

Interrupting the Canon: Samuel Selvon's Postcolonial Revision of *Robinson Crusoe*

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Europe's material conquest and colonization of much of the world was preceded, accompanied and authorized by what Edward W. Said describes as "impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination" (9). Journals of explorers, imaginative travel writings by individuals who never left home, Hakluyt's voyages, all produced Europe's differentiated perception of itself in relation to something they made possible to call "the rest of the world." The representational practices of Europe reinforced its notion of itself as destined to rule "the rest of the world" by virtue of its position as the center of culture, knowledge and civility.¹ The world of the "other" was inscribed from within the European archive to manage Europe's understanding of its colonial relationship with native societies. "Colonialist literature" which in the words of Abdul R. JanMohamed is "an exploration and representation of a world at the boundaries of 'civilization', a world that has not (yet) been domesticated by European signification or codified in detail by its ideology" thus did "not so much re-present as present the native" (64, 63). The all-encompassing 'colonial gaze' was made manifest in the European man's (white man = hero) "discovery" and production of authoritative reading of the colonies and their inhabitants.² Colonialist narratives endorsed the struggles and triumphs of the hero-explorer's self-fashioning and this imperial centrality rendered the native invisible or peripheral to the action, thereby facilitating processes of "othering" (Spivak's term).

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* first published in 1719 is considered a foundational text for setting the pattern for colonialist fiction.³ Characterization of the colonized as Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* made available to the West the native subject commodified into a "stereo-

typed object.” This trope served as a “resource” for colonialist conceptual frameworks and it was repeatedly and consistently enunciated in colonialist texts.⁴ Diana Loxley regards *Robinson Crusoe* as “a pivotal text” for its “educational importance,” “overwhelming popularity” and “unquestionable literary influence of quite outstanding proportions perhaps unrivalled by any other single work” (6). Martin Green in “The Robinson Crusoe Story” expresses a similar view: “Of all the stories of the British Empire, the most widely read, not only across the Empire, but across Europe, was that of Robinson Crusoe. Indeed, it seems demonstrable that the Robinson story has been one of the most widely read in the whole world” (35). Both Green and Loxley illustrate how *Robinson Crusoe* as one of the “founding myths” and an “ideal discourse” was embedded in the educational apparatus of the colonial enterprise. They point to the institutional reproduction and appropriation as well as the fictional renewals of this text, which provided “a model formula for the assimilation of the language of conquest, masculinity, supremacy and authority and also of the supposedly inherent, eternal values of that [English] language” (Loxley xi). Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin’s comments on Green’s *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* throw light on Loxley’s book. Drawing upon their comments on Green, it can be said that Loxley and Green are not “simply describing a moment of imperial expansionism,” when imperialist fictions were institutionalized and circulated around the world, “but a much longer period of ideational subjection which extends up to the present” (41).

My focus in this essay is on the role of literary texts in colonial and postcolonial cultures, and particularly, on postcolonial critical repetitions of English literary ‘masterpieces’, in order to enable an interrogation and re-definition of the conceptual frames of the West to undo the long-lasting effects of ideational colonization and subjectification of postcolonial subjects. I analyze the effectiveness of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* to contain the “other” through textual inscription, and the Trinidadian writer Samuel Selvon’s reformulation of the Crusoe–Friday trope, in a twentieth-century context in his novel *Moses Ascending*, as proof that postcolonial peoples are not inevitably contained by the discourses that seek to produce them as enclosed subjects/objects. Several critics—

Spivak, Said, JanMohamed and Boehmer—have demonstrated that categories of the “other” such as Friday, Caliban, Jewel, Oriental, enunciated in colonialist fiction were an ideological tool that aided and abetted the more overt brutalities of colonization. This paper demonstrates how one such category of the “other,” which facilitated and legitimized imperialist expansionist projects in the realm of culture, is critically intermeshed in a counter-narrative with a postcolonial emancipatory project to de-colonize the mind. Selvon chooses *Robinson Crusoe*, one of colonial literature’s most influential texts, a text with which the modern novel can be said to begin.⁵ His choice foregrounds the struggle to recover the culture and history of the colonized/post-colonized (Caribbean) suppressed/erased by *Robinson Crusoe* and similar colonialist fictions. The attempt is to re-construct the history of the Caribbean out of the textual elements of the dominant discourse, out of the very imperial textual strategy of domination that postcolonial writers seek to go beyond. I would like to call Selvon’s *Moses Ascending* an *interruption* for it enters critically into established (and existing) configurations of discourse and successfully destabilizes its universality, linearity and author/ity, without attempting to replace Crusoe’s hegemonic signifying authority with Friday’s (postcolonial) counter-hegemonic narrative.

In his *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France*, Richard Terdiman writes: “[D]iscourses of resistance ceaselessly interrupt what would otherwise be the seamless serenity of the dominant, its obliviousness to any contestation. . . counter-dominant strains challenge and subvert the appearance of inevitability which is ideology’s primary mechanism for sustaining its own self-reproduction” (39–40). The “serenity” and “inevitability” of colonialist narratives is interrupted through Samuel Selvon’s demonstration of the discursive strategies formulated and employed by Western imperialism to reduce the “other” to the position of the marginal and the subordinate. His “counter-discourse,” to use Terdiman’s term, tries “to represent the world *differently*” by going beyond “simply contradicting the dominant” and “negating its assertions” (13, 149). In *Moses Ascending*, Selvon tries to interpret and interrupt the sign systems with which dominant discourse constructed a hegemonic, unitary and universal view of

the social world. He engages with the “effectivity” of colonial tropes and exposes the constructedness of their binary bases and, in Helen Tiffin’s words, “their *interested* representational foundations” (155).

It is important to note that *Robinson Crusoe*, the text, or Daniel Defoe, the author, is never mentioned in *Moses Ascending*, but terminologies and tropes of the dominant discourse are repeated.⁶ This is an indication of the common knowledge (‘universality’) of the basic terms/tropes of Defoe’s novel in the Caribbean. The Caribbean immigrants in *Moses Ascending* who grew up in the Caribbean, like the author himself, knew this dominant discourse by heart. Helen Tiffin notes:

Well into the 1970s, curricula of the English Department(s) of the University of the West Indies and Guyana, like most post-colonial universities in both the colonies of occupation and settler-invader colonies, were still dominated by the study of the works of Shakespeare, Spenser, Johnson, Donne, Herbert, Dryden, Pope, Swift, Johnson, Keats, Eliot, Defoe, Fielding, Emily Bronte, Dickens, George Eliot, in spite of the inclusion of some local writing. (149)

In the Caribbean the teaching and general dissemination of “classic” English texts like *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Jane Eyre* and others as ‘great literature’ formed part of a curriculum devoted to naturalizing and legitimizing the colonial as “other” (Brydon and Tiffin 49–50). Defoe’s text, well-established in the educational system of the Caribbean (and other colonial cultures) and popularized through reiterations so that it became sedimented in the form of Gramscian “commonsense,” therefore requires no introduction in *Moses Ascending* to be recognizable, understandable or effective.

Selvon’s choice of the tropes of such a classic colonialist text to tell the story of anti-colonial/postcolonial subjects in Britain in the 1950s is an attempt to interrogate and de-stabilize the canon of English literature, while acknowledging the enduring power of “classics” in contemporary times. Moses, Selvon’s protagonist in *Moses Ascending*, points to the successful interpellation of the colonized within a European episteme through the widespread reading and teaching of *Robinson Crusoe*

and other colonialist texts, and to the continuing power of that interpellative energy, even after the colonies have gained formal independence. Moses presents us with a world that has done with what JanMohamed terms the “dominant phase” of colonialism but still remains caught up in what he calls the “hegemonic phase” of colonialism (61). The dominant phase “spans the period from the earliest European conquest to the moment at which a colony is granted ‘independence,’” while the hegemonic phase depends largely on “the active and direct ‘consent’ of the dominated” (61–62). The novel points to the importance of literary texts in generating colonial subjectivities and creating what Tiffin calls “‘obedient’ subjects who ‘consent’ in their own colonization” (152). However Selvon’s success lies in his ability to recuperate the emancipatory potential from the ambivalence of the once colonized, now post-colonial, subject through episodes of resistance, which suggest that the colonized are far from being Defoe’s ‘obedient’ subjects – the ‘ideal’ subjects of Euro-imperialism.

Moses Ascending (1975) is the second book of the trilogy, which begins with *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and ends with *Moses Migrating* (1983). In all three novels the main protagonist is Moses Aleotta, a helpful and kind Trinidadian man in *The Lonely Londoners*, who unfailingly aids new immigrants from the Caribbean in various ways. Moses’ personal experience as a coloured immigrant in London coupled with his active involvement in the lives of numerous immigrants makes him feel that “he had a lot of things to say” (13). The novel ends with a tired and aging Moses wanting to “draw apart” from his old friends and “just sit down and watch other people fight to live” (125). His realization “how after all these years I ain’t get no place at all, I still the same way, neither forward nor backward” (113) makes him wonder “if he could write a book . . . what everybody would buy” (126) – a book that would make him famous in London. In *Moses Ascending* Moses is convinced that he has been able to finally move “forward.” He has distanced himself from his fellow immigrants and is content in his friendship with a white man. Further, he is a “landlord” and is also writing a book that will establish and celebrate his presence in London. Unable to establish himself as an author or a landlord (in *Moses Ascending*), Moses decides to return to

Trinidad in *Moses Migrating*. In this final novel, Moses decides to depict Britannia on the face of a coin in the Carnival as a way of proving his loyalty and belongingness to the “mother Country.” He also persuades Jeannie and Bob, the two white characters we meet in *Moses Ascending*, to participate. Jeannie plays the role of his hand-maiden and Bob hauls him through the streets. The impersonation of Britannia by a black man with white servants establishes Moses’ authority in the realm of the public, even if he has failed miserably in private.⁷ The Carnival allows Moses to fulfil his desire for recognition as he wins the first prize for “the Most Original Individual Costume.” He is also scheduled for interviews in Trinidad Television and Radio Trinidad and is to meet with the British High Commissioner for Trinidad and Tobago.

Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* embodies Europe’s encounter with native (Caribbean) societies, with people of a different color, culture, religion and technology. Selvon’s trilogy gives us an alter/native narrative: the “other” perspective narrating the experiences of Caribbean immigrants in Britain from the point of view of a Black man. *Moses Ascending*, in particular, is a counter-narrative (although not counter-hegemonic), which interrogates and interrupts the linearity of colonialist texts that delineate the originary moment of contact between metropolis and periphery/colonizer and colonized.

In *Robinson Crusoe*, after Crusoe encounters a ‘native’ (= ‘Savage’) at the boundaries of “civilization,” the putative superiority of the European colonialist and Friday’s supposed inferiority is unequivocally established. Difference becomes the rationale for colonization. Arbitrary relationships are made to seem preordained, natural and a given. This enables Crusoe to make it his “Business to teach him [Friday] every Thing, that was proper to make him useful . . . but especially to make him speak, and understand me when I spake” (164). He teaches Friday to speak his language (referred to as language *per se*) and abstain from eating man’s flesh. He also instructs Friday in the Christian religion and in the use of firearms. Friday becomes a fully civilized human being after he embraces European cultural norms and values. The native’s “subjection,” that is “his self-interpellation as a subject with no will” (Hulme 206), brings Crusoe’s civilizing mission to an end.

In the first few pages of Selvon's *Moses Ascending*, there is a clear elucidation of this hierarchical syntax of Western imperialism (culture over nature, civilized over barbaric, knowledge over innocence, master over servant) within which the dreams and aspirations of Robinson Crusoe will be reiterated. Moses' superior status, in spite of his skin color and experience of racial discrimination in London, is assured in his own eyes, by having as his "lackey" a young Englishman, "a white immigrant named Bob from somewhere" in "the Black Country," the "wilds" of England (10, 38). The discovery of Bob marks the moment of the text's most overt ideological engagement with Defoe's text. Robinson Crusoe writes about his "man Friday": "never Man had a more faithful, loving, sincere Servant, than Friday was to me. . ." (163). Similarly, Moses, Selvon's black Crusoe, notes that Bob was "loyal and true," "a willing worker, eager to learn the ways of the Black man. In no time at all he learn how to cook peas and rice and to make a beef stew" (11, 10). As they became "Master and Servant" Moses tried "to convert him from the evils of alcohol" and also "decided to teach him the Bible when I could make the time" (11).⁸ In the final novel of the trilogy, *Moses Migrating*, Bob has graduated to reading Tolstoy and Hardy, yet Moses at one point in the novel concludes: "I supposes I have . . . a certain way of carrying myself that bespeak sophistication and worldliness, qualities that Bob could never possess no matter how diligently he tried to learn the ropes" (75). In this novel we again find Moses trying to "inculcate some culture in . . . a Englisher" he meets on the ship on his way to Trinidad (33) and is constantly correcting Jeannie's grammatical errors.

In Defoe's novel, Crusoe's dominance is depicted as 'natural' and hence as eternal. This minimizes the disruptions to the chosen model of domination and control, and blocks the possibility of other/alternative narratives from emerging. Crusoe's Friday is a willing slave and so is Xury, another slave, who is willing to be sold to the Portuguese Captain at Crusoe's wish. Crusoe reports that he was "loath" to sell him but the Captain "offer'd me this Medium, that he would give the Boy an Obligation to set him free in ten years, if he turn'd Christian; upon this, and Xury saying he was willing to go to him, I let the Captain have him" (29). There is hope for Xury's liberty if he willingly embraces European

civilization and an “Obligation” (contractual agreement) is suggested. This is explicitly echoed in *Moses Ascending*: Bob “didn’t have no more money to pay rent, and we come to an agreement for him to be my batman and to attend to all the petty details about running the house in lieu . . .” (10–11). In both cases, slavery/servitude becomes a contractual agreement that benefits both parties. Moses slaves in London for twenty years before being able to buy a house and move out from the basement. He takes pride in his possession and writes about his “property,” “dilapidated castle,” “mansion.” Defoe’s *Crusoe* too, in a seemingly light-hearted tone names the island, his property: “my castle,” “my country estate,” “my subjects.” In spite of the jocular tone, in both novels, the joy of ownership is evident, and the narrators’ proprietorship is beyond question. This is explicit in *Moses Migrating* when the Immigration Officer asks Moses if he enjoyed his visit to London. Moses chokes and retorts: “I am a citizen. I am a landlord” (24).

The exact repetition of the *Robinson Crusoe* story in *Moses Ascending* however ends here. Unlike *Crusoe*’s island, which is a rigid, colonial territory in stasis, Moses’ islandscape is a fluid space of becoming. Selvon transforms colonial encounter into a transformative field where identities are in the process of becoming. The critique of the “Robinsonade” motif of cultural icons being passed from white culture downward to natives is obvious as the novel challenges the dominant cultural norms of colonialist narratives. The hierarchical power structures of Western imperialism are interrogated and interrupted through the demonstration of Caribbean culture transforming the ethnic identity of “real” Britons (Moses’ phrase). Pointing to this “cosmopolitan creolism,” Stefano Harney comments: “*Moses Ascending* tells not just the story of Black Britain, but the story of Blackened Britain” (112). The novel points to how colonialist narratives portray the imperial metropolis as determining the periphery and blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis. In its resistance to and interrogation of notions of ‘center’ and ‘periphery,’ *Moses Ascending* challenges *Robinson Crusoe* as true representation of social relations in the ‘island.’ The novel emphasizes the interactive dimension of colonial encounters and draws attention to the mutual transformations of both the host community and

the immigrants to the “mother Country.” Through Moses’ narration we watch an “Englischer” going to Indian shops to buy items of Indian cuisine, such as, Basmati rice, tandoori paste and ghee. Moses’ self-congratulatory tone is obvious as he notes: “I was proud of myself . . . for having done such a brilliant job of converting him [Bob, a white man] to the Black man’s way” (25). But British cooking and music influences Moses himself; he offers tea to his visitors and plays records from the London symphony orchestra to welcome Jeannie. The cultural exchange is multidirectional as Moses also takes on aspects of Muslim culture from his Pakistani tenants, repeating after a number of conversations that there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet.

The nature of lived intersubjectivities in Britain as depicted in *Moses Ascending* work against the binary structures (white/black, master/slave, Crusoe/Friday) that inform colonial discourse. Thus the seamlessness of social domination naturalized in *Robinson Crusoe* cannot be reproduced in *Moses Ascending*. Selvon’s postcolonial rewriting of the text is unable to objectify and contain the “other.” For instance, Bob plays the social role of Moses’ “servant” to provide for his living expenses in London. He takes care of the house and does various chores for Moses in lieu of his rent. Moses, on the contrary, deludes himself into believing that he was commanding Bob to do all the work as “Master of the house” (10). This is obvious when Moses tells Bob, on his return to London, “From now on we live like friends, not master and servant” and Bob asks “suspiciously,” “You mean I’ll have to start paying rent, don’t you?” (132) The narrative makes it clear to the readers that Bob always knows that he is more than a servant. Episodes such as Bob telling Moses that he would not keep an inventory of the furniture and other items in the tenants’ rooms in spite of Moses’ ‘command’ to do so or drinking all of Moses’ liquor draw attention to the seeming capacity of Defoe’s novel to ignore or overlook potential subversion(s).⁹

Moses Ascending attempts to correct this myth-making tendency of colonialist fictions through its recognition of the political struggles of Caribbean and Asian migrants, that is, real peoples in Britain. Selvon’s move to re-define ‘Englishness’ in the image of the heterogeneous and diverse communities that actually make up Britain calls into question

the fixity and rigidity of colonial spaces. The delineation of the efforts of immigrants like Faizull, Paki and Galahad to retain their cultural patterns of speech, food and dress in the metropolis in order to resist assimilation questions the depiction of Crusoe's territory, in Defoe's novel, as a stable and manageable space. The female characters' – Brenda (black) and Jeannie (white) – sexual liaisons with Moses (black) and Bob (white), on the other hand, transgress the fictional myths of racial purity and raise doubts about the mythic purity of the 'original' encounter.¹⁰ The novel hints that *Robinson Crusoe*, like other imperial fictions, had less to do with the historic world of the colonies than with the reinstating and re-affirming of colonial ideology.¹¹

Selvon's Caribbean immigrants in London realize that they are on the margins of the 'center.' Their "(dis)identification" with the host country, in James Clifford's words, results from their location within an inhospitable space marked by "structural prejudice" (304, 307). Moses explains in *The Lonely Londoners*: "Nobody in London does really accept you. They tolerate you, yes, but you can't go in their house and eat or sit down and talk" (114). The immigrants' realization that they are not accepted by the metropolis (white Britain) results in an effort to reclaim their suppressed Caribbean history and identity. There are intimations of the heterogeneity of alterity in Selvon's portrayal of differences within the immigrant Caribbean community. Individualization of his characters questions the homogenization of black experience(s) by white culture and the silencing of native voice(s) by the monologism of dominant discourses. The monologic discourse in *Robinson Crusoe*, which acclaims European superiority, is interrupted by a dialogic tendency in *Moses Ascending*, which is responsive to the diverse color/cultural/linguistic distinctions within and between Black immigrants in Britain.

Further, *Moses Ascending* raises a number of questions about the relationship between the historical legacy and the contemporary experience of living in the metropolis through a demonstration of the gap between the ideology and reality of England. Selvon in his essay "Three into one can't go – East Indian, Trinidadian, West Indian" writes about his own disillusionment in Britain: "[The English] ignorance of the West Indies was astonishing. You can imagine, after being brought up to be-

lieve that Britain was the fountainhead of knowledge and learning how staggered I was to be asked if we lived in trees, or if there were lions and tigers in my part of the world” (216). In *Moses Ascending* England is depicted as mythical and unreal to force the diasporic Caribbean population to re-think Western forms of knowledge that are authored, authorized and disseminated through its institutional and symbolic structures. It is another move towards interrupting the imperial structures and tropes of Western domination in order to enable a re-definition and re-construction of their identity as Caribbean subjects. Reversing *Robinson Crusoe* where the white man in a ‘deserted’ island gives the (black) native speech, Moses in London encounters a white man who cannot read/write the language that Moses has appropriated. Moses is shocked on encountering an illiterate white man: “I could understand the ignorance of blacks, backward people, but . . . It was beyond my ken that Bobbie did not know that c-a-t make cat.” He tells Bob “sarcastically,” that “it is the first time that I have come across a fully-fledged white man in this day and age who does not know that A is for apple and B is for bat” (138). For Moses illiteracy equals “darkness” and he decides to send Bob to one of the ESL schools: “Your ignorance reflects on me” (138). Here philanthropic generosity is reminiscent of the white man’s ‘duty’ and ‘moral’ obligation to impart ‘civilization’ to the native, i.e. ‘the white man’s burden,’ an alibi for legitimizing processes of exclusion, subordination, repression and inequality.

Moses having left his homeland (Trinidad) finds himself in a psychological islandscape in London, so that he has to seek out “the boys and coast a old talk to pass the time away” (*Lonely Londoners* 31). Selvon’s protagonist is in the metropolis, not in an island like Crusoe’s, yet he finds that London can be “powerfully lonely when you on your own” (*Lonely Londoners* 31).¹² Since in Defoe’s text Crusoe finds an ‘uninhabited’ island and turns it into valuable property, Green argues that *Robinson Crusoe* is “a story of *morally justified* imperialism” (*The Robinson Crusoe Story* 23). The narrative attests to the fact that Defoe’s hero remains in complete isolation on the desert island, until Friday arrives and satisfies Crusoe’s longing for human companionship. This erases memories of native/indigenous inhabitants of the land and allows Crusoe, the hero-explorer,

to both erase a past and initiate a beginning. Loxley calls this topos of the desert island “the ultimate gesture of simplification. . . . a simplification of existing colonial problems and thus an ideological process of [colonial] wish-fulfilment” (3). Robinson Crusoe’s “virgin” island, according to Brydon and Tiffin, represents “the wish-fulfilment of an expansionist imperial culture and its determined amnesia in relation to prior ownership” (46). Selvon redresses this mythical projection of the hero as ancestor/originator/discoverer of ‘uninhabited’ colonies by making Moses explain to the readers how he bought his house in Shepherd’s Bush from a fellow Caribbean, Tolroy, who has a story, a history and a name.

Crusoe’s ability to successfully domesticate and subdue “others” in his island establishes his control over that space. It is not accidental that Selvon does not allow Moses to oversee his house, or control his tenants, or domesticate his “man Friday.” The gradual destabilization of the rigid, hierarchichal divisions between subservience and control, rulers and ruled, gestures to the possibility of going beyond a replication of Crusoe. It testifies to the possibilities of a lived experience, which surpass the limitations of a subjectivity forged only in relation to one or other side of binary divides. The novel emphasizes shared spaces, not ownership. Moses writes: “I –or rather Bob – had the basement free” so Brenda moves into the basement (33). He introduces Bob to Galahad as “My best friend and ally” (18), and at another occasion writes that they became “good friends, or rather Master and Servant” (11). Such instances highlight the ways in which *Moses Ascending* interrupts (and disrupts) the distinctions of difference that were essential for the maintenance of the pure (rigid) boundaries of colonial rule. Perhaps *Moses Ascending* is attempting to correct Defoe’s representation of the “other” in amity by replacing the distinctions between the “self” and the “other” of imperial discourses with friendship. The debunking of Manichean or binary paradigms of Euro-imperialism also allows Selvon to free his people from what Tiffin calls the “discursive ‘capture’ of the colonized subject within Euro-representation” (162). The novel suggests that roles such as master and slave are discursive positions that should be seen as contingent, provisional, open to validation or refutation with the possibility of being superseded. It successfully subverts the image of stasis

and predictability naturalized by imperial fictions, like *Robinson Crusoe*, and through its critical repetition and reconfiguration of the resonances of *Robinson Crusoe* asserts a creative openness.

In an interview Selvon said: “. . . strictly speaking, if you talk about the creolizing process, you’re not Indian, you’re not Black, you’re not even white; you assimilate all these cultures and you turn out to be a different man who is the Caribbean man” (Dance 234). The emphasis on multi-positionality of identity and creolized identities in *Moses Ascending* challenges the concept of ‘purity’ that is at the core of the binary structures of Crusoe’s discourse. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write in *The Empire Writes Back*, “crossculturality [is] the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation justified by the myth of group ‘purity’” (36). Creolization allows Selvon to transcend myths of racial purity and superiority legitimized by Defoe’s fiction and raise doubts about Crusoe’s reliability. Selvon’s advocacy of creoleness as a syncretic category also allows the colonized to think differently, by presenting to them the possibility of going beyond the structures authored and authorized by the West.

To borrow from Kobena Mercer’s discussion of the aesthetics of Black cinematography in Britain, Selvon’s novel demonstrates “[a]cross a whole range of cultural forms the existence of a ‘syncretic’ dynamic, which appropriates elements from the master codes of the dominant culture and ‘creolizes’ them, disarticulating given signs and re-articulating their symbolic meaning otherwise” (56). Thus, creolization functions as a tool of critical contestation of the dominant cultural discourse in *Moses Ascending* that further interrupts the colonial episteme. The interrogation and interruption of the Crusoe-Friday paradigm as a result of Moses’ creolizing tendency is most apparent at the level of language. The first sentence of “The Preface” to *Robinson Crusoe* is – “If ever the Story of any private Man’s Adventures in the World were worth making Publick, and were acceptable when Publish’d, the Editor of this Account thinks this will be so” (3). Unlike Defoe’s Crusoe who keeps a “journal” Moses is “writing Literature” (112) – his “Memoirs” (with a capital M) – as a means of “showing the white people, that we, too, could write book” (109). Moses’ assertion, “None of this narrative is fiction: if I lie I

die" (88), gestures to a black man (= Defoe's 'Savage' in *Robinson Crusoe*) voicing his own story. In *The Lonely Londoners* Moses is contemplating on writing a book and the last page of *Moses Ascending* (149) gives us the impression that we may be reading *The Memoirs of Moses*.

Moses wants to be at par with canonical British authors and therefore adopts the habit of addressing the reader "Dear R," after Henry Fielding or Laurence Sterne, in his "Memoirs." His desire to gain recognition as an author can be read as an attempt to convince himself and the "mother Country" that he "belongs": "I am as much part of the London landscape as little Eros with his bow and arrow in Piccadilly, or one-eye Nelson with his column in Trafalgar Square, not counting colour" (51). When leaving London in *Moses Migrating*, Moses is distressed that after "all these years toiling" he has not been able to leave his "mark in Brit'n" (18). He is sad that he would "just vanish without a ripple or a blink" (19). Ironically, Moses in his efforts to affirm his identity as an "Englishman with black blood in his veins" (*Moses Ascending* 105) ends up affirming his identity as a Caribbean man in all the three novels of the trilogy. Like Crusoe, he is constantly aware of the 'strangeness' of the alien land in *Moses Ascending* and sees himself as another Crusoe surviving with fortitude and hard work in a lonely "mother Country." Writing about a tree with one of its branches near his penthouse window, Moses comments: "I would prefer if it was a mango tree, or a calabash, to remind me of home. . ." (10). When upset, he calms himself "thinking of sandy beaches and waving coconut palms in my beloved homeland" (117). He describes Bob trying to gain his foothold after the beating from Brenda as "swaying like a coconut tree on the beach in a strong wind" (30). As tropical trees and beaches, images from the island landscape, make their way into the narration of the London scene they defamiliarize the London cityscape. Similar inscriptions of Caribbean selves and voices in Selvon's postcolonial revision of the Robinson Crusoe story are evident also from the number of references to the Middle Passage. When Galahad tells Moses about the Party, Moses asks, "Who is going to be captain of the ship?" (49). Being herded to prison Moses felt like "we was in the hold of a slave ship" (43) and "[a]ny minute now the timekeeper was going to crack a whip in the Black Maria" (44). He uses

the metaphor of the “sinking ship” (147) to explain his lack of control and authority as landlord and the last paragraph of the novel is evocative of plantation imagery: “I was reduced to living as a tenant in my own house, with Robert holding the reins and cracking the whip” (143).

For Crusoe the act of writing is contained within the Puritan ethos of personal experience. As the “I” that speaks and the “I” that writes the journal, which is the text of the novel, it is Crusoe’s reliable narrative and authentic voice, which instructs and controls the text and our reading of it. Similar to Crusoe’s journal, Moses is writing his “Memoirs,” which Margaret Paul Joseph notes is a “European literary genre that focuses on the self” (88). It is noteworthy that Selvon uses the calypso, which deals with ordinary people, and a communitarian mode of expression, to tell his story in *Moses Ascending* while his narrator self-consciously claims that his “Memoirs” is “personal and intimate” (49). The use of the Calypsonian’s dialect and form serves a dual purpose: it asserts and establishes the Caribbean voice and it successfully replaces the authoritarian voice and personal experience of one individual in *Robinson Crusoe* with the hopes and struggles of a diverse group of individuals. Moses, the narrator, very often (unconsciously) embodies the consciousness of his community and there are hints that Moses’ “Memoirs” are part of the culture of resistance valorized by Galahad and Brenda.

Moses’ conscious imitation of the structures and narrative modes of the master discourse is evident from his efforts to write his “Memoirs” in standard (or what he calls “proper”) English. Selvon on the other hand celebrates the experience of otherness as an indication of agency in *Moses Ascending*. His delineation of Moses’ failure to write in “proper” English shows an unconscious kind of “carnivalization” in which “oral tradition invade[s] the domain of literature” (Thieme 194) and “represents a unique attempt . . . to liberate Trinidadian fiction by negating the monopoly of the ‘great tradition’” (Fabre 124). Moses’ use of creoles, patios and Black English resists and decenters the domination of the “Queen’s English” and captures the rhythm, vocabulary and syntax of island “dialect.” The use of “modified” dialect, in the words of Selvon himself, “keeping the lilt and rhythm” (Fabre 117) of Trinidadian speech and combining with it standard English, academic phraseology, nonstandard

grammar, cliches, journalese, “an archaic form of English” (Ramchand 100) creates the Caribbean voice in the novel. Selvon’s merger and mixture of “the different musics” from the various islands validates Stuart Hall’s view that “[i]dentity is not in the past to be found, but in the future to be constructed” (291). The recognition of a multiplicity of island voices suggested by the use of “modified dialect” brings into existence what Hall describes as “a Caribbean sound” (291), and undermines Moses’ authority and authorship.¹³ It directs the readers’ attention to the larger community and thereby challenges the assumption in *Robinson Crusoe* of their inconsequence and silence.

Consequently, Moses’ inability to be a master of the English literary canon is not a reflection of his failure as a writer *per se*, as Joseph argues in her *Caliban in Exile: The Outsider in Caribbean Fiction*. She writes: “Caliban can never really ascend. . . just as Moses can never really succeed in his ambition to become a writer” (101). The repetitive, yet casual references to George Lamming, Andrew Salkey and James Baldwin in *Moses Ascending* attest to the existence and independence of writing from the Caribbean. Moses’ ignorance of Black authors along with his misquoting and “kicking aside a batch of Lamming’s ‘Water for Berries’” (147) to clear his way to get to his window raises concerns about the continuing interpellation of postcolonial subjects through literature departments in Third World nations.¹⁴ Galahad tells Moses: “Man Moses, you are still living in the Dark Ages! You don’t even know that we have created a Black Literature, that it have writers who write some powerful books what making a world realize our existence and our struggle” (50). Moses’ ignorance of Black “Literature” brings to the readers’ attention the urgent need to expand the canon of English literature through the inclusion and institutionalization of regional and national literatures. Presenting Moses’ inability to question the centrality and authority of the English canon and his desire to gain recognition in Western literary circles, Selvon’s novel urges postcolonial writers (like Moses) to interrogate and interrupt the English canon and proclaim the authority of “Caribbean Voices.”¹⁵

Although Moses desires to be part of the (white) host community, he is “not quite/not white” (Bhabha 92) which attracts contempt from

both the host community and the community of immigrants. Joseph concludes: “[B]y the end of the book it is Moses/Caliban who, . . . has been outmaneuvered by Bob/Prospero. Caliban does not seem to be able to escape his destiny, for Moses loses his apartment and his rights as owner, just as Caliban lost his island” (100). I disagree with Joseph because Selvon’s parody of Moses from the very beginning is an indication that Moses’ folly rather than his position as a Black man is responsible for his loss of control and authority. Moses first loses his authority as landlord to the Pakistani tenant, Faizull. Moses explains, “Faizull has commandeered the house and our hands are tied” (75). He is forced to wander the streets at night having given up not only his house but also his bedroom to a bunch of illegal immigrants. Next morning, he finds himself locked out of his own apartment as the illegal Pakistanis lock the penthouse from inside and Moses cannot get in. I agree with Galahad’s summing up of the situation and his comment to Moses: “You got yourself there, boy” (86). Selvon’s distance from the narrator and critique of Moses through other characters in the novel, in my view, allows the text to provide its own deconstructive reading of Moses.

It is not at all surprising that Moses’ ascending (unlike Crusoe’s) *cannot* and *does not* lead to governorship of the island/castle but results in Moses finding himself back to the basement (now of his own house). Moses’ “mimicry” and incomplete inversions of Crusoe function to interrupt the normative fixity of colonial tropes. His failure to effectively master Crusoe’s tools leads the reader to an interrogation of the strategies of containment, i.e., the discourses and motifs of representation of the imperial center. Further, his ironic and playful repetitions of the terminologies of *Robinson Crusoe* – such as “Memoirs,” “castle,” “man Friday” “master and slave” – successfully undermine the canon’s authenticity and authority. Selvon’s delineation of Moses’ ‘failure’ points to the impossibility and undesirability of appropriating the experiences of the Caribbean community into someone else’s story. It is not accidental that the black Crusoe struggling to gain recognition as an author in *Moses Ascending* wins the trophy for the “Most Original Individual Costume” in the Carnival, which is a key component of Trinidadian national culture in the concluding novel of the trilogy. Selvon seems to be urging the Caribbean nations

to re-write their own history and create new discourses to articulate with efficacy their anti-colonial self-definition. In its recuperation of a former historic moment and in its literary invocations (not only of Defoe's text but also of Caribbean texts and authors), *Moses Ascending* points to the role that postcolonial literature(s) can play to resist the colonial gaze and subject the whole configuration of power within which the "other" took its 'established' meaning to the dialectical power of alterity.

Selvon's use of a classic colonial text as a subtext to his novel makes a case for postcolonial literature(s) as a site for reflecting back on a colonial past that remains to be interrupted, interrogated and re-defined. This postcolonial novel does not in any way signify the demise of coloniality or a complete detachment from colonial and pre-colonial pasts. The novel suggests that the postcolonial nations/subjects cannot repeat/re-enact the master narratives of 'old' history, nor completely abandon the old texts in re-creating and re-writing a 'new' beginning/a history (Jeyifo 107–118). Unable to totally disinherit the colonial past or create a mythic past, the novel points to the ambivalence in postcolonial subjectivities, which contain within them contradictions of their postcolonial inheritance. It indicates the emergence of a postcolonial voice that, although successful in a positive articulation and recuperation of racial and cultural differences, which I have tried to present as anti-hegemonic agency (not counter-hegemonic), still contains residues of imperialist ideas, tropes and narratives.

While Defoe is crucial to the understanding of "the energizing myth of English imperialism" (Green, *Dreams of Adventure* 3), Selvon's strategies of dis-articulation and re-articulation provide us with tools that may indeed be capable of interrogating and disintegrating forms of imperialism that continue to persist. Selvon's use of the Friday-Crusoe trope in *Moses Ascending* reveals that the terms/tropes of colonialist discourse are available as subject position even to those who are constructed within it as commodified/objectified "others" and could potentially be (strategically and critically) appropriated by the so-called "others" in an articulation of their self-definition. In other words, the novel illustrates that the hermetic dexterity with which Robinson Crusoe created 'his' colonial journal can be successfully used in Friday's articulation of her/his experi-

ence and in the re-formulation of her/his identity. Terdiman in *Discourse/Counter-Discourse* states: “the counter-discourse always projects, just over its own horizon, the dream of victoriously replacing its antagonist” (57). But Selvon’s aim is to interrupt rather than replace the old colonialist fiction(s) with a counter-hegemonic postcolonial narrative. Therefore, at the end of *Moses Ascending* the narrative closure is not complete. The re-writing process continues beyond the pages of the novel as Moses in the final paragraph claims to still have an “epilogue” up his sleeve. The ending suggests that the struggle to interrupt, interrogate and re-define the representational practices of the master discourse is ongoing.

Notes

- 1 See Hulme; Pratt; Boehmer; and Brydon and Tiffin.
- 2 My use of the male gender is deliberate. In the words of Rudyard Kipling, “colonialist narrative was ‘the lore of men that have dealt with men’” (qtd. in Boehmer 77). Also see Pratt (15–37).
- 3 Three further editions of *Robinson Crusoe* were published in 1719. In 1720 the book was translated into almost all the European languages. Rousseau’s identification of *Robinson Crusoe* as the text for ideal education in *Emile* (1762), re-established the text in the late eighteenth century all over Europe. Rousseau writes in *Emile*. “. . . since we must have books, there is one book which, to my thinking, supplies the best treatise on an education according to nature. This is the first book Emile will read; for a long time it will form his whole library, and it will always retain an honoured place. It will be the text to which all our talks about natural science are but the commentary. It will serve to test our progress towards a right judgement, and it will always be read with delight, so long as taste is unspoiled . . . it is *Robinson Crusoe*” (147). See Loxley (1–12); Brydon and Tiffin (40–43); Green, “The Robinson Crusoe Story” (34–52), and *The Robinson Crusoe Story* (19–21, 33–47).
- 4 JanMohamed (64). The nineteenth century saw a whole spate of “Robinsonades” that perpetuated the myth of European superiority over natives in many parts of the world. The overwhelming popularity of *Robinson Crusoe* is evident in the number of texts which attempt to write into the interstices of the Crusoe story—Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), Robert Michael Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1858), and Jean Rudolph Wyss’ *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1800), to name a few. Pointing to the numerous retellings of the Crusoe story, Green in *The Robinson Crusoe Story* writes: “[T]he Crusoe story is a continental, not a national one” (15); also see (42–45) for a discussion on “Robinsonades.”
- 5 Ian Watt argues for *Robinson Crusoe*’s crucial place in the history of the novel and calls the text “singular and original” (68–98). Loxley points to “the elevated

- position of *Robinson Crusoe* installed as the founding monument of European realism” (142). Also, see Hulme (175–222).
- 6 Terdiman defines “discourse” as “a culture’s determined and determining structures of representation and practice” (12). He explains that for the members of a group “the dominant becomes the discourse within which the consecrated phrase “and so forth” represents a usable discursive move. For we know the next line of the social script, even without knowing *that* we know it or how we learned it. The dominant is the discourse whose content is always already performable by the general member of the population” (62).
 - 7 I see carnival not as a licensed inversion, but as a subversion that undermines categories of social privilege and thus prevents their unproblematic reassembling.
 - 8 Mervyn Morris in his Introduction to the Heinemann edition of *Moses Ascending* demonstrates how this paragraph echoes a number of passages in *Robinson Crusoe*.
 - 9 Although Crusoe persuades Friday to eat the meat of tamed goats, instead of the flesh of human beings he cannot convince Friday to take salt with it. Later on in the novel Crusoe is surprised by Friday’s theological question: “if God [i.e. the Christian God] much strong, much might as the Devil, why God no kill the Devil so make him no more do Wicked?” (170). Friday’s articulation of a question that his “Master” cannot answer is an indication of Friday’s intelligence and will that Defoe conveniently overlooks/ignores. See Zelnick for a discussion on the purpose of such ideological maneuvers in *Robinson Crusoe* (79–101).
 - 10 This is evident in *Moses Migrating* where Bob trying to trace his ancestry goes to the island of Tobago where Crusoe was supposed to be shipwrecked “to pick up a clue” (139). He is shocked to find out that one of his ancestors had sexual relationship with a Black woman. “There were children by that association . . . and their children begat more children,” and he is “a living link in that chain!” (176).
 - 11 *Robinson Crusoe* has no women characters. There is a mention of Crusoe’s mother at the beginning and a wife after Crusoe returns to England to find one. Here *Moses Ascending* is drawing attention to the erasure of female voices in Defoe’s novel, and also highlighting the polyphonic culture of the islands, which is the Caribbean’s reality.
 - 12 Alexander Selkirk has traditionally come down as the castaway upon whom Defoe based his novel. Selkirk was not shipwrecked. He chose to stay on the island of Juan Fernandez because of a dispute with the captain of his ship. Moses too is not a castaway but a migrant to London.
 - 13 Boehmer notes that for Caribbean writers like Selvon the use of “a layered, mixed language is both a reflection of their region’s fragmented history, and a recognition of the distinctive richness of Caribbean voices” (213).
 - 14 Lamming’s *Water with Berries* (1971) is a re-writing of *The Tempest* paradigms, and, similar to Moses’ “Memoirs,” narrates the experiences of Black artists trying to prove themselves in London.

15 “Caribbean Voices” the BBC Overseas Service Radio Program ran from 1945–58. In the early stage of the series, writing from the Caribbean would be sent to London and the commentary of established writers and academics in London would be broadcast back to the Caribbean islands. The BBC provided Caribbean authors legitimacy by providing critical commentary of British critics on their works. The BBC in London broadcast a number of Selvon’s poetry and short stories. In an interview with Frank Birbalsingh Selvon said: “Some of my poetry was broadcast on the BBC’s “Caribbean Voices” programme. That really made me feel I was able to write” (149). Lamming, critiquing the BBC’s role in *The Pleasures of Exile*, writes: “From Barbados, Trinidad, Jamaica, and other islands, poems and short stories were sent to England; and from a London studio in Oxford Street; the curriculum for a serious all-night argument was being prepared. . . . In other words, it was not only the politics of sugar which was organized from London. It was the language, too” (66–67).

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