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Dialogic Diaspora Formation and Colonial Critique: A Close Reading of the Train Scene in George Lamming's *The Emigrants*

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When, in “Journey to an Expectation”, George Lamming says that “most West Indians of [his] generation were born in England,” he refers to the process of diasporic identity formation that took place as West Indian migrants relocated to Britain following World War II (214). In Britain emigrants bonded as a community through oral culture, particularly “the kind of banter which goes between islander and islander,” discovering their commonalities and privileging them over individual island identities (215). Here I refer to this as dialogic diaspora formation and present a close reading of the train scene in Lamming’s *The Emigrants*, an illustration of this social phenomenon, transitional poem, and an astute literary critique of the hegemonic relationship between Britain and its Caribbean colonies. Characters in *The Emigrants* start diaspora building on-ship in the first half of the novel and their community formation is mirrored in the narrative technique that Lamming uses: a collective and ambiguous sense of narrator and narration, which, in his introduction to *In the Castle of My Skin*, he calls “the collective human substance” (xxxviii). “The Train” is a scene/poem of transition, positioned as it is between the two prose sections of the novel and between the emigrants’ arrival at the port and their lives in the city. In the scene/poem, the collective narration of the previous prose passages morphs into overlapping first-person voices as the emigrants speak with one another and others on the train. As they travel, they connect as a diasporic community over their recognition of British brands and over a disappointing tea service. Both the recognition and the disappointment reveal the depth of imperial cultural hegemony, allow the emigrants to bond by critiquing the concept of the “mother country” as a land of milk and honey, and display Lamming’s great wit and ability to critique the colonial experience.

In *The Emigrants* building diasporic identity and narrativizing experience facilitate questioning constructs of national belonging which simultaneously established colonial populations as British subjects *and* rejected them in Britain as foreign or alien. The irony, of course, is that colonial education made colonial populations expert in the symbols, history, literature, and culture of Britain. In the train scene, these symbols are, cleverly, the British-manufactured domestic articles emigrants used in the Caribbean. While British passengers question whether the emigrants belong in England and display ignorance of the Caribbean and its people, the emigrants discuss what lies ahead, mimic British language patterns, or relate the factories they see through the train windows to their colonial experiences of Britain—yet their remarks do not spare Britain from incisive critique.

The Emigrants is highly dialogic as it is invested in the characters’ speech and the discursive effects of that speech on community formation. I read the dialogic formation of the diaspora more along the lines of Michel Foucault’s and Edward Said’s ideas of discourses than as performative utterance in the manner of J.L. Austin. Like other abstract things, the diasporic community is formed

discursively and here it is through speech and dialogue. This practice becomes all the more valuable as a response to the discursive formation of emigrants as alien outsiders (the discourse of powerful immigration reformers in the postwar decades). I use the term “dialogic” primarily to refer to the dialogue in the novel and the dialogue of the community. For Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogical discourse, as a concept that acknowledges multiple languages (rhetorics, essentially), comes from a listening speaker and is influenced by social context. As we shall see, these ideas become even more complex in the appearance of the poetic form within a novel producing the dialogue of overlapping voices in a written form (or, for Bakhtin, the literary representation of speech as an image of language). Lamming presents oral, dialogic diaspora formation in writing in his fiction and essays where the former illustrates what the latter explains.

The narrative technique that Lamming uses to develop this theme is, as mentioned above, a collective and ambiguous sense of narrator and narration, which he describes as a

method of narration, where community, and not person, is the central character [and there is no] central individual consciousness where we focus attention, and through which we can be guided reliably by a logical succession of events. Instead, there are several centers of attention which work simultaneously and acquire their coherence from the collective character. (*Castle* xxxviii)

Elsewhere Lamming describes a benefit of community collectivity as a way of denying the personal hardship of being a West Indian confronting racism and social exclusion: “The easiest way to achieve this denial of a personal difficulty is to identify oneself with the general situation. You translate me into we and take refuge in it” (“Journey” 213). As one character in *The Emigrants* puts it, “It makes me feel that I r’ally belong to something bigger than myself. I’d feel now that whatever happen to you or you or you wus happening to me an’ the said way round” (77).

Characters in *The Emigrants* start diaspora building on ship in the first half of the novel. In the first section, titled “A Voyage,” characters share quarters in gender-segregated dormitories and form friendships. Some are unnamed (the Jamaican, the Trinidadian, the Barbadian), while others go by their last names (Collis, Dickson, Higgins), and others go by nicknames (the Governor, Strange Man, and Tornado).¹ At this point the novel follows only three women closely: Queenie, Lilian, and Ms. Bis (who does not go by her first name, Ursula, and later renames herself Una Solomon to avoid being recognized as the woman about whom

¹ The unnamed characters—those named for their countries of origin—may well be the same as the named characters. Such is the nature of the narration.

a popular and scandalous calypso was written). Some are students, Collis is a writer (and the character most commonly identified with Lamming himself), others are going for work, but they are all on their way toward what they hope will be “a better break” and as they get nearer to England they find that “the need for company became greater. It happened to all of them” (88). After they collectively read news reports about housing shortages their prospects feel bleaker and Tornado’s warnings about the poor hospitality of England toward West Indians sink in.

Once Higgins learns that the cooking school he planned to attend has shut its doors he is in the same situation as the others: going with no concrete plan other than to find “a better break.” The other men feel that “the fraternity had widened” because Higgins “was now a part of their bewilderment and there was nothing they could do but receive him. . . . They would stand together and fight together. The world was against them, and from this awareness they had taken a strength more terrible than the sun” (91). For the second time, they feel that “They were a group. *Those who had met and spoken* belonged to the same situation. It wasn’t Jamaica or Barbados or Trinidad. It was a situation that included all the islands. They were together” (77 emphasis added). The concept of being West Indian solidifies for the characters in moments like this. They shed their island rivalries and recognize something common to their shared identity. The sense of belonging to the situation, Lamming’s narrator says, happens for those who have spoken—the speech act, the narrativizing act then, is the catalyst for this diasporic bonding.

The effects of this technique are threefold: first, it is a mode of narration that allows an author to channel experience into his work²; second, it is the recipe for mediating experiences of racist oppression; and third, and most important to my view of *The Emigrants*, Lamming’s mode of narration echoes the means of diasporic community formation, much like the “old talk” of Selvon’s characters in *The Lonely Londoners*. For the emigrants, to identify as British (in citizenship and self-identity) is to *not* identify as immigrant. The nation-state—Britain—then interpellated emigrants as immigrant or alien, giving rise to one of the major themes in the Caribbean-British literary tradition: the destabilization of identity. Some of the ability to recognize regional kinship and form a diaspora originates in shared experiences and communal identification, as Lamming describes, but some of this also comes from the effect of interpellation from outside, from the British grouping West Indians under one title. For instance, in “Negotiating Caribbean Identities” Stuart Hall describes his own interpellation to becoming to an “immigrant” instead of the “kind of black Englishman” his mother raised him to be.³ While Hall was on

² For more on the relation between Lamming’s experiences and literary work see Margaret Paul Joseph’s *Caliban in Exile: The Outsider in Caribbean Fiction*.

³ By using Lamming’s essays and Hall’s scholarly work that include experiences of diaspora, I follow a postcolonial theoretical tradition of bringing experience to bear in analyses of society, culture, and politics. Notable examples of this are also found in the works of Frantz Fanon,

a return visit to Jamaica his parents told him that they hope the British “don’t take [him] to be one of those immigrants over there” and “having once been hailed or interpellated, [he] owned up at once...[and] that moment [he] migrated” (8). His experience demonstrates how the nation interpellates the diasporic nation within it as immigrant, creating a classification of people considered other or outside of the nation’s boundaries of automatic belonging. Hall emigrated in 1951 as a United Kingdom and Colonies citizen from Jamaica. It took over ten years and a comment from his parents for him to consider himself what the British would take to be “one of those immigrants.” By saying “in that moment I migrated” while being at “home,” Hall describes the complexity of identity formation by emphasizing that it is a process. He argues that “identity is not only a story, a narrative which we tell ourselves about ourselves” but that “Far from only coming from the still small point of truth inside us, identities actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognition which others give us. Without the others there is no self, there is no self-recognition” (8). As Benedict Anderson has argued, imagined communities form through their members’ ability to imagine their common bond and common story (11). The train scene, with its voices that overlap, build up, and interrupt one another in confusion and its characters learning through observation is a remarkable literary illustration of community formation.

While colonial identity is destabilized by the British view of West Indians in Britain as other or alien, there is also promise in the notion of a new, alternative diasporic identity, one that really was blooming with the growth of the West Indian diaspora in Britain. As Silvio Torres-Saillant has illustrated, one of the characteristics of “the socioaesthetic kinship exhibited by Caribbean texts” is the “culturally self-referential question of the meaning of West Indianness” (77). The further Lamming’s characters are from the West Indies, the more they employ dialogue to develop a sense of West Indianness. David Hart sees this as a quest, in Caribbean literature, for cultural agency. Specifically, Caribbean literature often dramatizes a crisis of life-changing proportions “in a variation on the theme of breaking through the ‘threshold’ of the imperial cultural hegemony and asserting a sense of Caribbean cultural agency” (2). Through their quest for a better break and the dialogic formation of their diasporic bonds, Lamming’s emigrants claim a sense of collective agency in the face of uncertainty. Those who are secure in their bonding are also more secure in their rejections of hegemony; those who separate themselves or remain on the community’s fringes are further marginalized by British oppression later in the novel.

Edouard Glissant, Amié Césaire, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Lamming’s essay is used here in this tradition of experience-in-thought rather than thought as detached or impersonal; when dealing with issues such as these, it *is* personal and these texts are representative of the intellectualization of experience.

Referring to this postwar “*Windrush* generation” of emigrants in a passage from “Journey to an Expectation” worth quoting at length, Lamming explains that:

It is [in interactions between West Indians] that one sees a discovery actually taking shape. No Barbadian, no Trinidadian, no St. Lucian, no islander from the West Indies sees himself as a West Indian until he encounters another islander in foreign territory. It was only when the Barbadian childhood corresponded with the Grenadian or the Guianese childhood [in conversation] in important details of folk-lore, that the wider identification was arrived at. In this sense, most West Indians of my generation were born in England. The category West Indian, formerly understood as a geographical term, now assumes cultural significance... the water which separates us can make no difference to the basic fact that we are West Indians; that we have a similar history behind us...So the discovery had taken place, partly due to the folk-lore and partly due to the singing, and especially to the kind of banter which goes between islander and islander. (214-5)

As we shall see below, Lamming’s narrative technique mirrors or parallels diasporic community formation with the use of overlapping voices, Caribbean vernacular, and Caribbean linguistic devices such as Signifyin(g), and his direct reference to “folk-lore,” jokes, storytelling, singing, and banter in *The Emigrants*—all oral traditions and speech acts put into writing.⁴

Anderson has shown the nation to be an imagined community as a product of legal, literary, religious, and journalistic discourses. The diasporic community within the nation functions similarly but with a significant difference: first by oral construct and then in print with the novels of the diaspora and other texts. British representations of Caribbean people, then, exist alongside Caribbean writers’ representations of the diaspora. Homi Bhabha has argued that “complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’...make them the immanent subjects and objects of a range of social and literary narratives,” thereby producing the nation *as* narration

⁴ For Henry Louis Gates and the scholars who follow him—such as Roger Abrahams, Geneva Smitherman—Signifyin(g) includes the employment of several speech patterns and oral traditions including metaphor; hyperbole; punning; joking; redirection; talking with great innuendo; cajoling, needling, and lying; talking around a subject; indirect argument or persuasion; implying; humor; rhythmic fluency and sound; and introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected among many, many others. Indeed, collective narration is used across the African diaspora in varied ways as in Toni Morrison’s use of collective voice or Zakes Mda’s use of the point-of-view of the “all-seeing eye of the village gossip.”

(“DissemiNation” 292). Similarly, the formation of a Caribbean diasporic identity, of the idea of being West Indian rather than British or from a specific territory, produces a diaspora *by* oral narratives. Instead of the public artifacts of written and mass-printed discourse (legal, literary, religious, and journalistic) forming the national imagined community, the dialogic, oral, intimate discourses of diasporic experience form the West Indian community that Lamming represents in writing. The manner in which Lamming handles orality, speech acts, and dialogue—how he handles the telling—directly correlates to the process of diasporic formation in the initial *Windrush* years of emigration and illustrates how the texts of this tradition are texts of the diaspora. Shared community identity makes a group of individuals who may never have previously left their islands of origin into a diaspora in the new island (England). Once in the new island they discover one another in an act of recognition between islanders encountering one another in another territory. Discovering their shared collective community identity allows the diaspora to form. For Sandra Pouchet Paquet, the emigration that makes diaspora possible “is not simply the result of economic necessity; it is part of the cultural mandate of colonization [because it] is a paradoxical journey to the ‘Mother Country’ and away from self and homeland” (30).⁵

Literature is fertile ground for asking questions of how a diaspora operates, represents itself, and is conceptually formed by that representation. In terms of the plotline of *The Emigrants*, Lamming’s train scene provides us with a moment that carries diasporic characters from the port of arrival to the city of residence and represents their collective identities and experiences. It is a moment, positioned as it is between the port and the city, that is situated between a looming national past—including the legacy of colonialism—and the future of diaspora building. The pages of the scene are laid out unlike others in the novel, in columns that project and recede from the margins—a form that mimics the process of migration itself.

Just prior to the train scene, Lamming’s collective has landed at Plymouth and must clear immigration and customs. As the men declare their “resources,” the state officials processing their entry are amazed that

Some of the men had just enough to pay the fare from Plymouth to Paddington. The officials asked what would happen after they reached Paddington, but no one answered with conviction...They were bewildered by the exhibition of adventure...For a while the movies seemed truer than they had vouched for, the story of men

⁵ Pouchet Paquet further shows that *The Emigrants* is a novel of “the alienation and disconnection of the individual who has lost touch with the historical and political forces that shape his society” (31). The diasporic formation ingrained in the novel also emphasizes that the estranged, depressed characters are those who are unable to maintain the diasporic bonds necessary to resistance and survival. These characters cannot take refuge in the “we.”

taking ship with their last resources and sailing into unknown lands in search of adventure and fortune and mystery. England had none of these things as far as they knew. [Then] the officials thought of the islands the passengers had come from, and the whole spectacle seemed more fantastic. These islands...that made up an archipelago of unutterable beauty had bred lunatics. How could sane men leave the sun and the sea where it was summer all the way, abandon the natural relaxation that might almost be a kind of permanent lethargy, to gamble their last coin on a voyage to England. England of all places...They could not understand what England meant to these men. (108)

They do not understand that for the emigrants “England was not only a place, but a heritage” (237). Evidently they are also unable to imagine what life might be like for these West Indian passengers, mostly men, who would have few options for work or further education in the West Indies. While there is an element of adventure for the emigrants, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes that they have made the journey in search of “a better break,” not mystery. Indeed, the sense of familiarity they feel toward Britain because of their cultural hegemony is a motivation for their journey and is abruptly and often desperately confronted by a sense that Britain as a “mother country” does not know its colonial “children.”

Of course the daily lives of these passengers had not been spent in idyllic relaxation as the officials imagine; the islands were only lethargic lands of Lotos-Eaters for those traveling on seemingly exotic holidays and forgetting the stresses of their own daily struggles. Of course the West Indian passengers would have known the pleasures of life in the tropics in their recreational time, just as the officials have their recreational pleasures in Britain. Because Britain is mundane and common to the officials, they cannot see the adventure that the passengers see in it, especially when the low temperatures on the day of arrival are contrasted with the Caribbean climate. Rather than realize that their experience of their island as familiar and mundane might be similar to the passengers’ experiences of their islands, the officials’ thoughts leap immediately to boyhood images of adventure. In this passage Lamming draws us remarkably to the Victorian obsession of adventure and exploration, a trope that may have done as much to further the Victorian imperial cause as the supposedly moral motivations of spreading Christianity and civilization. For the officials, the West Indian passengers are so many mad Kurtzes headed toward dreams of riches in the heart of England: London.

Lamming’s demonstrations of cultural hegemony in the train scene follow these Victorian values superbly. Anderson has argued that the meaning of nationalism relies on the construction and idea of antiquity for a narrative of nation

going as far back as possible (11). If we take this into account, in order for Britain to have been constructed as a “mother country” for West Indians, their lives and everyday experiences had to be discursively presented as an extension of the great British national project tied to a longstanding British heritage. This is the process of imperialism and it cannot begin to function without cultural hegemony replacing physical violence. As part of this replacement, colonial subjects experienced what advertising executives might call the “brand recognition” of Britishness: the brand recognition of British culture and the British products that were exported worldwide, often manufactured from raw materials originating in the colonies, and often marketed using national symbols. We cannot neglect that the export of British-manufactured products is one of many modes of cultural hegemony, as Anne McClintock has shown so superbly in her work on soap, advertising, race, and empire. The factories producing such products are important landscape features in the poem.

In “The Train,” what Bakhtin would consider to be the pseudo-objective authorial voice of the narrator, which has been destabilized by the collectivity of the narration, drops away leaving just the comments of the train’s passengers. Once the train journey to Paddington Station begins, the emigrants’ excitement rises in waves of overlapping conversation concerning what they are immediately experiencing, where they are heading, their plans, the advice of more seasoned emigrants who have experience living in England, and what they view out of the train windows punctuated by repeated requests that “PASSENGERS KEEP THEIR HEADS WITHIN THE TRAIN” that reflect the novelty of the train ride and of seeing England. The frequent repetition of the announcement in all uppercase letters suggests an already growing frustration of the mother country with the emigrants for whom the train ride is a novelty rather than every day.

As the emigrants travel through an industrial area, they spot the manufacturers of products they use in their daily domestic lives:

Look partner dat’s where they make the
blades, partner, all yuh shaving you say you
shave you do cause o’ that place. Look it,
ol’ man, they make yuh blades there.

Ponds, ol’ man, look Ponds. They make
cream there. All those women back home
depend on what happen in there. Look, Ponds Cream... (362-9)

These well-known British brands are articles of cultural hegemony. Some, such as the razor blades and face cream mentioned above, are used in very intimate domestic settings. The comment, “All those women back home / depend on what happen in there” to refer to the Ponds face cream factory really makes this explicit.

On the one hand, it's a gentle but sexist joke to think of "all those" women depending on their face cream and jokes are speech acts which bind us, as Lamming points out. On the other, this comment reinforces the foreign, imported product dependency of the colonial West Indies even into the most intimate parts of people's lives. Additionally, the phrase "back home" indicates the transitory nature of this moment: "home" is back there while London and the future are ahead. Even if London becomes home later, the duality of the diasporic experience allows for two homes or a dual sense of home. As articles used in the most intimate spaces of domesticity that are, in this scene, treated as commodity spectacles, these products place the empire firmly in the private space of the home. In *Imperial Leather* McClintock examines the role of products linked to the imperial mission by their manufacturers and advertisers in "the mass marketing of imperialism as a global system of signs" (61). Accompanying the products, she argues, is an ideology of British middle class status that was exported across the empire as a rank that colonials should endeavor to meet. The consumer spectacle of British products was not only about creating colonial dependencies on imported goods. The use of the products created a sense of hegemonic Britishness through this system of signs of Britishness and this took place in the home. As McClintock points out, "Domesticity denotes both a space...and a social relation to power" (34).

Also remarkable here in terms of the spectacle of commodities is the insistence on showing and looking with the repetition of the word "look" because the emigrants are recognizing that they share similar experiences with one another through their use of these products and are experiencing the continued discovery of the shared fact of being West Indians with similar histories, even if those shared histories are expressed as simply as being intimately familiar with the same merchandise. They acknowledge that they use the same personal items in their own personal domestic spaces. The comment "all yuh shaving you say you / shave you do cause o' that place" expresses familiarity between the speaker and the listener and indicates that the speaker is referring to previous conversations between them. Shaving may seem like a minor annoyance in life, but clearly some conversation about personal hygiene—an intimate topic—has previously taken place between the two travelers sharing this exchange. In the pages prior to this, but still in the train scene, the emigrants take to referring to one another as "ol'man" and in this moment add "partner," two terms that suggest the bond now cementing itself. Men and women who may have made the decision to emigrate alone are, by this point, situated in a sense of community.⁶

⁶ We could read the use of "ol' man" as some form of colonial mimicry of British speech patterns, but it is imperative to take into account the complex cultural hegemony that takes place at the level of language. This scene marks its first appearance and it is not sustained throughout the rest of the novel. It lends its speaker an air of authority, but the reader can take it ironically as many of these men are discussing things with which they are not entirely familiar.

Emphasizing the collective quality of this dialogue, there are no quotation marks and lines breaks do not always delineate a new speaker. The words rush together, punctuated only with commas and periods, stressing the excitement of the speakers. Even when questions are asked Lamming uses no question marks, turning questions into quasi-statements, as in this section:

They make life there. Life. What life partner.
Where you say they make what.
Life partner. Read it. Hermivita gives life.
You ain't see it.
In the same direction, look, they make
death there, ol' man. Look. Dissecticide kills
once and for all. Read partner. Look what
they make. (372-9)

This is a moment of skillful punning that allows a subtle critique of England to perform as a joke: a moment of Signifyin(g) upon England, to use Henry Louis Gates' term. The critique is made subtler and at the same time more poignant in its humor. The speaker's insistence that the listeners read the signs for themselves reinforces the need to authenticate the experience. The tragic joke here is that England is so strong as to have powers of life and death, but the more serious underlying commentary is that "in the same direction" the emigrants are heading toward the promise of good lives or the failure of an enterprise that could be the end of them.

"Hermivita" appears to be a product of Lamming's deft punning rather than a real product. Its name may be a combination of the name Hermes, the Greek messenger god and protector of travelers and poets, and *vita* for life in Latin. As a product it is probably kin to Bovril (beef concentrate) and Marmite (yeast extract), two products that have come, through marketing, to represent Britishness around the world, both marketed as health and strength boosters thereby linking Britishness with a certain robustness. Directly linking it to imperialism by its manufacturers, Bovril's Victorian-era advertisements capitalized on the imperial mission and it was often marketed as the stuff to keep explorers and adventurers healthy when they could not be sure of adequate nourishment. Likewise the name "Dissecticide" is a skillful pun. We may assume that it is an insecticide formulated to rid the home of six- and eight-legged pests, but in his characteristic brilliance Lamming gives us more. The word "dissect" in the name refers to cleaving something in two, "cutting it asunder," or displaying something in that manner for scrutiny and analysis ("dissect"). The product's name calls to mind this process of migration, the separation from home and the journey to a place that will offer no easy sense of belonging, and that will, in fact, reject the emigrants. There is a parallel, then,

between a product meant to rid your home of pests and the British attitudes we see elsewhere in the novel when the emigrants are excluded, harassed, told to get out of England and go back where they came from, as well as a parallel between the scrutiny of dissection and emigrants later having their communities and patterns of migration held up to governmental analysis and policing.⁷ A product for use in the personal domestic space of the home then metaphorically extends to the national level.

What follows this section is a more blunt questioning of the colonial reliance on British-made products:

They make everything here on this side.
 All England like this.
 Everything we get back home they make
 here, ol' man

 Why they doan' make these
 things themselves back home?
 We ain't got the buildings
 man, we
 ain't got them big buildings.
 Look,
 partner, look toothpaste. You
 not
 looking good. You doan' want
 to say you see dese things.
 Look
 good man. (380-423)

These lines begin with a statement made with a sense of wonder- “They make everything here on this side”—that is at once hyperbolic and expresses the novelty of seeing this industrial area and the manufacturers of “everything,” that is, familiar products. The line that follows it- “All England like this”—seems to come with the authority of a more seasoned emigrant, perhaps a person returning from a trip back to the West Indies but it, too, is hyperbolic and clearly not literal. Instead, it speaks to their impressions of this large, industrialized place. The comment that “Everything we get back home they make / here” speaks to that sense of colonial consumer dependency on the metropolis and is spoken with an authority that then comes under scrutiny in the question “Why they doan’ make these / things

⁷ See Kathleen Paul’s *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* and Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: the Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* in particular on this subject.

themselves back home?” The immediate answer that there aren’t the big buildings for this kind of manufacturing references the infrastructure of colonies that had for hundreds of years been dedicated to crops like cotton, tobacco, and sugar. The comment about not having the buildings is all the more poignant as it follows the comment of another emigrant who is struck by the number of buildings: “The buildings. Perhaps / there might be work in the buildings. Too / many buildings. Must be work” (395-7). The emigrants are already connecting large-scale manufacturing with their ability to secure work and wellbeing. The speaker chastises the listener for “not looking good” and asks “You doan’ want / to say you see dese things”—a question, despite the period instead of a question mark. Here the speaker is offering the listener the sort of authority that comes with experience and with seeing things for oneself. The comment expresses the excitement that the speaker is projecting onto the listener, an emotion that overrides any true sense of inquiry concerning why these products are not made in the West Indies as we see when the speaker brushes the question off to point out the toothpaste factory. Granted, some of this excitement stems from being in England, a place that many of them feel deep attachment to and cannot believe that they have reached, but the excitement particular to this industrial area and the brands manufactured there originates in their discovery of the sources of things so familiar to their daily lived experiences. In this scene every experience comes to the reader through its expression by the speakers. Because there is no third-person omniscient narrator, the scene has an immediate, urgent feeling. Its oral quality makes it a narrative of community identity. For Pouchet Paquet the emigrants’ “uninhibited response and cries of recognition reveal the thoroughness of the colonial process that supports [a structure in which the] emigrants have been educated to an appreciation of England as the industrial power that provides for all their needs” (34).

Emphasis on the value of *seeing* things marks this poem with lines like “Gawd bless my eyesight. Never / thought I would have see where those suspenders come from” and “Tell Edna you see wid your own / eyes where they mix up the lipstick / she use an’ she’ll say you tellin’ lies” or “you see that / yeast. They make yeast there...My Gawd, yeast” that show the excitement of spotting the familiar, intimate things of daily life (401-412). These lines also provide terrific commentary on the dependence of colonies on the metropole and the awe with which the emigrants have been hegemonically encouraged to regard Britain. Yet they are more remarkable for the humor in being bowled over by yeast or suspenders, particularly with the line break between “bless my eyesight” and what follows. The speaker who never thought he would see where his suspenders originate probably literally never thought about seeing the suspender factory and this makes the seriousness of his statement hyperbolic and dramatic.

The emigrants’ urgent need to see everything is juxtaposed against the attitudes of the Britons on the train. At the poem’s start an emigrant to observes one

man in particular who only stares ahead as the train ride continues and whose “eyes don’t wink when he / pull that pipe an’ he lookin’ only Gawd / knows where he looking like he ain’t got eyes / in his head...is the way they is in dis / country” (3-7). Later when the emigrants face questions from a British passenger who demands to know why they have come and whether there isn’t work for them “at home” one emigrant’s smart retort is that if the British man went there he would be made inspector of police, commanding so much power that it would take possession of him and he would no longer know himself. The speaker adds that “In the land of the blind... / ’Tis the other way round. In the land o’ / de one eye the blind is king. / You see, partner, if you can’t see, we’ll all / start thinkin’ that’s w’at we got eyes for, / not to see” (200-11). The comment critiques the relationship between the “mother country” and its colony, showing that the powerful do not have the edge but have convinced the powerless to follow them nonetheless. It speaks to the hegemonic practices of colonization as well as the colonial mimicry of the colonized. The emigrants are aware of the significance of arriving in a place they revere, and that generates this urgency to see things and report to those at home, like lipstick-loving Edna. One emigrant sums it up in this line: “I never thought ah would have set eyes on England” (133).

The hegemony of the colonial upbringing radiates through the poem as the emigrants spot the products of empire with which they are so intimately familiar, but they also perform this sense of familiarity in front of British passengers and one another by making comments like “There ain’t nothing in dis country ah don’t / know ’bout” (181-2). Tea is one such item and in the train scene someone, likely Lilian, is served tea and is flummoxed by being asked if she will take it “with or without.” She turns to Tornado because he is the experienced traveler among them:

Would you have a cup of tea? With or
without?
(What she mean with or without.)
Milk and sugar?
(What she mean milk an’ sugar.)
.....
Say Tornado what wrong wid dese people
at all? You doan’ mean to say people drink
tea when it ain’t got milk. They ain’t that
poor...dey ain’t so poor they can’t spare a
drop o’ milk in they tea, an’ what kin’ o’
talk is dis about with or without. Is it ol’
man that they doan’ like sugar. What wrong
wid dem at all. With or without. O Christ
Tornado, will take a long time ‘fore I forget

dat...with or without.

They have funny taste, partner. You
goin' get some surprises. You wait. (42-60)

This moment stresses the place of food and drink as national symbols wherein tea, as a quintessentially colonial product firmly entrenched in British life, becomes the vehicle for questioning Britain's power. First there is the shock of the new experience of being given the option of going without milk and sugar, two basic staples. Second, the speaker here is confronted with the collapse of learned ideals of Britain and comes up against evidence that some aspects of life in the West Indies are better than in Britain. This manifests itself particularly well in the question "What wrong / wid dem at all" (55-56). Proceeding from this is a subtle comparison between the richness of life in the West Indies where these basic staples are available and postwar Britain where they are heavily rationed. The surprise that the great country to which they have just migrated is "poor" disrupts the high expectations with which they have traveled to Britain. Third, the speaker swears that they will remember this moment because it defines one of their first encounters with Britain in an unexpected way. Tornado registers the first speaker's shock with a smug "You / goin' get some surprises" in a sentence that undercuts the history of British colonizers being shocked by the habits of those they encounter abroad and colonial familiarity with Britain in the same breath (59-60).

Significantly, these critiques are written in nation language. In *History of the Voice*, Kamau Brathwaite describes the phenomenon of Caribbean writers finding models for describing unfamiliar things, like snow, but lacking models for describing familiar things, like hurricanes. The dominant form that English has given us, Brathwaite explains, is the pentameter, which "carries with it a certain experience" (10). Therefore, Caribbean poets "have been trying to break out of the entire pentametric model...and move into a system which more closely and intimately approaches our own experience" (12). In order to make this move, Caribbean writers turn to nation language, which "ignores the pentameter" and is influenced by "the African aspect of our New World/ Caribbean heritage...in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, [and] is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be" (13). "The Train" uses nation language to directly describe a Caribbean experience of arrival in Britain and critique colonial experience at the same time. Importantly, there is a familiar/unfamiliar dichotomy at work as the emigrants are very familiar with British goods, culture, and landscape through the hegemonizing power of colonialism but most have never seen England. "The Train" is embedded in a novel in which Caribbean emigrants experience disillusionment with the "mother country" and it transitions the novel from scenes of cautiously optimistic, somewhat apprehensive travel to scenes portraying the difficulty of getting the "better break"

in London. Throughout the novel Lamming juxtaposes Caribbean nation language (much of it is not specific to any country, though one may discern individual accents periodically) with British English and produces a language that bonds the diaspora of its speakers, and in this particular scene the use of nation language also produces the sounds of the scene stripped of any narration. It is not only an aesthetic device: nation language has important political dimensions. As Edouard Glissant has argued, shaping our Caribbean aesthetic from our oral cultures “is a matter of ultimately reconciling the values of the culture of writing and the long repressed traditions of orality” (249). By emphasizing orality in his writing, Lamming illustrates the community-building potential of dialogue.

In this poem that breaks with the pentametric model, is written in nation language, and thereby reconciles the oral and the written, Lamming’s characters develop the agency Hart discusses. This agency facilitates their analysis of British life. For instance, when one of the poem’s speakers tastes their tea they are convinced that the woman serving it has lied: the woman “swear to my face she put as if she think ah / doan’ know what sugar taste like, me, / ...who been eating sugar before ah / drink tea” (21-24). Tornado then has to explain that “p’raps if you been lookin’ / when she servin’ you might ah see somethin’ in the spoon, but what it is you won’t taste, / not in yuh tea ’cause sugar ration in this / country” (30-34). Rather than accepting the word of the tea server, the speaker takes offense based on their experience of living in a place where sugar is available as one of the main exports, thus embracing their agency to criticize life in Britain.

Lamming develops another skillful pun on this milk and sugar moment several lines later. Lilian comments to Tornado that the “ground feel harder than back home” and asks “W’at dat mean”? (154-5). Tornado says is that it is “strange ground” to which her foot “got to get acclimatised,” and she answers by quoting Exodus 3:5: “Take off thy shoes from off thy feet / for the place thou standest is holy ground” (158-9). That Lilian quotes from Exodus is interesting given that the emigrants are in the process of their own exodus from the colony to the “mother country,” the importance of the Jewish diaspora to studies of diaspora in general, and the employment of the story of Israelite slaves in Egypt to speak of many forms of oppression worldwide, including the Atlantic slave trade. Yet following her consternation over the absence of milk and sugar, this takes on even more significance for in Exodus Chapter 3 God introduces the plan to bring his people to the land of milk and honey (in 3:8 and 3:17). Lamming’s irony is marvelously precise because this “holy ground”—Britain—is no land of milk and sugar. Instead of taking the Biblical quote seriously, Tornado brushes it off with “People doan’ go barefoot here...better tell yuh toes to make peace wid / yer boots” (160-2). Tornado has already experienced coming to Britain for the first time as an airman. His flippant response speaks not only to his having done this before, but also to his experience of not being impressed by it—he has learned that this is a difficult

country and is jaded. For Tornado to shrug off the special excitement of arrival is for the novel to subversively shrug off the special shine of the “mother country” by focusing on the practical rather than the symbolic. These lines make commentary on prioritizing survival in Britain over reverence for it, particularly as the comments about strange or holy ground call to mind the national hymn of England, “Jerusalem.” The hymn, written by William Blake and later set to music, opens “And did those feet in ancient time / Walk upon England’s mountains green” before going on to imagine the holy city on “England’s green & pleasant Land” (1-16).

Lamming does not limit the Signifyin(g) to the Bible and Blake, however. The emigrants later Signify upon Charles Kingsley’s 1857 poem “The Last Buccaneer” by replacing “OH England is a pleasant place for them that’s rich / and high, / But England is a cruel place for such poor folks / as I” (1-4) with “England’s a pleasant place / For those that are rich and free / But England ain’t no place / For guys that look like ye” (307-310). This improvised calypso finishes with a line from Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter’s 1933 song “Goodnight Irene”: “Good night Irene, Good night” and a calypso riff “Pam, pan, paddan pam pam” (311-312). The improvisation on Kingsley’s poem becomes a serious but tongue-in-cheek warning to the men treated as the first wave of West Indian emigrants.⁸ Calypso is, of course, well known for punning and Signifyin(g) on serious, socially conscious issues. For example, Lord Kitchener, a Trinidadian calypsonian whose work is mentioned in this scene, traveled to England on the *Empire Windrush* and many of his songs speak to both the difficulty of life in and reverence for England with characteristic humor. The speech acts of the train scene—calypso improvisation, Signifyin(g), joking, punning, explanation, admiration of the scenery, wonderment, and affected authority—confirm the bonds the men made on the ship and carry them forward to the city. In the train scene Lamming employs a number of the devices that Bakhtin has identified as evidence of novelistic form as an artistic arrangement of diverse social speech types and individual voices, including: emigrants voices overlapping with announcer’s voice ordering passengers to keep their heads in the train, the voices of British passengers and the voice of the tea server; the inclusion of calypso; exaggerated British slang like “ol’ man”; Biblical quotes; directives; punning and joking; national language, social dialect, and characteristic group behavior (262-263).

A major achievement of the scene is, of course, that the controlled form of the poem reads as spontaneous dialogue. For Glissant, “The book is the tool of forced poetics; orality is the instrument of natural poetics” (245). By fusing the two

⁸ While the *Windrush* generation is often cited as the first generation of West Indian or black emigrants to Britain, this generalization does not take into account the long history of Britain’s black residents—from African soldiers in the third century AD, to black slaves and their descendants, and on to black seamen, particularly in Liverpool. See *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* by Peter Fryer.

in a print poem celebrating orality at the heart of an anti-hegemonic novel about emigration, Lamming employs incisive critique and deft punning that celebrate “the collective human substance,” illustrate the phenomenon of dialogic diaspora formation, and analyze the colonial relationship between the “Mother Country” and Caribbean subjects.

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