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Consuming the Self: V.S. Naipaul, CLR James, and *A Way in the World*

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Prologue

If today, the Caribbean men and women who began to publish their work in the 1950s are considered the first cohort of internationally recognized Caribbean writers, then those of us born in that decade can count ourselves among the first generation of Caribbean readers, that is, the first generation of Caribbean children to grow up taking the existence of Caribbean literature as a given. By the time I entered secondary school in Trinidad in the 1960s, independence had washed over the “islands of the bluuuee Caribbean sea,” as we sang of them in our new national anthem, and books by local authors were beginning to find their way into libraries, literary soirees, and middle class homes. Unlike our parents, we took it for granted that West Indians *could* give birth to books, although, since practically none of these writers still lived in the islands, we weren’t quite sure where or how this literary conception happened.

The silence in our school curriculum on the subject of Caribbean writers raised additional doubts about the literary merit of such works as well as the moral standing of their authors, so we tended to talk about them, like the uncle who had fled to Venezuela to escape a little problem with the police, in the past tense, or the subjunctive. To make matters worse, the snippets of Caribbean poems and stories we heard recited at special events at the Public library downtown or at the USIS Library children’s hour, we considered embarrassingly folksy, not to say vulgar. Like students subjected to today’s politically correct educational agendas, we quickly worked out that many of the adults around us considered such events an uncomfortable duty, not nearly as appealing as attendance at the latest British Council evening of operatic arias. Public readings of West Indian literature were a bit like sex education; an attempt to make something we all knew was perverted sound straightforward and unremarkable.

Deviance delivers its own pleasures, however. Lacking the official seal of approval of the Cambridge School Certificate examination board, Caribbean books were free to pervert us rather than to uplift. Samuel Selvon’s *Turn Again Tiger* and Edgar Mittelholzer’s *Children of Kaywana* were the first “dirty” books I remember having read. I found Selvon’s tucked away in the back of a bookcase in my grandmother’s house. My older sister bought the cheap paperback edition of Mittelholzer’s *Kaywana Trilogy* with her own money and waved it inches away from my nose as a book that was “too old” for me. Of course I had to read it. It did not disappoint.

Even more than illicit sex these novels were about racial transgression. It was not just that they showed Caribbean people of different races in relationships of appalling intimacy with each other. Their stories presented non-white characters in ways that transgressed the conventions of the nineteenth century English and twentieth century American novels we usually read. Indians did not just skulk around in exotic, Kiplingesque settings, charming snakes and sleeping on nails. Blacks did not merely cower and croon. Chinamen were not sages whose pigtails always hung behind them. They were teachers, bakers, shoemakers, schoolchildren, cane farmers, laundresses, insurance salesmen and saga boys. Some were enterprising, others lackadaisical, still others downright evil but, at least in Mittelholzer, in a savvy, complex fashion. And the whites were not

all missionaries or Governors General doing time in the tropics either. Many were bored housewives or struggling clerks, who'd never been to the Mother Country, and who lived in backwaters like Berbice, British Guiana, or on sugar estates in Tacarigua, Trinidad, or in crumbling family villas along Old Hope Road in Jamaica.

We knew all these people. Some were our playmates, some, friends of our parents, others, relatives. Some were just people whose mango trees we lusted after. But until now they had not existed for us with the certainty with which we *knew* that Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* existed. I devoured those books, furtively, defiantly, and obsessively. In return, they delivered up those pleasures that Freud assures us are part of the process by which shame becomes bound up with the erotic, and desire with art.

The Caribbean books we read may have been transgressive, but that did not mean that they were politically “progressive.” Many of these early writers valued the colonial legacies they attacked. Today it has become fashionable to see early Caribbean writers who failed to abjure their relationship to the colonizing power as somehow un-liberated, or lacking in self-assurance. Nonetheless their ambivalence bequeathed to my generation of readers something the writers themselves had never had: a vast new library of words and images—some borrowed, some cloyingly folksy, some illuminating, some downright embarrassing—with which to begin to name *all* our worlds; a language through which to express *all* our desires, however politically retrograde some of them may now appear. They allowed us to see our world clearly for the first through the prism of art, which afforded us the luxuries of self-deception—as well as the promise of self-fabrication.

And indeed, we laughed hardest where we most refused to recognize ourselves. Movies, dances and football games were off-limits for Mrs. Cobham's daughters, so most of our teenage suitors had to make do with the blue wicker couch on the front gallery. I no longer remember whose copy of *Miguel Street* we found wedged between the blue cushions, but I remember one suitor looking at the title and saying with an air of self importance; “That's Luis Street, you know,” which was the street at the other end of Woodbrook where he lived. We read Naipaul's stories out loud to each other. I remember laughing till I cried at Man Man on the cross, urging the onlookers to “stone me, brethren, stone me!” and screaming with delight at the idea of his dog leaving symmetrical piles of droppings on the stools in the Café at the corner of Alberto Street where we regularly stopped for sweet drinks. And of course we were convinced that Man Man really must have been Mr Assee, whose endless chalked sentences on the pavement of Damien Road we were careful to circumvent when we took the short cut from the Avenue to Roxy Roundabout. It never occurred to us that we also might have been the subjects of Naipaul's satire: Mrs. Cobham's daughter, hedged in by all the elaborate protocols of black middle class respectability, but longing to play out a grand passion before the cinema audiences she could not be a part of. The suitor, somebody's well behaved boy child masquerading as a Black Panther under his Afro and knitted beret, reading short stories on the blue couch when he really wanted to do something else.

“The first sentence was true. The second was invention” (9), Naipaul says in *Finding the Center* of the famous opening exchange in *Miguel Street*: “Every morning when he got up Hat would sit on the banister of his back verandah and shout across, ‘What happening there, Bogart?’ Bogart would turn in his bed and mumble softly, so that no one heard, ‘What happening there, Hat?’” (9). That claim itself may be a writer’s fiction but it captures something of our first response to *Miguel Street*. We saw but did not see our world in the pages of Naipaul’s novel. We imagined that our own lives were not *that* sordid or petty and yet we knew that we had heard all the words, seen all the sights Naipaul described a hundred times before. The second sentence was always fiction; the first, already fact. Naipaul’s his sleight of hand convinced us that our experience as readers of his text—of any text—was as authentic as that of any other reader. He allowed us to gaze at our lives without feeling ourselves to be merely the diminished object of that gaze. For Naipaul framed our lives with art and art is always distancing and oblique.

My essay examines the meaning of this achievement in the work of a writer whose accomplishments over the past fifty years have been sustained and celebrated. That achievement has allowed Naipaul in recent years to experiment with forms which, in the work of writers of lesser repute, might have been considered too eccentric for serious consideration. It has given him a protected space to face up to issues that earlier he may have been too insecure or too inexperienced to confront, even as it leaves him open to the temptations of narcissism and isolation such license conceals. Naipaul knows that his work will outlive him, and in this later writing he is fighting for the right to influence the way in which that legacy will be read. The readings I offer here from Naipaul’s *A Way in the World* demonstrate how the project of writing one’s critical legacy can be understood as an overriding thematic concern as well as an important source of stylistic innovation.

In *A Way in the World*, Naipaul uses a character named Lebrun to talk about his fellow countryman, the political activist and intellectual, C.L.R. James. By basing Lebrun’s character on James, Naipaul finds a way to examine the problems of co-optation that come with fame—problems with which both he and James have had to struggle. I will focus on his descriptions of two meals that Naipaul’s semi-autobiographical narrator shares—the first with Lebrun, the second with Lebrun’s Manhattan friends. Naipaul challenges readers who have seen him and James as representing diametrically opposed positions in Caribbean intellectual thought to acknowledge the angst and insecurity, the refusals and accommodations that must of necessity have lain behind James’s poised public persona. Without an understanding of this angst, he contends, we cannot fully appreciate either the greatness of a figure like James or the limits of his vision. At the same time, this reading of James through the fictional character Lebrun offers us strategies for understanding the fictional persona Naipaul has created for himself in his writing.

Reviewers of *A Way in the World* note as a matter of course that Naipaul models the figure of Lebrun on the historical figure C.L.R. James, a fellow Trinidadian who, as Naipaul has done, achieved international renown as a thinker and writer during his lifetime. Naipaul includes several such characters, based on thinly disguised public figures, in his novel. Foster Morris, for example, the minor British writer whom the young narrator at first envies because he seems debonair and once wrote a “serious” book about Trinidad politics called *Shadowed Livery*, is based on the English novelist, Arthur Calder-Marshall, whose documentary, *Glory Dead* (1939), provides a detailed account of the political background to the 1930s oilfield riots in Trinidad. Naipaul’s method depends on readers “in the know” being able to pick up on these factual details, enhancing our sense that what we are reading is fact. However, Naipaul does not change the names of all of his loosely historical character: Sir Walter Raleigh and the Spanish adventurer Miranda remain Raleigh and Miranda. Henry Swanzy, the producer of *Caribbean Voices Programme* and an associate of Calder-Marshall, remains Henry Swanzy. On the whole it seems that only the characters whose lives he must manipulate in order to produce the effects he needs are given new names.

It is difficult, though, to decide what we are to make of Lebrun, as the few facts of Naipaul’s acquaintance with C.L.R. James seem identical with his representation of the relationship between his narrator and Lebrun. Moreover, such deviations as there are between his description of Lebrun’s career and the received record of James’s life can be documented easily by reference to the numerous volumes by and about James that have become available since his death in 1989.¹ James is such a well-known public figure in Leftist and Caribbean circles that altering his name seems to be as futile a gesture as it would have been for Naipaul to alter Raleigh’s name in his chapter on the explorer. Naipaul’s insistence on distinguishing Lebrun from James, therefore, seems to be his way of signaling his interest in imagining the private life of a public figure; to recreate through fiction the most intimate motivations of someone *like* James (or like himself), rather than to put on record an accurate historical estimate of the political contribution of C.L.R. James, the man. Thus, Naipaul can use Lebrun, the writer and intellectual, as a foil and mirror for himself, in ways he could not have done with the specific historical figure of C.L.R. James, even as he draws on the public record of the life of his fellow countryman to create the illusion of fact.

James is one of the few Caribbean intellectuals, certainly the only other Trinidadian, to have attained an international reputation equal to Naipaul’s as a consequence of his writing. In spite of significant political differences between them, Naipaul clearly respects this distinguished graduate of his alma mater, Queen’s Royal College, and his precursor on the British and American intellectual scenes. James had also anticipated many of Naipaul’s themes in his own publications as he and Naipaul share an interest in the history of the Caribbean and Latin America and in Trinidad’s role within that history (131). Indeed, Naipaul’s awareness of James’s achievement probably goes further back than he discusses in this novel. James was the co-

founder of the early Trinidad literary magazine, *The Beacon*, with whose extended circle of literati, Naipaul tells us elsewhere, his father, Seepersad Naipaul, interacted.² Naipaul himself was probably directly influenced by the stories of the *Beacon* group. He refers in the essay “Jasmine” to a handful of local short stories he encountered as a child through which he “began to appreciate the distorting, distilling power of the writer’s art. Where I had seen a drab haphazardness they found order; where I would have attempted to romanticize, to render my subject equal with what I had read, they accepted. They provided a starting-point for further observation; they did not trigger off fantasy” (27).³ Seen through these connections to Naipaul’s father, Naipaul’s school, Naipaul’s intellectual interests, and the international literary scene, the historical James was probably an early role model for Naipaul, as the younger writer acknowledges in a review of James’s *Beyond a Boundary*:

To me, who thirty years later followed in his path almost step by step—but I only watched cricket, and I won the scholarship—Mr James’s career is of particular interest. Our backgrounds were dissimilar. His was Negro, Puritan, fearful of lower-class contamination; mine was Hindu, restricted, enclosed. But we have ended speaking the same language; and though England is not perhaps the country we thought it was, we have both charmed ourselves away from Trinidad. ‘For the inner self,’ as Mr James writes, ‘the die was cast.’ (75)

James had to struggle with the limitations of a colonial society not that much different from Naipaul’s, if anything it was, as Naipaul notes, a world much harsher than his own in its racial divisions. Yet James had made a way for himself in the world. He had become known through his writing, in all the ways that Naipaul as a literary novice in the 1950s, must have aspired to be known.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Naipaul’s relationship to James is his unfeigned respect for James as a fellow craftsman of words. This is one of the qualities Naipaul gives to his fictional Lebrun, who publishes a review article about the narrator’s work in “one of the Russian ‘thick magazines’”—not unlike the early review of *Biswas* that James wrote:

The article seemed to me a miraculous piece of writing. It stuck closely to what I had actually written, but was about so much more. Reading the article, I thought I understood why as a child I felt that history had been burnt away in the place where I was born. I found myself constantly thinking, “Yes, yes. That’s true. It was like that.” (114)

The words “seemed,” in the first sentence quoted, and “I thought I understood,” later on, prepare the reader for the painstaking deconstruction of Lebrun’s reading that follows this passage. Yet the tone of the narrator’s response communicates an intuitive recognition of a fellow mind—a fellow *something*—which the figure of Lebrun represents for Naipaul at this moment in the story.

Lebrun's essay evinces the attention to surfaces capable of excavating the writer's hidden meanings, that Naipaul tells us elsewhere in *A Way in The World* is the essence of good close reading. Indeed, the intensity of Lebrun's critical engagement with the narrator's novel returns to the author a satisfying assurance of having been seen and heard. Naipaul even displaces onto Lebrun's reading insights that originate in his own writing. Most of Naipaul's critics are familiar with his pronouncement in *The Middle Passage* that "[h]istory is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (29). In this rendering of his ideal reader, however, it is Lebrun who provides the narrator with the language through which to articulate a half understood childhood notion that "history had been burnt away in the place where I was born" (114). By converting his written dismissal of Caribbean history into a thought that comes unbidden to his narrator as a child, and which the respected public oracle, Lebrun, is able to divine, Naipaul anticipates the absolution he hopes history will give his political pronouncements. He displaces his harshest judgments onto his reader via Lebrun, but in a form benign enough to suggest insight and acceptance, rather than what some have seen as the defensiveness of Naipaul's original formulation or, of the critical responses to it. "Look," he seems to say, "Lebrun can see what I mean. He has a wonderfully expansive intellect that is not afraid of the truth. He has borne witness to what many others can see but are afraid to acknowledge in their readings of my work. He has anticipated what the world may only come to understand about my aesthetic vision in retrospect many decades from now."

When the narrator finally meets Lebrun, he characterizes his conversation as being, like Ruskin's on the printed page, in its fluency and elaborateness, the words wonderfully chosen, often unexpected, bubbling up from some ever-running spring of sensibility. The thought-connections—as with Ruskin—were not always clear; but you assumed they were there. As with the poetry of Blake (or, within a smaller compass, Auden), you held on, believing there was a worked-out argument. (117)

Never mind the tongue in cheek, the Naipaulesque insinuation, too mischievous to let pass, that there may indeed have been no worked-out argument beneath the elegantly formulated rhetoric. Naipaul is comparing Lebrun here with the literary models that dominated his colonial education and subsequent literary initiation at Oxford. His association of Lebrun with the mercurial genius of Blake, the perfect poise of Ruskin, and the contemporaneous glamour of Auden, whose plays and poetry were much in vogue at Oxford in the 1950s, allows Naipaul to mark the narrator's enthusiasm as an initiate's naive response to a specific notion of literary greatness that he has been taught to admire. At the same time, however, Naipaul makes the point that in terms of what at that moment it was possible to imagine oneself as a colonial striving to attain through language, Lebrun had achieved it all.

Naipaul's representation of the relationship between his semi-autobiographical narrator and the public oracle, Lebrun, as opposed to a simple account of the relationship between V.S.

Naipaul and C.L.R. James, allows him to foreground a number of similarities between himself and a historical figure who many consider his nemesis. For contemporary Caribbean aficionados, James epitomizes a tradition of committed black intellectual thought associated with such figures as George Padmore, Frantz Fanon, and Eric Williams, to name a few. It is a tradition from which Naipaul often has been accused of distancing himself. This perspective on the opposition between Naipaul and James sits well on both sides of the literary and ideological divide, where Naipaul is ostracized, by one camp, as a betrayer of the Third World and lionized, by the other, as the consummate aesthete and man of conscience—embodying all the essential purities Kripalsingh projects onto his Aryan ancestors in *The Mimic Men*.⁴ For both kinds of readers, the essential Naipaul is a man divorced from his Caribbean roots: the purist made nauseous by filth and flesh, or the racist who has “forgotten” his own family’s sojourn in the cane fields of the New World.

Naipaul signifies on both the purist and racist readings of his work in his description of two meals, one of coo-coo, with Lebrun and other West Indians in London, and one of gefilte fish, with Lebrun’s influential American friends in Manhattan. The meal with Lebrun takes place in a Maida Vale flat in London, filled with overstuffed furniture. Naipaul describes those present with the kind of meticulous attention to racial nuance we West Indians invoke as a matter of course when describing ourselves. Thus, the host is described as Lebanese Trinidadian, his wife as a Creole who could pass for white but is from one of the smaller islands. Lebrun himself, though fairly dark in complexion, has a dash of Amerindian that gives his skin a reddish tinge. Only Lebrun’s woman friend, described as a Polish or Czech woman, is given no ethnic specificity at this point. Their meal, which Naipaul, somewhat anachronistically, calls coo-coo, is described in even greater detail:

A heavy glistening mound was placed on my own plate. I probed it: boiled yams and green bananas and possibly other tubers mashed together with peppers, the whole mixture slimy from the yams and—the Lebanese touch—olive oil. Below the pepper it had almost no taste, except one of a tart rawness (from the green bananas), and I thought it awful, the texture, the slipperiness. I didn't think I would be able to keep it down. I let it be on my plate. No one noticed.⁵

While Lebrun ate, and his dutiful woman friend ate, and the smell of meat and oil became high in the squashed sitting room with the old upholstered chairs, and people asked the Lebanese where they had got the yams and green bananas from, I (feeling that I was betraying them all, and separating myself from the good mood of the evening) remembered my aunt twenty years before, fanning her coal pot on the concrete back steps of our house in Port of Spain, and talking about Grenadians boiling their “pitch-oil tin” of ground provisions once a week. (120)

Naipaul sets up this moment of excruciating embarrassment and gross satire very carefully. The cosmopolitan mix of the company around the table is set off by the crude peasant

meal of coo-coo they make a point of eating; their stuffed mouths and the high smell of the food in the cramped room, against the elevated intellectual conversation Lebrun proceeds to initiate. Furthermore Naipaul draws into this moment, through the reference to his narrator's aunt, the ramifications attached to this meal for him in its original Caribbean setting. Naipaul associates the ingredients of the meal with the Grenadian and Vincentian laborers he describes earlier in the chapter, who flocked to the Trinidad of his colonial childhood in search of work.⁶ In the course of this earlier description, the narrator first introduces the satirical portrait of his aunt—now “an alert, generous, elegant woman” (80), resident in Canada but then a somewhat garrulous character, fanning a coal pot on the back steps of the Port of Spain house, filled with recently relocated migrants from the countryside. Her derogatory reference to small islanders and their pitch oil tins of ground provisions indicates some of the consequences for the status of Indo-Trinidadians that this “small island” invasion produced. Before the influx of immigrants, the Indo-Trinidadian peasant population of Trinidad was considered by many to occupy one of the lowest rungs on the very complex ladder of Trinidad social status. Further down in color hierarchy than the other indentured laborers of Chinese and Portuguese origin, less urbane and cosmopolitan than the black and mixed race Creoles of the city, Indo-Trinidadians who began to make the transition from country to town in the interwar years, may well have seized the opportunity to revise the public image of their community as backward and foreign when a new group, with even less prestige, arrived in the island after World War II.⁷ Thus, the narrator's aunt does not need to acknowledge the squalor of her coal pot on the back steps if the living and cooking arrangements of the small islanders can be represented as even more primitive. At the same time, any provincial unease with the cosmopolitan foods and customs of Port of Spain she may have felt can be transformed into disgust, when redirected at the foods and customs of the new immigrants she most dreads being lumped with at the bottom of the social ladder.

All the words through which Naipaul makes the coo-coo seem revolting can be associated with the ramifications Naipaul brings to its description from other moments in the novel, especially from his earlier presentation of small island squalor and East Indian social angst. The way the elements of the meal are mashed together recalls the overcrowded Port of Spain house both the narrator and his aunt have since fled, even as it explains the need to enhance their social standing that dictated the distance Indo-Trinidadians struggled to maintain between themselves and the bodies of the unassimilated small islanders. The emphasis on the meal's indiscriminate mixing of African, Indian, even Lebanese ingredients, which the narrator's probing fork uncovers, also signifies on the racial mixture—not to say sexual promiscuity—associated with Trinidad Creole culture that the narrator, like a reader of pornography, approaches with a mixture of curiosity and revulsion. The narrator's characterization of the taste and texture of the meal, as that of “tart rawness” overlaying blandness and of “slipperiness,” has obvious sexual overtones, as do the visual images associated with tubers and green bananas. These are further codified for the Caribbean reader through the popular association in Trinidad calypso between dried saltfish—the side dish usually served with coo-coo—and the female genitalia. Finally, the meal's sexual connotations are reinforced by the narrator's mildly envious

allusions to Lebrun's reputation as a successful womanizer, repeated throughout the chapter, but conveyed in the passage quoted here through the narrator's uncomfortable awareness of the devotional attitude of the Polish or Czech woman friend at Lebrun's side, dutifully consuming the slimy meal.

Naipaul's emphasis on the racial and sexual connotations associated with coo-coo highlights the cultural distinctions that still persist in the Trinidad popular imagination between the island's Indo-Trinidadian population, with its supposedly homogenous social contours, and the much vaunted cultural hybridity of the wider Creole society. One of the reasons why the narrator cannot quite bring himself to eat this "mushed-up" meal with the gusto and aplomb of the other middle class West Indians at the dinner party—for some of whom it *also* is an exotic dish—is that his relationship to cultural mixture, to culinary slumming if you like, is complicated by the conservative notions of cultural separateness that others assume he associates with the uncreolized aspects of Indo-Trinidadian culture. Thus, when the narrator notes parenthetically, in the passage quoted, that he feels as if he is betraying them all, he is expressing both an ironic distance from what he perceives as their staged indulgence in the culture of a class of people to which no one at the dinner party (including Lebrun) belongs—poor, uneducated, black, small island laborers—and a genuine sense of the limits placed on his Creole identity. His feelings of isolation are exacerbated by the way in which his Indianness in this self-consciously Creole context is never quite fully assimilated, even (especially!) when it is overlooked.

Critics in the "Naipaul as purist" cultural camp will be quick to celebrate the narrator's squeamishness as evidence of Brahmin sensibility, which Naipaul codes here through his references to the high smell of meat (actually another anachronism, since if the meal *had* been coo-coo it would have been served with would have been salt fish or flying fish). On the other hand, critics of the "Naipaul as cultural betrayer" camp will want to claim his over refined expressions of disgust as one more piece of evidence for his distaste of all things associated with black West Indians. But Naipaul's position at this stage in his narrative is a lot more complex. Earlier in the chapter on Lebrun, Naipaul makes a point of noting the influence of George Lamming's first novel on his literary development. Lamming's successful use of comedy in *In The Castle of My Skin* affirmed for Naipaul something he had been unable to acknowledge until then in his attempts to write; that "comedy, the preserver we in Trinidad had always known, was close to me, a double inheritance, from my story-telling Hindu family, and from the creole street life of Port of Spain" (89). Naipaul thus uses his connection to a Black Caribbean writer to underwrite his literary sensibility as deriving from both Creole and Hindu cultural influences. Similarly, Lebrun's Creole urbanity is one of the features Naipaul allows his narrator to admire in his fictional rewriting of James, whose 1936 "barrack yard" novel, *Minty Alley*, is one of the clearest precursors of Naipaul's urbane satirical style in Trinidadian fiction. Within Creole culture, no racial or ethnic trait exists beyond co-optation. A Lebanese Trinidadian may integrate coo-coo into her cuisine with the same matter of factness that an Indo-Trinidadian writer can

emulate the satirical conventions of the calypsos he hears on the streets of his neighborhood, or of the folk tales he absorbs via Caribbean writers of African *and* Indian descent.

The problem with Creole appropriation, however, is that it inevitably involves a loss of ethnic specificity. All Trinidadians constantly negotiate the tension between their specific ethnic and racial origins and their sense of belonging to a multiracial Creole culture. In fact, it is the elegance with which these contradictions are finessed that constitutes the hallmark of Creole cultural hybridity. But once this hybridity is perceived in terms of loss, rather than opportunity, it is possible to read the Creolization process as a denial of difference, a form of cultural erasure. This is the defensive sentiment that fuelled in part the Black Power reassertion of African roots in the Caribbean during the 1960s and 1970s. It is also the fear that constrains Naipaul's narrator: the minority sensibility that rewrites the inclusive gestures of Lebrun's dinner party as a denial of the specificity of his Indo-Caribbean background, including his embarrassing private insecurities about consuming or being consumed by small island food.

The limits of the Creole identity the narrator at one level seems so anxious to claim, are indicated obliquely by Naipaul's naming of coo-coo as the meal his narrator cannot consume. Naipaul's choice of the word coo-coo as the name of the meal he describes enables a second intertextual reference to Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*. The closing chapter of Lamming's first novel contains a famous passage describing how G-'s mother prepares a final meal of coo-coo for him before he leaves Barbados for Trinidad. In his essay, "Cuckoo [sic] and Culture," the critic Edward Baugh reads this passage as marking the moment at which the boy G- affirms and accepts the African/peasant roots of his culture, "so that every movement of his mother's hands, every ingredient that is added to the meal, becomes a kind of last sacrament and celebration of a culture which the boy G-, until this moment, has experienced with deep ambivalence" (22-23). Paradoxically, this insight comes at a point in the novel when the narration shifts from the third person, in which the boy is signified by the anonymous "G-," to a first person, "I," narrator, through whose agency the boy finally becomes an independent speaking subject. Separated from his mother and insulated from her culture, he can now reify each, as madonna and sacrament.

The meal of coo-coo in Lamming's text is thus both a gesture of embrace and a sign of the process of individuation that disrupts the connection between mother and son. The narrating, "I," who reifies the folk, is less enmeshed in the folk culture than the boy, "G-." By highlighting the difficulties his Indo-Caribbean narrator experiences when invited to participate in the same sacramental rite of consuming coo-coo, Naipaul helps us understand how Lamming's gesture could be read as an aggressive act of cultural appropriation, similar to the culinary slumming for which his narrator indicts the Caribbean intellectuals at Lebrun's dinner party. He also may be making the point that the limits to cultural and literary convergence between himself and Lamming, or himself and James, are imposed ultimately by the different relationships to power reflected in their respective social histories. Lamming's narrator's ability to simultaneously claim and distance his mother's dish of coo-coo does not liberate Naipaul's narrator automatically from the complexly different socio-cultural anxieties he brings to a similar meal.

Read in relation to the response of Lamming's "G-," however, Naipaul's narrator's refusal to eat may also signal a failure of the maturation process: an inability on the part of this narrating "I" to free himself of primal anxieties around status and identity embedded in his unconscious. Thus, the flashback to his garrulous aunt and his recourse to her language of "ground provisions" and "pitch oil tins" may be a way of signaling his failure—and everyone else's struggle—to complete the process of separation from an infantile identification with an imaginary mother culture. The impressionable child, who has never quite freed himself from the half articulated fears and dreams of his maternal community, resurfaces in the hysterical man, gagging inexplicably when faced with a meal that triggers the feelings of suffocation, vulnerability, and inarticulateness that also assault the boy, "G-," but which Lamming resolves in his novel by creating an independent speaking subject.

In Lamming's resolution, to be Creole is to be mature, that is, to be capable of choosing for oneself those aspects of one's own cultural heritage, as well as the cultures of others, which one wishes to celebrate or reject, to perform an identity one writes for oneself, rather than to live out an identity provided by others. This is the notion of identity that the Caribbean group at James's dinner party seems to celebrate when its ethnically diverse members self-consciously reclaim the humble small island meal of coo-coo as part of their shared culture. It is also a perspective on personal choice that Naipaul supports, or at least sees as an inevitable condition of modernity, in his emphasis on the personal rewritings of the self in all of the stories in this novel. Yet, in this story about Lebrun, Naipaul reminds us that the borrowed cultural practices in which these "new men" (and women) clothe themselves coexist at all times with more deeply held, primal patterns of belonging, from which none of us is ever fully liberated. Moreover, these new identities may threaten or erase the subjectivity of others — the black small island laborers represented only by their coo-coo at Lebrun's cosmopolitan dinner; the Indo-Trinidadian whose induction into the Creole cultural circle around the table conceals a threat or promise far more fraught than that associated with the inclusion of Lebrun's completely foreign Polish or Czech woman friend.

Naipaul uses the fear of cultural appropriation his narrator's inability to participate in the ritual meal of coo-coo intimates to reflect on the threat of cultural appropriation implicit in Lebrun's consummate ability to read his work. "The man want to take you over" (127), the chief minister says of Lebrun in the course of another significant meeting and meal. Trinidad historian and former Prime Minister Eric Williams, the model for this character, was one of the most famous of James's protégés to later part company with his mentor.⁸ Through him, the narrator comes to realize that what at first seemed to be an ideal interpretation of his writerly intent in Lebrun's article may have concealed a gesture of political co-optation that relegates the narrator's specific vision to a niche within Lebrun's elegantly formulated materialist reading of global culture. From that perspective, there is something sinister about a globalizing impulse that can cheerfully exoticize the narrator's racial difference, while at the same time insisting that the narrator demonstrate his successful assimilation by consuming Creole food. When Lebrun,

between mouthfuls of coo-coo, launches into a consideration of the debate between “Lenin and the Indian delegate, Roy, at the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920” (120), the narrator feels even more like the token outsider among the guests at the meal. In the end, he concludes that the price he must pay for his inclusion in Lebrun’s vision of international soildarity is simply too high. It demands that he trivialize his aunt’s deep-seated fear of poverty and squalor, expressed in her casual jab at small island culture. It calls upon him to fit his complex understanding of himself as Indo-Trinidadian into the broad generalizations about “Indians” that structure the debate between Lenin and Roy. From Naipaul’s perspective such generalizations merely exoticize his narrator’s racial specificity, by reducing it to one more instance of local color, divorced from its original setting like the now harmlessly fashionable meal of coo-coo served up in a Maida Vale flat.

But perhaps ultimately race, or cultural difference, is not the point. There is a real distinction—one might say, a *disciplinary* distinction—between Naipaul’s narrator’s position on co-optation and that of Lebrun that has everything and nothing to do with race. For him, a writer who approaches the representation of experience by formulating a theoretical position and then attempting to read the world around him in terms of that theoretical claim, is doing something quite different from a writer who works, as Naipaul does, empirically; that is, from a specific gesture, an observable trait, an emotional insight, *towards* a reading of his world. That is not to say that both writers do not start off with certain—perhaps identical—framing assumptions about the worlds they inhabit, or that both writers are not ultimately dependent on the power of the specific images their words evoke for credibility and rhetorical force. And, indeed, the two approaches to reading the world can be viewed as complementing each other. This is why at a certain level James remains Naipaul’s ideal reader. He can use his theoretically honed vision to excavate layers of meaning below the surface of Naipaul’s text that the creative writer can only indicate through anecdote and elision. As a theoretician, James is not bound by the limits of the world he can see or reproduce imaginatively. This freedom allows him to extrapolate layers of meaning from Naipaul’s work so that he can explain the process by which the writer constructs the world in a certain fashion. But the theoretician’s paradigms also can generate speculative universes, which operate according to the laws enumerated by his theories but which bear no relationship to reality as experienced by any human society. Divorced from their empirical grounding, such theories can abstract human experience to the point where they obscure rather than elucidate the truths they purport to apprehend. By manipulating logic and language, they can substitute concepts for each other that in the “real” world may have been diametrically opposed, thus achieving a theoretical or political resolution where a lived contradiction may remain.

Between Lebrun and Naipaul’s narrator, these disciplinary differences acquire additional nuances when race and culture become part of their concern. For Naipaul, racial attitudes and cultural perceptions have their origins in a plethora of factors affecting his characters, which his fictions can never pretend to exhaust. For his stories to work, he cannot merely summarize his

racial situation, as part of an Indo-Trinidadian minority in a culture shaped by the early confrontations and accommodations between Africans and Europeans, in the categorical terms I am using in this sentence. We can read his garrulous aunt as expressing a racist stereotype when she dismisses small islanders and their pitch-oil tins of ground provisions but, in the context of a fiction, she merely may be articulating her desire to escape the heat of her own coalpot, or repeating a catchy phrase she has picked up from her Creole neighbor, or invoking a barely remembered culinary taboo from her own forgotten cultural antecedents. Or maybe she is just a cantankerous old curmudgeon. There is, after all, something quite splendid about her theatrical dismissiveness that compels our attention as readers of fiction, the more so as the narrator tempts us to fantasize about how these qualities are subsumed into the facade of her later incarnation as a sedate, conventionally generous dowager living in Canada. The successful fiction must find a way to leave all of these possibilities open. It must move beyond literary cliché or theoretical paradigm even as it appropriates this one characteristic impression of the aunt to convey the multiple associations Naipaul imposes upon her words in the context of Lebrun's dinner party. And indeed, the writer of fiction is never quite in control of the how his readers will interpret his characters, as my earlier reading of this moment in conjunction with Lamming's novel as a hysterical failure of the narrator's voice demonstrates. Naipaul acknowledges this understanding of the disciplinary and stylistic boundaries that separate a writer like himself from a writer like James when his narrator says of Lebrun, "we both soon got to recognize—what I felt sure we always knew—that the relationship between us was forced. We shared a background and in all kinds of unspoken ways we could understand one another; but we were on different tracks" (121).

The problem of appropriation, of what from Naipaul's perspective it means to be read through someone else's intellectual assumptions, whether it be through the transplanted Creole norms of Caribbean immigrant culture or the intellectual paradigms of Lebrun's essay, is crucial to an understanding of what is at stake in Naipaul's reading of the meal of gefilte fish that he shares in Manhattan with Lebrun's powerful friends. Through the second meal, the narrator comes to realize that Lebrun, too, has been the victim of co-optation; that what Lebrun describes as the "political resolution" through which he comes to terms with the humiliations of his racial history is in part a form of spiritual capitulation to the meanings others have assigned to his body and his writing. During the Maida Vale meal, Lebrun recounts his humiliation at realizing that his great-uncle's stories of being treated like a guest in the kitchens of London Great Houses in the mid-nineteenth century were fantasies nurtured to deny the realities of colonialism and racism. The narrator uses this story to anchor his imaginative insights into Lebrun's inner life. Lebrun claims that he is only released from the shame he connects with his own participation in his great-uncle's self delusion when he can tell this story in public to others. But he also maintains that, "every black man has a memory like that. Every educated black man is eaten away quietly by a memory like that" (119). And, indeed, the narrator remains unconvinced that the shameful desire for approval, which fuels the great-uncle's fantasies of equality with white servants, is not still eating away at Lebrun. Thus, as Lebrun approaches senility, his compulsive

need to repeat his great-uncle's story marks the persistence of the trauma caused by this early childhood memory, just as the narrator remains unable to move beyond the range of his aunt's invective when confronted with small-island food.

Naipaul invites us to read the second meal of gefilte fish from the perspective of the shame surrounding this painful legacy of gratitude to one's oppressors which Lebrun's great-uncle bequeaths his nephew. At first, the narrator is horrified to realize that the sophisticated Manhattan intellectuals into whose company he has been admitted by virtue of Lebrun's introduction can see him only through the paradigms offered by Lebrun's article in the "thick" Russian magazine. All their vaunted knowledge of the islands has been siphoned off secondhand from their readings of Lebrun and other Left wing theoreticians. They seem to him to have no feeling for the nuances of cruelty, betrayal, indifference, and joy that separate and connect different regimes and racial groups within the region with which they claim solidarity. Where Lebrun offers the narrator coo-coo but is at least willing to overlook the fact that he cannot eat it, Lebrun's Manhattan friends appear to treat the narrator's refusal of their meal of gefilte fish as a kind of betrayal. Like the contrived global paradigms through which Caribbean societies often are read in metropolitan intellectual circles, the worked over, indeterminate mass of gefilte fish is offered to the narrator as a token of the automatic solidarity between oppressed Jewish and Caribbean peoples:

The idea of something pounded to paste, then spiced or oiled, worked on by fingers, brought to mind thoughts of hand lotions and other things. I became fearful of smelling it. I couldn't eat it. With the coo-coo or the foo-foo in the Maida Vale flat I had been able to hide what I did to the things on my plate. That couldn't be done here: everyone knew that the gefilte fish had been specially prepared for Lebrun's friend from London. (128)

Naipaul never names Lebrun's friends directly as left wing Jewish intellectuals, just as he never gets further than identifying Lebrun's woman friend as Polish or Czech. For his narrator, the ramifications of all their racial and ethnic histories remain opaque. He can see no organic link between the affluence and sophistication of his New York hosts and the social limitations of his Caribbean childhood, just as someone from the outside who did not know his aunt before she became a gracious Canadian lady would have had difficulty associating her with the shrieking harridan fanning a coal pot on the back steps of an overcrowded Port of Spain house. Or, as someone who had not read the novel's earlier descriptions of Leonard Side, the Trinidadian descendant of Lucknow's Shia Muslim dancing transvestites, whose long perfumed fingers iced cakes and laid out dead bodies at Parry's Corner, might miss the necrophilic associations Naipaul brings to the description of the way his narrator imagines gefilte fish is prepared. The narrator concedes in his story of Leonard Side that "we go back all of us to the very beginning; in our blood and bone and brain we carry the memories of thousands of beings" (11). But he sees that legacy as expressing only "a fragment of the truth" we understand about our racial inheritances. He distrusts his hosts' insistence that he equate their history of oppression with what they

imagine is his own; that coo-coo is somehow equivalent to gefilte fish and that the consumption of such meals confer on their eaters a badge of authenticity as representatives of the oppressed. For him, the distinctions in social status between himself and his hosts of which he remains most acutely aware have less to do with the coincidences of oppression within their respective histories than with the ease with which they now assume they can read him. They take it for granted that they can co-opt and categorize his experience, even as they prescribe how they expect him to read their own.

As he struggles with the social ostracism to which he imagines his refusal of the meal of gefilte fish exposes him, Naipaul's fictional double begins to reflect on the difficult line someone like Lebrun must constantly walk among such powerful patrons; the extent to which his global paradigms can be read as an attempt to protect himself from the appropriative power of his mentors, even as they seduce him into simplifying the stubborn contradictions of his specific history. He speculates that Lebrun's consummate rhetoric and his air of having transcended the legacies of slavery and racial oppression may in fact conceal a sense of incompleteness, a desire to be accepted, like that of his nineteenth century great-uncle, that betrays him into the false securities of unequal alliances.

Naipaul's speculations about the private motivations behind Lebrun's "political resolutions" produces one of the novel's most direct autobiographical statements and one of the few moments in the text when he seems to distance his narrator completely from Lebrun. The narrator is able to refuse the form of solidarity he imagines he has been offered over the meal of gefilte fish because he values his personal integrity as a writer above his hosts' approval. By contrast, Naipaul reads Lebrun's consent to the appropriation of his ideas by people, who neither acknowledge the moral ambiguities nor understand the personal humiliations out of which his political resolutions arise, as evidence of Lebrun's feelings of incompleteness:

Few of us are without the feeling that we are incomplete. But my feelings of incompleteness were not like Lebrun's. In the things I felt myself incomplete Lebrun was—as I thought—abundantly served: physical attractiveness, love, and sexual fulfillment. But there were other yearnings that no shedding of skin could have assuaged: my own earned security, a wish for my writing gift to last and grow, a dream of working at yet unknown books, accumulations of fruitful days, achievement. These yearnings could be assuaged only in the self I knew. (128)

There is a double subterfuge at work in this passage. In the first place, Naipaul structures his observation in such a way that Lebrun's gifts and insecurities are reduced to those that Naipaul's narrator can read through his own limitations. So, in a way, he is asking us to read Lebrun through his narrator's limited paradigms—in exactly the way he accuses the Manhattan crowd of reading his work exclusively through Lebrun's paradigms. And it is also difficult to avoid the impression that Naipaul is protesting too loudly. His distancing of his narrator from a particular reading of Lebrun's capitulation masks a defense of Naipaul *himself* from similar charges of

having “sold out” to the influential champions of his work within the literary mainstream. Naipaul uses the representation of his narrator as perversely difficult, as someone who refuses to make the kinds of compromises Lebrun has made and for whom the excellence and integrity of his work as a writer is paramount, to counteract the image of himself as the Third World writer who has made a fortune saying the derogatory things the First World wants to hear about his world. Thus, just as his writing seems most clear, most forthright, most free of elision, Naipaul conceals between the lines a passionate defense of himself from a criticism of his work that remains unformulated as such within his text.

Perhaps in the end this is the point of Naipaul’s estimate of James and himself through the character of Lebrun. For Naipaul, Lebrun is always most interesting when his facade of consummate urbanity cracks; when his naked sexual envy in relation to the writer Foster Morris flashes out, just as Naipaul’s narrator’s literary vanity is piqued by this same man; when his bitterness about a personal dilemma betrays him in Africa, as it has at times betrayed Naipaul in other settings, into vicious or reckless political pronouncements which others then proceed to take seriously; when the old hurt and humiliation associated with his great-uncle’s gratitude over being allowed to take tea with the servants in an English Great House betrays his pain at having to accept the way his ideas are co-opted by his powerful patrons—just as Naipaul’s have been. Through Lebrun, Naipaul sees men like himself and James as “men on the run.” Both writers have relinquished membership in the communities of their birth in order to pursue fame through their writing, thus gambling with the possibility of their co-optation by more powerful communities on a global stage. Both have claimed for themselves the license, as Naipaul notes of Lebrun, to critique anything and anybody wherever they find themselves but neither has stayed long enough anywhere to have had to live with the consequences of their pronouncements (160). The difference between them from Naipaul’s perspective is that his narrator claims to be aware of the dangers and limitations inherent in his way of reading the world, whereas a public figure like Lebrun, whose work has been politically appropriated by others, is constantly shielded from the consequences of the “real world” limitations of his vision by those who lionize him. Thus, while Naipaul’s narrator must constantly revise his reading of himself in the face of relentless criticism, Lebrun remains “oddly pure” (160) because the ideals of revolution and African redemption that he espouses have become fashionable “progressive” clichés whose inherent contradictions no one cares to expose.

Naipaul’s novel builds on the anecdotal. It incorporates into the character of Lebrun recognizable traits of C.L.R. James as well as observations Naipaul has made over time of other writers and colonial impresarios of James’s generation. Naipaul offers us little concrete evidence that James ever evinced the fears or responses the narrator imputes to Lebrun.⁹ But Naipaul’s autobiographical narrators have often evinced just such forms of personal angst. They know what it means, as the narrator says in his final estimate of Lebrun, to have one’s “intellectual growth ... at every stage ... accompanied by a growing rawness of sensibility,” to face the realization

that “[one’s] political resolutions, expressing the wish not to go mad, [have] been in the nature of spiritual struggles, occurring in the depth of [one’s] being” (160-1).

Through the ambiguous gesture of generosity and co-optation contained in this epitaph, Naipaul imputes to James, via his construction of the character of Lebrun, all the real and imagined fears of appropriation he has experienced as a writer. He challenges readers who have seen him and James as representing diametrically opposed strands in Caribbean intellectual thought to acknowledge the anguish and insecurity, even the petty viciousness, that must of necessity have lain behind James’s perfectly poised public persona. Without an understanding of this angst, Naipaul contends, we cannot fully appreciate either the greatness of a man like James or the limits of his vision. At the same time, Naipaul presents himself, through his narrator’s words, as having been able to refuse most of the accommodations someone like James in his opinion has had to accept. He claims he is able to do so, on account of the accidents of history that brought him into the literary world at a less brutal moment than James. These include the changes in the politics of racial patronage that separate a Caribbean intellectual impresario of the 1930s from a Caribbean Oxford graduate of the 1950s, as well as Naipaul’s understanding of himself as a creative writer rather than a political theoretician. Finally, Naipaul sees the double dispossessions of his Indo-Trinidadian racial heritage as making him less susceptible to the myths of racial affirmation that in his opinion have created the dissonance between the themes of global transcendence and cultural nationalism in James’s political pronouncements.

One of my colleagues a well-known literary reviewer, sent me a copy of his review of *A Way in the World* before I read the book, by way of acknowledging the help I had given him in identifying some of the autobiographical references in the novel. In his review, my colleague quoted the passage about coo-coo around which this essay is built as an example of everything he considered superfluous, even self indulgent, in the book. I had scarcely read more than a line of this excerpt when I was overcome by a memory that I had completely repressed. It was of my grandmother, who had visited us from Barbados when I was a child, bringing with her a biscuit tin, in which, wrapped in oily paper and held together by twine, lay a glistening mass of coo-coo.

Reading Naipaul’s description I registered as if for the first time how horrified and disgusted I had felt on seeing that glistening mound, in much the same way that Naipaul’s narrator feels. Not just because of its unfamiliar texture, but because somehow, at the age of six, I already had divined that this was “small island food;” something that Trinidadians like my family, who lived in the city and considered themselves cultured and urbane, didn’t really admit to eating. As I read on, all the ambivalence and confusion of that childhood moment returned. Those feelings persisted, even after I realized that the meal he was describing wasn’t actually what I thought of when I thought of coo-coo. Before I had read another sentence in the novel, I

thought I understood what Naipaul was trying to do with this description and why it was so crucial to the story he needed to tell about how he had made his way in the world.

Naipaul's language in that moment put me in touch with feelings I had not even allowed myself to think I had ever had. These were not feelings of nostalgia. They did not take me back to a childhood place that was wholesome, or affirming, or political or correct but, rather, to a place that I knew was emotionally true, whatever the interpretation I had given to that emotion in the interceding decades. I should add that I love coo-coo now and would probably have been wolfing it down in that Maida Vale flat with Lebrun and his partners, had I been there, and acting as if my relationship to the meal was somehow less complicated than that of Naipaul's narrator's.

Any gifted writer can make us feel good about ourselves. It is Naipaul's capacity to pick away at the scabs we all carry in our hearts, the insecurities and wounds and uncertainties and failures we all fear most when no one else is looking, that makes him truly great—that draws me back to his words year after year, decade after decade. Sometimes, I find beneath the scab a clean clear growth of new skin that is fresh and optimistic and filled with possibility. At other times I find only a pus filled abscess. But this is writing that always gets under my skin.

Notes

¹Several volumes of James's *Selected Works* were reissued in the 1980s and new editions of *The Black Jacobins* and *Beyond a Boundary* are also now widely available. The James Archive maintained in New York by Charles Murray has been partially indexed by Anna Grimshaw in *The C.L.R. James Archive: A Reader's Guide* (C.L.R. James Institute, 1991). Grimshaw also has edited James's love letters, *Special Delivery: The Letters of C.L.R. James to Constance Webb 1939-1984* (Blackwell, 1996). A collection of James's newspaper columns appeared in 1997, called *C.L.R. James on the Negro Question*, edited by Scott McLemee (Mississippi, 1997). The James Institute supports a C.L.R. James Society and publishes *The C.L.R. James Journal*. Other recent publications include Kent Worcester's *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography* (SUNY, 1996), several books of essays on James's legacy, including Paul Buhle's *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work* (Allison & Busby, 1986), and Grant Farred's anthology *Rethinking C.L.R. James* (Blackwell, 1995). Most of these anthologies refer, in passing or in detail, to the correspondence or interaction between Naipaul and James. Although I was unable to consult it in preparing this version of my essay, the original correspondence between James and Naipaul is now housed in the West Indian Special Collection at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine campus.

²See V.S. Naipaul's Foreword to *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories* by Seepersad Naipaul (9).

³Reprinted in *The Overcrowded Barracoon*.

⁴For examples of Naipaul as betrayer see Selwyn Cudjoe, *V.S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading* (UMass Press, 1988), especially his introduction, where he explicitly compares Naipaul's take on the Caribbean to that of James (pp. 33ff) and Rob Nixon's "London Calling: V.S. Naipaul and the License of Exile," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol. 87 #1 (Winter 1988). The best known of these attacks is probably Achebe's essay on *A Bend in the River*, "Viewpoint," *Times Literary Supplement* 1 February 1989: 71, 271, in which he dismisses the book without having read it, and Edward Said's critical remarks in "The Post-Colonial Intellectual: A Discussion with Conor Cruise O'Brien, Edward Said and John Lukacs," *Salmagundi* 70-71 (Spring-Summer 1986) pp. 65-81. O'Brien and Lukacs argued for Naipaul. Other examples of what Nixon calls "Naipaul worship" include Eugene Goodheart, "V.S. Naipaul's Mandarin Sensibility," in *Partisan Review* 50 (1983): 224-56, and Joseph Epstein's "A Cottage for Mr Naipaul" *New Criterion* (October 1987): 6-15.

⁵Although the meal Naipaul describes looks like coo-coo, the ingredients he ascribes to it seem more like those of a dish known as "rundown" in Jamaica, made with yams, eddoes, and green bananas in a coconut milk sauce. The small island equivalent is known in the Eastern Caribbean as "bluefood," or "oildown" usually made without coconut milk. Naipaul may not have been aware of the differences between these meals, or he may purposely have "smushed" them together. The sleight of hand allows him to draw on his aunt's memorable phrase, clearly a

reference to oildown, to produce that wonderfully gross description of the meal's contents, without sacrificing the many folk and literary references associated with coo-coo that I describe in the course of my reading of the meal.

⁶For an earlier version of Naipaul's response to the small island presence in Trinidad see the chapter on Trinidad in *The Middle Passage* (47 ff). His indignant response to a Trinidadian customs officer's callous treatment of "small island" children on the ship achieves greater resonance when we keep in mind that Indo-Trinidadian children were routinely treated in a similar fashion by other Trinidadians at the time.

⁷Ramabai Espinet's essay "Indian Cuisine," in *The Massachusetts Review* 35, 3-4 (Autumn-Winter, 1994): 563-573, provides independent corroboration of my hunch here that eating coo-coo has a special set of sexual connotations associated with Creole promiscuity among Indo-Trinidadians. Describing her own first attempts at making coo-coo in her Indo-Trinidadian home, she recounts the revulsion with which most of her family greeted it, as well as her mother's consternation when she realizes that her father is eating it with the practiced gusto of a long time connoisseur: "I heard the hiss in her voice, 'Yuh know bout coo-coo? Where yuh know bout coo-coo?' I was still doing home-work on the big table outside and listened attentively. I had heard a neighbour whispering to Muddie that Da-Da had a Creole woman and that it wasn't really the gambling job that took up so much time" (570).

⁸Most commentators concede that Williams' understanding of the class dimension of his economic study of the roots of abolition were a result of James's influence on him. Williams himself acknowledges that the idea for *Capitalism and Slavery* was an elaboration of the thesis about the economic motivations of "The Owners" put forward in Chapter II of James's *The Black Jacobins* (see Robert Hill, "In England: 1932-38" in Paul Buhle, *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work*, 79). The break between the two men occurred during the period 1958-1962 when James worked as editor of *The Nation*, the official organ of Williams's PNM party in Trinidad. The two men differed on the question of the party's willingness to compromise with the U.S. Government over the matter of ownership of the Chaguaramas Naval Base in Trinidad. Williams offers a summary of his version of their political falling out in his autobiography, *Inward Hunger* (267-8), but does not mention James's earlier influence on his intellectual development. For a summary of James's explanation of the split, see Kent Worcester's comments in *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography* (153 ff).

⁹Kent Worcester in *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography* takes exception to Naipaul's portrayal of James/Lebrun as an insecure intellectual:

... to the degree that Lebrun is intended to represent James, the idea that he actively repressed an underlying madness is completely at odds with all other portrayals of a proud and dignified rhetorician. A closer approximation of the truth would be to say that James—"in the depth of his being"—; had a pacific temperament, coated by a pride in

achievement and aptitude. *Pace* Naipaul, James was never a Stalinist hack, nor was he in “anguish.” James did not “become a child again ... looking only for peace” in his old age. Instead, he remained a sane old man, waiting to be liberated from a sick body, committed to basic socialist principles. (175)

But Naipaul’s point here is precisely that, as a writer of *fiction*, he needs to be able to imagine the inner life and tensions of such a man as James. Moreover, he remains persuaded that to the extent that James, like every other colonized West Indian, shares the humiliations of Naipaul’s own colonial socialization, there *must* be a level at which he remains traumatized by that experience. In fairness to both views it must be said that James, for all his charm and conviviality, remained for most people a distant person who seldom allowed others to see him “out of control.” So it is really anyone’s guess, Worcester’s as well as Naipaul’s, as to what really lay behind that carefully cultivated urbanity.

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