

In Between Places: Fictions of British Decolonization

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ABSTRACT

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"In Between Places" is a study in literary geography at the end of empire. It begins from the premise that decolonization itself is a question of place and the relationship of people to places. From this premise, the dissertation explores the narrative techniques that emerge from this moment of historical transformation, in which decolonization was inevitable but not yet fully achieved. The formal elements of decolonial fiction—an emphasis on the individual transformation of place, the incorporation of narrative settings both temporary and fragile—express the ways that spatial relations were central to the political aims of late colonial and early postcolonial writers from across the globe and who express a range of complicated cultural politics. This dissertation begins with an introduction that situates British decolonial fiction in terms of theories of space and place, the transition between modernism and postcolonialism, and current critical debates surrounding forms of anticolonial critique in the twentieth century. In the subsequent four chapters, the dissertation provides case studies of the narrative fiction of Jean Rhys, V. S. Naipaul, George Lamming, and Doris Lessing. Combining formal analysis, archival research, and literary and political history, this dissertation reconstructs the ways that colonial and postcolonial subjects respond to the places they inhabit—at the level of the room, the house, and the city. To tell this story, the chapters move from the abstract space of geopolitics to different sites within urban environments and domestic households. "In Between Places" explains how place functions aesthetically and politically; how Caribbean, African, and

English sites were physically marked by colonialism; and how midcentury writers of decolonization used literary setting to resist myths of imperial belonging as well as to uphold them.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: “Two Things That I Couldn’t Fit Together”: Race and Betrayal in Jean Rhys’s Caribbean Locations.....	26
Chapter Two: Decay, Decline, Destruction: V. S. Naipaul’s Homes at the End of Empire.....	75
Chapter Three: “Vagrant’s City”: George Lamming and the Rejection of London’s Sites.....	129
Chapter Four: “The Place Had Taken Shape”: Doris Lessing’s Architecture of Intimacy.....	176
Conclusion.....	228
Bibliography.....	233

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Making the pole framework of the house.....	189
Figure 2: Lessing's brother Henry in front of the house, just before thatching was finished.....	189

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Introduction

I. The Temporary Place

Consider Doris Lessing's 1964 short story, "The Black Madonna." The setting is Southern Rhodesia—the British colonial site of what is today Zimbabwe. The context is World War II, a global conflict that nevertheless feels distant to the British colonial settlers in southern Africa. The occasion for the story is a peculiar exercise known as a bombing demonstration: a military pageant in which a faux target is constructed and then destroyed by military ordnance, a "careful staging of force for the sake of impressing spectators" with the might of the Royal Air Force.¹ In England, these military pageants took place as part of annual air shows; in colonial locations, they were irregular but not infrequent, communicating to colonial populations "a sense of their vulnerability and visibility from the air."²

Lessing describes the motivation for the bombing demonstration as a desire to give the colonial Rhodesians "some idea of what war was really like."³ Responding to the idea that the colonial settlers in Southern Rhodesia were insulated from wartime conflict and its attendant restrictions on civilian life, the military officers of "The Black Madonna" similarly note the failure of the news to convey the realities of war. Instead, they decide to construct a faux German village and then destroy it by bombing.⁴

¹ Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 80.

² Ibid.

³ Doris Lessing, "The Black Madonna," in *African Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), 14.

⁴ Saint-Amour describes a few of the various types of "sets" that were built and then destroyed for the purposes of spectacle. Some are artificial villages, as in "The Black Madonna." In one interwar

The task of the artificial village's construction is taken on at first by a nameless military official known as "The General." The initial attempt is a failure:

It appears that the General and his subordinates stood around in the red dust of the parade-ground under a burning sun for the whole of one day, surrounded by building materials, while hordes of African laborers ran around with boards and nails, trying to make something that looked like a village. It became evident that they would have to build a proper village in order to destroy it; and this would cost more than was allowed for the whole entertainment. The General went home in a bad temper.⁵

Instead the construction of the village is assigned to an Italian artist and prisoner of war, Michele, who had previously displayed a talent for painting sufficient to earn him some repute in the British settler community. Michele's solution to the problem of expense is to create a remarkable illusion: "crazy gawky constructions of lath and board over it, that looked in the sunlight like nothing on this earth"—constructions which nonetheless look exactly like a small village when night falls and the parade-ground lights are switched on.⁶

The faux village of "The Black Madonna" is, thus, doubly ephemeral. Built simply to be destroyed, it is purposeless, wasteful, imbued with the seeds of its own downfall. Beyond its ontological status, its physical construction depends upon its temporariness as well. The village is not the "proper village" that the General imagines will need to be built—in the clear light of day, it more resembles the "skeleton" of one.⁷ The "village" exists only under specific conditions (darkness, parade-ground lights turned on) and can be destroyed not only by the planned bombing, but by the simple flick of a switch. In other words, the village is an unnatural

demonstration in England, "a hundred-foot tower" was built from "the wings of obsolete planes" before it was destroyed with incendiary devices (80).

⁵ Lessing, "The Black Madonna," 14.

⁶ 18.

⁷ Ibid.

intrusion. It is “profoundly disturbing” in its falseness, and it is destined to be destroyed.⁸ In this strange, vivid, overdetermined figure, Lessing lays out her conceptualization of the colonial project in Africa—and through the remainder of the story, proceeds to narrates its explosive downfall.

Published alongside a number of older short stories in her collection *African Stories*, “The Black Madonna” was, according to Lessing’s introduction, “full of the bile that in fact I feel for the ‘white’ society in Southern Rhodesia as I knew and hated it.”⁹ The story ruthlessly satirizes the military wastefulness, the solipsism of the white colonial civilians, and the mindless racism directed toward the few black characters who appear in the narrative. In its depiction of the faux village in particular, we can establish Lessing’s preoccupation with temporary dwelling places—sites of ephemerality which populate her midcentury fiction and ground her political attitudes in the intimacy of building and destruction.

As Lessing lays out in the introduction to the collection, her work is in conversation with other progressive voices of the midcentury that attempt to call attention to the damage inflicted upon African lives by the “colour bar”—the ongoing harm done not only by the mistreatment and exploitation of African laborers and the violent resettlement of native tribes, but also by the limitations placed upon education, access to work and housing for black Africans. “Britain, who is responsible,” Lessing argues, “became conscious of her responsibility too late; and now the tragedy must play itself out.”¹⁰ Like many of the stories in the collection, “The Black Madonna”

⁸ 20.

⁹ Doris Lessing, “Preface,” in *African Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), 7-8.

¹⁰ Lessing, “Preface,” 5-6.

articulates the excesses of the entitlement of British colonizers and their dehumanization of the black people with whom they interact; it also calls into question the troubling ability of sympathetic colonials to acknowledge structural inequalities while dodging their own personal exploitations.

But as this dissertation will show, this short story is in conversation, more largely, with texts that range across the midcentury decades and treat the period of British decolonization on a global scale. In “The Black Madonna,” we can identify several of Lessing’s key thematic interests during the decolonial period: the personal and structural violence of colonialism, the relationship between the physical settings of metropole and colony, and her engagement with forms of anticolonial resistance. Moreover, we find an emphasis on sites of temporariness and ephemerality. In the village that is always already marked by its own destruction, Lessing taps into a key figuration that marks decolonial fiction across several decades and global settings.

“In Between Places” examines a number of fictional narratives written during the primary period of British decolonization—as early as Jean Rhys’s 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark* and as late as George Lamming’s 1971 *Water with Berries*. In the chapters that follow, I begin with the premise that decolonization itself is a question of place and the relationship of people to places. The narratives of decolonization that I have described emerge from a historical and geopolitical context marked by the flux and transformation of geographic and spatial relations at multiple scales. Who, for example, is permitted to travel to and inhabit specific sites as political relationships and autonomous territories change in the midcentury decades? What impact can an individual have on the sites they inhabit? The national and colonial relations they emerge from? How does imperialism impact the physical sites of British colonies? And how are

spatial aspects of the metropole changed by the presence of colonial migrants, individually and en masse?

The following chapters identify the narrative techniques that emerge from this moment of historical transformation. The formal elements of decolonial fiction—an emphasis on the individual transformation of place, the incorporation of narrative settings both temporary and fragile—express the ways that spatial relations were central to the political aims of late colonial and early postcolonial writers from across the globe and who express a range of complicated cultural politics. In novels and short stories by Jean Rhys, V. S. Naipaul, George Lamming, and Doris Lessing, the interaction of character and setting drives both plot and theme. “In Between Places” reconstructs the ways that colonial and postcolonial subjects respond to the places they inhabit—at the level of the room, the house, and the city. To tell this story, my argument moves from the abstract space of geopolitics to different sites within urban environments and domestic households. In sites such as Rhys’s basement flats or Naipaul’s Hanuman House, protagonists are entrapped or assimilated; in other places, protagonists resist oppressive structures through acts of violence, as in Lamming’s Orkney Island refuge. Characters’ transformations of these locations—through stream-of-consciousness description or the incorporation of physical objects—help us see more clearly how these writers express their anticolonial critique: not (or not necessarily) through calls for political nationalism, but through recourse to and depiction of place. Throughout their fictions, specific sites also function as ways for these writers to mobilize visions of group consciousness and group political action and to imagine the transformation of both colonial and metropolitan sites—sometimes radically, sometimes idealistically, and sometimes with a pessimistic sense that political and cultural transformation is impossible.

II. Contexts of Decolonial Fiction

Much of the fiction covered in this dissertation was written and published in the 1950s and 1960s. This period in the history of British imperial decline is marked by what Louise Bennett termed “colonization in reverse,” as the 1948 British Nationality Act, “the last major piece of legislation...to assert the global dimensions of Britishness,”¹¹ permitted large-scale postwar colonial (particularly Caribbean) migration to England. During the period from 1948, when the SS *Empire Windrush* sailed from the West Indies to England, to 1962, when immigration became severely curtailed in England, tens of thousands of colonial immigrants traveled to England even as British decolonization picked up speed. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the West Indian Federation was formed and then shortly thereafter collapsed, as Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago secured their independence; furthermore, Harold Macmillan’s “Wind of Change” speech in 1960 inaugurated a rapid series of British political withdrawals from nine African states. The movement of African and Caribbean immigrants to Britain, occurring even as the British empire began to contract inward, underscores the sense of imperial retreat and instability that characterizes this historical period.

This dissertation builds on critical work which draws attention to the diverse forms of anticolonial resistance in the early and mid-twentieth century. While much critical attention has been paid to the forms of nationalism that imbued anticolonial discourse during these decades, recent scholarship has begun to consider a wider kind of anticolonial critique. Caribbean scholars have begun to sketch the contours of a wider range of discourse, from recourse to the

¹¹ Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 10.

middlebrow,¹² to an emphasis on women's writing that resists a kind of masculine nationalism,¹³ to pan-Caribbean approaches that emphasize the development of a literary culture.¹⁴ Gary Wilder has pointed to black Francophone writers' midcentury models of a new kind of colonial emancipation that utopically imagines a global cosmopolis beyond autonomous nationalism.¹⁵ Other postcolonial scholars have recently explored pan-African activism in the early decades of postcolonialism, examining writers such as C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, and others.¹⁶ Yet despite this turn to alternative forms of anticolonial resistance, contemporary criticism still rests frequently on the assumption that nationalism is the primary and most acceptable form of anticolonial political critique.¹⁷

¹² Belinda Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure Culture and the Middle Class* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

¹³ See, for example, Patricia Saunders, *Alien-nation and Repatriation: Translating Identity in Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), Kezia Page, *Transnational Negotiations in Caribbean Diasporic Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2014), Alison Donnell, "Rescripting Anglophone Caribbean Women's Literary History: Gender, Genre, and Lost Caribbean Voices," in *Beyond Windrush: Rethinking Postwar Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by J. Dillon Brown and Leah Reade Rosenberg (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 79-96, and Rhonda Cobham, "Women in Jamaican Literature 1900-1950," in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 215-217.

¹⁴ Raphael Dalleo, *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere: From the Plantation to the Postcolonial* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011) and Michael Niblett, *The Caribbean Novel since 1945: Cultural Practice, Form, and the Nation-State* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012).

¹⁵ Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹⁶ See, for example, Laura Winkiel, *Modernism, Race and Manifestos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Carrie Noland, *Voices of Negritude in Modernist Print: Aesthetic Subjectivity, Diaspora, and the Lyric Regime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Some recent examples of this mode include Saikat Majumdar, *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) and Norval Edwards, "The Foundational Generation: From *The Beacon* to *Savacou*," in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London: Routledge, 2011), 111-123.

My project takes part in this ongoing critical turn toward a wider understanding of the forms taken by anticoloniality in the midcentury decades. For several of the authors I examine, anticolonial sentiment is expressed less explicitly and with less recourse to political nationalism than that of other early postcolonial writers. Yet, through an engagement with place as formal strategy and as a legal and political construct, these writers navigated their colonial identities, their senses of political commitment, and their opposition to British imperial governance and ideology. By considering the ways in which these authors navigated their response to colonialism and the formal ways in which this identification and resistance took shape, I argue for a more nuanced reading of authors who have at times been dismissed for falling outside of the widely accepted political attitudes of their postcolonial peers. By bringing Rhys's complex engagement with her Creole identity into conversation with Naipaul's famously dismissive attitude toward the Caribbean, reading Lessing's urban socialism alongside Lamming's trenchant rejection of colonial exile, I sketch the contours of a larger conception of midcentury anticolonial fiction than has previously been acknowledged.

In so doing, I work in a historicist mode, which aims to situate the authors I examine in their temporal and global contexts. I look to the specificities of their locations and moments of textual production. Following in the vein of Maria McGarrity,¹⁸ I avoid the false equivalence of a comparative postcolonialism that effaces the differences in colonial experience across global contexts, from Trinidad to southern Africa to migrant experiences in 1950s London.

Decolonization began in some parts of the British Empire as early as the 1920s with the

¹⁸ Maria McGarrity, *Washed by the Gulf Stream: the Historic and Geographic Relation of Irish and Caribbean Literature* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2008).

“independence” of Egypt and continued well into the 1980s (and indeed into the present). While Jean Rhys’s 1930s fiction may seem an unusual starting point for a dissertation that focuses on decolonization, my attention to this earlier work suggests the protracted nature of British imperial withdrawal. Moreover, I attend closely to the forms of citizenship that governed the migration and movement of each of the authors I examine, all of whom traveled to and lived in England during their writing careers. The 1948 British Nationality Act asserted the equivalent citizenship and entry rights of British subjects of colonial rule across the globe, while at the same time making space for individual citizenship rights conferred by increasingly autonomous states. As Ian Baucom has pointed out, this legislation left global subjects of empire in increasingly fraught positions as decolonization progressed in the 1950s and 1960s. Baucom rightly notes that “while all the inhabitants of Britain’s sovereign territories were putatively equal” under the terms of the act, “sovereignty was not exerted equally over all the empire’s territories.”¹⁹ The right of immigration, fiercely debated and preserved in 1948, quickly fell apart over the subsequent decades. Indeed, by the 1971 publication of Lamming’s *Water with Berries*, immigration to England for colonial subjects was limited only to those who had been born there or who could prove the English birth of their parents or grandparents. This kind of specificity grounds my examination of the novels of exile and migration that characterize much of the decolonial fiction I explore in this dissertation.

III. Space and Place

¹⁹ Baucom, 11.

In 1967, Michel Foucault claimed that “the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space.”²⁰ As I have gestured above, it is my contention that the intrinsic concern with spatial relations on the geopolitical scale during the decolonial period has powerful resonances in the narrative forms that emerge from that period.

Much critical attention has been paid to the distinction between place and space, and the way that that distinction can frame discussions of power, race, and gender. Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has argued that “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.”²¹ His example of the place-making of a neighborhood is particularly suggestive of the arrival of the colonial immigrant: the description of Lamming’s 1954 *The Emigrants* closely describes this process as his protagonists transform the cold and frightening “no...home...” of their London arrival to a series of sharply rendered places: Fred Hill’s barbershop, the Mozamba club. In this process of place-making, we can identify not just the role of citizenship laws in the 1940s in the social and personal identities that ground the Caribbean emigrants of the novel’s title, but also the kinds of thematic and formal representations of place that characterize many decolonial novels.

Yet this distinction between space and place has not been consistently rendered by other geographers. For some, space has implied a sense of movement, in contrast to an understanding of place that suggests stasis and dwelling. Henri Lefebvre describes space as a production of

²⁰ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46-49.

²¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

social practices: “(Social) space is a (social) product.”²² In other words, society shapes spaces even as these spaces play a constitutive role in how societies develop. For Lefebvre, place is not altogether distinct from space, but rather one form “of the many existing discourses of social space.”²³

For Michel de Certeau, a place “implies an indication of stability,” while a “space is composed of intersections of mobile elements.”²⁴ Space, de Certeau argues, “is a practiced place.”²⁵ What I take from these contrasting depictions of space and place is an emphasis on the importance of praxis: that is, how a site is inhabited and by whom. De Certeau points to the resistant practices of those who move through and inhabit urban spaces as a way to acknowledge the forms of power inherent in the built environment. For de Certeau, walking the city can be “a space of enunciation,”²⁶ and stories can, therefore, “carry out a labor” that identifies and transforms the spaces they represent.²⁷ The kind of resistant spatial praxis imagined by de Certeau is crucial to my conception of space and place in the midcentury decolonial fictions I examine in this dissertation. In so doing, I use the terms space and place in a similar vein to that of Tuan. For abstract conceptions of spatial relations such as nation-states and imperial-colonial negotiations, I use the term space. For specific sites, particularly ones

²² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 26.

²³ Andrew Thacker, *Moving through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 19.

²⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ 98.

²⁷ 117.

which involve representations of dwelling, I use the term place. In this way, I aim to consider the specificities that places take on as they are inhabited and represented through narrative.

Neil Smith has cautioned that the spatial metaphors that undergird colonialism and the decolonization process can foster a consideration of these processes that effaces the material conditions of specific sites.²⁸ My analysis works to avoid this flattening of material conditions by taking seriously Doreen Massey's consideration of space and place. Arguing that "what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus,"²⁹ Massey rewrites the idealized notion of universal spaces³⁰ by attending to the layers of social networks—religious, political, economic, and so forth—that particularize places. As in my consideration of the geographic and temporal specificities of the colonial and metropolitan locations that serve as the settings for the novels I analyze, I also aim to examine the material conditions of the places that these writers and their characters inhabit. My readings pay close attention to the material ways that the spatial inflects power in both urban and rural settings. Like de Certeau's reading of the "resistant activity" that undermines the "space instituted by others" in urban environments, my examinations of the ways that characters interact in space highlight the bidirectional nature of the relationship between people and their physical settings.³¹ I examine,

²⁸ Neil Smith, "Homeless/Global: Scaling Places" in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, and Lisa Tickner (New York: Routledge, 1993), 87-119.

²⁹ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 154.

³⁰ Suggested as a consequence of modernity by Anthony Giddens, for example: "The progressive charting of the globe that led to the creation of universal maps, in which perspective played little part in the representation of geographical position and form, established space as "independent" of any particular place or region" in *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 19.

³¹ De Certeau, 18.

for instance, the housing crisis and labor riots that contextualize Mr. Biswas's search for a home in Naipaul's colonial Trinidad; similarly, I explore the settler handbooks and colonial discourses that guided the construction of houses like the Turners' in Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*.

To exemplify this consideration of space and place, I turn to a brief example from Naipaul's 1961 Trinidadian epic *A House for Mr. Biswas*. In this example, we can identify the resonance between abstract geopolitical transformation and transformation of place on an individual and narrative level.

In what is sometimes referred to as the "Shorthills episode" of the novel, Mr. Biswas and his wife's family, the powerful and seemingly monolithic Tulsi clan, move from their former home in rural Trinidad to the rundown former estate of a French Creole family at Shorthills, northeast of the capital city Port of Spain. The estate is described in glowing terms: "In the grounds of the estate house there was a cricket field and a swimming pool; the drive was lined with orange trees and gri-gri palms with slender white trunks, red berries and dark green leaves. The land itself was a wonder...Even if one didn't have a way with land, as they had, if one did nothing, life could be rich at Shorthills."³² While Mr. Biswas is initially skeptical of the move, even he finds himself swayed by the potential of the estate when he finally sees it. The swimming pool is "empty, cracked, sandy," with "plants pushing up through the concrete," yet Mr. Biswas can easily imagine it "mended and filled with clear water," just as he can imagine the gardens being restored and the electricity repaired.³³ Rapidly, the entire Tulsi clan, along with the Biswas family, moves to Shorthills.

³² V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (New York: Vintage International, 2001), 376-7.

³³ 382-3.

But the Shorthills experiment is a disaster. The electricity plant is melted down into lead to make dumbbells for an avaricious son-in-law. Crops are stolen by others and sold for personal profit. The widows, a group of Tulsi women who live at the generosity of the family matriarch, invent a variety of schemes to make their own money, all of which are abject failures. The many children in particular suffer due to the difficulty of transportation to Port of Spain for school:

So for the children Shorthills became a nightmare. Daylight was nearly always gone when they returned, and there was little to return to. The food grew rougher and rougher and was eaten more casually, in the kitchen itself, where the brick floor had been topped with mud, or in the covered space between kitchen and the house. No child knew from one night to the next where he was going to sleep; beds were made anywhere and at any time. On Saturdays the children pulled up weeds; on Sundays they collected oranges or other fruit. At week-ends the children submitted to the laws of the family. But during the week, when they spent so much time away from the house, they formed a community of their own, outside family laws. No one ruled; there were only the weak and the strong.³⁴

The social network of the Tulsis, gone feral in the isolated community, begins to cannibalize itself, with family units breaking apart and reforming as social bonds prove tenuous and even dangerous. Yet what the episode shows most sharply is the humanity of the Tulsis, who previously in the novel had often seemed like an indistinct mass of vindictiveness. The estate, with its potential for fertile land and luxurious living, proves to be an illusion as the structure of the Tulsi household turns on itself. As in the Biswas family's previous home at Green Vale, the security afforded by the estate is fictive—in this case, not brought down by a freak act of nature but by the cracks within the community itself, and by the actions of individuals.

³⁴ 395.

The Shorthills episode, in which the Tulsi clan takes over the ruins of a former plantation, has provided fertile ground for critics to examine Naipaul's political positioning with regards to the ongoing effects of colonialism in Trinidad. Kenneth Ramchand, in an early review of the novel, argues that Mr. Biswas's struggle is grounded in the historical context of colonialism in Trinidad.³⁵ Elsewhere, Gordon Rohlehr has read the Tulsi family as a slave society;³⁶ Helen Hayward has seen their dominance over their family as representing "Naipaul's fears concerning the future of the island under self-government; it foresees the destruction of the remnants of a decaying order by a new regime of senseless pillage."³⁷ The novel's publication just one year before Trinidad's independence and during perhaps the height of British decolonization's "Wind of Change" particularly invites these comparisons.

For both the Tulsis and the Biswas family, the Shorthills episode is defined by the place-making that transforms the idealized imagined space of Shorthills through an encounter with its materiality. Both families find that real place of Shorthills is far from what they had imagined: a resonance that plays out throughout the novel and is repeatedly connected both to the imagined space of England and that of India, where the Tulsis locate their ethnic and cultural heritage. Their simultaneous disappointment undermines any direct metaphorization of the Tulsis as colonial force or plantocratic symbol. This is not to say the Naipaul does not intend any parallel between the oppressive force of the Tulsis and colonialism on Trinidad;

³⁵ Kenneth Ramchand, "The World of *A House for Mr. Biswas*," *Caribbean Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (March 1969): 60-72.

³⁶ Gordon Rohlehr, "Character and Rebellion in *A House for Mr. Biswas*," in *Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1977).

³⁷ Helen Hayward, *The Enigma of V. S. Naipaul: Sources and Contexts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 34.

indeed, I believe that connection is vividly apparent in the way that the Tulsi machine consumes the often nameless men and women who marry into it, flattening them into further additions to the inchoate Tulsi mass. Yet it is not *just* that. When the Tulsis turn on one another in the poverty-stricken, rural Shorthills, they are individualized and humanized, suggesting the powerful effect of structural forces on both individuals and on seemingly stable social networks like the Tulsis'. In so doing, Naipaul creates a complex picture that both resists the seemingly "colonial" force of the Tulsi machine, while simultaneously undermining that resistance by his suddenly sympathetic portrayal. For Naipaul, anticoloniality is never simple; it is imbued within a complex of identification, historical entanglement, and a close attention to the material realities of poverty—as we see so vividly in the depiction of Shorthills. Thus the practice of place-making in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the vehicle for Naipaul's larger and more nuanced consideration of colonialism in midcentury Trinidad.

IV. Rural and Urban, Local and Global

In grounding my formal and literary-historical analyses in a consideration of geography and spatial relations, I hope to address several current aspects of the critical conversation around writers of the decolonizing British Empire. As J. Dillon Brown and Peter Kalliney have elucidated, postwar modernist literary circles faced the decreasing influence of experimental aesthetics with the rise of the Movement.³⁸ In projects including the BBC Colonial Service,

³⁸ J. Dillon Brown, *Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013) and Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot collaborated with late colonial writers, offering avenues of creative and financial production—as well as political resistance—for writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, and many others. As Brown has pointed out, the praxis of what we might call global modernist writers of the decolonizing British Empire is powerfully different from the “inward-turning late modernism” identified by critics such as Jed Esty, Thomas S. Davis, and Tyrus Miller.³⁹ Indeed, while some critics have termed the writing of the midcentury a “disastrously minor” literature that emphasizes a kind of reactionary realism,⁴⁰ I join with Brown, Kalliney, Leah Reade Rosenberg, James Procter, and other critics in identifying new forms of narrative that take influence from both metropolitan and colonial sources, forms that differ widely from one another even as they grapple with the uneven progress of British decolonization.

I also take up recent critical readings of the period that emphasize the late modernist turn to the metropole. From James Procter’s *Dwelling Places* to John Clement Ball’s *Imagining London*, postcolonial scholars have explored the ways that urban London represented both the dream of British high culture and the realized disappointment of metropolitan life for colonial immigrants. In my dissertation, I pair readings of urban novels set in London with depictions of rural and suburban England, as well as numerous colonial sites, from urban Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, to colonial settlements in the southern African veld. In so doing, I consider a much larger geographic scope, arguing that through their representations of both colonial and metropolitan sites, these writers used depictions of place to consider material conditions as well as the legal and political definitions of citizenship and subjecthood that powerfully impacted individuals across the global empire.

³⁹ Brown, 5.

⁴⁰ Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge, *British Fiction After Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.

In bringing together Rhys, Naipaul, Lamming, and Lessing, I aim to present a wider picture of the forms of anticolonial resistance—as well as its complicated interrelationship with colonial complicity—that took shape in the midcentury decades. Rhys and Naipaul are certainly not known for their radical cultural politics—indeed, to argue for the presence of anticoloniality of any kind in Naipaul’s fiction is, in and of itself, blowing against a very strong critical wind. My chapter on Naipaul’s midcentury fiction aims not to rehabilitate Naipaul’s politics, but rather to bring Naipaul into the growing conversation that attempts to recover forms of critique less widely recognized than calls for political autonomy. Drawing from recent discussions of aesthetic autonomy,⁴¹ I show that Naipaul’s midcentury career was centered on his desire to develop an “authentic” Caribbean literature—one that rejected the influence of British colonial education and literary production. For Naipaul, this development of a new literary aesthetic was grounded in the separation of Caribbean literary production from the British—an aesthetic sovereignty that emphasized its throwing-off of the yoke of cultural colonialism.

Moreover, I will show the ubiquity of temporary and transforming places as a narrative trope employed by writers across several decades and thousands of miles. I argue that this narrative form remained useful across this period for writers attempting to work out the decline of the British Empire in and through the mutability of colonial and metropolitan settings. In the novels of migration on which I focus, boarding houses become particularly emblematic of the kinds of place-making I examine. These boarding houses signal the colonial migrants’ poverty and economic and social precarity. For the racialized protagonists in Rhys and Lamming, the boarding house landlady is often a figure of British xenophobia, who rejects the colonial immigrant or, as in *Water with Berries*,

⁴¹ In addition to Peter Kalliney’s *Commonwealth of Letters*, see also Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

develops a complicated relationship of secret, tortured intimacy. The passenger ship, prominent because of its role in postwar migration, appears in Lamming's *The Emigrants* as a way to enable the coming-together of complete strangers within a crucible of uncertainty and change. These places coalesce around the pressures of historical emergency: the search for safe and affordable housing, for example, or the privations of postwar austerity. Moreover, these sites are particularly powerful vehicles for fictional narrative because they figure the kinds of sociality that emerge in these moments of historical crisis, highlighting the individual vulnerability and risk that occurs within the larger historical context of imperial instability.

I view literary setting not as a backdrop, "a static background for narrative action,"⁴² but an important determiner of the sociality that could occur in the mid-century moment in which these novels are set. In some ways, I am indebted to David Alworth's methodology in *Site Reading*, which offers a theory of narrative setting that "examines how the literary figuration of real, material environments reorients our sense of social relations."⁴³ Like Alworth, I seek to explore the "terra incognita" that is literary setting in critical discussion. While I similarly work to push against notions of setting as simply background or container, I do not examine the ontological properties of the sites of my analysis as he does. Rather, I look to the ways that the material conditions of specific settings enable certain social forms. Lamming's steamship in *The Emigrants* exemplifies this kind of transient, transformative setting. On the passenger ship, the Caribbean emigrants are freed from national differences and begin to create a collective black identity that they believe will function as a support system once they arrive in England: "They were

⁴² David Alworth, *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 2.

⁴³ 17.

a group. Those who had met and spoken belonged to the same situation. It wasn't Jamaica or Barbados or Trinidad. It was a situation that included all the islands."⁴⁴ Similarly, Lessing uses the figure of the boarding house in *In Pursuit of the English* to underscore her optimistic commitment to group political action that advocates for socialist reform.

In addition to setting, I also examine space and place as key terms in the critical writings of these authors during the midcentury decades. My research in the archives of the BBC's Colonial Service, for example, highlights how geography was negotiated as a key aesthetic and political category. The forms of "social protest" that Naipaul praises on *Caribbean Voices*, for example, are literary ones, grounded in Caribbean specificity: his utopic vision for a Caribbean free from British colonialism is based on a decolonized artistic community. The range of authors I examine allows me to consider aspects of gender, ethnicity, and transnationalism and their intersections across the political attitudes these writers express. As Rhonda Cobham has pointed out, a recognition of gender has been seen as threatening to the nationalist projects of early postcolonial writing.⁴⁵ By broadening the canon of authors we consider when reading for anticoloniality, my dissertation aims to consider more closely the complexities of intersectional identities for authors both resistant to and—often at the same time—complicit in colonial structures.

V. Fictions of the Decolonial

⁴⁴ George Lamming, *The Emigrants* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 77.

⁴⁵ Cobham, "Women in Jamaican Literature 1900–1950."

A key term underlying the periodization I examine in this dissertation is the decolonial. In using this word, I privilege Fanon's reading of decolonization in *The Wretched of the Earth*, which examines it as a highly specific historical process, one in which violence is the *sine qua non* of the transformation he envisions. "Decolonization," Fanon says, "sets out to change the order of the world."⁴⁶ It is "an agenda for total disorder,"⁴⁷ "a violent phenomenon" in which "a whole social structure" is "changed from the bottom up."⁴⁸ Fanon emphasizes the social shift in the context both of abstract structures such as values and culture and more personal and individual reconceptualizations, in the context of the self-identity of the colonized. It is this moment of violence and transformation that I see resonating through the depiction of place-making in the narratives I examine in this dissertation. Peter Hulme has argued that "If 'postcolonial' is a useful word, then it refers to a *process* of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome."⁴⁹ For Simon Gikandi, postcoloniality is "the term for a state of transition and cultural instability."⁵⁰ It is this process—uneven, in-progress, and never fully resolved—that defines the ways that each of the writers examined in this dissertation conceives of the relationship between the British Empire and its former colonies.

My argument is strongly influenced by Homi Bhabha's call "to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are

⁴⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ 29.

⁴⁹ Peter Hulme, "Including America," *ARIEL: A Review of English Literature* 26, no. 1 (January 1995): 120.

⁵⁰ Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 10.

produced in the articulations of cultural differences.”⁵¹ This call underscores my emphasis on the ways that specific places help produce kinds of group consciousness or sociality in decolonial narratives. Moreover, I read Bhabha’s reference to “moments and processes” in the context of my discussion of spatial praxis above. While Bhabha does not here use the term space, his ideas clearly resonate with the notion of spatial production of the social and the overlapping effects of race, gender, and nationality on the social relations that define spaces. Bhabha later draws our attention to the “‘in-between’ spaces”⁵² where individual identities are negotiated and societies themselves are defined. This idea of the in-between informs both my project and its title. This in-betweenness suggests the ongoing, protracted nature of decolonization as much as it does the transformation that Fanon describes.

Yet it should be noted too what this dissertation does *not* do. My focus on the decolonial period begins in 1934, and thus leaves out entirely a complex history of decolonial Ireland that begins in the previous decade. The absence of India too is notable—while Indian decolonization began earlier than that of the Caribbean and African colonies I address, I anticipate addressing India more fully in my consideration of the BBC Colonial Service in future research. Moreover, while the latest text I examine was published in 1971 and is set in England, I only briefly touch on the racial injustices and radical unrest of 1960s and 1970s urban London. My argument primarily emphasizes the period immediately postwar, from 1945 until about 1965, stopping before a thorough investigation of the political restructuring that took place in newly independent states after the collapse of the West Indian Federation in 1962.

⁵¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*

By incorporating authors of different racial and gender categories—categories that inflect and intersect with their cultural politics—I aim to present a complex picture of the cultural production of the decolonial period and the ways that colonial narratives are appropriated, interrogated, and made new. The process of decolonization attested to by Gikandi, Hulme, Bhabha, and others can only be conceived through an attention to its specific sites and its interplay across colonized and colonizer, global subjects and global citizens who inhabit a variety of modes of relation to the status of the colonial sites they describe.

My first chapter, "'Two Things That I Couldn't Fit Together': Race and Betrayal in Jean Rhys's Caribbean Locations," begins with Jean Rhys's short story "Let Them Call It Jazz." This story exemplifies Rhys's identification of consciousness with narrative setting. For Rhys, place is crucial to her creation of a specific narrative effect—but place also asserts itself into consciousness for political purposes as well. The chapter then moves to her 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark*, which highlights the intrusion of the trauma of the colonial past onto the present. Responding to early imperial contraction, Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* uses housing insecurity to question the extent to which the colonial immigrant can be incorporated into the metropole, exploring the betrayal of the promises of imperialism through a resonant critique of English xenophobia. Finally, the chapter explores place in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, highlighting the mutability of specific sites and suggesting the novel's deferral of resolution, which envisions the overthrowing of colonialism in and through the advent of a new system of oppression.

In Chapter Two, "Decay, Decline, Destruction: V. S. Naipaul's Homes at the End of Empire," we can identify a resonance between Rhys's and V. S. Naipaul's presentation of the failure of imperial myths. For Naipaul, these myths coalesce around the idealized space of the

metropole, the nation, and the home. Place-making in *A House for Mr. Biswas* and his rarely explored English novel *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* emphasizes the disillusionment that characterizes both the colony and the metropole. These novels suggest that the legacy of colonialism is written onto Trinidadian and English landscapes in the form of single- and multi-family houses, even as Naipaul highlights the isolation effected by these homes. Finally, I consider Naipaul's midcentury radio work, arguing that the pairing of his fiction and his critical commentary presents a new view of place grounded in aesthetic, rather than political autonomy.

Naipaul's close contemporary, George Lamming, is the subject of Chapter Three, "'Vagrant's City': George Lamming and the Rejection of London's Sites." For Lamming, literary geographies articulate questions of political and cultural sovereignty, as he dramatizes the violent destruction of the metropole by the colonial immigrant. In my discussion of *The Emigrants* and *Water with Berries*, I show how the spatial relations of the emigrants on the passenger ship and within London boarding houses inscribe the relationality of the metropole to the colonies. I conclude by highlighting Lamming's depiction of the metropolis as a failed space for productive sociality, which parallels his discussion of place-making in the Caribbean in his own midcentury radio work.

Finally, in Chapter Four, "'The Place Had Taken Shape': Doris Lessing's Architecture of Intimacy," I examine Doris Lessing through the colonial setting of *The Grass Is Singing* and the metropolitan setting of *In Pursuit of the English*. In my reading of *The Grass Is Singing*, I highlight Lessing's close attention to the African landscape, which ultimately fails as a form of radical anticoloniality. In moving to *In Pursuit of the English*, I show how Lessing uses the figure of the

boarding house to reflect on the capacity of spaces to explode and reconfigure social relations.

For Lessing, the group consciousness that forms in the London boarding house is grounded in her political commitment to socialism and her reading of the concomitant decline of empire and Britain's understanding of its duty of care to its global and local subjects.

Chapter One: "Two Things That I Couldn't Fit Together": Race and Betrayal in Jean Rhys's Caribbean Locations

I. Xenophobia and Housing Precarity in "Let Them Call It Jazz"

"One bright Sunday morning in July I have trouble with my Notting Hill landlord because he ask for a month's rent in advance. He tell me that after I live there since winter, settling up every week without fail."⁵³

Thus opens Jean Rhys's "Let Them Call It Jazz," first published in *The London Magazine* in 1962. Unique in Rhys's oeuvre for its protagonist of color and its narrative voice that speaks in patois, "Let Them Call It Jazz" has been read variously as an appropriation of a black vernacular, a "woeful portrait,"⁵⁴ a triumph "at the intersection of individual human freedom and the power of institutional authority,"⁵⁵ and a "declaration" of Rhys's own "living identity" as a Caribbean.⁵⁶ Readings have generally emphasized the narrative voice and the protagonist's agency and migrant status in the context of Rhys's novels.⁵⁷ But as the very first lines make clear, the issue of housing precarity is central to "Let Them Call It Jazz": to its narrative arc, as well as to the protagonist's characterization and the story's theme. "Let Them Call It Jazz" thus highlights how place operates in Rhys at the level of whole form; moreover, it serves as a test

⁵³ Jean Rhys, "Let Them Call It Jazz," in *Tigers Are Better-Looking* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1968), 47

⁵⁴ Thomas F. Staley, *Jean Rhys: A Critical Introduction* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1979), 126.

⁵⁵ Lucy Wilson, "'Women Must Have Spunks': Jean Rhys's West Indian Outcasts," *Modern Fiction Studies* 32, no. 3 (1986), 443.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Ramchand, "Introduction," in *Jean Rhys: Tales of the Wide Caribbean* (London: Heinemann, 1985).

⁵⁷ Kristin Czarnecki, "Jean Rhys's Postmodern Narrative Authority: Selina's Patois in 'Let Them Call It Jazz,'" *College Literature* 35, no. 2 (2008): 20-37.

case for considering the significance of literary geographies to Rhys more widely. In “Let Them Call It Jazz,” we find a clear iteration of a thematic connection between housing and the isolation of the colonial immigrant in England—a theme that underscores all of her fictional representations of Caribbean migration. For Rhys, the question that drives her portrayal of Caribbean immigrants is the extent to which they can be incorporated into the metropole: her representation of places at the level of setting highlights exclusion and exile from English social networks. But more than that, her portrayal of place at the level of form refracts more widely in the context of the colonial-metropolitan relationship, which, like the isolation of the immigrant in London, foregrounds the ways that colonial settings cannot truly be fitted into a larger imperial whole.

“Let Them Call It Jazz” tells the story of Selina Davis, a Martiniquaise immigrant to London whose social isolation and economic precarity climax in her brief incarceration in Holloway Prison. Selina, we learn, is the child of a white father and a mother she describes as “a fair coloured woman, fairer than I am.”⁵⁸ Selina immigrates to London in search of economic security, believing that her excellent sewing skills will afford her employment opportunities as a seamstress. Instead, she discovers that in London “all this fine handsewing take too long” and “quick” work is what is needed.⁵⁹ Moreover, Selina’s carefully hidden savings are stolen from

⁵⁸ Rhys, “Jazz,” 54. In this section, Rhys makes it clear that Selina’s mixed racial parentage is visible in her skin color; in other words, Selina cannot pass as a white woman in London. Rhys elaborates on the intersection of color and class in the Caribbean through Selina’s description of her grandmother: “It’s my grandmother take care of me. She’s quite dark and what we call ‘country-cookie’ [sic] but she’s the best I know” (54). “Country-cookie”—almost certainly a transcription or typographic error for “country-coolie”—is immediately indicative of the hierarchy based on color that Rhys herself would have been familiar with in Dominica. The demonstrative “but” suggests Selina’s own internalized color prejudice.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

the boarding house in Notting Hill, leaving her both unemployed and on the verge of economic collapse.

The story opens with Selina's forced departure from the Notting Hill boarding house and, though she is quickly installed in a basement flat of a home owned by Mr. Sims—an obscure figure who is possibly a pimp—this sense of vulnerability underlies the remainder of the text. By locating Selina's precarity within her lack of secure housing, Rhys draws attention to what Lukacs calls the "transcendental homelessness" of the modern moment.⁶⁰ The world, as Lukacs describes it, has become too large for the safety of the home to impart security on the individual. In "Let Them Call It Jazz," Selina has no home, and her status as a black woman is at odds with the temporary homes in which she finds herself.

The connection between temporary housing, the midcentury, and colonial and postcolonial migration has been developed by historians and critics alike. The post-war election of the Labour party was due in part to the promise of social insurance programs that would ensure healthcare and housing. Historian of the British Empire John Darwin connects the process of decolonization with this move toward domestic reform. He argues that British politicians envisioned a continued role in global affairs, marked by strategic retreat and continuing world partnerships with their former colonies, partnerships that would be "vital support" for Britain's social recovery after the war.⁶¹ Immigrants from the British colonies in particular had a unique relationship with the metropole at midcentury, for they were, in accordance with the 1948 British Nationality Bill, subjects of the British Empire, though not

⁶⁰ Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1963), 41.

⁶¹ John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 342.

necessarily its citizens, with the rights that citizenship afforded.⁶² Thus, their entrance into England in the 1950s was legally assured, even as their ability to find work and housing remained challenging, particularly in the context of rampant xenophobia. Selina's move from one site of temporary housing to another was common for mid-twentieth-century migrants to London. The colonies and former colonies served as sources of significant immigration to England in this period: immigration that, for many, led not to the economic opportunities they had anticipated, but a lack of secure housing or employment. In Sukhdev Sandhu's vivid description, these (often Caribbean) immigrants "were forced to squeeze into tiny, squalid households in broken streets in rundown areas of the capital. Rooms were small, heat and lighting limited, the air a fetid combination of paraffin-heater fumes and damp clothing that hung in every inch of space."⁶³ This experience is typified by Selina, whose remaining money after her savings is stolen is quickly diminished by wine and "shillings for the slot-meters" — that is, the shillings she uses to heat her section of the house.⁶⁴

Place functions in "Let Them Call It Jazz" not just in terms of the vividly drawn setting, but as a major force of characterization and plot. The move from the Notting Hill boarding

⁶² Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9-10. Baucom describes the 1948 British Nationality Bill as "a frankly fantastic piece of legislation (in the less than laudatory sense of the word)," which affirmed the subjecthood of all members of the British Empire, creating "a new class of citizens (United Kingdom and Commonwealth) who had no intrinsic rights but who were to claim equivalent subjectivity with a body of other citizens (South Africans, Indians, Australians, Canadians, and New Zealanders) who had whatever rights their governments afforded them" (9-10). Baucom makes clear that "while British subjectivity conferred obligations on the subject (primarily the obligation of loyalty), it did not confer any intrinsic rights. Parliament— particularly after the Glorious Revolution— could bestow or withdraw these at will, as selectively as it chose" (8).

⁶³ Sukhdev Sandhu, *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (London: Harper Collins, 2003), 132.

⁶⁴ Rhys, "Jazz," 50.

house to Mr. Sims's downstairs flat is the impetus for the story's action; the new setting not only continues to drive the plot, but also produces specific social interactions and emotional responses from Selina. The house itself is a "valuable property" that is in danger of being torn down by "local authorities." Selina speculates as to the reason behind the threat to the house, which strikes her as having "an elegant shape," making "the other houses on the street look cheap trash"; however, she notes, the house seems "sad and out of place, especially at night."

The sense of discomfiture—that the house itself is out of place—resonates with Selina's experience, as she cannot pass as white in England, just as she can neither find safety and inclusion within the white neighborhood in which she finds herself. But the depiction of the house is more complex—it stands in some ways as a monument to the past, a representation of a past that strikes both Selina and her upstairs neighbor as nostalgic, whose loss would be worthy of regret. For the upstairs neighbor, a white woman whose interactions with Selina are kind, if not overly warm, the potential loss of the house seems to suggest a loss of an English past defined by estates and single-family houses, as immigrants increasingly change the character of the London landscape after the wave of immigration that began after World War II. Yet Selina's attachment to the house is harder to explain. As an immigrant and person of color, her attachment to the English cultural past could, perhaps, be explained by the master narrative of imperialism, a story that positioned England as the center of empire and the font of cultural value. Yet despite her seemingly positive reaction to the house itself, the flat within does not provide the kind of safety or security of a home: like the promise of London's economic possibilities, the flat does not live up to Selina's hopes. From her references to Selina's failed hopes, Rhys crafts a critique both of imperialism and of the social welfare state in the 1950 and

'60s, which foundered in its World-War-II-era promises of security "from the cradle to the grave."

Within the flat itself, Selina gradually withdraws into an increasingly tiny enclosure. The bedroom is "nicely furnished," and she feels comfortable there despite the neglect she senses from the damp smell that emanates from it. In the remaining rooms, she discovers peeling wallpaper and mushrooms growing on the walls; the two rooms are "so big [they] look empty." The cellar below is filled with rats and broken furniture. Selina retreats to the bedroom and "never again" enters the rest of the flat. The setting here refracts onto Selina's sense of self. As she begins to realize that the neighbors see her as a threatening outsider, she begins to confront her own physical and emotional isolation. Selina slowly begins to take up less space, fearing to leave the house and, eventually, her single bedroom. Rather than enlivening the large empty rooms, Selina shuts herself away from them; the rooms take on the character of the wider white English people who reject and frighten her. Her desire to take up less space spills over into her physical form as well, as she finds herself growing thinner and thinner as she is unable or unwilling to eat. Moreover, the self-enforced enclosure of the flat foreshadows Selina's upcoming incarceration in Holloway Prison, suggesting the lack of distance between the isolation of immigrant life in the metropole and the literal isolation of imprisonment. Rhys intimately ties together Selina's response to other people with her response to the built environment around her, highlighting the significance of place to both Rhys's theme of isolation and the form of the story more generally.

Selina's ostracization is foregrounded in the narrative when she begins to interact with her white English next-door neighbors, as her housing situation grows even more precarious.

Separated from her neighbors' home only by a hedge, Selina makes a brief overture to the wife: "At first I say good evening, but she turn away her head, so afterwards I don't speak." She's similarly rebuffed by the husband, who stares at her "as if [she's] a wild animal let loose."⁶⁵ The wife begins by making cruel comments to Selina in a "very sweet quiet voice: '*Must* you stay? *Can't* you go?'"⁶⁶ But soon she is emboldened by Selina's evident poverty and inability to fight back. Her antagonism toward Selina is couched not only in her status as one in a string of girls brought to the house by Mr. Sims, but by her blackness as well: "At least the other tarts that crook installed here were *white* girls," says the wife.⁶⁷ Rhys's portrayal of the xenophobia of these neighbors is as clear-eyed and merciless as that which would appear just four years later in *Wide Sargasso Sea*; the white characters in "Let Them Call It Jazz" alternately exploit, humiliate, and punish Selina.

Selina's response to the neighbors—"to sing, so she can understand I'm not afraid of her"—leads to a fine for "drunk and disorderly" behavior.⁶⁸ Soon after, in a final confrontation, the couple tells Selina that she doesn't belong in their "respectable neighborhood." They inform her that her erstwhile landlord, Mr. Sims, is "in trouble" and can no longer help her, telling her: "Try somewhere else. Find somebody else. If you can, of course."⁶⁹ Selina responds by throwing a stone through their stained-glass window and is abruptly taken to a magistrate and then to Holloway Prison the following day. This kind of police action toward immigrants was common

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ 54.

⁶⁷ 57.

⁶⁸ 55.

⁶⁹ 58.

and often grounded in racial expectations. Stuart Hall et al. in *Policing the Crisis*, for example, describe the state of the London police force's racial relations in the 1970s as hostile, emphasizing the evidence of "heightened sensitivity to, and expectation of, black involvement in 'trouble,' and, by extension, 'crime,' especially in heavily 'immigrant' areas."⁷⁰ Public behavior such as Selina's outdoor singing was an area particularly available for police control.

Indeed the openness of the area in which Selina interacts with the neighbors contrasts strongly with the flat's almost carceral effect. Moving outside to the front of the house, she observes: "There's no wall here and I can see the woman next door looking at me over the hedge."⁷¹ This close physical proximity is the impetus for the ongoing antagonism by the neighbors: because they can see Selina and hear her singing, they feel empowered to enact various forms of social control, from verbal attacks to calling in the police, who also act out the structural racism that undergirds the story's plot. Here, the physical aspects of the house highlight the story's interest in visibility, from Selina's conspicuous status as a non-white immigrant to England to her desire to make herself physically invisible by retreating within the house and even within her physical body. Selina alternates between finding security in the walls around her and feeling constrained by them; she chooses to sing loudly when she is outside to show the neighbors that she is "not afraid" of them, as though the absence of a wall both tempts and terrifies her.

⁷⁰ Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (New York: Palgrave, 1978), 45.

⁷¹ Rhys, "Jazz," 50.

Like so many of Rhys's plots, Selina's feud with the neighbors and brief incarceration is drawn in part from Rhys's own life. In 1948, Rhys, living in Beckenham, was embroiled in a protracted feud with her neighbors, the Hardimans, whose dog she accused of killing her cat. After throwing a brick through their window, Rhys was forced to appear in court and fined five pounds. The following year, Rhys became involved in a physical altercation with her upstairs neighbor, Mr. Bezant, as well as with the constable who was called to the scene. The result of this event was not only another fine (this time four pounds), but a second altercation between Rhys and Bezant—the details of which are markedly different, depending on whose version of the story is told. In light of her previous imbroglios in Beckenham, Rhys's recounting of the second incident was not believed. Rhys was diagnosed with hysteria and taken for a week into the hospital wing of Holloway Prison before she was finally released on probation.⁷²

Rhys's intention to fictionalize her experience in Holloway appears in a letter to Selma vaz Dias—whose re-discovery of Rhys “made [Rhys] want to write again” after years of obscurity⁷³—as early as December 1949, only five months after her release. In the letter, she refers to an idea and a title: not “Let Them Call It Jazz,” which was at least the third title Rhys considered, but “Black Castle.” The subject, Rhys admits, is “dubious” though it is “not Sex...or

⁷² Carole Angier, *Jean Rhys: Life and Work* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), 441-447.

⁷³ Jean Rhys, *The Letters of Jean Rhys* (New York: Viking, 1984), 66. Selma vaz Dias located Rhys in 1949 by placing an ad in *The New Statesman* requesting information on her whereabouts. Rhys answered the ad herself and began a correspondence with vaz Dias, who had adapted *Good Morning Midnight* for a BBC broadcast. Ultimately the Rhys-vaz Dias relationship became a contentious one, as vaz Dias in 1961 persuaded Rhys to sign a contract granting vaz Dias full artistic control and half the proceeds from any dramatic adaptation of Rhys's existing or future works anywhere in the world.

Insanity.”⁷⁴ The subject, indeed, is imprisonment, and it took Rhys ten years to write the fictionalization of her Holloway experience.

In April 1960, Rhys began writing to her editor, Francis Wyndham, about her Holloway story, now titled “They Thought It Was Jazz.” Rhys describes the story to Wyndham in typically self-deprecating terms: “The other day I wrote a short story as a holiday. ... A bit of a crazy story. For fun.” A week later she mentions it to Wyndham again: “The short story I wrote a few weeks ago is ‘not serious.’” Then a few weeks later: “The story I wrote called ‘They Thought It Was Jazz’ is about Holloway Prison—so, all things considered, must not be taken too seriously. It is supposed to be a Creole girl talking but still—.”⁷⁵ Rhys’s intense desire to downplay the story is belied by her repeated references to it; moreover, her descriptions of the story as “crazy” and “a holiday” suggest a desire to distance the story from her own biography.

Later that year, Rhys wrote to her daughter Maryvonne Moerman to ask her to type the longhand version of the story, rather than the neighbor whom Rhys usually employed. She wished to prevent her neighbors from gossiping about her rather salacious plot points and their connection to her potentially disreputable background: “It is not (repeat *not*) autobiography, and not to be taken seriously,” Rhys assures Moerman. “But the people here are terribly narrow minded and they gossip like crazy. Really – this is true! ... For them ‘I’ is ‘I’ and not a literary device. Every *word* is autobiography!”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ 184-186.

⁷⁶ 187.

Rhys's insistence on the distance between her own experiences and Selina's is telling. In part, Rhys's protestations are due to the fact that she carefully kept secret her Holloway incarceration from her daughter. But her repeated assertions that the story is not autobiography also helps draw our attention to the differences between Rhys and Selina. Unlike Selina, Rhys is married; her husband Max Hamer owns the home in which Rhys lives during her repeated altercations, so there is no danger that Rhys can be evicted or will end up homeless. Selina's isolation and economic vulnerability are thus far more urgent than Rhys's. Most importantly, both of these qualities can be located in Selina's immigrant status and in her racialized body—made dramatically evident in the text through Selina's patois. The only time Rhys uses a primary narrative voice that speaks in patois, "Let Them Call It Jazz" foregrounds Selina's voice as a constant marker that the narrator is *not* Rhys: that her experiences in London are shot through with a racial divide that Rhys herself could never experience, despite their shared status as Caribbean immigrants. In "Let Them Call It Jazz," just as in Rhys's English context, race functions as the obvious factor in Selina's isolation, even as poverty and social class keeps the divide in place.

Rhys's own comments about her use of patois are significant, if limited. Writing again to Wyndham about "Let Them Call It Jazz" later in 1960, she explains: "It's 'stylized patois'—how true!—and I don't know if *that's* authentic, for they speak (or spoke) French patois in my island. Here are two pages. What do you think? Does it sound right? I've not read any of the 'West Indian' people. It's by ear and memory."⁷⁷ Rhys defends the usage choices she makes not

⁷⁷ 197.

through an attempt to emulate contemporary writers but by recourse to her own memory of Caribbean patois. She ostensibly distances herself from the West Indian writers gaining prominence in 1950s British literature, but simultaneously includes herself in that group by referencing *her* island and her own Caribbean background. Yet she is also doubtful, uncertain that she has gotten the patois correct, suggesting not only her tendency toward self-deprecation (in the same letter, she nervously tells Wyndham that she “expect[s] it [the story] is a waste of time”⁷⁸) but also her awareness that she is not a part of the Caribbean patois-speaking culture.

Indeed, it can and has been argued that Rhys, like white modernist writers Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, has appropriated a black vernacular in a kind of literary blackface.⁷⁹ To call Rhys’s use of black vernacular in the story appropriation is, I think, not incorrect—yet her appropriation is paired with her identification with Selina, a biographical connection that the use of patois seems to undermine. By reframing her own experience through the lens of a Caribbean immigrant of color, Rhys recontextualizes her own impoverished bourgeois experience of the London judicial and carceral systems into a terrifying narrative of the precarity of the immigrant experience in London. Rhys highlights the connection between the lack of affordable and safe housing and the isolation experienced by Caribbean and other

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Kristin Czarnecki has discussed Rhys’s use of patois at length in her article “Jean Rhys’s Postmodern Narrative Authority: Selina’s Patois in ‘Let Them Call It Jazz.’” The accuracy of the written patois, Czarnecki notes, was discussed at length by West Indian writers such as Kenneth Ramchand. Czarnecki says that Rhys “never lays claim to an unadulterated Caribbean patois, nor do her personal writings mimic the language of the black West Indians among whom she was raised, unlike the dialect letters of white modernists incorporating a made-up vernacular” (33). Recounting an anecdote in which Vaz Dias records Rhys singing several Caribbean songs, often using patois along with a noticeable West Indian accent, Czarnecki ultimately argues that Rhys does not “appropriate a black idiom,” but rather employs a personal version of a vernacular with which she was intimately familiar (33).

immigrants, and gestures to the unfairness of a court system that demands “Prove it” of an individual lacking entirely a social network that might bear witness. “Let Them Call It Jazz” powerfully figures the way that geography is entwined with immigration, colonialism, and isolation. Selina’s state of precarity, along with her physically marked status as a black Caribbean immigrant, set the stage for her social exclusion and her rapid imprisonment. Unlike Rhys’s brief incarceration, Selina’s speaks to a complex of race and class disparities that are heightened in the crucible of the downstairs apartment, in the “out of place” house on the block inhabited by white bourgeois English.

By reading “Let Them Call It Jazz” through the lens of both narrative setting and the historical context of immigrant life in the metropole, I aim to set out the methodological and conceptual stakes of my project. Geography is crucial to Rhys’s fiction, both in terms of the close attention she pays to narrative setting and the way that specific places take on powerful roles in the formation of characters’ consciousnesses; these kinds of geographies at the level of form parallel the importance of imperial geographies and the political stakes of Rhys’s fiction. In “Let Them Call It Jazz,” Rhys uses a black vernacular for the first and last time as a primary narrative voice—yet by placing that voice within metropolitan London, Rhys creates a context for a political reading of the story that emphasizes the ongoing colonization of the Caribbean and other locations across the globe.⁸⁰ Rather than simply integrating the patois into a

⁸⁰ While attention to Rhys’s use of patois and a protagonist of color in “Let Them Call It Jazz” are not uncommon in Rhys criticism, critical attention generally focuses on the ways in which Rhys highlights Selina’s marginalization and lack of social communication: see, for example, Thorunn Lonsdale’s “Displacing the Heroine: Location in Jean Rhys’s Short Stories ‘Let Them Call It Jazz,’ ‘Mannequin’ and ‘I Used to Live Here Once’” *Journal of the Short Story in English* 29 (Autumn 1997):

biographical reading of “Let Them Call It Jazz,” a consideration of the story’s geographies attends more fully to its historical and social context: that of the British metropolis in the context of the decolonization process, one that had not yet begun in the Caribbean but was underway by almost two decades in other parts of the world. Through this kind of reading, the political character of Rhys’s fiction becomes more clear; “Let Them Call It Jazz” is not, or not only, a veiled reference to Rhys’s own life, but a trenchant critique of the xenophobia of the English at midcentury and the failure of the social welfare programs promised by post-war reconstruction for the residents of the metropolis whose British subjecthood was established by empire, rather than by a culture of white Englishness.

II. Place and Modernist Interiority in *Voyage in the Dark*

“Sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together.”⁸¹ In these lines, Anna Morgan, protagonist of Jean Rhys’s 1934 *Voyage in the Dark*, reflects on the two locations she has lived: Dominica, where she spent her childhood, and England, where she resides during the course of the novel. At the novel’s outset, Anna has traveled to England to receive a traditional English lady’s education, to become more refined and—explicitly—more white, removed from the influence of her Caribbean upbringing. Yet as Anna explains, the two places cannot fit together—instead of the seamless process of refining her family had expected,

1-8, and Lucy Wilson’s “‘Women Must Have Spunks’: Jean Rhys’s West Indian Outcasts” *Modern Fiction Studies* 32, no. 3 (1986): 439-48.

⁸¹ Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1982), 8.

Anna finds herself unable to inhabit England comfortably. In London, Anna encounters what J. Dillon Brown calls “the dangerous deceptiveness of so-called English civilization for those at the margins.”⁸² Each experience in England is shot through with vivid recollections of the Caribbean; again and again she finds herself unable to make sense of the dull and terrible English metropolis in the context of her richly textured memories of Dominica.

This incorporation of the specificities of Caribbean places into Anna’s consciousness is the vehicle for Rhys’s pointed anticolonial critique in *Voyage in the Dark*. Published roughly thirty years before “Let Them Call It Jazz,” *Voyage in the Dark* takes on a far less explicitly critical position than the 1962 short story. Yet it serves as a foundational example for the way that Rhys uses literary geographies to conceptualize and articulate her opposition to the imperial project, which was, as of 1934, still several decades away from the wave of decolonization that would sweep through the Caribbean in the 1960s. This early novel’s narrative form highlights the entanglement between place and character, pairing modernist interiority with an attention to geography—both on the level of the geopolitical and the level of individual interaction with place—that presages the postcolonial writings of Caribbean authors in the middle decades of the twentieth century, including Rhys’s own more explicit critiques in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and “Let Them Call It Jazz.”

Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark* performs its anticolonial critique through a phenomenological reconstruction of the setting itself. Though *Voyage in the Dark* is ostensibly set in London, Rhys transforms the setting to Dominica through Anna’s vivid sensual memories and the

⁸² J. Dillon Brown, “Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys’s Critical Discourse,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 3 (2010), 573.

incorporation of artifacts into her consciousness. While *Voyage in the Dark*'s pre-war period has led critics to lump it in with Rhys's modernist oeuvre, recent examinations of the novel have emphasized its transitional quality, identifying its attention to the Caribbean as part of what Anna Snaith has called "the conjunction between the postcolonial and the modernist."⁸³ Like Snaith, I see *Voyage in the Dark* as occupying an important position: one in which modernist techniques are deployed to produce a critique of imperialism, specifically through the enmeshment of place into the interiority of the novel's protagonist, Anna Morgan.

Anna embodies Homi Bhabha's "unhomely" existence: caught in the disjunction between her native Dominica and urban England, she is exiled from both, socially and in her own consciousness.⁸⁴ Yet Anna's individual isolation takes on a decidedly political cast when read in the context of the British empire; as Bhabha's reading of female postcolonial writers suggests, "the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence."⁸⁵ It is this political qua individual disjunction that has led recent critics to see Anna as representative of the oppressed colonial, whose agency is erased as she enters the metropolis and is there commodified. Indeed, *Voyage in the Dark* takes on an imperial scope not only through its constant references to Dominica, but its criticisms of the white English, their xenophobia, and the universalizing power of colonial education. "I had read about England," Anna says, "ever since I could read."⁸⁶

⁸³ Anna Snaith, *Modernist Voyages: Colonial Women Writers in London, 1890-1495* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 134.

⁸⁴ Homi Bhabha, "The World and the Home," in *Close Reading: The Reader*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁸⁵ Bhabha, 370.

⁸⁶ Rhys, *Voyage*, 17.

Saikat Majumdar has recently argued that literary modernism “remains strongly linked to the cultural logic of the metropolitan and the peripheral,” emphasizing the heightened significance of specific metropolitan centers.⁸⁷ This bifurcation between the metropolitan center and the colonial periphery is obviously present in Rhys; yet Rhys reverses the significance of the contrast, transforming London into a parade of unspecific sites and vibrantly interpolating the chronological narrative of life in the capital with extradiegetic fragments of memory, artifact, and sensory input drawn from her childhood in Dominica. Anna repeatedly raises the trope of colonial narratives and, every time, rewrites them into her own fragmented reliving of Dominica. For Anna, “thinking...makes it happen”⁸⁸—in other words, her resistance to the British Empire is performed within her own consciousness and articulated to the reader through formal experiments that incorporate place into narrative consciousness. Through a combination of withdrawal from the social world around her and recourse to her own memory and imagination, Anna performs the elevation of the colonial place over the metropolitan. In this way, Rhys marries modernist interiority with literary geography to effect a clear anti-imperial critique.

Voyage in the Dark begins with Anna already in London, but from the very first page tracks backward to Anna’s past in the Caribbean. Indeed, Rhys gives her reader vastly more biographical information about her protagonist than in any of her other novels save *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Anna has traveled to London at the encouragement of her stepmother, Hester,

⁸⁷ Saikat Majumdar, *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 31.

⁸⁸ Rhys, *Voyage*, 162.

after the death of her father and the sale of their Caribbean estate. In England, Anna becomes a chorus girl and enters into a romantic relationship with a wealthy financier named Walter Jeffries, who is roughly twice her age. Despite—or perhaps because of—the difference in their ages, Walter is tender and protective of Anna; when he breaks off their relationship after a long business trip, Anna is stunned. Though he tries to support her financially, Anna grasps at independence. After a series of brief romances and increasingly unpleasant boarding houses, Anna moves in with an acquaintance named Ethel, who offers manicure and massage services from her flat in Bird Street. Anna briefly performs manicures and engages in some aimless sex work before discovering that she is pregnant. In a fit of morning sickness, she throws out a customer, partially wrecks Ethel’s flat, and moves in with another friend, Laurie, who provides advice and assistance in securing an abortion. Walter, through the proxy of his cousin, pays for Anna’s abortion, though he is not the cause of her pregnancy. The abortion is difficult due to Anna’s advanced pregnancy, and, in Rhys’s original version of the ending, Anna dies. In the final published ending, which Rhys was forced to change by Michael Sadleir of Constable and Company and which she repudiated to the end of her life, Anna survives, pondering her need to start “all over again.”⁸⁹

Yet this plot summary effaces the extraordinary importance of the Caribbean to the novel’s construction: Anna’s insistent rewriting of her metropolitan surroundings against the vividness of her Dominican memories. Consider, for example, Rhys’s description of Anna’s arrival to London:

⁸⁹ 118.

Lying between 15° 10' and 15° 40' N. and 61° 14' and 61° 30' W. 'A goodly island and something highland, but all overgrown with woods,' that book said. And all crumpled into hills and mountains as you would crumple a piece of paper in your hand—rounded green hills and sharply-cut mountains.

A curtain fell and then I was here.

...This is England Hester said and I watched it though the train-window divided into squares like pocket-handkerchiefs: a small tidy look it had everywhere fenced off from everywhere else—what are those things—those are haystacks—oh those are haystacks—I had read about England ever since I could read—smaller meaner everything is never mind—this is London—hundreds thousands of white people white people rushing along and the dark houses all alike frowning down one after the other all alike all stuck together—the streets like smooth shut-in ravines and the dark houses frowning down—oh I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place...⁹⁰

Critical reception of Rhys has long acknowledged her early work's formal indebtedness to the modernist experimental writing that preceded it by roughly a decade.⁹¹ Here Anna's stream of consciousness is used to effect the "dreamlike state" that Rhys associated with Anna's England in a letter to her friend Evelyn Scott in 1934.⁹² Coming quite early in the novel, this scene offers one of the first clear contrasts between Rhys's representations of Anna's memory of the Caribbean and her present life in England. The contrast at first seems obvious: the Caribbean is green and flourishing, marked by dramatic cliffs. Though the island is not specifically named in the text, the coordinates tell us that it is Dominica, Rhys's own home country. England, on the other hand, is marked by man-made structures: houses, streets, even haystacks that rise unfamiliarly out of the ground.

⁹⁰ 17.

⁹¹ See, for example, Leonora Eyles, "Voyage in the Dark by Rhys, Jean," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 1, 1934.

⁹² Rhys, *Letters*, 24.

In England, the houses are immediately personified as “frowning” — this negative, almost aggressive notion is repeated not just in this scene but throughout the text, hinting at Anna’s extreme discomfiture in the metropole: a discomfiture echoed by Selina nearly thirty years later.⁹³ The repetition of frowning is paired with other repetitions: “white people white people” and “I’m not going to like this place I’m not going to like this place I’m not going to like this place.” The repetition gives Anna’s narrative voice a pleading, almost childlike quality — what Rhys called a “kitten mewling” plaintively.⁹⁴ While other critical analyses of *Voyage in the Dark* have emphasized the gradual fracturing of Anna’s narrative voice over time,⁹⁵ this early scene suggests a perseverative quality that not only appears at the beginning of the novel, but in fact precedes the novel’s opening, given that this scene is one of Anna’s memories. Anna’s fixation on the discomfort of her arrival — particularly her horror at the parade of white faces and dark houses — highlights the contrast of her past in Dominica. This is an early example of Rhys’s combination of setting and interiority. While the diction and syntax highlight Anna’s earnest fear, the threatening aspect of the English landscape provides a necessary addition that foregrounds the presence of imperial critique in this novel.

Also notable is the curiously theatrical shift from Dominica to England that characterizes Anna’s memory of this transition: “A curtain fell and then I was here.” By eliminating the transitional moment or any scenes of journey, Rhys draws the two locations together,

⁹³ See, for example, “not friendly” (Rhys, *Voyage*, 36) and “sneering” (49).

⁹⁴ Rhys, *Letters*, 24.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Jed Esty’s chapter “Virgins of Empire: The Antidevelopmental Plot in Rhys and Bowen” in *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

figuratively removing the physical distance between them. This joining not only emphasizes Anna's shock and disorientation upon her arrival in England, but also speaks to the interrelationship of Dominica and England within the British Empire. Anna, as part of the white planter class in Dominica, is intimately tied both to her British ancestry and her Caribbean childhood. Yet her arrival in England is not a homecoming, despite her stepmother Hester's reassurances; rather than feeling recognition, Anna experiences a dazed sense of horror when confronted with the white English citizenry, of whom she is, at least legally, a part. Rhys sets up the stark contrast between the two places immediately, emphasizing the discomfiture of the colonies within the British Empire, the inability of British universalism to truly encompass its colonial subjects—either nationally or individually. From the novel's opening, Rhys begins to undermine the imperial narrative of the empire as a continuous whole; moreover, Anna's discomfiture similarly subverts the aspect of the colonial mythology of "home and family" that, as Judith Raitskin notes, "is particularly implicated in the economic impoverishment and social exploitation of the colonized woman."⁹⁶ While Anna's colonial education and familial insistence had encouraged her to see herself as returning home to a welcoming England, her actual experience is frightening and unfamiliar.

For much of the novel, Anna moves precariously from one unpleasant boarding house to another. As a chorus girl in the opening pages of the text, Anna is viewed by her landlady as a "professional" whose activities are not "decent."⁹⁷ Like Selina, Anna is confronted repeatedly

⁹⁶ Judith Raitskin, *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 145.

⁹⁷ Rhys, *Voyage*, 8-9.

with the exclusionary xenophobic attitudes of the English people who surround her and control the places in which she dwells. Though Anna is ostensibly white—her stepmother Hester intimates during an argument that Anna’s mother “was colored,” but Anna vociferously denies it—her voice marks her as a Caribbean immigrant just as Selina’s patois does. “That awful sing-song voice,” Hester complains: “Exactly like a nigger.”⁹⁸ Thus while the landlady of the first boarding house purportedly objects to Anna’s profession—and later landladies and landlords to specific behaviors, such as coming home late—her Caribbean background and possibly ambiguous racialization are evident to them as well, certainly playing a role in their reactions to Anna.

The setting is registered not just within narrative description, but also within Anna’s mind: the physical structures and Anna’s psychological state mirror one another to the point that setting cannot be abstracted as a simple framework or landscape for the plot: as in “Let Them Call It Jazz,” we find that the built environment produces specific physical effects on the protagonist, both in how she relates to it and within her own consciousness. Two key descriptors of the boarding houses are repeated throughout the text: that they are identical to one another, and that Anna feels them closing in on her—often the two occur in tandem. “I believe this damned room’s getting smaller and smaller,” Anna thinks to herself as she lies ill in the beginning of the novel. “I thought...about the rows of houses outside, gim-crack, rotten-

⁹⁸ 65. This remark is, according to Angier, drawn from life. Angier describes Rhys’s sensitivity about her own voice, which was described by white English people as “an accent” that made it sound like “a nasty, sing-song nigger’s voice.” Rhys’s discomfort with her accent led her to enroll in acting school to learn “to drop [her] voice” and, eventually, to spend most of her life speaking in a childish whisper (*Jean Rhys*, 46). Only in the anecdote of the *vaz Dias* recordings does Angier specifically mention a West Indian accent in the adult Rhys.

looking, and all exactly alike.”⁹⁹ Later, she begins to describe her latest landlady, then stops: “She was exactly like our landlady at Eastbourne. Was it Eastbourne? And the shapes of the slices of meat were the same, and the way the cabbage was heaped was the same, and all the houses outside in the street were the same—all alike, all hideously stuck together—and the streets going north, east, south, west, all exactly the same.”¹⁰⁰ This description is repeated almost verbatim toward the end of the novel, several locations later, as Anna recovers from her difficult abortion.¹⁰¹ Similarly repeated is the description of the claustrophobia that the rooms impart: the sensation of “high, smooth, unclimbable walls all round you, closing in on you.”¹⁰² Through these descriptions, the entwining of Anna’s conception of her physical setting and her mental state become clear. Both the people who surround her and the built environment seem to isolate and imprison Anna: as she reacts to the antagonism and judgment of the English landlords and landladies, the physical walls around her are transformed into an oppressive, dangerous force that highlights the urgency of her economic dependence and her frail physical body. In her portrayal of English settings as repetitive, isolating, and crushing, Rhys upends the imperial mythology that would place England as the center of the world, the pinnacle of education, taste, and value. Anna’s betrayal by England is, like Selina’s, in part economic and in part due to her status as an immigrant—in both, the paternalistic promises of imperialism, which vouchsafed an improvement to the conditions of the colonies and a center marked by its superiority, are proven utterly false.

⁹⁹ Rhys, *Voyage*, 30.

¹⁰⁰ 103.

¹⁰¹ 179.

¹⁰² 147.

Numerous moments of crisis in the novel—Anna’s frequent illnesses, almost certainly recurrences of malaria,¹⁰³ her pregnancy, morning sickness, and abortion—set off sudden intense recollections of Anna’s life in the West Indies. Lying in bed, Anna turns her mind again and again to vivid visualizations of her childhood home, Constance Estate. Leaving a rendezvous with Walter, Anna muses: “All the way back in the taxi I was still thinking about home and when I got into bed I lay awake, thinking about it. About how sad the sun can be, especially in the afternoon, but in a different way from the sadness of cold places, quite different.”¹⁰⁴ In a later boarding house, Anna lies in bed wearily “thinking of all the bedrooms I had slept in and how exactly alike they were...And then I tried to remember the road that leads to Constance Estate.”¹⁰⁵ Anna’s recollections of Dominica are only somewhat coherent, the memories fragmented but clear, shard-like in their intensity:

Everything is green, everywhere things are growing. There is never one moment of stillness—always something buzzing. And then dark cliffs and ravines and the smell of rotten leaves and damp. That’s how the road to Constance is—green, and the smell of green, and then the smell of water and dark earth and rotting leaves and damp. There’s a bird called a Mountain Whistler, that calls out on one note, very high-up and sweet and piercing. You ford little rivers. The noise the horse’s hooves make when he picks them up and puts them down in the water.¹⁰⁶

This moment of remembrance appears shortly after Anna’s falling-out with Ethel, but a similar series of recollections could be extracted from virtually any of the sites in the novel. Each

¹⁰³ Anna’s illness is one that she has experienced since childhood, and clearly chronic. Her nurse Francine comforts her during her first bout of fever: “when I was unwell for the first time it was she who explained to me, so that it seemed quite all right and I thought it was all in the day’s work like eating or drinking.” (*Voyage*, 68). Moreover, Anna’s symptoms are consistent with recurrent malaria: “I got fever and I was ill for a long time. I would get better and then it would start again. ...I got awfully thin and ugly and yellow as a guinea, my father said.” (73).

¹⁰⁴ 56.

¹⁰⁵ 150.

¹⁰⁶ 151.

moment of physical and emotional vulnerability and frailty is marked by a memory or series of memories of Anna's life in Dominica, recollections brilliantly colored, carefully drawn, and shot through with scraps of dialogue, characters, and intensely specific details of location, including sensations of all kinds. In this way, Anna's frail transplanted physical body—overwhelmed by illness, sexual trauma, and her ostracization from English society—is continually transformed through her recollection of the Dominica of her childhood, as she abstracts herself from the oppressive present into the dream of the past.

Yet to suggest that Anna's recollections of the past help her transcend the present would be to overlook the fractures that run through these stream-of-consciousness memories. From the same scene as the above extract, Anna describes the experience of taking the road from New Town to Constance Estate: "You ride in a sort of dream, the saddle creaks sometimes, and you smell the sea and the good smell of the horse. And then—wait a minute. Then do you turn to the right or the left? To the left, of course."¹⁰⁷ This crack in the recollection, this sudden return to Anna's consciousness and out of the thoroughly realized dream of the past, is telling, highlighting the inability of memory to take Anna entirely out of her physical location. Moments like this occur throughout Anna's recollections of Dominica. In one such instance, Anna tries to share the differences between the flora of England and Dominica with Walter: "But when I began to talk about the flowers out there I got that feeling of a dream, of two things that I couldn't fit together, and it was as if I were making up the names. Stephanotis, hibiscus, yellow-bell, jasmine, frangipani, corolita."¹⁰⁸ This remarkable moment highlights the key nature

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ 78.

of the failure of Anna's memories to transcend her present experience in London, for the two places are, to Anna: "two things that I couldn't fit together." The presence of the Caribbean, the location of Anna's memories and daydreams, intrudes repeatedly, whether she is alone or with others. Her Caribbean background informs all of her social interactions and interpolates itself into her thoughts again and again throughout the text. Yet Anna cannot incorporate her background into her present—the two things simply do not fit together. In this way, Rhys brilliantly exploits an innovative narrative form, in which the fragmentary narrative poetics of modernist stream-of-consciousness interiority is further fragmented by representations of colonial place. Rhys's fractured flashbacks of Caribbean places literalize the incompatibility of colony and metropole within the colonial subject.

To hold both Dominica and London in her mind, Anna must turn either the present or the past into a surreal kind of dream. And in fact, Anna has a stunningly vivid dream that attempts to combine the two places after she realizes that she is pregnant: "I dreamt that I was on a ship. ... Somebody said in my ear, 'That's your island that you talk such a lot about.' And the ship was sailing very close to an island, which was home except that the trees were all wrong. These were English trees, their leaves trailing in the water. I tried to catch hold of a branch and step ashore, but the deck of the ship expanded."¹⁰⁹ The dream sequence continues disturbingly, reaching "a climax of meaninglessness, fatigue and powerlessness" as Anna attempts to search for someone, possibly a child, who has fallen overboard¹¹⁰—but it is the initial creation of a distorted Dominica that I want to attend to here. Anna seems certain that the

¹⁰⁹ 164.

¹¹⁰ 165.

island she sees is *her* island—her home—and yet the evidence of her senses tells her otherwise.

Thus the dream suggests a combination of the two islands, Great Britain and Dominica, a combination that, under the British Empire, should theoretically be plausible, even natural.

Anna is a subject of the British Empire and, accordingly, is legally at home in England as well as Dominica. Yet as the novel has confirmed, Anna is not at home in England, and the synthesis of the two locations is impossible, perhaps even monstrous. When Anna tries to reach the island, the deck of the ship expands, preventing her from accessing it, in the same way that Anna can neither fully become a part of English society nor, it seems, Dominican society.¹¹¹ The characterization of Anna's in-betweenness suggests a greater level of nuance to Rhys's depiction of Anna—she is not, or not simply, an oppressed colonial subject, but also part of the white planter class, a class whose implosion Rhys would fully realize in her postcolonial achievement *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

In some ways, Anna's recourse to her sense of herself as oppressed figure is disappointingly naïve. Throughout the novel, Anna makes reference to the fact that she had, as a child, wished to be black, an echo of Rhys's own childhood feelings of "envy": "I decided that they [black people] had a better time than we did," Rhys says in her unfinished memoir, *Smile Please*. "They laughed a lot though they seldom smiled. They were stronger than we were, they could walk a long way without getting tired..."¹¹² Anna's feelings are much more frank and plaintive than Rhys's. "I wanted to be black, I always wanted to be black,"¹¹³ Anna says several

¹¹¹ "You know as well as I do that there is not the remotest chance of her ever being able to earn any money for herself out here," says her uncle who remains in Dominica (61).

¹¹² Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 34.

¹¹³ Rhys, *Voyage*, 31, 52.

times in the novel. "Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad."¹¹⁴ Anna's expressions of envy are phrased simply, her narrative voice almost childlike; these utterances come as she fantasizes about being cared for by Walter or by her black nurse, Francine, back in Dominica.¹¹⁵ Anna's desire for blackness is thus portrayed as, if earnest, also simplistic and unexamined.

Yet Anna's feelings extend beyond the childish envy described by Rhys into a kind of historical empathy that seems to pervade her consciousness. In addition to Anna's plaintive "mewing," the text also peculiarly incorporates a historical knowledge of the trauma of colonization and slavery that hints at a greater level of knowledge than what Anna can directly express. At one point, Anna describes for Walter "an old slave-list at Constance" that she had come across. "It was in columns—the names and the ages and what they did and then General Remarks.' ...Maillotte Boyd, age 18, mulatto, house servant. ... 'All those names written down,' I said. 'It's funny, I've never forgotten it.'"¹¹⁶ This fragment is remarkably suggestive: not just of the legacy of colonial trauma, but of the sense of women's history as marginalized, existing in the "gaps" and "silences" that define what Elaine Showalter calls "Women's Space."¹¹⁷ The name and age of Maillotte Boyd echoes hauntingly in Anna's mind several times in the novel—Anna, too, is eighteen, and her circling thoughts seem to suggest a connection between Anna's

¹¹⁴ 31.

¹¹⁵ Rhys's own nurse was a black woman named Meta, a figure whose mythic story-telling frightened and deeply affected the young Rhys. Anna's nurse, Francine, is named for Rhys's close childhood companion, a black woman who worked in their household, to whom Rhys was deeply attached (*Smile Please*).

¹¹⁶ Rhys, *Voyage*, 53.

¹¹⁷ Elaine Showalter, "Women's Time, Women's Space: Writing the History of Feminist Criticism," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3, no. 1/2 (1984), 30.

sexual relationship with Walter and a potential sexual relationship Maillotte Boyd might have had with the older and more powerful white master of the house. This interlude highlights a complexity to Anna's conception of black history in Dominica unacknowledged in her simple insistence that she wishes to be black. Though Anna's economic precarity is certainly no parallel to the social death of an enslaved black Dominican, Anna's perseveration on Boyd signals her own economic and sexual powerlessness. As Anna remembers Boyd, her imagination and her own transformation in the text add human detail and implied narrative to the spare details we are given about Boyd. Rhys thus hints at a rewriting of the cultural narrative that has erased Maillotte Boyd, overturning the powerful colonial narrative in favor of a resistant one.

More strange even than Anna's insistence that she has never forgotten the names on the slave-list is the interpolation of a seemingly verbatim scrap of Dominican history within Anna's consciousness:

'The Caribs indigenous to this island were a warlike tribe and their resistance to white domination, though spasmodic, was fierce. As lately as the beginning of the nineteenth century they raided one of the neighboring islands, under British rule, overpowered the garrison and kidnapped the governor, his wife and three children. They are now practically exterminated. The few hundreds that are left do not intermarry with the negroes. Their reservation, at the northern end of the island, is known as Carib Quarter.' They had, or used to have, a king. Mopo, his name was. Here's to Mopo, King of the Caribs! But they are now practically exterminated.¹¹⁸

If we read this scene literally, as I suspect we are meant to do—that Anna has, somehow, memorized this moment from a travel guide or history book—it indicates her extraordinary attention to the colonial history of Dominica. This is a novel dominated by stream-of-conscious thought, and the sudden interpolation of a new register, set off by quotation marks, is jarring.

¹¹⁸ Rhys, *Voyage*, 105.

Yet Anna is clearly thinking these words almost exactly, for she not only reflects on the historical information (“Mopo, his name was.”) but repeats it almost word-for-word (“They are now practically exterminated.”). The phrase “white domination” suggests a sympathetic reading to the Caribs’ “fierce” resistance, and the understated tragedy of the repetition of “They are now practically exterminated” seems to hint at Anna’s deeply held feelings of empathy, even of identification.¹¹⁹

This moment of startling extraliterary attention to the West Indies takes place at a moment of crisis for Anna—she has recently been thrown over by Walter, is recovering from another bout of fever, and has no prospects for making money or living a life independent of Walter’s financial assistance. The imperial metropolis has proven to be a relentless and crushing space for Anna, a location defined by urgency and despair. Only at this moment can Anna’s fragmented thinking push beyond the moments of vivid scenery or scraps of conversation within her memory to identify the true human cost of colonization, a cost that both includes and extends vastly beyond Anna herself.

In *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys’s insistence on the interpolation of the Caribbean into Anna’s present makes clear the text’s interest in an early form of anticolonial resistance. Yet *Voyage in the Dark* presents a picture of endless deferral, an interlocking relationship between colony and

¹¹⁹ This particular moment in the text has received some critical attention from Caribbean scholars such as Anna Snaith and Mary Lou Emery. Emery argues that this moment is not within Anna’s mind, but is instead “an excursion outside of that consciousness into the realm of public discourse” in *Jean Rhys at “World’s End”: Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007). Here Emery is describing what she calls the modernist interior monologue of Rhys’s stream-of-consciousness mode. Whether or not we are meant to read this as occurring literally within Anna’s thoughts, as I argue, or not, Emery’s reading, like my own, emphasizes the identificatory nature of Anna’s recollection of this Dominican history, calling it “a shared struggle.”

imperial power center in which colonial trauma extends across Dominican society. It is perhaps no coincidence that the original version of the text ends with Anna's death, while the published version, re-written by Rhys with significant hesitation, has Anna surviving her abortion. The pairing of these two endings suggests a failure of resolution in one direction or another, an intermingling of the past and the present that displaces any sense of real future. Thus Rhys's project is carefully attuned to the legacies of colonialism and its impacts on individuals across generations. Rhys's attention to the marginalized was recognized as early as her first collection, with Ford Madox Ford celebrating her "terrific—an almost lurid!—passion for stating the case of the underdog."¹²⁰ In *Voyage in the Dark*, that identification with marginalized subjects takes on a powerful political valence when read in the context of her rewriting of the London metropolis as the pale background for Anna's vivid Caribbean memories. The imaginative literary geography of Rhys's novel revises the imperial narrative of English superiority into one in which the metropolis figures as an internally incoherent and darkly oppressive mental state.

Over two decades before the rapid transformation of the British West Indies into a series of autonomous states, *Voyage in the Dark* offered an early anticolonial critique that challenges comfortable myths about the inherent goodness of universal Anglicization. Like novels such as Elma Napier's *A Flying Fish Whispered* or George Orwell's *Burmese Days*, it invites a deeper attention to the ways that resistance to colonialism can be figured prior to decolonization's beginning in earnest in the Caribbean: for Rhys, through an incorporation of place into consciousness that drives the novel's whole form. Rhys undermines the centering of the

¹²⁰ Ford Madox Ford, preface to *The Left Bank and Other Stories*, by Jean Rhys (New York: Arno Press, 1970), p. 24.

metropole, placing Caribbean locations at the heart of her work, even in a novel ostensibly set in London. And significantly, Rhys acknowledges her complicity in the imperial structure, as a white woman with historical associations with the planter class in Dominica. Rhys's writing transforms the London metropole, a phenomenological resistance that is articulated through the use of experimental form, in which Anna's consciousness is her only tool for opposing the oppressive forces of the imperial center. Through a deeper understanding of *Voyage in the Dark's* formal representation of its anticolonial critique, we can more clearly see how Rhys positions the Caribbean and England in her most famous postcolonial work, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

III. *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the Transformation of Place

In turning now to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I look to a novel that has been deeply mined for its postcolonial content. As Mary Lou Emery, Helen Carr, and others have described, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has often served as the basis for critics who describe Rhys as a postcolonial writer or, alternatively, marked the beginning of what is seen as her postcolonial period.¹²¹ Indeed, the postcoloniality of *Wide Sargasso Sea* has virtually never been contradicted, from its inclusion in *The Empire Writes Back*, with its attendant argument for the use of the term postcolonial, to Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, which, while questioning the term itself, uses Rhys's text as one of the field's emblems. Unlike *Voyage in the Dark*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published in 1966, well after the beginnings of the process of decolonization, and, as I have suggested earlier, marks her re-entrance onto the literary scene and her inscription as a Caribbean novelist.

¹²¹ Helen Carr, *Jean Rhys* (Horndon: Northcote Press, 1996) and Mary Lou Emery, *Jean Rhys at "World's End": Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007).

Reviews from the *Times Literary Supplement* immediately observed Rhys's vivid transformation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* into a West Indian tour de force, rewriting Brontë's novel to emphasize the untold Caribbean aspect of the plot. Nor were they unaware of the novel's commentary on the rapidly decolonizing British Empire and the emerging autonomous states in the Caribbean and elsewhere. One review shortly after the novel's publication claimed that while Rhys's "earlier heroines existed in a social vacuum...Antoinette's tragedy is in part at least the tragedy of the society to which she belongs."¹²² Similarly, Wally Look Lai's 1968 review emphasized the importance of the Caribbean half of the novel for its symbolic purpose "in order to make an artistic statement about West Indian society, and about an aspect of West Indian experience."¹²³ The novel's postcoloniality is thus inscribed from virtually its first critical reading, placing it within a new tradition of Caribbean novels that represent Caribbean and metropolitan sites after the beginnings of decolonization. Though *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set in the first half of the nineteenth century, the parallels between the historical context of post-emancipation and early decolonization are clear both within the text and to critics even as early as the 1960s.

Over the course the novel, Rhys depicts her Creole protagonist Antoinette's movement from several temporary homes in Jamaica and Dominica to her final, seemingly permanent residence in England, in Mr. Rochester's garret. *Wide Sargasso Sea* represents decolonization on multiple scales through its various settings, which stage the effects of colonialism within the

¹²² Mary Kay Wilmers, "A Fairy-Tale Neurotic: Review of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Rhys, Jean," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 17, 1966, 1039.

¹²³ Wally Look Lai, "The Road to Thornfield Hall: An Analysis of Jean Rhys's Novel 'Wide Sargasso Sea,'" *New Beacon Reviews* 1 (1968): 40.

colony and the metropole, on the colonized and the colonizer. The vivid destruction by fire of Coulibri Estate, Antoinette's plantation home in Jamaica, at the beginning of the novel parallels the burning of Thornfield Hall at the novel's close; this twinned structure highlights the importance of place to the novel's overall form and its thematic purpose. What is unique about *Wide Sargasso Sea* in Rhys's oeuvre, then, is the mutability of these places, the ways that the settings are repeatedly destroyed, unlike the parade of similar, oppressive homes in, for example, *Voyage in the Dark*. Yet the mirrored places at the beginning and ending of *Wide Sargasso Sea* also suggest a new kind of deferral, in which the violent overthrowing of a colonial system only serves to allow for the creation of another oppressive state for the marginalized.

The Jamaican family estate in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is characterized by its crumbling physical structure, highlighting the wreckage of the colonial plantocracy from which Antoinette is descended. The novel begins in 1839, immediately after emancipation in Jamaica; the family's dependence on slavery has led to their dramatic economic downfall. We are told from a variety of speakers in the novel that Coulibri Estate has gradually fallen into a state of disrepair. On the very first page of the novel, Antoinette describes a conversation with her mother about their family's physical and social isolation: "When I asked her why so few people came to see us, she told me that the road from Spanish Town to Coulibri Estate where we lived was very bad and that road repairing was now a thing of the past."¹²⁴ The connection between the state of the property and their sociality is clear: because the road is not maintained, their insular household is cut off from any social support. Yet the insularity of their household prevents any need to

¹²⁴ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1998), 9.

keep the road maintained as well, a self-perpetuating representation of the way that material spaces can produce certain social forms. Moreover, the dilapidation of the road is suggestive of the estate's economic failure as well—as no one works the land, no transportation of goods from the plantation takes place, and therefore no commerce supports the maintenance of the only available connection between the private land and the populous Spanish Town.

At first, Antoinette finds the physical presence of Coulibri Estate to be almost protective. As she lies in bed, she thinks to herself, “I am safe. There is the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe.”¹²⁵ Yet it is clear from this excerpt that the safety comes not just from her sense of the “friendly” nature of the dwelling space, but the vividly drawn natural scenery that surrounds it. The language of “friendly furniture” makes an interesting contrast with Anna's reaction to Walter's home in *Voyage in the Dark*, which is repeatedly described as “not friendly” and “sneering”—as in *Voyage*, the colonial location is associated with the safety and comfort of home.¹²⁶

But the voices of other characters repeatedly intervene, insinuating that Coulibri is not safe, either physically or economically. After her mother's marriage to Mr. Mason, Anna overhears visitors gossiping that Mason “will have to spend a pretty penny before the house is fit to live in—leaks like a sieve.”¹²⁷ Rochester is given similar information in the deceptive missive from Daniel Cosway that precipitates Rochester's break with Antoinette. Cosway

¹²⁵ 16.

¹²⁶ Rhys, *Voyage*, 36, 49.

¹²⁷ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 17.

explains that after “the glorious Emancipation Act,” there was “trouble for some of the high and mighties” of the plantocracy. “Nobody would work for the young woman and her two children,” Cosway explains, “and that place Coulibri goes quickly to bush as all does out here when nobody toil and labor on the land.”¹²⁸ These moments suggest that Antoinette’s childlike perception of Coulibri is not located in the basic physical attributes of the house, but that the estate is instead on a gradual path toward its eventual destruction by arson. It is no coincidence too that the disrepair of the estate is connected to the failure to work the land: the estate has failed because of the freedom of the former slaves who maintained it and their refusal to continue to work there after their emancipation. This particular historical context deftly interlocks the physical place—the house, the land—and the economic system of slavery with the social transformation of the post-emancipation period. The resentment of the freed slaves is both what causes the disrepair of the estate and will eventually lead to its destruction; thus does the legacy of slavery lead to the destruction of its own physical and social forms.

The Coulibri estate is marked by references to England and English culture suggestive of cultural colonialism. Antoinette is particularly attached to a painting titled “The Miller’s Daughter,” presumably based on the Tennyson poem of the same name. The painting depicts “a lovely English girl with brown curls and blue eyes and a dress slipping off her shoulders”¹²⁹—a style of dress that Antoinette later takes on during her short-lived honeymoon with Rochester. The dinner table is decorated with a “white tablecloth and the vase of yellow roses,”¹³⁰ entirely

¹²⁸ 57.

¹²⁹ 21.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

different from the native corolita and stephanotis that Anna recalls in *Voyage in the Dark*. These references to English culture stand out awkwardly against the Caribbean food that is prepared and the references to the natural world around the house; these imported cultural objects seem artificial, despite Antoinette's valuing of them. Paired with the descriptions of the estate as cut-off and crumbling to pieces, these references to English culture are suggestive of that culture's inability to function in the colonial location. Here, the setting unifies the personal and geopolitical dimensions of place. As Antoinette responds to the painting by recognizing its beauty and sympathetically taking on the dress of the miller's daughter, she brings into relief the effect of cultural colonialism, which positions the metropole as the center of taste and refinement. Antoinette's attempt to take on these characteristics further indicates the power of colonialism, which deforms her relationship to herself and to the land around her. Together with the house's isolation and dilapidation, the references to English culture suggest colonialism's simultaneous power and destructiveness.

In the act of arson that parallels the novel's end, Coulibri Estate is burned shortly after Antoinette's mother remarries. While Antoinette and her family are inside Coulibri, a group of black men and women, presumably recently freed slaves, comes to set fire to the house. Although Antoinette's stepfather is initially unconcerned, he quickly realizes the inevitability of the crumbling house's ruin, declaring, "This place is going to burn like tinder and there is nothing we can do to stop it."¹³¹ Mason tries to take the family to safety, but only after the

¹³¹ 24.

serious injury of Antoinette's brother, Pierre—an injury that will soon kill him and lead to their mother's descent into near-catatonia.

Antoinette's first reaction to the group of men and women outside the window is horror and unfamiliarity: "There must have been many of the bay people but I recognized no one. They all looked the same, it was the same face repeated over and over, eyes gleaming, mouth half open to shout."¹³² Through this description, Antoinette at first allies herself with the white Creoles for whom the black Dominicans are an undifferentiated mass—and, by the same token, the white colonial power that had enslaved them. Yet Antoinette's moment of incomprehensible sameness—so like Anna's reaction to the buildings and streets of England—quickly shifts into recognition when she encounters her close childhood friend Tia:

Then, not so far off, I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass.¹³³

Clearly, Antoinette identifies with Tia—in part through their similar relationship to the land: its food, its natural features. But Antoinette's attitude is childishly naïve; while they may have interacted with the land in similar ways, their relationship differs entirely in kind because of Antoinette's status as the child of landowners and former slaveowners. This moment is an echo of Anna's desire to be black in *Voyage in the Dark*; unlike in *Voyage*, though, Antoinette's feelings of identification are shot through with violence and confusion. As Tia throws the rock, she

¹³² 25.

¹³³ 27.

opposes Antoinette's belief in their sameness, refusing to provide sympathy or help. Yet this violence paradoxically causes Antoinette to feel even more convinced of their sameness; the violence that Tia brings into the relationship displaces some of the power differential and, for that single moment, allows Antoinette to take on the position of the oppressed. Tia's action forces Antoinette to see the futility of her desire to stay at Coulibri, to become absorbed in the lives of the black Jamaicans there. The destruction of the house signals the violent reaction against the colonial plantocracy on a thematic level, while Tia's action highlights the impact of colonialism on individuals: both Antoinette and Tia herself. Tia's rejection of Antoinette is also grounded in the land itself—the stone that she throws is literally a part of the natural landscape. As the stone falls back to the ground, the estate burns in the background, highlighting the destruction of what has been imposed by colonialism and slavery and the return to the natural world.

The burning of Coulibri is mirrored in the destruction of Thornfield Hall at the end of the novel. Unlike *Voyage in the Dark*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* features the repeated action of oppressed women to resist their oppressors, figured through transformations of specific sites. Yet the parallel between Coulibri's destruction and that of Thornfield Hall suggests that the forces of oppression will spring back up, and that radical transformation is not possible within the novel's context. The setting of Thornfield Hall functions as a strange, hazy double of Coulibri, the representation of the imperial power within the metropole, rather than its intervention into

the colony.¹³⁴ Yet, as we see in *Voyage in the Dark*, the metropole is presented as fantastic, both in imagination and in reality.

Antoinette both dreams about Thornfield Hall before her arrival there and refers to England itself as a dream, suggesting the metonymical function of the country house setting. She inquires about England several times while in Jamaica and Dominica, first telling Rochester that she has been told that England is “a cold dark dream” according to an acquaintance who has moved there.¹³⁵ Rochester disagrees, arguing that from his perspective, the Caribbean seems more like the dream. Antoinette also discusses the reality of England in conversation with her nurse Christophine, who questions whether “there is a country called England” at all.¹³⁶ Antoinette’s hopes and fears for her life-to-be in England tangle in an extended passage in which she conflates what she has read about England, her positive associations with it, and the repeated nightmare she has had about her future life there:

I will be a different person when I live in England and different things will happen to me.... England, rosy pink in the geography book map, but on the page opposite the words are closely crowded, heavy looking. Exports, coal, iron, wool. Then Imports and Character of Inhabitants. Names, Essex, Chelmsford on the Chelmer. The Yorkshire and Lincolnshire wolds. Wolds? Does that mean hills? How high? Half the height of ours, or not even that? Cool green leaves in the short cool summer. Summer. There are fields of corn like sugarcane fields, but gold colour and not so tall. After summer the trees are bare, then winter and snow. White feathers falling? Torn pieces of paper falling? They say frost makes flower patterns on the window panes. I must know more than I know already. For I know that house where I will be cold and not belonging, the bed I shall lie in has red curtains and I have slept there many times before, long ago. How long ago? In

¹³⁴ As Katherine Henderson has persuasively argued, the country-house figure of Thornfield Hall “reveals the way a notion of ‘real’ England relies upon and preserves colonial history even as it attempts to isolate and transform imperial legacies into ‘a memory to be avoided.’” In “Claims of Heritage: Restoring the English Country House in *Wide Sargasso Sea*” *Journal of Modern Literature* 38, no. 4 (2015): 99.

¹³⁵ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 47.

¹³⁶ 67.

that bed I will dream the end of my dream. But my dream had nothing to do with England and I must not think like this, I must remember about chandeliers and dancing, about swans and roses and snow. And snow.¹³⁷

In this passage, we see the incorporation of archival fragments that mirrors the memory of Dominican histories in *Voyage*. Yet here the history is not that of the Caribbean, which Antoinette seems to have lived far more viscerally than Anna, but the current state of England, rendered as a textbook image along with defamiliarized language. Not just “wolds,” but “snow” and “corn” are rendered as inexplicable in Antoinette’s imagination. Though Judith Raiskin has argued that the English cultural domination of colonial education in many ways makes England more ‘real’ to Antoinette in this passage than her own native Jamaica,¹³⁸ I see this fragment as suggestive not of colonialism’s power to convince Antoinette of England’s reality, but rather of its superiority. The image of the page itself is sharply depicted, while the representation of England is hazy, referred to other images that Antoinette can more clearly imagine. Her brief summary of England—“chandeliers and dancing...swans and roses and snow”—is poignant, a parade of nouns that Antoinette can barely imagine indicating her hope for a new life. Though J. Dillon Brown has argued that Antoinette “reads and absorbs, in the end, only what she wants to, and mistakes expedient words or images for the actual state of things,”¹³⁹ I see this passage not as a reflection of Antoinette’s self-centered naïveté, but as signaling the ways that her colonial education and background has presented the metropole as the apotheosis of taste and value. Despite the indications of negative experiences in England

¹³⁷ 66-7.

¹³⁸ Raiskin, 146.

¹³⁹ Brown, 581.

from her acquaintance, Anna has a lifetime of powerfully effective positive references to England that she cannot so easily overcome.

Her language wavers between certainty ("I will be a different person when I live in England") to questioning and then back to certainty: "I know that house where I will be cold and not belonging." This moment of magical realism for the novel suggests that Antoinette has dreamed of the exact place where she will ultimately end up: the prisonlike garret in Thornfield Hall. In this way, Rhys suggests the inevitability of Antoinette's fate. Yet by grounding this inevitability in a specific setting, Rhys shows the significance of place to the novel, both formally and thematically. England-as-dream is Antoinette's fantasy, created and enriched by myths of the superior metropole, by objects such as "The Miller's Daughter" painting, and by the English colonial education she has received. Yet the true knowledge of her carceral fate lies within her own consciousness, as clearly articulated as Anna's recollection of the history of the Carib tribe and King Mopo. These moments of extradiegetical knowledge come, for both protagonists, in moments of crisis, in which the descriptions of places spill over into their consciousnesses and blur the chronology of the narrative. As in *Voyage*, the intrusion of place into a modernist, stream-of-consciousness rendering of interiority serves as Rhys's formal method of centering place as part of the text's thematic purpose. The knowledge of her incarcerated future is as clear to Antoinette as the destruction of Coulibri is within its crumbling walls; the oppression of the colonial immigrant in the metropole as inevitable in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as it was in "Let Them Call It Jazz" or *Voyage in the Dark*.

The move to Thornfield Hall takes place after the disastrous honeymoon of Antoinette and Rochester at her family home in Dominica. Both Antoinette and Rochester employ

peculiarly artificial, childlike language in their representations of the new setting. For Rochester, as he considers the future of his marriage, he doodles an image of a house: “A large house. I divided the third floor into rooms and in one room I drew a standing woman—a child’s scribble, a dot for a head, a larger one for the body, a triangle for a skirt, slanting lines for arms and feet. But it was an English house.”¹⁴⁰ With the stroke of a pen, he closes off Antoinette, shutting her into the prison of the room that will contain her in Thornfield Hall. As Ian Baucom points out, Rochester’s production of this “carceral space... a reformatory of English identity” is possible in part due to the economic power he has achieved through the profits of sugarcane and rum, the exploitation of Jamaican slaves used to reinscribe English civilization and physically repress the colonial immigrant in Antoinette.¹⁴¹ Rochester’s easy economic and social power highlights Antoinette’s total lack of agency, both due to her gender, her economic position as a married woman,¹⁴² and her colonial status.

In a well-trodden later passage,¹⁴³ Antoinette describes Thornfield Hall as “made of cardboard,” a “cardboard world where everything is coloured brown or dark red or yellow that has no light in it.”¹⁴⁴ Both Rochester and Antoinette underscore the unreality of Thornfield Hall, an artificiality that parallels the fantastic dreaminess that Antoinette imparted to England in her

¹⁴⁰ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 98.

¹⁴¹ Baucom, *Out of Place*, 172.

¹⁴² Because the novel is set prior to the Married Woman’s Property Act of 1870, all of Antoinette’s previous wealth would have been settled upon Rochester at their marriage, as is noted by Antoinette in her conversation with Christophine in the text (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 66).

¹⁴³ Gayatri Spivak’s discusses the “cardboard house” in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” suggesting that this phrase implies that Antoinette has been brought into the England of Brontë’s novel” (250–1), performing the negation of the colonial that serves to consolidate the imperial identity via Jane Eyre. In *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 243–61.

¹⁴⁴ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 107.

earlier reflection. Unlike the vivid depictions of natural Caribbean settings, with their sensual references to heat and sun, green plants and colorful flower petals, Thornfield Hall is thin and unnatural, its created nature obvious through these descriptions. For Rochester, Thornfield Hall and its attendant carceral powers can be brought to bear on Antoinette with little more than a mild exertion of his will. He is able to construct the imprisonment of Antoinette using his power as a newly wealthy white English man. For Antoinette, the “cardboard” nature of the house suggests its frailty, like that of Coulibri. While we are not presented with any indication that Thornfield Hall is literally crumbling, as we are with the description of Coulibri, Antoinette’s representation of the house as cardboard is a clear foreshadowing of its destruction by fire. Cardboard suggests the earlier description of Coulibri: “This place is going to burn like tinder.”¹⁴⁵ From these descriptions, Rhys indicates both Rochester’s power over Antoinette, but also the final way that Antoinette will attempt to gain agency: through the transformation and destruction of Thornfield Hall.

The novel ends with a scene of Antoinette’s escape from her garret; she wanders through the house at night and in the house she imagines the objects and sights that populated Coulibri:

I saw the grandfather clock and Aunt Cora’s patchwork, all colours, I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in flames. I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs and the bamboos and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver, and the soft green velvet of the moss on the garden wall. I saw my doll’s house and the books and the picture of the Miller’s Daughter.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ 24.

¹⁴⁶ 112.

Antoinette imaginatively overwrites the setting of Thornfield Hall with her own childhood home, signaling the parallel between the two settings. Significantly, Antoinette mentions “The Miller’s Daughter,” the figure that represented English culture even within the Coulibri house. This reconstruction of Coulibri within Thornfield Hall suggests a transformation similar to that which Anna effects in *Voyage*, as Antoinette vividly inserts her own site-specific memories into the English setting. Antoinette’s recollection of Coulibri is a parade of specific, shard-like images, suggesting the comfort of her childhood in the patchwork quilt, the terror of the burning tree, and the natural world of the Jamaican landscape. Yet the description ends on the reference to the painting, with which Antoinette has identified and even sought to emulate. Rhys draws a strong connection between the two settings here, highlighting the insidious force of English cultural colonialism. Moreover, through the country house figure, Rhys suggests the continued legacy of colonialism throughout time: although Coulibri has been destroyed, a similar oppressive structure exists to incorporate the colonial immigrant in England. In reading this text in concert with “Let Them Call It Jazz” and *Voyage in the Dark*, we see that Rhys continues to represent these structures in her contemporary narratives as well, suggesting the ongoing effect of British imperialism, well past the historical setting of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Indeed, the country house of Thornfield Hall was still a clear part of English culture well into the twentieth century, even as parallel plantation structures in the Caribbean had in many cases been left to fall apart.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Including Jean Rhys’s own family estate in Dominica (Rhys, *Smile Please*, 38).

After overwriting the Coulibri estate onto her current surroundings, Antoinette fantasizes about jumping to her death, imagining that she is leaping toward Tia in a moment that again signals the burning of Coulibri. Brown has criticized readings that naively view Antoinette's action here as purely liberatory, noting accurately that Antoinette's "assumption of the mantle of postcolonial victim" and identification with Tia "erase the social and economic differences created by a racial hierarchy several centuries in the making."¹⁴⁸ Indeed, though Antoinette imagines Tia at the end of the novel, her actions are certainly self-motivated, resisting the site of imprisonment on a literal level, rather than the structural forces of imperialism that marked Jamaica forever. But after imagining Tia, Antoinette wakes—the imagined tour through Thornfield Hall has been a dream, and the novel ends with Antoinette setting out to put into motion the same series of events that took place in the dream. "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do,"¹⁴⁹ she thinks to herself, leaving the bedroom with the burning candle that will—as far as we know—destroy Thornfield Hall and blind Rochester. Yet we do not see this action in the text. Like Antoinette's premonitory nightmare of the garret, the destruction of Thornfield Hall is written into the text as something that happens first, and perhaps only, in Antoinette's consciousness. The only destruction that takes place within the narrative frame is that of Coulibri; the transformation that is actually effected upon a physical site is the annihilation of the former slave plantation. Though the eradication of the second site of oppression is suggested, it is not completed. For Rhys, while slavery has been abolished, there is no end in sight for the lingering effects of paternalistic,

¹⁴⁸ Brown, 582.

¹⁴⁹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 107.

xenophobic English culture, both in the colonies and in the metropole particularly. The reveal of Antoinette's dreaming state—that the imagined death and burning was not actually real—is shocking, even disappointing to the reader, who had imagined Antoinette's triumph against the forces that imprisoned her even as they claimed it was for her own benefit. Rhys deflates that expectation and then raises it once again, leaving the solution as endlessly deferred as the inability of the two islands to come together in Anna's dream in *Voyage*.

Just as Antoinette reimagines Coulibri onto Thornfield Hall in the novel's last scene, so too does she seek to reconstruct her fantasy version of England as well. In her final narrated section, Antoinette expresses her conviction that they "lost [their] way" while traveling to England and that the real England must be elsewhere.¹⁵⁰ Despite Grace Poole's insistence that they are, in fact, in England, Antoinette insists that the real England was a separate location, the "grass and olive-green water and tall trees" that she observed during her sole excursion out of the house.¹⁵¹ This pastoral landscape matches the England of Antoinette's hazy fantasy, with its insistence on weather and agriculture and attendant deemphasis of the social and the built environment. Like Anna, Antoinette feels that England has failed to live up to what she had been promised; the England she experiences is nightmarish enough to cause her to question the very nature of reality. Here again we find the betrayal of the imperial promise for the colonial subject, made especially horrifying due to Antoinette's lack of economic and legal rights during the first half of the nineteenth century. Both Anna and Antoinette struggle to accept the nature of the English setting as real and both work to transform it within their consciousnesses.

¹⁵⁰ 107.

¹⁵¹ 109.

Yet *Wide Sargasso Sea* differs because of the actions of the marginalized: both the free Jamaicans who burn down Coulibri and Antoinette herself, who sets out at the end of the novel to do what she has dreamed she can. The transformation of the colonial place, figured as Coulibri, is effected in a violent and far more tangible fashion than any other in Rhys's work. Yet the anticipated destruction of Thornfield Hall is in some ways more shocking: the colonial figure of Antoinette enters the metropole and, unlike Anna, seems to be on the verge of leaving a permanent scar on the English landscape. But it must be noted that, for Antoinette, the England of Thornfield Hall is not the real England—even if the house is burned, she will not, in her mind, be exacting her revenge on the state itself, but rather on the prison that has held her, on Rochester specifically. The England that seems real to Antoinette will presumably be unaffected. The novel's form highlights the resilience of the colonial place and the imperial master: though Coulibri burns down, Rochester draws a cage-like English house and Antoinette is instantaneously imprisoned. Just as we believe Antoinette has dramatically altered Thornfield Hall, the metaphorical seat of English civilization, she wakes, and we find that Thornfield Hall is still standing. And perhaps, though she begins the walk through the house that will lead to its ruin, the real England will remain entirely unaffected. In this way, Rhys answers the key question that drives her narratives of colonialism and decolonization: to what extent can the immigrant be incorporated into the metropole? For Rhys, the metropole will consume the immigrant and, despite attempts at transformation that range from internal to violently external, the colonial immigrant will be swallowed up by the undifferentiated mass of English culture, people, and places. The only transformation that takes place happens on colonial soil—as with Coulibri in Jamaica—or within the consciousness of the individual protagonist. Though

Rhys acknowledges the structural harm of colonialism, she does not, in her fictions of decolonization, articulate a form of resistance that is able to affect these larger structures.

Chapter Two: Decay, Decline, Destruction: V. S. Naipaul's Homes at the End of Empire

I. Fragile Houses

In his 1961 Trinidadian epic, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, V. S. Naipaul poignantly describes the purchase and destruction of a dollhouse: the novel's trope of the failure to achieve private housing written into miniature. Mr. Biswas, the novel's eponymous protagonist, purchases the elaborate and beautiful dollhouse as a Christmas present for his daughter Savi, who at the time is living separately from Mr. Biswas with his wife's family, the Tulsis, in a large family compound called Hanuman House. The expensive dollhouse's extravagant elegance enrages the Tulsi in-laws who live with Mr. Biswas's wife, Shama, and their children, Savi and Anand. Mrs. Tulsi, the matriarch, sharply criticizes Mr. Biswas for purchasing something only for his child, rather than all the children of the Tulsi clan: "When I give, I give to all," she says. "I am poor, but I give to all. It is clear, however, that I cannot complete with Santa Claus."¹⁵² A sister-in-law of the family tells a dramatic story "about an incredible doll house one of Seth's brothers had made for somebody's daughter, a girl of exceptional beauty who had died shortly afterwards."¹⁵³ The mounting rage at Mr. Biswas leads the other sisters to refuse to allow their children to play with Savi or the dollhouse and to the eventual crisis point, in which Shama destroys the dollhouse in an act of simultaneous bitterness and mercy.

¹⁵² V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (New York: Vintage International, 2001), 207.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

The scene is worth quoting at length. Mr. Biswas returns to Hanuman House to bring a present for the temporarily forgotten Anand and finds Savi sobbing, declaring that “they” have destroyed the dollhouse. The sight of the ruined dollhouse is shocking:

And there, below the almost bare branches of the almond tree that grew in the next yard, he saw it, thrown against a dusty leaning fence made of wood and tin and corrugated iron. A broken door, a ruined window, a staved-in wall or even roof—he had expected that. But not this. The doll’s house did not exist. He saw only a bundle of firewood. None of its parts was whole. Its delicate joints were exposed and useless. Below the torn skin of paint, still bright and still in parts imitating brickwork, the hacked and splintered wood was white and raw.

‘O God!’

The sight of the wrecked house and the silence of her father made Savi cry afresh.

‘Ma mash it up.’

He ran back to the house. The edge of a wall scraped against his shoulder, tearing his shirt and tearing the skin below.¹⁵⁴

The destruction of the dollhouse is thorough and seemingly senseless. The object of beauty that Mr. Biswas had brought to his daughter, a miniature version of the life of security and personal privacy that he hopes to provide for his family, is utterly annihilated. The Tulsis in this scene are figured much as they are in the bulk of the novel: as a force of powerful oppression, grinding Mr. Biswas’s individuality down until he fits within the existing social structure that they seek to maintain within their domain.

This scene lays out one of the key functions of place in Naipaul’s midcentury fiction: the role of the domestic house as a site of personal and structural trauma, an isolating place in which the effects of both personal and geopolitical history can be written. In Naipaul’s fiction of

¹⁵⁴ 209.

this period, domestic places represent the illusion of security, the colonial myth of home and family that, as it did for Rhys's protagonists, ultimately proves fraudulent. Naipaul highlights the fantasy of the single-family home in both his colonial and his metropolitan settings, narrating their destruction, as with the dollhouse, or their deflation, as the reality fails to live up to the expectations of the respective protagonist. As I will show in this chapter, Naipaul's radio work with the BBC program *Caribbean Voices* when considered alongside *A House for Mr. Biswas* signals Naipaul's clear-eyed grasp of the powerful influence of imperialism on Trinidad, both its landscape and its people. In contrast to current critical assumptions about Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas* and his *Caribbean Voices* editorial work show his understanding of and resistance to the harm done by colonialism. Yet as I will also show in this chapter, Naipaul pairs his historically engaged criticism of British imperialism in the Caribbean with a determination to draw parallels between universal human experiences in both colonial and metropolitan settings. In my reading of his underexamined novel published immediately after *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*, I show how Naipaul uses a parallel version of the domestic house to display a connection between the colony and the metropole that, while focused on the individual experience, is imbricated in totalizing narratives of empire.

The dollhouse scene in *A House for Mr. Biswas* reflects the complicated relationship between the individual and the larger forces of colonial history that Naipaul identifies both in this novel and throughout his work in the midcentury decades. Critical readings have often sought to draw parallels between the Tulsi family and imperial power structures. Kenneth Ramchand, in an early review of the novel, connects the Tulsi family directly to the colonial plantocracy. Criticizing Naipaul for what he feels is too direct of an authorial intrusion "in

deflating the Tulsis," he argues that the novel would have been a more effective political satire if Naipaul had simply "allowed the Tulsis' attempt to take the place of the departed French Creole estate owners to appear as what it is--the inadequate and pathetic fumbblings of a group that has been turned inwards too long to be able to cope with changing conditions," rather than disparaging them outright, and so directly in the context of Mr. Biswas's own, sometimes less-than-sympathetic desires.¹⁵⁵ Yet Ramchand believes that Mr. Biswas's struggle is grounded in the historical context of colonialism in Trinidad. According to Ramchand, Mr. Biswas "recognizes the blinkered insulation of this world and he senses its imminent dissolution. He spends most of his life trying, to escape its embrace, only to find that the future, the colonial society upon which he wishes to make his mark, is as yet uncreated. Mr. Biswas struggles between the tepid chaos of a decaying culture and the void of a colonial society."¹⁵⁶ The Tulsis have alternately been read as embodying Naipaul's fears for Trinidadian autonomy¹⁵⁷ and as a metaphor for the economic and social forces of African slavery on Trinidad.¹⁵⁸

Yet to read the Tulsis as directly paralleling a single historical moment is to deny the complexity of their portrayal in the novel. In the dollhouse's destruction, we can see the complex of social relationships between Mr. Biswas, Shama, and the Tulsis. At first glance, the Tulsis seem to stand in for the coercive social forces of cultural imperialism, crushing Mr.

¹⁵⁵ Kenneth Ramchand, "The World of *A House for Mr. Biswas*," *Caribbean Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (March 1969): 69.

¹⁵⁶ 62.

¹⁵⁷ Helen Hayward, *The Enigma of V. S. Naipaul: Sources and Contexts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 34.

¹⁵⁸ Gordon Rohlehr, "Character and Rebellion in *A House for Mr. Biswas*," in *Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1977).

Biswas's attempt to act independently of their expectations. Shama explains that her decision to destroy the dollhouse comes not from her desire to "please" the Tulsis, but from the way that she and Savi are ostracized by the rest of the family: "Everybody beating their children the moment they start talking to Savi. Nobody wanting to talk to me. Everybody behaving as though I kill their father...So I had to satisfy them."¹⁵⁹

The Tulsis are, undoubtedly, a force for conformity, rejecting Shama and Savi because Mr. Biswas's extravagant gift places the Biswas family in a position of social superiority which the Tulsis' ostracization attempts to curtail. But bringing the Biswas family down a peg cannot be completed by the Tulsis alone—it takes Shama's complicity in the act, and her desire to be a part of the family group, to return them to their former social status. Moreover, Shama's decision is portrayed sympathetically; the dollhouse *is* an extravagance and it is something that isolates Savi from the other children. Thus Shama is figured not as a blind force for conformity but a sensitive, if merciless, respondent to social conditions—far more sensitive, in some ways, than Mr. Biswas, who purchases the ostentatious gift with little thought of its effect on Savi's position within the family group at Hanuman House. Shama, caught between Mr. Biswas's individualistic impulses and the repressive force that is her own family, chooses to act in a way that will provide both social and financial security for herself and her daughter, even as she rejects the idealism that Mr. Biswas's actions suggest. Even the Tulsis, here, are portrayed with sensitivity. Though the destruction of the dollhouse is terrible, Mrs. Tulsi's initial defensive response that she cannot afford to give to all of the children at that level of lavishness is

¹⁵⁹ Naipaul, *House for Mr. Biswas*, 216.

sympathetic. While her words echo an imperial paternalism—in her view, she knows what is best for all of the families within her purview—she is also not wrong to wish to avoid jealousy and ill-feeling by giving to the children equally at holidays.

Yet the gutting of the dollhouse is shocking; the description of its broken pieces feels almost voyeuristic. Its damage is then impressed upon Mr. Biswas's body as he rushes into Hanuman House, tearing his clothing and, in parallel language, "tearing the skin below." Throughout *A House for Mr. Biswas*, we find ourselves drawn to sympathize with our protagonist, even as he acts in ways that are foolish or violent. Mr. Biswas's desires are simple, even naïve: a safe and private home for himself and his family. Like Antoinette, he believes in the power of a place to make a new future: in the home he imagines for himself, he will have financial security and individual pride. When the Tulsis act in direct opposition to his desires, they are, in part, signaling the complex of historical and structural forces that prevent Mr. Biswas from achieving his desires: poverty, racism, a lack of formal education, all inscribed into Trinidadian history by British colonial policies such as Indian indentured labor. Yet they are also acting to *protect* Mr. Biswas from his own choices, choices which, like the dollhouse, are both understandable and misguided. The dollhouse episode thus signals the twin reactions to colonialism that make Naipaul a complicated and frustrating writer of the decolonial period. Even as he acknowledges the harm done by colonialism and its ongoing legacy in the Caribbean, his novels also suggest the sense that the paternalism of English civilization is not entirely in the wrong. Like Anna and Antoinette, Mr. Biswas engages with the myths of home and security that pervade imperial narratives; unlike these Rhysian protagonists, who are betrayed by the metropole itself, Mr. Biswas is caught repeatedly in a deflation of his illusions

as a response both to structural forces and to his own choices. In Mr. Biswas, we thus see Naipaul's emphasis on sympathetic human feeling and the close association of individuals' emotional reactions with the places they inhabit.

II. *A House for Mr. Biswas*: The Dream of Place

Writing for the *New York Review of Books* in 1983, Naipaul describes the genesis of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, his third novel, as an idea that "was simple, even formal: to tell the story of a man like my father, and, for the sake of narrative shape, to tell the story of the life as the story of the acquiring of the simple possessions by which the man is surrounded at his death."¹⁶⁰ But this formal conceit was unsatisfactory—it was insufficient for the "truth" that Naipaul wanted his novel to contain. "In the writing the book changed," he explains, becoming "the story of a man's search for a house and all that the possession of one's own house implies."¹⁶¹ In this formulation, the story of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is defined by its titular drive—the search for the house and, indeed, the house itself, are not just the narrative arc of the novel's plot but also the book's motivation, its formal structure, and more, embodied in Naipaul's pregnant phrase "all that [it] implies."

The houses of *A House for Mr. Biswas* are central to our conception of the novel itself, as well as to a clearer understanding of Naipaul's cultural politics during this early stage of his career. Decolonization's multiple scales of spatial and geographic relations are figured, in the novel, as questions of how the individual can respond to the forces of poverty, of cultural

¹⁶⁰ V. S. Naipaul, "Writing *A House for Mr. Biswas*," *New York Review of Books*, November 24, 1983.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

conformity, of historical trauma, within the lens of the quest to find or build a home. The novel exemplifies Naipaul's extreme interest in isolation, particularly the way that isolation can be read through the vehicle of narrative setting and produced by intensely specific literary geographies. The 1961 novel, when read alongside his 1963 *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*, provides a clear sense of the ways in which Naipaul fictionalizes themes of isolation and exile, particular to the decolonial period, through the places that produce individual and communal identities. By exploring the significance of place in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, particularly the novel's emphasis on places both fragile and illusory, we can better understand Naipaul's representation of isolation in the context of British imperialism and Caribbean decolonization. As Baidik Bhattacharya has argued, Naipaul's conceptualization of space in *A House for Mr. Biswas* and elsewhere in his early Trinidadian fiction works against the reinforcement of either the British empire or autonomous Trinidad; instead: "his fictional half-made societies represent a historical juncture where the passage from the colony to the nation-state is structurally fluid."¹⁶² Bhattacharya points out that while other Caribbean writers of the period "mobilized this spatial uncertainty to construct a counterculture of modernity that Paul Gilroy describes as a discursive 'double consciousness,'" Naipaul, on the other hand, frames his literary geographies in a way that "narrat[es] the spatial frustration of a New World that repeatedly fractures modernist expectations of historical experience, nationality, and identity."¹⁶³ This emphasis on fractured expectation in the context of imperial history underscores the importance

¹⁶² Baidik Bhattacharya, "Naipaul's New World: Postcolonial Modernity and the Enigma of Belated Space," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 247.

¹⁶³ 247-8.

of place to Naipaul's fictions of the decolonial period, as the places of *A House for Mr. Biswas* represent both the pinnacle of Mr. Biswas's ambition and its repeated collapse.

Most apparently, the various houses in the novel allow us to understand the individual protagonist, producing not only his psychological motivations in the text, but also intensely paralleling his physical and psychological vulnerabilities. In the 1983 *NYRB* essay I cited earlier, Naipaul also describes his emotional state in the 1950s, just before he began work on *A House for Mr. Biswas*: "Thirty years later, I can easily make present to myself again the anxiety of that time: to have found no talent, to have written no book, to be null and unprotected in the busy world. It is that anxiety—that fear of destitution in all its forms, the vision of the abyss—that lies below the comedy of the book." This "vision of the abyss" underlies Mr. Biswas's search for a house of his own—a search for security and success painfully embodied in the physical world. As Gillian Dooley has observed, Naipaul's vulnerability and isolation in the 1950s in England parallels that of Mr. Biswas: "For Naipaul, the failure to succeed as a writer would mean an unfulfilled life of displacement: in Trinidad 'that society was such a simple one that I don't think there would have been room for me,' while in England, although 'I tried very hard...to get a job—to fit myself in,' he found 'there was nothing I could do.' For Biswas the danger is twofold: first, in his struggle to move beyond his family's crushing poverty, engendered by the legacy of Indian indentured labor in Trinidad, and second, in the threat of capitulation to the suffocating system of conformity and repression that is the Tulsi clan."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Gillian Dooley, *V. S. Naipaul, Man and Writer* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 27.

Mr. Biswas's search for "his own portion of the earth" is intimately tied to status and physical and financial security early in the novel.¹⁶⁵ As a very young man, living a precarious agriculture-based, uneducated life with his family in Pagotes, a rural area of Trinidad, Mr. Biswas writes a love letter to one of the daughters of the wealthy Tulsi family and, almost before he knows what has happened, is brought into Hanuman House, the Tulsi compound, and affianced to Shama, the object of his attention. His reflections upon leaving Hanuman House are telling:

When he had left Hanuman House and was cycling back to Pagotes, he actually felt elated! In the large, musty hall with the sooty kitchen at one end, the furniture-choked landing on one side, and the dark, cobwebbed loft on the other, he had been overpowered and frightened by Seth and Mrs Tulsi and all the Tulsi women and children; they were strange and had appeared too strong; he wanted nothing so much then as to be free of that house. But now the elation he felt was not that of relief. He felt he had been involved in large events. He felt he had achieved status.

His way lay along the County Road and the Eastern Main Road. Both were lined for stretches with houses that were ambitious, incomplete, unpainted, often skeletal, with wooden frames that had grown grey and mildewed while their owners lived in one or two imperfectly enclosed rooms. Through unfinished partitions, patched up with box-boards, tin and canvas, the family clothing could be seen hanging on lengths of string stretched across the inhabited rooms like bunting; no beds were to be seen, only a table and chair perhaps, and many boxes. Twice a day he cycled past these houses, but that evening he saw them as for the first time. From such failure, which until only that morning awaited him, he had by one stroke made himself exempt.¹⁶⁶

Both the reaction to the Tulsi family and his response afterward are framed by the figure of houses. From his first interaction with the Tulsis, he feels the oppressiveness of their family structure. They "had appeared too strong" just as Hanuman House itself is "furniture-choked," dark and stultifying. Yet the oppressiveness is also security: "too strong" implies fortitude even

¹⁶⁵ Naipaul, *House for Mr. Biswas*, 6.

¹⁶⁶ 85-6.

as it suggests the family's suffocating presence. This strength registers in Mr. Biswas as security and power that transfers to himself, particularly in the context of the contrasting physical structures that he passes on his way home. These homes are not "furniture-choked" but bare, "incomplete" both in their exterior structures and interior furnishings. Previously simply part of the background of Mr. Biswas's life, these houses suddenly come into focus as representative of the precarious life he believes he can escape by becoming a part of the Tulsi clan. What is more, the houses powerfully register on Mr. Biswas's consciousness, for he spends much of his adult life with the Tulsis similarly locked in the "ambitious" project of struggling to bring his own individual home to completion.

The figuration of the house as deflated illusion happens multiple times in the novel and is closely connected to the isolating effects of colonialism on Trinidadian society.¹⁶⁷ For much of the novel, the Tulsi family idealizes their supposed Brahmin Indian heritage. The sons-in-law who are the most religiously educated and apparently pious are favored; religious rituals are completed imperfectly but consistently. This kind of idealization seems common in colonial Trinidad, appearing with even greater fervor in Ismith Khan's *The Jumbie Bird*, in which the dream of the return to "Hindustan" pervades the interior life and indeed the entire paralyzed Bildung of the protagonist Jamini Khan.¹⁶⁸ But Jamini's imaginary version of India is deflated by

¹⁶⁷ My analysis here is related to Yi-Ping Ong's discussion of advertising in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Arguing that both the novel and Mr. Biswas himself frequently rely on the rhetoric of advertising, Ong concludes that ultimately the novel is a rejection of the "fantasy" suggested by advertising, in favor of new kind of realism. Like Ong, I note the transition from fantasy to realism, though I locate it in the physical setting, noting its cyclical nature as Mr. Biswas moves from home to home, rather than a narrative arc that occurs a single time. See Yi-Ping Ong, "The Language of Advertising and the Novel: Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 56, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 462-92.

¹⁶⁸ Ismith Khan, *The Jumbie Bird* (Harlow: Longman, 1985).

the reality of the deep cultural distance that imperial power both occludes and maintains. For the Tulsis, the effect of imperial Britain is similar: after Owad Tulsi returns from studying in London, he destroys “the family reverence for India” by sharing his stories of the revulsion he experienced when interacting with Indians in England.¹⁶⁹ The narrative structure of deceptively ideal home followed by disenchanting reality intensifies this moment of shattered illusion. The “homeland” of India, like the homes inhabited by the Biswas family, is both physically real but at the same time psychologically imbued with characteristics it cannot truly possess. The powerful and isolating sociocultural effects on individuals of colonialism are made even more clear by this formal parallel, which suggests that home both on an individual scale and on a geopolitical scale is a myth.

After marrying Shama, Mr. Biswas tracks a complicated path around Trinidad, living with the Tulsis in Hanuman House and later in a compound called Shorthills, interrupted by attempts to build his own home, which is finally brought to completion when he is able to purchase an urban home in Port of Spain. Naipaul has been explicit about the association between Mr. Biswas and the physical structures and possessions that surround him: “I wanted to tell the story of the life as the story of the acquiring of those simple, precious pieces.”¹⁷⁰ The creation and destruction of the various houses resonates with Mr. Biswas’s physical and mental states, with the moves to the Tulsi compounds serving variously as retreat and foil.

The most vivid example of the entanglement between Mr. Biswas and his physical setting comes in the slow disintegration of the house he attempts to build at Green Vale and his

¹⁶⁹ Naipaul, *House for Mr. Biswas*, 516.

¹⁷⁰ V. S. Naipaul, *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* (London: Deutsch, 1982), 72.

simultaneous nervous breakdown. Sent to work as an overseer for the Tulsis' laborers, Mr.

Biswas is disconcerted by the position and deeply uncomfortable with his role as superior to the laborers with whom he has little social connection. He moves out of the barracks that the Tulsis had provided for his housing and into a house that he has constructed as cheaply as possible, in part for speed and in part due to his lack of funds (stemming both from the Tulsis' parsimony and his own mismanagement of his earnings). Rather than pine floorboards, he chooses the cheaper soft cedar; the rafters are made from tree branches rather than planed wood. Perhaps most vividly, the used sheets of corrugated iron used for the roof are patched with pitch, which seals the cracks and successfully waterproofs the house, but creates a bizarre effect as the pitch melts in the summer heat: "The sun shone and the rain fell. The roof didn't leak. But the asphalt began to melt and hung limply down: a legion of slim, black, growing snakes. Occasionally they fell, and, falling, curled and died."¹⁷¹

As critics such as Helen Hayward have noted, the house's fragility corresponds to Mr. Biswas's own state of psychological vulnerability during this period which presages his nervous breakdown.¹⁷² He develops a crippling agoraphobia, as well as a paranoia that the laborers intend to burn down his new house. Each night, he goes to bed fearing the approach of laborers with torches, and "every morning he opened his side window as soon as he got up, looking past the trees for signs of the destruction in the fields he worried about. But the house always stood: the variegated roof, the frames, the crapaud pillars, the wooden staircase."¹⁷³ As his anxiety

¹⁷¹ Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, 252.

¹⁷² Hayward, *Enigma of V. S. Naipaul*.

¹⁷³ Naipaul, *House for Mr. Biswas*, 253.

grows, he begins to hallucinate a “billowing black cloud” that he can feel “pressing on his head”; the physical manifestation of his paranoia and his phobia of other people soon prevent him even from leaving the house.¹⁷⁴ Gradually we see the house begin to disintegrate further, bit by bit, as more and more “black snakes” of pitch fall from the ceiling. These too take on an increasingly horrifying aspect, as Mr. Biswas begins not only to dream about them, but “to regard them as living, and wonder what it would be like to have one fall and curl on his skin.”¹⁷⁵

The crisis reaches its apex when a violent storm—possibly a hurricane or associated tornado—causes the destruction of the house, as well as Mr. Biswas’s complete physical and mental collapse. The experience of the storm is focalized through Mr. Biswas’s son Anand, who has moved into the house with Mr. Biswas because, poignantly, he does not want his father to be alone. The vulnerability of both the man and the house are foregrounded as the storm rips the corrugated iron sheets from the roof of the house. With “a roar that overrose them all,” the storm strikes the house: “the window burst open, the lamp went instantly out, the rain lashed in, the lightning lit up the room and the world outside, and when the lightning went out the room was part of the black void.”¹⁷⁶ The imagery here is suggestive, highlighting not only the destruction of the house, but the storm’s entry into the house, the violent incursion of the natural world into the seemingly safe haven of the home. As Anand screams in fear, Mr. Biswas does not respond, lying motionless on the bed inside the “wall-less, floorless” house.¹⁷⁷ Mr.

¹⁷⁴ 254.

¹⁷⁵ 269.

¹⁷⁶ 279.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

Biswas's stupor takes weeks to lift, and he is moved to the shelter of Hanuman House for his recovery. The relationship of the destruction of the house to Mr. Biswas's collapse highlights not only his extreme investment in his own ambition, vis-à-vis the house, but also the failure of this attempt to develop his own individuality. For Mr. Biswas, the house represents the pinnacle of his self-actualization, the crowning achievement of the epic hero's journey. In this moment, the natural world intervenes, undermining the possibility that Mr. Biswas can achieve his goals—with a sense of inevitability and even fatefulness, as the intervention is not due to the Tulsis, or his own error, but the uncontrollable force of weather.

This early collapse of the illusion of home in *A House for Mr. Biswas* will be repeated cyclically in the novel, at Shorthills and in Port of Spain, as Mr. Biswas acquires a series of homes that prove, for one reason or another, insufficient or fraudulent. Again and again Naipaul writes of the same disappointment and disenchantment that Rhys's protagonists experience as well; the fantasy of the home is never matched by its reality. For Rhys, the fallacy of home is grounded in the imperial city, the epicenter of what is, for a white Creole like Anna or Antoinette, mythologized as a welcoming place. For Mr. Biswas, the illusion of the home is on a smaller and more intensely specific scale: the physical house that he will build, if necessary, with his own hands. In this way, the novel enriches our understanding of how the colonial-metropolitan relationship was lived in the decolonial period: as a time in which the myth of a positive relationship between colony and metropole will be punctured by the reality of the geopolitical transformation of decolonization. As Mr. Biswas is physically transformed in concert with the destruction of his home, so too has the landscape and populace of Trinidad been marked by the historical effects of colonial education, slavery, and indentured labor

practices. And in the house's fall, located partly outside of Mr. Biswas's control but, significantly, also partly due to his use of shoddy building materials and hurried process, we can find Naipaul's fears for the imminent Trinidadian autonomy. If the move toward autonomy is rushed, Naipaul seems to suggest, the new Trinidadian government will inevitably flounder and perhaps even, like Mrs. Biswas's return to the Tulsi stronghold, result in a return to the political system of imperial control that necessitated its freedom in the first place.

At several other points in the novel, we also see Mr. Biswas return to the Tulsi fold for physical and economic security. Mr. Biswas finds the Tulsi family home a "sanctuary," a physical place in which he can "become lost in the crowd."¹⁷⁸ His recovery from the nervous breakdown—occasioned in part by severe agoraphobia—is enabled in part because he does not have to risk departure into the outside world. Indeed, at certain points in the novel, Hanuman House takes on the significance of the entire world: "The House was a world, more real than The Chase, and less exposed; everything beyond its gates was foreign and unimportant and could be ignored."¹⁷⁹ The Tulsi family, like an imperial center, draws Mr. Biswas in because of the security in numbers and power it offers, conditioning him to lose his own individuality in favor of becoming a part of the large group. This is the insidious power of imperialism, which makes enclosure into the larger group not only secure but appealing. The reference to Hanuman House as the world, with the external community both foreign and unimportant, is perhaps one of the most direct references to the Tulsis as imperial power center. Here Naipaul suggests the universal Anglicization inherent in the British Empire's global dimensions, the "discourse of

¹⁷⁸ 180.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

collective identity” that groups together the disparate colonial places within the “world” of the British Empire.¹⁸⁰ By eliminating all outside influences, the Tulsis consolidate their power and encourage Mr. Biswas to not only be subsumed but in fact appreciate their repressive power. It is almost difficult to say whether Naipaul finds the power of the Tulsis encouraging or threatening—perhaps, in some ways, it is both. For Mr. Biswas, the time with the Tulsis is restful and formative, allowing him nearly a room of his own to recover himself—yet he is able to do so because he becomes an Ariel-like figure, blending into the Tulsi machinery without asserting himself. Ultimately, though, the Tulsis do fail to crush Mr. Biswas’s individual, enterprising spirit, suggesting perhaps Naipaul’s belief that the colonial subject with enough personal fortitude can escape the historical power even of imperial identity formation. Yet the circumstances that surround Mr. Biswas’s final house in the novel belie this reading, complicating our sense of Naipaul’s cultural politics.

The deflation of illusion happens a final time in the novel, when Mr. Biswas purchases his own home in Port of Spain after his career with the Government Office improves. The home, from fantastic first impression to precise reality, is described twice in the novel, both in the novel’s brief prologue and again during the novel’s chronological representation of the home’s purchase and habitation. The home is purchased from a local man known (though not to Mr. Biswas) for constructing and then selling shoddily built houses that look attractive from the outside but have serious structural flaws. “The very day the house was bought” the Biswas family notices problems: “The staircase was dangerous; the upper floor sagged; there was no

¹⁸⁰ Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.

back door; most of the windows didn't close; one door could not open; the celotex panels under the eaves had fallen out and left gaps between which bats could enter the attic."¹⁸¹ Yet the family manages to work around or overlook these problems: "And how quickly they forgot the inconveniences of the house and saw it with the eyes of the visitors! What could not be hidden, by bookcase, glass cabinet or curtains, they accommodated themselves to."¹⁸² And ultimately, the house is structurally sound, unlike the houses at Shorthills or Green Vale. When the house is opened to visitors after Mr. Biswas's death, though "the staircase shivered continually" and "the top floor resounded with the steady shuffle" of walkers, the house remains standing.¹⁸³ The house is in some ways the pinnacle of Mr. Biswas's ambition—deflated at every turn by poor construction and cheap materials, it fits neatly into the impulsiveness and mismanagement that have characterized Mr. Biswas's previous attempts to achieve independence and security. And yet despite its aesthetic problems, the house functions, providing a finally private living space for the family and both metaphorical and physical security. It is fitting that the house's final test comes after Mr. Biswas's death; the novel's refusal to commit to the triumph of its protagonist, despite its clear sympathy toward him, means that his achievements must always be undermined.

It is worth noting that Mr. Biswas is only able to achieve this final period of success after he achieves middle-class financial stability. By living on the Shorthills compound and working in Port of Spain, he saves enough money to begin the process of moving to the city. His

¹⁸¹ Naipaul, *House for Mr. Biswas*, 9-10.

¹⁸² 556.

¹⁸³ 564.

fortuitous career leap from journalism to working in a government office comes with substantial benefits, including a vehicle and a generous per diem. Thus Naipaul manages to suggest not only a gentle satire of colonial governance, but also the powerful structural barriers of poverty to any kind of physical security. Mr. Biswas's government job with the Community Welfare Department consists primarily of interviewing Trinidadians living in rural communities, gathering information for the vague purpose of "organiz[ing] village life."¹⁸⁴ Performing these interviews, he finds that his subjects are alternately "flattered" and flummoxed. Some, he explains, "were more than puzzled: 'You mean they paying you for this? Just to find out how we does live. But I could tell them for nothing, man.'"¹⁸⁵ Eventually the department closes, having made little or no progress in its vague and patriarchal goals—but the financial security it temporarily awarded Mr. Biswas has left him in possession of his house, if also in continued possession of a mortgage. His government job gives him the feeling that he is "at last getting at the wealth of the colony"—meaning, it is clear, the wealth of the empire and its bureaucracy on Trinidad, rather than the natural resources of the island with which he has engaged throughout the course of the novel.¹⁸⁶ Mr. Biswas's access to this wealth is, it is clear, temporary, based entirely on luck, and not extended to the remaining characters in the novel, most of whom remain in poverty. By presenting this fortuitous outcome for Mr. Biswas, Naipaul suggests not that a plucky individual can access imperial wealth through force of will, but rather that the system of class and financial security created by British colonialism is

¹⁸⁴ 476.

¹⁸⁵ 486.

¹⁸⁶ 487.

capricious and virtually impossible to enter. We can see clearly from this passage that even as Naipaul coldly articulates what he sees as the value of cultural imperialism—represented by the education that gives Mr. Biswas the chance to find a job, along with the security provided by becoming temporarily a part of the Tulsi clan—he also derides the colonial government in Trinidad, its bureaucratic excesses and its out-of-touch response to the problems of poverty for Trinidadian natives. He criticizes the lack of economic opportunity in Trinidad, suggesting through his portrayal of Mr. Biswas’s inexplicable rise to middle-class security that a lack of economic possibility in Trinidad is caused by the failure of the colonial government.

Unlike many Caribbean writers of the period, including his close contemporary George Lamming, Naipaul’s midcentury works do not include a novel that details the feelings of exile experience by colonial immigrants in London. Indeed, all of Naipaul’s early works were set in the Caribbean, frequently in rural settings like Pagotes or Shorthills. Yet the final phase of *A House for Mr. Biswas* takes place in urban Port of Spain. In his description of metropolitan settings of postcolonial novels, John Clement Ball explains that “metropolitan living is never simply a matter of dealing with present-day local conditions,” but rather “always involves maneuvering among the multiple spatial scales the city’s history, social reality, cultural associations, and built space evoke.”¹⁸⁷ Though Ball is referring to London here, his conception of multiple scales written into the landscape obtains just as clearly in the urban setting of Port of Spain as it does in metropolitan London. Port of Spain was influenced by historical forces as diverse as Indian indentured labor systems and British colonialism, as well as the 1940s

¹⁸⁷ John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 29.

American military presence and continuing colonial education system.¹⁸⁸ These layered historical contexts appear intimately in the physical environment of Port of Spain, in which homes are often built “from frames from the dismantled American Army camps”¹⁸⁹ and radio sets tuned to the BBC appear in many middle-class houses, including Mr. Biswas’s. Living in Port of Spain both with and without his family at different times in the novel, Mr. Biswas must navigate these contexts, which lead him to confront the impact of the forces of colonial history on the landscape and on himself.

Early in his marriage, Mr. Biswas lives temporarily with relatives in Port of Spain, where he is stunned by its size and by the intimacy of living in close proximity to strangers. During this period, Port of Spain was afflicted with a severe housing shortage and massive overcrowding in its existing homes. Though buildings were quickly being raised, the allure of increased employment prospects in the city, as well as a large population of illegal immigrants, made the housing demand virtually impossible to meet. The relatives live in a multi-family dwelling that forces them to interact with their neighbors, if not directly than simply by overhearing their daily lives: “The area between the kitchen shed and the back room was roofed and partly walled; so that the open yard could be forgotten, and there was room and even privacy. But at night gruff, intimate whispers came through the partitions, reminding Mr Biswas that he lived in a crowded city.”¹⁹⁰ Mr. Biswas also discovers that “the other tenants

¹⁸⁸ The colonial education system was still thoroughly entrenched even into the 1950s and 1960s. Various broadcasts by Naipaul for the BBC Colonial Service include school-day radio programs meant to elucidate great English classics, from Shakespeare to *The Mill on the Floss*.

¹⁸⁹ Naipaul, *House for Mr. Biswas*, 7.

¹⁹⁰ 299.

were all Negroes,” which only slightly discomfits him: “Mr Biswas had never lived close to people of this race before, and their proximity added to the strangeness, the adventure of being in the city.”¹⁹¹ The spatial organization of the city is like that of Hanuman House writ large, with the individual forced into proximity with unfamiliar others, taking on an intimacy that, in this case, goes beyond ethnic or racial lines. Yet the city is distinctly contrasted with the Tulsis organization: while the Tulsis work to bring about conformity, the city is capacious enough to allow for difference. For Mr. Biswas, the city is “made up of individuals, each of whom had his place in it.”¹⁹² In this description, we see the city as a canvas onto which the colonial history of Trinidad is written: the lack of economic prospects in rural Trinidad, the consolidation of industry into urban areas, and the economic draw of the presence of American troops, leads to a dramatic urban migration. Yet the city’s existing infrastructure cannot support the population it has attracted; the fantasy of urban dwelling is, for many, not realized. For Mr. Biswas, however, Port of Spain does provide a positive setting, if not economically then at least emotionally; the lack of stultifying pressure from the Tulsis helps him create his own “his place.” Again, Naipaul suggests a twin harm and benefit from colonialism, as the various population of the city, produced by the legacy of slavery and forced Indian labor, also allows for an expansive diversity.

While in Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas comes to a powerful realization that combines his quest for personal independence, the illusory nature of his dreams of place, and the impact of history on the individual. Feeling at first a sense of autonomy in the city, a liberation from the

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² 303.

demands of the Tulsis and his personal responsibilities more generally, Mr. Biswas comes to realize that this emancipation is false, as fraudulent as the promise of the Tulsi clan and his first attempts to secure his own housing. "His freedom was over," Mr. Biswas realizes, "and it had been false. The past could not be ignored; it was never counterfeit; he carried it within himself. If there was a place for him, it was one that had already been hollowed out by time, by everything he had lived through, however imperfect, makeshift and cheating."¹⁹³ This passage powerfully draws together several of the novel's key questions of place, figured within the urban environment and Mr. Biswas's reaction to that setting. Though the city's diversity seemed to suggest a freedom produced, in part, by the effect of colonialism on the composition of the population, Mr. Biswas realizes here that he is no more free in the city than elsewhere. Mr. Biswas first asserts that he carries the past within himself: not just his own past, but the larger past of geopolitical change, comprising Trinidadian, British, and Indian cultures and political structures. This reference to the effect of the past on the body calls to mind the way that the destruction of the dollhouse marks Mr. Biswas's skin; the annihilation of place changes the body itself. It also suggests Naipaul's own midcentury comments about the way that he is marked as other in London: "The people in authority feel my qualifications fit me only for jobs as porters in kitchen, and with the road gangs. My physique decrees otherwise."¹⁹⁴

The past is carried both within the self and also within the structures of the homes and of the cities themselves. The bare homes of rural Pagotes highlight the area's poverty as well as

¹⁹³ 303.

¹⁹⁴ Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V. S. Naipaul* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 136.

the legacy of Indian indentured labor on Trinidad; the Shorthills compound and its decrepit luxury signal the decline of the plantocratic system; even some of the homes in Port of Spain are built from the fragments of the American military occupation. The physical environment in *A House for Mr. Biswas* helps us grasp the import of this historical context of imperialism on the individual. Mr. Biswas's revelation is that the "place" that may exist for him must be "hollowed out" both by "everything he had lived through" — that is, his own unique experiences — as well as by "time" itself. In other words, the place that Mr. Biswas can find security in, the place that will be his refuge, will not be the fresh and beautiful self-built home of his dreams, but rather a reflection of his own personal past and the larger imperial past. For Mr. Biswas, the landscape of Trinidad is not enriched by the presence of English culture, but "hollowed out" by it, just as Mr. Biswas's experiences in Port of Spain and elsewhere serve to deflate and destroy his illusions of the glorious place that awaits him. The place that he will find for himself is "imperfect, makeshift, and cheating" — not grand at all. In this way, the effects of colonialism on Trinidad, and the attendant dream of an Indian or even a British homeland, are shown through the novel's formal geographies to be a powerful force of isolation. Mr. Biswas's home, a reflection of both himself and his past, does not connect him to a rich culture of English or Indian identity. Instead, it is hollowed out, and Mr. Biswas is left bereft both of history and of fantasy.

III. Naipaul at the BBC and the Creation of a Caribbean Literary Community

In this section, I turn to Naipaul's radio work with the BBC during the 1950s, shortly after his arrival in England and before the composition of *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Naipaul's

early work with the BBC emphasized and indeed helped to drive the development of a Caribbean literary community, highlighting the cultural colonialism that had left the Anglophone Caribbean bereft of its own literary aesthetic and idealized the literary production of the English “homeland.” In the midcentury decades, we find something other than the Naipaul so roundly criticized at the end of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. From what Terry Eagleton calls Naipaul’s “harsh, unforgiving elitism”¹⁹⁵ to Pascale Casanova’s assessment of Naipaul as “a traitor to the colonized condition,”¹⁹⁶ critics, postcolonial and otherwise, have emphasized Naipaul’s political conservatism even as they grudgingly admit his talent.¹⁹⁷ (“Great art, dreadful politics” is the frequently adduced Eagleton quotation, missing the crucial final phrase: “it is the link between the two that needs to be noted.”¹⁹⁸)

Yet some recent studies of Naipaul have sought to add nuance to this view. As Alison Donnell has suggested, “these charges” of derision and contempt for the Caribbean, “while not easily dismissed, do not bring full satisfaction.”¹⁹⁹ In addition to Donnell’s recent article on queering Naipaul’s relationship to the Caribbean, John McLeod has attempted to explain Caryl Phillips’s ongoing affection for and attention to Naipaul.²⁰⁰ Sanjay Krishnan has argued that

¹⁹⁵ Terry Eagleton, “A Mind So Fine: The Contradictions of V. S. Naipaul,” *Harper’s*, September 2003, 84.

¹⁹⁶ Pascale Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 212.

¹⁹⁷ Edward Said too has criticized Naipaul’s political positioning, most famously in “Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World,” in which he describes Naipaul as “desperate” for the approval of “metropolitan intellectuals,” trading in “the cheapest and the easiest of colonial mythologies about wogs and darkies, myths that even Lord Cromer and Forster’s Turtons and Burtons would have been embarrassed to trade in outside their private clubs” (53). In *Salmagundi* 70/71 (Spring-Summer 1986): 44-64.

¹⁹⁸ Eagleton, 84.

¹⁹⁹ Alison Donnell, “V S Naipaul, a Queer Trinidadian,” *Wasafiri* 28, no. 2 (2013), 59.

²⁰⁰ John McLeod, “Vido, Not Sir Vidia: Caryl Phillips’s Encounters with V.S. Naipaul,” in *Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life*, ed. Bénédicte Ledent and Daria Tunca (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012).

“the relationship between Naipaul’s Eurocentrism and his past is more complicated than such readers would have us believe. Naipaul’s premise is that subjects in the periphery are shaped by complex pasts that they are not well placed to comprehend.”²⁰¹ In my examination of Naipaul’s role in the London and West Indian literary scene in the 1950s and 1960s, I too find a more politically complex Naipaul than many critics suggest. In particular, by reading his commentary during his editorship of *Caribbean Voices*, as well as his contributions to other radio programs in the 1950s, we can discover Naipaul’s interest in the development of a global literary community and his own conflicted relationship with the British people among whom he lived and the British audience upon which he materially depended. For Naipaul, the driving factor of his editorial choices was his emphasis on literary style, well beyond literary content. Indeed, for Naipaul, great literature was defined not by its subject matter, but by clean writing, honest representation of its subjects, and sympathetic characterization. This aesthetic, for Naipaul, was not only a powerful inducement to better writing and future publication, but a kind of ethical and even political responsibility, one that imagines the emancipation from the powerful effects of English literary culture and the development of a new kind of specifically Caribbean style.

In December 1954, twenty-two-year-old V. S. Naipaul had just started his first job—editor of the BBC radio program *Caribbean Voices*. For over a decade, *Caribbean Voices* had served as the oral literary magazine of the West Indies. Broadcast out of London directly to the British colonies in the Caribbean, *Caribbean Voices* nurtured West Indian writers of prose and poetry,

²⁰¹ Sanjay Krishnan, “V. S. Naipaul and Historical Derangement,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 2012), 434.

giving them not only a community but critical acceptance and feedback, as well as, perhaps most crucially, financial support. It was, as E. K. Brathwaite later described it, “the single most important literary catalyst for Caribbean creative and critical writing in English.”²⁰²

In May of 1954, V. S. Naipaul had written, rigidly and awkwardly, to J. Grenfell Williams, the head of the BBC Colonial Service. One year after taking his degree at Oxford, finding himself no longer interested in completing the B. Litt he had begun, Naipaul was then “trying to place myself in suitable employment. One thing I certainly do not want to do,” he said:

Go back to Trinidad or any other island in the West Indies if I can help it. I very much want to go to India. But there are many difficulties. I cannot be employed on the Indian side because I am British, and on the British side, I cannot be employed because I am not English. I think it is almost impossible for me to do anything worthwhile in this country, for reasons which you doubtless know.... I deeply regret obtruding a purely personal problem on you; but if you can reveal a glimmer of hope, I will be very grateful.²⁰³

By this time, Naipaul had submitted his work and been accepted to *Caribbean Voices* several times, beginning at age 18; he had also been paid to read not only his own short stories, but the creative work of other West Indian writers not living in London at the time, including his own father. *Caribbean Voices*’ longtime editor, Henry Swanzy, was shortly to be transferred to another area of the BBC Colonial Service and so Naipaul was offered the position of editor, in concert with producer and former cricket star Kenneth Ablack.

²⁰² Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), 87.

²⁰³ Letter from V. S. Naipaul to J. Grenfell Williams, 14 May 1954, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

Recent years have seen growing interest in BBC radio and television archives, from Amanda Bidnall's discussion of the roles of Caribbean actors and singers²⁰⁴ to James Procter's recovery of Una Marson's 1940s role in the development of Caribbean programming such as *Calling the West Indies* and *Caribbean Voices*.²⁰⁵ Building on work begun as early as Rhonda Cobham's 1986 exploration of the *Caribbean Voices* archive,²⁰⁶ critics such as Glyne Griffith and Philip Nanton have thoughtfully explored the cultural politics evinced by Henry Swanzy's editorial tenure and his role in shaping the publishing trajectory of numerous Caribbean writers.²⁰⁷ Alison Donnell has sought to fill in the history of "lost" women writers of the Windrush period by examining women's fiction on *Caribbean Voices*,²⁰⁸ while Peter Kalliney has explored the connections and competition between high modernists and the rising stars of Caribbean literature in the 1950s.²⁰⁹ Yet, perhaps because of Naipaul's fraught position within postcolonial criticism more widely, his editorial term at *Caribbean Voices* is generally minimized in the recent treatment of the BBC archive. In the coda to *Migrant Modernism*, J. Dillon Brown examines Naipaul's editorial tenure in the context of the Movement, arguing that Naipaul

²⁰⁴ Amanda Bidnall, *The West Indian Generation: Remaking British Culture in London, 1945-1965* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

²⁰⁵ James Procter, "Una Marson at the BBC," *Small Axe* 19, no.3 (2015): 1-28.

²⁰⁶ Rhonda Cobham, "The *Caribbean Voices* Programme and the Development of West Indian Short Fiction: 1945-1958," in *The Story Must be Told: Short Narrative Prose in the New English Literatures*, ed. Peter O. Stummer, 146-60 (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1986).

²⁰⁷ Glyne A. Griffith, *The BBC and the Development of Anglophone Caribbean Literature, 1943-1958* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and Philip Nanton, "What Does Mr. Swanzy Want—Shaping or Reflecting? An Assessment of Henry Swanzy's Contribution to the Development of Caribbean Literature," *Caribbean Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (2000): 61-72.

²⁰⁸ Alison Donnell, "Rescripting Anglophone Caribbean Women's Literary History: Gender, Genre and Lost Caribbean Voices," in *Beyond Windrush: Rethinking Postwar Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. J. Dillon Brown and Leah Reade Rosenberg, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 79-96.

²⁰⁹ Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters*.

“advances an aesthetic project that sounds like an uncanny double of Amis’s.”²¹⁰ While Brown convincingly traces the continuity of Naipaul’s aesthetic preferences through the next generation of Caribbean writers, his portrayal of Naipaul’s editorial comments as “adamantly in favor of effacing political concerns” seems to me to continue a critical tradition that understands Naipaul’s cultural politics as unchanging, persistently at odds with the political nationalism of his fellow Caribbean writers. By reading Naipaul’s editorial comments alongside his other 1950s writings, I instead identify a vibrant resistance to English colonialist discourse, an acknowledgment of the ongoing violence of racism in England, and a call for a new kind of Caribbean literature that, he envisions, can be truly free from English influence through its groundedness in Caribbean sites and Caribbean characters.

Just one week after his first editorial broadcast, Naipaul’s incisiveness and well-known acid wit were apparent in his critical introductions. Naipaul’s introduction to his second editorial program is, characteristically, simultaneously critical and empathetic in his attitude toward the West Indian literary tradition:

The British West Indies are in a unique position. All its inhabitants are emigrants. The West Indies today is an amalgam of peoples of nearly every race under the sun, bar the Japanese. There is therefore no binding national tradition; such traditions as exist are derived from Britain. In the schools, the children read poems about daffodils and daisies which most of them, alas, will never see. ...The West Indian writer is therefore in a difficult position. He has grown up in a certain tradition, and yet he is not quite sure of that tradition. He needs an outside audience, since the population is too small to support him. He tends to do one of two things. He tries to develop the tourist’s eye; or he attempts to ally himself to literary movements in America, or British. We had a spate of

²¹⁰ J. Dillon Brown, *Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 172.

Steinbecks at one time; Runyon still has his devotees; and Joyce has had his share of imitators. This sort of imitation is dangerous and wasteful.²¹¹

This introduction helps to lay out several of the themes that would guide Naipaul's editorial selections and introductions over the subsequent two years. He highlights the difficulty of developing a West Indian literary community, along with a specifically West Indian literary aesthetic, given the powerfully influential legacy of British colonial education that provides a literary history based primarily in the literature of an island to which most West Indian writers had no tangible connection.

Due to the lack of an existing West Indian tradition, Naipaul explains, the result has been an influx of submissions to *Caribbean Voices* that obviously derive from English and American literary styles. From the first, Naipaul's position contrasts with that of Henry Swanzy, his Anglo-Irish predecessor at *Caribbean Voices*. Throughout his tenure as editor, Swanzy worked to encourage and nurture new Caribbean writers, often giving specific advice as to how they might improve their submissions. Like Naipaul, Swanzy also wanted West Indian writers to avoid imitative styles, speaking critically even of authors he admired, such as Edward Brathwaite, who had submitted poems that, according to Swanzy, sounded just like T.S. Eliot. As Peter Kalliney observes, Swanzy was dedicated to helping create an autonomous literature in the West Indies, particularly one that avoided "the dreaded Romantic poetry of birdsong and lush meadows."²¹² But Swanzy's encouragement focused frequently on what he called "local

²¹¹ V. S. Naipaul, 12 December 1954, BBC *Caribbean Voices*, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

²¹² Kalliney, 125. Kalliney also notes Swanzy's role in supporting the creation of the pioneering Barbadian journal *Bim*, edited by Frank Collymore, as evidence of his interest in the development of a West Indian literature not dependent on metropolitan patronage or models.

colour”; in his view, avoiding derivative writing could be done effectively through recourse to dialect and local specifics.

Naipaul’s trenchant observation that the traditions of the West Indies “are derived from Britain” sharply critiques the idea that simply by providing more West Indian flavor can a writer avoid imitation. Indeed, Naipaul repeatedly notes that he does *not* want more “local colour.” Even as he criticizes novelist Edgar Mittelholzer for “ordinariness” —that is, he says, a lack of “West Indian-ness” in his latest novel—he says: “I am not complaining about a lack of local colour. I am not saying that he should use more dialect. What I mean is that the flavor of the West Indies seems somehow to evaporate in Mittelholzer’s work, and no amount of insistence of the shade of people’s skins or the precise degree of kinkiness in their hair can altogether remove this sense of loss.”²¹³ For Naipaul, Mittelholzer’s writing has become too “professional”: as he has developed his craft, he has lost the specificity and heart that made his earlier writing that of a West Indian “insider.”²¹⁴ Yet place is nonetheless an important aesthetic

²¹³ V. S. Naipaul, 22 January 1956, *BBC Caribbean Voices*, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

²¹⁴ This differences between Swanzy’s and Naipaul’s critical responses to the submissions they received is of particular interest to Glyne Griffith. Griffith notes that Swanzy’s “idea of the necessity of ‘local color’ in the submissions read on the program was linked to the artistic value of the truth of representation or verisimilitude, and simultaneously to the idea that any possibility of universal truth that might be discovered in the literary manifestation of the author’s imagination would itself be a product of the work’s rootedness in the local and particular” (32). Griffith sees this emphasis on the local and specific as a response to the “hegemonic colonialist representation” of Caribbean geography as amorphous and unreal, providing instead a “substantive alternative geography” (76). For Griffith, Naipaul’s critical position was primarily a negative one: “Naipaul’s tendency [was] to criticize perceived weaknesses in submissions without offering clear and focused guidance in the manner that Swanzy had employed” (144). Noting that “as a cultural ‘insider,’ [Naipaul] probably would not have felt the same uneasiness in unabashedly criticizing regional literary practice as Swanzy had felt,” Griffith observes a consistent trend in Naipaul’s editorial commentary toward restraint, rather than Swanzy’s general attitude of encouragement (145).

category for Naipaul—perhaps the most important, as it is the regional character of the literature that Naipaul most wants to return to in Mittelholzer’s fiction. His struggle to articulate the exact meaning of this regionality in terms of its stylistic content is clear. His reference to the “flavor” of the Caribbean in Mittelholzer’s work is vague—clearly it is not necessarily related to description or dialect, which he seems to think is not in and of itself sufficient. Instead, as we shall see, he values a representation of Caribbean sites that is both accurate and, in his view, sensitive. In Naipaul’s view, the best Caribbean literature treats its Caribbean characters and, crucially, its settings with respect, depicting them wholly, without an overemphasis on either their virtues or their flaws.

Repeatedly in these editorial comments, Naipaul expresses some of the conservative aesthetic and sociopolitical attitudes for which he has since been roundly criticized: “Writers are so boring when they are only being black,” for example, in 1956.²¹⁵ (Brown notes drily in his examination of Naipaul’s *Caribbean Voices* editorship: “Race, of course, is also eschewed.”²¹⁶)

Yet it is difficult to overlook the numerous ways that an anticolonial politics finds voice in Naipaul’s editorial comments. Writing for the BBC in 1958, he praises writer Leslie Roberts for his respectful treatment of characters who could too easily be portrayed as “quaint and picturesque and backward.” Rather, Naipaul says, “Roberts sees his characters the way, one feels, they see themselves.”²¹⁷ More than once, Naipaul praises Roberts and others for writing

²¹⁵ V. S. Naipaul, 16 September 1956, *BBC Caribbean Voices*, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

²¹⁶ Brown, 173.

²¹⁷ V. S. Naipaul, 31 August 1958, *BBC Caribbean Voices*, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

not just with the insider knowledge of the Caribbean that their birth afforded them, but with humor and with love, what he terms a “sensitive humanitarianism.” It is in this humanitarianism “that lies the appeal of the writing and the hope for social improvement in the Caribbean.”²¹⁸ This is a crucial sentence, yoking together as it does Naipaul’s emphasis on style and his belief that literature can not only describe a social problem but, through respectful and generous treatment of its subjects, effect political and societal change: “the hope for social improvement in the Caribbean.”

I have brought together in short order some of Naipaul’s most problematic comments regarding race and his most explicit statements on the political power of literature. In doing so, I aim to portray as clearly as possible the ways in which his 1950s cultural politics were, at times, internally contradictory and not always precisely articulated. Naipaul’s disregard of race, as quoted above and elsewhere in his editorial comments, remains deeply problematic. Yet it is nonetheless true that the Naipaul of the 1950s was far more willing than the Naipaul of later decades to acknowledge the effects of racial prejudice on his own life. His letter to J. Grenfell Williams quoted above highlights his conviction that his racial background and regional origin have barred him from gainful employment in England even as it reveals his discomfort in acknowledging this fact. During his period of unemployment during 1954, he proposed a script to the Colonial service titled “A Culturally Displaced Person,” which focused on his experience of race and culture as an ethnically Indian Trinidadian in England. It was rejected by the head of the Eastern Service, Gordon Waterfield, as “exaggerated.” Waterfield notes:

²¹⁸ V. S. Naipaul, 19 June 1955, BBC *Caribbean Voices*, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

The reference to being educated in an alien tradition and speaking its language and thinking in it, surely this is a rather out-of-date form of nationalism; the Indian official in India finds it useful that he has had this background since it links him with the outside world and enables him to do business effectively, to take part in international conferences with effect, etc. etc. ... It seems to me that there is an underlying idea in this talk that part of Britain's colonialism has been to suppress an existing language in India; but that is not the case. Mr. Naipaul could, it seems to me, equally write a good talk saying how lucky it is that he knows English since it enables him to keep in touch with Indian thought, Indian novelists, etc., for most of the intellectuals write in English.²¹⁹

This then is the context in which we ought to understand Naipaul's developing political consciousness—a situation in which the official erasure of pre-colonial history is taken as a given. Naipaul's rage during this period at his unemployment is, indeed, often couched in racial terms as well. In a letter in response to his soon-to-be-wife Patricia Hale's suggestion that he "go out and get a clerical job," Naipaul furiously retorted: "I hate to spring a surprise on you... but the people in authority feel my qualifications fit me only for jobs as porters in kitchen, and with the road gangs. My physique decrees otherwise... Niggers ought to know their place."²²⁰

Obviously, Naipaul's reaction to racial prejudice in the period is sharply personal—and, characteristically, pragmatic, more pointed when it affects his financial situation than, say, when he travels first class to the Caribbean, as in the snobbish opening to *The Middle Passage* for which he has been criticized. Yet Naipaul's concerns are also political and structural. "You think I talk a lot of rot about history," he writes to Hale in 1954. "But I wonder whether you ever consider that my position has been caused by several complex historical factors: the slave trade, its abolition; British imperialism and the subjection of Indian peoples; the need for cheap labor

²¹⁹ Gordon Waterfield, "Memo," 25 October 1954, BBC Eastern Service, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

²²⁰ French, 136.

on Caribbean sugar plantations; Indian indentured immigration.”²²¹ Thus to see Naipaul’s outright rejection of writers focusing on color as one of intentional ignorance or naïveté is inaccurate; Naipaul in the 1950s is powerfully interested in the impact of historical forces on the individual encounters that make up what Frantz Fanon calls the “violent phenomenon” of decolonization.²²² Naipaul’s dismissal of social protest literature out of hand is certainly overly simplistic; when he criticizes writers who are, in his view, “only being black,” he rejects numerous writers who are attempting to work through the very “complex” of historical factors he describes to Hale.

Yet Naipaul’s model for how to do social protest is grounded in style. His concern is that literature that engages explicitly with political factors such as race at times loses its grounding as an aesthetic object. When he complains that writers exploring racial prejudice or poverty are “boring” or “too facile,” his criticism explicitly makes the case for an altogether different kind of political literature, one in which the political content is based upon cultural authenticity. For Naipaul, literature that engages explicitly with these factors at times loses its grounding as an aesthetic object; this conception of Naipaul’s attitude toward political fiction thus clarifies some of the complexity of theme of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, in which the multivalent figure of the Tulsi family can stand in for cultural colonialism even as they later signal the dangers of overly rapid political autonomy. For Naipaul, Caribbean literature must gain cultural autonomy through the development of a new style in which authenticity of place is perhaps the most important aesthetic category.

²²¹ 135.

²²² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 35.

It is important to note that through *Caribbean Voices*, Naipaul was speaking not just directly to the British colonies of the Caribbean but *only* to them—the program was broadcast on the Colonial Service, not the Home Service. Thus Naipaul was writing not to many of the professional writers living in England at the time, but indeed to many aspiring writers who had not emigrated. Perhaps more importantly, Naipaul was speaking to a vast audience of listeners with no interest in becoming writers at all. *Caribbean Voices* was broadcast weekly as part of the comprehensive radio program *Calling the West Indies*, which included current events, cricket scores, and frequent commentary from West Indian immigrants and expatriates in Britain: Kenneth Ablack, George Lamming, and others. Many radio sets were left on continuously; in Jamaica alone, the number of daily listeners to the BBC is estimated to have reached 400,000 by the 1960s.²²³ Other estimates put the number of radio sets broadcasting the BBC in the Caribbean at three million between 1943 and 1958.²²⁴ The oral nature of radio allowed the broadcast to cross lines of education and literacy—listeners were exposed to the technical advice that Naipaul gave for writers, certainly, but they were also exposed to a West Indian literary and artistic community that was developing even as they listened.

Naipaul's broadcasts make clear his desire not only for authentic West Indian writing, but also for a growing West Indian audience—and moreover, the integral connection between the two. Responding to the criticism of a Sam Selvon novel he had admired, Naipaul explains: "In *An Island Is a World*, Selvon was trying to write about the West Indian sense of frustration,

²²³ Anne Spry Rush, *Bonds of Empire: West Indians and Britishness from Victoria to Decolonization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 202.

²²⁴ Donnell, 79.

the peculiar West Indian claustrophobia, the sense of being lost and displaced on islands; and he wrote about the problem in terms only a West Indian can understand....But few people in the wider world care very much about intellectual malaise in the Caribbean."²²⁵ Because of the lack of a Caribbean audience, Naipaul says, Selvon's book could not be appreciated — and yet, "The West Indian writer must bear with this indifference until a West Indian audience is created large enough to support him by buying his books."²²⁶ The lack of a West Indian literary community — not just the monetary support of West Indian readers, but the machinery of publishing, printing, and marketing — was one of the primary drivers of Naipaul's comments regarding his refusal to return to the West Indies in his letter to Grenfell Williams in 1954.

And yet, while the creation of a West Indian literary industry was a practical one for Naipaul, it was not solely so. To once again quote Naipaul on *Caribbean Voices* at length:

So often with West Indian writing one gets the impression that the whole thing is being done for alien approval: there must be explanations, apologies, or defiance. (I am thinking of a young writer from St Vincent who disapproves of dialect in dialogue because 'they does laugh at we enough, man.') [The writer E. M.] Roach has none of this obsession with *they*, which I believe is responsible for so much of the insincerity in West Indian writing. Once West Indians begin to feel that it is as normal for them to write about the West Indies, as for Englishmen to write about England and Americans about America, I feel this obsession with the outside will disappear.²²⁷

In this excerpt, Naipaul makes clear both his distinction from and nonetheless tacit alignment with the more openly political and anticolonial Caribbean writers of the period. This is not a Naipaul attempting to whitewash his own background or experiences, or to deny his own association with his Caribbean background. Instead this is Naipaul calling for a cultural

²²⁵ Naipaul, 22 January 1956.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Naipaul, 16 September 1956.

decolonization, in which West Indian writing is freed from the influence of British colonial education and influence. The decolonized Caribbean writers he imagines are not derivative or pleading, but available for their own literary experimentation and the creation of a unique stylistic tradition. This is not a call for racial unity or group political action; rather, Naipaul's utopic vision is based purely on art and his desire for a kind of aesthetic purity, unadulterated by the lasting structural effects of colonialism.

While Naipaul's remarks seem to suggest the necessity of a functioning West Indian literary audience in order for his vision to become reality, it is clear that the onus is on the individual writer to feel as Naipaul believes one should. In these comments, we see that while Naipaul is aware of the structural forces of colonialism and racism that have delayed the development of the Caribbean literary community in the midcentury, his emphasis is on the power of pure literary aesthetic to effect change. In this respect, Naipaul's argument is in some ways aligned with the belief of his contemporary George Lamming that political content is always already inherent in Caribbean writing. For Naipaul, though, literary work must not necessarily seek to make a political point. Instead, social protest will prove immanent in the work of Caribbean writers who honestly portray their communities and their Caribbean characters. Moreover, resistance to the effects of colonialism will take place through the simultaneous rise of these "honest" writers and a wider Caribbean audience. We can find in Naipaul's argument an almost Hegelian sense of the unity of the art object, in which the literature of the Caribbean, by arising from its own native tradition rather than that of a foreign colonial power, will contain within itself a new kind of literary style that, in and of itself, maintains a political resistance to imperialism. For Naipaul, the literature's autonomous

integrity not only comes before but, indeed, gives rise to the cultural autonomy of the Caribbean states. Like Mr. Biswas himself, Naipaul seems almost naïve, so powerfully convinced of the importance of literature that he neglects the economic factors necessary for the kind of literary community he imagines in the Caribbean: enough financial security to allow for leisure time, a broader education, a developing infrastructure of local publishing and reviewing. Yet the information that his BBC work adds to the overall picture of Naipaul's politics does indeed shed light on his approach to the representation of Caribbean sites during the 1960s. For Naipaul, the emphasis is on the individual, striving against the societal and historical forces that mark themselves on the landscape; the individual artist, as we see here, is for Naipaul the progenitor of lasting change.

IV. Decay and Decline in *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*

Recent readings of radio modernism have emphasized the power of radio to connect global sites. Naipaul's work with the BBC included educational programs designed to be broadcast to schoolchildren in the Caribbean, sending English cultural inculcation directly from the metropole to the colonial site, powered by the familiar accents of a Trinidadian speaker. Other programs, such as "Calling the West Indies," described English news and current events through the lens of Caribbean immigrants in London. These programs performed the effect of drawing together the two physically distant sites, making the imperial narrative of a global whole in some ways more physically real. Naipaul's second 1960s novel, *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*, performs a similar function of drawing together the colonial and metropolitan sites when read in conjunction with *A House for Mr. Biswas*, published just two

years earlier. Like *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* highlights the isolation of the individual within the figure of the private home. Unlike *A House for Mr. Biswas*, this novel is set in metropolitan London and features white English characters almost exclusively.

This brief comic novel has received scant critical attention despite its close chronological proximity to the well-trodden *Mr. Biswas* and *The Mimic Men*. Primarily an “office” novel, like Edgar Mittelholzer’s *A Morning at the Office*, which Naipaul deeply admired, the narrative follows Richard Stone, a middle-class English office worker nearing retirement from a vaguely drawn company called Excal. Troubled by his advancing age and the imminent void of retirement, Mr. Stone suddenly marries late in life. After a disturbing experience with an elderly retiree they encounter on their honeymoon, Mr. Stone proposes a program to Excal in which younger pensioners can travel to visit older pensioners, thus providing a meaningful activity for retired workers while also helping to ensure the security and wellbeing of those of advanced age and infirmity. The program quickly becomes a success, layered with public relations rhetoric and its catchy—if ridiculous to Mr. Stone—name: the Knights Companion. (Knight Companions was, sadly, rejected.) The end of the novel is humorous and sober by turns, as the Stones react to their sudden fame by imitating the behavior of the upper class, even as Mr. Stone finds his success increasingly unsatisfying as retirement and old age once again loom before him.

Only a few years before writing *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*, Naipaul declared on the Third Programme that he did not believe he “would ever be able to write about

England.”²²⁸ In an essay titled “London,” he explained that his knowledge of England seemed too superficial to write about the country and the people with the fullness a novel would demand: “I feel I know so little about England. I have met many people but I know them only in official attitudes—the drink, the interview, the meal. I have a few friends. But this gives me only a superficial knowledge of the country, and in order to write fiction it is necessary to know so much.”²²⁹ Yet after *A House for Mr. Biswas*, his triumphant Trinidadian epic, he shifted directly to a novel based entirely in England and on English characters—suggesting either an increase in his knowledge of England or a change in his belief about what is necessary to write such a novel. Simon Gikandi has argued that “Caribbean writers, in response to their historical marginalization, have evolved a discourse of alterity which is predicated on a deliberate act of self-displacement from the hegemonic culture and its central tenets.”²³⁰ Yet *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* does not obviously present itself as a discourse of alterity, taking on its purely English subjects—perhaps the definition of hegemonic culture—with Naipaul’s typical satire, but without, it seems, any obvious aesthetic experimentation or anticolonial sentiment.

The novel is comic and mocking, yet like *Mr. Biswas*, its sympathy for its protagonist always remains at the forefront. Three decades after writing *Mr. Stone*, Naipaul explored his regrets about the novel, explaining:

In the past few months, it’s been tormenting me more and more. I like the excellent material, still, but I felt it was thrown away by my suppression of the narrator, the observer who was an essential part of the story. To write a book as though you were this

²²⁸ V. S. Naipaul, “British Caribbean Writers,” 21 April 1958, *BBC Third Programme*, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

²²⁹ V. S. Naipaul, “London,” in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (London: André Deutsch, 1972), 14.

²³⁰ Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 20.

third-person omniscient narrator who didn't identify himself was in a way to be fraudulent to the material, which was obtained by me, a colonial, living precariously in London in a blank and anxious time, observing these elderly Edwardian people trying to postpone death.²³¹

This is a remarkable sentiment from a writer who, by some critical accounts, has attempted to whitewash his own colonial history in order to subsume himself in English culture. The presence of a Caribbean author-narrator is indeed effaced in *Mr. Stone*, but the novel's use of the spatial forms and parallel themes of *A House for Mr. Biswas* highlights Naipaul's thoughtful engagement with British imperialism both in the colony and metropole in the 1960s. In his portrait of "elderly Edwardian people trying to postpone death," Naipaul suggests the collapse of the monolithic English society even while highlighting the individual sense of isolation and loneliness that, for Naipaul, is a universal phenomenon.

Like *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the narrative form of *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* immediately draws a connection between space and the physical body. The novel opens with a scene of confrontation between Mr. Stone and the neighborhood cat that has "penetrated" into his home. The shock of encountering the cat and the invasiveness of its appearance is recorded in Mr. Stone's body: "The beating of Mr Stone's heart moderated and the shooting pain receded, leaving a trail of exposed nerves, a lightness of body below the heavy Simpson's overcoat, and an urge to decisive action."²³² This interlude immediately recalls the way that Mr. Biswas's house at Green Vale was invaded by the storm and its attendant effects on Mr. Biswas's physical and psychological state. For Mr. Stone, this intrusion is not paralyzing but galvanizing,

²³¹ Aamer Hussein, "Delivering the Truth: An Interview with V. S. Naipaul," in *Conversations with V. S. Naipaul*, ed. Feroza Jussawalla (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 156.

²³² V. S. Naipaul, *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 6.

prompting a ludicrous plan to entice the cat with cheese cubes that serves only to highlight his ineffectualness, once again obviously reminiscent of Mr. Biswas. Mr. Stone's identification with the house itself is clear throughout the novel: he finds extreme "pleasure" in the house exactly as it is, and his affection makes him resistant to seeing any changes made to it, even the most necessary.²³³ Aside from his fondness for the house, he also feels that the house, along with his wife and servant who reside there, enter into a "suspension" when he leaves for work in the morning, only to "reanimat[e] in the afternoon in preparation to receive him."²³⁴ While this fantasy may highlight Mr. Stone's misogyny almost as much as it does his particular self-identification with the house, it is nonetheless clear that, like Mr. Biswas, Mr. Stone's "place" is closely associated with, as Mr. Biswas notes, "everything he had lived through."²³⁵

In a clear elaboration of the way that physical sites are marked by history in *Mr. Biswas*, places in *Mr. Stone* are shown again and again to record the history both of their habitation and that of England itself. On his honeymoon with Margaret in Cornwall, Mr. Stone and Margaret visit the ruins of Celtic dwellings in Chysauster. The small "solid stone hovels" make them feel like "giants entering the houses of men," and the buildings themselves strike Mr. Stone as strange and disturbing: "How thick the walls, how clumsy, how little space they enclosed, as though built for people sheltering from more than the elements!"²³⁶ Like Mr. Biswas's and Mr. Stone's own houses, the physical site is alive with a sense of the lives of the inhabitants, from their size to their physical needs, as well as hinting at the period's own dangers. Similarly, Mr.

²³³ 22.

²³⁴ 57.

²³⁵ Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, 303.

²³⁶ Naipaul, *Mr. Stone*, 62.

Stone's house is marked by its own historical context, including its attendant violences. During a conversation with Margaret about making some repairs to the house, they discover that "if the repairs were to be thorough whole areas of the house would have to be rebuilt. Part of the roof had subsided, the attic floor was dangerous, the window frames had buckled."²³⁷ The damage is a result of the Blitz, Mr. Stone tells his wife, explaining "how the planes came over this part of South London every Saturday night"; the fact that the damage has not been compensated "rouse[s] Margaret to perfect fury against the government."²³⁸ The history living in the house recalls that of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, reinforcing a reading of Naipaul's midcentury novels as grounded simultaneously in the specificity of place and in the legacy of national and regional history.

In *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*, though, the most important role of the house is its connection to individual isolation, death, and societal disintegration. Weiwei Xu has argued that while "the house in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is frequently used to convey the disorder, haphazardness and transience of Trinidad, Mr. Stone's house is a much more substantial affair, a regulated space that happily records a long history of occupancy."²³⁹ Indeed, the house is marked by the many years of habitation, yet the adjudication of the house as a "regulated" space belies the descriptions of the house that emphasize its physical dirtiness and deterioration. Mr. Stone is dismayed by the "frenzied home-making" of his neighbors, who

²³⁷ 88.

²³⁸ 88-9.

²³⁹ Weiwei Xu, "Colonial Fantasy Shattered, Cosmopolitan Dream Broken: V. S. Naipaul's *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*," *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* 5, no. 1 (2016): 107.

regularly indulge in home improvement projects from painting to putting up fencing. Instead, he finds “pleasure... in the slow decay of his own house, the time-created shabbiness of its interiors, the hard polish of old grime on the lower areas of the hall wallpaper, feeling it right that objects like houses should age with their owners and carry marks of their habitation.”²⁴⁰

Unlike the disintegration of the Green Vale and Shorthills houses in *Mr. Biswas*, which rapidly fall apart due to the natural forces of wind and fire, Mr. Stone’s house is imbued with a sense of sturdiness gradually fading away. In his resistance to the improvement projects of his neighbors, Mr. Stone embraces the gradual process of entropy, not just accepting but evidently preferring the natural erosion of physical objects by time. When Margaret moves into the house after their marriage, she brings her own possessions with her, including an elaborate tigerskin rug, which at first do not strike Mr. Stone as an improvement:

The mustiness, the result of ineffectual fussings with broom and brush by Miss Millington, in which he had taken so much pleasure, was replaced not by the smell of polish and soap but by a new and alien mustiness. ... Many little bits of furniture came with the tigerskin as well. Very fussy frilly bits he thought them, and they looked out of place among the bulky nineteen-thirty furniture which was his own.²⁴¹

As before, his home is marked by its historical moment—the 1930s furniture—and, perhaps most significantly, by his isolation within the house. The entrance of an alien presence, first the cat, then Margaret, discomfits him, given the house’s association with his own person. Yet quickly, the new furniture is subsumed by the effects of decay as well, as his servant, Miss Millington, who “fall[s] on them with a delight as of one rediscovering glories thought dead and gone, regularly and indefatigably heighten[s] their gloss, using a liquid polish which,

²⁴⁰ Naipaul, *Mr. Stone*, 22.

²⁴¹ 42.

drying in difficult crevices, left broken patterns of pure, dusty white.”²⁴² Thus Mr. Stone’s home incorporates Margaret, even as their marriage itself does not seem to intrude upon his solitude. Margaret, we learn “revealed a plasticity of character which abridged and rendered painless the process of getting to know her, getting used to her...just as at first it seemed Margaret had become an extension of Miss Millington, so he now saw them both as extensions of himself.”²⁴³ Margaret’s role both in the home and in the marriage is quickly rendered subordinate to Mr. Stone, and neither he nor the house demonstrably change. In these passages, we see the incorporation of Margaret and her possessions through the lens of the powerful central figure who subsumes her. These scenes contrast sharply with those in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, in which Mr. Biswas struggles against the inducement to conform to the existing Tulsi household. In Mr. Stone, we have the embodiment of the white English culture that acts to repress, to consolidate, to bring outside influences within its totalizing whole. Yet crucially, that whole is marked by and infatuated with its own decay. If Mr. Stone’s assimilation of Margaret and her household objects is meant to suggest the same colonizing power that the Tulsis signaled, then it is a colonizing power that is engaged with its own inevitable decline.

It should be noted that Mr. Stone’s affection for the house’s decay, and his resistance to being altered by his marriage, are not just blind resistance to change (though his fear of the impending future as a pensioner is certainly relevant). Outside Mr. Stone’s bathroom window is a tree which he observes daily, noting the changing of the seasons and the passage of time without distress:

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ 57.

The present was flavourless; its passing was not therefore a cause for alarm. There was a tree in the school grounds at the back of his house by which he noted the passing of time, the waxing and waning of the seasons, a tree which daily when shaving he studied, until he had known its every branch. The contemplation of this living object reassured him of the solidity of things. He had grown to regard it as part of his own life, a marker of his past, for it moved through time with him.²⁴⁴

Watching the tree, Mr. Stone is reassured by its regular changes—the transformation of the tree from season to season gives him the same sense of comfort and familiarity as do the dingy wallpaper, cracked tiles, and worn carpet of his own home. In fact, during the period of mental distress before the Knights Companion scheme improves his circumstances, Mr. Stone finds that the renewal of the tree in fact distresses him, wishing as he does for a dramatic transformation of his own. The tree “would shed its leaves in time; but this would lead to a renewal which would bring greater strength.”²⁴⁵ Yet for Mr. Stone, who feels that the pattern of his life is “broken” by his lack of meaningful work and the upcoming misery of retirement, his own aging is unlike the tree’s loss of its leaves: he will not experience renewal, but only death. In light of this approaching disruption to the comfortable routine of his life, he no longer finds “comfort” in the tree, but “reproach.”²⁴⁶ It is not that Mr. Stone wants total stasis, for he values and finds comfort in the way the tree changes in time for much of the novel. Instead, he seeks out change driven entirely by his own purposeful creation, rather than change forced upon him from the outside. His acceptance of the entropy of the home belies his fear of a purposeless life and death; he must make the home’s deterioration into something meaningful in his own mind, a kind of value in its representativeness of his own life, in order to push back against the fear of

²⁴⁴ 20.

²⁴⁵ 45.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

aging and death that drives him. The fear of change due to the pressures of outside forces clearly connects Mr. Stone's end of life with the downfall of Edwardian society to which Naipaul referred in his summary of the novel's strengths. Mr. Stone wants to change on his own terms; his emotional quandary here reflects this moment in the history of the British Empire, in which full decolonization was clearly inevitable but not yet fully achieved. Mr. Stone, in simultaneously admiring the trees renewal and finding in it a "reproach" of his own life, is at the same time absurd and strangely poignant. We see in Mr. Stone Naipaul's characteristic sympathy toward his characters, even as he mocks Mr. Stone's attachment to a physical site which is crumbling around him. Through the representations of the house and the tree outside it, Naipaul signals the importance of the places in the novel to register the complicated reactions to geopolitical change at midcentury—in this case, from the imperial side.

Mr. Stone's complicated relationship to his own personal changing circumstances also plays out in his reaction to the societal change that surrounds him. In several places in the novel, there is reference to the shifting demographics, including the increasing presence of people of color, in the neighborhoods in which he and Margaret have resided. Written just after the Notting Hill race riots of 1958, and not long before Enoch Powell's notorious "Rivers of Blood" speech, *Mr. Stone* hints at the growing racial tensions of the late 1950s and early 1960s in London. Before their marriage, Margaret lives in Earl's Court, an area which Mr. Stone sees as "disreputable" and "overcrowded."²⁴⁷ Visiting her hotel for the first time, Mr. Stone observes that "the entrance to the Underground station was filthy; in a street across the road a meeting of

²⁴⁷ 32.

the British National Party was in progress, a man shouting himself hoarse from the back of a van. Behind neon lights and streaming glass windows the new-style coffee houses were packed; and the streets were full of young people in art-student dress and foreigners of every colour.”²⁴⁸ The disreputable nature of the neighborhood is quite obviously connected with both politics and race; the young people are marked by their bohemian dress and the coffee house by its “new style” — that is, representative of physical change both to people and places. When arriving at Margaret’s hotel, he observes “a small typewritten ‘Europeans Only’ card below the bell,” which “proclaimed it a refuge of respectability and calm” — thought that proclamation is undermined by what Mr. Stone actually observes. The hotel is actually, Mr. Stone observes acidly, “a refuge of age” — signaling the association of English homogeneity with a generation that is passing into decrepitude.²⁴⁹ This brief reference to Earl’s Court has received some critical attention. John McLeod has read Earl’s Court as a place “where the certainties of English place are challenged by the spontaneous and contingent transformations of subaltern renegotiations of space.”²⁵⁰ Similarly, John Thieme sees it as “a symbol of a nascent multiracial society beginning to impinge on the homogeneous, older England Mr. Stone represents.”²⁵¹ These assessments are certainly accurate — Mr. Stone’s discomfiture when arriving at Earl’s Court is in no small part a response to the shifting nature of British society and the arrival of immigrants from across the empire in the midcentury decades, which took off dramatically after the 1948

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 71.

²⁵¹ John Thieme, “Naipaul’s English Fable: *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 30, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 499-500.

British Nationality Act reinforced the right of Commonwealth subjects, including many black West Indians, to live and work in England. Mr. Stone's assessment is also class-based; the dirt and grime of his own middle-class home holds only pleasure, while the dirt of the Underground stop at Earl's Court signals the inferiority of the area.

Several other points in the novel make passing reference to the rise of a multicultural London, along with Mr. Stone's complicated relationship to these changes. Mr. Stone and Margaret choose Cornwall for their honeymoon because "Mr Stone preferred to spend his holidays in England."²⁵² Though he has traveled abroad previously, after the Second World War, he found that "the most enjoyable part" of his journey to Ireland "was the journey from Southampton to Cobh in a luxurious, rationing-free American liner" and "a fortnight in Paris" was "a tedious torment."²⁵³ Mr. Stone's extreme insularity seems obvious here; however, the trip to Cornwall is also a failure, suggesting perhaps that Mr. Stone does not so much prefer England as prefer his carefully routinized home life—and perhaps that Mr. Stone's apparent xenophobia is rather an exaggerated version of his own attachment to his home.

In fact, several negative references to the changes to Mr. Stone's area of London are either belied by the narrative or mouthed by other characters. His coworker Whympers, for example, whom Mr. Stone finds general distasteful, is occasionally enraged by "the sight of black men on the London streets," which "drove him to fury."²⁵⁴ Whympers spends "the whole of one lunchtime walk counting those he saw," a ludicrous response that ultimately ends in

²⁵² Naipaul, *Mr. Stone*, 60.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ 114.

laughter from Whymper and Mr. Stone. We learn, too, that “well-dressed women with their daughters infuriated [Whymper] as much as black men,” implying, like Mr. Stone’s feelings about holidays, that the racism and xenophobia suggested by the initial description is actually an outpouring of something else entirely. In Whymper’s case, the “something else” is inferiority and misplaced rage, directed not specifically at the black men in London but at his own frustration with his social position.²⁵⁵

Similarly, we learn in the second half of the novel that Mr. Stone’s neighborhood is, in his mind, declining in quality. Yet this decline is not the result of an influx of “foreigners,” which one might expect given Mr. Stone’s earlier description of Earl’s Court. Instead, Margaret explains “her helpless awareness that the street was no longer what it was. ... Once the habitation mainly of the old and the settled, it was now being invaded by the married young.”²⁵⁶ The neighborhood is changing not because of the arrival of immigrants or people of color, but rather mothers pushing their prams, injecting the neighborhood with a new future-looking generation that contradicts the genteel decay of the Stones’ home. The one Jamaican family that moves into the neighborhood is described as a “family of ferocious respectability” who maintain this reputation by “receiv[ing] no negro callers, accept[ing] no negro lodgers for the room they let, and...[keeping] a budgerigar.”²⁵⁷ In fact, their freshly repainted home, with its “gleaming black-pointed red brick” is “like a reproach to the rest of the street.”²⁵⁸ While Naipaul’s merciless satire skewers the tenets of respectability that might simultaneously include

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ 139.

²⁵⁷ 140.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

refusing black lodgers and keeping a budgie, it is nonetheless apparent that it is not simply the existence of immigrants or London's shifting social fabric of the midcentury decades that drives Mr. Stone's sense of the city's—and more particularly, his neighborhood's—decline.

In part, this allows us to maintain our sympathy toward Mr. Stone. Naipaul is, always, deeply invested in portraying his characters with heart: his satire tackles social issues and individual failings, certainly, but his portrayals are always human, nuanced, and sympathetic. Mr. Stone is not the embodiment of “self-consciousness and arrogance”²⁵⁹ that some critics have identified. Rather, the novel signals the collapse of Edwardian society by intertwining its slow decay with Mr. Stone's own, highlighting the gradual deterioration of physical place even as Mr. Stone heads toward his own disappointed end. The intertwining of sociocultural and geopolitical change is written directly into the setting of the middle-class neighborhood; through Mr. Stone's eyes, we register the impact of empire on the metropole. Colonialism has marked the landscape here, even as it marked Trinidad's landscape in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. In these two novels, we find two halves of Naipaul's understanding of empire: one that acknowledges imperialism's effects on both sides, clearly signaling the harm it has done in the colonies even as he attempts to indicate his sympathy toward the English people experiencing the end of imperial society as well. Mr. Biswas and Mr. Stone both experience isolation, disappointment, and frustration, often figured in the domestic places they inhabit. In drawing this parallel, Naipaul suggests a kind of universal humanity that crosses the boundary of colonized and colonizer.

²⁵⁹ Xu, 109.

This association—that we are all in some ways the same at heart—is underscored by a moment of transcendent horror described by Mr. Stone. Reflecting on how invisible the changes wrought by his marriage and his career’s trajectory are from outside his house, he thinks:

What strange things must happen behind the blank front doors of so many houses! And just as sometimes when travelling on a train he had mentally stripped himself of train, seats and passengers and seen himself moving four or five feet above ground in a sitting posture at forty miles an hour, so now he was assailed by a vision of the city stripped of stone and concrete and timber and metal, stripped of all buildings, with people suspended next to and above and below one another, going through all the motions of human existence. And he had a realization, too upsetting to be more than momentarily examined, that all that was solid and immutable and enduring about the world, all to which man linked himself (the Monster watering her spring flowers, the Male expanding his nest), flattered only to deceive.²⁶⁰

In this remarkable passage, Mr. Stone draws together the physical aspects of setting and the motif of individual consciousness that pervade the novel. Imagining the removal of the built environment, he sees the “motions of human existence,” the actions that connect humans across societies and cultures. By stripping away the trappings that might assert a specific moment in time or place, he instead identifies a kind of human universality—an identification with the basic human needs and behaviors of other people, no matter their contexts. This is followed by his realization that “all that was solid and immutable and enduring about the world, all to which man linked himself” is not, in fact, as enduring as it seems. Indeed, the physical objects of culture or identity are fleeting—like the leaves of his beloved tree, they will fall away. Here, Mr. Stone realizes that as his home is slowly deteriorating, so too must any specific kind of cultural or temporal identity. His sense of the centrality of his moment in time and history (his “nineteen-thirty furniture”) is illusory. The greatness of English Edwardian culture is a myth,

²⁶⁰ Naipaul, *Mr. Stone*, 53.

universal Anglicization impossible, for these aspects of culture are mutable and, indeed, unreal. The discovery of the fraudulence of this dream is peculiarly parallel to that of Mr. Biswas: the deception of imperial narratives affect Mr. Stone's very conception of himself. But he can only "momentarily examine" this revelation—so deeply would it transform his identity that he cannot fully assimilate it.

In some ways, Naipaul's rendering of this cross-cultural connection engages with totalizing narratives of imperialism, which suggest that colonial sites can easily be brought together under a single unitary English identity. But he also complicates that narrative by undermining the idea of Englishness as a functional category, one that is "solid and immutable and enduring." By figuring the decline of Edwardian society both through Mr. Stone's aging and through the crumbling site of the Stone house, Naipaul represents the inevitability of a decolonization that is both geographic and cultural, one in which English identity itself will change over time. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, we see the sudden collapse of the home, the crushing of Mr. Biswas's dreams through both his personal failures and the larger forces of poverty and the urban housing shortage. In these collapses, we can read Naipaul's anxieties for the inevitable political autonomy of Trinidad, which he both desires and fears. In the physical settings of *Mr. Stone*, we instead see the collapse of the English identity at the heart of the empire itself. This is not the violent upheaval of Thornfield Hall's arson—instead it is a gradual crumbling over time, a slow degradation in which a culture consumes itself. The houses of Naipaul's 1960s novels are canvases onto which both the acts of the protagonist and the long arc of historical narrative are written.

Chapter Three: “Vagrant’s City”: George Lamming and the Rejection of London’s Sites

I. On Return: Lamming at the BBC

In 1958, twenty-six-year-old Stuart Hall—at the time a rising intellectual and political activist who had emigrated to England from Jamaica seven years prior—moderated a discussion for the BBC radio service’s Third Programme titled “British Caribbean Writers.” Featuring Jan Carew, Fernando Henriques, Errol John, George Lamming, Edgar Mittelholzer, V.S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, and Sylvia Wynter, the discussion included writers both early in their careers and more established, and originating from four different Caribbean islands. The topics at hand ranged widely, highlighting the aesthetic products and political character of what Hall called “a new and emerging culture.”²⁶¹

That the discussion appeared on the Third Programme at all is, in itself, significant. Rather than being framed as a niche topic, directed only toward other West Indians and thus broadcast solely on the Colonial Service, the conversation was placed instead on the far more elite and established Third. The Colonial Service, what George Lamming called “the back door of the Corporation,” had nurtured many of these writers through programs like *Caribbean Voices* and its progenitor, *Calling the West Indies*.²⁶² But the Caribbean writers’ “promotion,” as Lamming ironically termed it, to the Third Programme in this instance highlights the growing respect afforded to their writing in the metropolitan capital in the late 1950s and the growing

²⁶¹ Stuart Hall, “British Caribbean Writers,” 21 April 1958, BBC *Third Programme*, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England, 1.

²⁶² George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 44.

critical praise that their work commanded. Indeed, the discussion itself, though initially proposed by Leonie Cohn of the BBC Talks Department, was primarily developed by Lamming himself. He suggested the host and invited writers and articulated the contours of the discussion: “First we should learn something about the relation of these writers to the West Indian community. This would give some picture of the West Indies as a place. And secondly we should try to find out what kind of contribution the West Indian writers have made, or are likely to make, to the development of language in the literature of the English speaking world.”²⁶³

The discussion itself, authoritatively moderated by Hall, is compelling in the extreme. In bold strokes, the writers outline their relationships to their English publishers and critics, their notions of attachment (or lack thereof) to the Caribbean, and their senses of their own identities as “British Caribbean writers.” Beginning with a statement by Jan Carew about the “human world” of the West Indies and the ways in which it is “breaking into the main stream of the twentieth century” — that is, by breaking out of its colonized past and into an increasingly autonomous political present — the discussion almost immediately transitions into a series of increasingly tense back-and-forth interactions between the participants.²⁶⁴

Responding to a question about his audience, Lamming demonstrates his characteristic attention to questions of class and race. At first, he says, his audience had been his mother: a “test of authenticity” for his writing about his native island both because of her background as a

²⁶³ Letter from George Lamming to Leonie Cohen, 18 February 1958, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

²⁶⁴ Hall, “British Caribbean Writers,” 1.

Barbadian native, but also because she was a member of the working class, to which Lamming was particularly attentive.²⁶⁵ But, he asserts:

My whole attitude to the audience has changed since then, you see, between 1954, when I returned to the West Indies, and 1958. I had become acutely conscious of the need for thinking politically and the whole conception of my audience is a political conception. ...Now today my audience as far as I'm concerned is every man who is literate, who reads English, whether he is in West Africa or in Malaya or in the Caribbean, because the whole theme of my books is this peculiar migration from one state of life to another, which is essentially a political situation.²⁶⁶

Here Lamming highlights his changing political consciousness as a novelist, marking the shift from a fidelity to a certain class and place to a much larger sense of group identity and a politicized attention to migration. Asked the same question, Edgar Mittelholzer tends to agree. Sam Selvon, also characteristically, answers with a charming artlessness that he has never thought about who his audience might be until that very moment.

Unprompted, V. S. Naipaul jumps in to remark, "Don't you think that by getting your books published in this country you are really hoping for an English audience?"²⁶⁷ This question prompts the first direct back-and-forth interaction of the discussion:

Lamming: No, not at all.

Naipaul: Well, why don't you get your books published by the Pioneer Press, Jamaica?

Lamming: Yes, but the Pioneer Press is an experiment in a country that has had no tradition of publishing. The one thing that has never occurred to me in the writing of my book is my curiosity about the demands of my publisher. It has never ever occurred. Or the curiosity about the demands of my English-speaking public.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ 2.

²⁶⁶ 3.

²⁶⁷ 4.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

The conversation moves to the use of dialect by Selvon and others, and again, Lamming and Naipaul engage one another in direct conversation.

Naipaul: I believe because Sam has written so authentically he has made it easier for the rest of us who want to make people talk the way they do. Sam was the first man, and I think we ought to give him credit for this, who made it possible...

Lamming: This is an absolute distortion. What has happened in this country is, it's a very absurd situation that, for example, "The Ways of Sunlight"—if I may say so with Sam present—was given a whole press treatment which it did not deserve. For example, some man in *The Spectator* said that this is Mr. Selvon at his best, when Mr. Selvon was in fact writing something that was an interval between one real book and another. This is the confusion in which we are operating.

Hall: Just a minute, Naipaul.

Naipaul: I think you are being—you are being very ungenerous toward the English critics, you know. I...

Lamming: The English critics have absolutely no idea what is happening around them.

Naipaul: You—we depend for our existence on their suffrage, I'm afraid.

Lamming: I do not depend on that.

Naipaul: But you do.

Lamming: I mean if I have to make my living I will go on a farm.²⁶⁹

These interactions provide a fascinating view of the developing political consciousnesses of these two Caribbean writers. Lamming, at thirty-one, was considerably more established as a writer than Naipaul in 1958. He had published three successful novels, including the Somerset Maugham Award-winning *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), and had already won a Guggenheim Fellowship (1955), allowing him to travel to the United States, West Africa, and back to the

²⁶⁹ 5.

Caribbean. Naipaul, five years younger, had served as editor for *Caribbean Voices* and published two short novels—his great Trinidadian epic *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) was still several years in the future. Their emigrant experiences in England were not dissimilar; both faced the pressures of economic precarity and racism, even as their careers charted similar courses through the BBC and top London publishers.

Yet it is apparent even from this brief interaction that their respective senses of themselves as political actors, and their attachment to their Caribbean heritages, differed markedly. For Naipaul, practical concerns are paramount—he is the first to raise the pointed and pragmatic notion that, for an early-career author, concerns about getting published may influence the work produced. Similarly, he sees not just himself but all of the West Indian writers as “dependent” for their career success upon the positive reception of their work by English critics. Lamming’s attitude is both more idealistic and far more explicitly political. His flat declaration that he would work on a farm if his writing did not receive positive critical attention is not simply flippant—he worked in a factory before being hired at the BBC—and simultaneously indicates his prioritization of the working class, represented by his initial claim that his own mother would be his ideal reader.

In this interaction, we see a critical contrast between the way that place functions as a crucial category in the mid-century writing and political thought of George Lamming and V.S. Naipaul. As I showed in the previous chapter, place functions for Naipaul both as an aesthetic category and a key driver of theme, highlighting the decline of imperialism while also serving to underscore totalizing narratives of empire that emphasize universal human emotions. For Lamming, on the other hand, place functions as a way to register his conflict over the spatial

relations of decolonization itself. As this conversation suggests, both Lamming and Naipaul were viscerally aware of the way that British colonialism continued to influence Caribbean literary production even as decolonization was clearly underway. Yet their approaches are markedly different. In contrast to Naipaul's picture of universalism, Lamming expresses a pointed desire for separation. Here that desire is evidenced by his insistence that his work is not influenced by his English critical audience; later, as we shall see, he expresses his desire for the disentangling of the metropole and colony via his belief that Caribbean writers must return to their homelands in order to write authentically. In this chapter, I will put Lamming's radio work from the 1950s and 1960s into conversation with two of his metropolitan novels—*The Emigrants* (1954) and *Water with Berries* (1971)—to more fully comprehend the way that Lamming uses place as a vehicle for his characters to think through and act out their responses to colonialism. For Lamming, sites within and outside of the metropole function as laboratories for the working out of group relations and group identities, in which political unity is oriented toward the autonomy of the colonial state.

Like Naipaul, Lamming is passionate about the necessity for the Caribbean writer to become free of the influence of British cultural imperialism. Yet Lamming provides a specific and practical solution that Naipaul does not: that is, the removal of the Caribbean writer from the metropolitan seat of empire. As the Third Programme discussion continues, Lamming makes a powerful argument for the necessity of both his migration to England and of returning to the Caribbean. "The West Indian writer has got to be returned to the West Indies," he argues, for the true establishment of a West Indian literature can only happen "when the West Indian

writer is situated in the West Indian community, writing for the West Indian community."²⁷⁰

Clearly, the specificity of place is at the heart of Lamming's political consciousness, as well as his beliefs about his own literary production and that of others.

As Simon Gikandi has noted, "A postcolonial reading is not one that inscribes the temporal and spatial distance between metropolis and colony but one that reinstitutes their mutual imbrication at the moment of rupture (decolonization), when they were supposed to have been finally separated."²⁷¹ Lamming's words here, though they precede complete political autonomy in the Caribbean by a few years, highlight the continued imbrication of the British empire and the Caribbean, particularly in the context of the commercial aspect of literary writing. For Lamming, it is a matter of deep regret that commercial success is not currently achievable in the West Indies; in his view, the lack of a substantial West Indian literary audience and commercial system is another sign of the betrayal of the imperial relationship that has collected artistic taste, influence, and power within its metropolitan capital. This emphasis on returning to the Caribbean for "the true establishment of a West Indian literature" shows perforce the interlocking of place, literary fiction, and political awareness that drives much of Lamming's own fictional narratives. As we shall see in the discussion of the metropolitan novels that follows, Lamming presents emigration to London as a choice that ultimately works to deny agency, as the stultifying site of the metropolis oppresses the Caribbean immigrants who arrive there.

²⁷⁰ Hall, "British Caribbean Writers," 10.

²⁷¹ Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 228.

The other writers at the discussion do not allow Lamming this idealized view of a Caribbean return unquestioned. Sylvia Wynter asks, "But how will you make a living?" Errol John follows on her heels, inquiring: "Excuse me, this is what I want to know. Which one of us here is prepared to go back to—to live in an attic?"²⁷²

Lamming: I would go back tomorrow.

John: That's gracious of you.

Naipaul: Then why don't you, George?

Lamming: Don't be absurd. I would not go back tomorrow on a boat. I would go back tomorrow because the West Indian situation, if you do not realize it, is essentially a political situation.²⁷³

In this rich interaction, we see these Caribbean writers working out in real time what it means to embody their mutually agreed-upon support for Caribbean literature. Does it necessitate a return to the site from which they had departed—some nearly a decade before—and a retreat from the rarefied literary circles they currently inhabit? For Lamming, the answer is, ostensibly, yes. Yet when challenged by Naipaul, Lamming's response moves from the literal to the metaphorical. "I would not go back tomorrow on a boat," he says—in other words, Naipaul should not take his statements literally but rather in the "political" spirit that they are meant. Yet in this way, Lamming retreats slightly from the definiteness of his intention to return, even as he continues to assert it. This exchange highlights the troubled nature of the desire to throw off the cultural colonialism of the English literary tradition and its attendant

²⁷² Hall, "British Caribbean Writers," 10.

²⁷³ 11.

industry of publication and cultural value. While it is, in theory, a goal upon which these writers can agree, it is nonetheless one that is nearly impossible for them to embody.

The political situation, as Lamming describes it in what follows, is that the “agents of power” in the West Indies “are either indifferent” to the new writer who “does not matter” or, on the other hand, “absolutely hostile when they assume that he might matter.”²⁷⁴ These agents of power are not only the British government officials still technically in political control in 1958, despite the rise of the short-lived West Indies Federation, but the lingering structural effects of the decades of colonial power in the region. “The contribution that the West Indian will make to the novel,” Lamming goes on to say, “will only be made in its fullest sense when the Caribbean community is a fully independent community.”²⁷⁵ Though this statement ostensibly refers to political autonomy, Lamming’s argument here is much more complex, suggesting the fraught historical process of decolonization. Lamming is vividly aware of what Gikandi terms the “mutual imbrication” of the metropole and colony; in literature, for example, he has witnessed the ways that West Indian writers have been and continue to be influenced by the legacy of British colonial education. Moreover, the extended period of colonialism has reinforced the idea—even, or perhaps especially for the colonized themselves—of the belief in “England’s supremacy in taste and judgment,” which, in his view, must be actively resisted by West Indian writers.²⁷⁶ Thus when Lamming imagines a “fully independent community” in the

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, 27.

Caribbean, his words go far beyond the political, into the community of the arts and, moreover, the very self-conception of those who live there.

The contrast between the approaches of Lamming and Naipaul, as evidenced in the 1958 Third Programme discussion, are often reiterated in their assessments of their own work—and that of the other—as well. Lamming famously dismisses Naipaul's work more than once in his 1960 *The Pleasures of Exile*. He argues that Naipaul's failures to achieve at the same level of writers he admires more greatly, such as Selvon, stem from Naipaul's sense of his own inadequacy as a colonial writer. "His books can't move beyond a castrated satire," Lamming says, "and although satire may be a useful element in fiction, no important work, comparable to Selvon's, can rest safely on satire alone. When such a writer is a colonial, ashamed of his cultural background and striving like mad to prove himself through promotion to the peaks of a 'superior' culture whose values are gravely in doubt, then satire, like the charge of philistinism, is for me nothing more than a refuge. And it is too small a refuge for a writer who wishes to be taken seriously."²⁷⁷ For Lamming, political concerns are always already intertwined with his fictional narratives. In a 1970 interview at the University of Texas, Lamming noted that "the relation of the artist to the drama of politics is in fact one of the basic themes running through everything I write."²⁷⁸ Lamming rejects the possibility that a Caribbean writer might be politically aloof, arguing: "I find it very difficult to see how a writer of serious intention, coming out of such a society, cannot be organically related to the political movement of that society in

²⁷⁷ 225.

²⁷⁸ George Lamming, "Interview with George Lamming," in *Kas-Kas: Interviews with Three Caribbean Writers in Texas*, ed. by Ian Munro and Reinhard Sander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), 12.

the widest sense.”²⁷⁹ As recently as 2009, he has said: “I am very opposed to the notion that politics and the political is a polluting factor when it is brought into the novel...I believe in political centrality, or that the political is very central to the organization of a narrative that is coming out of the kind of experience that I’m sharing.”²⁸⁰ Through Lamming’s clear references to his sense of responsibility to the Caribbean—both in an abstract political sense and through physical lived experience—we can clearly see the importance of place to Lamming as a political writer.

As Emily Bloom describes in her study of Anglo-Irish radio broadcasts, the medium functions throughout the twentieth century as “a significant site for redefining literary networks” that connect states.²⁸¹ This connection is immediately apparent in the *Caribbean Voices* broadcasts, as Lamming, Naipaul, and others articulate their connections to their homelands and the metropole from which they are delivering their broadcasts. But in this Hall discussion, we see another site: the room itself, into which the nine Caribbean writers are gathered. Within this room, situated at the heart of empire and broadcast directly to the homes of white English citizens, we find the clashes and connections through which forms of group consciousness are worked out. This radio discussion is the embodiment of various scenes that Lamming fictionalizes, in which Caribbean immigrants come together and break apart within the urban environment, articulating their group sentiment and then watching their network fall apart.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ George Lamming, “The Aesthetics of Decolonisation: Anthony Bogues and George Lamming in Conversation” in *The George Lamming Reader: The Aesthetics of Decolonisation*, ed. by Anthony Bogues (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2011), 228.

²⁸¹ Emily Bloom, *The Wireless Past: Anglo-Irish Writers and the BBC, 1931-1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

Within the radio room, as within the ship and train cars of *The Emigrants*, we see individual Caribbean immigrants brought together for a specific purpose, articulated initially by Lamming himself to Leonie Cohn. And yet though Lamming is motivated to bring together this group of writers, it does not satisfy his goals for political action. Instead, he seeks separation, both in the form of his personal return to the Caribbean and the political sovereignty for Caribbean nations that serves as a crucial step in disentangling the colonies from the metropole. The emigration to London, though a practical necessity for most Caribbean writers wishing to earn a living by their writing during the midcentury, is, for Lamming, “a journey which I know, risked, and today, with supreme ingratitude, consider to be unfortunate.”²⁸² More explicitly, he argues that “the voyage of the West Indian writer out will only be completed with his return to the community which, unaware of its root, not yet informed of its revelation, helped to exile his gift.”²⁸³ These editorial comments from the BBC’s *Caribbean Voices* echo comments made by Lamming throughout the 1950s and presage his actual return to the Caribbean in the subsequent decade.

Throughout Lamming’s midcentury novels, as well as his wider writings, we can locate sites like the radio room, which serve both as a starting point for the creation of a social identity and a representation of the imbrication of place and politics within the larger context of decolonization. Unlike the emphasis on extreme isolation and loneliness presented in Rhys’s narratives featuring emigrant protagonists, we see instead a far more postcolonial picture,

²⁸² George Lamming, 13 July 1958, *BBC Caribbean Voices*. BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

²⁸³ George Lamming, 6 July 1958, *BBC Caribbean Voices*. BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

which prizes group over individual subjectivity. Through his novels set in midcentury London, we can see the ways that specific places, such as temporary housing for recent immigrants, can foster the production of a positive group identity. However, Lamming is also loathe to present a positive picture of group collectivity that transforms into productive political action; in Lamming's novels instead, we are confronted with the ways in which the ongoing structural effects of colonialism, as well as the sense of exile and the racism that exist in London ultimately doom these collective networks.

II. *The Emigrants*: London and Its Enclosures

Like Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*, Lamming's 1954 second novel, *The Emigrants*, takes as its subject the arrival of West Indian immigrants to London and their subsequent experiences with racism, isolation, and social exclusion. As Rhys depicts in her portraits of Anna in *Voyage* and Selina in "Let Them Call It Jazz," the urgency of finding affordable housing during the midcentury decades in London was paramount; Lamming too attends to insufficient housing as a primary driver of immigrant precarity at this time. In Lamming's portrayal, we find an emphasis on the temporariness of dwelling places, a thematic parallel to the historical moment of the text's production, in which decolonization was in process but not yet completed. In *The Emigrants*, the multiple sites of precarious dwelling foster an increased sense of community even as he emphasizes their ephemeral nature and their failure to overcome the ongoing impacts of imperialism on colonial immigrants. This novel suggests the failure of metropolitan structures—both physical and social—to nurture group consciousness and resonates with his desire for return to the Caribbean as expressed in the Third Programme discussion in 1958.

Critical perspectives on Lamming have frequently addressed his relationship to British modernism, particularly given the context of his formal difficulty and experimentalism. As J. Dillon Brown notes, a review of *In the Castle of My Skin* in the *Times Literary Supplement* suggests that one is “tempted to rename” it “‘The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Barbadian.’ It recalls [...] the *Portrait* and certain scenes in *Ulysses*, not by virtue of imitation but in a curious similarity of vision.”²⁸⁴ This association has continued through contemporary criticism, from perspectives such as Douglas Mao’s, which emphasizes Lamming’s use of the modernist *Bildung* genre, to Peter Kalliney’s and J. Dillon Brown’s, who emphasize the practical ways in which Lamming and the rest of the Windrush generation activate their connections to their British modernist contemporaries, both commercially and aesthetically.²⁸⁵ A particularly fruitful avenue for consideration has been the connections drawn between the concept of exile in British modernism and in George Lamming specifically. Simon Gikandi describes Lamming’s portrayal of exile not as “the internalized state of *Heimatlossen*—the Nietzschean ‘refusal of the refuge of both home and nation’—that drove European modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century,” but rather as “operat[ing] under the premise that [West Indian writers] had no home or nation to begin with.”²⁸⁶ Yet Lamming’s novels break free from the themes of modernism, even as they take up some of its experimental forms, through their emphasis on collectivity,

²⁸⁴ Quoted in J. Dillon Brown, *Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 78.

²⁸⁵ See Douglas Mao, “Transcolonial *Bildung*: George Lamming, Social Death, and Actually Existing Modernism,” *Modernist Cultures* 13, no. 1 (January 2018): 33-54; Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); and Brown, *Migrant Modernism*.

²⁸⁶ Simon Gikandi, “Back to the Future: Lamming and Decolonization” in *The Locations of George Lamming*, ed. by Bill Schwarz (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 2007), 191.

rather than individual subjectivity. For Lamming, these novels are direct vehicles of political awareness, even political action, writing the violence of colonialism into a lived physical reality that highlights the urban environment lived in by both colonizer and colonized, inscribing the history of imperialism on sites even after their political independence would suggest a freedom from colonial power. As we will see in *The Emigrants*, temporary dwelling sites in Lamming encourage social networks to form, a coming-together than never appears in the places that are inhabited by Rhysian and Naipaulian protagonists, even when they live with and among others. Yet Lamming's view of these sites is not a wholly positive one, as this chapter will show.

The first temporary dwelling place that appears in *The Emigrants* is the site of the passenger ship that transports the eponymous emigrants to London. The ship journey literalizes the in-betweenness of the moment of decolonization, highlighting the unique qualities of this liminal space in between the Caribbean and England. The ship itself inscribes the relationality of the colony and metropole in this historical period, as it travel in between the two sites in order to create a new way of living and new forms of community. The ship, called the *Golden Image*, is likely a passenger liner that had also operated as a wartime steamship, like the *Empire Windrush*. It functions as a remarkable site for the development of communal consciousness based in new recognitions of group identification and a removal from clear association with either the colonial embarkation or metropolitan destination.²⁸⁷ At first, the ship moves within

²⁸⁷ See Lorraine Coons and Alexander Varias, *Tourist Third Cabin: Steamship Travel in the Interwar Years* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) for a description of the transformation of passenger liners to troop ships and back again in the interwar years, and Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999) for its account of how the *Windrush* came to serve its immigration purposes. Phillips and Phillips also present

the Caribbean from island to island, maintaining a constant sense of relation to land and, by extension, the British empire. Before the open-sea stage of the journey, the passengers “had spent their time anticipating the novelty of ports the ship would call at...the ship was simply the vehicle that had taken them from one experience to another.”²⁸⁸ Yet once they leave the Caribbean, they are no longer distracted by “spectacle” —instead, they are confronted by “the unresponsive stretch of sky and sea on all sides.” Now, “only the ship remain[s]” and the passengers have time to ponder the new conditions of their lives there even as they anticipate their arrival in England.²⁸⁹

The vast majority of the characters in *The Emigrants* travel by steerage class and live together in shared rooms or large dormitories. The domesticity of the dormitory is described in the text almost immediately: “The dormitory was their temporary abode. It was like home; and they regarded its limitations as the limitations of a home for which they were responsible. They had come together without effort or invitation, exchanging confidences.”²⁹⁰ This form of communal living encourages a rapid development of intimacy, prompted by the closeness of the living quarters. Writer and semi-protagonist Collis describes his sleeping bunk as “about a third remove from the ceiling,” which allows him to “hear the men on the top” —that is, above him in another room or perhaps even the deck—“as clearly as he heard the two who lay beside him on the other side the dark passage.”²⁹¹ The characters hear one another sleeping, moving,

multiple first-person accounts of life aboard the *Windrush*, which include significant similarities to daily life as described in *The Emigrants*.

²⁸⁸ George Lamming, *The Emigrants* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 32.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Lamming, *The Emigrants*, 33.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

breathing—a physical intimacy that quickly effaces the fact that these characters are strangers to one another and foreshadows the ways that they will come together, not as British citizens but as black Caribbeans.

In addition to physical intimacy, the ship also produces a sense of detachment, explored by Collis as he considers what it means to be “in mid-ocean”—for Collis, being separated from land means that “decisions don’t mean a damn because we’ve got no reality to test their efficacy” against.²⁹² The combination of material intimacy and symbolic unreality is highlighted in a remarkable scene that takes place on the ship’s deck. Shortly after the passenger Ursula Bis tells the secret of her traumatic past to Collis, a number of the characters fall asleep in the sun on the ship’s deck, prompting a peculiar passage about the nature of reality and the senses, which is worth quoting at length:

It is difficult to tell when precisely the nap begins. ... It was the sun that shone. That’s what they had been trained by the habit of the senses to conclude. They saw. But those who were asleep on the deck couldn’t tell what at that moment the sun felt like. In sleep they were without a relation which the others now experienced. They couldn’t see. The habit that informed them was suspended, and therefore there was for each a temporary destruction of the properties which those who were awake could attribute to the sun. It is unusual to think of such a destruction becoming permanent; but it seemed possible. It seemed possible that the habit which informed a man of the objects he has been trained to encounter might be replaced by some other habit new and different in its nature, and therefore creating a new and different meaning and function for those objects. It seemed that this could happen even in a man’s waking life: that change which deprived the object of its history, making it a new thing, almost unknown, since all the attributes of presence would be destroyed, leaving what was once a thing with certain fixed references, a kind of blank.²⁹³

²⁹² 50.

²⁹³ 82.

Here, napping on the deck is converted into a powerful vehicle for considering the nature of reality. As the characters sleep, they are unable to associate the warmth of the sun with its typical context—that is, they are not aware of the “relation” between the warmth that they feel and their historical understanding of that warmth as stemming from the sun. In this unconscious sensation, the text suggests a powerful analogue with the change in identity that can take place in an individual life. If a person can dissociate certain objects from their “fixed references,” a sense of blankness emerges: a blank canvas onto which new histories can be written. While the text does not explicitly associate this detachment from history with individual personality, it seems evident given the placement of this scene immediately after Ursula Bis’s revelation of her secret past. And while this detachment from past history could, presumably, occur anywhere, it seems particularly available on the deck of the ship, far from the islands which lock the characters into specific histories and, therefore, specific identities.

In this scene, we find a compelling representation of Lamming’s desire for separation that he describes in his BBC work. Separate from their association with their colonial past and not yet arrived in the imperial capital, the characters are “deprived... of [their] history.” Through this removal of historical conditions, a remarkable freedom emerges, in which “a new and different meaning” can be found. On the deck, in the middle of the ocean, the emigrants can disentangle themselves from the imperial narratives that have defined their education and personal and political histories in the Caribbean, just as Ursula Bis is freed from her association with her past shame. This utopic vision is “possible” because of the specific site in which this scene takes place. Once the passengers arrive in London, they will no longer be freed from their pasts and, as we shall see, will be once again circumscribed by “attributes of presence.”

Interestingly, an early Lamming poem, titled "Recollection," describes a similar experience to that of the *Golden Image* passengers. In "Recollection," which appeared on *Caribbean Voices* in 1948, we are confronted with an almost identical vision of the sun losing its reference for the protagonist:

You may be sitting under the shade of a casuarina
Making love to an indomitable sky
Or building bridges on a shifting sand slope
Watching the sun reduce your shadow to a dwarf.
And suddenly, suddenly the vision is blurred
And the sun and the fingering tide lose all meaning
And space and time are housed in an egg-shell.²⁹⁴

As in *The Emigrants*, the significance of the absence of "space and time" is clear. In this transformative moment, something new can be brought forth. In "Recollection," this moment of transcendence is tied to a new kind of identity as a part of a social relationship. The poem ends with the connection between two individuals: "So it was I saw you through the grey years / Sitting in the back house sipping your tea ... And smiling to see how fine I had grown."²⁹⁵ The moment in which the historical time and specificity of location are erased or merged into a new blank consciousness transforms into a gentle interaction between two people. This transition from freedom from historical identity to a new kind of social relationality is writ large in *The Emigrants*. After the transcendent moment on the deck, the characters on the *Golden Image* are newly available to leave behind their individual national identities in favor of a group network. Crucially, this network can only function within the oceanic space; the arrival in London brings

²⁹⁴ George Lamming, "Recollections," 4 January 1948, BBC *Caribbean Voices*, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

with it the reinscription of the “certain fixed references” that enforce the characters’ isolation as colonial immigrants within the urban environment.

An aspect of *The Emigrants* that has received some critical attention is the extent to which the emigrants develop a sense of group consciousness as Caribbeans—even as black Britons—once they arrive in London. This has substantial corroboration in the personal narratives of Caribbean immigrants from the midcentury. Sam Selvon, for example, explains, “My life in London taught me about people from the Caribbean, and it was here that I found my identity.”²⁹⁶ Lamming similarly notes in *The Pleasures of Exile*, “No Barbadian, no Trinidadian, no St Lucian, no islander from the West Indies sees himself as a West Indian until he encounters another islander in foreign territory.”²⁹⁷ In *The Emigrants*, this identification begins to form on the ship after they are separated from their prior national and historical senses of self. When boarding the ship, the characters are distinct individuals, each associated with specific characteristics and, significantly, their particular nationality. “Me born an’ bred in Jamaica,” declares one passenger, described as “proud of his origin, prouder than any of his companions seemed to understand.”²⁹⁸ Shortly after his statement, “an altercation” takes place between a Barbadian and a Grenadian passenger, “in which each enumerate[s] the virtues of his own island.”²⁹⁹ Yet this initial association with place of origin is dissolved as the characters merge into one another on the ship and begin to see themselves as a single mass of people, irrespective of national origin. As passenger and former RAF member Tornado reflects toward the end of

²⁹⁶ Sam Selvon, “Finding West Indian Identity in London,” *Kunapipi* 9, no. 3 (1987), 37.

²⁹⁷ Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, 214.

²⁹⁸ Lamming, *The Emigrants*, 35.

²⁹⁹ 36.

the journey: "They were a group. Those who had met and spoken belonged to the same situation. It wasn't Jamaica or Barbados or Trinidad. It was a situation that included all the islands. They were together."³⁰⁰ This sense of community is reiterated by other characters, including a nameless Barbadian man, who exclaims, "It makes me feel that I r'ally belong to something bigger than myself. I'd feel now that whatever happen to you or you or you wus happening to me an' the same way round."³⁰¹ Also asserting his sense of community is the cook Higgins, whose status as uniquely prepared for his life in London is eradicated when he receives word that his future school will be shut down before he can complete his training. Through this destruction of his plan, he enters the group even more strongly as he, like the rest of the passengers, becomes part of the emigrants' economic insecurity. "They would stand together and fight together," Higgins reflects. "The world was against them, and from this awareness they had taken a strength more terrible than the sun."³⁰²

Higgins's declaration of group identity and his enthusiasm for group action seem to suggest an optimistic reading for the power of social networks and collective action on the part of black immigrants. Indeed, this optimistic reading has been taken up by some critics. James Procter has emphasized the settings of black gathering—Fred Hill's barbershop, Miss Dorking's apartment—as places that allow the emigrants to "practice their own exclusions, border definitions, and controls," giving them some agency within the largely oppressive space of

³⁰⁰ 77.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² 91.

London.³⁰³ Though noting that these sites are not “utopian space[s] of black solidarity and resistance,” he argues that even the most claustrophobic of dwelling places is “much more than a simple site of incarceration: it accommodates the possibilities of an emergent black consciousness.”³⁰⁴ Likewise, Gail Low has made similar points about the ship space, arguing that the ship in the first portion of the novel is “a necessary space for the exchange of voices and stories” that “function[s] as vital points of identification necessary for collective vision.”³⁰⁵ Others, such as Sandra Pouchet Paquet and John Ball, have found the settings of *The Emigrants* more representative of the general mood of isolation and exclusion in metropolitan London.³⁰⁶ For Ball, “London’s spatial environment is a concrete legacy of imperialism’s structures of production and power.”³⁰⁷ The emphasis on claustrophobic interiors in *The Emigrants* seems, for Ball, to “imply that the divisive binaries and excluding borders associated with colonialism have extended into the very metropolitan space that was supposed to offer the colonial subject expanded opportunities and a break from the past.”³⁰⁸ Indeed, for Ball, the ship space only prefigures the “confinement” that the characters will endure once they arrive in London.³⁰⁹ My reading of the places of *The Emigrants* allows for both the optimistic interpretation of group consciousness produced by the places of gathering, even as the ongoing effects of imperialism—

³⁰³ James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 38.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Gail Low, “Streets, Rooms, and Residents,” in *Landscape and Empire, 1720-2000*, ed. by Glenn Hooper (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 173.

³⁰⁶ Sandra Pouchet Paquet, *The Novels of George Lamming* (London: Heinemann, 1982).

³⁰⁷ John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 111.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ 112.

overlaid in the physical environment of London—ultimately destroy the fragile social networks that have begun to form.

The other prospective purpose of the shift toward group identity on the ship is that of potential political awareness or even joint political action, as we see in Lamming's portrayal of the power of black identity fostered in the United States in *In the Castle of My Skin*. In London, as on the ship, the characters reference the power of West Indians as a group, particularly in the context of British colonialism. "If ever there's any fightin' in our parts o' de world," explains Tornado to his fellow hostel residents, "we'd be nastier to the English than to any one, because we'd be remembering that for generations an' generations we'd been offerin' them a love they never even try to return. 'Tis why colonial wars will be de bloodiest, 'cause 'tis a more personal matter 'twixt us an' dem, de English, than 'twixt dem an' some other enemy."³¹⁰ Similarly, in the intimate environment of the barbershop, the barber declaims, "'It is de age of colonial concern... Dat's why we in all the colonies will fight... Tis the time to fight... We ain't got nothin' to lose."³¹¹ When an African customer at the barbershop expresses some reservations about this statement—"What have you got to win?" he asks—the other customers clearly suggest their disagreement: "it seemed that the general feeling had turned against him."³¹² But, as in virtually all of Lamming's novels, there is no positive political action or movement. The references to the "colonial wars" do not develop into active resistance, and the violence that occurs in the novel is primarily within the group, not directed toward any outward imperial target.

³¹⁰ Lamming, *The Emigrants*, 192.

³¹¹ 132.

³¹² 132-3.

The group consciousness that is largely shared on the ship is one that engenders both increased political awareness and an empowered sense of safety upon entering the precarious situation of the London metropolis. Though the emigrants generally lack specific plans for their activities post-arrival—other than RAF member The Governor—their identification as a group creates a sense of safety in numbers, reassurance that they will not be completely isolated upon their arrival. This sense of shared experience is reiterated upon their arrival in London and the train journey that transitions the novel from its first to its second part. The train journey's lyrical narrative is one that has received substantial critical attention, one of the many places in which Lamming's narratives have been likened by critics to high modernist writing. In this section, narrative essentially vanishes in favor of stretches of unattributed monologue and dialogue, placed on the page in narrow, prose-poem-esque columns, in which speakers seem to merge with a narrative voice that describes the view out the window. The repetitive interjecting voice of the train conductor or attendant, written in unpunctuated capital letters—"WILL PASSENGERS KEEP THEIR HEADS WITHIN THE TRAIN"³¹³—inevitably recalls the Eliotic "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME." In this section, the characters, freed almost entirely from individual identity, share their fears and immediate impressions of their new surroundings. In many sections, it is unclear if there is a single speaker or multiple:

I never thought ah would have set eyes on England.

If you'd tell me that ten years ago, ol' man, I would have say you tryin' to poke fun at my head.

But the worl' get small, small, ol' man.³¹⁴

³¹³ 118, 119, 120, 121.

³¹⁴ 114.

The text suggests that the emigrants are engaging in a shared experience and that the similarities of their backgrounds are enough to draw them into a unified group as they face the disorienting new setting. Again, though, the text presages the collapse of the group, as the voices become increasingly fractured, suggesting that the protective power offered by the group is in fact illusory:

Weak. Frightened. They said it wouldn't
be so cold. So cold... So frightened...
so frightened... home... go... to
go back... home... only because...
this like... no... home...³¹⁵

Just as the chorus structure of the train section fades into fractured panic as the arrival in England stretches onward, the group itself devolves into smaller interactions, shot through with tension and even violence, as the pressures of London life mount. The form reflects and foreshadows the dissolution of group identity that characterizes Lamming's portrayal of Caribbean life in London. The wonder of the arrival, as the characters marvel at the sights they see and the transformation of their surroundings shifts to disillusionment; the perseverance on the notion of "home" and "no home" suggests the fraught nature of the relationship between colony and metropole, played out in the lived experiences of these emigrants.

Once the passengers disembark in London, several find themselves living together in a hostel that caters to recent arrivals, in part due to the extreme lack of affordable housing, particularly housing that allows for presence of black residents—a situation of some historical emergency, as we have seen in Rhys. That housing would be difficult to achieve once arriving in

³¹⁵ 124.

London is a fact acknowledged by Lamming's emigrants, even as they experience the unique setting of the passenger ship transporting them to the metropolitan capital. As James Procter describes, "To leave 'home' for Britain was not simply an issue of departure or travel: it also involved a fraught territorial struggle over local space."³¹⁶ Like those in Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* or "Let Them Call It Jazz," the temporary and precarious dwelling places in London produce unusual effects of claustrophobia and reflection in their inhabitants. Like the ship, the hostel forces the emigrants into a state of introspection due to its immobilizing nature: "They had worked, returned home, and now in the early night which had suddenly grown thick outside they were together in a small room which offered no protection from the threat of boredom. It was so easy to feel the emptiness of being awake with no activity which required their whole attention. ... Alone, circumscribed by the night and the neutral staring walls, each felt himself pushed to the limits of his thinking."³¹⁷ Though these characters experience a kind of intimacy that Rhys's characters lack—even when they are residing in shared living spaces—the sense of isolation is present just as strongly for Lamming's characters. Even more strongly resonant is the claustrophobia that both Lamming's emigrants and Rhys's protagonists endure, here embodied in the thick and circumscribing night and the small room with its "staring walls."

This living space is contrasted with that of "another climate, at another time": that of their former lives in the Caribbean. That life would have allowed them to "ramble the streets yarning and singing, or sit at the street corners throwing dice as they talked aimlessly about

³¹⁶ Procter, 31.

³¹⁷ Lamming, *The Emigrants*, 192.

everything and nothing.”³¹⁸ Here instead, they are forced by the “immediacy” of the room “to see that each was caught in it.”³¹⁹ Rather than finding the living space a respite from the pressure of the housing search, they are trapped by this interior space, by the boredom and anxiety it engenders, and indeed the limited options that they have for escaping it: “their action,” the text notes, “was limited to the labour of a casual hand in a London factory.”³²⁰ There is no remarkable revelation of consciousness here in the hostel, as there had been on the ship in the middle of the ocean. Instead, the enclosing physical structures and the painful economic realities of London, unlike the unusual unreality of life at sea, circumscribe their ability to think beyond the immediate, even as their actions are similarly physically restricted.

These claustrophobic interiors abound in *The Emigrants*. Very little of the novel is set outdoors; the narrative seems to jump from interior scene to interior scene, highlighting individual sites of group gathering, including the barbershop, several party scenes at various apartments, and the Mozamba Club run by ship passenger The Governor and African doctor Azi. The novel repeatedly presses into focus the contrast between these sites of coming-together and the pressures on the individual characters that cause them to continue to experience the isolation of the hostel. This conflict forms the basis for my understanding of the political stakes of Lamming’s use of setting. What Lamming shows us through the interaction of character and setting is that the communal places that foster sociality and group consciousness cannot be idealized. Through the pressures of racism, the historical emergency of housing shortage, and

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

the limited job opportunities for West Indians, the characters of *The Emigrants* are forced into an emotional isolation that belies the social networks they inhabit. The optimism suggested by the opening scenes on the *Golden Image* cannot truly come into existence in the real experience of life in London.

As Pouchet Paquet points out, the novel's increasingly fragmented form as it draws toward its conclusion underscores the ways in which the characters have become increasingly dispersed and even at odds.³²¹ At the very end of the novel, the Governor attacks the Strange Man because, in a shocking reveal, the Strange Man's female companion turns out to be the Governor's estranged wife. In another disturbing scene, the character Una Solomon (the renamed Ursula Bis) recounts the murder of former shipmate Queenie. At this point, the group has broken down dramatically, and Queenie's death is almost unnoticed by the other members of the group. ("What's happened to Queenie?" Collis asks; "Only God knows," responds Frederick, "but no one has seen her in months."³²²) After two years in London, the optimistic mood of the ship has transformed into a grim battle for survival, in which each character acts primarily out of his or her own self-interest.

The culminating scene of the novel takes place at the Governor and Azi's club, in the final section of the novel, titled "Another Time." Two years have passed since the *Golden Image* docked in England, and the characters interact only occasionally. While some of the characters seem to be moving forward—Collis is making a living as a writer, Una Solomon may be entering into an engagement with her former lover, Frederick—the narrative sharply reminds

³²¹ Pouchet Paquet, 45-6.

³²² Lamming, *The Emigrants*, 254.

us of the precarity of midcentury immigrants in London with its return to the crisis of housing. In this final scene, the Strange Man—originally a stowaway on board the *Golden Image* who is not allowed to dock in England with the rest of the cast of characters—finally arrives in London, bringing to the Mozamba Club a large group of West Indian immigrants who have come directly from their ship's docking. "They all out dere, Guv, wid they luggage an' everything," explains the Strange Man. "They ain't got nowhere to go an' that hostel closed down."

The Governor looked to Azi for help. "But this is a club," he said.

The Strange Man was confused. He looked at the Governor with misgiving.

"'But remember, Giv, how de las' time de chaps say how in rain or sun, poor or rich they'd always stick together. Dat's why when we couldn't find no place, I asked whether there wus any kind o' West Indian set-up an' lo an' behold they sent me to the bes' o' de lot, you, the Governor.'" The Governor seemed to collapse. He felt no loyalty towards the crowd outside, but he didn't know how he could explain himself to the Strange Man.³²³

The Governor's lack of loyalty to the group signifies the total loss of the group identity achieved on the ship. This shift is underscored by the Strange Man's attempts to persuade him: "Ever since those little talks between those chaps on the boat," he says, "ever since then I change, Guv. I live my life since different rememberin' w'at those chaps say 'bout bein' together."³²⁴ Though the Strange Man has been dramatically affected by the transformative experience of the ship journey and its development of a unified West Indian identity, his intervening two years back in the Caribbean have not subjected him to the same pressures of living within the metropolitan capital as have the Governor's.

³²³ 279.

³²⁴ Ibid.

This moment is significant in our understanding of the effect on London on the Caribbean characters. For the Strange Man, who failed to immigrate on his first journey because of his status as a stowaway on the ship, life continued in the West Indies for the preceding two years. This time period allowed him to reinforce the group consciousness and ideals of political action within the “climate” that, for Lamming and for the characters, could foster such group connection. London, on the other hand, has stripped away the transformative experience of the ship for the remaining ship passengers, who successfully immigrated. The Governor’s refusal to help the immigrants—indeed, his total lack of an emotional connection to them—is clearly located in the crushing pressures of London life: from the specific pressures of racism and poverty to the closely felt betrayal that arises from the discovery that the colonial homeland does not, in fact, welcome the subjects who had believed that they were part of a cohesive empire.

In 1952, Lamming read a personal essay on the BBC radio program *Calling the West Indies: Behind the News* titled “A Letter Home.” This compelling personal essay describes his experiences in specific terms as he walks around London: Oxford Street, H. G. Wells, Christmas trees, the weather. Yet these specifics are underscored by his sense of detachment from his surroundings. “London,” he explains, “is above everything else a vagrant’s city. The frequent visit or even long residence will not help. It simply does not receive your roots. The soil has several layers, but offers no promise of fertility, no feeling of continuity. Here, in the thickest crowd, on the most festive occasion, a man is alone and he knows it.”³²⁵ This is the London that

³²⁵ George Lamming, “A Letter Home,” 27 December 1952. BBC *Calling the West Indies*, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England.

the emigrants encounter upon their arrival: a city that “simply does not receive [their] roots,” that allows for no creation of a community, in which a colonial immigrant is inescapably isolated. In this figuration, it is the physical space of London itself that does not permit the entrance of the colonial immigrant into its society—London itself prevents the development of roots, of social networks and close communities, by those who attempt to enter it from the outside. It is this powerful resistance to entry that leads to the collapse of the social groups raised in the early stages of *The Emigrants*, rather than a failure of individual personality or will. As we will see in his second metropolitan novel, *Water with Berries*, Lamming’s depiction of London highlights the ways in which immigrants cannot fit themselves into the existing physical structures and sites of London, despite their best efforts. Instead, it is London itself that must be transformed by the immigrants through a violent cleansing of place.

III. Violence and Metropolitan Transformation in *Water with Berries*

Lamming’s only other novel set primarily in London is *Water with Berries*, one of his last two novels, published near-simultaneously with *Natives of My Person* in 1971. Like all of his later novels, *Water with Berries* has received far less critical attention than his first two novels—*In the Castle of My Skin* and *The Emigrants*—or his book of essays *The Pleasures of Exile*, despite its close attention to some of the same themes of imperialism, exile, and the potential for political action both in the Caribbean and in the metropole. *Water with Berries* relates the story of three men who have migrated from San Cristobal, Lamming’s fictional Caribbean island, to London, in order to attempt to establish careers in the arts. Teeton, a painter, Roger, a musician, and Derek, an actor, all achieve some measure of commercial success in London, and, as members of a

group of West Indians known as the Secret Gathering, they are alive to the colonial power structures that influenced their lives in the Caribbean and now in London. By the end of the novel, all three characters explode into forms of violence enacted against both people and property; all are eventually imprisoned and, at the close of the novel, await their trials.

Like *The Pleasures of Exile*, *Water with Berries* is deeply engaged with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Its title references Caliban's early description of his relationship with Prospero:

When thou cam'st first,
Thou strok'st me and made much of me, wouldst give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night. And then I lov'd thee
And showed thee all the qualities o' th'isle,
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile.
Curs'd be I that did so!³²⁶

From the very first, we see that Lamming's intention with the novel is to provide a complex view of the relationship between colonized and colonizer. As J. Dillon Brown describes it, "Lamming immediately pushes us toward an understanding of the relationship between colonizer and colonized that is far more complicated than the thought of it as simple, unidirectional oppression."³²⁷ The novel's engagement with *The Tempest* resonates throughout the text: from the characters names (Myra and Randa as the two characters that reference Miranda, Fernando as Ferdinand) to the details of their stories. In a clear echo of Miranda's story, for example, Myra is taken as a child by her father to the San Cristobal island, where she

³²⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 1.2.397-406.

³²⁷ J. Dillon Brown, introduction to *Water with Berries* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press Ltd, 2016), 10.

lives in a sort of idyllic isolation for a time, surrounded by the natural world, before the intrusion of characters from the outside.

Lamming has explained his interest in using *The Tempest* for this novel in a 1973 interview:

What is happening here is that I am in a way attempting to reverse the journeys. In Shakespeare's *Tempest*, it was Prospero in the role of visitor to Caliban's island. In *Water with Berries*, it's reversed. The three characters really represent three aspects of Caliban making his journey to Prospero's ancestral home—a journey which was at the beginning, a logical kind of development because of the relationship to Prospero's language. Then they discovered the reality of Prospero's home—not from a distance, not filtered through Prospero's explanation or record of his home, but through their own immediate and direct experience.³²⁸

The notion of the characters faced with and reacting to their experiences in London defines the text, as each of the three protagonists explores his artistic practice and individual social experiences in relation to the wider context of colonialism and its ongoing legacy in England.

As in *The Emigrants*, we see a careful attention to the settings of the novel, and a particular interest in close, often claustrophobic interiors. Unlike *The Emigrants*, however, the rooms and interiors in *Water with Berries* do not function as producers of a new kind of black British or West Indian identity. In this novel, the migration has occurred seven years prior; the characters' identities and membership within the group—in this case, the Secret Gathering—are already well-established. Instead, the settings in *Water with Berries* become sites where the relationships between colonizer and colonized play out and come to violent climaxes.

³²⁸ George E. Kent, "A Conversation with George Lamming," *Black World* 22, no. 5 (March 1973): 89.

The first setting of the novel, depicted at length, is the room that Teeton rents from his landlady, the widowed Mrs. Gore-Brittain, referred to primarily in the text as the Old Dowager. The room is described in precise and exhaustive detail:

Two windows and one door.

A pair of chairs at opposite ends of the table.

Twin divans that stretched the whole length of the wall.

There was a white plaster head of Columbus on the mantelpiece.

A black tree trunk rose from the far corner.

The folding maps were his only curtains.

He loved this room. Spare, solitary, without any trace of fuss. It was beyond improvement.³²⁹

This description of the room seems at first to remove it of its human elements, focusing on the crisp physical description of specific items. Yet the items themselves are revealing. The map on the windows is a map of the Caribbean, constantly bringing to mind Teeton's home country of San Cristobal and confronting him with his current geographic distance from his home. As John Ball points out, the map "makes oceanic connectedness between London and the 'external frontier' a central image of [the novel's] first scene."³³⁰ Through the map, "the Caribbean seascape and landscape are symbolically present in London"³³¹; moreover, the map proves both a reassurance and a spur for Teeton as he reflects on his determination to return home and to effect political action in San Cristobal.

³²⁹ George Lamming, *Water with Berries* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press Ltd, 2016), 31-2.

³³⁰ Ball, 153.

³³¹ 154.

The black tree trunk, originally brought in with a kind of silent determination by Teeton, is at first shocking to the Old Dowager. The tree trunk highlights the intervention of the natural world into the safe, homey place of the room—a theme which we saw drawn out repeatedly in V. S. Naipaul's novels as well. Yet the tree is quickly subsumed by the Old Dowager as she comes to accept it and, eventually, insist that it not be moved. Indeed, her possessiveness over the tree trunk—almost always described weightily with the adjective “black”—in many ways parallels the relationship between herself and Teeton, a relationship which highlights the complexities of the colonizer-colonized relationship even as it turns on her possessiveness and desire for control. As with many of the names in the novel, the Old Dowager's is significant: as Mrs. Gore-Brittain, her name is suggestive of her role as colonizer. As “the Old Dowager,” her name also indicates the novel's sense of imperial contraction and decline, of a political and social institution in the process of radical change.

In the early parts of the novel, Teeton describes his feelings toward the Old Dowager in appreciative, even filial tones. It is the Old Dowager, in his view, who has “turned this room into a home” through a “miracle of affection.”³³² Through his lack of attention to the room during the work day and evening, it becomes “harsh and cold with neglect,” but the Old Dowager's morning arrival transforms it “back to its more normal state: a mixture of workshop, playground and garden,” leaving behind “some signature of her presence.”³³³ In Teeton's impression, the house is not positively influenced by his own presence; instead, the Old Dowager's cleaning, organizing, and general housekeeping leave a lingering mark that is, in his

³³² Lamming, *Water with Berries*, 34.

³³³ *Ibid.*

view, imbued with positivity and homeliness. Yet his further references to the room are more complex: “He had come almost to think of the room as a separate and independent province of the house. The house was the Old Dowager’s; but the room was his; and house and room were in some way their joint creation; some unspoken partnership in interests they had never spoken about.”³³⁴ From the first pages of the novel, we see that the domestic setting of the house is writ large as a metaphor for the relationship between empire and colony, particularly the lingering effects of imperialism even after decolonization: the house contains the room, even as the room is independent of it. Yet the fact that the Old Dowager’s influence on the room “lingers” even after she departs from it—and her continued daily activities in the room itself—highlight the real lack of independence that the room has from the house. Though Teeton’s emotional attachment to the Old Dowager is figured as almost wholly positive in these early scenes, the characterization of their relationship as signified by the room-house setting highlights the power imbalance that will ultimately lead to the violent explosion of their “unspoken partnership.” Indeed, as Lamming notes in *The Pleasures of Exile*, “colonization is a reciprocal process. To be colonial is to be a man in a certain relation.”³³⁵ This relation is clearly present between Teeton and the Old Dowager: Teeton’s initially positive view suggests not a lack of oppression but rather the myth of imperial harmony put forth as part of the very concept of colonialism.

As the novel proceeds, the relationship between Teeton and the house—and by extension, between Teeton and the Old Dowager—grows increasingly fraught. Teeton begins to

³³⁴ 34-5.

³³⁵ Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, 156.

discern some of the power imbalance between the two as he struggles to tell her that he is leaving her home to return to San Cristobal and become engaged in local politics post-independence. Though he has made all of the preparations to leave, including selling his artwork, he anxiously avoids telling her of his departure. Ostensibly, he wants to avoid hurting her feelings, as he knows of her attachment to him. Yet underlying this near-filial guilt is also the lingering knowledge of his precarious position in London—he is attached to the dwelling space and the safety it affords and does not want to lose it. As he struggles to take action, he observes that “there was a sense, deep and subtle and even dangerous, in which she had achieved some powerful hold on the roots of his emotion. She had trained him to forgive her; to find some reason for diminishing any offense, however wounding it might have been.”³³⁶ Teeton’s realization about the Old Dowager’s “hold” on him is suggestive of decolonial disillusionment. While imperial narratives of paternalistic care and provision remained alive throughout the midcentury decades—the end of *Caribbean Voices* in 1958, for example, was located in the fact that “the children had outgrown the patronage of the parent”³³⁷—by the 1971 publication of *Water with Berries*, it was more widely recognized that the promise of the imperial relationship had not been delivered to its colonial half, proving instead a relationship of oppression and brutality. Though the Caribbean emigrants to London in the midcentury decades had expected to find a home within the larger empire of which they legally belonged—

³³⁶ Lamming, *Water with Berries*, 211.

³³⁷ Remarkably, this phrase, though referring to the 1958 end of the program, was in fact used as late as 1966 by BBC Director of External Broadcasting Edward Tangye Lean in a ceremonial distribution of program scripts to the University of the West Indies libraries. Quoted in Glyne A. Griffith, *The BBC and the Development of Anglophone Caribbean Literature, 1943-1958* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 163.

and considered themselves culturally a part of—the metropole does not fulfill its end of the bargain, disappointing them with its lack of housing and jobs even as they seek to “forgive,” in Teeton’s words, the city’s flaws.

Recalling *The Emigrants’* Tornado’s declaration that “for generations an’ generations we’d been offerin’ them a love they never even try to return,” Teeton’s attachment to the Old Dowager is tensely characterized in the middle part of the novel, offering enclosure and anxiety to Teeton even as it had formerly provided him with a sense of domestic security and even pleasure.³³⁸ Moreover, Teeton’s determination to return to San Cristobal after his seven years in London is strikingly reminiscent of Lamming’s own comments during the 1958 Stuart Hall discussion on the Third Programme—indeed, exactly eight years after Lamming’s own arrival in England. Lamming’s sense of the necessity of his own return, described earlier in this chapter, resonates in Teeton’s own determination to go back.

A climactic moment in the novel occurs when Roger’s wife, Nicole, commits suicide in Teeton’s room after Roger’s rejection of her pregnancy due to his paranoid terror of having a mixed-race child. At this moment, the Old Dowager takes charge of the situation: “The arrival of disaster had given the Old Dowager a boldness he hadn’t seen in her before; as though this death had, in some way, increased her hold on the living; sharpened the edge of her confidence.

³³⁸ In reference to this section of the novel, A.J. Simoes da Silva describes the domestic space in much more negative terms: “Once a place of welcome relief from the hostility of a cold and inhospitable land, the room that Teeton occupies in the Old Dowager’s house becomes the prison from which there is no escape” in *The Luxury of Nationalist Despair: George Lamming’s Fiction as Decolonizing Project* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 161. This assessment seems to me an extreme overstatement of the case; while Teeton does indeed feel guiltily reluctant to address his plans to depart with the Old Dowager, he nonetheless proceeds apace with those plans. It is not until the move to the Orkney Islands that Teeton’s sense of enclosure and restriction turns into one of imprisonment.

It had reinforced her defiance against the forces which now threatened her house.”³³⁹ Crucially, the text suggests that the Old Dowager is not rising in support of Teeton, in a desire to protect him from undue suspicion, or even to protect herself—instead she is responding to the threat to her home. Again, the home metaphor is suggestive of the empire, and the threat to the empire posed by decolonization across the globe. As part of their “unspoken partnership,” they work together to bury Nicole’s body in the back garden and quickly flee London. At the Old Dowager’s complete command, Teeton follows her to the Orkney Islands, where they take refuge in a home occupied by Fernando, her late husband’s brother. The scenes that follow are surreally claustrophobic, as Teeton, the Old Dowager, and Fernando speak in long, dreamlike monologues and Teeton repeatedly expresses his desire to leave, to no avail. The house is on an island—suggestive, of course, of the other, larger islands that have been Teeton’s homes—and functions like a prison, trapping him within its bounds more physically than the gentle, insidious enclosure of the Old Dowager’s house in London.

On the island, Teeton finally manages to tell the Old Dowager about his intention to return to San Cristobal: “You don’t understand,” Teeton explains. “You’ve got me wrong. I mean I’m going home. Back to San Cristobal...I wanted to tell you before. I should have told you before....Before what happened at the house.”³⁴⁰ The Old Dowager sits in stunned silence, perhaps eventually slipping into a faint, as he tries futilely to express an apology he cannot fully articulate: “I’m grateful. You can’t imagine how grateful I am. There had never been a house like that, nor a room like that. For me never. And I wanted to let you know what you did. How

³³⁹ Lamming, *Water with Berries*, 195.

³⁴⁰ 229.

you made it so.”³⁴¹ As always, the tenor of their relationship is framed in and through the domestic space that they shared. Teeton’s gratitude, caught up in his sense of safety and peace in the house, is belied by his resistance to the lack of independence he also maintained there.

Feeling as though he has finally discharged his duty, Teeton imagines himself returning back to the Gathering and back to San Cristobal; yet events quickly work to destroy this imagined progression toward fulfilling his political desires. In a disturbing extended monologue, Fernando vents his wrath against Teeton and people of color more generally, letting loose a stunning series of revelations: first, that the Old Dowager’s daughter had been fathered by him, not her husband; second, that he had killed the Old Dowager’s husband after discovering him and their daughter on San Cristobal; and third, that he had falsely told the Old Dowager that her daughter had died, when in fact he had abandoned her after she was raped by the West Indian men who worked her father’s plantation. In response both to these discoveries and to his threatening move against Teeton with a knife, the Old Dowager shoots and kills Fernando. At first, Teeton is once again grateful to her, helping her hide Fernando’s body as they had hidden Nicole’s, and offering tentatively to help her find her daughter, now revealed to be the character Myra, whom he had met earlier in London. Yet the Old Dowager, betrayed by his announcement that he had planned to leave her—interestingly resonant with her husband’s departure with her daughter to San Cristobal—turns in her shock and pain to the familiar solution of racism and exclusion. She believes that he is lying to her, and that she had “discovered some animal treachery in his secretive ways. She saw the ancestral beast which

³⁴¹ Ibid.

possessed his kind, a miracle of cunning and deceit, forever in hiding, dark and dangerous as the night.”³⁴² She refuses his offer of assistance.

Teeton, realizing again his imprisonment on the island, determines that “he would have to make his own escape.”³⁴³ That escape takes the form of killing the Old Dowager—an act that is not witnessed in the text—and burning her body in a funeral pyre: “He had burnt the Old Dowager out of his future. He had burnt her free; burnt her losses; burnt her husband; burnt her lover; he was burning her into eternity.”³⁴⁴ The language here is compelling: “he had burnt the Old Dowager out of *his* future” (italics mine) even as he burns her “into eternity.” By quite literally destroying the Old Dowager, he believes that he has freed himself from the control she exerted over him and removed himself from her influence. Yet the sentences end on the statement that he is “burning her into eternity.” Perhaps meant to suggest that he is sending her to some kind of religious afterlife, these words also imply that she is inscribed forever into both his personal history and, more largely, a global history as a product and producer of colonialism. Here we can identify another expression of the pessimism that Lamming displays in his metropolitan fiction. Even as Teeton seeks to free himself from the effects of the colonizer, as seen in Mrs. Gore-Brittain, he also continues to enshrine her in his memory. Lamming’s transition to the island setting suggests the kind of freedom that an escape from London might engender—but it is a freedom ultimately fails. Teeton cannot escape from the influence of the Old Dowager, even as he physically escapes the island prison. In this way, Lamming casts

³⁴² 260.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ 273.

doubt on the power of the return to the Caribbean that he had advocated for in his BBC work and in *The Pleasures of Exile*; instead, we see a kind of angry resignation that acknowledges the ongoing harm done by the British Empire to the colonized.

This rapid explosion into violent conflict at the end of the novel is suggestive of Lamming's comments on the cleansing power of violence, particularly in the context of colonial resistance. Discussing Frantz Fanon in an interview in 1970—the year before the publication of *Water with Berries*—Lamming observes, “There is sometimes almost an implication not only that certain situations may require violence, but sometimes, because of the psychological history of oppressed people, violence may almost be necessary as a kind of exorcising instrument.”³⁴⁵

Several years later, discussing this novel specifically, Lamming explains:

I believe that it is against all experience that a history which held men together in that way can come to an end in a cordial manner. That we can say, ‘Here is the parting of the ways; we will meet up here and continue as though nothing had ever happened; we can put all this horror, all this brutality behind; we are now equal in a new enterprise of human liberation.’ That horror and that brutality have a price, which has to be paid by the man who inflicted it—just as the man who suffered it has to find a way of exorcising that demon. It seems to me that there is almost a therapeutic need for a certain kind of violence in the breaking. There cannot be a parting of the ways. There has to be a smashing.³⁴⁶

Indeed, the explosive final section of the novel has been read positively, as a kind of productive or cleansing political act, by some critics. Brown notes that “the violent rebellion in *Water with Berries*, simultaneously personal and political, is directed specifically at those members of the English population who are seen as inheritors of colonial privilege.”³⁴⁷ A.J. Simoes da Silva

³⁴⁵ Lamming, “Interview with George Lamming,” 15.

³⁴⁶ Kent, 91.

³⁴⁷ Brown, “Introduction,” 7.

agrees that the novel's ending "proposes that the Caribbean subject needs to break away from the past," though he also critically notes that "it seems to be suggesting that this will be achieved only through an act of violence directed at the female body."³⁴⁸ This reading is certainly supported by the novel's text: in addition to Teeton's murder of the Old Dowager, the text also describes the suicide of Nicole, described above, as well as Derek's on-stage rape of a white English female actor. It should also be noted that the novel's ending is not positive but exceptionally pessimistic: Teeton, Derek, and Roger are all imprisoned and left lingering in the purgatory of the judicial system. Thus, critics such as Helen Tiffin and John Ball see the ending as signifying a sense of powerlessness among the Caribbean immigrants and "a continuation of the atrocities of the past."³⁴⁹

Reading the ending in the context of *The Emigrants* can shed further light on how we might view the nuances of the places, relationships, and their violent climaxes in *Water with Berries*. The ending of *Water with Berries* is far more active, perhaps even productive, than that of *The Emigrants*; while Una Solomon of *The Emigrants* does commit murder, it is directed inward, toward another member of their group. In *The Emigrants*, the final fracturing of the Caribbean immigrant group seems to stem from their self-conceptions as individuals, rather than members of a unified, coherent whole. In *Water with Berries*, the individual actors do not resist their membership in the group; their attempts to help and support one another are notable, even as they tend to be thwarted. Yet in both cases, the violence is inextricably intertwined with the

³⁴⁸ Simoes da Silva, 173.

³⁴⁹ Helen Tiffin, "The Tyranny of History: George Lamming's *Natives of My Person* and *Water with Berries*," *ARIEL* 10, no. 4 (1979), 51. See also Ball, 153.

pressures of life in metropolitan London. In *Water with Berries*, it is the presence of the colonizer that leads to the specific explosions of violence, particularly the betrayal of the colonizer—in Teeton’s case, his realization of the Old Dowager’s power over him and her sudden vituperative racism leads directly to the murder he commits.

It is worth noting that Roger’s acts of violence, unlike Teeton’s and Derek’s, are not necessarily explicitly directed against white British women, who take on the role of colonizer. Though Roger rejects his white American wife Nicole’s pregnancy, it is a passive resistance, born from fear rather than destructive rage or rebellion. After her suicide, his destructive response comes in the burning of multiple sites that represent both metropolitan power structures and his own personal history—a personal and political “smashing,” to use Lamming’s terminology: first his boarding house, followed by the pub they frequented, then finally the Old Dowager’s house. Derek makes an attempt to help Roger save some of his possessions—“the archives of unfinished scores, volumes of exercise books with note of what had happened during their first year in England”—but Roger does not react, alarming Derek with his “total incapacity,” as if he “might have been grateful to be buried under the debris of the rooming house.”³⁵⁰ The destruction of the boarding house is evidently tied up with the destruction of self—but more specifically, Roger’s identity as a professional musician that had been fostered by his emigration to London. The subsequent destructions are more clearly targeted outward, yet they too focus on locations that had seemingly met the needs of the immigrants, even as they reinforced the power imbalance highlighted by the Old Dowager’s

³⁵⁰ Lamming, *Water with Berries*, 241.

relationship with Teeton. Again we see the idea of betrayal, as Roger realizes that these seemingly innocuous, even supportive places, are actually further examples of a colonial power structure written into the physical structures of the city. These acts of destruction—less problematic than those acted upon women’s bodies performed by Teeton and Derek—also highlight Lamming’s view of the significance of place and metropolitan structures that reify the colonizer-colonized relationship in *Water with Berries*—and indeed, in *The Emigrants* as well.

Just as Teeton’s desire to go back to San Cristobal recalls Lamming’s own insistence that he must and will return to live permanently in the Caribbean, the depictions of place and place’s significance in supporting and even producing specific imperial relationships calls to mind Lamming’s mistrust and rejection of life in the metropolis, described earlier in this chapter. As decolonization is tied to a revisioning of place, so too is Lamming’s political consciousness inextricably intertwined with his use of physical places in his novels. These novels confirm that Lamming’s rejection of the metropolitan sites of London in *The Emigrants* and *Water with Berries* is not only intimately tied up with his own insistence on the importance of returning to the Caribbean, but also his belief that there can be no adjusting to the spaces designed by colonialism. Instead these places must be destroyed, as in *Water with Berries*, or entirely sidestepped. The significance of place for Lamming in these novels is that of escape and removal, of a departure from the metropole that he evinces in *The Pleasures of Exile* and across his BBC work in the midcentury decades.

In Lamming’s novels set outside of the metropolitan space, we see similar reflections on the torturous process of decolonization and its effect on social networks. In the 1958 novel *Of Age and Innocence*, for example, Lamming portrays the negative effects of colonialism on both

sides of the relationship, figuring the social collapse of the group of white Britons who visit San Cristobal even as he highlights the failed attempts of local individuals to form a unified political party on the island. *Season of Adventure*, published in 1960, is perhaps Lamming's most optimistic reading of the potential of Caribbean society for unity. The novel makes room for this potential by celebrating a return to traditional religious ceremony—the Ceremony of Souls—and a prizing of the peasant class as the most successful origin of creative energy, a theme that Lamming describes in *The Pleasures of Exile* as well.

Indeed, in his BBC work as well, Lamming is optimistic about the political power of a close attention to the specificities of Caribbean sites in particular. Lamming personally edited a series six programs of *Caribbean Voices* in 1958, shortly before its end. Featuring a number of, by this time, well-established Caribbean writers, the programs highlight some of the themes most important to Lamming at this time. In the first program, for example, he explains that “we should get an idea through the three poems: ROOTS by Telemaque, POCOMANIA by Sherlock, and MOON by M.G. Smith, some idea of the West Indies as a physical reality, closely observed and deeply felt by these writers.”³⁵¹ From a later story by Sam Selvon, the listener should take away “the power and possibility of a true regional literature, a literature that never breaks with its folk resources.”³⁵² He prizes, perhaps above all, the “physical reality” of the West Indian narratives, highlighting not only the importance of place to Lamming aesthetically, but also its significance as a site of emotional intensity for these writers.

³⁵¹ Letter from George Lamming to Billy Pilgrim, 3 June 1958, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England, 2.

³⁵² 3.

Similarly, his language about the “power and possibility of a true regional literature” highlights his hope for the development of a West Indian writing that is not primarily influenced by the British literary tradition. It is this emphasis on physical lived reality that defines Lamming’s metropolitan novels that I have addressed earlier in this chapter, particularly his explanation for the crushing oppressiveness of the metropolitan capital. The physical space of London, given that it does not allow for the entry of its colonial subjects, is both a space of extreme emotional intensity and a site onto which political action can only play out in doomed acts of violence, an attempt to revise the physical space that has little effect on the overall societal power structures. What is perhaps most revealing about these comments is the way in which place is figured as a primary contribution for an “authentic” West Indian literature. Not only can sites produce specific thematic effects—they can, in fact, help drive the production of a regional literature that attends not to the language and traditions of the colonizer, but rather to the “folk resources” that Lamming prizes. Showing not only how much Lamming values and prioritizes the representation of place in fiction, but also his sense of place as an aesthetic connection across multiple writers, Lamming’s comments here signal the way that his novels themselves can function as political action. By writing novels of place, Lamming can help produce the very West Indian literary community he desires; and further, by rejecting London, as his two metropolitan novels do, he can reinforce his own commitment to the regional literature he endorses.

Chapter Four: “The Place Had Taken Shape”: Doris Lessing’s Architecture of Intimacy

I. Antiracism, Anticoloniality, and Lessing’s Ghosts

In her 1960 metropolitan narrative, *In Pursuit of the English*, Doris Lessing describes in vivid detail the dreary, unwelcoming state of postwar England. The narrative describes the journey and arrival of the protagonist-narrator, along with her young son, from Africa to London—a journey that Lessing herself made in 1949, bringing along her manuscript of *The Grass Is Singing*. The protagonist of *In Pursuit* (unnamed for much of the book, but called Doris in its final pages) describes her extreme difficulty in finding safe and affordable housing for herself and her son. Lessing experienced a similar struggle: what she has called “my years-long, decades-long worries over getting and keeping a roof over my head.”³⁵³ In this, Lessing references a real state of historical emergency in postwar austerity Britain, a housing crisis precipitated by the Blitz, and powerfully alive in midcentury metropolitan novels by Rhys, Lamming, Selvon, and others.

The first boarding house that Doris finds for herself and her son is richly figured in the text. At this point in the text, Doris has undergone an alarming search for housing, involving numerous rejections and a clear sense of precarity in terms of her limited remaining funds. The room that she eventually finds is a six-room space within a much larger boarding house,

³⁵³ Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography, 1949-1962* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 145.

heavily damaged by wartime bombardment. He first impression of the house is one of oppressiveness: it is “decaying, unpainted, enormous, ponderous, graceless.”³⁵⁴

Describing her impressions upon entering, Doris explains:

When I stand and look up, the sheer weight of the building oppresses me. The door looks as if it could never be opened. The hall is painted a dead uniform cream, that looks damp. It has a carved chest in it that smells of mould. Everything smells damp. The stairs are wide, deep oppressive. The carpets are thick and shabby. Walking on them is frightening—no sound at all. All the way up the center of this immense, heavy house, the stairs climb, silent and ugly, flight after flight, and all the walls are the same dead, dark cream colour. At last another hostile and heavy door. I am in a highly varnished little hall, with wet mackintoshes and umbrellas. Another dark door. Inside, a great heavy room, full of damp shadow. The furniture is all heavy and dead, and the surfaces are damp. The flat has six rooms, all painted this heavy darkening cream, all large, with high ceilings, no sound anywhere, the walls are so thick. I feel suffocated. Out of the back windows, a vista of wet dark roofs and dingy chimneys. The sky is pale and cold and unfriendly.³⁵⁵

The remarkable repetition of this passage is oppressive and almost difficult to read, suggesting the series of rejections Doris experienced in attempting to secure the lodging. Moreover, the description itself is peculiar: a “dark cream” seems paradoxical, and high ceilings and a wide vista seem anything but “suffocat[ing].” Indeed, the images are almost ghostly in their repeated references to whiteness and death. The house, it slowly becomes clear, is a spectral version of the English country house that pervaded representations of English identity for several centuries.³⁵⁶ Rather than the security of the country house, Lessing depicts a site that

³⁵⁴ Doris Lessing, *In Pursuit of the English: A Documentary* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), 28.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Sharon Marcus describes the persistence of the Victorian ideal of the single-family home in *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), an ideal that would maintain its hold well into the twentieth century. English housing reformer Elizabeth Denby, for example, argued in the late 1930s that “most working-class people...still dreamed of a cottage with a garden” (Mary McLeod, “Domestic Reform and European Modern Architecture: Charlotte Perriand, Grete Lihotzky, and Elizabeth Denby,” in *Modern Women:*

is both ephemeral through its peculiar, ghostly description and temporary in terms of its ability to serve as a secure residence for Doris and her son.

In this way, Lessing figures her metropolitan experience as a colonial immigrant similarly to the ways that London is represented by Rhys and Lamming. Yet as this chapter will argue, Lessing's version of London is complicated by her involvement with postwar reconstruction and her political commitment to a kind of "salvific socialism."³⁵⁷ By reading Lessing's midcentury representations of the metropole alongside her depictions of colonial sites in fiction such as *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) and *African Stories* (1965), we can identify what I term Lessing's "architecture of intimacy" — that is, a way of representing place that emphasizes the interaction of individuals, the formation of social communities, and the kinds of productive political action that result from a sense of communal responsibility and care.

The ghostly house that dominates the first section of *In Pursuit* is suggestive of exactly these themes. In her portrayal of the house as dead and dying, Lessing conveys an appreciation of the trauma of wartime bombardment on London, despite the fact that she herself did not witness this bombardment. As I alluded in the introduction to this dissertation, Lessing's colonial status as a resident of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) during World War II isolated her from many of the direct effects of war, despite military officers' attempts to convey the costs of war to British settlers.

Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art, ed. Cornelia H. Butler and Alexandra Schwarz (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 186).

³⁵⁷ James Arnett, "African, Communist: Situating Doris Lessing's 'Africa Dances,'" *Doris Lessing Studies* 35 (2017), 18.

Yet the house is not simply a “ghost” of what it once might have been before the damage of war—it is also suggestive of Lessing’s conviction that the current state of political affairs is simply a precursor to radical change. The house’s uniform whiteness calls to mind the racial homogeneity of the white English population, undergoing a dramatic transformation in the immediate postwar moment, in which the black population of Britain more than quintupled in a single decade.³⁵⁸ Its oppressiveness, the way it refuses the sound of Lessing’s voice, signals Lessing’s investment in political feminism and her resistance to patriarchal structures that do not permit women’s intervention. And the sense of moldering that permeates the descriptions of the house highlights the implication that it is decaying from the inside. Yet for Lessing, the process of political and social change that she anticipates will not be the slow rot and collapse of a neglected house. Instead, she imagines the two great sociopolitical experiments of the period—decolonization and the rise of the welfare state—as intentional, rapid, and intimately interconnected.

The political situation in which Lessing found herself in postwar London was marked by a renewed commitment from the state to the needs of its citizens—a commitment which played out unevenly across racial, gender, and socioeconomic lines. Beginning with the 1942 Beveridge report, which outlined the “five giants” that were to be the core priorities for the British government, the welfare state in Britain sought to eliminate the effects of class inequality on the daily lives of its citizens, including priorities such as education, healthcare, and

³⁵⁸ Chris Waters, “‘Dark Strangers’ in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963,” *Journal of British Studies* 36, no. 2 (Apr 1997), 209.

housing.³⁵⁹ Lessing describes the optimism she felt to be the zeitgeist at the rise of “the National Health Service, the Welfare State”: “What pride in it, what elation—and what confidence!”³⁶⁰ What is more, her autobiography notes her powerful belief in communism’s conviction of the inevitable downfall of the capitalist system. For Lessing at midcentury, “it was taken for granted [that] capitalism was doomed.”³⁶¹ In *In Pursuit*, Lessing describes Doris’s idealistic commitment to the Labour party and its political ideas, noting with gentle satire Doris’s shock to find that many of the people living in poverty around her did not share either her optimism or her political convictions. Yet despite her pervasive self-deprecation (“What state of mind could we have been in, to trust the promises of governments?”³⁶²), Lessing nonetheless describes an intense and ongoing commitment to the rise of socialism in Britain.

Alongside that commitment was her sense that decolonization was similarly politically inevitable. “The white regime” in Southern Rhodesia, she explains, “was doomed. It could not last long.”³⁶³ It is certainly worth noting her identical use of language to describe capitalism and imperialism, both of which she saw as imbued with the seeds of their own destruction. In fact, Lessing repeatedly explains her brief association with the British Communist Party not only through her ongoing commitment to socialist ideals, but also through the importance placed by others in the communist party on decolonization and antiracism. Throughout her

³⁵⁹ Gideon Calder, Jeremy Gass, and Kirsten Merrill Glover, introduction to *Changing Directions of the British Welfare State*, ed. Gideon Calder, Jeremy Gass, and Kirsten Merrill Glover (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 6.

³⁶⁰ Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, 99.

³⁶¹ 58.

³⁶² Lessing, *In Pursuit*, 99.

³⁶³ Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, 24.

autobiography, *Walking in the Shade*, Lessing ascribes to the communists in Britain a potent commitment to global equality, even as she criticizes their idealism and naïveté. “Anywhere outside communist circles, my information that Southern Rhodesia was not a parade of happy darkies was greeted with impatience,” Lessing explains. “How patronized I have been by people who *don’t want to know*. But the comrades did want to know.”³⁶⁴ In her well-known 1962 psychological novel *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing ascribes a similar political journey for her protagonist, Anna, also a Rhodesian exile. “I became ‘a communist,’” Anna explains, “because the left people were the only people in the town with any kind of moral energy, the only people who took it for granted that the colour bar was monstrous.”³⁶⁵ James Arnett, in an examination of Lessing’s earliest unpublished work, has recently argued that Lessing’s “communist beliefs were inextricably African in origin.”³⁶⁶

It is this chapter’s contention, then, that by reading Lessing’s midcentury urban fiction alongside her narratives set in Africa of the same period, we can identify these two key political commitments. It is in her architecture of intimacy that we find this cultural politics most strongly, for her figures of architectural oppression and decay make space for Lessing’s anticolonial and anticapitalist critique even as they provide the ground for communal responsibility and an assertion of the state’s duty of care. Her rejection of colonization alongside capitalism is a familiar position for political argument, but it is a tradition into which Lessing has not frequently been placed. I argue for a renewed critical attention to the cultural politics

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 66.

³⁶⁶ Arnett, 19.

that Lessing evinces in these novels, a critical attention that is grounded in Lessing's careful attention to the specificities of place: from the settler house on the African veld to the boarding house in urban London.

What we will find in these narratives is an emphasis, like that in Lamming, on places of temporariness. "The fact is," Lessing explains in her travel memoir *Going Home*, "I don't live anywhere; I never have since I left that first house on the kopje. I suspect more people are in this predicament than they know."³⁶⁷ Like Lamming, Lessing signals the historical emergency of postwar London for colonial immigrants and the ways that emergency plays out unevenly across racial lines. Yet for Lessing, these places allow her to indicate two kinds of political, social, and economic change: both the radical ejection of colonizers from Africa and the incipient transformation of the metropole through socialist policies. In her use of setting, we also find a vehicle for her questioning of the extent to which individuals can and should take responsibility for colonial violence, and her reckoning of her own imbrication—like that of Jean Rhys—in the colonial system.

II. Lessing's Land in *The Grass Is Singing*

In this section, I turn to Lessing's first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, first published in 1950. *The Grass Is Singing* is set in Southern Rhodesia, where Lessing was raised and lived until her immigration to England in 1949 at the age of 26. In turning to this text, I explore Lessing's early

³⁶⁷ Doris Lessing, *Going Home* (London: Michael Joseph, 1957), 35.

expression of anticolonial critique, as well as her potent investigation into the ethics of responsibility for colonial settlers in Africa.

Southern Rhodesia experienced a particularly tortuous process of decolonization, and in this respect differs markedly from the Caribbean states I have explored in this dissertation's earlier chapters. The "Wind of Change" described by Harold Macmillan in South Africa in 1966 did not extend to Southern Rhodesia, which declared independence not under black majority rule, but under Ian Smith's white minority rule in 1965. Rhodesia's path to sovereignty as the republic of Zimbabwe and majority rule would take another fifteen years, following over a decade of civil war and culminating in the establishment of Robert Mugabe's authoritarian government. Historians such as Brian Raftopoulos, A. S. Mlambo, and Michael O. West have noted the difficulty in achieving a "national consciousness" in twentieth-century Zimbabwe after Shona and Ndebele uprisings were violently suppressed in the previous century.³⁶⁸ West particularly notes that, despite the rise of anticolonial nationalism in the 1950s, colonial brutality caused decades of attendant difficulties in producing the same kind of independence under majority rule that occurred in other Caribbean and African countries during the midcentury period.³⁶⁹

It is in this context that we can understand Lessing's anticolonial critique in *The Grass Is Singing*. Describing her early African fiction as "the bile that in fact I feel for the 'white' society in Southern Rhodesia as I knew and hated it," Lessing is explicit about the political project of

³⁶⁸ Brian Raftopoulos and A. S. Mlambo, introduction to *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-Colonial Period to 2008*, ed. Brian Raftopoulos and A. S. Mlambo (Harare: Weaver Press, 2009), xix.

³⁶⁹ Michael O. West, *The Rise of an African Middle Class: Colonial Zimbabwe, 1898-1965* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 33.

her novels and short stories set in the region.³⁷⁰ In *The Grass Is Singing*, we find an expression of the architecture of intimacy to which I alluded in the chapter's opening: in which the specific sites inhabited in the novel are closely related to the inhabitants and in which the proximity induced by the dwelling place produces specific social effects. In this case, the settler house in *The Grass Is Singing* provides a testing ground for Lessing's questions regarding colonial society and its potential for radical change.

The Grass Is Singing features the isolation, insanity, and eventual violent death of its white settler protagonist, Mary Turner. Highlighting the matter-of-fact cruelty practiced by white colonial settlers in southern Africa, *The Grass Is Singing* was initially read as a progressive novel, and reviews, if mixed, pointed to its powerful engagement with themes of racism and white supremacy in colonial Africa.³⁷¹ In the intervening decades, criticism of Lessing's first novel has grown less favorable, describing its politics as insufficiently radical and even racist in her portrayal of the novel's primary back character, Moses, which offers no sense of his interiority.³⁷² More recently, critical attention has turned more favorably to the novel's participation in the tradition of Zimbabwean literatures of resistance³⁷³ and its explicit depiction of the social mores of the midcentury colonial period.³⁷⁴ My reading of *The Grass Is Singing*

³⁷⁰ Doris Lessing, preface to *African Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), 7-8.

³⁷¹ See, for example, Mertice M. James and Dorothy Brown, "Reviews of *The Grass Is Singing*," in *The Book Review Digest: March 1950-February 1951*, vol. 46 (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1951) and Eve Bertelsen, "The Quest and the Quotidian: Doris Lessing in South Africa," in *In Pursuit of Doris Lessing: Nine Nations Reading*, ed. Claire Sprague, 41-60 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

³⁷² Margaret Moan Rowe, for example, has noted that Moses is primarily depicted as a force of sexual energy (*Doris Lessing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), 17).

³⁷³ Robin Visel, "Then Spoke the Thunder": The Grass is Singing as a Zimbabwean Novel," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 43, no. 2 (June 2008), 157-66.

³⁷⁴ Susan Watkins, "Going 'Home': Exile and Nostalgia in the Writing of Doris Lessing," in *Doris Lessing*, 32-52 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

points specifically to Lessing's close attention to space in the novel, in which the settler house and the surrounding landscape become a vehicle for articulating her anticolonial resistance.

Several critics have noted Lessing's particular interest in this text in the African bush landscape. Anthony Chennells has criticized what he calls Lessing's "romantic anticapitalist" portrayal of the landscape, arguing that her portrayal of the bush's active power is inherently Eurocentric and colonial.³⁷⁵ Eve Bertelsen has critically noted the narrative reference to the setting in colonialist terms: "the savage sun," "the savage heat," and "the savage and antagonistic bush."³⁷⁶ Yet my interest in this novel's geography is not primarily Lessing's representation of the bush, but the built environment instead—that is, the pole-and-dagga house inhabited by the Turners. Lessing is careful to depict the intimate relationship between the inhabitants and the house, emphasizing the project of construction and the identification with the house and its belongings, even as she suggests that the house is always on the verge of being reclaimed by the bush. In this way, Lessing signals her sense of the empire's fragility in Southern Rhodesia and her conviction that British imperialism—as we saw in the chapter's introduction—will soon end in the region.

The Grass Is Singing tells the story of Mary Turner, a child of British immigrants to Southern Rhodesia, raised in semi-poverty, who abandons her life as an urban secretary to marry and move to an isolated farm in the veld. The story, a frame narrative, begins with the local community's response to the discovery of Mary's murder. The novel's primary narrative

³⁷⁵ Anthony Chennells, "Reading Doris Lessing's Rhodesian Stories in Zimbabwe," in *In Pursuit of Doris Lessing: Nine Nations Reading*, ed. Claire Sprague (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 25.

³⁷⁶ Eve Bertelsen, "Veldtanschauung: Doris Lessing's Savage Africa," *Modern Fiction Studies* 37, no. 4, (December 1991), 657.

highlights Mary's isolation within the house, as her husband Dick spends much of his time working the farm. After Dick hires Moses, a former farm laborer whom Mary has mistreated, to work as her house caretaker, Mary becomes increasingly obsessed with the intimacy of her relationship with Moses and with the house itself. After several nervous breakdowns, including a final climactic one in which Mary imagines that the land itself has come alive to "avenge itself" against her, Mary flees the house and is murdered by Moses.

As this plot summary makes clear, the relationship between Mary and the house itself is a crucial one for the development of the narrative and the novel's thematic concerns. In the novel's depiction of the house, it is frequently functions metonymically for the Turners themselves in the minds of the other community members. In the novel's opening, the news of Mary Turner's death is greeted with a sense of inevitability and even satisfaction by the other white settlers, in part because of their distaste for the Turners' home and way of life:

It was not right to seclude themselves like that; it was a slap in the face of everyone else; what had they got to be so stuck up about? ... That little box of a house—it was forgivable as a temporary dwelling, but not to live in permanently. Why, some natives (though not many, thank heavens) had houses as good; and it would give them a bad impression to see white people living in such a way.³⁷⁷

Here, the house stands in for the Turners' identity—they are secluded within the house and their refusal to improve upon it suggests a kind of disdainful dissociation from the tenets of the larger society. Moreover, it also signals a failure to live up to the expectations for whites within colonial Rhodesian society, placing them on par—in the minds of the British settlers through which this section is focalized—with black Africans, catalyzing a racialized resentment

³⁷⁷ Doris Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 2-3.

as well. This description of the house also suggests Lessing's interest in the kinds of sociality produced—and in this case, limited—by a dwelling. The house becomes a space for the Turners to “seclude” themselves; both through their isolation and their calculated refusal to improve the material state of the house, their community is reduced solely to one another. This section also presages the fraught nature of the connection between Mary and Moses, in which colonial racial codes are challenged as their relationship is twisted by Mary's virulent white supremacy.

The construction of the house is described tenderly in the text and reflects the same preoccupation with personal building to which I have previously alluded. Lessing's interest in the construction of the dwelling appears in several of her midcentury texts. In her 1957 travel memoir, *Going Home*, Lessing describes her return to her native Rhodesia after seven years in England. In an early scene, Lessing returns to the site of her family's farm and, in an extended and detailed passage, explains how to build the kind of pole-and-dagga house her family had inhabited for nearly two decades: “To make such a house you choose a flat place, clear it of long grass and trees, and dig a trench two feet deep in the shape you want the house to be. You cut trees from the bush and lop them to a size and insert them side by side in the trench, as close as they will go. From the trunks of living trees in the bush, fibre is torn; for under the thick rough bark of a certain variety of tree is a thick layer of smooth flesh.”³⁷⁸

As Victoria Rosner points out, the second-person form of the house-building instructions in *Going Home* parallels the colonial handbooks that instructed settlers on how to

³⁷⁸ Lessing, *Going Home*, 38.

build their homes, farm their new land, and establish occupancy.³⁷⁹ Significantly, the colonial settlers would have been deeply involved with every aspect of building their new dwelling place, from selecting the site to digging the trenches to selecting an appropriate ant-heap for creating wall-earth. After the ant-worked earth is selected: “the feet of the builders squelch it into the right consistency. Also, in this case, the feet of my brother and myself, who were small children.”³⁸⁰ Even the materials themselves are imbued with a viscosity suggestive of physical intimacy: fibers are “torn” from “the trunks of living trees,” and the “flesh” is peeled away while the tree is still alive.³⁸¹ The builders must confront the living materials that they use to construct the home; there is virtually no distance between the living world and the dwelling place, the dwelling and its inhabitants. In this way, we see Lessing’s architecture of intimacy playing out not on the social level, as I have suggested above, but on a physical, material level as well. The colonial settlers involved in the construction of the house developed a close connection with the physical landscape, as well as a connection with the house that underscores the significance of the domestic in establishing a specific kind of racialized identity (as we saw in the societal reaction to the Turners’ continued inhabitation of a pole-and-dagga house).

³⁷⁹ Victoria Rosner, “Home Fires: Doris Lessing, Colonial Architecture, and the Reproduction of Mothering,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 18, no. 1 (April 1999), 65.

³⁸⁰ Lessing, *Going Home*, 39.

³⁸¹ 38.



Fig. 1: Making the pole framework of the house.³⁸²



Fig. 2: Lessing's brother Henry in front of the house, just before thatching was finished.³⁸³

³⁸² Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 116.

³⁸³ Ibid.

Like Homi Bhabha's Third Space, which "exists in-between the violent and the violated, the accused and the accuser, allegation and admission," the colonial home suspends and brings into focus the complicated relationship of white British settlers to African land and African people.³⁸⁴ Lessing figures the violent destruction of the natural world as the necessary step to building the colonial house. Through her description of the construction of the pole-and-dagga house, she also signals the vast distance between colonial living and the Victorian ideals of the English house prevalent in the early twentieth-century. The pole-and-dagga house is far from the established country house, grounded in generations of English identity. Thus, through her emphasis on the pole-and-dagga house's construction, particularly alongside its ephemerality as a structure, Lessing insists on the material differences between metropolitan and colonial sites. This distinction also allows her to identify the falseness of a key tenet of imperialism's mission: to contain and universalize its colonial locations.

We can identify this emphasis on the material distinctions between colonial and metropolitan sites and the inability of the two to be fitted together through an examination of Dick Turner's relation to Rhodesian sites. For Dick, the suburbs highlight the hypocrisy and ludicrousness of a colonial society bent on replicating English life in Southern Rhodesia. When he must leave the veld for the local urban center where he meets Mary — "one of those sleepy little towns scattered like raisins in a dry cake over the body of South Africa"³⁸⁵ — he feels claustrophobic, "ill at ease and uncomfortable and murderous."³⁸⁶ He observes the way that the

³⁸⁴ Homi Bhabha, foreword to *Communicating in the Third Space*, ed. Karin Ikas and Gerhard Wagner (New York: Routledge, 2009), x.

³⁸⁵ Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, 31.

³⁸⁶ 43.

“ugly scattered suburbs” appear to have “no relationship with the hard brown African soil and the arching blue sky, cosy little houses meant for cosy little countries.”³⁸⁷ He is horrified by the sameness of the suburbs, suggesting that “thousands of people in Africa...could be lifted bodily out of their suburb and put into a town on the other side of the world and hardly notice a difference.”³⁸⁸ Dick’s perspective on the African landscape is certainly romanticized—the language of soil and sky is perhaps that of a farmer but also reminiscent of a travel magazine. Yet he employs that kind of description of the landscape to signal the incompatibility of a white colonial society’s attempt to continue on with their English ways of building and living, refusing to adjust their construction, their aesthetics, and their desires to the realities of a non-English life. In this way, he upends the universalizing narratives of imperialism that fail to acknowledge the distinctions and lived realities of colonial sites.

In many ways reminiscent of the violent transformation of George Lamming’s *Water with Berries*, Dick imagines the destruction of colonial society in Africa:

He wanted to run away—either to run away or to smash the place up. ... When Dick Turner saw them, and thought of the way people lived in them, and the way the cautious suburban mind was ruining *his* country, he wanted to swear and to smash and to murder. ... He felt he could kill the bankers and the financiers and the magnates and the clerks—all the people who built prim little houses with hedged gardens full of English flowers for preference.³⁸⁹

Dick’s fantasies of violent social transformation allude to the destruction of an imperial project that seeks to replicate Englishness across the world. Yet as is evident in his language, it is also a possessive fantasy, one in which Dick rejects the effects of colonialism not simply because of its

³⁸⁷ 44.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

exploitation of the land and people, but because it is changing something that he considers to be his own. As we know from his initial description of his house to Mary, “he had built it himself, laying the bricks, although he had known nothing about building.”³⁹⁰ An attention to this language allows us to re-read his description of the building of his house as an even more intimate connection with the earth—a possessive one, in which he uses land that he considers to be his own in order to make a place for himself. This relationship of entitlement, though ostensibly respectful of the natural characteristics of the land, continues to engage in colonialist discourse.

Mary’s perspective on the built environment’s relationship to imperialism comes from the opposite direction. For Mary, the settler house, scratched out of the landscape and intimately constructed by Dick’s own hands, more closely signals the problems of a colonial lifestyle destined to failure. In Mary’s colonialist view, the land itself is hostile to outsiders. Repeatedly throughout her time spent in the house, she describes the oppressive heat, which enters the house freely due to the lack of ceilings, damages the furnishings, and causes Mary to experience intense physiological reactions.³⁹¹ Even outsiders, such as their hired assistant Tony Marston, are horrified by the way that the sun invades the small home: “Why did they go on without even so much as putting in ceilings?” he wonders. “It was enough to drive anyone

³⁹⁰ 55.

³⁹¹ The importance of the built environment, along with dress and appropriate behaviors, to protect against the deleterious effects of hot-weather climates was common during the colonial period. See, for example, the discussion of tropical architecture and medial and racial discourse in Jiat-Hwee Chang and Anthony D. King, “Towards a Genealogy of Tropical Architecture: Historical Fragments of Power-Knowledge, Built Environment and Climate in the British Colonial Territories,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 32, no. 3 (November 2011): 283-300.

mad, the heat in this place.”³⁹² Like Dick’s response to the suburbs, Mary’s and Tony’s responses continue to engage in colonialist discourse—but this too is part of Lessing’s satire, and there is no sense that she is sympathetic to the anxious physical symptoms displayed by either character in response to the climate. What is most significant is that here, the built environment is incompatible with the physical landscape.

In this incompatibility between the home, its inhabitants, and the landscape, we can begin to see the problematic anticolonial politics that emerge from *The Grass Is Singing*. That Lessing is expressing a critique of colonialism and the discourses that support white supremacy is clear. “Africa belongs to the Africans,”³⁹³ Lessing argues in 1957—and in this novel from nearly a decade earlier, we see a sense that Africa itself, figured through the landscape, will play a central role in the breakdown of colonial society. As Pat Louw has argued, Lessing “uses the crossing of boundaries in colonial space to construct complex subjectivities” in her stories set in Africa.³⁹⁴ The intrusion of the sun into the home both instigates Mary’s internal collapse and also, more largely, the collapse of colonial society. In *The Grass Is Singing*, we can locate a broader project that goes beyond individual identity and subjectivity, one in which Lessing figures an anticolonial resistance through her construction of narrative setting. In *The Grass Is Singing*, it is the physical landscape itself that acts on colonial society, both its physical structures and its individual actors, radically refusing British imperial attempts at permanence.

³⁹² Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, 23.

³⁹³ Lessing, *Going Home*, 12.

³⁹⁴ Pat Louw, “Inside and Outside Colonial Spaces: Border Crossings in Doris Lessing’s *African Stories*,” in *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings*, ed. Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins (London: Continuum Literary Studies, 2009), 27.

Yet this form of anticoloniality also works within the context of a particularly latent strain of white supremacy and imperialist discourse: one which conflates the land and its inhabitants, Africa and the Africans who live there. When Lessing, through her depiction of the physical landscape, suggests that the land itself will act to throw off the yoke of colonialism, she fails to imagine a radical transformation of society that admits the role of individual subjectivities both from the perspective of the colonized and the colonizer.

To explore the way that Lessing presents this problematic form of critique, I turn again to the architecture of intimacy produced within the pole-and-dagga house, which keeps its inhabitants in close proximity to one another at all times. The four-room house that Lessing describes in *Going Home*, “built long” and “sliced across for rooms,” housed Lessing, her parents and brother, and, for some time, their Irish governess.³⁹⁵ In *Going Home*, as well as her autobiography *Under My Skin*, Lessing describes the extreme intimacy of her childhood home, its small size and “cigar box” floorplan resulting in near-constant encounters with various family members and household employees. The closeness of the pole-and-dagga colonial house is particularly relevant to the climactic insanity that Mary experiences in *The Grass Is Singing*. The isolation and oppressiveness of the small building leads to Mary’s increasing—and increasingly sexual—obsession with Moses: “the knowledge of that man alone in the house with her lay like a weight at the back of her mind.”³⁹⁶ The physical structure of the home presses the inhabitants together, producing an intensified site for social interaction.

³⁹⁵ Lessing, *Under My Skin*, 57.

³⁹⁶ Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, 168.

Mary's descent into insanity is most fully and finally focused through her obsessive fixation on the "vengeance" of the African bush upon the house and, by extension, herself. The fragility and ephemerality of the pole-and-dagga house is emphasized throughout Lessing's writings on African dwelling places. In *Going Home*, she explains that "a pole-and-dagga house is built to stand for two, three, four years at most," though her own family resisted that transience "for nearly two decades" through a near-constant series of repairs to the home.³⁹⁷ In her memoir, she describes the way that the house, built directly by the inhabitants from materials drawn from the immediate landscape, is always in the process of "sink[ing] back into the forms of the bush," as if the house's materials seek to return to their original state.³⁹⁸ The house, like "a living thing," changes as the climate changes. "The grass of the roof flattened like old flesh into the hollows and bumps of the poles under it," she explains, "and sometimes the mud-skin fell off in patches and had to be replaced; and sometimes parts of the roof received a new layer of grass."³⁹⁹ She imbues the house with the natural characteristics of life that its materials once possessed, not anthropomorphizing it, but rather signaling the futility of the attempt to alter natural forms into an unnatural, constructed site.

In *The Grass Is Singing*, the house is similarly depicted as constantly on the verge of returning to the land from which it came. Unlike the tone of Lessing's memoir, which seems critical of the project of building more generally, the landscape in *The Grass Is Singing* is depicted as threatening and terrifying through Mary's focalization. Despite the length of her

³⁹⁷ Lessing, *Going Home*, 38.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

marriage to Dick and their time spent living in the small house, Mary inhabits it uncomfortably, regarding with “a stirring of alarm” the sounds made by “unfamiliar birds” and other animals who live in the “encircling veld.”⁴⁰⁰ As her emotional decline progresses, she imagines that “the trees were pressing in round the house, watching, waiting for the night.”⁴⁰¹ Though she has inhabited the house in the veld for quite some time, she defamiliarizes it through her reference to the animals, which seem shocking and unknown. Moreover, the sense of claustrophobia is heightened through her imaginative descriptions of the living plants and animals that circle the house, suggesting an intentional surrounding couched in threat. Mary’s sense of the house is one of fragility, the outside landscape like a powerful weight: “Often in the night she woke and thought of the small brick house, like a frail shell that might crush inwards under the presence of the hostile bush.”⁴⁰² The use of the word shell suggests vulnerability, but it also interestingly frames the inhabitants as defenseless living creatures as well, the house as an external apparatus that is also part of themselves. The personification of the bush as hostile markedly contrasts with Lessing’s own interpretation of the bush as both giver and destroyer of the materials used in construction—a frightening, rather than fatalistic, view of the power of the natural world. Mary’s attitude toward the landscape also suggests her sense of her own gendered vulnerability. In her identification with her domestic dwelling place, she also suggests the vulnerability of her own body—the soft animal within the fragile shell. Finally, her semi-hysterical imagination calls to mind the colonialist narrative of the African climate as a

⁴⁰⁰ Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, 183.

⁴⁰¹ 224.

⁴⁰² 183.

“pathological site especially unhealthy for Europeans.”⁴⁰³ Mary’s fear—which ultimately does indeed end with her death—suggests a kind of incompatibility between her own physical body and the environment.

Mary’s perseveration on the landscape also turns to her impression of its powerful fecundity. No arid “hard brown African soil” in her imagination, the land is instead imbued with a powerful and sexual regenerative force. Frequently Mary narrates her fear that “if they left this place, one wet fermenting season would swallow the small cleared space, and send the young trees thrusting up from the floor, pushing aside brick and cement, so that in a few months there would be nothing left but heaps of rubble about the trunks of trees.”⁴⁰⁴ The phallic image of the “trees thrusting up from the floor” is keyed to the colonialist discourse of “black peril” that traded in the sexualization of African men.⁴⁰⁵ Moreover, it relies on a powerful creation and destruction dialectic. The pole-and-dagga house in this imaginary does not return gently to the bush from which it emerged, but is graphically torn apart, just as the trees were violently stripped in Lessing’s depiction of the house’s creation. The means of the house’s creation is also the means of its destruction—and, in fact, the same physical methods are used in each process, embodying the vengeance of the bush exactly as Mary fears. This fear of the landscape is wrapped up inextricably with her fear of Moses and her sense that her abusive behavior will be turned back upon her. Mary seems to sense that her own culpability will lead

⁴⁰³ Chang and King, 291.

⁴⁰⁴ Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, 183.

⁴⁰⁵ Susan Watkins also notes that “the implication that racial, ethnic and social differences are inevitable, deriving directly from the natural world (the soil, the sky, the sun) but particularly from the land, is typical of the white settler, second-world ideology of Southern Rhodesia” in *Doris Lessing* (16).

to downfall, and the guilt that she feels comes not from the exploitation she has performed, but from her fear for her own physical safety.

In the climactic scene leading up to her flight from the house and murder by Moses, Mary imagines in extraordinary detail the way that the house will finally be taken over by the powerful living forces of the veld “when she [is] gone.”⁴⁰⁶ In one long, nearly stream-of-consciousness descriptive paragraph, Mary imagines the vivid, visceral forces of nature, their colorful, powerful manifestations of the natural world insistently dismantling the house. She personifies the bush, which, she says, “had always hated” the house, waiting threateningly to take it apart:

First would come the rats. Already they ran over the rafters at night, their long wiry tails trailing. They would swarm up over the furniture and the walls, gnawing and gutting till nothing was left but brick and iron, and the floors were thick with droppings. And then the beetles: great, black, armored beetles would crawl in from the veld and lodge in the crevices of the brick. Some were there now, twiddling with their feelers, watching with small painted eyes. And then the rains would break. The sky would lift and clear, and the trees grow lush and distinct, and the air would be shining like water. But at night the rain would drum down on the roof, on and on, endlessly, and the grass would spring up in the space of empty ground about the house, and the bushes would follow, and by the next season, creepers would trail over the veranda and pull down the tins of plants, so that they crashed into pullulating masses of wet growth, and geraniums grew side by side with blackjacks. A branch would nudge through the broken windowpanes, and, slowly, slowly, the shoulders of trees would press against the brick, until at last it leaned and crumbled and fell, a hopeless ruin, with sheets of rusting iron resting on the bushes. Under the tin, toads and long wiry worms like rats’ tails, and fat white worms, like slugs. At last the bush would cover the subsiding mass, and there would be nothing left.⁴⁰⁷

What is perhaps most noticeable about this description is the lush, almost tender way that the destruction of the house is described. While the entrance of the natural world into the house is

⁴⁰⁶ Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, 224.

⁴⁰⁷ 225.

undoubtedly invasive—the swarming rats, the crawling beetles—it is also gentle and even beautiful. The sensory details of the rats and beetles are carefully drawn and fully realized, from the sensation of the rats’ fur to the “feelers” that the beetles reach out with. The clear sky, the air “shining like water,” and the “lush and distinct” trees suggest the clarity of Mary’s vision and a kind of peaceful acceptance of the house’s end. Though the house becomes “a hopeless ruin,” it is transformed through “pullulating masses of wet growth” into plant matter—indeed, into flowers. Through this description, Mary’s horror at the bush’s revenge on the house is transformed into an almost jealous desire for that destruction, a sense of the inevitability and, indeed, the gentle, natural insistence of the way that the bush returns the house to its original state. In this we see a mirroring of Mary’s unspoken, obsessive desire for Moses—her obsession with him is transmuted into an obsession with the tender, ruinous, inevitable contact between the bush and the house, a contact that leaves only the bush intact. Yet in the destruction of the house, we also see Mary’s rejection of the colonial presence in Southern Rhodesia and the beauty that comes in its removal. I read this as an expression of Lessing’s anticolonial resistance, even as it fails to extricate itself entirely from colonialist discourse. Stephen Slemon has argued that “the Second-World writer, the Second-World text, that is, has always been complicit in colonialism’s territorial appropriation of land, and voice, and agency, and this has been their inescapable condition even at those moments when they have promulgated their most strident and spectacular figures of post-colonial resistance.”⁴⁰⁸ It is possible to read Lessing’s use of the landscape here as appropriation, an exploitation of the landscape figuratively parallel to that of

⁴⁰⁸ Stephen Slemon, “Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World,” *World Literature Written in English* 30, no. 2 (1990), 38.

colonialism itself. But I argue that it is possible to read Lessing's recourse to the land as actor as not just appropriation, but also a reflection of the text's inability to envision a possible political action in which white colonials themselves perform radical social change.

The problem with Mary's seeming desire for the end of the colonial house, and thus colonial presence writ large, comes in the abdication of her responsibility for that action. In the narrative, it is the bush that is personified into acting, the romantic vision of the landscape itself rising up to throw out the oppressor. In other words, Mary exhibits no sense of her own culpability for the larger structural problems of colonialism, or even for her own private interactions with the African laborers on the farm. The destruction of the house is something that she imagines as occurring due to forces from the outside, not something that she envisions actively taking part in. Occasionally, Mary wrestles with her own feelings of guilt toward Moses for her cruelty: "The conflict between her judgment on herself, and her feeling of innocence, of having been propelled by something she did not understand, cracked the wholeness of her vision."⁴⁰⁹ Her ability to dehumanize the Africans is fractured due to her intimate daily life with Moses in the house, and through that fracture, she oscillates between shame at her own mistreatment of people she now recognizes as human and her desire to abdicate her own sense of responsibility toward them. Yet Mary does not find a way to act that recognizes the humanity of Moses or the other African laborers on the farm—indeed, she retains a solipsism that underscores the white supremacy she evinces. Her final scene in the novel ends with a focus on

⁴⁰⁹ Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, 224.

her own pain, even as her portrayal of the bush's vengeance takes on a surprisingly peaceful acceptance.

Lessing widens the scope of her criticism from Mary alone to the settler society more broadly through her repeated references to the failure of even liberal colonials, who enter Africa with positive notions of humanity and civil responsibility, to effect any change either socially or personally. Upon their arrival, these English people "were shocked, for the first week or so, by the way natives were treated. They were revolted a hundred time a day by the casual way they were spoken of, as if they were so many cattle; or by a blow, or a look."⁴¹⁰ While they had imagined a humane, if not equal, relationship between black Africans and white colonists, they find themselves taking on the attitudes and actions of their fellow settlers, discovering that "they could not stand out against the society they were joining."⁴¹¹ Indeed, in Lessing's estimation, this is a failure of "white civilization" more generally, inherent in a racial attitude that can "never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or evil, with a black person."⁴¹² Lessing figures the white colonial settlers as culpable, not just for their exploitative actions, but for the larger systemic dehumanization that they effect through their attitudes toward black Africans. Thus, Lessing resorts to the power of the land itself to create radical transformation.

⁴¹⁰ 11-12.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² 21.

Dennis Walder has argued that colonizers and colonized are “overlapping categories too often set against each other in a frozen binary.”⁴¹³ Lessing herself was particularly attuned to this overlapping of positions. Raised first in Persia (now Iran) and then Southern Rhodesia, Lessing grew up identifying closely with her African context, even as she recognized the significant problems inherent in Britain’s racialized politics and exploitation of African people and natural resources. Though she repeatedly argued for African nationalism, she also acknowledged her sense of homeliness within Africa, suggesting that while African self-determination was clearly the right political choice, “a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it” —that is to say, herself and other European colonists.⁴¹⁴ Though Lessing powerfully argues against the violence of colonialism and racial prejudice in *The Grass Is Singing* and elsewhere, the politics she evinces in this novel is limited. She does not create a picture of a society in which white racial prejudice can be transformed or in which individual actors can effect larger change. The novel presents the individual as powerless, embodied in Mary’s increasing withdrawal and indolence: “Her horizon had been narrowed to the house. The chickens began to die.”⁴¹⁵ Like Mary, Lessing’s focus narrows to the African landscape; her vision of revolution focuses on the destruction of the colonial built environment. Mary’s abdication of responsibility for her chickens is paralleled by Lessing’s suggestion that British colonials have refused to take responsibility for the effect of their actions in Africa. The solution, in *The Grass Is Singing*, is the death of Mary and the destruction of her home—not a positive

⁴¹³ Dennis Walder, *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 4.

⁴¹⁴ Lessing, *Going Home*, 12.

⁴¹⁵ Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, 169.

action by Mary, but a passive one, in which she surrenders to the vengeance of the earth itself. As I have suggested above, this version of anticoloniality is unsuccessful and unproductive. Though Lessing imagines a radical transformation (as Lamming does in, for example, *Water with Berries*), this transformation does not involve any specific action on the part of the colonial settlers. It does not envision a reckoning with racism or the exploitation of colonialism, nor does it imagine an empowered political community of Africans causing this transformation. While it is clear from the text that Lessing is opposed to the colonial project in southern Africa, it is not clear that she imagines a viable solution to it even as late as 1950. This cultural politics will change, however, in *In Pursuit of the English*, published a decade later. By this time, Lessing had become a powerful proponent of socialist policies, and through this commitment to the welfare state, could envision a social transformation along an anticapitalist and anticolonial axis.

III. *In Pursuit of the English*: Social Space, Social Responsibilities

As Bhabha, Walder, and others have argued, the relationship between colonizer and colonized is a fraught and intimate one. In *The Grass Is Singing*, Mary gives up her agency and allows it to be taken on by Moses, both in his actions in the home and in her eventual death. Yet as the frame of the novel suggests, her subject position as a white woman retains its power even after her death, as Moses is quickly captured and Rhodesian colonial society, evidently, is impacted minimally by the complex power dynamics between the two characters. In her 1960 metropolitan narrative, *In Pursuit of the English*, Lessing tackles the complicated relationship between colonized and colonizer from a different angle entirely, focusing on the arrival of her white colonial protagonist in London, and her troubled relationship with race and her own

English identity. Traveling from Rhodesia to London, Lessing moves from colony to metropole in a journey that mirrors that of Rhys, Naipaul, and Lamming. Like Rhys's, Lessing's complicated subject position impacts the way that she is read and the way that she reacts to racial attitudes and prejudices in England. The journey from colonial to metropolitan space is a complication of the boundary crossing that Louw describes as crucial to Lessing's creation of subjectivity, for, under the narratives of imperialism, the crossing between colonial and metropolitan location should be read as within the larger imperial whole; that is, the arrival in London should be less a border crossing and more a homecoming. Yet, like Lamming's emigrants, Lessing's protagonist finds that her arrival in London serves to heighten her identity as a part of the colonial society rather than the imperial whole. Unlike Lamming's emigrants, though, Lessing's protagonist is part of the class of the colonizers themselves. Thus, the border crossing in *In Pursuit* serves to reinforce these overlapping identity categories and allows Lessing to more deeply investigate questions of personal responsibility and avenues for anticolonial critique, issues raised but not satisfactorily handled in *The Grass Is Singing*.

In Pursuit of the English is a hybrid text, a comic "documentary" that combines aspects of autobiography and novel forms. As I described in this chapter's introduction, the novel's protagonist, Doris, charts a course of immigration to England and search for housing that parallels that of Lessing. Yet despite the similarities between Lessing and "Doris," the text is not pure memoir. In *Under My Skin*, the first volume of her autobiography, Lessing says that the boarding house that functions as the setting of the majority of the book is based not on a place

she lived in London, but one she inhabited with her son in Cape Town.⁴¹⁶ And in *Walking in the Shade*, the second volume, she describes the differences between her life and the one described in *In Pursuit*, explaining, “That little book is more like a novel; it has the shape and the pace of one.”⁴¹⁷ In this way, Lessing emphasizes the constructed nature of the text, just as the text itself highlights the construction of the built environment and—as in *The Grass Is Singing*—the close association of the inhabitants with the dwelling.

As we see in many of the novels of immigration and arrival I have explored in the previous three chapters, Lessing depicts Doris’s arrival in London as shocking and gloomy; as Lamming memorably terms it, Doris experiences a London that “does not receive [her] roots.”⁴¹⁸ Her introduction to England is framed as a series of endlessly depressing snapshots: “The white cliffs of Dover depressed me. They were too small. The Isle of Dogs discouraged me. The Thames looked dirty. I had better confess at once that for the whole of the first year, London seemed to me a city of such appalling ugliness that I wanted only to leave it.”⁴¹⁹ In her autobiographies, Lessing reports a similar feeling of dismay upon her own arrival. Holding her young son up on the deck of the passenger liner to look out at the English landscape, they find instead the maze of docks, a specter of “grayish rotting wooden walls and beams.”⁴²⁰ Looking back upon her diaries in later years, she describes her references to London as “a nightmare city...endless miles of heavy, damp, dead buildings on a dead, sour earth, inhabited by pale,

⁴¹⁶ Lessing, *Under My Skin*, 407.

⁴¹⁷ Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, 4.

⁴¹⁸ George Lamming, “A Letter Home,” 27 December 1952, BBC *Calling the West Indies*, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England, 3.

⁴¹⁹ Lessing, *In Pursuit*, 28.

⁴²⁰ Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, 3.

misshapen, sunless creatures under a low sky of gray vapor.”⁴²¹ In many ways, this description echoes that of other novels of migration I examined in earlier chapters, emphasizing the lack of color, the unpleasant weather, and above all the repetitiveness of the built environment, in which apparently identical gray buildings pile upon one another. “In London,” Lessing explains, “buildings are so heavy and tall and ponderous they are a climate of their own; pavements, streets, walls—even parks and gardens—are an urban shell.”⁴²² In *In Pursuit*, Doris describes her first experiences with London as marked primarily by “the interminable streets of tall, grey, narrow houses.”⁴²³ Far removed from the tendency to romanticize the landscape that can be read in *The Grass Is Singing*, *In Pursuit* emphasizes the grayness and artificiality of a city overrun by miles of boxlike dwellings. Life in London is far removed from the powerful verdancy of the African bush, and Lessing’s attachment to the physical landscape, so vivid in *The Grass Is Singing*, seems entirely effaced.

After the shock of arrival comes the tortured process of finding secure housing in London, to which I alluded in the chapter’s opening. Though Doris does not experience the racial prejudice that Lamming and others describe, her vulnerability as a single mother adds its own levels of urgency to the narrative of the search for housing. Many of the flats that she visits will not accept her because she has a child, or because she is a single woman, or because she is a colonial immigrant. Like Rhys’s Selina and Anna, Doris becomes ground down by the difficult and isolating experience. She describes the “grim and barbed gaiety” she feels while traveling to

⁴²¹ Lessing, *Going Home*, 12.

⁴²² 34.

⁴²³ Lessing, *In Pursuit*, 34.

address after address and being repeatedly rejected, explaining that her “by now highly-developed instinct” could tell her in advance when a search “would be useless.”⁴²⁴ Her racial background is also questioned (“Where do you come from? I might as well say now that the old lady won’t take foreigners.”⁴²⁵). Doris finds that the fruitless, repetitive search “work[s] on [her] in a way” that she does not entirely understand—yet the reference to racial identity is suggestive of the traumatic effects of English xenophobia. The repeated rejection that Doris experiences seems to suggest a sympathetic resonance for the experience of black immigrants in London. Here again is the uncomfortable overlap between colonizer and colonized, as Doris, formerly a privileged white woman in colonial Rhodesia, is thrust into a new subject position in London that is marked by her difference from the English working class that surrounds her.⁴²⁶ Here, the sympathetic attitude that she displayed toward black Africans in *The Grass Is Singing* and elsewhere is not explicitly present—she rarely mentions race in the text—but is certainly suggested by her acknowledgment of the emotional weight of her encounter with English xenophobia.

Once Doris does find housing, it is repeatedly figured as ephemeral. Like that of the settler house, Lessing’s experience of living in the boarding house in *In Pursuit* is also closely identified with its construction—in this case, its reconstruction after World War II

⁴²⁴ Lessing, *In Pursuit*, 34.

⁴²⁵ 38.

⁴²⁶ Many critical explorations of *In Pursuit* have focused on Lessing’s representation of class consciousness. See, for example, Peter Kalliney, “The Elusive Englishman: Doris Lessing Goes to London Town,” in *Cities of Affluence and Anger: A Literary Geography of Modern Englishness* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007) and John McLeod, “London, England: V. S. Naipaul, Doris Lessing, and Janet Frame,” in *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*, 59-92 (London: Routledge, 2004).

bombardment damage. As each room in the boarding house is methodically repaired, Lessing describes sitting in the room with her typewriter, witnessing the slow return of the boarding house to its former, undamaged state. In this way, the intimacy of the inhabitant with the construction of the pole-and-dagga house is replicated in the tenant with the boarding house. Though the two settings are markedly different, Lessing's midcentury depictions of both draw them together to represent place in the age of imperial contraction. The inherent temporariness of boarding-house living parallels the extreme ephemerality of the settler home as well, "built to stand for two, three, four years at most."⁴²⁷ In this way, Lessing depicts postwar London as characterized by its state of change. Wartime bombardment caused the destruction of many living spaces; postwar reconstruction has led, in a contrasting direction, to another state of flux. What is more, the racial demographics of London changed rapidly in the postwar era, due primarily to colonial immigration. Peter Kalliney describes Lessing's depiction of the built environment in London in terms of the "uncharted territories, inscrutable customs, and feelings of alienation caused by hostile environments."⁴²⁸ He argues that "Lessing figures metropolitan geography and culture as unknown and virtually unknowable," but that by closely describing the space that she inhabits, she takes back some of the power and agency that the oppressive urban landscape has stripped from her.⁴²⁹ Indeed, scholars of *In Pursuit* have often focused on the text's investigation into the boundaries of English identity, and the overlap of space with identity that is present in the text.⁴³⁰ In my view, Lessing depicts London not so much as

⁴²⁷ Lessing, *Going Home*, 38.

⁴²⁸ Kalliney, 149.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ See, for example, Watkins, *Doris Lessing*, and McLeod, *Postcolonial London*.

unknowable as in the middle of a radical transformation: not just a fluctuating sense of identity, but the temporary, changing nature of London's sites and the state itself. In her representation of what she calls "the British Empire, Final Phase,"⁴³¹ Lessing emphasizes not just a shift in Englishness, but a shift in the physical structures of the city and the kinds of sociality they produce.

In a later passage, Doris and her new flatmate, Rose, walk through their neighborhood. As they walk, Doris is confronted by ruins all around her: "It was as if the houses had shaken themselves to the ground. Thin shells of wall stood brokenly among debris."⁴³² Doris, whose upbringing in Africa had sheltered her from the realities of wartime destruction, is shocked and horrified by what Rose "dispassionately" points out. Later in this same scene, Doris discovers a solitary man using a typewriter amidst the ruins: "From this desolation I heard a sound which reminded me of a cricket chirping with quiet persistence from sun-warmed grasses in the veld. It was a typewriter; and peering over a bricky gulf I saw a man in his shirt-sleeves, which were held neatly above the elbow by expanding bands, sitting on a tidy pile of rubble, the typewriter on a broken girder, clean white paper fluttering from the rim of the machine."⁴³³ The scene begins with a sensory detail that evokes Doris's experiences in Rhodesia; the shock of the destruction sends her mind searching for connections to the familiar. The disjunction between what she thinks she hears—crickets—and the actual source of the sound—the clacking of keys—is pointed. Here we see the transition from the romanticized language of the veld to a

⁴³¹ Lessing, *Under My Skin*, 142.

⁴³² Lessing, *In Pursuit*, 47.

⁴³³ Ibid.

stark depiction of urban life that emphasizes technology and construction. The sudden appearance of the typist, appearing as if from nowhere amidst the rubble, is strangely suggestive of Eliot's typist in *The Waste Land*, with its grim depiction of the "Unreal City," filled with litter and cloaked in brown fog. John McLeod has argued that the appearance of the typist is in fact "an optimistic symbol of creativity and opportunity," emphasizing "London as a space, and at a moment, of vital re-creation and reinscription."⁴³⁴ My reading shares this emphasis on London's spatiality, yet in my view, the appearance of the typist serves more largely to confirm the ways in which London has failed to make space for Doris as a colonial immigrant. The discomfiting realization that Doris's past experiences have not prepared her for life in London is underscored by the essential differences between landscape: from "the sun-warmed grasses" to the "pile of rubble." This insertion of imagery grounded in African ecological details also signals the way that Lessing figures the dissolution of the urban environment. Like Rhys's Anna Morgan, Lessing's Doris imaginatively transforms the urban environment through her references to the colonial site. In this case, the typist is not a signal of optimism, but a disjunctive figure that breaks Doris out of her imaginative retreat to her past and forces her to confront her lack of familiarity with the urban environment. The repeated references to the typist's neatness and tidiness only underscore the absurdity of this project: Lessing's imagery is laced with a gentle satire of the absurdity of the man's continued project, his determination to continue his typing right in the center of a bombed-out site, a blind optimism that refuses to face reality. When Doris asks Rose who the typist is, she replies

⁴³⁴ McLeod, *Postcolonial London*, 80.

“grimly” that he is “an optimist” who “thinks he is going to be rebuilt.”⁴³⁵ The peculiar metonymy here—he thinks that *he* is going to be rebuilt, not his home—further heightens the association of person with site that appears throughout *In Pursuit*. Here, Lessing sympathetically presents not just Doris’s shock and amusement, but also Rose’s frustration with the character who waits, passively and fruitlessly, for a resolution that he does not appear willing to enact himself.

Not only in the typist’s “chirping,” but repeatedly throughout the text, Lessing’s experiences with the built environment—whole or in ruins—calls to mind her experiences in Africa. The sounds of other inhabitants in her flat suggest to her an anthill: “a tall sharp peak of baked earth, that seems abandoned, but which sounds, when one puts one’s ear to it, with a continuous vibrant humming.”⁴³⁶ When she encounters the moss on the gate of her new boarding house, she is reminded of “that fine spongy fur that one finds, in the veld, cushioning the inside of a rotting tree trunk where the sun never reaches.”⁴³⁷ As Robin Sizemore points out, “throughout Doris’s trips around London... she keeps her hybrid vision and overlays London geography with African images both visual and aural.”⁴³⁸ Doris’s recollections draw together the colonial and urban site, their remarkable sensory richness suggesting Doris’s sympathetic familiarity with and longing for the African site. Moreover, they also suggest her discomfiture with the urban landscape, as she figuratively rewrites it. Through this transformation at the

⁴³⁵ Lessing, *In Pursuit*, 47.

⁴³⁶ 77.

⁴³⁷ 48.

⁴³⁸ Christine W. Sizemore, “*In Pursuit of the English: Hybridity and the Local in Doris Lessing’s First Urban Text*,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 43, no. 2 (June 2008), 140.

level of the sensory, I read not just nostalgia for the colonial landscape, to which she was so attuned in *The Grass Is Singing*, but also an expression of her anticoloniality. Lessing suggests the “doom” of the British Empire through her repeated images of its transformation into a colonial site—an elevation of the colonial site to the center, and a powerful argument for the way that the immigration of colonial subjects can rewrite the very structures of the urban center.

In one scene, Doris finds that the sensory experience of living in the boarding house, listening to the sounds of daily living from the other occupants, engenders a Proustian recollection of her Rhodesian childhood home:

In the darkening afternoons I was taken back to a time when I lay alone at night and listened to people talking through several walls, while the rain streamed from the eaves [sic]. Sometimes it was as if the walls had dissolved, and I was left sitting under a tree, listening to birds talking from branch to branch while the last fat drops of a shower spattered on the leaves, and a ploughman yelled encouragement to his beasts in the field over the hill.⁴³⁹

This recollection is at once sensorily specific—the water drops touch the leaves as the birds chatter back and forth—and simultaneously fuzzy and vague. As the walls that surround her “dissolve,” the memory of African birds and farm workers “blur[s] and mingl[es]” with the sounds of English rain and the voices of fellow inhabitants.⁴⁴⁰ Here, Lessing draws together her experiences of social life in the boarding house and settler dwelling. Though it may seem that Lessing is attempting to compare the two memories, to suggest that her experiences reflect similar situations, it is notable that in order for her memories of Africa to come to the fore, the English setting must “dissolve”—the walls must “shake apart” even as they did during the

⁴³⁹ Lessing, *In Pursuit*, 77-8.

⁴⁴⁰ 77.

bombing in order for the Rhodesian setting to take prominence. Indeed, Lessing goes on to emphasize the fragility of the house in this same scene of fuzzy identification. From her room, Doris listens to the sounds of the city—not just the hum of her flatmates, but the sounds of urban technologies, from trains to buses. “As the trains went past and the buses rocked their weight along the street,” she explains “shock after shock came up through brick and plaster, so that the solid wall had the fluidity of dancing atoms.” Rather than the solidity of brick and stone, or even the rubble of the Blitz, Doris’s imagination transforms the city into a fragile, fleeting moment in time: “I felt the house, the street, the pavement, and all the miles and miles of houses and streets as a pattern of magical balances, a weightless structure, as if this city hung on water, or on sound.”⁴⁴¹ In a single, drawn-out description of Doris’s room within the house, Lessing moves from an identification with the colonial site to a transformation of the metropolitan one that emphasizes its constructed nature and its extreme vulnerability. In this way too, Lessing suggests the fragility of the “British Empire, Final Phase.” By bringing the colonial site into her depiction of the metropole, she clearly grounds her portrayal of London in the realities of British imperialism. Moreover, her portrayal of imperial Britain creates an impression of ephemerality, emphasizing the empire’s already ongoing decline. Lessing’s depiction of London as a city in flux is figured not just through the destruction wrought by the Blitz, but also by the transformation effected by colonial immigrants like Doris, who imaginatively revise the city’s homes and buildings into both versions of colonial sites and figures of fragile impermanence.

⁴⁴¹ 78.

As in *The Grass Is Singing*, Lessing emphasizes in *In Pursuit* the specific social effects produced by the architecture of her dwelling place. Again, we find an emphasis on the intimacy that occurs within the multifamily dwelling, similar to that of the pole-and-dagga house described by Lessing in her memoirs. Unlike those in *The Grass Is Singing*, the relationships in *In Pursuit* are often figured as optimistic and productive. Walking about her neighborhood, Rose presents to Doris a picture of a supportive community: "Inside this terrible, frightening city, Rose had created for herself a sort of tunnel, shored against danger by habit, known buildings, and trusted people. Rose's London was the half-mile of streets where she had been born and brought up, now populated by people she trusted."⁴⁴² This is an explicit example of the ways that knowing the city can provide increased power and security, as Rose transforms the frightening and unknown London into a "tunnel"—a physical representation of the community to which she belongs. Rose brings Doris to the flat she eventually inhabits, and Rose draws Doris into the social community of the boarding house. The characters living in the boarding house overhear one another regularly, and are frequently brought into conversation about the lives of the others. When Rose approaches Doris to discuss her personal life, Doris frames Rose's behavior as "exerting her rights as a neighbor."⁴⁴³ These rights and responsibilities are reciprocated by Doris, who explains that she "might go into her and say: 'I'm depressed, please come and sit with me,'" at which point Rose would "put aside whatever she was occupied with, and [come] at once."⁴⁴⁴ The house is also marked by relationships of communal sharing. Flo, the

⁴⁴² 94.

⁴⁴³ 95.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

landlady, prepares elaborate Sunday dinners in which most of the residents gleefully partake. Doris regularly shares her quota of cigarettes and nylons, despite her internal chafing against the post-war restrictions. In other words, simply by sharing a living space, Rose, Flo, and Doris become part of a relationship of mutual care and obligation.

While the relationships that develop in the house are demanding and perhaps oppressive to the ambitious Doris, they are also clearly figured as emotionally supportive. Doris expresses her social need when she feels depressed, and Rose is apparently able to meet that need. Indeed, Doris at one point declares that “being alone in that little box...frightened me.”⁴⁴⁵ This language interestingly parallels that of *The Grass Is Singing*, reproducing the isolation and fear of Mary Turner—written, now, from the perspective of the colonial in exile in the metropole, rather than the other way around. Yet unlike Mary Turner, Doris is surrounded by a lively social network, in which she finds distraction and comfort. Though the narrative voice satirizes the foibles of the neighbors, even grimly reflecting on social issues such as child abuse and neglect, Doris is nonetheless encouraged by her flatmates and optimistic about the social assistance programs proposed by the Labour Party after World War II. In addition to Doris’s attempts to persuade her neighbors of the power of social welfare programs, she also highlights the value of social programs to support caregivers through her representations of child and elder neglect through lack of education and support. Here, the isolation that Doris experiences in her small room is counteracted both by the imaginative transformation she effects—in which her consciousness of her room expands to a sense of the connectedness of the city more

⁴⁴⁵ 78.

widely—and the social bonds that she develops with Rose and the other flatmates. The pursuit of the English of the text's title has typically been read as referencing Doris's search for Englishness as an identity category; yet my reading suggests that it is also a pursuit of other English people with whom Doris can build new and productive social relationships. Indeed, the social network that forms in the house in part functions as a vehicle for Lessing's arguments regarding the importance of social assistance and the welfare state more broadly. Susan Watkins has argued that in *In Pursuit*, Lessing "examines and also challenges her own privileged detachment from those around her."⁴⁴⁶ I locate this active sociality in the relationships that Doris forms, as well as her enthusiasm toward welfare-state programs dedicated to the creation of a community of mutual support.

The 1950s were a period of intense political involvement and scrutiny for Lessing. A member of the British Communist Party in the early part of the decade, Lessing shifted to a powerful commitment to socialist principles after the revelation of Stalin's purges in 1956. Benjamin Kohlmann has placed Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* in his category of "socialist bildungsroman," arguing that in *The Golden Notebook* Lessing "expresses the hope that the energies of socialism, having found their way into 'ordinary thinking,' can be channeled into the political activities of the New Left."⁴⁴⁷ I identify this same shift to socialism in the earlier and less thoroughly critically examined *In Pursuit*. Indeed, the communist ideal of the working class is satirized in the opening pages of *In Pursuit*, in which Doris explains that the working class is

⁴⁴⁶ Watkins, 21.

⁴⁴⁷ Benjamin Kohlmann, "Toward a History and Theory of the Socialist Bildungsroman," *Novel* 48, no. 2 (2015): 182.

in fact “a platonic image” that is “by definition...unattainable.”⁴⁴⁸ Susan Watkins has noted that Lessing’s shift from communism to socialism is “more often identified in terms of changes in ‘tone’ or ‘atmosphere’ than in relation to a change in particular political beliefs or attitudes.”⁴⁴⁹ This tonal shift is certainly present in the inwardly directed criticism of Doris’s naïveté as she identifies the true need for and the real effects of the social programs she supports.

In Pursuit is a comic text, but it is also one quite seriously grounded in Doris’s confrontation with the effects of poverty, housing insecurity, and the other “giants” identified by Beveridge. Frequently, Doris cheerfully touts the benefits enacted by the Labour government to her variously politically resistant housemates:

“Aren’t you pleased about the Health Service?”

“I never said anything against that, did I?”

“That was Labour.” She was skeptical. “It was, too.”

“If you say so, dear.”⁴⁵⁰

Yet the benefits of the socialist programs that have been instituted are often figured, in the text, as insufficient for the real social problems encountered by Doris and the others. The owners of the house, Flo and Dan, struggle to raise their small child, Aurora, engaging in violence as they attempt to make Aurora sleep or eat. Frequent visits from “Welfare” are met with anxiety. Flo dresses Aurora nicely and sets out her best eiderdown, but ignores the advice that her Aurora’s teeth are rotting due to her continued bottle use: “They’re baby teeth and

⁴⁴⁸ Lessing, *In Pursuit*, 6.

⁴⁴⁹ Watkins, 60.

⁴⁵⁰ Lessing, *In Pursuit*, 124.

they'll fall out of themselves."⁴⁵¹ Her request that Aurora be granted a spot in a council nursery, another Labour advance, is rejected on the grounds that "it was better for small children to be with their mothers."⁴⁵² Lessing notes the lack of education that affects Dan and Flo's approach to caring for their child and its consequent effects on Aurora's health; this lack of education is a social "giant" that, Doris imagines, can be solved through socialist programs. In addition, though, Lessing points out the problems inherent in the health visitor program—still part of the National Health Service today—in which fear and mistrust of government work together to make this kind of personal outreach less successful than it could be. Yet in the end, Aurora is gradually brought to a healthier schedule of eating and sleeping; while the welfare programs are not perfect, Lessing seems to be saying, they are better than continued ignorance and isolation.

A similar series of interactions occurs in the context of "the old couple" who lives in basement flat of Dan and Flo's home.⁴⁵³ When Dan and Flo purchased the severely war-damaged building, they were unaware that the basement flat was occupied. Due to "the Rent Act"—likely the 1915 Rents and Mortgage Interest Restrictions Act kept in effect in the postwar period—Flo and Dan can neither evict nor raise the rent on the existing tenants.⁴⁵⁴ The elderly couple and the owners spend much of the novel engaged in a pitched battle of spying, argument, and bizarre antagonism, culminating in a court battle in which Flo and Dan are successful in having the couple removed from their house. Like the depiction of Aurora, the

⁴⁵¹ 125.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ 156.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

representation of the elderly couple is comical, but shot through with tension and pity.

“Welfare” comes to remove the elderly couple, explaining that “they’re not fit to look after themselves” and that they will be placed in a “Home”:

“‘What sort of a Home?’ asked Rose.

‘How should I know, dear?’”⁴⁵⁵

The elderly couple is thus removed, and their living conditions are revealed to be a horrifying hoarders’ hell: “The floors were so thick in dirt that pieces of string and paper and plaster were embedded in a hard gluelike lumpy surface. Shreds of dirty lace hung at the lower half of the windows. Everywhere were bits of newspaper, bits of rag, smelly scraps of food. The smell was a sour thick reek.”⁴⁵⁶ Doris is shocked, and even the house’s owners, who had long demanded the couple’s eviction, are disturbed. “Why couldn’t they have said it before?” Flo wonders, suggesting that the couple will be far better off in a Home—even “a lunatic asylum,” she says, would be better than the conditions of the basement flat. Again, we find a suggestion of a social support system that, if better than nothing, is also seriously flawed. In the postwar years, the elderly couple was allowed to live in squalor, with “no running water, electricity, no sanitation,” using “the backyard as a lavatory at night.”⁴⁵⁷ It is not until Flo and Dan seek to make more money as landlords that the elderly couple is attended to and, hopefully, provided care. While they are “on the old age pension,”⁴⁵⁸ the money alone is not sufficient to spare the elderly couple from squalor and illness. While there is a place for the elderly couple to live—the

⁴⁵⁵ 188.

⁴⁵⁶ 191.

⁴⁵⁷ 155.

⁴⁵⁸ 156.

vague and vaguely ominous “Home”—it requires the intervention of others in their social orbit to place them there. What Lessing seems to be suggesting, then, is the combined power of a social network and the large government-sponsored programs of the welfare state.

Indeed, the very last scene of the novel emphasizes the importance of social connections. Doris is preparing to move out of the house, and her conversation with Flo and Rose revolves around the changing nature of their relationship. “We’ve been good to you, haven’t we?” asks Flo. “We have been good to your little boy?”⁴⁵⁹ Doris assents, and Flo says solemnly, “We should all be kind to each other. If we was all kind to each other all over the world it would be different, wouldn’t it now?”⁴⁶⁰ The novel ends with the two contrasting responses of Doris and Rose. Doris is, characteristically, optimistic: “That’s right,” she says. Rose, on the other hand, is skeptical: “A likely story.”⁴⁶¹ The novel’s final words summarize the text’s emphasis on both optimism and realism, as Lessing looks forward to an improved future even as she acknowledges the ongoing problems that negatively impact the poor and working class in England. Lessing’s support for socialist programs in *In Pursuit* is thus grounded in her personal encounter with poverty and housing insecurity; it is a position that stems from her communist commitment but one that examines the effect of state-sponsored programs in a clear-eyed and realistic way. What is more, Lessing’s approach also emphasizes the importance of individuals to one another: the social relationships that she develops with Flo, Rose, and the other inhabitants of the house are imbued with a duty of care that she feels deeply. While “all be[ing]

⁴⁵⁹ 227-8.

⁴⁶⁰ 228.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

kind to one another” will certainly not fix the structural problems that Lessing investigates, this personal duty of care is a way for her to grapple with the problem of individual responsibility that she skirts in *The Grass Is Singing*.

Kohlmann also argues that in her shift to socialism, Lessing relinquishes her concern with British colonialism in Africa, identifying a move from global anticapitalism to “a narrower sense of national belonging.”⁴⁶² Indeed, it has been generally agreed that *In Pursuit* emphasizes the national to the point of ignoring the problems of global empire at midcentury. A persistent criticism of *In Pursuit* has been Lessing’s lack of treatment of racial concerns and explicit issues of British imperialism. Kalliney has argued that Lessing’s representation of midcentury London “remystifies England as a culture virtually unconnected with and untouched by imperialism.”⁴⁶³ Several critics have pointed out the lack of reference to what was an increasingly diverse London landscape in the late 1940s and 1950s due to the upswing in colonial immigration that began with the 1948 British Nationality Act.⁴⁶⁴ Louise Yelin has noted that, while the book is set prior to moments of high racial tension in the midcentury, such as the 1958 Notting Hill race riots and sustained opposition to Caribbean immigration, Lessing’s lack of attention to “a history of race and immigration” signals her particular focus on the constitution of white English identity and her establishment as a white English writer.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶² Kohlmann, 182.

⁴⁶³ Kalliney, 146-7.

⁴⁶⁴ Waters, 209.

⁴⁶⁵ Louise Yelin, *From the Margins of Empire: Christina Stead, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 60.

It is clear that while *In Pursuit* does consider the state's duty of care to the individual living in England, it does not explore the similar duty of care to the populations of its colonial sites around the globe. In part, this is due to Lessing's sense that the British Empire was in its final stages. Yet the lack of attention to colonialism is also continuous with the welfare state's lack of attention to colonial immigrants within England. Although the establishment of the welfare state coincided with rapidly changing demographics in England due to colonial migration, these state-sponsored programs did not explicitly treat race and were based on the needs of the white English population. The British government's determined blindness toward the needs of people of color has been described as "almost constantly hostile to the presence of Black, Asian and now other minorities."⁴⁶⁶ Historians such as Kathleen Paul and David Goodhart have noted that the welfare state's development typically rested on ideas of colonial immigrants as "foreign parasites" rather than citizens to whom the state held a significant social responsibility.⁴⁶⁷ Migrants from the Caribbean, Africa, and elsewhere were often ghettoized in war-damaged buildings such as the one that Doris inhabits; council housing was typically inaccessible, and they were driven primarily toward unskilled labor. As Charlotte Williams has observed, "welfare policy from the 1950s onward focused on a twin strategy of assimilation for those 'at home' and ever increasing strategies of punitive immigration control to those seeking

⁴⁶⁶ Gary Craig, "'Cunning, Unprincipled, Loathsome: The Racist Tail Wags the Welfare Dog,'" *Journal of Social Policy* 36 (2007), 605.

⁴⁶⁷ Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Post-war Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 116, and David Goodhart, *Progressive Nationalism: Citizenship and the Left* (London: Demos, 2006).

entry.”⁴⁶⁸ In not treating colonialism as a major focus of the text, Lessing retreats from the globalism that underscored her commitment to communism; this shift to more local socialism reflects her ongoing commitment to state welfare as a method for ameliorating poverty. Yet her lack of attention to race specifically cannot be so easily explained as part of a political purpose. Instead, Lessing’s lack of attention to race in the text reflects a blindness similar to that of the British government itself.

These lacunae are certainly notable in a novel that concerns itself with mapping the contours of English and British identity in the midcentury, one in which the writer is ever conscious of her colonial status in England and her persistent negotiation of her British xenophobia. In one of the few direct references to race, Doris respond coyly when questioned about her racial and national background by the caregiver of an elderly potential landlady:

“Where do you come from? I might as well say now that the old lady won’t take foreigners.”

“What do you mean by foreigners?”

She looked me up and down, a practiced, sly movement. “Where do you come from, then?” She moved slowly backwards, her hand pressed against her chest, as if warding off something.

“Africa.”

The hand slowly dropped, and at her side, her fingers clenched nervously. “You’re not a black?”

“Do I look like one?”

⁴⁶⁸ Charlotte Williams, “A Very ‘British’ Welfare State? ‘Race’ and Racism,” in *Changing Directions of the British Welfare State*, ed. Gideon Calder, Jeremy Gass, and Kirsten Merrill Glover (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 145.

“One never knows. You’d be surprised what people try to get away with these days. We’re not having blacks.”⁴⁶⁹

Most explicitly, this passage is suggestive of Rhys’s portrayal of Anna Morgan’s ambiguous racialization. Like Anna, Doris is questioned due to her colonial status, and the weight of English xenophobia increases the isolation that she feels as an immigrant during her experience of housing precarity. And indeed, like Anna, Doris reacts with resentment and opposition, as she ultimately refuses the flat when the nurse offers it to her. In this way, Doris makes an overt stand against the racism expressed by the nurse. Yet through this interaction, Lessing also obliquely considers her own role as a white colonial, which allows her to critique both her own society in Rhodesia and the community of white Londoners with whom she interacts. Though her actions at the flat are ostensibly a small, personal response to overt racism, her privilege of whiteness and her middle-class status allow her to be coy about her racial status and to make such a refusal in the first place. In this scene, Lessing acknowledges the particular advantages accorded to her as a white woman even as she critiques the system from within.

Doris also encounters a fellow colonial immigrant, Colonel Bartowers, in London, who is the subject of pointed satire. The Colonel reflects nostalgically on his time in Southern Rhodesia, which he departed for England forty years prior. “The best days of my life,” he calls his time in Africa, reflecting with glee on the “good fun” he had with “those nigs” — fun that seems primarily to involved “taking pot-shots” at them “as they came to the river for water.”⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁹ Lessing, *In Pursuit*, 38.

⁴⁷⁰ 73.

Lessing's representation of the Colonel embodies virtually all of the disturbing characteristics she mocks in other texts that figure elderly white colonial settlers—misogyny, racism, an attachment to a faux-genteel Englishness that seems absurd in its vacuity. Here we can see that Lessing's criticism of the imperial system is not absent in *In Pursuit*, though it is certainly less conspicuous than in her fiction set in Africa. Moreover, the presence of the Colonel in London reminds the reader of the ongoing imperial presence in Africa, as the Colonel thinks dreamily of returning to Southern Rhodesia. In his nostalgia for colonial southern Africa, Colonel Bartowers is presented as backwards-looking, unable to conceive of the new future of postcolonial autonomy that Lessing counted upon. In addition, the Colonel is presented as actively opposing the development of the welfare state that Doris supports: "This damned country. Can't stand it. It's a nation of old women these days. It's the Labour Government. Petticoat government, that's what I call it."⁴⁷¹ In this way, Lessing sets up a parallel between capitalism and colonialism, highlighting their problematic entanglement. Moreover, her clear opposition to capitalism in the text thus subtly underscores her anticoloniality here as well.

The focus in *In Pursuit* is clearly not on the role of the colonial immigrant in physically reshaping the English landscape, as we have seen in *Lamming*, for example. For Lessing, the power of social bonds is foregrounded in the text, driving a positive argument about the value of social welfare, rather than a more active argument for the dramatic ejection of the colonizer that she imagines in *The Grass Is Singing*. In her ongoing pursuit of the appropriate avenues for her social politics as a white colonial, Lessing rejects a radical transformation in favor of a

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

socialism that will lift members of the working class. While her use of ephemeral sites in London, including both ruins and boarding houses, resonates with her earlier portrayal of the settler house in Southern Rhodesia, she ultimately suggests that these sites produce entirely different effects than what she reveals to be the outcome of Mary Turner's racism and isolation in *The Grass Is Singing*. Instead of the isolation that oppresses the white colonial, à la Anna Morgan, Lessing instead depicts the power of these communal dwellings to produce positive relationships and suggests the need for their expansion into a stronger welfare state. In *The Grass Is Singing*, Lessing retreats from a clear accounting of the transformative power of the individual to effect change on an ongoing social system like that of British colonialism in Africa. In *In Pursuit*, Lessing articulates a politics that emphasizes not individual power but group consciousness and a politics that foregrounds the value of a community bound together both by interpersonal connections and a powerful web of social programming that would support mothers, children, the elderly, and those in conditions of poverty or housing precarity. Yet in failing to explore the uneven effects of social programs across racial lines, Lessing retreats from the antiracist stance she expresses in *The Grass Is Singing* and other midcentury texts. In attempting to account for an individual politics that can make space for social transformation, Lessing leaves behind the resistance to the "color bar" that she powerfully expresses in her African fiction. In shifting her setting to metropolitan England, Lessing locates a cultural politics designed to support the working class—but one that takes effect unevenly across that population. As we have seen across these midcentury texts, it is possible to imagine a radical social transformation—but it is far more difficult to conceive of a politics in which an individual can help enact lasting social change. From the isolation and pessimism of Rhysian and

Naipaulian protagonists to the group consciousness of Lamming's and Lessing's characters, we find an impressive range of reactions to and against British colonialism. What comes clear from our encounter with midcentury decolonial fiction is the myriad ways that places can be described and put to use—and that, like colonial and metropolitan societies themselves during the midcentury decades, these sites can be powerfully appropriated, inhabited, and made new.

Conclusion

It may perhaps come as a surprise to a reader familiar with their two careers that in 1963 Kamau Brathwaite—soon to be one of the most innovative and influential of the period's Caribbean postcolonial writers—would name V.S. Naipaul the progenitor of a new order of Caribbean literature. "The novels of Vidia Naipaul," Brathwaite explains, "come at a significant stage in the development of our (British) Caribbean literary tradition. [Naipaul's books] have 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."⁴⁷²

As I have described in this dissertation, Naipaul is certainly not known for his resistance to the British literary tradition, just as he is not known for his active resistance to British political imperialism. Yet as I have also shown, Brathwaite's belief in Naipaul's transformative power is not at all unfounded. Naipaul's rejection of imitative styles is grounded in his belief that an "authentic" Caribbean literature will be free from British influences. In Brathwaite's rejection of "the English Romantic/Victorian cultural tradition," we can see resonances of Naipaul's injunction to avoid derivative writing.⁴⁷³ In his own political writings, Brathwaite takes up Naipaul's call for "a literature of local authenticity."⁴⁷⁴ And in Brathwaite's powerfully anticolonial "nation language," we can find the exact kind of literary hero that Naipaul calls for,

⁴⁷² Kamau Brathwaite, *Roots* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 39.

⁴⁷³ 73.

⁴⁷⁴ 205.

one who writes not for pleasure of his English audience, but for the speakers of his own, specifically Caribbean, discourse.

In this dissertation, I sketch the contours of a much wider kind of anticoloniality than is typically recognized in early postcolonial writing. I show that if our understanding of anticoloniality is limited to political nationalism, we fail to recognize the diversity of anticolonial critique expressed by late colonial and early postcolonial writers across the midcentury decades. Through my focus on place—both as formal feature and term of art—I chart the presence of a flexible form of critique that can encompass and grapple with the cultural politics of writers as divergent as Naipaul and Lamming, Rhys and Lessing. This form of anticoloniality seen through the lens of place gives us a language for thinking about the complexity of Naipaul, whose emphasis on aesthetic autonomy is contrasted by his recourse to a kind of universal humanism. Similarly, it allows us to identify common themes between, for example, Rhys and Lessing, who use their depictions of metropolitan London and rural colonial sites to consider their own complicity as part of the colonial settler class.

By choosing to use the term “decolonial” in the dissertation’s title, I signal my emphasis on what Bhabha terms the “moments and processes” of decolonization. I consider not just the abstract structures of the geopolitical, but personal and individual reactions to the transformation wrought on a global scale. Through Rhys and Lamming, I investigate the ways that these writers imagined the colonial immigrant affecting the physical sites of urban London, a microcosm of the “colonization in reverse” that transformed England in the midcentury decades. And in Lessing, I find an emphasis on community that twins the individual’s responsibility in the social sphere to the state’s duty of care to its changing population. Through

the fictions of these writers, I find a consistent emphasis on both larger political structures and the individual, the personal and political paired in their portrayal of how people inhabit specific sites across the globe.

Perhaps my most important term of art in the dissertation is that of place-making. In my introduction, I describe the “place-making” that occurs at the Shorthills compound in Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas*, where the reality of life on the estate destroys the rosily imagined utopia that presaged the Tulsi family’s move. Throughout the dissertation, I explore numerous versions of place-making. In Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette imagines an England shot through with light and shadow: her actual arrival in England rests upon the vivid transformation that she creates in her mind’s eye of the country house she comes to know and, eventually, to destroy. Lamming’s emigrants similarly come to know an England that had previously been only an abstract vision; for these characters, place-making is played out in the intimate gatherings that occur within hyper-specific interior sites. Often, the place-making that occurs in these fictions emphasizes the characters’ disillusionment, as the imagined site is written over by the painful reality of its material conditions. This version of place-making is used again and again to highlight the betrayal of the imperial promise, the rejection of the “love” that Lamming’s emigrants express toward the imperial center. When place-making occurs in colonial sites, it can similarly be put to critical purposes. In the Turners’ pole-and-dagga house in Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing*, for example, Mary Turner’s growing familiarity and intimacy with the dwelling space serves as a way for Lessing to express the isolation of her colonial settler characters and convey her rejection of the imperial presence in Africa.

Over the course of the dissertation, I trace a narrative arc that begins with Rhys's early anticolonial critique in her 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark*. Rhys's novels display a consistent theme of isolation: in the sites she creates, her characters experience a sense of exile and loneliness that does not change, despite the fact that they are surrounded by other people. The sociality that Rhys describes emphasizes the traumatic impacts of colonialism on the colonized, even as she suggests that the immigrant can never be incorporated into the imperial whole. In the subsequent chapter, I show Naipaul's emphasis on isolation as a parallel to Rhys's—his focus on the individual, however, is far less pessimistic than Rhys's. For Naipaul, the experience of isolation is a universal human one—impacted by structural harm such as colonialism and racism, but not solely defined by it. For Naipaul, while isolation is ubiquitous, the solitude and detachment of the individual is not entirely negative: indeed, it is the individual heroic author that Naipaul envisions powerfully revising the literary and cultural traditions of a decolonial Caribbean.

As my following chapters move from Rhys and Naipaul to Lamming and Lessing, I highlight the shift from the individual to the communal. Beginning with Lamming's *The Emigrants*, I draw out a representation of group identity that also functions as group-oriented political action. Unlike Naipaul's transformative individual actor, Lamming portrays the group as socially and politically powerful. Yet Lamming's black British groups fracture and fall apart; only within the context of the Caribbean site does Lamming imagine the social group as truly effective in enacting change. In this way, Lamming registers his rejection of the metropolitan site wholesale, paralleling his political calls for the return of the Caribbean writer to the Caribbean. In Lessing, too, we find an emphasis on the political power of the group. For

Lessing, it is in the creation of a social community that she identifies the future of British politics. The commitment of the individual to the care of her friends and neighbors alongside the state's social safety network will provide the radical transformation that Lessing envisions as not only possible, but indeed inevitable.

In this narrative arc, I again return to the flexibility of place-making as a method for registering a spectrum of anticoloniality. Through the lens of the sites they create, these authors enact a wide range of political resistance grounded in where and how their characters inhabit homes and encounter their housemates. Through the formal features they emphasize—from Rhys's transformative interiority to Lessing's sensorily fractured landscapes, from Naipaul's cyclical presentation of illusory places to Lamming's polyvocal registering of the London landscape—these writers use place to work through their culpability and their critique. And in these mutability of the process of place-making, they express the personal and global transformations of the decolonial period.

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