

The Tyranny of History: George Lamming's *Natives of My Person* and *Water With Berries*

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I had felt the wind rocking me with the oldest uncertainty and desire in the world, the desire to govern or to be governed, rule or to be ruled forever.

Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock*

IN the West Indies a concern with the slave past and the disorienting effects of colonialism on contemporary man's individuality underlies works as different in tone and technique as V.S. Naipaul's novels and Derek Walcott's poems. This literature of disorientation has developed from simply registering the state of being "divided to the vein"¹ to investigating the fundamental nature of the human personality and its legacy from the historical traumas of slavery and colonialism, and has gone on to explore ways of reintegrating the colonized personality. Escapes to a European autumn pavement,² or even to an African homecoming³ are being rejected in favour of careful re-examination of the roots of individual and collective personality behind the phenomena of slavery and colonialism in order to confront and interpret the West Indian present. Wilson Harris's analysis leads him to regard the division within and between individuals positively. For Harris, the diversifying forces of the colonial and slave past inherently contain a richer creative potential for the future than is offered by monocultural societies. But Naipaul is more pessimistic, and in *Guerrillas* even the possibility of personal revolution as an answer to the West Indian dilemma is rejected, since a pattern of history has already been established which makes militancy and violence only part of the repetitive cycle of the past.

George Lamming's works also have been from the beginning concerned with West Indian history, and his method of writing has been governed by what he has termed "the informing influence of history on the imaginative rendering of character."⁴ Even in *In the Castle of My Skin*, where Lamming is concerned to reproduce at random the experiential present of a child, one of the most important structural thematic devices is the recurrent allusion to the colonial and slave past. "G", the half-boy, half-adult narrator concludes, "A man's memory, it seemed, was the penalty he paid for his own existence."⁵ For Lamming, history is the collective penalty all men pay for their present and future; it constitutes a debt which is never cleared. In later works, Creighton's Village of *In the Castle of My Skin* is transformed into the West Indian collective of San Cristobal. Here, even where political independence is imminent or achieved, the ties of the past still bind. Fola's personal revolution, a rebellion against the class attitudes imposed by the past, is the most hopeful prognostic in Lamming's earlier writings of the efficacy of personal revolution in paving the way to a future unshackled by history, but it is only a beginning. *The Emigrants* and *The Pleasures of Exile* point the way to the expatriated West Indian world of *Water with Berries*, though *The Emigrants* clearly explores that older West Indian tradition of escape to an autumn pavement which proves to be no real rebellion against the West Indian past, and no escape at all.

It is however in *Natives of My Person* and *Water with Berries* that this pervasive theme of West Indian fiction receives much closer scrutiny, the two novels forming complementary parts of the same analysis. *Natives of My Person* dissects at source the strands of personal and political power that underlie slavery. The back-to-Africa journey of West Indian literature becomes here an investigation into the root cause of Caribbean history, a journey for the contemporary black into the white seventeenth-century mind which initiated the dilemma. Yet at the same time at which the root cause is examined, the nature of one of its potential antidotes, revolution, is also considered. What seems to promise some hope in the present is thus intrinsically interwoven in *Natives of My Person* with that very

past from which present personality hopes to escape. This linking is thematic as well as methodological. Like Naipaul, Lamming is cautious about the possibility of defiantly wrenching free from history's legacy. Indeed, in *Water with Berries* the contemporary West Indian is still deeply enmeshed in the toils of that history, still acting out the black slave stereotypes that were the nightmare products of the white European mind.

Superficially Lamming's two latest novels are quite different. *Natives of My Person* traces the unauthorized voyage of seventeenth-century Europeans to the African slave coast and thence to the West Indies, while *Water with Berries* deals with the experiences of three West Indians in contemporary London. However, the novels share an overriding concern with the past, with the meaning of enslavement, with the struggle for power in imperial as well as individual terms. Both novels see colonizer and colonized as inevitably tied by bonds of past violence in a "blood knot" which issues in death or life in death, and in personality disintegration. Consequently the novels share a stream of imagery of imprisonment, corpses, disease, mutilation, violation and aborted resurrection. With past and present so tightly bound, what escape route is offered? Both novels also explore the potential of idealism and individual rebellion in resisting the tyranny of history.

This is not a naturalistic account of events and character, but a quasi-allegorical exploration of that early slave and colonial history which produced the twentieth-century West Indian present. Through the motives and minds of these seventeenth-century white slavers and colonizers, Lamming attempts to penetrate to the root cause of that history, the innermost "native" or ancestor of the contemporary person.

Under charge of the Commandant, the *Reconnaissance* leaves the Kingdom of Lime Stone to voyage to the Isles of the Black Rock via the African coast. The Commandant has undertaken such voyages before, and under the auspices of the House of Trade and Justice, the governing body of his native Lime Stone, he has taken part in the capture of slaves on the African coast and the virtual extermination of the native tribes of San

Cristobal. The *Reconnaissance* has her necessary complement of crew, most of whom are designated in the novel by function alone. This separation of man and function indicates the degree to which personality tends to disintegrate in the struggle for power, fame or fortune. The human being is lost behind his mask and role. The general crew are overseen by the officers, Surgeon, Priest, Boatswain and Steward, with the enigmatic Pinteados and the Commandant in control. In their particular roles, the officers in the microcosmic world of the ship cater to the physical, spiritual and governmental needs of their populace. In the general populace, or crew, are to be found the better integrated personalities, men with a function but also with a "private" name, such as Marcel the fisherman, Pierre the carpenter, Ivan the visionary painter and Baptiste the powder maker.

It is, however, no routine voyage of slaving and empire building on which this crew is engaged, for the voyage is in effect an attempt to escape from history. The Commandant seeks to "reverse"⁷ his own atrocity-ridden past and to set up an "ideal" colony free from such historical violence on the Isles of the Black Rock. "I would plant some portion of the Kingdom in a soil that is new and freely chosen, namely the Isles of the Black Rock more recently known as San Cristobal" (p. 17). Some of the officers consciously flee their own private pasts, while some of the crew are fleeing Lime Stone's domestic persecution and tyranny. Although others are drawn to the voyage by the promise of wealth, flight from the past is the most pervasive motive for voyaging. Collectively, too, the voyage is portrayed as a symbolic escape from history. Being unauthorized, the voyage goes unrecorded in the annals of the House of Trade and Justice. Moreover, by the absence of women and of slave cargo from this microcosmic world of the *Reconnaissance* Lamming symbolizes the attempt to avoid two of the most destructive examples of human domination which have been part of the experience of the men aboard. Unrecorded, and eschewing racial and sexual abuse, the *Reconnaissance* attempts to outsail her past.

Idealist and revolutionary, the Commandant would not only "reverse" that past, but also would attempt to erode the power

structures that produced it. Refusing to recognize the power of the House of Trade and Justice, he also departs from hierarchical tradition by offering a share in the profits of the voyage to the general crew. Yet, for all the attempt at new beginnings, the power struggles and structures of the old order sail with the men: "A man's memory . . . was the penalty he paid for his own existence," and it is memory which dominates the minds of the men as they witness the new wonders of the present and which inevitably governs their actions. Decisions taken, conversation shared, shaky friendships formed through discovering comparable experiences back in Lime Stone, all look backward for a basis from which to proceed. Even new and rich wonders are categorized and judged in the light of past experience, thus losing their potential for inspiring new interpretations and new scales of value.

Much of the novel is occupied with the flashbacks to the Commandant's colonial and slaving experience; with his memories of his mistress; with Surgeon's and Steward's bitter power struggles with their wives; and with the worry of Pinteados' ambiguous connections with the women in Lime Stone. Almost all actions and thoughts aboard the *Reconnaissance* are influenced by memory. It is after the Commandant remembers his mistress's accusations of murder that he orders that no slaves be taken: it is after he learns of the liaison between his mistress and Boatswain that he halts the voyage one day from its destination and precipitates mutiny and bloodshed. It is because Steward and Surgeon so desperately fear their pasts that frail bonds of comradeship develop between them, and it is when they are faced with a confrontation with this past in learning that their wives await them at San Cristobal that they attempt to escape this meeting by shooting the Commandant. Though Boatswain has waited all his life for this chance of command, his memory of his liaison with the Lady of the House, the relationship instrumental in achieving his goal, eventually drives him mad. In a world of wonders of new geography and races only the past is truly revelatory; only it can astound a crew most of whom have not seen such worlds before. And the men like Pierre the carpenter, who do find their sense of

the marvellous excited by the slave coast, quickly force the wonder of a different race and custom into the straitjacket of Christian platitudinizing which then conveniently eases the conscience of the charge of violation of that wonder. When the slaves commit suicide by leaping overboard into the crocodile-infested river, Pierre explains that

this decision to leap was beyond our reason, so that we did surmise — and ancient wisdom confirms — how this blackness of hide which resembles skin must be nature's way of warning against the absence of any soul within, which is the clear cause of their ignorance, just as a true Christian countenance resembles the colour of the sun, thereby giving a power and beauty of light which adorns the skin and supporteth all pious reason; being yet further proof that there be nothing that appears by accident or indolent chance in the purpose and harmony of our Lord's creation. (p. 111)

This impossibility of man's ever escaping his past, however revolutionary or idealistic his intention, is given objective representation by the vessel appropriately named *Penalty* with her cargo of women who, like the men, have sailed from Lime Stone to San Cristobal. Pinteados, the Pilot, is the one man who seems to have at least partially escaped from history and the two sides of the destructive "blood knot" of colonial domination. He eschews national and personal loyalties for an independence of spirit that does not allow him to indulge in either domination or self-sacrifice. It is appropriately Pinteados who sums up the nature of the inability of the men to face their respective pasts:

Different in status and intention, the absolute deficiency they shared was a common failure to accept reunion with their women. (p. 320)

And

To be within the orbit of power was their total ambition. But real power frightened them . . . they had to avoid the touch of power itself. The women are absolute evidence of what I mean. To feel authority over the women! that was enough . . . But to commit themselves fully to what they felt authority over! Such power they were afraid of. (p. 325)

The women, on the other hand, commit themselves too fully to these men who own them, body and soul. Jeremy in *Water with Berries* is

presiding over the gravest of issues: how to be responsible to others without any servile abdication of interest in oneself. He had no praise for those who had made courage an act of demolishing the individual

self . . . these mercenaries of the soul . . . poisoned by the vapours of sacrifice. Self-sacrifice was the most fatal narcotic of the soul.⁸

Both Steward's wife and Surgeon's wife are guilty of the "servile abdication of interest" in self, and thus bind themselves to their husbands in a complicity of servitude. The same is at least partially true of the Lady and the Commandant, though their superior courage, the depth of the Lady's passion, and her consciousness of the true nature and meaning of her relationship with the Commandant give their love a status beyond the more squalid power struggles of the two officers. It is the meaning of this relationship, its direct parallel in the wider political context of slaving and imperialism, that forms the central equation of the novel — that between sexual politics and colonial/slave politics. To the Commandant, the Lady is "a colony of joys given over entirely to his care" (p. 65), and like the women of the slaughtered tribes she is violated and abandoned to a life-in-death where she literally practises dying. For her, as for the African slaves, "the middle voyage was the worst" (p. 62) and the necklace the Commandant brings her as a souvenir of his adventures is like a slave collar round her throat. The Commandant himself is cursed by his past with an inability to experience the immediate present, even in love-making:

There was a treasure of naked flesh in his arms, heaving and sobbing like the wind. But he couldn't feel her legs grow tight and quivering between his thighs; his desire had taken root elsewhere. An imperial joy had shipped his pride over the ocean seas . . . She was kneading her hands down the root and testicle of his strength; his sperm, however, was nurturing a different soil, his star was ascending a foreign sky.

(pp. 70-71)

Yet it is this imperial design, a kind of giving and loving however thwarted and distorted, that elevates the Commandant's passions, in the private and public spheres, above the level of those of Steward and Surgeon. In a series of brilliantly sustained imaginative comparisons between white women "slaving" and the trade in African blacks, Lamming expresses the gross appetites and sickness of the men who engage in both, and the petty personal fears and weakness behind the political expression of that fear in the horror of slavery and empire building.

Surgeon's sadistic appetites, so obvious in his relations with his wife, are also expressed as appetite for the trade in flesh:

Surgeon wore that blissful, remote look of a horse chewing in sleep. He had a habit of soaking dry prunes in his wine; then he would suck for a moment before grazing on the acrid, black flesh. (p. 155)

Steward, Priest and Boatswain also participate in this ironic Christmas Communion of the black coast, and like the lesser crew who trade in black flesh they risk the sickness it sometimes causes. Madness claims victims among slaves and slavers alike, and Surgeon's wife, driven mad by his sadism, is incarcerated in Severn Asylum where the victims of the black coast sickness also are housed. Madness, too, is the fate of Boatswain.

Lamming continually reiterates that the taint of any power relationship falls upon both slaver and enslaved, and indissolubly links them. In a recent radio broadcast he declared: "There is no continent, *white or black*, which today can be said to be free of the consequences of [the force of imperialism and the legacy of colonial rule]." Here, too, the ties that bind slaver to slave are explored. Surgeon fears a devotion in his wife which he cannot comprehend. He is the master who fears that beneath the Uncle Tom passivity of his slave lies the potential for the blackest treachery. Escaping from the power of his wife, Steward carries the persisting memory of her with him in the gold ring he wears on a chain around his neck and which has "become a prison round his flesh" (p. 190). Steward's unwitting incestuous relationship is a further instance of the insidious tendrils a power relationship puts out. So cloyingly intimate, so madly deadly, these family power struggles and liaisons are apt expressions of the colonial situation where two races are bound together in a violent yet seemingly indissoluble embrace.

Boatswain boasts in his madness of being "a man of parts", and feels these "parts" have been defiled and polluted in his relationship with the Lady of the House. Yet the "parts" he cites are already contaminated by the atrocities and defilements of history, "San Souci, Belle Vue, the Demon Coast" (p. 269). Boatswain is initially prepared to violate his soul for commercial success, and the monetary motive behind the

private power struggles between the sexes and in the trade in "black gold" is characteristic of a Lime Stone where the relative values are appropriately set forth in the title of the governing body, "The House of Trade and Justice".

SURGEON'S WIFE: How do they survive it without going mad? Husband and wife in the role of whores? And the keepers of whores? How? How?

LADY OF THE HOUSE: Because their whoredom is also the whoredom of the House of Trade and Justice. It is the National principle of the continent of Lime Stone. What safer consolation or protection can a citizen have than to know that his private vice is the nation's religion? (p. 349)

From this "religion" of Lime Stone's past there is no escape. "Never", says Priest, "*can the shepherd of the coast of black cargoes be born again*" (p. 329). The penalty of that violent history whose springs are the petty weaknesses of the individual soul is inability to be liberated from that history into an uncontaminated future. The wives wait in vain for the *Reconnaissance*, whose voyage reconnoitered nothing in spite of its idealistic aims and rebellious character. Their experience of San Cristobal, the new Promised Land, is a reliving of their pasts of waiting for the men. Men in Lime Stone, says Priest, "could not be sure of the ground they stood on" (p. 120), and this metaphor of instability has already been given actual expression in the Tribes' retaliation. The Commandant has lost soliders in a San Cristobal where men literally could not be sure of the ground on which they stood. The leaves of the forests which the Lady collects are also the leaves of the San Cristobal forests, and there the *Penalty* waits with its cargo of the past. This cargo is also that of the accumulated atrocity of all human power struggles whether sexual or colonial, and the weaknesses out of which such struggles arise. Against such native, such indigenous human weakness, Lamming sees little hope of escape from the tyranny of a violent repetitive history. Even idealistic visions and rebellious acts become perversely involved with the perpetration of man's weakness and violence. The selflessness of the women is a more hopeful prognostic, "the future" that the men "must learn" (p. 351): yet paradoxically, as *Natives of My Person* demonstrates, that very selflessness is both product of and continuing reinstitigator of the very native weakness that produces the deadly slave/master syndrome.

The twentieth-century successors of the crew of the *Reconnaissance* are the three West Indian exiles of *Water with Berries* and the English and American characters with whom they are involved. Teeton (a painter), Roger (a musician) and Derek (an actor) have for political or personal reasons left their native San Cristobal for permanent exile in London. All three are attempting to escape the San Cristobal past and establish a creative relationship with the London present. All three find, like the characters of *Natives of My Person*, that the past, the island, is "a nerve"¹⁰ their exile cannot kill, a history from which there is no eventual resurrection. In choosing three artists, Lamming has chosen three men who might be expected in their individuality and creativity to escape their respective pasts. Teeton is an artist *and* a revolutionary and shares the idealistic plans of the Gathering for the future of San Cristobal. Yet all three end by disintegrating into false stereotype and self-destruction.

Since his arrival in London, Derek has had one particularly successful season at Stratford as Othello, the jealous Moor. Since then, however, his career has suffered a decline, and his habitual role has come to be that of a corpse. As his life in London gradually comes to emulate his stage roles, his satisfaction in life narrows to playing peacemaker in the Roger and Nicole estrangement. Feeling himself responsible for the final catastrophe, he "resurrects" himself from his usual role of corpse in *A Summer's Error in Albion* to rape the white heroine on stage. In this cruel parody of his *Othello* success, and in frightful and abortive "resurrection", Derek plays the "role" his history has assigned him. As a kind of racial scapegoat the corpse rises to act out the monster stereotype of his white colonizer's imagination.

Roger Capildeo has come to London to escape from the influence of his father, and from a land with which he has no ancestral sympathy. Presumably the descendant of Indian indentured labourers, he finds San Cristobal an isle "full of noises,"¹¹ but of the wrong kind. There is no ancestral harmony, only a cacophony of history, imposed from outside.

Roger could never recognize any links between him and San Cristobal. It seemed that history had amputated his root from some other human soil, and deposited him, by chance, in a region of time which was called an island. He had never heard any music stir in his hands when he climbed the rocks in the Cockpit country. There was only sound; a fury of noise conferred on the landscape from outside. That's how he had always thought of his childhood. It lacked some melody that was native to the rocks. (p. 70)

Yet this very sense of amputation anchors him firmly in the West Indian past with its "rootless" population sprung only from slavery and the indenture system. Never at home in San Cristobal, Roger cannot find a home in exile either. It is significant that he is rescued from despair by a white American girl, Nicole, yet the rescue in the end proves to be abortive. Through Roger's inability to face the possibility of Nicole's bearing him a child, Lamming is denying that any recombination of the colonized West Indies and the new giant of America can produce a creative liberation into the future. Teeton too has been abortively "rescued" by America in the past, only to reject that rescue and with it all he has formerly lived for and believed in in San Cristobal: his wife and his revolutionary comrades. After rejecting Nicole so violently, Roger, like Derek, disintegrates from person into stereotype. In a series of fires, reminiscent of the slaves' most characteristic act of retribution, Roger destroys himself and his creative potential as man and as musician. He is left at the end facing trial for arson and murder, a prisoner of his colonial past and its San Cristobal-England nexus, after a fruitless attempt to escape to "America", the new land of West Indian hope.¹² The past has, as in Derek's case, converted creativity into destruction and stereotype. Like Derek he resorts to the retaliations, real or imagined, of his ancestors.

Teeton, on the other hand, has two possible avenues of escape from his past: his painting and his political activity. Yet neither is proof against his growing relationship with the Old Dowager, an insidious "colonial" relationship which inevitably ends in tragedy.

The Old Dowager rescues Teeton from his interminable room-hunting in a London of racially hostile landladies. She

appears to Teeton as a stroke of luck, sudden, unexpected and beneficent — like magic.

. . . When thou cam'st first
 Thou strok'st me, and made much of me; would'st give me
 Water with berries in't.¹³

The seduction of this latter-day Caliban is however a much more subtle process than was Prospero's wooing and eventual sovereignty. When the novel opens, Teeton's departure from the Old Dowager's care and his return to San Cristobal are imminent, and though technically he owes the Old Dowager nothing, he is reluctant to sever ties with her. In San Cristobal a future, free of the political and personal past, awaits him, but he is reluctant to tell her of his departure. He knows the depth of the hurt she will feel and is unable to face her accusatory disappointment. The complex web of relationship that has evolved between them and which is expressed in their rituals of speech and significant silences has a tenacity that their great differences in age, race, history and life style would seem to preclude. But their long association has made him sensitive to her moods and obligated to respect them. The power struggle which issues from this association is gentle and subtle, yet it has its underlying mutual tyrannies. Almost without recognizing it, Teeton has become enslaved to the Old Dowager's moods, while she has become enamoured of him.

Nicole's death changes the nature of the relationship between the Dowager and Teeton. Their complicity in the burial of Nicole's body leaves the innocent Teeton a prey to the Dowager's protective instincts. On the eve of his departure for San Cristobal, he is taken by the Dowager to a cold, bleak island in the North Sea and on a journey into the Old Dowager's past which is, by historical association, also his own. Again it is impossible to ignore the wider political implications of the personal history. Teeton, anxious to keep his appointment with a San Cristobal future, is borne back instead to the past by the Old Dowager (Mrs. Gore-Brittain), whose protection he needs but for which he forfeits his potential personal and political history. Colonizer and colonized are bound in a blood knot, whether vicious or apparently benevolent, that will curse their

futures. The Pilot, the Old Dowager's lover, puts this idea bluntly:

I know what I've learnt. That experiment in ruling over your kind. It was a curse. The wealth it fetched was a curse. The power it brought was a curse. . . . And it will come back to plague my race until one of us dies. That curse will always come back. Like how you've come here. (p. 229)

The Pilot is killed by the Old Dowager, who shoots him to prevent his killing Teeton. Her act puts him even further in her debt, for his life is now doubly owed to her at the cost almost of his physical identity:

Teeton remained nailed to the chair. He hadn't moved at all; as though his feet were still in chains. He couldn't move. He didn't know whose air he was inhaling; whose lungs were in charge of his breathing. But he felt he was a stranger to his body. He was squatting in some foreign shelter of flesh and bone that could never be his own. He didn't know what sound his tongue should make; what language he could make his own. . . . And he continued to stare at the Old Dowager as though he wanted her to find some cure for this impediment; this total speechlessness which had now made him prisoner in his own dark and distorting consciousness. (pp. 230-231)

Once again Teeton and the Dowager are involved in a death, though this time the burial is carried out by Teeton alone. In shooting her lover, the Dowager buries her own past, and in so doing loses all connection with, and interest in, the present. Destroying her own kind leaves her life without meaning and continuity. Teeton, who has enjoyed her protection, can't grasp that "their partnership was at an end" (p. 233). Though this is the end for the Dowager, Teeton finds that

He was drifting finally out of her care. But he was still within her power. She was free to defy his wish, free to refuse her favours. He felt a brief thrust of rage at the thought that his future was dependent on her mercy. (p. 233)

Her power is the power of their combined past. His feet are "still in chains." Resentment urges Teeton to apprise the Dowager of his intended "defection", offering as a kind of consolation prize the restoration of her daughter long lost on, and betrayed by, San Cristobal. In the sudden shock of Teeton's admission and of his offer, the Old Dowager reverts to the stereotypes her race has created of the colonized in fear of retaliation for past violation:

She discovered some animal treachery in his secretive ways. She saw the ancestral beast which possessed his kind, a miracle of cunning and deceit, forever in hiding, dark and dangerous as the night. (p. 234)

The accusation is a denial of the complex web of understanding that has been built up. Too brutal, far too simplistic, it nevertheless expresses the violence inherent in any colonial or quasi-colonial relationship. It is the outward expression of the underlying violation of one human being by another — the verbal equivalent of the denial of humanity and individuality implicit in the colonial situation and explicit in the slave one. Deserted by the Old Dowager and betrayed into stereotype, Teeton "knew he would have to organize his own escape" (p. 234). That "organization" now involves the revolutionary act of murdering the power that holds him back from the future, and out of a complex of hate, love and desperation he kills his former benefactress. Now it seems he has severed the ancient blood knot that tied colonizer and colonized, and is ready for his appointment with the West Indian future. But out of a too-complex and too-conjoined history he too has now acted out the stereotype, the black slave who murders his white mistress. A "new" San Cristobal, as in *Natives of My Person*, remains "unreached".¹⁴ Teeton is apprehended and, with Roger, awaits trial. Derek, escaping trial after his abortive "resurrection", lives only to see his life "assume the mantle of a corpse" (p. 219). His act of rebellion against the corpse-like role into which the colonial past has cast him issues not in revolution, but ironically in reversion to racist stereotype, the self-fulfilling prophecy of white hate.

With the exception of the six-line ending, only two sections of *Water with Berries* are not divided into subchapters; and these sections, which describe Teeton's encounters with the girl on the heath, are central to an understanding of Lamming's purpose. Seemingly these are casual encounters, of sudden recognition and understanding, superficially quite unlike the slow-growing, tenacious relationship between Teeton and the Old Dowager. While in the Teeton/Dowager relationship, Lamming anatomizes the subtle ties that bind person to person or race to race through long association, the story of the girl on

the heath, so shocking in its violent intensity, expresses the dark underside of the violent West Indian past which eventually will erupt into the apparently civilized English present. The Miranda/Myra of San Cristobal is here in Lamming's rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, seduced by her own father and then raped by a vicious band of Calibans and their animals in retaliation for similar violence committed by Myra's sadistic guardian on his own servants. Vividly evocative of that past, Myra's tale, told on a gentle rainy night on a London heath to a native of that past, literally "brings home" the ties of violence that bind Teeton's, Roger's, and Derek's San Cristobal pasts to their London presents, and exposes the real nature of those ties, however much the subtle conversion of centuries has softened them.

The Commandant's revolutionary ideals in *Natives of My Person* were ultimately thwarted by the unrelenting tyranny of history. The rebellious gestures of the three central characters of *Water with Berries* prove similarly ineffective and destructive. Worse, they precipitate the characters directly back into that violent past, and ironically into those white racist stereotypes of rape, arson and murder that provided the fear-motive for atrocities committed by whites on blacks and then inevitably the justification for such crimes. In his latest two novels Lamming seems to find the past shackling the future in a repetitive cycle, empty of any possibility of resurrection. The revolutionary impulse may seem promising but inevitably it fails before the petty viciousness of human nature which, expressed as the slaving and colonial impulse, ensures a continuation of the atrocities of the past. In the latest novel, the Lady of the House offers the first glimpse of hope. Although Lamming has not arrived at any sort of coherent theory of salvation from the colonial impasse, he does seem to endorse the idea that the Lady might provide "a directive for the future."¹⁵ At this point such a hope is embryonic, but it is clear that Lamming believes that the colonized rather than the colonizer has a better chance of escape.

NOTES

- ¹Derek Walcott, "A Far Cry from Africa", in *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* (London: Cape, 1962), p. 18.
- ²Andrew Salkey, *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (London: Hutchinson, 1960).
- ³E. R. Braithwaite, *A Kind of Homecoming* (London: Muller, 1963).
- ⁴"Guest of Honour" Broadcast, Australian Broadcasting Commission, September 19, 1976.
- ⁵*In the Castle of My Skin* (London: Longman Caribbean, 1970), p. 248.
- ⁶"Revolution and Literature", *Semper Floreat* (Brisbane), 46, No. 13 (28 September 1976), p. 13.
- ⁷*Natives of My Person* (London: Longman Caribbean, 1972), p. 72. All subsequent references cite this edition by page numbers.
- ⁸*Water with Berries* (London: Longman, 1971), p. 97.
- ⁹George Lamming, "Guest of Honour" Broadcast. *My italics*.
- ¹⁰*Water with Berries* (London: Longman, 1971), p. 110. All subsequent references cite this edition by page numbers.
- ¹¹*The Tempest*, III, ii, 133.
- ¹²Lamming in *The Pleasure of Exile* and in *Season of Adventure* had already touched on the West Indians' ambiguous connections with the Americas. They seem to offer hope of a homecoming that never really eventuates as in the journey of Chikki Crim and Powell to Virginia in *Season of Adventure*.
- ¹³*The Tempest*, I, ii, 334-6.
- ¹⁴A. Boxill, "San Cristobal Unreached", *WLWE*, 12, No. 1 (April 1973).
- ¹⁵Gloria Yarde, "George Lamming — The Historical Imagination", *Literary Half-Yearly*, 11, No. 2 (July 1972), 36.