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V. S. Naipaul and George Lamming at the BBC: Reconsidering the Windrush Generation's Political Art

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Abstract: This article reconsiders V. S. Naipaul's cultural politics by attending to his work with the BBC in the middle decades of the twentieth century, particularly alongside the midcentury political argument of George Lamming. Because of Naipaul's skepticism of Caribbean autonomy in his later life, critics have overlooked his anticolonial and antiracist critique in the midcentury. This elision has led to a simplification of the Windrush generation's cultural politics. Scholars of these writers often paint Naipaul and Lamming as political opposites; this essay instead draws parallels between their emphases on the development of a Caribbean literary tradition. Through extensive archival work, including the examination of a heretofore unexplored Third Programme discussion, this article sheds new light on the multifarious ways that Windrush writers worked out their mutual desire for aesthetic and cultural autonomy for Caribbean writers.

Keywords: George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, BBC *Caribbean Voices*, Windrush, anticolonial critique

In contemporary criticism, V. S. Naipaul and George Lamming are typically figured as opposite poles on the spectrum of political consciousness for Caribbean writers.[1] Indeed, the Naipaul who famously expressed his dissatisfaction with the progress of now-autonomous former members of the British Commonwealth—the "postcolonial mandarin" of Rob Nixon's thorough 1992 critique—could hardly be more diametrically opposed to today's Lamming, who resides in Barbados and is an active

member of the Caribbean literary community he imagined decades earlier. Yet when we look at the two writers' rise to prominence in London in the middle decades of the twentieth century, we find a wealth of archival material that complicates the received knowledge of Naipaul and Lamming's political opposition. Focusing on Naipaul's editorial tenure at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) alongside internal communications at the BBC, personal and literary writing, and BBC editorial work by Lamming, Henry Swanzy, and others, this essay argues that Naipaul's midcentury cultural politics are more nuanced and rich than contemporary criticism would suggest. I aim to expand the conception of Naipaul's cultural politics by focusing on his role as editor and tastemaker for Anglophone Caribbean literary production in the early 1950s. In so doing, I recover a specific strain of anticolonial resistance that aims to develop an "authentic" Caribbean literature—one that rejects the influence of British colonial education and literary production. For Naipaul, this development of a new literary aesthetic is grounded in the separation of Caribbean literary production from English influence—an aesthetic sovereignty that emphasizes throwing off the yoke of cultural colonialism. This form of resistance—distinct from the calls for political autonomy more widely recognized among early postcolonial literary figures—was nonetheless a key form of aesthetic critique for Windrush generation writers.

By exploring the BBC work of Lamming and Naipaul in the 1950s, this essay locates specific points of similarity in their approaches to Caribbean literary production.[2] To be sure, Naipaul's cultural politics over the course of his career were often "dreadful" (Eagleton 84),[3] but to overlook his provocative, pointed critique of racism and colonialism in the midcentury is to conceive too narrowly his literary career and, indeed, the limits of early postcoloniality itself. The forms of "social protest" that Naipaul praises on the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* are literary ones: his utopic vision for a Caribbean free from British colonialism is grounded in a decolonized artistic community. This political vision must be brought to light in order to fully grasp the multifarious ways that Anglophone Caribbean writers expressed anticolonial critique—messily and often contradictorily—across their work in the decolonial period.

I. Setting the Terms: Stuart Hall's "British Caribbean Writers"

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" (1). Indeed, the discussion itself, though initially proposed by Leonie Cohn of the BBC Talks Department, was primarily developed by Lamming. He suggested the host, 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" (Lamming, Letter 1–2).

That the discussion appeared on the Third Programme at all is 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 Programme. The Colonial Service, what George Lamming calls "the back door of the Corporation" (*Pleasures* 44), had nurtured many of these writers through programs like *Caribbean Voices* and its progenitor, *Calling the West Indies.* But the Caribbean writers' "promotion" (as Lamming ironically terms 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 critical praise their work commanded.

The discussion itself, authoritatively moderated by Hall, is quite compelling and has not to my knowledge been examined in critical literature. 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 how it is "breaking into the main stream of the twentieth century" (Hall 1)—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.

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 Bajan and because she was a member of the working class, to which Lamming is particularly attentive (Hall 2). 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. (3)

Lamming highlights his changing political consciousness as a novelist, marking the shift from a fidelity to a certain class and space 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, 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?" (Hall 4). This question elicits the discussion's first direct back-and-forth interaction:

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. (4)

Selvon and others then move the discussion to the use of dialect, 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. . . .

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. (5)

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 Caribbean. Naipaul, five years younger, had served as an editor for *Caribbean Voices* and published two short novels but had not yet written his great Trinidadian epic *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). 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 were paramount—he is the first in the discussion 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 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 sincere—he worked in a factory before being hired at the BBC—and simultaneously indicates his prioritization of the working class, adding to his initial claim that his own mother would be his ideal reader.

In some ways, this interaction is suggestive of exactly the kind of political consciousness that contemporary postcolonial critics would expect from Lamming and Naipaul. For Lamming, political concerns are always already intertwined with his fictional narratives. In a 1970 interview at the University of Texas, Lamming notes that "the relation of the artist to the drama of politics is in fact one of the basic themes running through everything I write" ("Interview" 12). 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 the widest sense" (12). 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 the political centrality, or that the political as very central to the organization of a narrative that is coming out of the kind of experience that I'm sharing" ("Aesthetics" 228). This attitude is demonstrably present in his powerful rejection of English literary society and the cultural colonialism that dominates what is and is not able to be published by Caribbean writers.

Naipaul, on the other hand, infamously failed to acknowledge Trinidad in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2001. From his description of Mauritius as a "simple philistine society" (*Overcrowded Barracoon* 9) to his widely denounced statement that "nothing was created in the West Indies" (*Middle Passage* 20), Naipaul has been widely seen to prioritize Anglo-European culture and view the sites of former colonies with disdain and even shame. His writing has been criticized by other Caribbean writers since the midcentury; Lamming has argued that Naipaul's novels are failures in comparison to those of Selvon. "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" (*Pleasures* 225). Naipaul's fiction, according to Lamming, reveals that he is "ashamed of his cultural background and striving like mad to prove himself through promotion to the peaks of a 'superior' culture" (225). Postcolonial critics have continued to identify what they see as Naipaul's position on the wrong side of history. Edward Said describes Naipaul as "desperate" for the approval of "metropolitan intellectuals" (53), while Pascale Casanova casts him as "a traitor to the colonized condition" (212).

But, perhaps surprisingly, it is Naipaul on the Third Programme who evinces the positive reaction to Selvon's use of dialect in his fiction, praising Selvon—as he had done in his editorial comments on *Caribbean Voices*—for his pioneering authenticity in representing the Anglophone Caribbean. Selvon's fiction marks, for Naipaul, a new vista in Anglophone Caribbean literature, one which might enable other

Caribbean authors to write about their islands in a similarly honest, authoritative way. And it is Lamming who, with a brief apologetic note, criticizes Selvon's novel in no uncertain terms, even as he attempts to roundly reject the English literary critics' failure of taste. In Naipaul's response—"I think you are being—you are being very ungenerous toward the English critics, you know"—it is easy to locate the nascent political sensibility that has cast him as a "Caribbean Uncle Tom" (McIntosh 92), a writer whose perspective on British colonialism is "glaringly wrong-footed" (Donnell, "V S Naipaul" 58) and whose literary output and public comments establish "the colonizer's culture as the norm" (Cudjoe 34). To be sure, this article's project is not to rehabilitate Naipaul. Yet what I am pointing to, in this discussion on the Third Programme, along with numerous editorial comments on *Caribbean Voices* and elsewhere, is that Naipaul at midcentury displayed an enthusiasm and—indeed—love for Anglophone Caribbean literary output that complicates received notions of his rejection of and disdain for the Caribbean and its cultural products. Naipaul's praise for Selvon's *The Ways of Sunlight* is grounded in Selvon's authentic representation of the Caribbean and the way that Selvon's work has encouraged and enabled new forms of literary production from the region. These comments echo others from the much larger archive I explore in this article, which tells the story of Naipaul's cultural politics through an emphasis on authenticity—an emphasis shared by Lamming and other Caribbean writers. In reconstructing Naipaul's midcentury BBC career, this essay works at the intersection of literary modernism and postcoloniality, a key valence for understanding the scope of midcentury anticolonial resistance as it was articulated by Anglophone Caribbean writers of the period. The dialectic of aesthetic autonomy, as advanced by modernist writers, and the literary qua political argument of early postcolonial thinkers helps illuminate the charged nature of Lamming's and Naipaul's disagreements on the Third Programme. Peter Kalliney observes that "black Atlantic writers were the twentieth century's most eloquent and committed defenders of aesthetic autonomy"—that is, "that a work of art should transcend economic calculations, political partisanship, or racial tensions" (5–6). When Naipaul argues for this kind of transcendent literature in

his BBC commentary, it is in the larger service of the establishment of a productive Anglophone Caribbean literary community and, more broadly, an authentic regional literature. Thus, a reconstruction of Naipaul's 1950s cultural politics allows us to see more clearly the range of forms that were brought to bear on the colonial situation by writers of the Windrush generation.

II. Lamming and the Sovereignty of Place

As I suggest above, separation is a key term for connecting the midcentury cultural politics of Naipaul and Lamming and for illuminating their powerful arguments for the development of an Anglophone Caribbean literature. I turn now to Lamming to frame my discussion of separation and sovereignty: for Lamming, place functioned as a way to register his conflict over the spatial relations of decolonization. As the Third Programme 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. For both writers, in different ways, separation was a crucial valence for considering the development of a Caribbean literature. In the discussion with Stuart Hall, Lamming's desire for separation is evidenced by his insistence that his work is not influenced by his English critical audience; later, as I show below, 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.

Like Naipaul, Lamming passionately argues that Caribbean writers should free themselves from the influence of British cultural imperialism. Yet Lamming provides a specific and practical solution that Naipaul does not: 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 his future return 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" (Hall 10). Clearly, the specificity of place is at the

heart of Lamming's political consciousness and his beliefs about his own and others' literary production. As Simon Gikandi notes, "[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" (228). Lamming's words above, though they precede complete political autonomy in the Caribbean by a few years, highlight the painful contrast between the continued imbrication of the British Empire and the Caribbean, particularly in the context of the commercial aspect of literary writing. Lamming deeply regretted that commercial success was not, at the time of this discussion, achievable in the West Indies; in his view, the lack of a substantial West Indian literary audience and commercial system was another sign of the betrayal of the imperial relationship that had collected artistic taste, influence, and power within its metropolitan capital.[4] 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 fiction as well, in which the stultifying site of the metropolis oppresses the Caribbean immigrants who arrive there.

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?" (Hall 10). 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?" (10)

> 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. (11)

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

The political situation, as Lamming describes it, 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" (Hall 11). 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 also the lingering structural effects of 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" (11). 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 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 (Lamming, *Pleasures* 27). Thus, when Lamming imagines a "fully independent community"

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

As Emily Bloom describes in her study of Anglo-Irish radio broadcasts, the radio medium functions throughout the twentieth century as "a significant site for redefining literary networks" that connect states (6). 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 talks. But in the discussion with Hall, the room in which the nine Caribbean writers are gathered also becomes a significant site. Within this room, situated in the heart of the empire and broadcast directly to the homes of white English citizens, forms of anticolonial resistance are worked out through clashes and connections. This radio discussion is an embodiment of various scenes that Lamming fictionalizes, in which Caribbean immigrants come together and break apart within an urban environment, articulating their group sentiment and then watching their network fall apart. Within the radio room, as on the train in *The Emigrants*, individual Caribbean immigrants are gathered for a specific purpose, which Lamming himself initially articulated to Leonie Cohn. And yet though Lamming brought together this group of writers, the discussion alone did not satisfy his goals for political action. Instead, he sought separation, both in the form of his personal return to the Caribbean and the political sovereignty for Caribbean nations that would serve as a crucial step in disentangling the colonial and the metropolitan.

III. Naipaul's Aesthetic Resistance

This idea of separation underscores the common goals shared by Lamming and Naipaul. While Lamming argues for a return to the Caribbean, Naipaul stops far short of articulating the same goal—in fact, he vehemently opposes going back himself. Yet the idea that the Caribbean literary community must break free from the influences of the English is crucial to Naipaul's midcentury cultural politics. In this section, I turn to Naipaul's radio work with the BBC during the 1950s,

shortly after his arrival in England. Naipaul's early work with the BBC helped to drive the development of a Caribbean literary community, emphasizing that cultural colonialism left the Anglophone Caribbean bereft of its own literary aesthetic and instead idealized the literary production of the English "homeland."

While much postcolonial criticism has emphasized Naipaul's rejection of his Trinidadian heritage, there have been some recent attempts to work through his complex relationship with Trinidad and colonialism more generally. As Alison Donnell suggests, "these charges" of derision and contempt for the Caribbean, "while not easily dismissed, do not bring full satisfaction" ("V S Naipaul" 59). In addition to Donnell's recent article on queering Naipaul's relationship to the Caribbean, John McLeod attempts to explain Caryl Phillips' ongoing affection for and attention to Naipaul.[5] Sanjay Krishnan also argues that "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" (434). 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, his commentary during his editorship of *Caribbean Voices* and his contributions to other radio programs in the 1950s demonstrate Naipaul's interest in the development of a Caribbean literary community and a powerful argument for what he terms an "authentic" Caribbean literature. For Naipaul, authenticity—defined as an honest representation of place, roundness of character, and sympathetic characterization—is the driving force behind his editorial decisions and much of his critical commentary. 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 Naipaul had just started his first job—as 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, giving them not only a community but critical acceptance and feedback, as well as, perhaps most crucially, financial support. It was, as Edward Kamau Brathwaite later described it, "the single most important literary catalyst for Caribbean creative and critical writing in English" (*History* 87). *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 (Rush 202). Other estimates put the number of radio sets broadcasting the BBC in the Caribbean at three million between 1943 and 1958 (Donnell, "Rescripting" 79). The aural nature of radio allowed the broadcast to cross lines of education and literacy—listeners were exposed to the technical advice that editors gave for writers, certainly, but they were also exposed to a West Indian literary and artistic community that was developing even as they listened.

In May of 1954, 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 Bachelor of Letters he had begun, Naipaul was then "trying to place [himself] in suitable employment" (Letter). "One thing I certainly do not want to do," he wrote to Williams:

> 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. (Letter)

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

Recent years have seen growing interest in BBC radio and television archives, from Amanda Bidnall's discussion of the roles of Caribbean actors and singers 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.* Building on work begun as early as Rhonda Cobham's 1986 exploration of the *Caribbean Voices* archive, critics such as Glyne Griffith and Philip Nanton thoughtfully explore the cultural politics evinced by Swanzy's editorial tenure and his role in shaping the publishing trajectory of numerous Caribbean writers. Donnell seeks to fill in the history of "lost" women writers of the Windrush period by examining women's fiction on *Caribbean Voices*, while Kalliney explores the connections and competition between high modernists and the rising stars of Caribbean literature in the 1950s. 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 "advances an aesthetic project that sounds like an uncanny double of Amis's" (172). 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" continues 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 characters.

Just one week after his first editorial broadcast, Naipaul's incisiveness and well-known acid wit were apparent in his introductions. Naipaul's introduction to his second editorial program is, characteristically, simultaneously critical and empathetic in its 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 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. (12 Dec. 1954)

This introduction lays 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 and aesthetic given the powerful legacy of British colonial education that provided a literary history based primarily in the literature of an island to which most West Indian writers had no tangible connection.

The lack of an existing West Indian tradition, Naipaul explains, has resulted in 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 Swanzy, his Anglo-Irish predecessor as editor of *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 Brathwaite, who had submitted poems that, according to Swanzy, sounded just like T. S. Eliot. As 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" (124).[6] But Swanzy's encouragement focused frequently on what he called "local 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 a writer can avoid imitation and thusly free themselves from the pernicious influence of Anglo-European cultural forms by simply providing more West Indian "flavor." Indeed, Naipaul repeatedly notes that he does *not* want more "local colour." Even as he criticizes novelist Edgar Mittelholzer for "ordinariness"—that is, a lack of "West Indian-ness" in his latest novel, *My Flute and My Bones*—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" (22 Jan. 1956). 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."[7] Yet place is nonetheless an important aesthetic category for Naipaul—perhaps the most important, as it is the regional character of the literature that Naipaul most wants to return to 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 the description of characters' appearance or

dialect, which he seems to think are not in and of themselves sufficient. Instead, as I show below, Naipaul 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 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 (16 Sep. 1956). (Brown notes drily in his examination of Naipaul's *Caribbean Voices* editorship: "Race, of course, is also eschewed" [173].) Yet it is difficult to overlook the numerous ways that Naipaul expresses anticolonial politics in his editorial comments. Writing for the BBC in 1958, he praises 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" (31 Aug. 1958). More than once, Naipaul praises Roberts and others for writing not just with the insider knowledge of the Caribbean that their birth afforded them but also with humor and 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" (19 June 1955). 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 also, through respectful and generous treatment of its subjects, effect political and societal change—"the hope for social improvement in the Caribbean." In this broadcast, Naipaul empathizes with the "bitterness" that imbues the stories he features: these authors are bitter, Naipaul suggests, because they describe the realities of poverty and exploitation in Trinidad and St. Lucia. But their bitterness, he argues, highlights the kind of economic and social change necessary to improve Caribbean social life. Moreover, it is through this honest reckoning in literature that political change will occur.

This essay brings together in short order some of Naipaul's most dismissive 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 how 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. Nonetheless, compared to the Naipaul of later decades, the Naipaul of the 1950s was far more willing to acknowledge the effects of racial prejudice on his own life. His letter to J. Grenfell Williams 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 in 1954, he proposed a script to the Colonial Service titled "A Culturally Displaced Person," which focuses on his experience of race and culture as an ethnically Indian Trinidadian in England. Gordon Waterfield, head of the Eastern Service, rejected it as "exaggerated." Waterfield noted:

> 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.

We ought to understand Naipaul's developing political consciousness in this context—a situation in which the official erasure of precolonial history is taken as a given. Naipaul's rage during this period of 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 retorts: "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. . . . Why don't I go back where I came from, and not be a nuisance to anyone? Niggers ought to know their place" (qtd. in French 136; first ellipsis in original).

Obviously, Naipaul's reaction to racial prejudice in the period is sharply personal—and, characteristically, pragmatic, more pointed when it negatively 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 on Caribbean sugar plantations; Indian indentured immigration" (qtd. in French 135). 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 interested in the impact of historical forces on the individual encounters that make up what Frantz Fanon calls the "violent phenomenon" of decolonization (35). Naipaul's dismissal of social protest literature is certainly overly simplistic; when he criticizes writers who are, in his view, "only being black," he rejects out of hand numerous writers who are attempting to work through the "complex historical factors" he describes to Hale.

Instead, 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" (2 Sep. 1956), his criticism explicitly makes the case for an altogether different kind of political literature, one in which the political content is based on cultural authenticity. 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. His emphasis on authenticity is the clearest expression of Naipaul's anticolonial politics.

Naipaul's broadcasts highlight 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 criticism of a Sam Selvon novel he admires, Naipaul explains: "In *An Island Is a World*, Selvon was trying to write about the West Indian sense of frustration, 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" (22 Jan. 1956). Because of the lack of a Caribbean audience, Naipaul says, Selvon's book could not be appreciated—yet "[t]he West Indian writer must bear with this indifference until a West Indian audience is created large enough to support him by buying his books" (22 Jan. 1956). The lack of a West Indian literary community—both monetary support for West Indian readers and the machinery of publishing, printing, and marketing—was one of the primary reasons Naipaul gave for refusing to return to the West Indies in his letter to Grenfell Williams in 1954.[8]

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

> I see no point in the West Indies producing work indistinguishable from work produced in England or America. I don't care to see Barbados through Graham Greene eyes or Hemingway eyes or Faulkner eyes. In West Indian writing, that is. . . . I am interested only in good writing *from* the West Indians. Honest writing, from people who really have something to say. . . . 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. (16 Sep. 1956; emphasis in original)

In this excerpt, Naipaul makes clear both his distinction from and simultaneous alignment with the more openly political and anticolonial Caribbean writers of the period. This is not an attempt to whitewash his own background or experiences or deny his association with his Caribbean background. Instead Naipaul calls for a cultural decolonization in which West Indian writers free themselves 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 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 for his vision to become reality, it is clear that the onus is on the individual writer to decolonize their own writing. As I note above, Naipaul believes that Caribbean writers must "bear with [the] indifference" of English critics to Caribbean political and social concerns; the "honest" West Indian writer should portray the realities of Caribbean life unflinchingly and sensitively despite the lack of an attentive literary community. 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 individual writers to effect change. In his remarks here, alongside his comments from 1955 about "the hope of social improvement," Naipaul believes that artists, through effort and strength of will, can free themselves from outside influence. What is more, Naipaul believes in the power of literature itself to make change. In this respect,

Naipaul's argument is in some ways aligned with Lamming's belief that political content is always already inherent in Caribbean writing. For Naipaul, though, literary work should 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 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. Naipaul's argument suggests 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 a new kind of literary style that 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 his own complex character Mr. Biswas, Naipaul seems almost naïve, so 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. Instead, the individual artist is for Naipaul the progenitor of lasting change—not through a return to the Caribbean, as endorsed by Lamming, but through the development of an autonomous form of literature.

This, then, is Naipaul's version of anticolonial resistance, grounded in the power of authentic, honest writing to transform a mimetic literary tradition warped by cultural colonialism into something entirely new. So perhaps it should not surprise us that in 1963 Brathwaite—soon to be one of the most innovative and influential of the early Caribbean postcolonial writers—would name 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" (*Roots* 39). Naipaul's injunction to avoid derivative writing resonates in Brathwaite's rejection of "the English Romantic/Victorian cultural

tradition" (73). Brathwaite, too, calls for "a literature of local authenticity" (205). And his powerfully anticolonial "nation language" suggests that he is the literary hero Naipaul calls for, one who writes for speakers of his own, specifically Caribbean, discourse. To be sure, Naipaul's literary career followed an entirely different trajectory than Brathwaite's. Yet the remarkable resonances in their calls for a new kind of Caribbean literature reflect the range of political discourse and anticolonial cultural resistance that the "British Caribbean Writers" discussion attempts to work out in real time.

Notes

1 See, for example, McIntosh's detailed account of the contrasting cultural politics of Lamming and Naipaul and the "entrench[ment]" of their positioning as opposites in postcolonial criticism.

2 McIntosh also notes points of similarity in the early fiction of Naipaul and Lamming, observing an "overlapping, if not shared, conceptual locus" (90). My reading differs from McIntosh not only in my archive, which prioritizes Naipaul's and Lamming's public commentary, but in its reading of their cultural politics. Unlike McIntosh's reading of Naipaul and Lamming's "structure of feeling" that "sees the Caribbean as a dead end" (90), I identify a shared positive impulse toward colonial critique.

3 This refers to the frequently adduced Terry Eagleton summation of Naipaul: "Great art, dreadful politics" (84).

4 Indeed, Lamming takes up similar concerns in *The Pleasures of Exile*. In the book's opening chapters, he discusses the motivations of the Windrush exiles, noting regretfully that "the situation of a West Indian writer, living and working in his own community, assumes intolerable difficulties" (42). In Lamming's view, the lack of development of a West Indian audience stems in substantial part from a widespread lack of interest in novels: "book reading has never been a serious business with us" (42). This, Lamming suggests, plays a role in why West Indian writers of the period so often found themselves writing "for the foreign reader" (43) and why so many were reluctant to return to the Caribbean (46). In *Pleasures*, Lamming displays a perhaps surprising willingness to direct his criticism not at the lack of structural support for local publishing but at middle-class readers who, in his view, do not materially support what could be a thriving literary community.

5 In this reconsideration, McLeod argues for a more nuanced reading of Naipaul than other critics have allowed, suggesting that Phillips' attention to Naipaul demonstrates the value of this recuperation.

6 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 (124).

7 The differences between Swanzy's and Naipaul's critical responses to the submissions they received are of particular interest to 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).

8 Naipaul's calls for an increased West Indian audience echo those made by Lamming in the discussion led by Hall, in *The Pleasures of Exile* and elsewhere—though unlike Lamming, Naipaul stops short of attacking Caribbean middle-class readers directly.

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