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V.S. Naipaul and the Interior Expeditions: “It is Impossible to Make a Step Without the Indians”

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"It is Impossible to Make a Step Without the Indians" is a phrase that William Hillhouse, surveyor and plantation owner in the Demerara region of colonial Guyana, used in his "Account of British Guiana" (Burnett 36).¹ Cited in his essay "It's Impossible to Make a Step without the Indians': Nineteenth-Century Geographical Exploration and the Amerindians of British Guiana," D. Graham Burnett describes Hillhouse's "Account" as a colonial handbook that never found a publisher (13). Burnett calls attention to the way that published accounts of expeditions of surveyors and explorers like Hillhouse and Richard Schomburgk "did a certain kind of colonial work, narrowly shaping the histories and characters of indigenous people to conform to the needs of the colony. Still closer examination of that writing provided dramatic evidence that this work involved minimizing Amerindian knowledge and power in an effort to reflect the superiority of the European and to validate the virtue of the colonial project" (33-34).

This essay explores some of the ways in which V.S. Naipaul shapes the histories and characters of indigenous peoples in Trinidad and Guyana in *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies-British, French and Dutch in the West Indies and South America* (1962), in *The Loss of El Dorado: a History* (1969), *A Way in the World* (1994) (subtitled a "novel" in the 1995 Vintage edition), *Reading and Writing: a Personal Account* (2000), and the Nobel Lecture "Two Worlds" (2001), with a view to assessing unresolved incongruities in his various representations. I argue that in respect to the way he shapes the history and character of indigenous peoples over a span of some thirty-nine years, Naipaul moves away from the traditional imperial models of cross-cultural exploration he identifies in the travel narratives of Aldous Huxley, D.H. Lawrence, and Evelyn Waugh, through a more rigorous imaginative inquiry into history, to something approaching what Wilson Harris might describe as "an art of compassion" ("Interior of the Novel" 140) that unravels the blocked formations of a colonial relationship.²

In a reversal of the historical chronology that this analytical approach might imply, I would like to begin by noting the elegiac tone with which Naipaul situates the original inhabitants of his native Chaguanas in his 2001 Nobel Lecture:

I was born in a small country town called Chaguanas, two or three miles inland from the Gulf of Paria. Chaguanas was a strange name, in spelling and pronunciation, and many of the Indian people—they were in the majority in the area—preferred to call it by the Indian caste name of Chauhan. I was 34 when I found out about the name of my birthplace. I was living in London, had been living in England for 16 years. I was writing my ninth book. This was a history of Trinidad, a human history, trying to re-create people and their stories. I used to go to the British Museum to read the Spanish documents about the region. (n.p.)

Naipaul recounts his shock on discovering a letter from King Philip IV of Spain dated 12 October 1625 to the Governor of Trinidad, perhaps Don Luís de Monsalves (1624-1631), instructing him to punish the Chaguanes for their intractability to Spanish rule and for conspiring with the English:

What the governor did I don't know. I could find no further reference to the Chaguanes in the documents in the Museum. ...What is true is that the little tribe of over a thousand—who would have been living on both sides of the Gulf of Paria—disappeared so completely that no one in the town of Chaguanas or Chauhan knew anything about them. And the thought came to me in the Museum that I was the first person since 1625 to whom that letter of the king of Spain had a real meaning. And that letter had been dug out of the archives only in 1896 or 1897. A disappearance, and then the silence of centuries. (Nobel Lecture n.p.)³

Naipaul pauses to lament the erasure of the Chaguanes from the annals of Trinidad's history and the consciousness of those who succeeded them in that landscape over time:

The people who had been dispossessed would have had their own kind of agriculture, their own calendar, their own codes, their own sacred sites. They would have understood the Orinoco-fed currents in the Gulf of Paria. Now all their skills and everything else about them had been obliterated. (Nobel Lecture n.p.)⁴

The absence of the Chaguanes from popular consciousness in Trinidad, and the compulsion to reiterate the fact of their erasure marks this discovery as an epiphany of sorts in the unraveling of the maze of deception within historical revelation and self-revelation.

In the previous year, Naipaul had published *Reading and Writing: A Personal Account* (2000) with the New York Review of Books. In the title essay, Naipaul expresses similar sentiments in a brief mention of the same sequence of events: time spent in the British Museum studying old documents, among them, a selection from the Spanish archives:

The records took me back almost to the discovery. They showed me the aboriginal peoples, masters of sea and river, busy about their own affairs, possessing all the skills they had needed in past centuries, but helpless before the newcomers, and ground down over the next two hundred years to nonentity, alcoholism, missionary reserves, and extinction. (*Reading* 32-33)

Naipaul writes on this occasion that his quest for local history in the British Museum, that is, a history of the former island colony, uncovered a framework for revisiting earlier judgments about indigenous peoples whom he nonetheless condemns to inescapable ruin in our time. Yet, he writes that he remains haunted, by “the thought of the vanished aborigines, on whose land and among whose spirits we all lived” (*Reading* 35), which suggests a recognition of mutuality or shared experience in lieu of the seemingly absolute Otherness that characterizes *The Middle Passage*:

This was more than a fact about aborigines. It to some extent altered my own past. I could no longer think of the *Ramlila* I had seen as a child as occurring at the

very beginning of things. I had imaginatively to make room for people of another kind on the *Ramlila* ground. Fiction by itself would not have taken me to this larger comprehension. (*Reading* 35-36)

Naipaul's assessment of the experience so many years after the actual event is interesting in that he makes a clear argument for the subversive value of historical/colonial records despite the partial truths and poverty of conception that characterizes them; they enable a revisualization of time and space and a consciousness of the relativity of the self's relationship to cultural environment, and myths of racial and ethnic origin. Altered concepts of place, space, and landscape reveal a hidden dimension in history that is self-revelatory and potentially transforming. In fact, the critique of his efforts in *The Middle Passage* (1962) long after the fact in *Reading and Writing*, suggests that his altered vision occasions a Wilson Harris-like "unraveling of self-deception within self-revelation" (Harris, "The Native Phenomenon" 148). In Naipaul's words, one result was "to have a new vision of what one had been born into and to have an intimation of a sequence of historical events going far back" (*Reading* 30). The experience Naipaul describes, though written with a clarity and purposefulness that differs sharply from Wilson Harris' characteristic style, constitutively resembles Harris's concept of "creative erosion," which links the discovery of "alternative realities," previously obscured in the void of colonial history, "to a new scale or illumination of the meaning of 'community'" ("The Phenomenal Legacy" 45- 46).

While an elegiac sense of loss pervades Naipaul's more recent references to the erasure of an aboriginal people in Trinidad, my purpose here is to connect the dots, so to speak, to question the interior journey over time that the written record implies; a journey that for my purposes begins with the publication of Naipaul's *The Middle Passage* some 50 years ago. If historical research and writing are an essential part of that journey, as Naipaul explains in *Reading and Writing*, travel and travel writing with its distinct expeditionary values, are also an essential component of this pilgrim's progress:

For all its faults, the book [*The Middle Passage*], like the fiction books that had gone before, was for me an extension of knowledge and feeling. It wouldn't have been possible for me to unlearn what I had learned. Fiction, the exploration of one's immediate circumstances, had taken me a lot of the way. Travel had taken me further. (30-31)

Naipaul's observation confirms a dynamic relationship among the different genres he employs in individual texts and over time as enabling different elements of learning and thus of personal growth. It is as though each has limitations from which he has to liberate himself. In respect to *The Middle Passage*, he writes much later in *Reading and Writing*:

I had trouble with the form. I didn't know how to travel for a book. I traveled as though I was on holiday, and then floundered, looking for the narrative. I had

trouble with the “I” of the travel writer; I thought that as traveler and narrator he was in unchallenged command and had to make big judgments. (*Reading* 30)

This trouble with the “I” of the travel writer is observable in the hierarchical judgments the narrator makes in *The Middle Passage* in respect to the Amerindians he encounters in Guyana. His first impulse is to distance and differentiate in the time-honored reductive colonial fashion: “This was my first sight of these people, known fearfully to Trinidadians as “wild Indians” and contemptuously referred to as “Bucks” by coastland Guianese” (*Middle Passage* 104). The alien space the Amerindians occupy within the state that is their native land is at first unsympathetically underscored in relation to Afro-Guyanese:

The exotics were not the Amerindians whom I was seeing in quantity for the first time, but the two Negro policemen in smart black uniforms and bush hats. And this, too, was a singular reversal of the roles, this policing of Amerindians by Negroes: in the days of slavery the Amerindians were employed to hunt down runaway slaves. And now these policemen spoke to me of the Amerindians as of some primitive, unpredictable people, who needed to be watched (*Middle Passage* 105).

Though the narrator in turn distances himself from the policemen suggesting the superior status of the traveler as observer-recorder and evaluator of cultural morays, the policemen’s judgment is reinforced when, on the next page, the narrator comments on savannah fires: “The fires are started by ranchers who wish to burn away the grass-choking sedge; and more indiscriminately, in defiance of the law, by Amerindians, who like to see the savannah burn;” and for good measure, he adds, “at times, I was told, whole mountains are on fire. After such a fire the savannah becomes truly lunar; a landscape in with curling copper leaves hang on gnarled, artificial-looking trees rising out of the black ground” (*Middle Passage* 106-107).

In *The Loss of El Dorado*, published seven years later, Naipaul offers a correction to this assessment of the Amerindians as mindless arsonists, when he recounts that they in fact once used fire in the savannahs very successfully as a weapon of attack: “Sudden fire on the brown grasslands encircled and consumed all the hundred and seventy men. Two years later the local Indians, exaggerating, told Raleigh they had killed three hundred” (*El Dorado* 39). This explanation is later repeated by an elder of the Amerindian community in Chapter 3 of *A Way in the World*. But in the earlier travel narrative *The Middle Passage*, the sense of latent Amerindian menace lingers in the narrative with unexamined observations such as, “Everyone knows that Amerindians hunted down runaway slaves; it was something I heard again and again, from white and black; and on the Rumpununi, and wherever one sees Amerindians, it is a chilling memory” (107). In the absence of any recognition that this hunting of runaway slaves was an arrangement managed by European settlers and administrators with specific tribal groups, the myth of the compulsive hunter of men and the bloodthirsty savage is uncritically reified, perhaps for the reader’s edification and certainly to assuage the narrator’s guilt at finding them repulsive.

Though Naipaul cites Michael Swan's *The Marches of El Dorado* (1958), and Swan's book was published with a range of references to his predecessors in expeditionary writing, including the works of Walter Roth so admired by Wilson Harris, this does not result in further investigation into the history and character of the Amerindians in Guyana at the time. He is distracted by the immediate reality of Amerindian/African hostilities, which in turn blinds him to the gap in his historical understanding. Similarly, he cites Richard Schomburgk not for the wealth of knowledge the latter had acquired about indigenous peoples, but rather to make a point about the Victoria lily, which Schomburgk got credit for "discovering" and made him famous.

In *The Middle Passage*, cross-cultural exploration is stymied by a lack of communication between the observer-narrator and the Amerindians whom he observes, a hypersensitivity to observed cultural differences, and the predictable sense of vulnerability, perhaps fear, that the narrator expresses: "I had tried hard to feel an interest in the Amerindians as a whole, but had failed. I couldn't read their faces; I couldn't understand their language, and could never gauge at what level communication was possible" (111). Recognizing the nature of the problem in part, the narrative deteriorates into a projection of a felt personal failure onto the Amerindians themselves in the deepening mask of their Otherness. He continues: "Among more complex peoples there are certain individuals who have the power to transmit to you their sense of defeat and purposelessness: emotional parasites who flourish by draining you of the vitality you preserve with difficulty. The Amerindians had this effect on me" (111).

I quote from *The Middle Passage* extensively as a way measuring the quality of change in Naipaul's recent empathetic engagement with the erasure of the Chaguanes from Trinidad and Tobago's history. From conventional representations of a childlike and doomed people, doomed because of their inability, not their refusal but their inability to change, Naipaul enshrines this moving, even sentimental account in the Nobel Lecture:

There was a vague story when I was a child—and to me now it is an unbearably affecting story—that at certain times aboriginal people came across in canoes from the mainland, walked through the forest in the south of the island, and at a certain spot picked some kind of fruit or made some kind of offering, and then went back across the Gulf of Paria to the sodden estuary of the Orinoco. The rite must have been of enormous importance to survive the upheavals of 400 years, and the extinction of the aborigines in Trinidad. Or perhaps—though Trinidad and Venezuela have a common flora—they had come only to pick a particular kind of fruit. I don't know. I can't remember anyone inquiring. And now the memory is all lost; and that sacred site, if it existed, has become common ground. (Nobel Lecture n.p.)

In this instance, the horizon of culture-contact is problematized in personal terms and in the context of colonial history. But Naipaul had already initiated this mantra in his Foreword to the 1973 Penguin edition of *The Loss of El Dorado: a History*. Situating himself as he has done so

often, by naming his birthplace, his race, and his colonial upbringing in Trinidad, Naipaul writes of his childhood in Chaguanas:

All this seemed so settled and complete it was hard to think of Chaguanas being otherwise. It was hard to feel any wonder at the fact that, more than four hundred years after Columbus, there were Indians in a part of the world he had called the Indies; and that the people he had called Indians had vanished. They had left no monuments; they were not missed. Chaguanas was a place-name, no more; many Indians turned it into "Chauhan," a Hindu caste-name. Wonder came later, with my own sense of being cut off from a past; and wonder grew during the writing of this book. One day in the British Museum ... (13).

This statement appended to the Penguin edition four years after the book was first published betrays lingering incongruities in Naipaul's narrative of the history and character of the Amerindians in *The Loss of El Dorado*. At the end of the first of the two narratives that comprise this history, a narrative that begins more or less in 1595 with Sir Walter Raleigh's raid on Trinidad and ends more or less with Raleigh's return to the Tower of London in 1617, Naipaul observes by way of conclusion that, "The Indians had changed. They had been dulled by defeat and disappointments, and there is no trace in their stupefied descendents today of that intelligence and quickness which attracted Raleigh and made them such feared enemies, masters of the waters" (*El Dorado* 107). Yet, this perfunctory and unexplained statement comes at end of a narrative shot through with admiration for the Amerindian people who struggled with mixed results to maintain some degree of independence in the face of a mushrooming European onslaught on their persons and their territory. Drawing largely on English and Spanish archives, in *The Loss of El Dorado* Naipaul's culls from these narratives a compelling portrait of Amerindian resistance and accommodation in their attempts to manage their collective fate. The Amerindians are anything but capricious and indolent and passive in character. In fact they are masters of the seas and rivers, with a geographical knowledge of their territory on which the Europeans were totally dependent (56). Alliances with Amerindian tribes meant the difference between survival and death, victory and defeat for the Europeans, who relied on them as guides and pilots and interpreters, and also for provisions without which they soon starved: "The Spaniards, even in extremity, never planted; they depended on the Indians for food. When the Indians withdrew, when no crops were planted, the Spaniards starved" (*The Loss of El Dorado* 74).

In fact, Naipaul describes the strategic withdrawal of the Indians from Spanish settlements as "the worst sort of Indian war, famine" (77); and there was also their growing proficiency with guns (85), not mention the poisonings which the Amerindians understood, when selectively administered, could disrupt the hierarchical structure of a Spanish settlement and leave it in disarray (78). As Burnett argues, though in respect to a later period, there was a direct link between the loyalty of Amerindians and territorial possession (Burnett 25). As Naipaul describes them, they are highly mobile and self-sufficient people in a fertile landscape that they

know intimately; they are skilled hunters, fishermen, and warriors and provided bread, fish, game, and determined the direction of expeditions across difficult terrain. Bartering with Amerindians for seeming trifles produced by the Europeans is a small part of the terms of cultural-contact, which left the Europeans dependent on the Amerindians and the latter sensitive to their need to understand the culture and disposition of the invaders, their languages and religion, and their warring with each other.

Perhaps, the most regressive uncreative element of *The Loss of El Dorado* is the way Naipaul sets the Caribs apart as a special order of savage largely because of a perceived inherent disposition to cannibalism. Naipaul recounts with vigor stories of Carib raids and cannibalism on terrified Amerindians and Europeans alike. In fairness to Naipaul, so-called "cannibalism" as a practice among groups of people designated as uncivilized and savage had not yet received the kind of critical and corrective examination subsequent to the publication of *The Loss of El Dorado*. Indeed, Wilson Harris would be among the first to revise and correct earlier determinations that the Caribs lusted for human blood. Still, there is really no excuse, even for a Naipaul seemingly interred alive among documents in the British Museum, to write with such uncritical relish and indifference to the incongruities evident in this account of one of Antonio de Berrio's expeditions:

They [Berrio and his men] ate the horses. They hollowed out four canoes from tree-trunks and dropped down the river until they came to Carib country. The Caribs ate men. Twice a year Carib fleets of up to thirty canoes went up the river, hunting; for three hundred and fifty leagues the river banks had been depopulated, eaten out. But the hunting party Berrio met was friendly. They offered food. They also offered to guide Berrio part of the way to El Dorado. (*El Dorado* 27)

Naipaul is aware that to be designated Carib/cannibal is to be outside the protection of the Spanish crown, to be a ready target for enslavement or extermination. He also writes about Carib alliances with the Dutch in the tobacco trade and trade in cloth, though when these alliances are with the Spanish they are identified as Indians. He writes of an Indian warning system to protect traders and their illegal trade. But still, he appears to relish the Europeans' strategic depiction of the Caribs as eaters of human flesh, as the bad Indians as opposed to the "good" Indians, whatever that distinction might mean in written reports detailing progress and failure to Spain, or England.

I want to turn to one chapter in *A Way in the World* in particular, as a way of demonstrating how Naipaul problematizes the horizon of culture-contact in this remarkable multi genre work that grapples directly with the problem of form Harris had addressed in "Tradition, the Writer and Society." In *A Way in the World: a Novel*, Naipaul employs elements of fiction, history, and autobiography in ironic counterpoint in part to demonstrate the dialectical relationship between his fiction and non-fiction that engenders what he has described as "a new vision of what one had been born into" (*Reading* 30). This structural arrangement also facilitates

self-parody and self-scrutiny as key elements of a creative rereading and critical rewriting of the earlier work analyzed here. In Chapter 3, *New Clothes: An Unwritten Story*, Naipaul plays with the idea of reversible fictions. He begins by revisiting his account of traveling into the interior of Guyana in *The Middle Passage* with something of an apology that acknowledges his inexperience as a writer and awe of his environment at the time. Then he carefully refashions the earlier account into a specific setting for his re-sensitized perspective. With profound irony Naipaul retells his earlier narrative experience as a fiction in which the narrator's journey up river into Amerindian territory in order to foment a rebellion of the indigenous people of the interior against the coastal inheritors of colonial power and authority (African and Indian and Portuguese), is also a psychic journey through self doubt and cynicism about the futility of his undertaking, the clutter of his metropolitan sense of superiority, to an overt empathy and identification with the Amerindian community, though admittedly after a casual homoerotic experience with one of his two young Amerindian guides. Anticipating the pain he will bring the community that hosts him, he admits his "love for these people, which contains the wish that no harm should come to them" (*A Way* 66):

It is pain rather than love which now suffuses the narrator's vision, and corrupts everything he sees. It is all like something he has already lost: the late afternoon light, the friendly women and children, the very blue smoke. And all the half-formulated doubts, mere impulses, of the last few days harden into a determination to turn his back on these people, to put them out of his mind. (*A Way* 66)

Whatever the narrator does finally, and the ending is left open, a new understanding of the Amerindian community he seeks to lead into rebellion is in place. His prior perception of their innocence and naiveté and vulnerability is altered. He observes:

And they, people without writing and books, depend completely on sight and memory; they have greater gifts that way. They will commit an infinity of details about him to memory: his voice, gait, gestures. He will exist in the minds of these people as he will exist nowhere else. And after he has gone away they will remember him as the man who stayed long and wasn't straight with them, who promised many things and then went away. (*A Way* 66-7)

The narrator is in fact at the threshold of a new understanding of what Harris has called the paradoxical "mutuality of cultures" (Harris, "The Quest for Form" 23). He will have evidence very shortly that the Amerindians do not live in a timeless void as he assumes. Indeed, they have a long memory of historical events and betrayals that date back at least to Walter Raleigh, one of his forerunners. Once he opens himself to them as an engaged listener, he sees them for the active, self-reflective, historically aware, and dynamic people that they are, who have a keen sense of the past and thus a context for evaluating his presence among them independently of the role he assumes—that they let him assume in their community.

This is but one example of several that I could draw from *A Way in the World* of an elaborate process of critical rereading and creative rewriting evident in this work. By stressing the chronology of its composition and the dialectical relationship over time between Naipaul's fiction and nonfiction, I have tried to detail what is in fact an organizing theme of *A Way in the World*, and that is, the evolution of this writer's consciousness from the thrall of colonial models of thought. It is about different ways of looking and seeing, about representations of reality and turning reality into fiction. The narrative strategy involves a discontinuity in discourse that is at once self-reflective and reconstructive. Think of this, if you will, as an outline of a particular trajectory of intellectual thought and history that informs Naipaul's work. I chose to focus on the changing shape of the history and character of indigenous people in his work because this trope is so exquisitely wrought in colonialist discourses of travel and expedition, and for this reason pivotal in unraveling the formations of colonial thought in our culture and society. Naipaul is making an important point about our cultural disposition when he writes in *The Loss of El Dorado*, with particular reference to Trinidad and coastal Guyana, "It is the absence of the Indians that distorts the time-scale in these parts of the Indies" (56).

Notes

¹Hilhouse is cited in D. Graham Burnett, “‘It’s Impossible to Make a Step without the Indians’: Nineteenth-Century Geographical Exploration and the Amerindians of British Guiana,” endnote 34. In 1834, the Royal Geographic Society of London published Hilhouse’s “Journal of a Voyage up the Massaroonny in 1831” (*Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, Vol. 4, 1834, pp. 25-40), and “Memoir on the Warow Land of British Guiana” (*Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, Vol. 4, 1834, pp. 321-333). In 1837, *RPGS* also published Hilhouse’s “Journal of an Expedition up the River Cuyuny, in British Guayana, in March, 1837” (*Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, Vol. 7, 1837, pp. 446-454). William Hilhouse, *Indian Notices, or Sketches of the Habits, Characters, Languages, Superstitions, and Climate of the Several Nations, with Remarks on their Capacity for Colonization, Present Government, and Suggestions for Future Improvement and Civilization, Etc. Also the Ichthyology of the Fresh Waters of the Interior*. (sl, [Georgetown]: Printed for the Author for Private Circulation) 132 pages 8vo, 1825 1st ed; (Georgetown: National Commission for Research Materials on Guyana, Edited by MN Menezes) xiii, 153 pages, 1978 facs ed.

²Cited in Russell McDougall, “Walter Roth, Wilson Harris and a Caribbean/Postcolonial Theory of Modernism,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 67.2 (Spring 1998): n.p. Accessed 2/8/07. http://www.utpjournals.com/product/utq/672/672_mcdougall.html

³The challenge that the enormity of these archives represents is in part the subject of Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s brilliant novel *the Sea of Lentils* (El mar de las lentejas) first published in Spanish in 1985.

⁴Naipaul continues: “They were a small tribe, and they were aboriginal. Such people—on the mainland, in what was called B.G., British Guiana—were known to us, and were a kind of joke. People who were loud and ill-behaved, were known, to all groups in Trinidad, I think, as warrahoons. I used to think it was a made-up word, made up to suggest wildness. It was only when I began to travel in Venezuela, in my 40s, that I understood that a word like that was the name of a rather large aboriginal tribe there” (Nobel Lecture n.p.)

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