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Creolization West One. Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*

Bill Schwarz

Queen Mary, University of London, b.schwarz@qmul.ac.uk

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Sam Selvon arrived in London from Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad, in 1950, with some published stories to his name and a sheaf of manuscripts in progress. He led a hand-to-mouth existence, writing when money allowed. In 1956, six years after his arrival, his novel -- *The Lonely Londoners* -- appeared.¹

The novel opens:

One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet, Moses Aloetta hop on a number 46 bus at the corner of Chepstow Road and Westbourne Grove to go to Waterloo to meet a fellar who was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train. (Selvon 23)²

This sentence conforms to a certain mode of realism, naturalism even, in which the presence of the city is precisely located: Chepstow Road, Westbourne Grove, Waterloo Station, the number 46 bus. On the other hand, paradoxically, this is a realism intent on communicating the “unrealness of London,” a phenomenon which produces a sensation “as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet.” The notion that London is in some sense “unreal” has a long pedigree to it, not least in the imagination of high modernism. Selvon has confirmed the degree to which Eliot was an influence, and the parallels between *The Waste Land* and *The Lonely Londoners* are there for all to see, not least in the shared invocation of an “unreal London” (Fabre 64). However Selvon’s conception of the interplay between the reality and unreality of the city is particular. It derived principally from the fact of his being a colonial migrant, part of the great Caribbean diaspora which transformed the life of metropolitan Britain in the postwar years. Selvon’s prose, I suggest, can be understood as a particular recasting of inherited realist tradition, inventing a new form of diasporic realism.

For Selvon’s generation of West Indians, to be colonized was to live a life at odds with reality, in which self and society never seemed to fit. In the words of Selvon’s contemporary from Trinidad, V.S. Naipaul, one was “removed from oneself” (“Regional Barriers”). To be colonized in the

¹ I borrow the title of my chapter from Selvon’s episodic, loose dramatization of *The Lonely Londoners* which appeared in print as Samuel Selvon, *Eldorado West One*, Peepal Tree Press, Leeds, 1988. Segments of this were first published in my “Diasporic realism” in Jerry White and Andrew Whitehead (eds), *London Fictions*, Five Leaves Press, Nottingham, 2013.

² Discussions of the fiction can be found in Clement H. Nyke, *Sam Selvon’s Dialectal Style and Fictional Strategy*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 1991; Mark Looker, *Atlantic Passages. History, community and language in the fiction of Sam Selvon*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 1996; and Roydon Salick, *The Novels of Sam Selvon. A critical survey*, Greenwood Press, Westport CT, 2001.

Caribbean – celebrating Christmas with images of snow or pastoral interludes with daffodils – was to live with a kind of permanent unreality, for reality always seemed to be elsewhere, in London or in the metropole as a whole. This was a situation deeply felt by Naipaul, in particular, who came to believe that the only avenue open to the colonized was to mimic self-destructively the lives of the colonial masters. The great renaissance of Caribbean letters which took off in the 1930s and in the decades which followed (and which includes Naipaul's fiction) generally offers a less bleak conclusion for it marked, and still marks, a collective enterprise which successfully sought to represent a specifically Caribbean world, in which – through a new casting of language – the realities of Caribbean life could be understood as just that: a reality, as much as any other. Derek Walcott recalls that when he started writing at the end of the 1940s it would have been regarded as a scandal to include the word “breadfruit” in a poem, for to do so would have transgressed the literary conventions stipulated by the colonial order (56). “Breadfruit,” an uncomplicated concrete noun, both offered a naturalistic description and at the same time signalled the political assertion that the lives of the colonized could claim equal value to those who ruled them.

However this is to tell only part of the story. To a great extent the renaissance in Caribbean literature took place outside the Caribbean: an entire generation of authors found themselves compelled to leave their homelands – and to leave as well societies which condemned them to experience their lives as “natives” – and to move to the metropolitan centres. In the 1950s the majority of those from the Anglophone islands travelled to Britain, producing an encounter – “colonization in reverse,” in Louise Bennett's words – of great complexity (179-180).³

Many who made the journey welcomed the prospect of abandoning the “unreality” of the colonial periphery for the putative “reality” of the metropolitan centre where modern life *happened*. Galahad, in *The Lonely Londoners*, is driven by the allure of the city. “Jesus Christ, when he say ‘Charing Cross,’ when he realise that it is he, Sir Galahad, who going there, near that place that everybody in the world know about ... he feel like a new man ... Galahad feel like a king living in London” (Selvon 84-85). In the novel Galahad condenses the hope that the unreal self of the colonial, the split self torn between a dark skin and a white mask, might be overcome and that the West Indians might yet become truly modern, agents of their own destinies. But at the very moment he feels this promise most intensely – “This is London, this is life oh Lord” – an everyday, banal racial encounter erupts, innocent enough to begin with, yet with the power to unhinge Galahad's sense of self (Selvon 87). Back in his room, in a moving soliloquy, he addresses his own blackness: “Colour, is you that causing all this you know ... Is not me, you know, is you!” (Selvon 88).

³ I have discussed this larger issue in “Crossing the seas” in Bill Schwarz (ed.), *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003.

Selvon, like all his generation of West Indians, knew England before he had ever arrived. He knew its language, literature and history, its sports and religions. He later recalled the

feeling for the English countryside and landscape which had possessed me from schoolday reading of the English poets. In the hot tropical atmosphere I dreamed of green fields and rolling downs, of purling streams and daffodils and tulips, thatched cottages and quiet pubs nestling in the valleys. And I wanted to see for myself the leafless trees covered with snow as depicted on Christmas postcards ... This was the country whose geography and history and literature I had been educated upon long before I knew that Port of Spain was the capital of Trinidad (“Finding” 58)

But the actual England he encountered as a migrant – what Selvon called “the actualities” -- had its own kind of “unrealness,” for it did not match at all the idealized expectations which had been incubated in the Caribbean. In shops, at work, in the street, he and a generation of West Indian migrants encountered not the abstract England of their school curriculum, nor an England derived from their reading of Dickens or Hardy, but an altogether more complex and less enchanted location, in which their role as “natives,” far from disappearing, took on new, hybrid forms: “the land did not deceive, as the people did” (“Finding” 59).

The magic of *The Lonely Londoners* works by presenting this specifically migrant view of London. It is the black West Indian, penniless and despised, who mutates into the authoritative anthropological investigator. It becomes the task of the novel’s narrator to explain to the reader the peculiar habits of the native Londoners. Indeed, the West Indians – “the boys” in Selvon’s argot – both as migrants and transients have a privileged perspective on the city, their mobility giving them an access to the entire city customarily denied to the domesticated native. “It have people living in London who don’t know what happening in the room next to them, far more the street, or how other people living” (Selvon 73).

Selvon’s perspective on London not only generates a rich ethnography, but it also enables him to explore the social relations which inhibit human contact and understanding, not only between black and white, but between the poor and the rich. “It have a kind of communal feeling with the Working Class and the spades, because when you poor things does level out, it don’t have much up and down” (Selvon 75).

Selvon has a sharp eye for the city’s dispossessed, white as well as black, creating vignettes which resonate in the memory as much as the monochrome photographs from the same period by Bill Brandt or Bert Hardy.

A lot of the men get kill in the war and leave widow behind, and it have bags of these old geezers who does be pottering about the Harrow Road like if they lost, a look in their eye as if the war happen unexpected and they still can't realise what happen to the old Brit'n. All over London you would see them, going shopping with a basket, or taking a dog for a walk in the park, where they will sit down on the bench in winter and summer. Or you might meet them hunch-up in a bus queue, or waiting to get the fish and chips hot. On Friday or Saturday night, they go in the pub and buy a big glass of mild and bitter, and sit down by a table near the fire and stay here coasting lime till the pub close.

Or he observes, too, the men who go singing – begging – through the smart streets of the capital.

now and then a window would open and somebody would throw down threepence or a tanner, and the old feller would have to watch it good else it roll in the road and get lost. Up in that fully furnished flat where the window open ... it must be have some woman that sleep late after a night at the Savoy or Dorchester, and that she was laying under the warm quilt on the Simmons mattress, and she hear the test singing ... Could be that she have a nice night and she is in a good mood, or could be, after the night's sleep, she thinking about life and the sound of that voice quavering in the cold outside touch the old heart. But if she have a thought at all, it never go further than to cause the window to open and the tanner to fall down. In fact when the woman throw the tanner from the window she didn't even look down: if a man was a mile away and he was controlling a loudspeaker in the street moving up and down, the tanner would have come the same way. Also, for the old test who singing, it ain't have no thought at all about where this tanner come from, or who throw it, man, woman or child, it ain't make no difference.

The narrator concludes:

When you come to think of it, everything in life like that ...
People in the world don't know how other people does affect their lives. (Selvon 75-76)

London, in this vision, operates as an inhospitable, atomized environment, where human actions are little more than mechanical reflexes. This is the picaresque London made familiar by Defoe's *Moll Flanders* – Moll

and Moses; Moses and Moll – in which good and bad fortune are entirely random, and where events exist beyond the control of the city's more hapless inhabitants.⁴ The endless search for food (“rations”) and shelter predominates. The bodies of white women and black men are bartered indiscriminately. Moses, that “veteran” of the city – “Mr London” – has seen it all before. “Take it easy,” he counsels Galahad, “London will do for you before long,” advice repeated later in the novel (Selvon 33, 39, 35, 85).

Time for Moses is broken only by the seasons. “From winter to winter, summer to summer, work after work. Sleep, eat, hustle pussy, work.” Reveries of Maracas Bay, “sleeping under a tree, with just the old sun for company,” remain no more than wishful dreams (Selvon 129-130). “Grim winter evenings” – a London composed of “stale porridge, wet blankets, inactive gas-rings and silent neighbours. It was always Sunday afternoon with the four o'clock night waiting leisurely, absurdly, outside the window” – induce a kind of perpetual despair.⁵

The Lonely Londoners presents a number of competing strategies which allow the various characters to survive as migrants and, in doing so, to establish a precarious hold on the city. A refrain which recurs throughout the story turns on the insistence that the old identities which the migrants brought with them, fashioned in Port of Spain or Kingston, can't operate, untransformed, in the new locale of the metropole. Cap, a Nigerian, ducks and weaves, the vast anonymity of London enabling him to disappear when those whom he has aggrieved – creditors, lovers – finally lose patience. “Yet day after day Cap still alive, defying all logic and reason and convention, living without working, smoking the best cigarettes, never without women” – inducing the narrator, simultaneously quizzical and resigned, to comment: “Sometimes you does have to start thinking all over again when you feel you have things down the right way” (Selvon 51, 61). Harris, Cap's contrary, is an early prototype of Naipaul's mimic man, obsessed with inhabiting respectability and English custom to the maximum. Galahad, as we've seen, is drawn to the bright lights, to the “big romance,” and more particularly to Piccadilly's Eros (“a magnet for him”): all of “the boys” devote considerable time and ingenuity to “hustling pussy,” as the narrator has it, or in a variation on the unexpurgated vernacular, “white pussy” (Selvon 84, 90). In this respect Galahad, although perhaps more assiduous than his fictional compatriot West Indians, is entirely representative.

Throughout the novel the pleasures of migration, and the pleasures of the city, are almost exclusively organized through the optic of male sexual desire. There are moments when Selvon makes it clear that the objectification

⁴ See particularly the short section entitled “From picaresque to criminal biography” in Michael McKeon's dazzling *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, Hutchinson Radius, London, 1988.

⁵ These words are from George Lamming's obituary of Roger Mais, republished in Richard Drayton and Andaiye (eds), *Conversations. George Lamming. Essays, addresses and interviews, 1953-1990*, Karia, London, 1992, p. 157.

of black male bodies is the cause of violent retribution: no such understanding occurs in his (or in that of “the boys”) parallel conceptualization of white women as “pussy” or “skins.” The deep sympathies of the novel lie with the male migrants, the lonely Londoners who against all odds make a life for themselves. As they do so, in Selvon’s terms, they undermine the larger social system which conspires to substitute a life governed by human reciprocity in which “how ... people does affect” others is recognized, known, and acted upon for one driven by a utilitarian imperative alone. Yet such a vision is compromised by the author’s relentless objectification of white women, barely Londoners at all in Selvon’s view of things, for it reveals the Caribbean men of his imagination to be complicit in the degradation of the city which otherwise, he suggests, they counter in their very beings.

This damages the novel, though there are also contrary moments and tensions in the narrative. Moses, not one to demur in his search for “pussy,” represents a wiser, more experienced and (it seems) older figure. He operates as an unofficial “welfare officer,” looking after the new arrivals, and searching out accommodation and jobs for them in appropriate neighbourhoods (Selvon 25). He inducts them into local ways: queuing for the bus, purchasing platform tickets at railway stations, having a shilling for the meter. He is a Labour voter and canvasser. He is conscious of the pains of separation that migration has inflicted on him: separation from his grandmother back home and, after some ten years in London, from “a girl friend who always writing him why he don’t come back” (Selvon 141).⁶ Never one to embrace nostalgia, or worse, sentimentality – “slackness,” in his eyes -- on returning to Waterloo Station, “a place where you see people crying goodbye and kissing welcome,” Moses nonetheless experiences it as “that sort of place where you have a soft feeling” (Selvon 25-6). On Sunday mornings “the boys” congregate at his place,

like if is confession, sitting down on the bed, on the floor, on the chairs, everybody asking what happening but nobody like they know what happening, laughing kiff-kiff at a joke, waiting to see who would start to smoke first, asking Moses if he have any thing to eat, the gas going low, why don’t you put another shilling in, who have shilling, anybody have change?

This communion is a precondition for their collective survival. In Moses’s words, “This is a lonely miserable city, if it was that we didn’t get together now and then to talk about things back home, we would suffer like hell” (Selvon 130). But at the same time Moses experiences this repeated ritual with frustration, the company of “the boys” bringing not only irreverence and laughter but a deadening claustrophobia:

⁶ The grandmother and girlfriend appear only on the penultimate page of the novel.

How many Sundays gone like that? It look to him as if life composed of Sunday morning get-togethers in the room: he must make a joke of it during the week and say: "You coming to church Sunday?" Lock up in that small room, with London and life on the outside, he used to lay there on the bed, thinking how to stop all this crap, how to put a spoke in a wheel, to make things different. Like how he tell Cap to get to hell one night, so he should do one Sunday morning when he can't bear it any more: Get to hell out, why the arse you telling me how they call you a darkie, you thin I am interested? (Selvon 140)

Moses identifies with "the boys," but as his story proceeds, he also draws away from them, a process anticipated from the opening pages in his reluctance to make the journey to Waterloo – in the dusk and fog, on the number 46 – to meet Henry Oliver, shortly to be re-christened by Moses, Sir Galahad.

Some two-thirds of the way through the novel, darkness and dampness having become repeated motifs, the tone momentarily shifts and in breathless, lyrical and seductive prose with no punctuation to impede its pace, Selvon celebrates the coming of summer in the city.

Oh what a time it is when summer comes to the city and all them girls throw away heavy winter coat and wearing light summer frocks so you could see the legs and shapes that was hiding away from the cold blasts and you could coast a lime in the park ... (Selvon 101)

The reader is drawn into this change of mood. A genuine eroticism seems to enter the tale, embracing not only the black migrants but the native English as well, dispatching the pervasive gloom of the earlier parts of the novel:

everywhere you turn the English people smiling isn't it a lovely day as if the sun burn away all the tightness and strain that was in their face for the winter and on a nice day every manjack and his brother going to the park with his girl and laying down on the green grass and making love (Selvon 101-102)

But even in this moment of ebullience darker themes intrude, the erotic release generating violence and disaffection.⁷ The narrator indicates that with the

⁷ Susheila Nasta, in her "Introduction" to the new Penguin edition of *The Lonely Londoners* (Penguin, London, 2008) argues that this passage represents "one of the most uplifting moments in the book," p. xx. I think, for the reasons I have suggested, it is more contradictory than that. In a strikingly different defence of Selvon, Ashley Dawson proposes the argument that he is deliberately employing "the boys" in order to develop a "critique of ... black male style and the cultural nationalism they embody," a generous reading but one based more on

arrival of summer “your” first impulse (an unspecified “you”: “the boys”? the reader? men in general?) is to barter with the prostitutes around Hyde Park Corner. One woman with whom Moses makes love nearly dies, or at least he believes that she is on the point of death; another is just coming off smack. Voyeurs cruise the park to observe the couplings between prostitutes and their clients. Black men are propositioned by whites to take part in a variety of sexual, or putatively more innocent, encounters for money. Prostitutes beat clients; clients beat prostitutes. Young black women – “fresh blood” in the narrator’s terms – join the ranks of those selling their bodies, “but as far as spades hitting spades it ain’t have nothing like that for a spade wouldn’t hit a spade when it have so much other talent on parade” (Selvon 106). White women get off by inciting West Indian men to play the primitive. Black men beat white lovers. Once darkness falls the entire city is propelled into an unresolved force-field of polymorphous sexual and racial energy, where the main currents of human intercourse reproduce the mechanics of everyday exploitation.

all sorts of fellars from all walks of life ... people wouldn’t believe you when you tell them the things that happen in the city ... lot of people in London who cork their ears and wouldn’t listen but if they get the chance they do the same things themselves everybody look like they frustrated in the big city the sex life gone wild ... all these things happen in the blazing summer under the trees in the park on the grass with daffodils and tulips in full bloom and a sky of blue oh it does really be beautiful then to hear the birds whistling and see the green leaves come back on the trees and in the night the world turn upside down and everyone hustling that is life that is London (Selvon 101-109)

It’s difficult to be sure of the degree to which the voices of the narrator and of the author are, or are not, conflated in these passages. The line separating indictment, on the one hand, and approval or acceptance (in the terms which Moses makes peculiarly his own: “So it go, boy”), on the other hand, seems constantly to be on the move (Selvon 27). Either way, these pages produce a disturbing accumulation of images. They testify, not simply to the predispositions of “the boys,” but to an entire, repressed domain of eroticism within the national landscape, conventionally concealed through the practices of English decorum. The heat of the city evening finally reveals a perverse national pathology: “sex life gone wild.”

wish than textual evidence: *Mongrel Nation. Diasporic culture and the making of postcolonial Britain*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2007, p. 36. She attributes the passage in question (pp. 101-110), wrongly in my view, to Moses.

Galahad revels in this erotic underworld: “oh lord Galahad say when the sweetness of summer get in him he say he would never leave the old Brit’n as long as he live” (Selvon 110). Moses, though, is more circumspect, and it is with his thoughts that the section closes. He “sigh a long sigh like a man who live life and see nothing at all in it and who frighten as the years go by wondering what it all about” (Selvon 111). The unrestrained erotic hedonism which summer brings appears to him essentially to be an illusion. Ultimately, the shift from winter to summer doesn’t possess the power to free him from the deeper structures of migrant time, notwithstanding, the hopes that spring brings with it.⁸ The seasons mark time’s passing, in a repetitious cycle; but Moses imagines himself, notwithstanding the movement all about him, to be in stasis. In the words of the narrator, “He used to see all his years in London pile up one on top of the other and he getting no place in a hurry, and the years going by, and he thought make him frighten sometimes” (Selvon 98). Or as Moses himself tells Galahad: “I just lay there on the bed thinking about my life, how after all these years I ain’t get no place at all, I still the same way, neither forward nor backward” (Selvon 129).

THE CREOLIZED CITY

And yet, and yet: the miracle which the novel affirms – and which we can still wonder at some half century later -- is that the West Indians, dispossessed and lonely though they are, *become Londoners*. In this sense, certainly at the beginning of the novel, Galahad’s agency works as the counter to Moses’s experience as well as to his weary passivity. But overall there is no great triumph in the manner in which this tale is related, nor is the reader pressed into accepting it as a heroic vindication of migrant life. The transformation of West Indians into Londoners happens unobtrusively, the sum of innumerable everyday decisions not one of which, in itself, is deemed – by the narrator, at least – to be remarkable.

Early on in the novel Selvon has his narrator comment on the ubiquity of Caribbean migrants in the capital: “this was a time, when any corner you turn, is ten to one you bound to bounce up a spade. In fact, the boys all over London, it ain’t have a place where you wouldn’t find them” (Selvon 24). As the migrant population increases, they leave their mark on the city. “The grocery it had at the bottom of the street was like a shop in the West Indies ... The test who had the grocery, from the time the spades start to settle in the district, he find out what sort of things they like to eat, and he stock up with a lot of things like blackeye peas and red beans and pepper sauce, and tinned breadfruit and ochro and smoke herring, and as long as the spades keep coming he don’t care, in fact is big encouragement, ‘Good morning sir,’ and

⁸ I derive the notion of “migrant time” from my reading of John Berger and Jean Mohr, *The Seventh Man*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975.

‘What can I do for you today, sir,’ and ‘Do come again.’ All over London have places like that now” (Selvon 77).

It’s significant that one of the agents in the transformation of London who in particular is named, is not as one might expect one of “the boys,” but aged Tanty Bessy, Tolroy’s aunt. When at the opening of the novel Tolroy had arrived at Waterloo to meet his mother he was aghast to discover that his entire extended family had made the journey to London, Tanty included. Tanty however turns out to be a resourceful figure, adapting her matriarchal authority to her new conditions. It is she who, through force of will alone, arranges for the local shopkeeper to adopt a system of credit on the Caribbean model. And it is the women – “the spade housewives” – who turn the shop into a “jam session,” with “Tanty in the lead.” “They getting on just as if they in the market-place back home” (Selvon 78). But this active reshaping of the city by migrant blacks, its creolization, can only occur as a dialogic practice: one in which there is an interaction between migrant and native Londoner, and in which each in part becomes the other. It requires an act of translation, the consequences of which ensure that neither will ever again be quite the same. It requires too, on the part of the new migrant, a willingness to embrace the city and to make some part of it their own. In the process, new contact-zones between migrant and native occur. Galahad’s hunger for the city is pronounced as perhaps, once, was Moses’s. Tanty’s determination to become a Londoner is more modulated, but it is just as powerful symbolically. She decides that she will make the journey by herself, on public transport – that great medium by which the city was known, and sometimes loved -- from the Harrow Road to Great Portland Street. Attired in “the old fireman coat that Tolroy did get for her ... and a piece of coloured cloth on her head” she navigates the transport system. She takes the tube from Westbourne Park, and returns on the 18B bus. Despite her fears each journey is accomplished without mishap. Relieved at arriving home, hers represents a modest victory: “Now nobody could tell she that she ain’t travel by bus and tube in London” (Selvon 81-83).

In such transactions London too is transformed, its creolization a permanent, continuing process. Selvon’s achievement in *The Lonely Londoners* was to write a novel which, in its very form, enacted creolization. How was this so? And how, fifty years on, can we appreciate its drama and audacity?

This may most easily be addressed by returning to Selvon’s contemporary, Naipaul, and to the question of the “unrealness” of London. For many years Naipaul has dwelt upon the depredations of the colonial nation in which he grew up. Trinidad represented one of those disorderly “half-made” societies which he has grown to despise, or which perhaps he always despised from the very start. Literature, he contends (he has in mind the great classics of nineteenth-century European realism) requires an ordered, complex social basis: without that, literature – proper literature – cannot thrive. These are observations which Naipaul has recounted obsessively throughout his life.

Mostly they are rehearsed with a fastidiousness which holds no appeal, although his memories of the startled boyhood realization that he could become a writer are moving. In Trinidad, he believed, “all literatures were foreign ... it seemed impossible that the life I knew in Trinidad could ever be turned into a book” (“Jasmine” 46-47). And as if to prove the point, he had in the person of his father Seepersad Naipaul, intimate knowledge of the tribulations involved in the attempt to embark upon such a quest, not only of becoming a writer, but of attempting too to put Trinidad on the page -- a story dramatized with compassion in V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961). Like many of his generation, including Selvon, Naipaul concluded that he would be best placed to write if he left the region and travelled to the metropole. His early novels and stories, all written in London, do indeed “write Trinidad,” or at least part of it, drawing from his memories of the decomposition of the traditional, rural Hindu nation: *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), *Miguel Street* (1959), culminating in *A House for Mr Biswas*.⁹ It’s not clear, within the terms of Naipaul’s own sociology of literature, what made this possible, for in his view Trinidad remained as “half-made” as ever. And as his readers were soon to discover he quickly arrived at the conviction that England -- far from representing the orderly, completed nation which he’d imagined it to be from afar – proved to be an outpost of civilization in which vulgarity reigned and disorderliness pressed in from every quarter. But although his capacity to represent Trinidad remains unexplained in his own peculiarly Naipaulian maxims, there are enough clues to know what was going on. Without being able to draw on either the order of Trinidad or the order of England, Naipaul retreated into a fantasized role of the metropolitan writer, whose resources came entirely from within the individual, cultivated self. Order of a sort, he reckoned, could be achieved through writing. As we know from their fictionalized personas, both Naipaul and Selvon were captivated by the fantasy of being at the centre of things.¹⁰ For Naipaul, this meant fashioning himself as a representative of a new kind of aesthetic clerisy, while for Selvon – with the image of Galahad never far away – it meant something altogether more profane, in which he took the disorderliness he encountered in both colony and metropole to be, not the antidote to writing, but its deepest creative force.¹¹ If Selvon can be

⁹ Written in Streatham, Naipaul liked the conceit that *Mr Biswas* was “very much a South London book”: qtd in John Thieme, *The Web of Tradition. The use of allusion in V.S. Naipaul’s fiction*, Dangaroo Press and Hansib Publications, Armidale, NSW and Hertford, 1987, p. 94.

¹⁰ See V.S. Naipaul, “Prologue to an autobiography” (1982) in his *Finding the Centre. Two narratives*, Penguin, London, 1985.

¹¹ When Naipaul reviewed Selvon’s *Turn Again Tiger* (1958) he alluded to this issue of a “disorderly” aesthetic, commenting on Selvon’s capacity to employ “the flimsiest of frames which can, without apparent disorder, contain unrelated episodes and characters” *New Statesman*, 6 December 1958, republished as “*Turn Again Tiger*” in Nasta, *Critical Perspectives*, p. 123.

imagined as a compound of Galahad and Moses, then in turn Naipaul is closest to the figure of Harris in *The Lonely Londoners*, a mimic man despite himself.

Even so, both also shared the idea that “to write” Trinidad, in its own terms and from the inside, provided a means to confront the putative unreality of the region. This, of course, was based on an inescapable paradox. Imaginative *fiction*, through the necessary medium of language, came to be understood as the means by which the reality of the Caribbean could be established. Both Naipaul and Selvon were aware of the paradoxical nature of what this new fictive voice involved, aware of the tantalizing interplay between stories and conceptions of reality. Both were persuaded by the fact that Caribbean lives would continue to remain “unreal” until they became representable in some version of a native literature.

Their respective long-term writing strategies, however, were very different.¹² At the very start of his career as a published writer, Naipaul expressed his anxiety about his role as a Caribbean writer. On the eve of the white riots in Notting Hill in 1958, in a contribution to the *Times Literary Supplement*, he rued the fact that his novels on Trinidad were not readily accepted within English literary culture; so long as he wrote about the Caribbean, he claimed, he could be regarded only as a “regional” writer, which in his terms was to be no writer at all. Naipaul was probably correct about the provincialism of English letters in this period. But rather than engaging with this provincialism, in the hope of revealing it for what it was, he determined to inhabit it and make it his own. Having arrived at this decision, however, he found himself in a fix. If he were to become properly worldly, and properly a writer, he would have to stop writing about the Caribbean. “The only way out,” he declared, “is to cease to be a regional writer.” His stance, at this point, was unequivocal. But he realized that he didn’t know England – its “actualities” -- from the inside: this was something he would

¹² But not always diametrically so, for in their writing careers there were moments of affinity as well as of divergence, especially in the 1950s. For a good discussion: John Thieme, “‘The world turned upside down’: Carnival patterns in *The Lonely Londoners*” in Martin Zehnder (ed.), *Something Rich and Strange. Selected essays on Sam Selvon*, Peepal Tree Press, Leeds, 2003. When after nearly twenty years Selvon picked up again the story of Moses Aloetta in *Moses Ascending* – Penguin, London, 2008 (1975) -- the resemblance between Moses and Mr Biswas was, playfully, intentional: p. 51. Indeed the novel can be read as *A House for Mr Aloetta*. It’s also the case that in this later fiction Selvon’s doubts about the racial exclusivity of Black Power echoed Naipaul’s more unrestrained denunciations: see Sam Selvon, “Three into one can’t go – East Indian, Trinidadian or West Indian?” (1978), *Wasafiri* 5, 1986. The final instalment of Moses’s story appeared as *Moses Migrating*, Longman, Harlow, 1983. How this trilogy – if that is what it is – should be read remains a matter of controversy. The distinguished critic, Kenneth Ramchand, in his “Introduction” to the 1983 Longman edition of *The Lonely Londoners*, suggests that it has only been “loose talk” which accounts for the three novels being categorized as a trilogy: the latter two, he believes, offer only “disengagement” and “cynicism or evasion,” p. 21. He subsequently elaborated this position in “Comedy as evasion in the later novels of Sam Selvon” (1988) in Zehnder, *Something Rich and Strange*. To my mind this underestimates the many ambiguities which run through *The Lonely Londoners*, particularly in its depiction of erotic life.

have to learn. Or more particularly, as he put it, he didn't know London. "And yet I like London. For all the reasons I have given it is the best place to write in. The problem for me is that it is not a place I can write about. Not as yet" ("Regional Barrier").¹³

Naipaul made this statement two years after the publication of *The Lonely Londoners*. His estimation of Selvon's qualities as a writer is difficult to pin down, as he was in the habit of making contrary judgments. On April, 21 1958, a few months before his article in the *TLS*, he was interviewed by Stuart Hall on the Third Programme, in a discussion on Caribbean writing, where – for a man not known for his generosity – he was notably positive about Selvon's work: "because Sam has written so authentically he has made it easier for the rest of us who want to make people talk the way they do. Sam was the first man, and I think we ought to give him credit for this, who made it possible" (qtd in Sandhu 142). It's also true, however, that he had inherited a tribal hostility to Selvon. Both Seepersad Naipaul and Selvon had worked together on the *Trinidad Guardian* as aspiring writers. Seepersad, though, came to suspect that Selvon had plagiarized him. "How much that man has mulched my ideas!" The young Vidia Naipaul repeatedly attempted to reassure his father that he was the better author; Selvon, Vidia wrote in a letter to Seepersad, "has no talent."¹⁴ These contrasting opinions may be framed as much by context as by anything else.¹⁵ But it would seem safe to conclude that once Naipaul had embarked on his mission to jettison his "regional" identity, however contradictory and uneven this was, there could be no place for Selvon.

Thus some years later, when Naipaul first came to write about London in *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), he produced a comedy of suburban manners in which the migrant location of the author was buried deep in the text. He portrayed a society overburdened by its past, but one none the less lacking in order and coherence. "Mr Stone," according to John McLeod, "is Naipaul's first English ruin" (McLeod 73).¹⁶ This can be taken as a largely

¹³ Or as he put this later: after seven years in England "I had a little of the social knowledge that was necessary for an understanding of English and European fiction," "Reading and writing. A personal account" (1999), *Literary Occasions*, p. 11. For a reading which brings together Selvon and Naipaul's later novel, *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), which does indeed represent Naipaul's determination to settle accounts with England, see Mark Stein, *Black British Literature. Novels of transformation*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 2004.

¹⁴ V.S. Naipaul, *Between Father and Son. Family Letters*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 2000: Seepersad to Vidia, 12 March 1952, p. 160; Vidia to Seepersad, 3 February 1953, p. 212. Unknown to both, while Vidia had been working for his exams in Port of Spain Selvon had embarked upon a secret romance with Kamla, Vidia's striking sister, a relationship which was rekindled in later life: Patrick French, *The World Is What It Is. The authorized biography of V.S. Naipaul*, Picador, London, 2008, pp. 57 and 189.

¹⁵ According to Austin Clarke, whose hostility to Naipaul was undisguised, Selvon would never be drawn on his own views, beyond repeating: "I does-do my thing, and Vidia does-do his thing. Is so, yuh know, boy": *A Passage Back Home. Personal reminiscences of Sam Selvon*, Exile Editions, Toronto, 1994, p. 26.

¹⁶ See too Sue Thomas, "V.S. Naipaul" in Schwarz, *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*.

experimental novel, allowing Naipaul to try out his “social knowledge” of England and to deploy a prose to match. The novel which followed, *The Mimic Men* (1967), was a good deal more complex. It is Naipaul’s first novel in which the presence of Conrad – the Conrad whom Naipaul was later to discover “had been everywhere before me” – is evident (“Conrad’s Darkness” 59). It plays on the shifting registers of “real” and “unreal” London and, most of all, it offers a more profound exploration of the imperatives of order and disorder in colonial and postcolonial history. But in neither case could it be claimed that the main protagonists function *as Londoners*. They are, more, spectators, conscious all the while of the distance between themselves and the city they inhabit. As Singh recounts:

I would play with famous names as I walked empty streets and stood on bridges. But the magic of names soon faded. Here was the river, here the bridge, there that famous building. My incantation of names remained unanswered. (*Mimic Men* 19)

Mr. Stone in *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* and Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men* each choose to repudiate the disorder of the city and its “unreal actualities” by fabricating a privatized, solipsistic order, free from contamination, but which works to remove them from the human energies of the urban world about them. In the same *TLS* article of 1958, Naipaul explained that “after eight years here I find I have, without effort, achieved the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment” (“Regional Barrier”). Naipaul was neither Mr. Stone nor Ralph Singh. But his determination to seek order exclusively in the mental world of the individual author cannot be disconnected from the trajectories of his two protagonists. London, as a consequence, seems strangely out of reach in these novels. It remains as abstract, as distant, as ever, the *mis-en-scène* against which the events of each novel are worked through but in the end untouched by all that occurs. Whatever the merits of these two novels they can’t be said to have turned *London* “into a book.”

Naipaul’s insistence that he would cease to be a “regional” writer represented an extraordinary gesture. How it worked, or what it would mean for it to have worked, remains a matter of controversy. However it has certainly proved powerful rhetorically. When Naipaul first returned to the Caribbean, having written *A House for Mr Biswas*, he travelled self-consciously as “a visitor” (“Reading and Writing” 16). By 1968 he had rejected the idea that he was part of a community of West Indian writers in London. “We don’t have anything in common, you see ... I used to read a lot of West Indian novels until 1956. [Until, that is, the year in which *The Lonely Londoners* appeared.] Since then I have stopped really. This is because they have stopped feeding me. It is really hard to read books that don’t feed me” (Naipaul and Rouse 10-11). Naipaul’s strategy represents one response to the predicament of finding oneself, in the epoch of decolonization, a diasporic figure.

It would be wrong, though, to position Selvon as the regional writer pitted against Naipaul the mimic-metropolitan, for the realities of diaspora stretch and modify unequivocal adherence to either centre or periphery alike. Selvon was alert to these complexities:

I have never thought of myself as an “exile” – that word returned to vogue as people shuffled around the world getting settled after the war. I carried my little island with me, and far from assimilating another culture or manner I delved deeper into an understanding of my roots and myself. Immigrating did that for me, and provided the nourishment I could not find in the island to foster my creativity. I feel I do more for myself and my country by being abroad than I would have had the opportunity to do if I had stayed. I am, in a sense, still visiting abroad. But “home” is where you start from. And should end from. (“Finding” 61)

Nor does it help to imagine Selvon down in the street, hustling with “the boys,” counterpoised to a contemplative Naipaul relegated to his Muswell Hill or Streatham bedsit. Much as Moses’s own increasingly reflective disposition draws him away from his peers, so Selvon appreciated the degree to which he “lived in two worlds”: that of the fictional Moses/Galahad and that of the aspiring writer (“Finding” 59). It is the case, however, that while Naipaul sought to redeem himself from disorder through his writing, Selvon, on the contrary, embraced the disorder of the city – social, ethnic, sexual, literary – and in the process created an appropriately “disorderly” aesthetic.

This was a matter mostly to do with language.¹⁷ It is clear from the passages quoted that the rhythms and velocity of the prose, as well as its humour, derive from a fabricated version of migrant (not just local or regional) West-Indian-talk. This is shared both by the majority of the characters and, crucially, by the narrator as well.¹⁸ Selvon had arrived in London in 1950. His first novel, *A Brighter Sun*, was published in 1952. A year later he was seriously ill with pulmonary tuberculosis. When he was released from hospital, he decided that he would seek his fortune as a full-time writer, and soon after he received a Guggenheim fellowship which took him to the United States. *An Island Is a World* appeared in 1955. Neither of these early novels was as inventive in its linguistic construction as *Lonely Londoners*.¹⁹ The idea

¹⁷ A fine discussion can be found in James Procter, *Dwelling Places. Postwar black British writing*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003, pp. 45-61.

¹⁸ Although as John Thieme reminds us in his ““The world turned upside down”” Selvon was not the first Caribbean writer to compose an entire novel in the vernacular idiom: Vic Reid’s *New Day*, published in 1949, had done this.

¹⁹ Though there is a clear anticipation in the latter: Samuel Selvon, *An Island Is a World*, Allan Wingate, London, pp. 186-7. Naipaul reviewed the novel on 1 May 1955 on the BBC radio programme, *Caribbean Voices*, a review notable for its barbed faint praise. In it Naipaul

for the latter came to him when he was in the US. This seems to me significant, both in social and aesthetic terms, although we know too little about the details of his stay there to be able to say much more. Back in London, ensconced in a friend's flat in Ladbroke Grove, he spent two months trying to tell the story of Moses in Standard English.

I made little headway until I experimented with the language as it is used by Caribbean people. I found a chord, it was like music, and I sat like a passenger in a bus and let the language do the writing. ("Finding" 60)

The image is appropriate – “like a passenger in a bus” – reminding us of Tanty's bid for freedom.

It is difficult to be certain of the degree to which the language of the novel was true to the voices which Selvon heard all about him amongst the Caribbean migrants and how much was invented.²⁰ We can be sure, though, that London provided the arena in which a new collective voice emerged. In Selvon's own view, from an August 30, 1957 interview on BBC Overseas Service entitled “‘English Goes Abroad’: English as Spoken in the West Indies”:

It is only now, in the migration of people from all these islands to Britain that the opportunity occurs to get together and hear one another talk ... And settling in this country has of course given much opportunity for the invention of new phrases or the novel usage of words. (qtd in Sandhu 146).

It is for this reason, in part, that Selvon, and his generation, believed that they first became *West Indian* in London.²¹ And the paradoxical achievement of *The Lonely Londoners* is that it gave this collective voice *form*, and in so doing – by putting black migrant London on the page – made it, for them and others, “real.”

Mobilizing this voice, and giving it form, was necessarily a dialogic process, in which there occurred a reciprocity between the West Indian migrants and the writer who represented them. As Jessica Huntley pointed out, *Lonely Londoners* was not only a migrant text but a text migrants read and exchanged amongst themselves. In her words the novel functioned like “a community newspaper,” institutionalizing a new vernacular (Huntley 56). In a

reflected on the syndrome which compelled West Indian authors to leave their homelands, leaving them disconnected from their deepest subject: “*Caribbean Voices*” reproduced in Nasta, *Critical Perspectives*.

²⁰ We can, though, hear something of the exuberance of this public voice on *London Is The Place For Me: Trinidadian calypso in London, 1950-1956*, Honest Jons Records, HJRCD2, 2002.

²¹ See, for example, Stuart Hall, “*The Windrush issue*. Postscript” *Soundings* 10, 1998, p. 190.

similar judgment, George Lamming believed that “[t]here can hardly be another writer who has contributed in this way to the vocabulary of West Indian conversation” (220).

This allows us to grasp something of the formal properties of Selvon’s novel. According to the great critic Mikhail Bakhtin the novel-form itself “is associated with the eternally living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought.” The novel, in Bakhtin’s terms, represents an unruly rendezvous of the “official” expectations of the nation and its popular, profane counterparts. Crucial to this conception of the popular is “popular laughter,” for it is laughter that “destroys the epic” (we need to think here of the resolutely anti-epic dispositions of both Moses and Galahad despite the irony of their names) and “demolishes fear and piety” (Bakhtin 20, 21, 23). As such this brings the people -- or in Selvon’s rendition, black West Indians -- into the imagined collectivity of the nation. Or more particularly, in the case of *The Lonely Londoners*, it enables them to transform themselves *into Londoners*. “One must take the word,” wrote Bakhtin, “and make it one’s own.” As he explains:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes easily and freely into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (294)

“Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents”: this is an active intervention in the linguistic-symbolic field. It was interventions along these lines, harnessing the vernacular voices of the Caribbean, which underwrote the renaissance of Caribbean writing from the 1930s onwards.²² And as Selvon demonstrated it was by such means that the disorder of the migrant metropole could find form: both overcoming the “unrealness” of London and, in the very same moment, creolizing it.

SOUNDS OF THE CITY

A year after *Lonely Londoners* appeared, Selvon published a collection of short stories, *Ways of Sunlight*, the first half of which was set in Trinidad, the second in London. The published collection does not make clear when each story was drafted or first found publication. The stories (“ballads”) of the second half echo many of the themes and situations of *The Lonely Londoners*. The final one takes for its title “My Girl and the City,” and is a wonderful tale.

²² I have argued this in relation to George Lamming in “C.L.R. James and George Lamming: the measure of historical time” *Small Axe* 14, 2003. The classic account remains Kamau Brathwaite, *The History of the Voice. The development of the nation-language in anglophone Caribbean poetry*, New Beacon Books, London and Port of Spain, 1984.

There is every reason to think it was written close to the period when Selvon was in Ladbroke Grove – or in all probability a little thereafter – drafting *The Lonely Londoners*.²³ It can best be read as a coda to the novel, expanding the field of vision which the novel itself provides.

“My Girl and the City” is not written in Selvon’s variant of the Caribbean nation-language; indeed there is little in it which would lead the reader to think it a migrant story at all.²⁴ It is very short and is mostly written in the first person, with some reported and direct speech, nearly all of it composed in simple prose. Yet it directly addresses the question of how London can be represented in words and – as a correlate to this question – what motivates a love for the city.

In the narrator’s imagination, love for the city and love for the girl each becomes superimposed on the other, and both take *form* through the practice of representation: through talking and writing.

My girl is very real. She hated the city, I don’t know why. It’s like that sometimes, a person doesn’t have to have a reason. A lot of people don’t like London that way, you ask them why and they shrug, and a shrug is sometimes a powerful reply to a question.

She shrugged when I asked her why, and when she asked me why I loved London I too shrugged. But after a minute I thought I would try to explain, because too a shrug is an easy way out of a lot of things. (“My Girl” 173)

The girl may be his muse, the medium by which he can grasp the words which will express his joy for the city. But if so she is a recalcitrant muse, for initially she takes no pleasure in the city, and her enthusiasm for the narrator himself is tempered at best. Only at the end, the narrator’s words having worked their spell on his girl, does her stance shift. “If I love you, why shouldn’t I tell you so?” he asks, to which he receives the oblique response,

²³ The reference in the story to the newspaper headline, “Suez Deadlock,” would make it unlikely that it was written before the crisis of the autumn of 1956: Sam Selvon, “My Girl and the City” in his *Ways of Sunlight*, Longman, Harlow, 2003, p. 172. It’s also clear, given what I say earlier about the US that, in his imagining of London, New York functions as an important counterpoint: p. 176.

²⁴ It is intriguing that Selvon, having discovered the power of writing in his West Indian vernacular, chose then to follow *Lonely Londoners* with linguistically more conventional novels: *Turn Again Tiger* (1958) and *I Hear Thunder* (1963). It wasn’t until *The Housing Lark* (1965) that he employed again the strategy of *Lonely Londoners*. He subsequently described – but didn’t explain – this trajectory, calling *Turn Again Tiger* and *I Hear Thunder* as “straight” novels, then claiming that he “lambasted” his readers “with another dialect novel, *The Housing Lark*,” reproduced in Sam Selvon, “A note on dialect” in Nasta, *Critical Perspectives*, p. 63

with which the story closes: “I love London,’ she said” (“My Girl” 176).²⁵ Yet she, the narrator explains, is “very real.” While their relationship may be understood as skewed, given her refusal to reciprocate his confession of love with an amorous declaration of her own, by association her expressed love for London serves to make the city – for him, for the narrator – real enough. But this climax, ambiguous though it is, occurs also because the words on the page, against the odds, have been written and London itself “turned into a story.”

Through most of this story the narrator and his girl, singly or together, are on the move, and Selvon marks the means of transport precisely. “We take the Northern Line to Belsize Park”; or “One morning I am coming into the city by the night bus 287 from Streatham.” Or, with greater reflection:

Once again I am on a green train returning to the heart from the suburbs, and I look out of window into windows of private lives flashed on my brain. Bread being sliced, a man taking off a jacket, and old woman knitting. And all these things I see – the curve of a woman’s arm, undressing, the blankets being tucked, and once a solitary figure staring at trains as I stared at windows. All the way into London Bridge – is falling down, is falling down, the wheels say: one must have a thought – where buildings and the shadows of them encroach on the railway tracks. Now the train crawls across the bridges, dark steel in the darkness: the thoughtful gloom of Waterloo; Charing Cross bridge, Thames reflecting lights, and the silhouettes of city buildings against the sky of the night. (“My Girl” 170-175)

They are still only when they are waiting for buses or tubes, or waiting – fidgeting impatiently – for each other. They cross the city on public transport and, whatever the weather, on foot. This is a restless vision of London, in which the city itself is in motion. As they are transported from one urban situation to another, they enter into an infinite cacophony, a soundscape which echoes in the inner life of the narrator. The “sounds of the city” infiltrate his consciousness – “mind the doors ... there is no substitute for wool” – and his own volubility comes to be indistinguishable from the ambient, discordant noise which assails the Londoner, rendering his own words “missionless.” Only able to get his words in “edgeways,” “a train would rumble and drown my words in thundering steel” (“My Girl” 169).

Words, too, are transported across the city and, indeed, in keeping with Selvon’s own conceptualization, authors are transported by their words. For

²⁵ And see too Selvon, *An Island Is a World*, which describes the Trinidadian, Foster, in the UK, and his relationship with Julia: “She was London to him ...,” p. 162. This practice of thinking the city through a feminine figure echoes C.L.R. James’s first responses to London nearly a quarter of a century earlier: *Letters from London. Seven essays*, Signal Books, Oxford, 2003 (1932).

the narrator words are to be spoken at speed and with urgency. The story itself “takes off,” from a contingent, random beginning, “as if this were an interrupted conversation” (“My Girl” 169). In a crowded bus, “I shot words over my shoulder, across seats ... My words bumped against people’s faces”:

All these things I say, I said, waving my hand in the air as if to catch the words floating about me and give them mission. I say them because I want you to know, I don’t every want to regret afterwards that I didn’t say enough, I would rather say too much. (“My Girl” 170-171)

The narrator’s girlfriend is recruited to his mission to give his spoken words meaning and form:

Once I told her and she said, as she was a stenographer, that she would come with me and we would ride the Inner Circle and I would just voice my thoughts and she would write them down, and that way we could make something of it. Once the train was crowded and she sat opposite to me and after a while I looked at her and she smiled and turned away ...

... We scattered words on the green summer grass, under trees, on dry leaves in a wood of quivering aspens, and sometimes it was as if I was struck speechless with too much to say, and held my tongue between thoughts frightened of utterance. (“My Girl” 175)²⁶

Here the city itself is composed, literally, of words. To be part of the city is to join its discordant, democratic conversation.²⁷ Words themselves are unruly, shooting off into different directions unwilling by their speaker. They collide with other words and other sounds in the city, creating strange new rhythms. Bakhtin talked of heteroglossia to catch the “overpopulation” of contrary meanings in language, the mingling of difference, and the way that words collide with other words and ricochet into new spaces. “Everything that happens is words,” claims the narrator, “But pure expression is nothing” (“My Girl” 176). The only way that words can work, it seems, is if they engage with the disorder of the city and operate, not “as they are” but “edgeways,” by “forcing” or beguiling the real world to submit to their own intentions.

“If landscapes do not start to be real until they have been interpreted by an artist,” Naipaul argues, “so, until they have been written about, societies

²⁶ An unlikely parallel can be found in Roland Barthes: “I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire” *A Lover’s Discourse: fragments*, Cape, London, 1979, p. 73.

²⁷ For a persuasive discussion of the democratic virtues of mis-communication, see John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into The Air: a history of the idea of communication*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999.

appear to be without shape or embarrassing” (qtd in Nixon 19). Selvon was not one to be “embarrassed” by the unreality of the societies he encountered, be it Trinidad or England, nor of their capacities for disorderliness. But he did strive to imagine societies which could be more real – more accommodating – for the dispossessed. *The Lonely Londoners*, especially, is testament to the power of the imagination – the power of the migrant imagination – to turn existing realities inside out. As the narrative proceeds, and Moses becomes more reflective, the reader can speculate that there occurs a growing convergence between the author and his principal protagonist, such that Moses emerges as the author of his own tale, undoing the “unrealness” of what has now become his own city.²⁸ By the end of the novel, standing on Chelsea Embankment, he looks down at the Thames concludes:

it had a greatness and a vastness in the way he was feeling tonight, like it was something solid after feeling everything else give way, and though he ain't getting no happiness out of the cogitations he still pondering, for is the first time that he ever find himself thinking like that.

Daniel was telling him how over in France all kinds of fellars writing books what turning out to be best-sellers. Taxi-drive, porter, road-sweeper – it didn't matter. One day you sweating in the factory and the next day all the newspapers have your name and photo, saying how you are a new literary giant.

He watch the tugboat on the Thames, wondering if he could ever write a book like that, what everybody would buy. (Selvon 142)

²⁸ In *Moses Ascending*, in which Moses embarks upon writing his memoirs, he makes it clear that he has already written the story of his early years in London – in, presumably, *The Lonely Londoners*: Selvon, *Moses Ascending*, p. 59. By 1991, when Selvon wrote a new introduction for the US edition of *Moses Migrating*, author and protagonist are conflated: “A special preface by Moses Aloetta Esq,” reproduced in Nasta and Rutherford, *Tiger's Triumph*.

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