the slaughter ground of Uganda, find in Amin’s African nihilism a proof of African power (*REP*, 198-9).

At the beginning of this passage, Naipaul recalls a story about slave resistance in Trinidad that he had told in *The Loss of El Dorado*: another way in which he can be seen to be viewing the contemporary African situation in the outdated terms of the Caribbean past. Cudjoe, accordingly, has read this as a sterile rehashing of old ideas.<sup>389</sup> Naipaul does not disguise, however, the nature of the diachronic story he is telling: it is not just that his perception is repetitive, but that the phenomenon he describes, as far as he is concerned, repeats. As he goes on to make clear, he sees the ‘African cult of authenticity’ as an articulation of “the discouraging immensity of [material] underdevelopment”, of powerlessness, as real in the postcolonial as in the colonial world, and as real in Haiti as in Uganda or the Congo (*REP*, 199).<sup>390</sup> But the realities of this ‘fantasy’, as Naipaul sees it, are dangerous, as Mobutu’s Congo and Amin’s Uganda show. The travelogue, positioning itself as coming from the epicentre, the potential ‘slaughter ground’ in which these fantasies are proliferating, implicitly

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<sup>389</sup> Cudjoe p.157.

<sup>390</sup> Naipaul takes this quotation from Seydou Lamine.

positions itself in opposition to those ‘sufficiently far’ away who nourish these fantasies, or fail to recognise them for what (Naipaul believes) they are.

The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Tulsa, OK, University of Tulsa Special Collections, V.S. Naipaul Archive. Diana Athill, letter to VSN July 26<sup>th</sup> 1973. Box 5 Folder 2. Yet it seems that the essay was not available to a mass audience in Trinidad until six years later, when it was gathered (in an expanded version) in *The Return of Eva Peron* (1980).<sup>391</sup> This encapsulates the nature of Naipaul’s work in this period: evidently addressing the Caribbean and urgently invested in its emerging politics, yet addressed *to* audiences in Britain and America. For this reason, the thrust of Naipaul’s polemic addresses the way solidarity movements or liberal activism in Britain and America, aided and abetted by African and Caribbean activists, were intervening in a situation which, as far as he was concerned, they did not understand. Michael X (a mixed-race Trinidadian who had consolidated his position as a Black Power leader in London, with the help and financial support of the British left) was for Naipaul a symbol of this. Naipaul insists that wealth and distance – the ‘security’ of the white British so-called counterculture (John Lennon was among Michael X’s most prominent backers) – meant that they viewed Malik’s racial posture as ‘entertainment’ or ‘play’ (*REP*, 23). This was a ‘section of the middle class’ for whom ‘Malik’s kind of Black Power was an exotic but safe brothel’. Malik’s murder of Gale Benson, a white supporter who had gone to live on his commune in Trinidad, is for Naipaul an example of realism interrupting this romantic or exotic ‘theatre’ (*REP*, 29). As we know, by this

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<sup>391</sup> ‘De Freitas – alias Abdul Malik or Michael X – will be the main interest for readers in this country’, wrote Jeremy Taylor in the *Trinidad Express*. ‘Naipaul’s opening essay – the longest and richest – was published in the London *Sunday Times* in 1974, and (of course) *has remained unknown here*: now it is updated to cover Stanley Abbott’s execution last year’ (my emphasis). ‘An Incisive Piece of Work by V.S. Naipaul’, *Express* (Trinidad), 27 July 1980, p. 15.

period Naipaul was more removed, personally, from Caribbean communities and intellectual organisations in London, and he caricatures them here in his totalising and paranoiac descriptions of Black Power fanatics and their white hippy collaborators.<sup>392</sup>

‘A New King for the Congo’ adopts a similar mode of address. When Naipaul writes that ‘there are people who, sufficiently far from the slaughter ground of Uganda, find in Amin’s African nihilism a proof of African power’, he is describing Jamaica (the people ‘at the university [...] who feel that Negro redemption and Negro power can only come about through a return to African ways’). But he is addressing readerships in Britain and America – themselves ‘sufficiently far from the slaughter ground of Uganda’ – whose response to the rise of African survivalism and Black Power matters insofar as they are involved in supporting or condemning it, materially or discursively. As Said alludes to, Naipaul uses his prominence within the centre-right press (*The Sunday Times*, *The New York Review of Books*) to make this point to a presumably sympathetic audience. But to characterise this writing as merely neo-colonial apologia is to caricature it in as blunt a way as Naipaul caricatured his opponents, to weigh the scales rhetorically in advance. Naipaul is not attacking African and Caribbean sovereignty per se. He is attacking what he saw as the romanticism of African survivalist ideas in the postcolonial era, because he thinks it leads to – or at least masks – communitarian violence. And he contests this with an insistence on his own documentary realism, his proximity to and witnessing of the ‘real’ effects of this romanticism in Africa and the Caribbean.

Naipaul’s best-known text of the 1970s is *A Bend in the River*, a text whose conservatism and ‘realism’ have become proverbial not just in literary criticism but in

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<sup>392</sup> Helen Hayward – drawing on Derek Humphrey and David Tindall’s *False Messiah: the Story of Michael X* – is rightly sceptical of ‘Malik’s spurious claims to represent the interests of West Indians in England’, or to be a genuine ‘Black Power leader’. Hayward, p. 143.

political thought more broadly, and whose influence – despite many critiques – persists to the present day. In a valedictory interview with the *New York Times* from January 2017, Barack Obama spoke of his relationship with the book, and its famous opening phrase: ‘The world is what it is’. ‘I always think about that line,’ Obama says, ‘and I think about [Naipaul’s] novels when I’m thinking about the hardness of the world sometimes, particularly foreign policy, and I resist and fight against [...] that very cynical, more realistic view of the world. And yet, there are times where it feels as if that may be true.’<sup>393</sup> By echoing the text of Naipaul’s earlier reportage closely, by means of auxiliary publications such as *The Congo Diary* itself (a documentary record, supposedly underwriting the authenticity of Naipaul’s ideas), and by means of its own realist rhetoric (‘the world is what it is’), *Bend* positions itself as a work of documentary realism. It aspires to be an example of the new kind of novel, arising from travel, that Naipaul had looked to write in this second phase of his career. But, rewriting and revising the earlier travelogues, it also brings their central polemical concerns into focus. Read in context, these concerns may not most helpfully speak to the ‘hardness of the world’ as such, but to the specific, and apparently intractable ‘hard’ circumstances of diasporic Asian communities in the African and Caribbean postcolonial world, and to Naipaul’s own ‘involvement’ (in Wynter’s sense) within debates about African survivalism. *Bend*’s realistic posture masks, and works to reinforce, the polemic latent within it.

‘Africa was my home,’ says Salim, the narrator of *Bend*, ‘but we came from the east coast’: ‘an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place’. ‘My family was Muslim’, he states, ‘but we were a special group’: distinct from the ‘Arabs’, ‘we were closer to the

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<sup>393</sup> ‘Transcript’.

Hindus of north-western India, from which we had originally come'.<sup>394</sup> Unlike the Indian Trinidadian community in which the Naipauls grew up, Salim's East African Indian community pre-dated European expansion: Salim's presence in Africa, unlike the Naipauls in Trinidad, is not directly tied to British imperial traffic. But there are close parallels between the way Naipaul represents Salim's community – isolated, in decline, imperilled within East Africa as agitation spreads and a kind of independence is achieved, 'black men assuming the lies of white men' – and the way he wrote about his own community in Trinidad (*BR*, 18). Shiva had written about the same East African Asian community, acknowledging his own involved perspective – 'I could not separate myself from what I had seen' – and his brother's perspective in 'New King' and *Bend* is not disinterested either. In *North of South*, Shiva shows how diasporic Asian communities were seen in East Africa as outdated 'colonials': both the residue of the colonial traffic of people, and in some sense complicit in colonial regimes. And he showed how he, as a Trinidadian Indian, was seen to be complicit in this coloniality. Vidia, in his travelogues and in *A Bend in the River* plays up the 'colonial' status of these communities, exaggerating the extent to which the retreat of the British Empire has, paradoxically, rendered diasporic minorities – including his own – 'colonial'. In the first-person narration of *Bend*, he adopts the 'colonial' perspective as a riposte to the equation of African-ness with anti-colonialism that he thought was taking place not just in Africa but also in Trinidad.

At the end of *A Bend in the River* – amid Mobutu-like seizures of property, and the harassment and imprisonment of non-'African' communities – Salim is forced to escape the 'town at the bend in the river' where he has passed his life (*BR*, 127). His escape, on a river steamer, parallels Naipaul's description of his own river journey in

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<sup>394</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (London: Picador, 2002), p. 12. References are henceforth included in the text as *BR*.

the earlier Congolese travelogues. But with each revision – as he moves from the notebook, to the travelogue, to the novel – Naipaul’s account of the scene is retouched and altered to emphasise the point he is trying to make. In *A Congo Diary*, Naipaul describes the steamer as ‘a great flat-iron affair with people crowded between, as it seemed, the caged low decks; then a gap, and a white superstructure at the stern’ (*CD*, 27). One craft, in other words, with low decks and a white superstructure, occasionally met by poled barges as it passes downriver. In ‘A New King’ the description changes.

When the steamer was Belgian, Africans needed a *carte de merite civique* to travel first class, and third-class African passengers were towed on barges some way behind the steamer. Now the two-tiered third-class barges, rusting, battered, needing paint, full of a busy backyard life [...] are lashed to the bow of the steamer; and first-class passengers sleep and eat outside their cabin doors in a high, warm smell of smoked fish and smoked monkey (*REP*, 181-182).

Rather than one structure, it has become two: a steamer reserved for administrators and a third-class barge, imperfectly lashed together by the new postcolonial authorities. This idea of the suturing of the two crafts is reiterated in *Bend*. ‘The passenger barge was not towed behind these days, that was now considered a colonial practice. Instead, the barge was lashed to the forward part of the steamer.’ Yet here the imperfection of the suture is emphasised. As Salim flees there is an attack on the boat and the assailants ‘jammed and jostled against the sides of the steamer and the barge’. In the very last passage of the book, the barge and the steamer cleave:

At that time what we saw was the steamer searchlight, playing on the river bank, playing on the passenger barge that had snapped loose and was drifting at an angle through the water hyacinths at the edge of the river. The searchlight lit up the barge passengers who, behind bars and wire guards, as yet scarcely seemed to know that they were adrift. Then there were gunshots. The searchlight was turned off; the barge was no longer to be seen (*BR*, 325-6).

This final scene – the Africans on the barge disappearing from view, gunshots ringing out, the narrator on the colonial steamship, the postcolonial chaos now invisible to him – recalls Lamming’s much earlier image of ‘realistic shock’. Behind it, many of the

same ideas are legible: a postcolonial African society whose similarities to those more profoundly colonised others (Caribbeans) was only ever superficial and are now disappearing. The rhetoric of realism is analogous, an image of coherence breaking into incoherence, chaos, illegibility. In the last image of the book, the thousands of ‘moths and flying insects’ obscuring the vision from the searchlight echo the scratches moving ‘everywhere impartially’ around Eliot’s ‘lighted candle’. In this context, however, the ‘realism’, rather than marking cognitive expansion, has ironically become a trope, a repeated idea that Naipaul has foregrounded, an embellishment to the original notebook, and in this way a window into the preconceptions that shaped his perception. Naipaul’s ‘realism’, as a trope, a strategic rhetorical posture, signifies within the African Survivalism debate in a familiar and recognisable way: it is a sly attempt to suggest that the world *really* is ‘as he thinks it’. Lamming’s ‘realistic shock’ participated in a productive, ongoing conversation about the relationship between Africa and the Caribbean, to better define the ways in which Africa might or might not prove to be a model. Naipaul’s ‘realistic shock’ brings his narrative to a conclusion: it allows for no qualification of his now-entrenched position concerning the violence of the ‘cult of African authenticity’ and the romanticism of African survival movements in the Caribbean.

## FROM TRAVELOGUE TO LIFE WRITING: NAIPAUL AND CONDÉ

In the first half of this chapter, I argued that Naipaul’s wilful affiliation to Joseph Conrad – and his rhetorical framing of his texts as offering a disinterested, external perspective – was a strategic pose: masking the ways in which Naipaul was in fact

involved or implicated in the scenes he describes. For the most part, Naipaul emphasises how this external perspective affords an objective, impartial and therefore holistic view of the society he describes. But there are brief moments in these texts when he explores other affordances of this external perspective: the way in which it limits, as well as enables, vision. At these moments, he also shows an awareness that his method of travelling and writing has a precise historical lineage.

Naipaul's Zairois travelogues, *A Congo Diary* and 'A New King for the Congo', both centre on a steam-ship journey Naipaul took from Kisangani to Kinshasa, mirroring a river journey Conrad had taken a century earlier. This was a mode of travel Naipaul used in person, and it becomes a key motif in both texts, as well as in *A Bend in the River*, as we have seen. The justification for the journey, for the most part unexamined, seems to be that it allows some more total or holistic vision of the country than would be allowed by remaining in the cities, or travelling by plane. But when Naipaul does examine it, he betrays an awareness of the second set of affordances I mention above. The steamer is explicitly a colonial mode of travel, a residue of the days of Belgian occupation – 'the Belgian *Otraco* being succeeded by the Zairois *Onatra*' – and in this sense an inheritor of the boat Conrad had taken. Conrad 'might have thought that he was penetrating to the untouched heart of darkness'. But in fact what he was witnessing was a busy colonial trade route that passed through, but never really 'penetrat[ed]' the country beyond the riverbank (*REP*, 181). In a similar way, in the following paragraph Naipaul distinguishes between what his own imitative journey *seems* to show him, and what it in fact shows him: 'And, in 1975, the journey [...] is still *like a* journey through nothingness. So little has the vast country been touched: so complete, simple and repetitive still *appears* the African life through which the traveller swiftly passes' (*REP*, 181; my emphasis). In this passage, the vision of the 'complete,

simple, and repetitive [...] African life' is shown to be rooted in the speaker's 'swiftly pass[ing]', 'traveller's' perspective. The bulk of the land remains 'untouched': beyond the speaker's horizon.

The paradox that lay within Conrad's travelling method – that his emphasis on first-hand, sensory perception both reached towards objectivity and in the process foregrounded the perspective of the viewer – has been explored by scholars of literary 'impressionism'.<sup>395</sup> The same paradox is neatly drawn out by Lamming's metaphor of the 'old fashioned camera': an apparently objective representative machine, whose vision is nonetheless hampered by the position from which it films (not being 'close enough' to its subjects). Whereas in Naipaul's 1970s travelogues the 'exterior' Conradian vision had been strategically deployed, for the most part to emphasise the comprehensive, synthetic nature of Naipaul's vision, in 'Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro' (1984), this second, submerged, constraining affordance of Naipaul's travelling method is more prominent.

In 'Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro', Naipaul draws on the representative constraints of the travelogue as a form, as means by which to explore this constrained colonial perspective. This is a travelogue form he has inherited from a tradition of earlier, European travellers and writers. As he attests in *The Enigma of Arrival* – the book he wrote directly after *Finding the Centre* – the idea of the metropolitan traveller-writer was one that attracted him early in his career. The frequent allusions to and citations of J.A. Froude's *Bow of Ulysses* and Anthony Trollope's *The West Indies* in Naipaul's first travelogue *The Middle Passage* attest to this. In *Enigma*, Naipaul

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<sup>395</sup> Conrad's impressionism, as Todd Bender notes, emerged as a response to 'naïve realism', trying to ground representation in a more 'empirical' recording of sensory impressions or stimuli. The 'empiricism' of Conrad's impressionism both invited and confounded 'objectivity'. Whilst accruing a form of hard data it nonetheless privileged the optic of the subject. Todd K. Bender, *Literary Impressionism in Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Garland, 1997), pp. 5, 64–66.

suggests that his first attempts at travel writing, using metropolitan models (inheritors of Froude and Trollope), had been difficult because he did not share the social position from which these travellers spoke, and was not part of the society for whom they wrote.<sup>396</sup> Conrad, as we have seen, offered a way round this. Conrad's best-known books were not travelogues as such, but were interesting to Naipaul as written registers of Conrad's travel. (Writing his own *Congo Diary* in imitation of Conrad's *The Congo Diary* – which *was* a kind of travelogue – Naipaul emphasises his fascination with this aspect of Conrad's work). Emily Apter has called metropolitan travel-writing a kind of 'translational language', an act of 'cultural shape shifting' in which the traveller-writer makes culturally alien spaces legible to the metropolitan audience.<sup>397</sup> But Naipaul was attracted to the way Conrad's travel writing emphasised detachment from the society, rather than the 'cultural shape-shifting' of the author. The travelogue form Naipaul adopts and plays with in 'Crocodiles' is precisely this Conradian mutation of it, that Naipaul had identified (and perhaps to some extent invented) in his travelogues of the 1970s. But whereas in 1974, Naipaul had suggested that – via travel, via Joseph Conrad – he had seen a way of writing about societies in an unmediated way that escaped the distortions of inherited form, by 1984 he is using this Conradian travelogue as a generic, inherited structure that inflects his thought and writing.<sup>398</sup>

In 'Crocodiles', Naipaul explores how his external perspective makes the country he visits invisible or illegible to him. Crucially, however, he associates this

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<sup>396</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, pp. 167–68.

<sup>397</sup> Emily S. Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 160.

<sup>398</sup> Again, scholars of impressionism identify this potential affordance of Conradian impressionism that Naipaul lights on. 'Literary impressionism' in the modernist period was – according to Clive Scott – an 'attempt to make language the act of perception, rather than the analysis of the act'. But, Scott adds, 'this impulse may be jeopardized, among the painters [for example], by deeply ingrained ways of making pictures, like the portrait (Renoir) or the genre-painting (Morisot, Degas)'. Clive Scott, 'Symbolism, Decadence and Impressionism', in *Modernism 1890-1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 206–27 (p. 222).

‘external’ perspective with his Caribbean origin. The Caribbean is the comparatively Westernised space that renders him an outsider. Received Caribbean ideas distort his vision, whilst Caribbean expatriate communities draw the bulk of his attention. These expatriates are the mediators he uses to try and discover the Ivory Coast, but they also share his constraint of vision, suggesting that these are constraints held in common by Caribbean people in West Africa. In this text, Naipaul explores the way this constrained vision is thrown into relief as it comes into contact with a less deeply colonised (as he sees it) African country. This is, as we have seen, a characteristic Caribbean idea which Naipaul is revisiting, with stubborn melancholy, twenty-five years after it was explored by Lamming and others. In the second part of this chapter, I first show how, in ‘Crocodiles’, Naipaul uses the affordances of travelogue form to discuss the position of the Caribbean, and of Caribbean people, within the postcolonial world. Second, I read Maryse Condé’s *La Vie sans fards* (2012), a retrospective memoir about the lives of Caribbean expatriates in West Africa in this period. Condé’s text, I argue, ratifies and supplements the claims I have been making. First, it frames Naipaul’s ideas about Caribbean communities in West Africa at this time as characteristic of Caribbean expatriate sentiment of the period. It shows Naipaul’s account, or, the point of view which underlies it, to be hardly exceptional or singular. Secondly, it marks out the historical specificity of Naipaul’s frame of reference, the way in which his ideas would be superseded by subsequent travellers and writers, and were – even at the time of writing – on the way to becoming outdated.

(a) Naipaul in the Ivory Coast

‘To arrive at a place without knowing anyone there, and sometimes without an introduction; to learn how to move among strangers for the short time one could afford to stay among them; to hold oneself in constant readiness for adventure or revelation; to allow oneself to be carried along, up to a point, by accidents [...]’.<sup>399</sup> V.S. Naipaul’s second major African travelogue, ‘Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro’, which takes the Ivory Coast as its subject, was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1984, and gathered into the diptych *Finding the Centre* later the same year. Discussing his ‘travelling method’ in the Ivory Coast in the preface to *Finding the Centre*, the passage quoted above, Naipaul emphasises randomness and chance (*FC*, 13). ‘To be carried along [...] by accidents’ is to refuse any disciplinary procedure of investigation. The aleatory and occasional encounters with Ivorian life parallel Conrad’s idea in his 1897 preface that the (alien) writer casts a ‘passing glance’ on the target society: that the price to be paid for immediate, unfiltered experience is to perceive in a series of ‘fragments’.<sup>400</sup> In these sentences, Naipaul describes himself as a willing yet passive vessel – ‘carried along,’ ‘in readiness for [...] revelation’. If, as he claims, the text of ‘Crocodiles’ is an attempt to render this travelling method in writing, then it can be read as an explicit attempt to embody Conradian ideas in the travelogue form (*FC*, 13).

But at the same time – as Shiva did in *North of South* – Naipaul suggests that his imbrication in Ivorian society, the stance from which he observed, may have been different from that of Conrad. ‘The people I found, the people I was attracted to, were not unlike myself’, he writes, acknowledging that, behind the façade of randomness, the organizing principle may have been one of attraction to similitude, and even projection of the self (*FC*, 10). The story of this attraction, this discovery or seeking of similitude,

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<sup>399</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* (London: Deutsch, 1984), p. 12. Henceforth references are to this edition and are cited in the text as *FC*.

<sup>400</sup> Conrad, III, p. viii,x.

is ‘as much a part of the story as the unfolding of the West African background’. In this sentence, the real subject of the travelogue is unsettled: what is ‘background’ and what is ‘foreground’? Is this piece about West Africa or about the narrator’s relationship with the people he finds? The people to whom Naipaul is attracted, moreover, are not in fact native Ivorians, but expatriates, like himself: and the expatriate experience to which he returns most often is that of Caribbean migrants in the Ivory Coast. In the same way that Shiva’s encounter with ‘Asian’ interlocutors come to dominate *North and South*, Vidia’s encounters with Caribbean expatriates in the Ivory Coast constitutes a burden to which the narrative repeatedly returns. C.L.R. James, in 1958, had written that ‘in Africa [in contrast to the Caribbean] the native populations have got a *background* and a basis of civilisation which are their own’.<sup>401</sup> ‘Crocodiles’ consistently alludes to the privacy, or inaccessibility, of this ‘background’ to Caribbean travellers in the Ivory Coast. In this way, Vidia’s conception of Caribbean people as inexorably ‘colonial’ – a people whose ‘colonial’ mentality is set in relief on the African continent – becomes manifest.

Naipaul’s travels in the Ivory Coast, and his travelogue, are dominated by two Antillean women: Andrée and Arlette. Their provenance from the French-Caribbean *départements* – then and to this day part of France – foregrounds their ‘colonial’ status in Naipaul’s eyes.

Martinique, France, French-speaking Africa: the chain was obvious, and at one time – when I was at school in cramped Trinidad, learning French from black men who had a high idea of a welcoming, liberating French culture – Arlette’s life journey would have seemed to me romantic. But when I had thought of going to the Ivory Coast, I hadn’t thought of French West Indians making the roundabout journey back (*FC*, 107).

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<sup>401</sup> C.L.R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory*, p. 97. My emphasis.

The French language, in this passage, becomes a metonym for the processes of assimilation and inculturation that were at the centre of the colonial project in the Caribbean. Arlette and Andrée try to escape French colonial space, but nonetheless follow the routes of the passing empire (and the still-current Francophonie). As Francophone Afro-Caribbeans who have travelled to Francophone Africa in this way, they occupy a particular, and particularly Caribbean, position of homelessness. They occupy a middle position, not quite European, not quite African, and therefore feel themselves to be neither absolutely foreign nor truly at home.<sup>402</sup> In the contrasting figures of the two women, Naipaul describes possible responses to this position. It could lead to disillusion, disappointment and alienation, or to a (necessarily incomplete) elective assimilation. Andrée adopts the first approach, Arlette, to an extent, the second. ‘Arlette, in her own mind, had been re-educated and remade by Africa. Her solitude, as an expatriate, was different from Andrée’s’ (*FC*, 127). At different times in the travelogue, these two figures act as mediators, gatekeepers, and explicators of Ivorian life and culture for the narrator.

The clearest example of this is the scene in which the two women combine to arrange an interview for Naipaul with an Ivorian academic, Georges Niangoran-Bouah. ‘Crocodiles’, as Timothy Weiss notes, ‘contrasts a dualistic world: the modern, sophisticated, economically successful Ivory Coast with the primitive, animistic world that, according to the author, still lives in the psyche of Ivorians’.<sup>403</sup> And Naipaul arrives hoping to speak to Niangoran-Bouah about the distinction between the ‘day world’ of colonial modernity and the ‘night world’ of African magic that has

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<sup>402</sup> Arlette, for example, describes how, ‘in the Ivory Coast the French West Indians, *les antillais*, behaved like French people. They looked down on the Africans and – because they thought of themselves as civilized and French – they expected the Africans to look up to them. “*Mais ils sont déçus.*” The West Indians made an error; the African’s looked up to nobody; and life was as a result full of stress for some West Indians in the Ivory Coast’ (*FC*, 109-10).

<sup>403</sup> Weiss, p. 162.

preoccupied him throughout the narrative. But as the scene is narrated, it is repeatedly punctured by diversions, parentheses, descriptions not of Bouah but of Andrée and Arlette. Naipaul establishes the scene with Andrée ‘sat at her desk’ and Mr Niangoran-Bouah ‘in his swivel chair’ before the digression begins: the scene was ‘almost domestic’: ‘(the influence of literature, the influence of the French language! I saw her as a Balzac character)’. As the conversation begins, Arlette appears, ‘as if in a novel or a play, and at another level of reality’. What is she doing there, he asks, before remembering that she ‘also [had] arranged my meeting’. Andrée’s role as a mediator in this encounter – and, crucially, in the writing of the encounter – is literalised at the moment in which Naipaul, ‘so taken by what Mr Niangoran Bouah was saying’, asks ‘for a sheet of paper to write down his words’. In a hugely overdetermined description – returning to the image of the Balzacian domestic scene – Naipaul describes how: ‘Gently, like someone performing a welcome domestic duty, Andrée put down her knitting and gave me three sheets of thick new paper’. The writing that follows is foregrounded *as* writing, both by the verb phrase which immediately follows Andrée’s sacerdotal, domestic gesture (‘I wrote’) but by the fact that from this point, Naipaul records Bouah’s narration macaronically, in both French and English, a scriptural strategy that draws attention to the process of translation and transcription itself. Again, the Antillean women act as exegetes on Bouah’s phrases:

*“Le monde des blancs est reel”*, Bouah begins, *“Mais [...] nous autres africains noirs, nous avons tout cela dans le monde de la nuit, le monde des ténèbres.”* [...] Arlette, eyes bright said, *“Ils pratiquent le nuit.”* “They do it all at night” (FC, 174-5).

Naipaul’s choreography and phrasing here foregrounds not just the way these Caribbean women arrange and stage the scene for him, but also the way they mediate its transcription: the way they gloss it, explicate it, and (providing Naipaul with the paper) literally enable it to be documented or written down. These are the intermediaries –

personifications of the processes of meditation and interpretation – through which Naipaul’s transcription of the scene takes place. And these personified figures are defined by their oblique, Caribbean relationship to the Ivorian subject matter being documented. Where Bouah speaks of ‘we Africans’ (*nous [...] africains*), Arlette refers, telling, to ‘they’ (*ils*) or them. Her phrase, ‘they do it at night’ attempts to corroborate Bouah’s story, but is in fact more vague, less articulate.

‘The world of the whites is real’, Bouah says: ‘But us black Africans, we have all that in the night world, the world of darkness’. This scene is a local instance of a concern Naipaul carries throughout ‘Crocodiles’. It will be recalled, from *The Loss of El Dorado*, that Naipaul was fascinated by the idea of a ‘night world’ among the African slaves in which the power structures of the day were reversed. And Naipaul at different points extrapolates about Africa based on his Caribbean research, in one instance doubling back on himself: do these ideas, he asks, derive solely from ‘his own fantasy’, from an imagined similarity with life on the ‘other side of the Atlantic’ (*FC*,162, 174)? It is clear that they do. But they are also, in this new context, reified. Whereas in the Caribbean these pageants became degraded into make-believe mimics of the pageantry of the Europeans, in Africa this ‘night world’ is presented as autochthonous. Naipaul is obsessed by the ‘reality’ of this world of ‘magic, and the gods, and the spirits’ and its relationship to the ‘reality’ of the European world: ‘Is it real, for Africans, the European world? This city they have built here in Abidjan – do Africans consider it real?’. And as he tries to articulate this alternative ‘reality’, the latent narrative logic underlying the earlier Congo writings comes to the surface (*FC*, 174). In contrast to the ostentatiously *realist* descriptions of his West Indian interlocutors (‘like a scene from Balzac’), this alternative ‘African’ reality is referred to by means of its invisibility to the foreign traveller. It is fascinatingly, but inexorably,

other, and can only be pointed to in the vaguest terms: an ‘African world’ of ‘spirits and magic and the true gods’ (*FC*, 162). This world gets more real (its gods more ‘true’) the less Naipaul can see of it, because its ‘reality’ depends on it being invisible to people like him. At one point, Naipaul meets a European expatriate who recounts a number of horror stories regarding child sacrifice in the ‘African’ interior. Naipaul gives the man heightened credence – ‘I believed what the man said’, he comments – because of his very separation from the African community he describes. His accuracy, Naipaul suggests, can be attributed to his ‘acceptance of African ways [...] But his acceptance went with a correct distancing of himself from the continent and its people’ (*FC*, 166-167).

The ‘Crocodiles’ of Naipaul’s title refer to the crocodiles that lived in the moat surrounding the presidential compound of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, first president of the independent Ivory Coast. The feeding of the crocodiles had become a ritual in Yamoussoukro, and Naipaul became interested in the symbolism or fetish-character of the crocodiles: what did they do or represent? Rob Nixon identifies the ‘totemic centrality’ Naipaul gives to the ‘croc-pit’, which is made to stand as a synecdoche for ‘the *real* Ivory Coast and, moreover, the *real* Africa’. And he points to the disjunction between what he takes to be Naipaul’s aim – to provide an ‘insider’s perspective’ on the Ivory Coast; to decipher the symbol of the crocodiles – and his technique. ‘His decision to invest the crocodiles with a centripetal force in the narrative was preceded by a social decision taken during the trip itself: he sought out the company of European, American, and Caribbean expatriates as he felt drawn to people who maintained a tangential relation to the society’. According to Nixon, he attempts to ‘penetrate to the purported center of the society by way of those who are extraneous to it’.<sup>404</sup> But what if the

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<sup>404</sup> Nixon (1992) p.76-7.

testimonies of these European, American, and above all Caribbean expatriates are read not as an unhelpful alternative to Ivorian local testimony, but as interesting in its own right? What if 'Crocodiles' is read not as the 'insider's perspective' that Nixon, and perhaps even Naipaul (at his more delusory moments), would like it to be, but as the outsider's account that it is? This would be the perspective of a British educated Indian-Trinidadian, speaking to other Caribbean expatriates, each occupying an oblique position in relation to the country they attempt to describe. Rather than the 'real' Ivory Coast, or Africa, the subject would then become the experiences of Caribbean people in decolonising Africa and, beyond that, the relationship between Caribbean and African experiences of colonisation. The search for perceptual transparency and realistic representation in this sense would itself become totemic of an ideal of congruence or mutual comprehensibility between peoples from the two regions, an ideal that was never achieved but rather continually frustrated.

Naipaul is interested in the crocodiles as 'totemic' (of something) but the more people he asks, and the more times he himself tries to articulate their significance, the more vague he becomes (*FC*, 91). They speak, sometimes, of the 'African' spirit-world of the night, 'ceaselessly undoing the reality of the day' (162). They are the subject of a frenzied commentary that adds 'to the religious mystery'. They are a show for tourists, but become 'more than a tourist sight[:] they became touched with the magic and power they were intended to have' (163). The 'crocodiles' of the narrative function in a similar manner to Novalis's 'Blue Flower' in Penelope Fitzgerald's novel of that name: not as an emblem to be expounded, but as a signifier whose significance is deferred or altered with every attempt to describe it. Both symbols become placeholders for a subject immanent in the text: in Fitzgerald's case romantic obsession, in Naipaul's, an inviolate world beyond the reach of colonial modernity, available he presumes to the Ivorians,

yet always, frustratingly, just out of the narrator's Caribbean, 'colonial' reach. 'The symbolism remained elusive, worrying [...] Perhaps the concepts were not really translatable?' (164). In 'Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro', Naipaul unsettles the what Emily Apter calls the long-standing generic idea of travel writing as a 'translational language': in which the realities of a foreign culture are made legible (usually, to a metropolitan audience).<sup>405</sup> Rather, Naipaul's text documents the acts of circumlocution or referential failure, the linguistic carapaces that in-between figures like Naipaul, Andrée and Arlette create when trying to access and describe a reality beyond their conceptual horizon. Despite her elective affinity with Bouah, even Arlette cannot finally explicate the crocodile symbol at the center of the narrative. "“Nobody knows”", she answers, when Naipaul asks her what they mean (*FC*, 180).

A question that is begged in 'Crocodiles' is: what is the alien and alienated narrator doing in the Ivory Coast, or what suasive force does the text intend? Many of the polemical concerns that seemed to motivate Naipaul's Zairois travelogues did not pertain to the Ivory Coast: he makes no mention of inter-ethnic tension, for example. And the contexts which motivated those earlier texts – the coincidence of Black Power movements in Trinidad and Jamaica with the expulsions of Asian communities from East and Central Africa – were perhaps not superannuated but were no longer urgent and new. The polemical thrust of the earlier texts is absent. Nor does there seem to have been an urgent political context which would have made readers of *The New Yorker* eager for news of the Ivory Coast in 1984. It is as if the piece is its own justification: as if Naipaul was travelling for the sake of travelling, selling his work on the basis of his celebrity status, writing for the sake of producing new work.

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<sup>405</sup> Apter, p. 160.

Situated within Naipaul's intellectual biography, however, 'Crocodiles' is a crucial text. In the trajectory of his African writing, it sits between his Zairois travelogues, and the much later *Masque of Africa*. 'Crocodiles' retains methodological and ethnographic ideas from the earlier travelogues, but its foregrounding of the authorial self, and the degree to which it privileges uncertainty, self-doubt and hesitation has more in common with the later text. Similarly, within his wider oeuvre, it sits between texts such as *A Bend in the River* and *Among the Believers* – texts which traded, as we have seen, on Naipaul's pose of dispassionate objectivity – and late works such as *The Enigma of Arrival*, which mark a turn towards self-reflexion, and constitute an ambitious autobiographical attempt to position himself and his work in historical and literary-historical time. In *Finding the Centre*, 'Crocodiles' was printed alongside 'Prologue to an Autobiography', a text which, as its title suggests, can be read as a proem or preparation for the more explicitly autobiographical works – *The Enigma of Arrival*, *A Way in the World*, and 'Reading and Writing' – that he would publish in the years to come. 'Crocodiles' is not an accidental or ancillary text in this chronology.<sup>406</sup> It is clear that Naipaul wanted 'Crocodiles' to be the title of the book that became *Finding the Centre* (the extant title being inserted on the insistence of the publisher).<sup>407</sup> Had that diptych born its name, it would be a more prominent text, and perhaps its association with 'Prologue to an Autobiography' would be further foregrounded. Many of the concerns – about the singular and quickly vanishing position of the author within a changing global and literary-historical landscape – are explored in 'Crocodiles'. The modality of his own, peculiar, late-colonial-Caribbean encounter with West Africa

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<sup>406</sup> In this respect I differ from Patrick French, who has read Naipaul's claim in this prologue that the book admits readers into the processes of writing as a piece of marketing, an excuse for lumping together two unlike pieces. See French, p. 418.

<sup>407</sup> The text originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The text was sourced at Tulsa OK, University of Tulsa Special Collections, V.S. Naipaul Archive. Letter from DA to VSN, 19 August 1983. Box 17 Folder 2.

becomes the key subject he addresses: drawing on, and projected onto, the Caribbean expatriates he meets. Moreover, the travelogue form, as a mode of perception and a colonial inheritance, becomes an explicit register of this transient, unsatisfactory encounter.

In chapter eleven of 'Crocodiles', exhausted by the disturbing, un-'translatable' sight of the crocodiles, and the gruesome expatriate stories about child sacrifice in the interior (for which read, 'background'), Naipaul reports a 'bad night', a psychological disturbance:

I dreamed I was on a roof or bridge. The material, of glass or transparent plastic, had begun to perish: seemingly melted at the edges. I asked whether the bridge would be mended. The answer was no. What had been built had been built; the roof or bridge I was on would crumble away. Was it safe, though? Could I cross? The answer was yes. The bridge was safe; I could cross. And in the dream that was the most important thing, because I wasn't going to pass that way again (*FC*, 168).

Naipaul's image of the bridge, crumbling away as he crosses it for the last time, points to a growing chasm between his formation in Trinidad in last decades of the British empire, and the cultures of the independent African states, now in their third decade of independence. It recalls the image of the steamship, a residue of colonial infrastructure, carrying Naipaul through – but never properly into – Zaire. These motifs speak both to Naipaul's exteriority to the societies he visits, and to the colonial infrastructures he relies on to navigate them. In this way, they also draw attention to the travelogue form itself: an account of a passage *through* rather than residency *in* a country. In 'Crocodiles' Naipaul inhabits a structure – the travelogue – associated with 'bridging', with translation: suturing the cognitive gap between two alien places. But this textual 'bridge' – as he defines it in the motif – is itself an imported, foreign structure, passing over rather than inhabiting the landscape. Like the 'sinister' buildings of 'concrete and steel' that represent for Naipaul the superficial, neo-colonial modernity of Abidjan, the

bridge on which he travels and the travelogue form which he uses are ‘perishable’, passing structures with no permanence or purchase within the invisible, autochthonous, ‘real’ Ivorian world (*FC*, 168).

(b) From ‘Parenthesis’ to ‘Perimeter’: Condé’s *La Vie sans fards*

Maryse Condé’s memoir *La Vie sans fards* (2012) gives a retrospective portrait of the lives of Caribbean expatriates in West Africa in the decades following the independence of Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast and Senegal. In her 1983 essay, from which I quote in my introduction, Condé had acutely characterised the relationship between Naipaul and the Caribbean literary world in these decades: a world which was, she suggests, both Anglophone and Francophone. The sketch she gives is of a plethora of conferences and colloquia in the Caribbean among Caribbean writers, critics, and intellectuals whose pre-eminent concern, ‘to dissect and denounce the oeuvre of V.S. Naipaul’, paradoxically confirmed his centrality in Caribbean literary discussion.<sup>408</sup> The sketch is intended as a cartoon, but the humorous exaggeration nonetheless articulates an acute point. ‘The fascination which Naipaul exerts over the Antilles is only equalled by the fascination that the Antilles exert over him’.<sup>409</sup> Condé’s essay was published the year before ‘Crocodiles’, and its scepticism regarding the easy separation of Naipaul from the concerns of the Caribbean, or of the literary world of the Caribbean from the work of Naipaul, is evidently a scepticism I share. In this sub-section, I read *La Vie sans fards* for the light it sheds as a retroactive commentary on, correction to, or point of

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<sup>408</sup> Condé, ‘Naipaul et les Antilles: Une histoire d’amour?’, p. 6. I quote this passage, and provide the original French text, in the introduction.

<sup>409</sup> ‘En un mot, la fascination que Naipaul exerce sur l’intelligentsia des Antilles n’a d’égale que celle qu’exerce sur lui les Antilles.’ Condé, ‘Naipaul et les Antilles: Une histoire d’amour?’, p. 7. My translation.

comparison with Naipaul's African travelogues discussed so far, in particular 'Crocodiles'. Condé's text frames Naipaul's ideas about Caribbean communities in West Africa at this time as characteristic of Caribbean expatriate sentiment. It shows Naipaul's account, or the point of view which underlies it, to be hardly exceptional or singular. But it also figures the conclusions he draws as to some extent inherited or clichéd, and inflected by the author's politics, presumptions, and gender position. *La Vie sans fards* probes many of the formal questions Naipaul and Lamming had earlier hinted at – to what extent does the illegibility or untranslatability of Africa to the Caribbean observer inflect the documentary or representative protocols of the Caribbean writer? – but it also revises their earlier representative practices. As a revision, a later text, it reveals the specificity of the historical vantage point from which those earlier texts were written. It suggests the tenacity of their influence, the occasional perspicacity of their perceptions, but also the limitations of their frame of reference.

*La Vie sans fards* – which recounts Condé's life in West Africa in the 1960s and 1970s – begins with a quotation from a thumbnail biography of the author circulated at one time by her publicists. The extract describes her first encounter with Mamadou Condé, a Guinean actor, who she met in Paris, married, and then lived with in communist, postcolonial Guinea. 'These phrases create a seductive image,' she writes: 'that of a love affair ignited by activism' ('Ces phrases créent une image séduisante. Celle d'un amour éclairé par le militantisme').<sup>410</sup> They also recall the circumstances of 'Andrée' and 'Arlette', or rather, the way Naipaul describes their circumstances in 'Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro'. Yet, Condé insists that the image the thumbnail creates is a false one: not only are the facts wrong (she first travelled to Africa without her husband, and lived in the Ivory Coast), but the wider impression it gives of her

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<sup>410</sup> Maryse Condé, *La Vie sans fards* (Paris: Pocket, 2014), p. 11. Henceforth references to this book are included in the text as *VSF*.

relationship to Africa is misleading. Reversing the genders of the spousal metaphor that Naipaul and her own publicists had relied upon, she compares her relationship to Africa with that of Swann and Odette (in Proust's *Un amour de Swann*). 'I ask myself', she writes in her memoir *La Vie sans fards*,

if, regarding Africa, I could not apply to myself the words of Proust's hero [...], almost without modifying them: "[...] that I ruined years of my life, that I wanted to die, that I had my greatest love with a woman who didn't attract me, who was not my type."

(En fin de compte, je me demande si, à propos de l'Afrique, je ne pourrais reprendre à mon compte presque sans les modifier les paroles du héros de Marcel Proust dans *Un amour de Swann* : "Dire que j'ai gâché des années de ma vie, que j'ai voulu mourir, que j'ai eu mon plus grand amour pour une femme qui ne me plaisait pas, qui n'était pas mon genre.") (*VSF*, 16).

Naipaul, describing Arlette, had seen her marriage to an African man as metonymic of her willful-but-misjudged attempt to affiliate with an idea of Africa: a 'romantic' move (as he called it), in both senses. Setting her own narrative in opposition to this simplification, and to the conventions of the romantic narrative that this implies, Condé frames *La Vie sans fards*, at its opening, in fundamentally realist terms. Indeed, it narrates that point of her life in which the exigencies of work and raising children made writing impossible, and – quoting Sartre: 'live or write, one has to choose' as its epigraph – a recurrent idea in the text is that real experience will always push out the possibility of written representation ('Vivre ou écrire, il faut choisir') (*VSF*, 9). Describing a scene is always a form of falsification. The title, *La Vie sans fards* (life without pretense or makeup), points to this familiar realist aporia.

Condé's revision of Naipaul is easier to describe as a formal move than as a propositional or discursive departure. In fact, in many ways, *La Vie* ratifies and fleshes out some of the arguments made – or left implicit – in 'Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro', *North of South* and also in *The Pleasures of Exile*. Notably, Condé describes the expatriate Caribbean communities in the Ivory Coast and Guinea as detached from

Ivorian or Guinean society. They formed, she suggests, an isolated community, perceived as colonials by the Africans: that is, as mediator figures between European administrations and African peoples, or as belated expatriate communities adrift after the retreat of the French Empire, or else as sympathetic but deraciné figures, isolated from the body of the populace by their lack of local knowledge and local languages (*VSF*, 40-45, 67-68). Condé's own inability to speak Malinké, and the difficulties this occasioned, are the subject of frequent reflection.<sup>411</sup> The inadequacy of shared political commitments, or the sense of a shared pan-African inheritance, for fostering interpersonal connection is parodied in moments of 'realistic shock' that will now be familiar. Condé describes discovering Césaire as a student. But when she presents the *Cahier* to her husband, he is uncomprehending: 'Who is he writing for?' Mamadou asks. 'Not for me, certainly. I don't understand it' ("Pour qui écrit-il? Certainement pas pour moi qui ne le comprends pas") (*VSF*, 29). On her first night in Africa, in Senegal, her Senegalese host intimates that Caribbean expatriates – still associated with their role in the colonial civil service – are distrusted and resented.

“And René Maran!” I protested, outraged.

“Who is René Maran?” he asked me, perplexed.

I believed first of all to have misunderstood. Dismayed, I discovered the limits of literature.

(“– Et René Maran! protestai-je, outrée. | – Qui est René Maran?” me demandait-il, perplexe. | Je crus d’abord avoir mal entendu. Consternée, je découvrais les limites de la littérature”) (*VSF*, 37).

The inability of the Senegalese host to recognize the name 'René Maran', a French-Guyanese novelist who had lived in French Equatorial Africa and written about his experiences, is met by total mutual incomprehension. It is the experience of shock –

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<sup>411</sup> Bella Brodzki, drawing on Condé's failure to integrate linguistically, notes that the '(un)translatability' of the autobiographical (Caribbean) subject in a foreign (African) setting is a key trope in the book. See Bella Brodzki, '(Un)Translatability and the Autobiographical Subject in Maryse Condé's *La Vie sans Fards*', *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 30.1 (2015), 99–105.

‘dismay’ or ‘consternation’ – which strips Condé’s illusions about Pan-African solidarity, and the ease of her assimilation into African society.

But this scene does not just repeat a familiar idea that might be found in Lamming or Naipaul. It is also, as I say, a parody. The allusion to a relatively minor writer – Maran as opposed to Césaire – draws attention to Condé’s naivety. Moreover, Maran was best known for his consecration by French literary gatekeepers. He won the *Prix Goncourt* for *Batouala* (1921), a token gesture Sartre alludes to in the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, so Condé’s outrage implicitly ratifies what her host has been saying: she is still in thrall to hierarchies of colonial taste.<sup>412</sup> Exaggerating her naivety through dramatic irony, Condé creates a distance between the position of herself and her readers (in 2012), and her character at the time: what was shocking then is, in retrospect, not that shocking. Indeed, that it was ever shocking might be seen as funny. In contrast to Lamming, Condé points to the experience of realistic shock as something that is now familiar and at risk of parody. Whereas in Lamming it constituted the large part of his fragmentary narrative, whereas in Naipaul this experience of alienation was a pessimistic conclusion beyond which one could not venture, in Condé this is the start of the story: the remainder of the narrative will describe her attempt to accommodate and adapt to this continually unfurling revelation.

‘I saw it straightaway,’ Condé writes,

the Antilleans lived only amongst themselves. Across the whole of the African continent, a gap separated them from the Africans. [...] As far as the Antilleans were concerned, Africa was a mysterious *background* which scared them, and which they didn’t dare to decipher.

([J]e m’en aperçus tout de suite, les Antillais ne vivaient qu’entre eux. À travers l’ensemble du continent africain, un fossé les séparait des Africains. [...]) Quant

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<sup>412</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Preface’, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 7–26 (p. 9).

aux Antillais, l'Afrique était un mystérieux *background* qui leur faisait peur et qu'ils n'osaient pas déchiffrer) (*VSF*, 42-3).

The word 'background' appears in Condé's text in English, and in italics, to emphasize that it is not her own word, but rather a received idea or cliché: Africa as a mysterious 'background'. It is the word used by V.S. Naipaul (and before him, C.L.R. James). Naipaul's own personal 'discoveries' were 'as much part of [his] story as the unfolding of the West African background' (*FC*, 11). Whether or not the reference is intended, we can read in Condé's work a confirmation that Naipaul's ideas – indeed, Naipaul's language use – was characteristic of Caribbean bourgeois travelers in that period. And there is an implicit critique of his interpretative fear: his phobic construction of West Africa as '*background*' which precluded the possibility of engaging with it and 'decipher[ing]' it. Condé's narrative does at times condense into pessimistic, synthetic statements about the fate of the Antillean community, but the structure of the book does not operate centripetally to foreground these moments of propositional synthesis. Moreover, as in this case, a retrospective, critical distance is taken which allows the writer to contextualize both her own behavior, and that of the Antillean community. *La Vie sans fards* is in one sense structured like a travelogue: it begins with Condé's arrival in Africa and ends as she leaves. Yet she resists the narrative structure of the journey. Her peregrinations are presented as relatively random, and the effect is perspectival, as she accrues experiences, encounters, relationships that – if they do not discredit her moments of synthetic thought – reveal them to be specific, situated responses.

Late in the book, after some decades in different parts of West Africa, she finds her response differing sharply from the responses of African-American tourists, in this case visiting Ghana in search of the sites from which their ancestors were shipped as slaves. 'What did Africa signify' to them? she asks:

A change of scene from the hard quotidianity of their existence, circumscribed by racism and hindered by the slowness of the progression of civil rights. Within days, they would be leaving again for Brooklyn, Washington D.C., or Ames, Iowa, their eyes blinded by light, their ears ringing with sounds and rhythms, their palettes intoxicated by unusual flavors [...] I could not commune with them. For me, Africa represented neither a change of scene nor a parenthesis in my existence. It was the perimeter within which I had struggled for many years.

(Que signifiait l’Afrique pour ces touristes afro-américains? Un dépaysement dans la dure quotidienneté de leur existence, délimitée par le racisme et entravée par la lenteur des progrès des droits civils. Dans quelques jours, ils allaient repartir pour Brooklyn, Washington D.C. ou Ames, Iowa, les yeux aveuglés de lumière, les oreilles bourdonnantes de sons et de rythmes, le palais enivré de saveurs inhabituelles. [...] Je ne pouvais communier avec eux. Pour moi, l’Afrique ne représentait ni un dépaysement ni une parenthèse dans mon existence. C’était le périmètre à l’intérieur duquel je me débattais depuis des années (VSF, 201).

The response of these African-American tourists contrasts with that of the Caribbean travellers so-far discussed. Perhaps because these Ghanaian sites have now been developed specifically as tourist sites, they do not experience the shock of disconnection, but are furnished, she suggests, with the ‘African’ experience which they travelled to find. But the metaphors she uses to describe the journeys might also describe the journeys of Naipaul and Lamming. The journeys of these American travellers are ‘parentheses’; they are quests made with the intention of bolstering – in the face of racial harassment – a nourishing sense of personal genealogy and historical ties. This is the same conception of the African journey that Lamming had had. His journey had not been felicitous, but the sense of shock he describes could only arise within this framework: to travel with expectations, to find those expectations disappointed. Naipaul, ‘travelling on a theme’ as he puts it, had known what he was going to find.<sup>413</sup> He expands on the ideas that ‘realistic shock’ narratives articulated to emphasise and reconfirm his own preordained conclusions. Condé, by contrast, rejects the shape of these narratives. Her African experience is not a quest, a ‘parenthe[tical]’

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<sup>413</sup> cit. Giles Foden, ‘*The Masque of Africa* by V.S. Naipaul’, *The Guardian*, 4 September 2010 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/sep/04/vs-naipaul-masque-africa-review>> [accessed 10 November 2016].

journey made to clarify a Caribbean life or dilemma. Rather, ‘Africa’ serves as a ‘perimeter’. This is a different metaphor for her experience and, by extension, for her narrative. For Condé Africa is a perimeter, a physical space: it has boundaries (it is not shapeless), and is not innocent of meaning or ideological formation (we have seen what ‘Africa’ signified to both European and Caribbean visitors); but by emphasising ‘perimeter’ over ‘parenthesis’, Condé positions herself as rejecting any one governing infrastructure which determines her experience of Africa or corrals the written record of it: there is no equivalent of the Naipaulian steam-boat or ‘bridge’. And this is a spatial construction – the ‘perimeter’ – that she approximates within her text. *La Vie sans fards* is bounded by her arrival and departure on the continent, but presents itself, internally, as shapeless: a series of encounters and episodes that do not reach towards, arrive at, or disabuse one particular thesis. Her early discovery that the ideals of *négritude* have not arrived in Africa, for example, is consistent with her observations about the mutual isolation of African and Caribbean communities. But she will teach in African schools and participate in Guinean protests and social activism. She will feel a distance from her African interlocutors, yet she, and the Antilleans she meets, are part of the African landscape she describes: they sit within the perimeter.<sup>414</sup> The parenthetical ‘travelogue’ has been replaced by a shapeless life writing ‘without makeup’: its ‘anti-generic’ thrust, dismantling the old form, promotes once more the ideal of a new and truer realism.

Condé’s book ends in Kaolack, in Senegal, where she meets her second husband. This encounter, she suggests, marked the beginning of the end of her time in Africa. The new couple would travel together to Europe, to Guadeloupe, and then to

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<sup>414</sup> There is a parallel to be drawn between this latent anti-essentialism – comprehending African experience as *inclusive* of diasporic communities within it and Emily Apter’s influential account of Condé’s anti-essentialist revision of the Creole language politics (for Condé, Apter suggests, there is no ‘essential’ Caribbean language; rather, it is comprised of the totality of Caribbean language use, in the Caribbean itself and in the diaspora). See Apter, pp. 164–65.

America where she would take up residence as a university professor. ‘Africa’, she reflects in the last lines of the memoir, ‘at last tamed, metamorphosed, poured itself out, docile, into the hinterland of my imagination. It would become no more than the subject matter for numerous fictions’ (‘L’Afrique enfin domptée se métamorphoserait et se coulerait, soumise, dans les replis de mon imaginaire. Elle ne serait plus que la matière de nombreuses fictions’) (*VSF*, 285). This is an ambivalent conclusion. On the one hand, it participates in the more pessimistic aspect of the book, emphasising disconnection. Just as integration into African communities had always been a struggle, so her future writings about Africa will be ‘fictions’: metamorphosed, artificial versions of the place itself. Yet on the other hand, her fictions would be precisely what defined her professional life to come. And these take this experience, albeit somewhat altered, as their subject matter: Africa constitutes the perimeter in which they move. Thinking forward, in broad-brush terms, across her oeuvre, this makes sense. Novels such as *Heremakhonon* (1976) are marked by an awareness of disconnection between Antillean and African; yet Africa, in this case Guinea, remains the perimeter in which they operate. These are not just portraits of West Indian subjectivities in exile, but also partial portraits of African societies, of which the Antillean diasporas form important and revealing parts. The nature of the African-set fiction, then, is linked to her experience and background as a Caribbean writer, but it also linked to the nature of her engagement with Africa itself.

### V.S. NAIPAUL: POSTCOLONIAL MANDARIN?

In a 1966 essay, ‘East Indian’, V.S. Naipaul wrote:

To be a colonial is to be a little ridiculous and unlikely, especially in the eyes of someone from the metropolitan country. All immigrants and their descendants are colonials of one sort or another, and between the colonial and what one might call the metropolitan there always exists a muted mutual distrust (*LO*, 38).

This seems to be a straightforward comment on the relationship between people from colonies (Trinidad) and metropolitan spaces (London). But in fact, the purpose of this essay is to disrupt these too-simple assumptions about what constitutes a colonial as opposed to a metropolitan state. Naipaul's point is that to an 'East Indian' like himself, India is also a kind of metropolitan space, and Trinidadian 'Indians' are seen by Indians as 'colonial'. How this community became 'colonial' in this sense is not as simple as this first statement suggests. It was not, in fact, enough simply to leave a 'metropolitan' space. For a while, 'India' was recreated in Trinidad, isolated and unaffected by external influence. It was only at the point where customs changed, habits of thought, speech, and behaviour irreparably altered, that the community became 'colonial': 'the colonial, of whatever society, is a product of revolution, and the revolution takes place in the mind'. Fragments of Hindi understood, moments of recognition, could trick the mind into a belief in a connection with the metropolitan culture, but only 'fleetingly', Naipaul says, 'since for the colonial there can be no true return' (*LO*, 43-4).

For many of the writers discussed in this chapter, Africa also constituted a kind of 'metropolitan' space in which their 'coloniality', as Caribbean emigrants, was perceived in illuminating if painful ways. Shiva and Vidia Naipaul, as Indian rather than Afro-Caribbeans, have usually been read outside of this context, and the perspective they have on Africa is different from that of Lamming and Condé. But as I have shown they too are enmeshed in this Caribbean problem-space concerning the relationship of the Caribbean and Africa, and their representations of Africa, as self-fashioned 'colonials', can be read as an intervention into this ongoing conversation. *An Area of Darkness* – V.S. Naipaul's account of his voyage to India – would seem to be

the preeminent text in which he expounds these ideas about Caribbean ‘coloniality’ and the disjunction between Caribbean populations and their ethnic source cultures. But, as he would later say, his Caribbean upbringing did not bequeath to him only one ‘area of darkness’, but rather plural ‘areas of darkness’, places obliquely related to him through his Trinidad upbringing and the Caribbean intellectual world in which he slyly moved: ‘Africa, South America, the Muslim world’ (*LO*, 191-2).<sup>415</sup>

Naipaul’s travelogues, and the fictions they spawned, reflect both his imbrication within this problem-space, but also the particularity of his own concerns, and the nature of his travel and experience in Africa. The time Naipaul spent in Africa was not negligible, but never constituted residency, and even in its longest stints was structured as a series of journeys through, rather than extended residency in, particular places. He estimates that his longest stint in a single place may have lasted about six months, at the Makerere University in Kampala in 1966.<sup>416</sup> The ‘fictions’ he would graft from the metamorphosed memories of the continent would emphasise what I have called his ‘conscriptio to modernity’: his sense of being an outdated colonial figure which – like his Caribbean contemporaries – was heightened by his encounter with Africa. Moreover, his peculiar East Indian West Indian position in relation to the places he visits heightens his sense of his own outdated coloniality.

When Nixon speaks of Naipaul as a ‘postcolonial mandarin’, he refers to the ways in which Naipaul was a participant in the Western power structures that in fact perpetuated colonial ways of viewing and treating the formerly colonised world. I argue that these travelogues suggest another way in which his ‘postcolonial[ism]’ can be

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<sup>415</sup> Needless to say, Naipaul’s self-claimed intimacy with the ‘Muslim world’ did not make him any the more sympathetic towards it. On Naipaul’s controversial writings about Islam see Pablo Mukherjee, ‘Doomed to Smallness: Violence, V.S. Naipaul, and the Global South’, *Yearbook of English Studies* 37 (2007) 209-226.

<sup>416</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 1.

viewed. First, I have claimed that reading Naipaul's 1970s travelogues alongside those of Lamming and Shiva Naipaul draws attention to the differential and competing experiences of postcoloniality in different parts of the formerly colonised world, in which some regional, sub-regional or diasporic communities were perceived to be more dogged by the after-lives of colonialism than others. Second, drawing on Suleri's suggestion that texts like *Area* and *Enigma* constitute acts of 'tentative' 'postcolonial self-definition', I suggest that works such as *Bend* and 'Crocodiles' bespeak a particular mode and modality of 'postcolonial' encounter between the formerly colonial subject and the now decolonising world. 'In an arena of such frenetic change, Naipaul records a perspective that knows its time is done even before it has had the chance to be fully articulated.'<sup>417</sup> In the case of Naipaul, to be a postcolonial subject was to be marked by colonial processes of transplant, cultural loss and subjective reconstruction, to have been co-opted into a colonial way of living in and perceiving the world, but to have outlived the colonial system, and the time in which that way of life, its hierarchies and values, pertained. This was a perspective that is characteristic of his Caribbean moment, encapsulating or exaggerating fears about the possibilities for real decolonisation that other Caribbean intellectuals were having. But it was also a precise position within that intellectual field: specific to its time, to the cultural background and the political priorities of the author. Naipaul's postcolonialism – in this sense – has its origin in his imbrication in a Caribbean intellectual-historical field. Reading these acts of self-definition in the African travelogues, and reading these travelogues in dialogue with the works of Lamming, Condé and others, allows us to see how this is the case. Naipaul, far from being an original writer (without a tradition), in fact comes after Lamming and others; but he is also himself superseded: he is a middle-figure, in yet another sense.

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<sup>417</sup> Suleri, pp. 150–53, 158.

In contrast to Condé, Naipaul's most significant writing on Africa is marked by the trope of passing through, of transience and non-belonging, and by a reliance on a colonial infrastructure – now passing away – on which his belated colonials are forced to travel. These tropes, and these concerns, are prominent in *In a Free State*: 'the story of a day-long journey made in a car by two white people at a time of tribal war, suddenly coming, suddenly overwhelming colonial order and simplicity', as he would describe it himself in *The Enigma of Arrival*.<sup>418</sup> They are latent in the Congo narratives: the steamer passing through but never 'touch[ing]' the 'untouched heart of darkness' (*REP*, 181). They become more prominent in the revision of this Zairois journey in *A Bend in the River*, and they are perhaps most prominent in 'Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro'. These are texts that emphasise the external, perhaps outdated, perspective of the character or speaker in order to recuperate the experience of postcolonial constituencies that, for Naipaul, risked being submerged or forgotten (diasporic Asian communities in Africa and the Caribbean), or misappropriated or misunderstood (Caribbean communities in West Africa, or even the Caribbean community as such). These texts constitute active, polemical, and historically situated attempts to redefine these communities, and their postcolonial experiences, in Naipaul's terms. But these texts also call attention to their own built-in obsolescence. Their presence within the discursive world is already anachronistic; perhaps soon it will be irrelevant or definitively superseded. This fear haunts each of these texts. The historical specificity of these travelogues is not only a concern for the literary historian. It is also a looming presence in each of the texts themselves: above all, I have suggested, in 'Crocodiles', with its crucial motif of the crumbling bridge, across which the speaker 'will not pass [...] again'. The modality of enunciation, the confluence of peoples,

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<sup>418</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, p. 107.

cultures, eyes, texts that create this written record, will never be repeated. This fleeting 'postcolonial' moment will shortly pass away. The fear of superannuation is the price Naipaul pays for living, as he sees it, in a period of frenetic, world-historical, and unrepeatable change.

## Conclusion

In 1987, as part of a journey through the south of the United States, V.S. Naipaul visited Tuskegee University, formerly the Tuskegee Normal School, which Booker T. Washington had founded in 1881 for the education of freed slaves and their children. The visit is described in Naipaul's 1989 book *A Turn in the South*. As a child in Trinidad, Naipaul says, Washington's autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901) had been a part of his father's collection of 'self-help' literature, alongside the works of Samuel Smiles:

My father, born poor and in spite of his ambition always poor, liked stories of self-help and of men rising from poverty. He suffered in Trinidad, and I would have known that *Up from Slavery* had racial implications and could be related to the way things were on our own island.<sup>419</sup>

In *Up from Slavery*, the young, black narrator is repeatedly offered mundane tasks (making a bed, sweeping a room) and gradually gains the trust and respect of his white employer by doing what he is asked with diligence and care. Naipaul describes how, through his childhood, he was drawn to the 'romance' (*TS*, 138) of the narrative: its fetish for 'the fairy-tale test, the doing of a seemingly trivial or irrelevant thing supremely well' (136). Later, as an adult, Naipaul becomes aware of the 'complexity (and anguishes) of Booker T. Washington', the context in which the autobiography had been written – during the growing 'disenfranchisement' of black people after the first years of emancipation – and the 'background' against which Washington had 'built up his school' (138).

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<sup>419</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A Turn in the South* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 136. References are henceforth included in the text as *TS*.

What interests Naipaul is how Washington and his disciples imagined black liberation from within the ‘slave’s world picture’ bequeathed to them by generations of racist white administrators (*TS*, 145). Tuskegee provided a model for self-improvement ‘within that world picture’ but did not challenge the picture itself (145). Washington’s book, for Naipaul, suggests ‘helplessness’: ‘a man working against the odds, combining uplift with a wish not to offend’ (140). ‘Yet’, Naipaul says, ‘it had resulted in a great achievement’ (140), and he describes how, over the course of his visit, he met people who had found ‘sanctuary’ – an ‘oasis’ of dignity, free from harassment – at the school during the years of racial segregation in the first half of the twentieth century (145). Through time, Naipaul writes, the ‘irrationality’ of Tuskegee’s teaching – the admonitions to maintain ‘correct posture’ and ‘military correctness’ within the campus walls, whilst always ‘signal[ling] to the people outside that you were not getting above yourself’ – became more controversial. What would have ‘been simple prudence in the days of Booker T. Washington’ would have ‘looked like old-fashioned servility in the 1920s and 1930s’ (146). After desegregation in the 1960s, ‘when black men could join the airforce [for example], there was no longer any need for them to learn to fly at Tuskegee’ (148). Caught between admiration for Washington, and awareness of the ‘many contradictions’ of his ‘achievement’ and legacy, Naipaul does not offer a simple narrative or assessment. He describes Washington’s debates with W.E.B. Du Bois: how, even at the time the school was being founded, Washington’s critics saw his teachings as acquiescent and servile. And Naipaul describes how, long after desegregation, arriving in Tuskegee in the late 1980s, he still finds black students who feel the need for the ‘sanctuary’ that Tuskegee offers.

This passage condenses a number of ideas that run through Naipaul’s work. It articulates his interest in the inherited ‘world pictures’ which shape and delimit action

and expression, and which can be reconstructed by subsequent readers or historians only in part and with great effort. It returns to his fascination with the ‘fairy-tale[s]’ told to, and internalised by, ‘subject[ed] people’: African-Americans like Washington in the United States, and colonial people like his father in Trinidad (*TS*, 136, 147). Though no equivalence is suggested, it is clear that Naipaul himself identifies with Washington, as someone seduced into believing that he could gain the respect of hegemonic power by learning to perform the tasks it set without question, and with exceptional facility. But of equal or greater interest is the way Naipaul concludes the scene. The questions and contradictions do not disappear; in Tuskegee they remain immediate and urgent. Nor does the narrator solve them, or reach any conclusion in his portrait of Washington. Instead, he simply leaves. He travels north, and then to Tennessee. It is only months later, when he returns to Alabama, to a space research centre in Huntsville, which was also, by coincidence, the site of the first ‘State Normal and Industrial School for Negroes’ in the late nineteenth century, that he is reminded of the questions which had been provoking him in Tuskegee. From the ‘new landscape’ around Huntsville – ‘wide boulevards, low, flat factories, spacious grounds’, a ‘NASA museum’ full of visitors from China and the Indian subcontinent – ‘Tuskegee seemed to belong to another age, to exist in a melancholy time warp. It made one think of the prisons of the spirit men create for themselves and for others – so overpowering, so much part of the way things appear to have to be, and then, abruptly, with a little shift, so insubstantial’ (154).

The ‘prisons of the spirit’, the problem-space which Washington and his interlocutors inhabited, will find an echo five years later in the ‘regions of the spirit’ inhabited by Lebrun (or C.L.R. James) in *A Way in the World*. This scene, from *A Turn in the South*, constitutes one of a number of what Rhonda Cobham-Sander calls ‘epitaphs’ spread throughout the late Naipaul which – rather than promising a definitive

assessment of one or other figure – are intended rather to draw attention to the fierce grip these ‘world picture[s]’ hold, and to alert or nudge the reader toward sympathetic, or at least historically aware, interpretation. They are related, as Cobham-Sander notes, to a burgeoning awareness that the world that Naipaul himself ‘describe[s] – the world in which [he] came of age – no longer exist[s]’. As she argues of *A Way in the World*, these ‘epitaphs’ for others function in part as epitaphs for the authorial self; they ‘are meant to pre-empt [...] judgement by others, to tutor us in the proper ways of reading their achievements, and to insert into the literary tradition [...] a record of their subjectivity’.<sup>420</sup>

Like Africa or India, the southern states of the US constitute one of those plural ‘areas of darkness’ that Naipaul spoke of in his Nobel lecture: places obliquely related to the Trinidad of his childhood. In this case, they are related because of the common presence of large African diasporas, facing the challenges that follow emancipation and desegregation. Passages such as this, in *A Turn in the South*, descend genealogically from Naipaul’s growing awareness of the transient, passing nature of his own historical perspective displayed in ‘Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro’. They constitute a final ‘turning’ or circling around those plural ‘areas of darkness’ which define Naipaul’s Trinidad through historical similarities, contiguities, and shared inheritances. And they look forward to *A Way in the World*, in which Naipaul would return to the epicentre of his career-long inquiry: the Caribbean.

In this thesis, I have tracked the influence of that gravitational centre, the Caribbean, on Naipaul’s work. I have treated the Caribbean as an imagined space, a geographical region, but above all as a network of writers and readers, publishing houses and broadcast networks, readers’ groups and writers’ circles, periodicals,

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<sup>420</sup> Rhonda Cobham-Sander, *I and I*, p. 16, 11.

magazines and newspapers. Naipaul's work, I have suggested, should be read as one voice in a historical conversation which had many speakers. Eric Griffiths, in a landmark study of the relationship between voice and script, writes that 'no page displays a voice's pace, its dips and rises [...] the ever-varying timbres of allegiance, longing, shyness, or disdain which colour utterance'.<sup>421</sup> One way to better understand the character of Naipaul's written voice is to piece together the dialogues, the 'allegiance[s]' or oppositions, which gave that writing its social, polemical 'colour'. Taking my cue from *A Way in the World*, and from the scholarship of David Scott, Nadia Ellis, Belinda Edmondson, Rhonda Cobham-Sander, Malachi McIntosh and others, I have reconstructed these conversations at three pivotal junctures in the history of Caribbean writing and thought. My objective has been not just to hear the timbre of Naipaul's voice afresh, but to hear new inflections in the voices of his many interlocutors.<sup>422</sup>

In her 2017 book, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, Toril Moi uses an epigraph from Wittgenstein. It reads, 'a *picture* held us captive. And we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably.'<sup>423</sup> The argument Moi makes in this book is that literary scholars have been captivated by an outdated, false, and overly abstract notion of language and writing. In place of abstract or generic theories of reference or signification, Moi proposes, following Wittgenstein,

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<sup>421</sup> Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 12.

<sup>422</sup> In his most recent work, David Scott has explored the affordances of 'voice' as a concept for understanding the ethical thought of Stuart Hall. Scott's elegiac book attempts to outline a 'possible general relation between voice and the *ethos* of an intellectual style'. But Scott's readings of Hall's work are grounded in his friendship with (and devotion to) his subject. In this thesis, I foreground the situated, motivated, and pragmatic aspects of verbal performances, rather than attempting to fix a 'general relation' between a writer's written voice and their '*ethos*' or character. Scott, *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017) p.2, and see pp. 2-22.

<sup>423</sup> The quotation is taken from the Anscombe translation of the *Philosophical Investigation* (1953); and is quoted on the epigraph page (p.vii) of Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

that readers and critics attend instead to the (historically and spatially specific) social circuits of action or use in which utterances and texts took on or take on meaning.<sup>424</sup> My sympathy with Moi's argument will be clear from the foregoing thesis. But it is also worth emphasising an important corollary to her argument, which is that theories about language – theories we develop through time and in dialogue with one another – are also part of these social circuits of use and meaning. In the hands of writers and intellectuals like those discussed in this thesis, these theories can be complex and abstract, yet they inflect in crucial ways how these writers spoke and wrote, and were read.<sup>425</sup>

In this thesis I have tracked the evolution of ideas about written language in the Caribbean: about literary forms such as the novel, about historiography and the written record, and about travel narratives. These became, I suggest, captivating pictures which underlay creative experiment within and critical reception of novels, historical works, and travel narratives across the Caribbean in this period. The way writers understood the novel as a European form, for example, or the English language as a vessel of colonial ideology, was not fixed. These ideas changed through time. But as they changed and gained common purchase, they can be seen to catalyse the formal experiment and poetic choices of the writers I discuss, and to make them meaningful. These 'picture[s]' of the world were a central part of the 'regions' or 'prisons' of the spirit that these writers inhabited.

To view these conversations and these world pictures historically is to examine, first, the length of the shadows they cast. I have insisted, throughout this thesis, that the

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<sup>424</sup> see Moi, pp. 1–19, 44–63.

<sup>425</sup> This is a version of the argument Deborah Cameron makes in *Verbal Hygiene*, that our theories, beliefs and meta-discourses about language use are a 'fundamental' part of everyday (or in Moi's term 'ordinary') usage, not something 'perversely "grafted on"' by gatekeepers in positions of power, or by scholars after the fact. Deborah Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 2, and see pp. 1-3.

Caribbean writers I discuss believed their ideas and anxieties to be specific to their time and place, to their moment in the history of the decolonising Caribbean. Yet, in each chapter, we have seen subsequent or distant writers and critics recognising affinities, or constructing comparisons, to other times and places. This might be Homi Bhabha, a Parsi student, reading *A House for Mr Biswas* in Oxford, Sara Suleri encountering *Enigma* between Pakistan and America, or David Scott continuing to fret over the postcolonial experience of ‘constriction to modernity’ – that he found in James and I find in Naipaul – between Jamaica and New York in 2004. The terms in which these affinities are felt, these relationships articulated, give a clue to the geographical extension and historical persistence of the cultural, social, and economic systems that shaped the problem-space in which these works were written.

To view these conversations historically is also, however, to specify the limits of their similarities to contemporary debates and preoccupations. In a well-known 1996 essay, Colin Dayan described how, in Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, ‘the rites of the Middle Passage, the journey from Africa to the New World’, functioned as an ‘origin myth for later chosen tales of ocean crossings by Wright, Du Bois, Douglas, and others’, to the extent that – with ‘history’ ‘expurgated’ – ‘slavery [...] becomes nothing more than a metaphor’.<sup>426</sup> Stephen Best thinks that Dayan’s essay identifies a critical temptation that remains strong: to value the texts, events, or figures of the past for the ways they provide analogies for understanding (and road-maps for action in) the present, without regard for historical difference.<sup>427</sup> Nadia Ellis finds an example of this

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<sup>426</sup> Joan Dayan, ‘Paul Gilroy’s Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor’, *Research in African Literatures*, 27 (1996), 7–14 (p. 7).

<sup>427</sup> Best cites Dayan’s article (on p.457) and writes: ‘There is an accepted truth at the basis of all this – not the idea that the past is made available only through the present, or as Michel Foucault’s injunction that “morally and politically what ought to be at stake in historical inquiry is a critical appraisal of the present itself”, but the notion that the past simply is our present. In this view history aims not to come to terms with the past “wie es eigentlich gewesen” (as it really was [Leopold von Ranke]) but to discern structural inequalities repeated in the present’. Best, pp. 462–63.

phenomenon in the developing legend of C.L.R. James, the ‘Jamesian figure’ created by his acolytes in the 1980s and 1990s. She argues that where James is uncritically championed as a prophet of global racial liberation, without attention to the social world in which he wrote, many of the more dated aspects of James’s self-presentation (what Ellis calls a ‘patriarchal form of Caribbean cultural nationalism’) continue to be unwittingly preserved.<sup>428</sup> Many of the texts I discuss in this thesis – like James’s *Black Jacobins*, Lamming’s *Pleasures of Exile*, or Wynter’s ‘Reflections’ – have attained canonical status, and a prominence on university reading lists across the anglophone world that will continue to grow with demands for the decolonisation of curricula and increasingly fraught debates, in Britain and America especially, about race and immigration. This is to be celebrated. But, as Best warns, the temptation ‘to make the past present’, to seek in these texts a proleptic analysis of contemporary debates, a message-in-a-bottle from the past bearing a strategic map for contemporary activism, would be a mistake.<sup>429</sup> Rather, to quote Gillian Beer, ‘engaging with the *difference* of the past in our present makes us aware of the trajectory of our arrival and of the insouciance of the past – their neglectfulness of our prized positions and our assumptions’. ‘The encounter with the otherness of earlier literature can allow us to recognize and challenge our own assumptions, and those of the society in which we live.’<sup>430</sup>

Comparing Booker T. Washington with W.E.B. Du Bois in *A Turn in the South*, Naipaul notes that, of the two men, ‘Du Bois might seem closer to contemporary feeling’ (*TS*, 151). Naipaul’s decision to focus at first on Washington is strategic. The ‘prisons of the spirit’ that Washington inhabited are more obvious and stark to

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<sup>428</sup> Ellis, p. 28.

<sup>429</sup> Best, p.453.

<sup>430</sup> Gillian Beer, *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 1.

contemporary readers, and so open a window onto the historical distance of the problem-space in which both Washington and Du Bois wrote. This is how the difficult or ‘mysterious’ elements of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* are introduced to the reader, and attain heightened visibility (151). ‘To understand the modern state,’ Pico Iyer wrote in 1997, ‘we are often told we must read V.S. Naipaul’. Ironically, from the vantage point of 2017, of all the writers discussed in my thesis none seems as detached from ‘contemporary feeling’ as V.S. Naipaul. He has disappeared from the pages of the *Sunday Times*, the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Yorker* just as, decades earlier, his voice disappeared from the *Caribbean Voices* studio. Like the cast of characters, ‘figure[s]’ from a passing century, sketched in *A Way in the World*, he has become a figure of literary history (WW, 69). Like Tuskegee, his work exists in a ‘melancholy time warp’, tracing the outdated concerns of a disappeared world, and it may be that that, with the waning of his public importance, even the controversies he has inspired for so long will, in time, come to seem irrelevant or ‘insubstantial’.

It may be tempting to regret the disfigurements visited by history and mischievous temperament on this supreme stylist, a literary thinker of such extraordinary range and subtlety, such that his fame now survives, where it survives at all, in terms of the ‘prisons of the spirit’ he inhabited. But this would be a crude Platonism. No writer, no writing, exists outside of history. Like the famously mischievous temperament, the supreme style and the literary thinking arose within these prisons, and took on meaning within these contexts. It may be that his value to modern readers is to be found not in his closeness to ‘contemporary feeling’ but in his distance from it, in his power to provoke and unsettle, in his capacity to reveal the recalcitrant difference of the historical past. His value today is not as a writer whose verbal felicity

transcended his moment, but as a writer intractably imbricated within that moment. He came to see this himself, late in his life. He would make this his wager for the future.

### **Chronology of Major Texts Discussed**

**1938** C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* [first edition].

**1944** Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*.

**1953** George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin*.

**1957** V.S. Naipaul, *The Mystic Masseur*.

——— Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'Sir Galahad and the Islands'.

**1960** George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*.

**1961** V.S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas*.

**1962** V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*.

——— Eric William, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*.

**1963** Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'Roots'.

——— C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*.

——— C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* [second edition].

**1967** V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men*.

——— Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery*.

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