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London is the Place for Me: On Cultural Hybridity in Sam Selvon's The Lonely Londoners

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LONDON IS THE PLACE FOR ME: ON CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN SAM SELVON'S *THE*  
*LONELY LONDONERS*

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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BY

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## ABSTRACT

LONDON IS THE PLACE FOR ME: ON CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN SAM SELVON'S *THE LONELY LONDONERS*

BY ZAIN ASLAM

“London Is The Place For Me” is the title of a calypso by Lord Kitchener, an ode written and recorded in 1948 shortly after his arrival to England by way of the *Empire Windrush*. It captures the spirit of an entire generation of newly arrived West Indians, who continue to transform British culture and identity into the present day. Sam Selvon’s 1956 fiction, *The Lonely Londoners*, is the quintessential novel of the Windrush Generation. He tells his narrative like a calypsonian to depict the everyday and existential struggles of working class Black Britons in midcentury London. This paper looks at Selvon’s masterpiece in three ways: as a calypso, as a work of West Indian literature, and as an experiment in language. Informed by Anglophone Caribbean literary criticism and the cultural theories of Stuart Hall, the thesis considers *The Lonely Londoners* as an exercise in cultural hybridity which consciously articulates the complications and problems of nationality and identity. With its notable use of language, lack of cohesive structure, Caribbean influences, and English concerns, Selvon challenges readers to locate the novel’s identity in what Hall defines as *différance*—the mode of analysis which emphasizes the evolving differences of cultural production over the satisfaction of a straightforward cultural product. Therefore, *The Lonely Londoners* reads like an uncommonly modern text because it continues to inspire novel interpretations of the postcolonial world.

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## CALYPSO

### 1. Introduction

To measure the value of a novel, it helps to begin with the nomenclature. The word itself claims something new, unusual, or at least interesting. To read a novel is to read something previously unimagined. This is one of the reasons why certain novels demand a gravitational pull. Due to their originality, they are buoys that mark turning points in the otherwise inordinate sea of history. When considered etymologically, the form is reflexive because it welcomes continuous scrutiny about its own definition and validity. Salman Rushdie asks, “How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made? How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is?”<sup>1</sup> Such inquiry moves the reader to search novels to uncover the complex legacies they can contain. Canonical novels endure because they fit neatly into either a literary tradition or a nation’s history. Meanwhile, genuinely innovative works of art defy these conventions to complicate notions of form, nationality, and identity. They combine a variety of perspectives, from the margins to the cultural center, to provide a hybridized vision of modernity.

When Allan Wingate published *The Lonely Londoners* by the self-taught Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon in 1956, the book offered plenty of novelty. Its seemingly modest concept consists of a series of stories about the arrival of Windrush era immigrants into the neighborhoods of Notting Hill and Bayswater. Conventionally, the novel is merely considered faithful reportage on the changing demographics in the English capital. However, *The Lonely Londoners* subverted British literature in four ways. First, for a book about London, there is a

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, (Random House, 2020), 6.

significant lack of white characters in the narrative. Selvon immediately challenges readers to rethink the metropolis, and who belongs there, with the title. J. Dillon Brown writes, “The very title communicates some of this ambiguous unease: naming the characters in the novel ‘Londoners’ is a strong claim for West Indians belonging in the British capital city, but the modifier ‘Lonely’ surely signals that a sense of community is missing.”<sup>2</sup> The Black characters of the novel rightfully belong in London, according to Selvon they are literally entitled to it, but there’s a critical lack of cohesiveness in 1950’s England that makes it easy for them to feel like they are accepted. Secondly, the diverse storylines of these characters, though comic, are mostly unsettling and unresolved. Third, upper and middle-class England, while present, are kept at a cold distance in the fringes. Then lastly, and most notably, the entire novel is written in an unusual, modified style that exists somewhere between the everyday speech of West Indian vernacular and a lyrical, standard English. While it may seem like it, this expression isn’t creole. For this language to be properly considered creole, it should be the first language of a creolized community or nation. Selvon’s prose, meanwhile, isn’t a representation of the mother tongue of his Caribbean characters, since it deliberately takes on the guise of modernist British literature. The best possible way to define his articulation is to label it as hybridized, because it is an experiment in complicating identity and language through the differences between multiple distinct cultures.

The reputation of the novel rests largely on this turn by Selvon, who originally began the draft in a familiar style—which he used in his earlier works like *A Brighter Sun* (1952) and *An*

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<sup>2</sup> J. Dillon Brown, “A Commoner Cosmopolitan: Sam Selvon’s Literary Forms,” in *Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel*, (University of Virginia Press, 2013), 124.

*Island is a World* (1955).<sup>3</sup> This new register ushered in a fresh perspective, especially since the hybridized language is used as a third-person, omniscient narrative voice. For instance, to start off the novel, the narrator says:

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.<sup>4</sup>

The reader is forced to recalibrate, as the voice seamlessly blends impressionistic lyricism and an intentionally rough speech. Especially when the narrator says, “... 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 ...” The creative personification of “a fog” mixed together with a broken phrase like “as if is not” provides an uncommon vision of London as “some strange place on another planet”—even if the cityscape like the fog, buses, and blurry lights are easily recognizable. Beforehand, nonstandard English was treated as dialect and was solely reserved for dialogue. By default, simply in his unorthodox use of language, Selvon challenges established authority. He frustrates the norms of comprehensibility and legibility. Readers are forced to reconsider both the narrator and the intended audience of *The Lonely Londoners*. Does the book only speak to West Indian immigrants? If so, then why would an author want to appeal to such a narrow demographic?

There’s a better question to ask, however: where does the narrator take the novel? Not just *The Lonely Londoners*, but the novel as a form. Where does this language take the reader? As a book about migration *The Lonely Londoners* functions like a work of translation. Selvon’s language allows the narrative to dig deeper into London, specifically the new consciousness of a

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<sup>3</sup> Susheila Nasta, “Introduction,” to *The Lonely Londoners*, (Penguin Books, 2006), vi.

<sup>4</sup> Sam Selvon, in *The Lonely Londoners*, (Penguin Books, 2006), 1.

metropole on the brink of transformation. Critics commonly refer to the novel as stream-of-consciousness, and this stream runs through an ensemble that includes Moses Aloetta, Sir Galahad, and friends. Their experience defamiliarizes London. Susheila Nasta writes (2006), “Mimicking the oral rhythms of a modified Caribbean vernacular, Selvon immediately takes us inside the worlds of his immigrant characters, creating an intimacy between storyteller and reader and distancing us from the bleak landscape of the alien city outside.”<sup>5</sup> In its hybrid form, the language is a bridge between the West Indies and England, which brings a new air to London in particular and English literature in general.

## 2. The Emergence of Calypso

The fresh rhythm of Selvon’s English injects an original cultural tradition into the genealogy of the novel as a form, which ends up informing the structure and tone of *The Lonely Londoners*. The style and movement of the narrative is shaped by calypso, the Trinidadian folk music known for its wit, melodrama, licentiousness, and satire.<sup>6</sup> The novel’s ambivalence towards typical plotting and its light-hearted approach to themes such as alienation, racism, and poverty read like the song of a calypsonian. This isn’t just an empty moniker, however, as the calypsonian holds various public responsibilities like providing social commentary and political critique, along with relaying the latest news to the collective community. Selvon carefully peppers *The Lonely Londoners* with references to the larger conversation in England at the time, which mostly revolved around the waves of Black people arriving into the nation. This commentary is handled by the protagonist Moses Aloetta. For instance, during the first scene of

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<sup>5</sup> Nasta, “Introduction,” vii.

<sup>6</sup> Nasta, “Introduction,” xiii

the novel, while awaiting Sir Galahad's arrival at Waterloo Station, he's accosted by a reporter. The reporter asks, "But tell me, sir, why are so many Jamaicans immigrating to England?" To this, Moses replies, "Ah ... that is a question to limit, that is what everybody trying to find out. They can't get work ... And furthermore, let me give you my view of the situation in this country. We can't get no place to live, and we only getting the worse jobs it have—" <sup>7</sup> In this straightforward response, Moses raises the two great themes of the narrative, which continue on to linger throughout the novel. Why are West Indians immigrating to England? And, despite their second-class condition, why do they stay? Both are, of course, too complex to answer—especially in the mid-1950's when there was little to no recorded precedent for working class Black migrants in England. The social function of Selvon as literature's resident calypsonian is that, despite the grave uncertainty that surrounds his subjects, he is clever and curious enough to seek meaning in oftentimes abject conditions.

Alongside aesthetics, the influence of calypso on *The Lonely Londoners* carries a deep historical and cultural relevance. The legacy of West Indian migration and popular music in the United Kingdom has long been joined at the hip, as evident in genres as diverse as ska, bluebeat, reggae, dub, dancehall, jungle, grime, and more.<sup>8</sup> Calypso, likewise, is twinned with the Windrush generation and was considered "the official soundtrack of black Britain" in the fifties and early sixties.<sup>9</sup> The troopship *SS Empire Windrush*, the vessel that gives the postwar Caribbean-British generation its name, docked in Tilbury in June 1948. Half of the boat's

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<sup>7</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Hall, "Calypso Kings," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, (Duke University Press, 2021), 286.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, "Calypso Kings," 286.

six-hundred passengers were West Indian World War II volunteers, and the other half was made up by anyone who could afford the £28 ticket. Amongst the latter were Lord Beginner and Lord Kitchener, two of the Caribbean's finest and most consequential calypsonians.<sup>10</sup> The arrival of the diaspora in England, as represented by Selvon, quite literally moved across the sea to the rhythm of calypso.

It's impossible to overstate the legacy of the Windrush generation. While it's not the beginning of Blackness in Britain, the *Empire Windrush* was certainly the cultural emergence of Black Britishness. This was primarily due to an enormous population boom. In 1931 there were approximately 7,000 West Indians in the United Kingdom. By 1951 this number more than doubled to 15,300. Then, by 1961 there were around 174,000 West Indians all over Britain.<sup>11</sup> This exponential growth was initially due to postwar rebuilding, when the United Kingdom was suffering from a labor shortage and needed to rehab its economy. The West Indies were the ideal resource for workers because they were already citizens of the empire. Consequently, the disproportionate number of these migrants were men.<sup>12</sup> The background of this mass movement, though, isn't just reliant on England's needs. West Indians typically migrated in the pre-war years to the Americas or other countries in the Caribbean. After immigration restrictions by the

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<sup>10</sup> Hall, "Calypso Kings," 286-7.

<sup>11</sup> Guuy Grannum, "African-Caribbean Genealogy," in *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History*, (Oxford University Press, 2008). <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.lapl.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532988.001.0001/acref-9780199532988-e-1999>.

<sup>12</sup> Lynne Macedo, "Empire Windrush," in *The Oxford Companion to Black British History*, (Oxford University Press, 2007). <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.lapl.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780192804396.001.0001/acref-9780192804396-e-135>.

United States and Canada, along with the welcome pipeline to England, the destination swerved.<sup>13</sup> Especially after the early fifties when hurricanes decimated the islands. The need for migration was mutual, and the West Indies and the United Kingdom were legally the same place. With this massive population shift, the future of Britain was bound to change drastically. Lynne Macedo writes, “Today the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* is viewed as a turning point in the recent history of Britain, and has come to symbolize the many ways in which Caribbean people have contributed to and transformed aspects of British life.”<sup>14</sup> The Windrush years welcomed a new generation of British professors, activists, solicitors, politicians, olympians, footballers, cricketers, actors, artists, musicians, and, of course, writers like Selvon.

One of the most notable members of this generation was the Jamaica-born Marxist cultural theorist Stuart Hall. He arrived in England in 1951 to attend Oxford and went on to have an influential life as an activist and academic. Familiarity with his writing is crucial to understanding the social and political complexities experienced by people of the Windrush generation, and all minorities in England, from the early fifties and onwards into the twenty-first century. His work is ideal to elucidate the impact of a writer like Sam Selvon. Not only does Hall understand the historical moment of the Windrush years by experience, but his criticism informs the magnitude of a cultural product like *The Lonely Londoners*. Hall has written a great amount on cultural hybridity and *différance*, and how they materialize in Caribbean and contemporary British society. Many of his essays can be keys to understanding the complexities of Selvon’s art. Particularly because both writers insist on complicating notions of identity to embrace cultural heterogeneity. Even if Hall wrote little on Selvon or Caribbean literature, his work serves as the

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<sup>13</sup> Grannum, “African-Caribbean Genealogy.”

<sup>14</sup> Macedo, “Empire Windrush.”

consummate proxy because he frequently covers subjects like diaspora, identity, London, Blackness, multiculturalism, migration, and Calypso.

As *The Lonely Londoners* and calypso are historically aligned, they conquer Britain with the same spirit. Hall writes (2002):

The calypso, a topical song associated with Carnival, specially composed for the occasion, was much influenced by this carnivalesque tradition—a period of licensed expression, when for a time, the normal rules of everyday life are suspended, the world is turned upside down, and the people of ‘the below’ are granted the freedom both to revel in public and to comment on and satirise the actions and behaviour of those in authority.<sup>15</sup>

Arguably, the conceit of the novel is to expand this Trinidadian folk tradition and stretch it out to the scope of a nineteenth-century realist novel. The vantage point of the narrative is decidedly askew, as it looks at the streets of London from the subaltern perspective. Each character in each story is an outsider, Black, and impoverished. Yet, they all exist in this carnivalesque text that’s consistent with Mikhail Bakhtin’s synonymous theory. London is destabilized and power structures are reversed. However, Selvon is unlike François Rabelais, whose bawdy works are central to Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque. Comic subversion by Rabelais’ relies on his characters’ grotesque bodily functions.<sup>16</sup> For Selvon, the body is analogous to the English language, and his grotesque hybridization of its form and structure allows *The Lonely Londoners* to satirize and undermine the imperial capital of the dying empire. It’s emblemized in a small moment during a fete late in the novel, the only time calypso is mentioned by name. Tanty, perhaps the strongest character in the book, cuts in on a dance with Harris, who is busy with a

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<sup>15</sup> Hall, “Calypso Kings,” 290.

<sup>16</sup> Ian Buchanan, "carnivalesque," In *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, (Oxford University Press, 2018). <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.lapl.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780198794790.001.0001/acref-9780198794790-e-104>.

white girl. She says, “Tell this girl to unlace you: you know what they playing? ‘Fan Me Saga Boy Fan Me’, and that is my favourite calypso. These English girls don’t know how to dance calypso, man.”<sup>17</sup> Selvon’s excellence as a calypsonian is on full display in this short but lyrical scene where music subverts expectation. Harris is in the middle of a negotiation to bed an English girl, following the clichéd perception of Black men desiring white women. Tanty has other ideas, because she inserts herself between the two to sever the sexualized exchange and embrace the calypso, this novel expression for this new London, delivered straight from Trinidad. The English, and this can mean language, is replaced unexpectedly with something that’s appropriate to the transformed rhythm of the city. Hall explains (2002), “The essence of the successful calypso lies in capturing the event or occasion in a vivid, piquant, creole idiom.”<sup>18</sup> Selvon combines creole with standard English to complicate and defer the arbitrary assumptions of race, nation, and ethnicity. In *The Lonely Londoners*, all three are hybridized and reinvented with an undeniably modern lens.

### 3. Translating Calypso

Selvon’s calypsonian and creolized defamiliarization of English and England’s metropole functions as a work of translation to acquaint readers with the novel condition of the nascent postcolonial world. As a migrant, Selvon takes on translation as a necessary responsibility. Rushdie famously fused migration with translation in his 1982 essay “Imaginary Homelands.” He writes, “The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’.” Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that

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<sup>17</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 110.

<sup>18</sup> Hall, “Calypso Kings,” 290.

something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.”<sup>19</sup> With Selvon, London and the rest of Britain experience loss and gain. The narrative of empire loses the polish and fiction it has thrived on for centuries, and then gains the unwelcome perspective of the voices and experiences England has suppressed over the very same timeline. This dissonance of what’s lost and what’s found, what’s there and what’s not there, is a common problem of reality that writers of color have to grapple with and enforce. Rushdie explains, “The black American writer Richard Wright once wrote that black and white Americans were engaged in war over the nature of reality. Their descriptions were incompatible. So it is clear that redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it.”<sup>20</sup> When there is such a vast disconnect that shared experience is a matter of conflict, novels and novelists offer a mediative space for restoring the cultural consciousness. Rushdie illuminates the many virtues of the migrant, translated, author. Being from elsewhere, with an incongruous experience of past and present, makes these writers better equipped to comment on subjects of universal appeal. Rushdie uses the term “stereoscopic” to define the translated men’s preternatural ability to perceive and offer “whole sight.”<sup>21</sup> He expands, “And those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps had modernism forced upon us.”<sup>22</sup> Modernity, hybridity, and complexity are not solutions

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<sup>19</sup> Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, (Granta Books, 1992), 17.

<sup>20</sup> Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” 19.

<sup>22</sup> Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” 12.

migrant writers bring forth to readers. Rather, “translated men” have the foresight to present these ideas as raw material from a not-too-distant future.

Translation parallels *The Lonely Londoners*’ central theme of migration, as it reflects how languages, people, and cultures transform when they move from one place to another—and how these places transform when languages, people, and cultures arrive from elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> Although this transformation is felt by every character in the novel, it is most relevant in the experiences of the newly arrived King Galahad. Especially in his dynamic with Moses, as together they represent the innocence and experience of the Windrush generation. While the central force of the narrative emphasizes King Galahad’s reliance on Moses to acclimate to London, it’s important to note that Moses finds in King Galahad a fresh and intimate connection back home to Trinidad. Their exchange on Galahad’s first night together speaks volumes:

‘Tell me. what you used to do before you come?’

‘I was working at Point-a-Pierre in the oilfields,’ Galahad say.

‘Where you used to live?’

‘Down south, San Fernando, in Mucurapo Street.’

‘Eh-heh! You know Mahal?’

Mahal was a mad Indian fellar who used to go around town playing as if he driving car, putting in gear and stepping on the x and making hand signals and blowing horn.

‘But how you mean? Everybody know Mahal!’

‘He must be catching arse with the new type of gear it have on them cars now!’ Moses laugh.

Galahad laugh. ‘He still driving old-model.’

‘And how about Palace Theatre? Is still there? Boy, when I was there the film used to burst every minute.’

‘Yes man, the Palace still there, but they showing a set of Indian pictures now to make money.’

‘I hear they build-over the market, is true?’

And old Moses start to get nostalgic now that he have a friend who just arrive from Trinidad, and the two of them talk a long time, until they feel sleepy.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, 2020), 29.

<sup>24</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 17-18.

This mutually beneficial relationship between Moses and Galahad gives insight into the motivations of the protagonist. Moses frustratedly carries his stubborn willingness to help every notable new arrival at Waterloo Station. Throughout the novel, he's on the verge of dropping this responsibility to stick to his own survival and wellbeing. Yet he constantly lives up to his Biblical namesake as the leader of this transatlantic exodus of men out of the Caribbean. This conflict is central to Moses, and perhaps the best way to understand it is to identify him as a translator. On the surface, his role involves intercultural communication between the West Indies and London, but as a translator he constantly balances the power relations that threaten his immediate community.<sup>25</sup> This role surfaces when Moses tries to explain the employment agency to Galahad. The narrator says:

‘But you could refuse jobs, you know.’ Moses press the Galahad, wanting to find out what kind of fellar he really is. ‘And all the time the State will go on supporting you. By and by you will learn the ropes and how you could coast a long time without work.’ Galahad think about all the things that Moses tell him, then he say, ‘Boy, I don’t know about you, but I new in this country and I don’t want to start antsing on the State unless I have to. Me, I am a born hustler.’ ‘I wish it had plenty of other fellars like you,’ Moses say, ‘but a lot of parasites muddy the water for the boys, and these days when one spade do something wrong, they crying down the lot. So don’t expect that they will treat you like anybody special—to them you will be just another one of them black Jamaicans who coming to London thinking that the streets paved with gold.’<sup>26</sup>

The employment agency is a space that tests both characters. As a good translator, Moses dutifully offers all possible negotiations needed to benefit from the state without sacrificing judgment. As a newcomer and reader, Galahad has to negotiate his relationship with both the state and with Moses. He reads Moses, understands him, and knows that his relationship with Moses is far more bountiful and interesting than his relationship with the state. At least for the

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<sup>25</sup> Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, 140.

<sup>26</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 22.

time being. Of course, Moses is relieved, because he has a keen understanding of how certain toxic stereotypes follow West Indians who benefit from the employment agency. As a translator, he can't explain London to Galahad, because the best way Galahad can read London is through his own perspective. Furthermore, as a translated space, not unlike a poem where there are multiple connotations within a single word or phrase, London contains all sorts of contexts and interpretations that need to be extracted out of a migrant's negotiation with the city.

#### 4. The Origins of Calypso

Moses is not a particularly special hero. He is as wise as any solitary everyman can be, and, beside his generosity and hospitality, he is unremarkable in all other ways. What distinguishes him from his comrades is that he is jaded by both London and its women. Plus he has ambitions to write. The latter is a preoccupation that takes up marginal, though climactic, space in the text. It's partially what makes him a model translator at the center of these calypso ballads. Most importantly though, Moses is perfect for his role because he is Trinidadian. Moses' identity is central to his character as it informs his pitfalls, his motivations, and his dreams. He's the one character with his eyes fixed on Trinidad, as opposed to Kensington. The Caribbean is in itself a product of translation, with its abundance of languages, histories, and cultures.<sup>27</sup> Therefore Moses is the ideal agent to hybridize London, which he transforms by absorbing and carrying the displaced stories of West Indians from Notting Hill to Bayswater and beyond—as if each are costumes and disguises for the Carnival.

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<sup>27</sup> Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, 142

Trinidad's syncretic culture is central to the ethos of *The Lonely Londoners*. Made up of seemingly competing identities, the island offers a unique glimpse into multiculturalism and coexistence. Hall writes (1999):

In Trinidad, above all, the complex traditions of 'the East' in 'the West'—of Indian, Carnival Queens, roti stalls on the savannah and Diwali candles glittering in the San Fernando darkness, and the distinctively Spanish Catholic rhythm of sin-contrition-and-absolution (Shrove Tuesday's masque followed by Ash Wednesday mass) that is so close to the Trinidadian character. Everywhere, hybridity, *différance*.<sup>28</sup>

With this mixture of traditions and rituals in mind, Trinidad's wide ranging diversity and layered plurality make it exceptionally modern, especially when compared to the gray and foggy London of the 1950's. It's what makes Selvon a transformative presence in the imagination of postwar British literature, he celebrates the break from the stiff old world by putting on a Carnival—the island's marquee celebration. *The Lonely Londoners* as a hybridized text is the calypso to accompany the action, and the ensemble cast of Black characters are the radiant outfits, while Moses is the boulevard that hosts the parade. This tradition, which emerges as a sort of bricolage made up of pre-Easter balls by Catholic settlers and pagan ritual in plantation society, has historically empowered the Black population. Slaves were given days of reveling, which is when they took to the streets and marched in crude disguises to imitate or ironically mimic their masters. All of this came with plenty of drumming and marching.<sup>29</sup> Lots of noise, lots of disruption.

Carnival is the inspiration to the newly arrived Black Britons of the Windrush generation when it comes to building a local presence, both aesthetically and collectively. While they are

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<sup>28</sup> Stuart Hall, "Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts from Abroad," in *Essential Essays*, Volume 2: *Identity and Diaspora*, (Duke University Press, 2019), 212.

<sup>29</sup> Hall, "Calypso Kings," 289.

consistently debased by the English establishment in *The Lonely Londoners*, their fearless presence in the public along spaces like Charing Cross Road and Hyde Park puts pressure on the fissures of the colonial metropole to breaking point. Selvon's translation of the festival into text becomes a definitive work of what Kobena Mercer names the "diaspora aesthetic," especially in his hybridized use of language. Mercer writes:

Across a whole range of cultural forms there is a "syncretic" dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master codes of the dominant culture and "creolises" them, disarticulating given signs and re-articulating their symbolic meaning. The subversive force of hybridising tendency is most apparent at the level of language itself where creole, patois and black English decentre, destabilise and carnivalise the linguistic domination of "English"—the nation language of master discourse—through strategic inflections, re-accentuations and other performative moves in semantic, syntactic and lexical codes.<sup>30</sup>

Appropriating the master codes of the dominant culture is central to Mercer's definition of the "diaspora aesthetic," because it challenges, even destabilizes, the power dynamics standardized through colonial indoctrination. This is precisely how Selvon commands his narrative, by disarticulating and re-articulating Englishness in a couple of ways. First, he takes the structure of the typical British novel, of the nineteenth century realist tradition, and deflates its pomp by discarding plot and character archetype to instead favor comedy and anticlimax. This modification allows *The Lonely Londoners* to express the disillusionment with nationhood in postwar England, especially by colonial subjects. Then, of course, there is Selvon's reconstruction of the English language, which mixes West Indian dialect with Standard English. The syncretism in *The Lonely Londoners*, evidently, is layered. Another one of these layers, which makes the novel calypsonian in the carnivalesque tradition, is that it is both an oral

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<sup>30</sup> Kobena Mercer, "Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination," in *Blackframes: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*, ed. Mbye B. Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins, (MIT Press, 1988), 57.

narrative and a literary narrative. From within this conflicted dynamic, Selvon introduces readers to the cracks of English culture and society.

## 5. The Novel as Calypso

The hybridized language of *The Lonely Londoners* makes it a quintessential work of Black British and diasporic culture. The novel centers orality, which itself enables a rich and musical attention to writing, and distances the narrative from conventional logocentric, European fiction. This style, compounded with the novel's free-wheeling and episodic form, opens up previously unknown modes of representation. Selvon achieves this by selective appropriation of British images, like the fog and the streetscape of London, but with a Caribbean mindset which leads to innovations in language and expression, and through depicting characters trapped in alien spaces. The result is complex but always grounded in sustaining camaraderie and community—a calypsonian sings to a collective crowd. Since Selvon pulls from two separate directions to build a narrative of the Black diaspora, he subverts simple assumptions about race, identity, and nationality. As Hall explains (1992):

Always these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of receding and transcoding, of critical signification, of signifying. Always these forms are impure, to some degree hybridized from a vernacular base.<sup>31</sup>

Selvon is unique because he understands there are multiple traditions at play in his fiction, and there is an excitement that these will converge into a singular product. He takes the fabric of the English novel through a cross-cultural dying process, obscuring the constructs of national and

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<sup>31</sup> Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' In Black Popular Culture?" in *Essential Essays Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora*, (Duke University Press, 2019), 90.

semantic purity, both of which were used as excuses to quash the immigrants of the Windrush generation by lawmakers and conservatives. In effect, the impurity in *The Lonely Londoners* is antiauthoritarian. It demands the sort of modernity that equates to the complex social and racial dynamics of the postcolonial globe.

Since it is essentially a calypso, *The Lonely Londoners* is concerned with the immediate condition of its immigrant ensemble and, therefore, community. In terms of content and substance, Selvon fills his novel with observations that parallel the British years of Lord Beginner and Lord Kitchener. They offer satirical, though good humored, outlook of daily life in England as the migrants first experienced them. In their songs, Lord Beginner and Lord Kitchener feature moments like nosy landladies, housewives, dogs, the underground, the weather, mixed marriages, race, passing, and sex.<sup>32</sup> Selvon, meanwhile, casually includes such themes in his prose as anecdotes—like they are background noise. For example:

And this sort of thing was happening at a time when English people starting to make a rab about how too much West Indians coming to the country: 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, and big discussion going on in Parliament about the situation, though the old Brit'n too diplomatic to clamp down on the boys or to do anything drastic like stop them from coming to the Mother Country. But big headlines in the papers every day, and whatever the newspaper and the radio say in this country, that is the people Bible. Like one time when newspapers say that the West Indians think that the streets of London paved with gold, a Jamaican fellar went to the income tax office to find out something and first the clerk tell him is, 'You people think the streets of London are paved with gold?' Newspaper and radio rule this country.<sup>33</sup>

This type of digressive commentary is the mortar that keeps the varied episodes—or as the narrator calls them, ballads—cohesive as a novel. Within each story, Selvon delves into specific topics like housing insecurity, poor job prospects, bartering, the summer, and hunting pigeons.

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<sup>32</sup> Hall, "Calypso Kings," 290-291.

<sup>33</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 2.

Accordingly, just like the calypsonians, *The Lonely Londoners* crystallizes the Windrush generation's initial encounter with "the English at home."<sup>34</sup> This convergence emerges in a unique comic tone which explores harsh conditions with an uncannily light touch. Much like the calypsos of the time, Moses and company experience a world rapt in double entendre. London is both gray and gold, comic and tragic—it's full of opportunity yet inevitably a trap.<sup>35</sup> Nasta describes their condition as "double appropriation," because "... the representatives of a Western modernity which can only read them as the flat and stereotypical black subjects of empire; and secondly, as characters who are the natural agents of an alternative modern vision."<sup>36</sup> The presence of these characters supplants the reductive white gaze to instead represent a community entrenched in the political complications of a flailing empire in postwar Europe.

*The Lonely Londoners* stands as the preeminent novel of the Windrush era because it is a unique glimpse into the condition that would go on to revive England from its doldrums. This novel is the materialization of the language and rhythm of a multiracial society that has the perseverance to achieve modernity through adopting alternative cultures and traditions. This is a legacy that Selvon shares with calypso. As Hall explains, "They [calypso songs] are still overwhelmingly jaunty and positive in attitude—this is the music of a minority who have travelled to a strange or strangely familiar place in search of a better life and are determined to survive and prosper."<sup>37</sup> Selvon's novelization of calypso helped set the precedent for what's known today as Black British literature. The task of translating this tradition, however, from the

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<sup>34</sup> Hall, "Calypso Kings," 291.

<sup>35</sup> Nasta, "Introduction," xiii.

<sup>36</sup> Nasta, "Introduction," xiv.

<sup>37</sup> Hall, "Calypso Kings," 291.

West Indies involved necessary engagement with some very complicated notions of history, identity, and culture.

## A TRADITION OF HYBRIDITY

### 1. The Origins of the West Indian Novel

The West Indian novel is a rather complex cultural product tangled in some confounding ironies. It's already a problem to consider something as West Indian, as the name derives from Christopher Columbus's failed voyage to the South Asian subcontinent. The West Indies are Indian because he thought that he had arrived in India. When the noun "West Indian" emerged in the English language, it was to identify the various plantation owners in the British colonies all over the Caribbean Sea.<sup>38</sup> This Englishness is central to the so-called West Indian identity, since in the English language the West Indies only consist of the British Commonwealth in the Antilles. Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Martinique, and Puerto Rico—though they belong to the same archipelago—are excluded from its boundaries. These islands and territories were divided by European borders like the Spanish West Indies, Dutch West Indies, or French West Indies. Inside and out, the definition of the West Indies is steeped in empire.

Still, out of this convoluted relationship with Britain and the English language, it is possible to discern a genuine West Indian literary identity. Its history, meanwhile, is by no means straightforward. There is a lengthy, albeit scattered, genealogy that originates in the eighteenth century, which begins with exotic adventure narratives written about the colonized islands. Much of these early works are dismissible, because they are mere impressions of outsiders. Examples include *Montgomery; or, the West-Indian Adventurer* (1812), *Hamel, the Obeah Man* (1827), *Marly, or a Planter's Life in Jamaica* (1828), and *Warner Arundell: The Adventures of a Creole*

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Gilkes, *The West Indian Novel*, (Twayne, 1981), 9.

(1838).<sup>39</sup> A conscious attempt at original literature to represent the West Indian identity was launched in 1903 with Thomas MacDermot's "All Jamaica Library."<sup>40</sup> Then there was a lull until after the first World War. Not until the 1920's and 1930's did West Indian writers begin to gain critical recognition in the anglophone literary circles. Claude McKay was a Jamaican born writer and poet who became a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance with formalist poems like 1919's "If We Must Die" and the 1928 novel *Home to Harlem*. Another was Jean Rhys from Dominica, who gained a reputation in Europe for her modernist fiction about exiles in works like *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927), *Quartet* (1928), and *Voyage in the Dark* (1934). Her later masterpiece, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a retelling of a key subplot from Charlotte Brontë's Victorian classic *Jane Eyre*, is a landmark postcolonial novel. These two writers articulated themes of displacement and alienation, mostly informed by their lives as expats, which have constantly reemerged, with freshened and complicated variations, in Caribbean literature ever since. Leading up to the second World War, leftist West Indian writers, influenced by the Bolsheviks and Indian nationalists, would go on to influence the hopes of independence, regional federation, and decolonization.<sup>41</sup><sup>42</sup> The most prominent figure from this group is C.L.R. James, a versatile writer who was the first Black novelist to be published in England with his 1936 fiction

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<sup>39</sup> Candace Ward, *Crossing the Line: Early Creole Novels and Anglophone Caribbean Culture in the Age of Emancipation*, (University of Virginia Press).

<sup>40</sup> Bruce King, "Introduction," in *West Indian Literature*, ed. Bruce King, (Archon Books, 1979), 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> King, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Birbalsingh, "Samuel Selvon and the West Indian Literary Renaissance," in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta, (Three Continents Press, 1988) 142.

*Minty Alley*. He's best known, though, as the authority and historian of radical colonial legacies with books like *The Black Jacobins* (1938) and *Beyond a Boundary* (1963). The sum of all these works is, arguably, only a precursor to the phenomenon presently known as West Indian literature.<sup>43</sup>

This history begins again in 1950, on a transatlantic boat that contains two notable figures: the Barbadian George Lamming and the Trinidadian Samuel Selvon. Lamming himself defines this journey as the source of West Indian literature. In his 1960 book, *The Pleasures of Exile*, he writes:

It is now ten years since that morning in mid-March when Sam Selvon and I left for England. I have tried to chart, through my own experience, some of the events of that period, for it is also the decade in which the West Indian acquired recognition as a writer, first outside and later within his own society. This order of acceptance was logical since a native commodity of any kind must always achieve imperial sanction before it is received back in its own soil.<sup>44</sup>

Lamming, in this brief memory, reveals perhaps the oddest irony that haunts West Indian literature—it came to being in the United Kingdom. He admits that recognition in Europe was required for West Indian literature to gain validity back home. This is mainly because the early Caribbean diaspora found community in each others' experience of colonialism which galvanized into solidarity, a shared identity called West Indian. Not to mention that the longing for home while alienated and exiled in England inspired the conditions and themes of what's considered West Indian literature. While it's true that this era produced some of the best known Caribbean writers—besides Lamming and Selvon, Nobel Laureates Derek Walcott and V. S. Naipaul also made names for themselves in the 1950's—the problems of colonialism remained

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<sup>43</sup> King, "Introduction," 6-8.

<sup>44</sup> George Lamming, "Journey to an Expectation," in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta, (Three Continents Press, 1988), 17.

intractable at the time. After all, anti-colonialism was a nascent sentiment at the moment, as the formal decolonization of Caribbean nations from England didn't begin until 1962. Many of these writers, who arrived in the United Kingdom to find an audience during the Windrush generation, were some of the first to share the experience of a community under imperial rule. It was evident that the influence of colonialism was entrenched. All of them, including Selvon who otherwise ended school at an early age, were educated and indoctrinated in a British curriculum. Their relationship to literature, their inspirations, their art, was dependent and subservient to the culture of the crown. Moreover, they lacked literary precedents to a home-grown West Indian tradition, since such celebrated writers like Rhys, McKay, and James gained recognition abroad.

In fact, regardless of their talents, this ambitious crop of writers was unlikely to find a sustainable or wide readership in the West Indies. As colonies and stratified plantation societies, these places suffered from dire disenfranchisement with vast disparities in wealth and education. These problems only magnified after independence for the economically and militarily weak nation-states that suffered from extensive poverty and underdevelopment.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the West Indies—unlike England, the United States, and Europe—lacked a stable middle-class at the midpoint of the twentieth century. And to thrive and circulate as a cultural commodity, literature needs a reliably educated bourgeoisie to read, appreciate, and pay for books. Even though writers published in the West Indies leading up to the postwar years, it was exercised less as an art and more as a niche hobby. According to V.S. Naipaul, “A reading to a small group, publication in a magazine soon lost to view: writing in Trinidad was an amateur activity, and this was all the encouragement a writer could expect. There were no magazines that paid; there were no

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<sup>45</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Multicultural Question,” in *Essential Essays Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora*, (Duke University Press, 2019), 99.

established magazines; there was only the *Guardian* ...”<sup>46</sup> In fact, while there were a few important literary journals based in the West Indies—*Bim*, *Kyk-over-al*, and *Focus*—the greatest and most effective platforms for writers were British print networks.<sup>47</sup> Selvon found his voice as a journalist for the *Guardian* and earned recognition as a storyteller in the BBC program *Caribbean Voices*. He, like every other major West Indian writer of his generation, was encouraged and established by a largely British audience.

## 2. Sam Selvon and the Dilemma of National Identity

Despite his initial success with the internationally renowned *A Brighter Sun*, one of the first novels to lyrically treat Trinidad as a complex society, Selvon continued to reinvent his prose to mold a lot of the mentioned paradoxes that defined a West Indian writer into a cohesive novel. By the time he published *The Lonely Londoners* in 1956, the subject of the Caribbean immigrant was long established since Jean Rhys’ 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark*, and it had been recently re-established with George Lamming’s 1954 fiction *The Emigrants*. What made Selvon’s narrative fresh was, initially, his language and his comic tone—a departure from its serious and existential precedents. This lightness of touch, however significant it is to the novel’s structure, can bury its depth of insight into a crucial historic moment of the postcolonial world. Selvon grapples with the authenticity of West Indian identity with an inimitable compassion, eventually exposing the complicated psyche and dissonance of his exiled characters. Furthermore, his hybridized use of language formally dissolves the distances between the West

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<sup>46</sup> King, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>47</sup> Sandra Pouchet Paquet, “The Fifties,” in *West Indian Literature*, ed. Bruce King, (Archon Books, 1979), 63.

Indian experiences abroad and at home, all while maintaining a style that demonstrates a distinct Caribbean identity in global literature. *The Lonely Londoners* remains a seminal West Indian novel, because it subtly loosens the ironies that bind the concept of the West Indies.

Born to a Christian Indian family in San Fernando, Trinidad, Sam Selvon grew up with an open-minded outlook on cultural identity which stuck with him for the rest of his life—and a syncretism was evident in his work. “I was creolized from an early age,” he said, “which is a good thing, in my opinion, as a mixing of traditions makes for a more harmonious world.”<sup>48</sup> This ethos is all over a novel like *The Lonely Londoners*, where the dissonant conflict arises from the impossibility of the great colonial metropole and its refusal to make space for migrants from its own colonies. Selvon contrasts this impenetrability with the camaraderie of his immigrant characters, where their commonality and solidarity flattens their differences. It’s irrelevant whether someone is from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, or even Ghana, they are presented as individuals in a singular community in search of a livelihood<sup>49</sup>. In fact, their presence in London—their exploits, desires, and routines—breaks open any fixed attachment to identity, namely nationality, and offers new ways for the reader to experience either West Indian-ness or British-ness. In both modern and historical contexts, the distance between the two is much closer than implied by the authority of things like documents or passports. Stuart Hall explains, “The fate of Caribbean people living in the UK, the US, or Canada is no more ‘external’ to Caribbean history than the empire was ‘external’ to the so-called domestic history of Britain, though that is

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<sup>48</sup> Sam Selvon, “Sam Selvon: Interviews and Conversations,” interviewed by Michel Fabre in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta, (Three Continents Press, 1988), 70.

<sup>49</sup> Louis James, *Caribbean Literature in English*, (Longman, 1999), 92.

indeed how contemporary historiography constructs them.”<sup>50</sup> Colonialism has bound together otherwise far-reaching places like Europe, the Caribbean, Africa, and North America. They are contained into a single body, and it’s impossible to isolate the pain in one appendage without considering the power of the others.

*The Lonely Londoners* is a product of its time, since it captures a specific history and crystallizes a cultural shift in England. Selvon accomplishes, unexpectedly, this by providing the smaller details, behaviors, and exchanges between his characters. He condenses the magnitude of migration into something that’s rather commonplace. This is most evident in Tanty’s arrival at Waterloo Station, she appears unannounced as if she’s coming from another neighborhood like Hackney, and not an island on the other side of the Atlantic. She reflects, “Why all you leaving the country to go to England? Over there it so cold that only white people does live there. But they say that it have more work in England, and better pay. And to tell you the truth, when I hear that Tolroy getting five pound a week, I had to agree.”<sup>51</sup> The comedy is rather straightforward, Tanty has come around unannounced with her entire family and expects her space in the notoriously difficult city—despite the many practical and personal complications of permanent relocation. Beneath the humor, though, is a moment where she displays her unapologetic entitlement to keep a piece of England for herself and her loved ones. Why couldn’t she deserve Britain? Selvon is a calypsonian, so he’s not interested in lecturing the reader about colonialism and empire. Instead, he subverts with a comedy that welcomes West Indians into London because, according to him, the city belongs to them. To be West Indian is to be British and to be British is to be West Indian. His characters don’t need excuses, reasons, or any profound purpose

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<sup>50</sup> Hall, “Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts from Abroad,” 206.

<sup>51</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 10-11.

to make their way—Selvon is uninterested in these details and chooses to ignore them. Every ballad in the novel is contained in the city. While the West Indies may come up in conversation or memory, the narrative never leaves the city limits of London. The book is titled *The Lonely Londoners*, after all, and it is deliberately a British novel. The dreadful irony that heightens this comedy for Selvon is that London commits to remaining unaware of the immigrants, with a convenient amnesia that has wiped off the last few centuries from its memory.

As Selvon meditates on this theme of belonging by illustrating the various wants, needs, and rights to find acceptance in a deeply hostile environment, he consistently plays with the vulnerability of diasporic identity. There are two sides to the term West Indian, both of which were valid at the time. On the one hand, the nomenclature behind “West Indian” implied a shared identity and unity for a population from a very specific part of the world. David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe explain, “The common experience of colonisation, displacement, slavery, indenture, emancipation and nationalism has shaped most West Indian environments, creating a unity of experience that can be identified as particularly West Indian.”<sup>52</sup> Certainly, by bringing his band of West Indian immigrants together with an episodic narrative, Selvon finds and displays emotions and frustrations which are a constant through the book, despite the origins of each character. In a broad sense, since this novel is an ensemble, it is about West Indians in London. Still, though, beneath this sense of oneness, there are some crucial and natural differences. Stuart Hall elaborates, “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history,

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<sup>52</sup> David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *Reader's Guide to Westindian and Black British Literature*, (Hansib, 1997), 13.

culture and power.”<sup>53</sup> Identity can be broadened to strengthen a community, especially when this community exists in an alien country. However, identity also contains deep and specific roots. In *The Lonely Londoners*, Moses is frustrated with misnomers and generalization. The narrator says, “Now Moses don’t know a damn thing about Jamaica—Moses come from Trinidad, which is a thousand miles from Jamaica, but the English people believe that everybody who come from the West Indies come from Jamaica.”<sup>54</sup> Trinidad and Jamaica, while they share similarities in geography and history, are two very different places with two very unique cultures. To conflate a Jamaican with a Trinidadian is erasure at worst and problematic at best. Selvon is conscious of the nuances behind a shared West Indian or Caribbean identity, and it’s a term he feels that his generation had to negotiate. He says:

The main thing they [West Indians] have in common is an ignorance of the world outside the Caribbean, outside their islands and their people. Therefore, when they go abroad and become exiles and live in places like Canada, America, Europe, they tend to talk to the outside world as if there was one Caribbean nation and say: ‘I come from the Caribbean’, because if they say, ‘I come from a land like Tobago in the West Indies’, people become confused.<sup>55</sup>

There’s a vulnerability hidden in this sentiment, it implies that Selvon had to identify himself as a monolith for places which didn’t feel the need to recognize his specific history, identity, or home. It’s an excruciatingly personal sacrifice paid to belong elsewhere. Paradoxical, in fact, as a genuine identity is shed in an attempt to find a new identity with the hopes to gain acceptance. In London, Selvon finds that Trinidad is trivialized, and it only exists in Moses’ faded memories. For the newly arrived Galahad, his home becomes so insignificant that it’s not worth the time.

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<sup>53</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, (Duke University Press, 2021), 259-260.

<sup>54</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Selvon, “Samuel Selvon: Interviews and Conversations,” 73.

When he is at the Piccadilly Circus train station with his date, a white woman named Daisy, and looks at a map complete with a world clock he finds himself at a loss. The narrator says:

‘What time it is now in Trinidad?’ Galahad look at the big clock, watching for Trinidad; the island so damn small it only have a dot and the name. ‘That is where I’m from,’ he tell Daisy, ‘you see how far it is from England?’  
 ‘We’ll be late,’ Daisy say.<sup>56</sup>

There are conflicted layers in this brief exchange. As Galahad attempts to impress his English date, by showing her where he’s from—which has been presented as so negligible on the map-clock, that it has neither shape nor time—it’s not even worth a response from her. To England, to the English, Trinidad is nothing more than a word in the ocean. No history, no culture. The reader is prompted to ask: what does Daisy see in Galahad? If it’s a West Indian man, then what is inside that man? What does he contain? There is an implicit exoticism in Daisy’s motivation to go out with him, which Galahad doesn’t mind. The night predictably ends in intercourse and when Galahad shares all the details with Moses, the veteran gives a conflicted response. The narrator says, “Moses smile a knowing smile, a tired smile, and ‘Take it easy,’ he tell Sir Galahad.”<sup>57</sup> Moses’ “tired” reaction says it all. As Selvon’s mouthpiece, his awareness of this exoticism, presented in the shell of a well-meaning West Indian man, is cutting. By the time he lost Trinidad at the map-clock, Galahad was emptied and turned into a fetish by Daisy. This is just one example of a negotiation made in the novel by the immigrant characters, where their consolidated identity is hollowed out to the point of stereotype by the white majority. It’s comparable to the larger and transactional relationship between England and the postwar migrants, where the industries buy the labor of Black bodies at a discount without any sincere concern for their livelihoods and history. *The Lonely Londoners*, while light on the surface, is an

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<sup>56</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 80.

<sup>57</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 83.

unsettling novel about a fragile community. As the narrative moves, almost every character loses the past that made them. Only Moses impossibly tries to hold onto Trinidad, which makes him a grump. The travesty is that the Trinidad he reminisces about, the Trinidad of ten years ago, is most likely unidentifiable as it is simply made of bygone memories. In the span of a novel, Selvon observes the galvanized strength of the West Indian identity, especially with its promise of community and solidarity. Consequently, in the same book, he also exposes the cracks of the West Indian identity, which would eventually reach a breaking point.

As Hall noted, cultural identities transform constantly, and within a decade after the publication of *The Lonely Londoners*, as the Civil Rights movement gained strength and decolonization efforts moved forward with full force, the term Black replaced West Indian to represent the diaspora—not just from the Caribbean, but from Africa and South Asia as well<sup>58</sup>. Not unlike West Indian, Black represented a collective solidarity, this time among people of color in England to gain access to power and agitate white supremacist institutions. Unlike West Indian, however, Black was a word reclaimed and redefined by Black people to charge a liberation movement. Hall explains (1991), “In that very struggle is a change of consciousness, a change of self-recognition, a new process of identification, the emergence into visibility of a new subject. A subject that was always there, but emerging, historically.”<sup>59</sup> West Indian, a diminutive name with colonial overtones, no longer felt significant—especially as all hopes for a West Indies Federation collapsed in favor of individual nations in the Caribbean. The term feels outdated. It’s mostly used today within the context of cricket, since the national team of the

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<sup>58</sup> Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” in *Essential Essays Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora*, (Duke University Press, 2019), 74.

<sup>59</sup> Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” 75.

Caribbean commonwealth collectively competes as the West Indies. Yet the term is reminiscent of a very specific historic period which featured the flowering of diasporic arts on an international stage. As West Indian literature lost meaning in the 1960's, Jamaican literature, Trinidadian literature, and Black British literature took its place. The early works of Lamming, Selvon, and Naipaul, while they are historically determined to be West Indian, provide some of the first and most relevant critical perspectives on the early postcolonial movement. They are of a dated nomenclature, but their masterpieces, like *The Lonely Londoners*, reveal some crucial social dynamics that remain relevant for the various diasporic corners of the globalized world. Selvon found clever ways to formally and contextually transform a novel about London into a distinctly West Indian expression. He understood that a quintessentially West Indian novel is by nature hybridized, and this is likely why *The Lonely Londoners* lasts as a consequential work of world literature.

### 3. Hybridizing London

Selvon distorts London multiple ways to present it as a distinctly West Indian enclave. He begins by stretching its boundaries loose into a laid back narrative that unfolds as a series of calypso ballads. It's a remarkable departure from how London had typically been depicted in novels up until the 1950's. The city took center stage as a recognizable character in Victorian times with the works of authors like Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Robert Louis Stevenson. It was a container for the plot and structure of their novels. For example, in *Great Expectations*, London is the corrupted entry into adulthood for Pip—where its socio-economic mechanics outline the illusions and growth for the bildungsroman. Meanwhile, in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the split personality that defines the protagonist is coded with

London's wealth disparities. The city became more than a setting, it was the binding material for these narratives. Selvon ignores this precedent so the London of yore can fall apart to make way for a new, culturally complex London.

Regardless of its subversive potential, the structure of *The Lonely Londoners* has been somewhat polarizing. It's considered lazy at worst, especially by early metropolitan critics, and naïve at best.<sup>60</sup> The latter point of view became prominent later on, after the late sixties, as a Caribbean and Black political awakening started to inform literary criticism. Brown writes, "Noted especially for its skillful use of creole language forms and its comedic vivacity, Selvon's writing has conventionally been read as colorful, intuitive, light-hearted reportage, rather than an artful product of thoughtful literary construction—a perception that remains active in present-day Caribbean criticism."<sup>61</sup> There is an obvious effortlessness in Selvon's touch, and scholars attribute it to the author playing to his strengths.<sup>62</sup> His facility in writing comic short stories thrives in a novel that is almost entirely made up of semi-related comic short stories. Yet this episodic structure, while common and established, offers something novel. Frank Birbalsingh writes:

There is some evidence that suggests this species of fiction flourishes especially in the early stages of a literary tradition, when the novel in its more sophisticated forms has not yet emerged. In Britain, for example, important fore-runners of the novel as early as the sixteenth century, were writers of picaresque sketches such as Nashe and Deloney. They were followed more than a century later by Defoe and Fielding, with longer works notable for their episodic structure and vigorous display of contemporary manners. The form of Selvon's writing compares with the fiction not only of these early British writers,

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<sup>60</sup> Susheila Nasta, "Introduction," in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta, (Three Continents Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>61</sup> Brown, "A Commoner Cosmopolitanism: Sam Selvon's Literary Forms," 103.

<sup>62</sup> Birbalsingh, "Samuel Selvon and the West Indian Literary Renaissance," 156.

but of the early writers in other traditions as well—for instance, Marivaux and Le Sage in France, and Washington Irving in the U.S.<sup>63</sup>

Birbalsingh has a complicated reading of *The Lonely Londoners*, where the novel serves as a precursor or progenitor to a more advanced West Indian novel. While his interpretation diminishes the novel's quality as a singular masterpiece, he values *The Lonely Londoners* as the initial arrival of a recognizably West Indian literary tradition. There is a definite simplicity implied here in regard to Selvon's literary prowess, because he is considered something of a pitstop towards a greater cultural trajectory—and therefore not entirely a modern writer.

Birbalsingh expands further, "... for it is the unstable social customs first successfully reported by Selvon in a predominantly vernacular idiom, that Naipaul transmutes, by means of penetrating intellectual analysis, into the bleak satiric vision that has proved so popular with today's neo-existentialist critics."<sup>64</sup> In this perspective, the relevance of Selvon's works is as comparison, background, or context to the more lauded novels of fellow Trinidadian V. S. Naipaul. It's a rather limited understanding of West Indian literature in general, and Selvon in particular.

Naipaul and Selvon are commonly compared to each other for obvious reasons. They are Trinidadians of East Indian descent who are part of the aforementioned West Indian literary renaissance. Known for their comedies, they either observe newly arrived West Indians in England or the lives of East Indians in Trinidad. In the narrow-minded and predominantly white literary landscape of midcentury London, the two writers might as well be the same. However, even with a slightly deeper analysis, Selvon and Naipaul are of an entirely different breed of writers. As artists they have distinctly opposing visions and worldviews. Their individual backgrounds, for starters, provide a number of differences between the two men. Selvon grew up

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<sup>63</sup> Birbalsingh, "Samuel Selvon and the West Indian Literary Renaissance," 156.

<sup>64</sup> Birbalsingh, "Samuel Selvon and the West Indian Literary Renaissance," 158.

in a multicultural middle-class environment. Although he always had aspirations to write, he ended his education prematurely to work and provide a salary for his family. When he migrated to England to establish himself as a writer, he did so as a worker and therefore held a number of menial odd jobs to keep afloat in the new country. Naipaul was born to the elite Capildao family, which maintains cultural and political influence in Trinidad to the present day. His journey to England was facilitated by a scholarship to Oxford, and he arrived with savings in his bank account. Both writers would struggle to fit into their new environments. Selvon, in his London novels and stories, illustrated the systemic disadvantages of West Indian and Black people in England as a community forced to stay at the very bottom of an impossibly stratified civilization. For Naipaul, his problems emerged from an inability to assimilate, socially and psychologically, into the upper crust of English society.

The two writers managed to make use of comedy to work through these struggles. Selvon gave his characters the comic voice to expose the hypocrisies of the empire, defined by the cityscape of London. Naipaul, on the other hand, cynically satirized England and Trinidad from a distance to maintain a sort of intellectual authority that recognizes a high irony to cloud the dynamic between the two places. His approach is a bit more typical, especially in European literature, as the comedy talks down to its readers and pokes fun at its characters. When he uses dialect in dialogue, it implies a lack of intelligence. Naipaul's capability in writing a perfectly European satire, or a comedy along the lines of Kingsley Amis, works for mainstream critics as he follows an established form, structure, and voice. For Selvon, the comedy is gregarious and anarchic. He breaks the basic narrative form to bring to life a misunderstood community. Selvon says, "The episodic quality of my novel may come of the quality of West Indian life in London itself. Most of the characters live from day to day, with ups and downs; encounters and chance

occurrences are just as important as social rituals.”<sup>65</sup> Much like Selvon couldn’t authentically recreate the West Indian experience in London without using dialect, he found it impossible to build his characters’ world without doing away with the structural integrity of novels established by writers like Dickens and Stevenson. By avoiding a recognizable or intricate narrative, Selvon can describe London as the alien and inescapable chaos it is for Black people.<sup>66</sup> Neither the city nor the novel are containers for its characters, rather they melt into a new shape at the arrival of these immigrants. Selvon looks forward to new potentials for place and aesthetic, whereas a writer like Naipaul is comfortable with dissecting the conventional norms. As the structure breaks apart in *The Lonely Londoners*, the characters define the boundaries of novel and city. Since all of them are West Indian, London becomes a West Indian city.

#### 4. Migration and the Loss of Identity

Kind of like other urban modernist novels—*Ulysses* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), and *Petersburg* (1916)—*The Lonely Londoners* collects the city as consciousness without necessarily shaping its body. London might be the capital of England, but it’s more importantly the collective experience of Selvon’s West Indian characters. There is a didactic quality to their survival in the city, especially in Moses and Galahad’s relationship. Their dialogue provides instructions on how to make a living in London, to the point that the book can be an almanac for Black immigrants looking to make it to England in the 1950’s. The weather, the environment, how to get work, how to get a place, how to get around, how to get women, and

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<sup>65</sup> Selvon, “Samuel Selvon: Interviews and Conversations,” 66.

<sup>66</sup> E. K. Brathwaite, “Sir Galahad and the Islands,” in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta, (Three Continents Press, 1988), 26.

how to work the welfare system are all quotidian but important topics addressed in the novel. In fact, the consciousness of Selvon's characters rarely escapes London. Only Moses is ascribed to have a past, the reality of which is unreliable because he is so caught up in idealizing life in Trinidad to combat his bitterness and disillusionment in cold England. Everyone else dreams of making it in London, while others hope to conquer the rest of Europe. Meanwhile, the large existential concerns are avoided—whether this is by Selvon or his characters is a detail that's left quite fuzzy. As each ballad unfolds, or after every laugh, the reader is left to ponder the three questions that haunt the circumstances of the novel. Why did these characters escape the Caribbean? If London is so bad, why don't they leave England? How much longer are they bound to stay in the city?

Since these questions remain unresolved in the narrative, the novel does end on a deliberately ambiguous and uncertain note, *The Lonely Londoners* maintains a tinge of haunting melancholy beneath its comedy. This quality heightens the fragility of each character. Michael Fabre writes, "Selvon refrains from exploring the underlying reasons for the presence of West Indians in England. He ascribes their exile to a lack of stable political and cultural identity."<sup>67</sup> Little context is given on why Moses, Galahad, Cap, or Tanty left their homes. Better salaries and jobs are often mentioned, but vaguely. There are debilitating existential crises underneath each character, where their loyalties and nationalities are questioned. Published near the end of empire, when decolonization promised independence from English rule, the novel presents characters who are apprehensive of a West Indies without the influence of England. At the same time, they recognize that—much like the writers of the West Indian literary renaissance—they

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<sup>67</sup> Michel Fabre, "Samuel Selvon," in *West Indian Literature*, ed. Bruce King, (Archon Books, 1979), 116.

are completely indoctrinated in English values. Yet, according to London, their Blackness makes them something other than English. Therefore, especially in the historic moment now known as the Windrush era, their identities are suddenly undefined. F. Gordon Rohlehr explains, “But the ‘boys’ remain fragmented, partial personalities. They continue to be identifiable in terms of idiosyncrasy; they have nicknames, not real names. Perhaps, nicknames are an acknowledgement of individual richness of personality, but they are also suggestive of an incompleteness of self.”<sup>68</sup> Every character besides Moses is primarily known by their nickname, which carries some subtle connotations. It suggests that much of the West Indian community that Selvon writes about has yet to discover their sense of self. Everyone is operating to survive, and there isn’t the luxury to come to some definitive realization. Selvon mentions that he uses nicknames for verisimilitude, though even this condition is upsetting. He says, “But most names are not chosen for symbolic reasons, many names are just pulled out of a hat. Nicknames are far more important in the West Indies. It is when I came to England that I discovered the importance of having a name and a tradition, ancestors and a heritage.”<sup>69</sup> Here’s a key difference between England and the West Indies, particularly in how individuals see themselves. The importance of tradition, ancestors, and heritage—and how they are reflected in a name—are absent from the West Indians. Of course, such things were forcibly removed from indigenous people, slaves, and indentured servants upon their contact with the colonizer—so the nickname is something of a placeholder for all that’s been stolen from Selvon’s Black characters.

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<sup>68</sup> F. Gordon Rohlehr, “The Folk in Caribbean Literature,” in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta, (Three Continents Press, 1988), 41.

<sup>69</sup> Selvon, “Samuel Selvon: Interviews and Conversations,” 70.

It's also a reminder. There is a comedy to many of these nicknames, as they are punchlines to inside jokes. The most obvious example is Five Past Twelve, who has earned this title because his skin color is darker than midnight. Identity, then, takes on a childlike quality that's filled with mischief or, in the case of Galahad, wonder. F. Gordon Rohlehr writes, "The term 'the boys' begins to gain weight as the book proceeds. It indicates not only the strange premoral innocence which Selvon's people seem to preserve wherever they are, but a certain immaturity, which persists because these calypsonians refuse to awaken to responsibility, even under the weight of metropolitan pressures."<sup>70</sup> If these nicknames refer to an incomplete sense of self, the characters' collective title of "the boys" suggests a state of arrested development. In this sense, *The Lonely Londoners* can be read as a collection of incomplete bildungsromans, where every male is trapped in the malaise of youth despite their age. It turns out that, according to Selvon, this isn't a series of personal crises, it's rather a systemic symptom of England's extractive and negligent treatment of its Caribbean colonies that has left the population in a state of perpetual stasis.

For Selvon and Moses, it's revealed that the motivation to leave Trinidad sparked from a need for growth. While it's unclear whether this means class mobility, recognition, or maturity, both author and protagonist recognize the same frustrations. It's already been noted that Selvon's ambitions as a writer played a crucial role in his expatriation to England, just like so many of his peers. However, it's also true that Selvon was disillusioned with the directionless complacency of the Trinidadian middle-class.<sup>71</sup> He said, "The reason why I left is that I was finding myself in a situation where life was beginning to become very complacent and easygoing; this general

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<sup>70</sup> Rohlehr, "The Folk in Caribbean Literature," 41.

<sup>71</sup> Nasta, "Introduction," 2.

impression of beach parties and boozing-up parties and driving a car around and going swimming in the blue Caribbean waters, and things like that, is part of the life in Trinidad.”<sup>72</sup> He didn’t want to get stuck in the stereotypical island routine that relies on leisure and revelry. It seems, however, according to *The Lonely Londoners*, Moses finds this very same complacency among his friends in London. At the very end of the novel, the narrator says:

Under the kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts, he [Moses] could see a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same spot. As if a forlorn shadow of doom fall on all the spades in the country. As if he could see the black faces bobbing up and down in the millions of white, strained faces, everybody hustling along the Strand, the spades jostling in the crowd, bewildered, hopeless. As if, on the surface, things don’t look so bad, but when you go down a little, you bounce up a kind of misery and pathos and a frightening — what? He don’t know the right word, but he have the right feeling in his heart. As if the boys laughing, but they only laughing because they afraid to cry, they only laughing because to think so much about everything would be a big calamity — like how he here now, the thoughts so heavy like he unable to move his body.<sup>73</sup>

This is an uncharacteristically meta conclusion, where both Moses and the narrator at once recognize the repetitive structure of the novel and realize that this routine is developed and maintained by “the boys” to bury some deep rooted, yet impossible to diagnose problem. Beyond exile and marginalization, each character is also trapped. In order to escape the misery of London and its capitalistic vice-grip, the boys resort to fetes, sex, and drink where fulfillment lies in the illusion of pleasure. These benefits are short-lived and they seep any semblance of gain from the livelihood of Selvon’s characters. Moses, despite having lived in London for ten years, has no savings. He can’t afford a ticket back to Trinidad, even though it’s his dream. Cap’s entire lifestyle is contingent upon squeezing favors out of the hesitant generosity of his friends. This

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<sup>72</sup> Sam Selvon, “Interview with Sam Selvon,” in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, interview by Peter Nazareth, ed. Susheila Nasta, (Three Continents Press, 1988), 82.

<sup>73</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 139.

dynamic between London the metropole and its Black subjects is nothing new, because the wealth and power of England was built off the labor and exploitation of its colonies. In the end, the novel can feel decolonization in the near future, but it can't see the complex problems of colonialism going away. Susheila Nasta writes, "The incompleteness, frustration, and claustrophobia of the 'boy's' existence is enacted throughout the novel, both in the fragmentary nature of its form and in the ironic representation of the characters' failure to break out of the two-dimensional identities—the self-caricatures—they have created for themselves for security within the closed immigrant group."<sup>74</sup> Despite the free-flowing and picaresque structure of *The Lonely Londoners*, it contains outsider characters bound together by a shared trauma in their histories and bleak prospects. It's uncommonly heavy material for a novel that's otherwise considered a light and unserious exercise. The comedy that defines the narrative itself, however, is an acute but traditional act of subversion.

## 5. Dissonance and Comedy

For Selvon, comedy is inescapable. It's the blood of his lineage as a storyteller, especially with the formative influence of calypso in the mix, and it distinguishes him as an archetypal West Indian writer. However, there is an inherent conflict between Selvon the novelist and Selvon the West Indian, and it shows in his distinctively melancholic sense of humor—or as Derek Walcott calls it: "reflective laughter."<sup>75</sup> Selvon shares some of Moses' sour observations about the comic outlook or the *joie de vivre* in colonial Trinidad and oppressive London. He said, "Socially, you meet people, and you want to start a serious discussion, and there again, this laughter comes out

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<sup>74</sup> Nasta, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>75</sup> James, *Caribbean Literature in English*, 125.

very clearly. Maybe the laughter started to jar on me and I said, what the hell? Why should we laugh at a serious discussion?"<sup>76</sup> As an artist, Selvon is eager to explore the myriad social problems of his time. His debut, *A Brighter Sun*, is an earnest study of industrialization and multiculturalism in Trinidad. This genuine and sober approach goes on to define the tone of Selvon's ensuing fictions which take place in Trinidad, which include the sequels to *A Brighter Sun* centered around its protagonist Tiger. However, when his subject shifts from the West Indies to London, so does his tone. Along with *The Lonely Londoners*, Selvon's other outright comedies are *Ways of Sunlight*, *The Housing Lark*, *Moses Ascending*, and *Moses Migrating*—all of which are his only books set in London. They all function out of a tension between comedy and pathos, which is indicative of the polarizing spectrum upon which Black people operated in a hostile and racist society. The comedy has another function in Selvon's British works like *The Lonely Londoners*, and it's to center its West Indian identity onto the narrative and its readers. Of course, Selvon understands the importance of comedy to the Caribbean:

The comedy element has always been there among black people from the Caribbean. It is their means of defence against the sufferings and tribulations that they have to undergo. I always felt that this is a very strong element indeed and it is too easily brushed aside by well-meaning critics who feel that the funny story has its place but its just so much and nothing more. I think it is a great deal more. It seems to me that if this gift for laughter, of being able to laugh at everything and to laugh at themselves, is so much a characteristic of the Caribbean people, how is it possible to write about them without due emphasis on this particular trait?<sup>77</sup>

As a novel that exists in between two places, two cultures, and two traditions, *The Lonely Londoners* establishes comedy and pathos as the two poles that negotiate the gravity of the narrative. Here the novel is West Indian when there's a laugh, but it fluctuates into an English novel when things get somber. Of course, most of the time, *The Lonely Londoners* is both in the

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<sup>76</sup> Selvon, "Interview with Sam Selvon," 82.

<sup>77</sup> Selvon, "Interview with Sam Selvon," 80-81.

same instance. Take this exchange between Moses and Galahad as an example, which concerns New Years Eve celebrations in Piccadilly Circus. Moses says, “Ah, bags of people stand up in the Circus and throw balloon in the air—you call that fete? The only thing is them white girls does want to kiss you. They say if the first thing they do for the new year is see a spade, they will have luck for the whole year. Them bastards!”<sup>78</sup> Moses mocks London’s inability to throw a worthwhile party, details the absurd circumstances under which Black people are accepted into the festivities, then reveals that the inclusion is due to abject exoticism and transactional objectivism. The trajectory of the comedy is like a pratfall, where the slippery acrobatics of each of Selvon’s characters’ experiences in London start off as amusing, but by the end leave the reader flattened and in pain.

Yet there is a strength to the comedy that needs to be contextualized. Much like calypso and Carnival, humor takes on a celebratory quality of resistance for West Indians that combats against a brutal history of oppression and colonialism. Caribbean writers and artists typically use humor as a sort of praxis to encapsulate their vision. Roydon Salick writes:

Far from encouraging relentless laughter, which, like unrestrained tears, blinds us to the reality of the human condition, West Indian artists have indeed forged in the smithy of their restless souls the uncreated conscience of their people through comic structures that allow us to express ourselves without fear and shame. ... They help us, as well, to temper fanaticism, to criticize openly and constructively the follies of power-brokers, and to feel part of the human family with whom we share both cultural and literary traditions.<sup>79</sup>

The comedy in *The Lonely Londoners* emerges with a unique perspective. It’s humanistic and character driven but hyper-aware of the systemic and social problems that produce the incongruity and dissonance that forces the characters into comic situations. Selvon isn’t

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<sup>78</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 128.

<sup>79</sup> Roydon Salick, “Introduction,” in *Comic Vision in West Indian Literature*, ed. Roydon Salick, (University of West Indies, 1993), vi.

interested in making fun of his all Black cast, yet nearly all of them are central to his comedic episodes. The trademark “reflective laughter” of Selvon’s stories create a fugue-like effect, where the humor humanizes the subject while it simultaneously critiques or exposes their environment. For example, when Galahad is broke and hungry, he finds a pigeon in Kensington Park that he’d like to cook and eat. When he gets caught, the narrator says:

As aforesaid, that particular season it was as if the gods against the boys, and just as Galahad swinging the pigeon one of them old geezers who does always wear furcoat come through the entrance with little Flossie on a lead, to give the little dear a morning constitution, and as soon as Flossie spot the spade she start a sharp barking. ‘Oh you cruel, cruel beast!’ the woman say, and Galahad fly back from where he kneeling on the ground to handle the situation better. ‘You cruel monster! You killer!’<sup>80</sup>

While Galahad is the unfortunate main character in this episode, the critical comedy is reliant on the hypocrisy of the nameless “old geezer.” She appears on the scene with a fur coat and a dog on the leash who defecates on the grass, yet goes on to call Galahad a beast, monster, and killer. The irony lies in the performative horror to call out animal abuse and public indecency, as eating a pigeon is unethical because they are around the park to “beautify.”<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, this woman has no issues with wearing the remains of a dead animal for show or letting her dog use the public green as a toilet. Not to mention there is the immediate racism on part of Flossie, as the conflict hinges upon her discriminatory barking at the random Black man. Of course, this scenario is resonant with the comedy and pathos duality already mentioned, but it enforces that the target of Selvon’s aim is not Galahad but the xenophobic bourgeoisie of London. Moses and the narrator are sympathetic to Galahad, as both understand he is unemployed, hungry, and desperate. Furthermore, Moses is keen to point out that pigeon is a delicacy in Trinidad. Selvon is clever enough to blur Galahad’s social transgression in order to illustrate a more urgent sense

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<sup>80</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 119.

<sup>81</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 120.

of hostility from London. Kenneth Ramchand writes, “If comic response in *The Lonely Londoners* is profound it is so because almost every episode contains an acknowledgement of the tragic dimension in the lives of ordinary people.”<sup>82</sup> Each moment of comedy in the novel reveals a deeper social issue. Yet there is a notable comic motif that remains complex and problematic. The nearly all male cast of characters, Tanty is the only major female character, are obsessed with white women. The comedy here can be funny because it’s over-the-top, raunchy, and saturated. It’s also problematic, however, because it’s haphazard and complicated.

## 6. Dissonance and Masculinity

There’s a murky theme of masculinity in *The Lonely Londoners*, which initially emerges from comic pursuits of sex but then converges into the downtrodden positions and conditions of the collective ensemble in the novel. Selvon plays the desire for white women for a laugh, but then, as is his wont, this effect has adverse connotations. Many of the characters, namely Galahad, don’t mind being tokenized or exoticized by their white dates if it results in intercourse. There is an obvious travesty in this negotiation. Harold Barratt writes, “The attitude of Selvon’s West Indians toward white women can be understood if we examine their self-image. As a group they are objects of ridicule and laughter, not only to others, but perhaps more importantly, to themselves.”<sup>83</sup> The novel is populated by vulnerable Black men performing masculinity, hiding deep-seated insecurities connected to their identities, incapacities, and lack of self-worth in a

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<sup>82</sup> Kenneth Ramchand, “Comedy as Evasion in the Later Novels of Sam Selvon,” in *Comic Vision in West Indian Literature*, ed. Roydon Salick, (University of West Indies, 1993), 32.

<sup>83</sup> Harold Barratt, “From Colony to Colony: Selvon’s Expatriate West Indian,” in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta, (Three Continents Press, 1988), 252.

cruel city. As “the boys,” they have yet to mature, and to reach maturation they perform machismo to assert their masculinity. According to Enid Kirton-Lewis, there is a legacy in this performance by Selvon’s boys. She explains (1974), “In the slave society the male slave was powerless to perform the normal roles of a husband or father. The total control which the slave master exercised over him and his female counterpart, particularly the sexual exploitation of the female, tended to emasculate the African male. Deprived of all other power, the man was tempted to capitalize on the only power he possessed—sexual potency.”<sup>84</sup> This same drive for sex, when relocated to the white populated metropole, takes on a novel severity. The Black male’s temptation to sexually assert his masculinity thrives uncontrollably in an environment with white women, as they are made into a sort of priceless and unattainable prize.<sup>85</sup> It’s as if their possession contains a remedy for alienation, isolation, and racism. Ironical, as this fetishization is not dissimilar to how these same Black men are tokenized by certain white characters in the novel. Frantz Fanon famously elucidates this dynamic between men of color and white women in his landmark 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks*. He writes sardonically, “By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man ... I am a white man.”<sup>86</sup> As an illusion, this mentality contains complex problems on the other side. Selvon and Moses are both aware of this, as noted by Moses’ ambivalence to Galahad’s sexual conquests which ends with his advice to “Take it easy.”<sup>87</sup> Moses elaborates further on this

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<sup>84</sup> Anson Gonzalez, “First of the Big Timers: Samuel Selvon,” in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta, (Three Continents Press, 1988), 47.

<sup>85</sup> Gonzalez, “First of the Big Timers: Samuel Selvon,” 49.

<sup>86</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (Pluto Press, 1986), 63.

<sup>87</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 83.

specific issue in another instance. He says, “They go back with English wife and what happen? As soon as they get there, the places where their white wife could go, they can't go. Next thing you hear, the wife horning them and the marriage gone puff. Look what happen to that Indian fellar what married a German girl and went back after he study. He kill the girl, cut she up and put she in a sack and throw she in the sea.”<sup>88</sup> There's some context needed behind this excerpt, as it's a rebuttal by Moses when Galahad tries to defend England, and uses Black students as an example of immigrants who have assimilated comfortably. From the start, this quote implies that only a certain class of migrant has access to long-term relationships with white women. But even with this relationship, there is no solution to segregation, racism, or the feelings of ineptitude. The psychological pain experienced by both partners is destructive, divisive, and explosive. Selvon, characteristically, doesn't even pretend to have a solution to this problem of masculinity that plagues his boys. There is no action or monologue where the men are suddenly saved. This corrupted masculinity is curiously paired with a historically patriarchal tradition. Old Moses is the reluctant exemplar to pull these boys out of their lost condition and perhaps find homes as men. Selvon hides a clever and symbolic parallel in his protagonist that speaks volumes to Black readers.

## 7. Dissonance and Hybridization

It's no coincidence that Moses Aloetta shares his name with the Moses from the Old Testament. The analogy between these two figures is slight, but significant enough for narrative depth and cultural importance. Of course, not unlike the prophet, Moses is something of a leader in his West Indian community, as exemplified by his relationship with Galahad. Moses is the

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<sup>88</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 129.

facilitator of this great exodus out of the Caribbean and, despite his hesitance, he takes on the role to help people settle into London as comfortably as they can. With Galahad, Moses meets him at Waterloo Station under mysterious circumstances:

He wasn't in a good mood and the fog wasn't doing anything to help the situation. He had to get up from a nice warm bed and dress and come out in this nasty weather to go and meet a fellar that he didn't even know. That was the hurtful part of it—is not as if this fellar is his brother or cousin or even friend; he don't know the man from Adam. But he get a letter from a friend in Trinidad who say that this fellar coming by the SS *Hildebrand*, and if he could please meet him at the station in London, and help him until he get settled ... So for old time sake Moses find himself on the bus going to Waterloo, vex with himself that his heart so soft that he always doing something for somebody and nobody ever doing anything for him.<sup>89</sup>

Not unlike the leader from the Old Testament, Moses is called upon for unknown reasons. His duty isn't limited to family or friends, and is driven by his empathy and heart. The prophet left his comfortable position with the Pharaoh's royal family in Egypt to defend his people, and eventually liberate them. Parodically, Selvon's Moses leaves his warm bed to retrieve another stranger, though a Trinidadian, and get him situated despite the cold and the fog. There's even the idiomatic reference to Adam, which only further binds this oddball allegory to the Abrahamic lineage. These references to the Old Testament, and particularly the Book of Exodus, aren't simply a literary device because they hold some significance in the Caribbean, for Black people specifically, where Moses is arguably a far more important religious figure than Jesus.<sup>90</sup> Stuart Hall explains (1996):

More significant, however, for the Caribbean is the Old Testament version of the story. There we find the analogue, critical to our history, of 'the chosen people,' taken away by violence into slavery in 'Egypt'; their 'suffering' at the hands of 'Babylon'; the leadership of Moses, followed by the Great Exodus—'movement of Jah People'—out of

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<sup>89</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 1-2.

<sup>90</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual," in *Essential Essays Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora*, (Duke University Press, 2019), 194.

bondage and the return to the Promised Land. This is the ur-source of that great New World narrative of freedom, hope, and redemption which is repeated again and again throughout slavery: the Exodus and the 'Freedom Ride.'<sup>91</sup>

These analogies and their specific vocabulary are rooted in the Rastafari religion from Jamaica, which has a strong history of resistance against empire, and has influenced countercultural movements in the Caribbean, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. Whether or not Selvon's symbolic gesture behind the name Moses was inspired or informed by Rastafari ideology is both unclear and irrelevant, even though the move reinforces the significance of themes like diaspora, liberation, and redemption. Selvon, with his trademark light touch, downplays this otherwise blatant intertextuality with the Bible. Much like James Joyce did with *Ulysses*, Selvon humanizes big, classical, and canonical themes by making them small, quotidian, and relatable to twentieth century readers. His Moses, like Leopold Bloom, is an everyman. Unlike Joyce, however, Selvon isn't as obsessed with recreating the ur-text in a contemporary space. Moses and Selvon instead revisit the Old Testament to see if there is any hope in the spiritual resemblance between the Book of Exodus and the Windrush generation.

In *The Lonely Londoners*, Moses' most prophetic moment is at the very end. It's prophetic because he attempts to look forward to a future for his community, with the hopes to find consolation somehow and somewhere. Meanwhile, this moment also mimics a scene from the Old Testament. The narrator says:

The old Moses, standing on the banks of the Thames. Sometimes he think he see some sort of profound realisation in his life, as if all that happen to him was experience that make him a better man, as if now he could draw apart from any hustling and just sit down and watch other people fight to live. Under the kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts, he could see a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same spot. As if a forlorn shadow of doom fall on all the spades in the country. As if he could see the black faces bobbing up and down in the millions of white, strained faces, everybody hustling

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<sup>91</sup> Hall, "The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual," 209.

along the Strand, the spades jostling in the crowd, bewildered, hopeless. As if, on the surface, things don't look so bad, but when you go down a little, you bounce up a kind of misery and pathos and a frightening—what? He don't know the right word, but he have the right feeling in his heart.<sup>92</sup>

This reflective passage, which relevantly begins with “The old Moses,” zooms out from the day-to-day ballads that make up the novel to examine the greater condition of West Indian immigrants in England. Moses, so far so intimately involved in supporting every newcomer he can, looks forward to a calm retirement—as if all the work he has put in as a host to London will bless him with peace and comfort in the future. Not unlike ending up in Paradise after a life of devotion. However, he's quick to realize that this is something of an illusion, because from this perspective that he gains from above Moses sees the great “swaying movement”—of time, of people—that is both overwhelming and debilitating. Moses can't see himself improving from his present condition. This is likely from fear, the “shadow of doom,” or hopelessness. In reality, he doesn't know, and neither does the narrator. The “—what?” that attempts to tie together misery, pathos, and fright leaves a hole in the novel. This emptiness is what makes this end so prophetic, because it conveys an unsettling feeling that ambiguously foreshadows a bleak future. Perhaps it's the feeling of horror about the reality that the subpar living conditions of West Indian immigrants and communities in London wouldn't improve in the slightest for another three to four decades. It can be the feeling that in just a few years after the publication of the novel, West Indian enclaves would be terrorized with race riots, like the notable 1958 Notting Hill riot. There's the feeling that less than a decade after *The Lonely Londoners*, the British government would pass The Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 which significantly restricted the entry of Commonwealth citizens. It was an outrageous response to the evolving demographics of England, which were largely due to the arrival of the West Indian generation portrayed in

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<sup>92</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 138-139.

Selvon's book. The empty feeling could perhaps also foresee the notorious Windrush scandal, which revealed the wrongful detainment and deportation of British citizens who arrived around the time *The Lonely Londoners* was written. The novel, therefore, doesn't end with false hope or sentimentality. Its conclusion is prompted by the silence, the confounding "—what?" Moses reflects on how immigrants like him in France and Europe found their voice as writers, despite being workers and laborers in their cities. He begins to dream, perhaps to provide the language to the "—what?" that leaves him incomplete. Or a language that could console his community and his people as they work towards liberation.

This last scene, with Moses overlooking the Thames, is clearly reminiscent of a crucial Biblical moment that unlocks a significant inconsistency between the two Moseses and their people. David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe explain:

This picture of "old Moses" standing on the banks of the Thames' on the brink of vision, alludes to the Biblical Moses on the banks of the Nile, brooding on the fate of his people in bondage, his people stranded in a foreign land, and brooding on the possibility of Exodus and of locating the Promised Land. This linking of Moses and the Biblical Moses reinforces the novel's theme of the dream or illusion of Utopia and the reality of bondage. The crucial difference between Selvon's Moses and the Biblical Moses is that Selvon's Moses, and his fellow West Indians, have no place to go, no Promised Land to inherit.

There's no question that *The Lonely Londoners* is a novel of and about diaspora, but the term doesn't entirely fit the gaping problem that makes Moses feel so uneasy. In its original definition, the diaspora recognizes a "Promised Land" as a place of origin and return. For the West Indian diaspora, both the origins and the return are complicated, as both terminals have been severed due to slavery and colonialism. The Caribbean before Western imperialism was indigenous territory. After imperialism, the Caribbean is frayed. It has dispersed all over the world without a sensible return. Stuart Hall recommends widening the definition of diaspora to acknowledge and possibly disentangle this condition. He writes:

I use this term [diaspora] here metaphorically, not literally: diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising, form of “ethnicity.” We have seen the fate of the people of Palestine at the hands of this backward looking conception of diaspora—and the complicity of the West with it. The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.<sup>93</sup>

The future of the West Indian diaspora, which Moses finds so murky among the waters, lies in community building, political action, and embracing difference. It’s not a utopia as in a destination or settlement, but a movement that breaks apart the racist and imperialist values that dominated the Caribbean in the past. Most importantly, it’s an effort that isn’t tied to geographical or national boundaries, as “living through difference” can be reproduced around the world. The Caribbean already has a history of hybridity and heterogeneity, and though it can certainly be improved, it can also be transferred and embraced anywhere. With *The Lonely Londoners*, Selvon finds a way to embrace difference, to create a new environment for a postcolonial metropolis. He achieves this primarily by hybridizing language, bridging dialect and formal English to meld opposing literatures, like Caribbean and English, into a singular expression.

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<sup>93</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 268-269.

## HYBRID LANGUAGE FOR HYBRID IDENTITIES

### 1. Locating Identity

“We are never quite there,” writes Stuart Hall, “but always on our way to it, and when we get there, we will at last know exactly who it is we are.”<sup>94</sup> For the diaspora, identity lies somewhere between the departure and an unapproachable arrival. The definition of these two locations remains rather blurry. For someone like Sam Selvon, his cultural identity is never as straightforward as the hyphenation of the two ports that made up his journey. There are waves of history that unsettle the relationship between these two ends, in his case Trinidad and England, to the point that identity is always on the verge of revelation. Layers of complicated migratory patterns have scribbled over any semblance of a clear sense of being, where every route emerges with a new language. This is the evergreen, erratic condition of the displaced, who are constantly in a state of formation. *The Lonely Londoners* has been quintessentially global, West Indian, Trinidadian, British, postcolonial, modernist, and Black since publication. It is likely to transform further, and gain new adjectives, as social, cultural, and political discourse progresses into unfamiliar intellectual territory.

If there is one constant that’s kept *The Lonely Londoners* relevant over the last nearly seventy years, it’s Selvon’s unprecedented hybridization of language. It’s considered a novel in dialect before it’s considered a West Indian, Trinidadian, or British novel. The book’s in-betweenness is also its timelessness and in the twenty-first century, when change is the only reliable condition, *The Lonely Londoners* remains elementally relatable. The language of the novel is slippery. The tone, slang, and pace are diasporic and, therefore, consistently transforming. However, to label Selvon’s narrative simply as dialect, pidgin, nation language, or

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<sup>94</sup> Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” 64.

literary feels incomplete. While he did turn away from standard English to achieve a sense of authenticity and verisimilitude provided by the vernacular of Caribbean and Black Briton communities in London, Selvon had a more complicated objective in mind. He said, “I juxtapose the stilted and the colloquial, or shift from one to the other somewhat abruptly, in order to show that there are essential similarities between these two levels of language.”<sup>95</sup> To experiment this way and explore the parallels and differences of language in narrative is a conscientiously radical approach to composing a novel. There are a few virtues which result from this motion. For example, the novel is very distinctly West Indian in form and feel, without entirely losing its legibility to a British readership. *The Lonely Londoners* helps dissolve the boundary between the Caribbean and England, not simply by placing Trinidadians and Jamaicans in London’s parks and basements, but by diversifying the lexicon of high English literature with West Indian slang and idioms. Brown writes, “In spite of this possibly overabundant critical attention, the narration of *The Lonely Londoners* clearly merits recognition as a watershed moment in West Indian literature that provides symbolic legitimacy to a pointedly Caribbean way of thinking and speaking.”<sup>96</sup> Selvon sets a precedent for not just diasporic novels, but diasporic experiments in language and expression. Still, perhaps its most profound accomplishment is textual, in that this hybridized language surprisingly turns out to be the solution to the novel’s central anxiety.

When Moses is on the banks of the Thames, he is overcome with a profound melancholy about the current condition of Black people like him in the city. It’s nearly debilitating. The narrator says:

As if a forlorn shadow of doom fall on all the spades in the country. As if he could see the black faces bobbing up and down in the millions of white, strained faces, everybody

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<sup>95</sup> Selvon, “Sam Selvon: Interviews and Conversations,” 72.

<sup>96</sup> Brown, “A Commoner Cosmopolitanism: Sam Selvon’s Literary Forms,” 122.

hustling along the Strand, the spades jostling in the crowd, bewildered, hopeless. As if, on the surface, things don't look so bad, but when you go down a little, you bounce up a kind of misery and pathos and a frightening—what? He don't know the right word, but he have the right feeling in his heart.<sup>97</sup>

A cloud of darkness overwhelms the novel as it comes to a close, with words like “doom,” “bewildered,” “hopeless,” “misery,” “pathos,” and “frightening.” Certainly, as mentioned already, Selvon avoids any sentimentality or false hope for his readers about the day to day experiences of Black Britons. At the same time, *The Lonely Londoners* isn't a sad book, nor does it have an especially unhappy ending. Selvon's modus operandi is hybridity, and just like this novel is between the Caribbean and England, or between orality and prose, it is also between comedy and tragedy. There is an unexpected dream that swells up in Moses' heart, directly motivated by these waves of sorrow, that inspires him to write a successful book. While endearing, it's a bit of an odd moment because, as a character, Moses has never shown any interest in books nor has he had any ambition as a writer. Of course, *The Lonely Londoners* doesn't end with the publication of Moses' bestselling short story collection or memoir. Yet, it's still something of a fairy tale finish to a kinetic but desolate series of anecdotes.

The miracle at the end of the narrative is metatextual, as it is the novel itself, or more specifically the language of the novel that provides closure. When both Moses and the narrator are sulking by the river, they are suddenly awoken by a strange prompt. The narrator says, “As if, on the surface, things don't look so bad, but when you go down a little, you bounce up a kind of misery and pathos and a frightening—what?” This, “—what?” can be read a couple of ways. The most obvious interpretation is, as already analyzed, that there is something worse than misery and pathos ahead of the experiences that have been related in the novel. As if the problems of subalternity are not going to be resolved any time soon. On the other hand, “—what?” is an

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<sup>97</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 139.

interjection, more or less an interruption, to the stream-of-consciousness free indirect discourse that attempts to finish the non-narrative and aimless story. It's a sudden realization that there is an abysmal absence of language that can properly bring the experiences of these Black immigrants together into a cohesive dramatic structure. After all, the narrator explains right away, "He don't know the right word, but he have the right feeling in his heart."<sup>98</sup> If the "—what?" is just another adjective synonymous with misery and pathos, then what makes it the "right" word with the "right" feeling? A consonance is insinuated to follow the dissonance felt by both Moses and narrator, even if the notes are left silent. It feels ironic that Selvon, as a creative writer, is incapable of finding a neat word or metaphor to settle this inconsolable absence of language. He understands, however, that it's not a simple turn of phrase that needs to be articulated into literature. There's a need for a whole new language. Susheila Nasta writes, "Only Moses, who has almost merged in consciousness by the close with the narrating voice ... seems to perceive the need to forge a new language for existence."<sup>99</sup> As a novelist, it's apt that Selvon is in search of newness in language, as he sees West Indians and London transforming into something unrecognizable—into something hybrid and diasporic, for which both dialect and standard English are incompatible.

## 2. Language as Différance

There is an unforgettable episode in the final third of *The Lonely Londoners* which meets the urgency of the novelty desired by Selvon to lyrically represent the tensions of Black experience in postwar London. Known as "summer as hearts," it's a sentence that lasts for ten

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<sup>98</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 139.

<sup>99</sup> Nasta, "Introduction," xvi.

pages with almost no punctuation—there are a couple of em-dashes to splice the flow. Modernist scholars have noted similarities between this moment and the “Penelope” chapter in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, since both passages are written in an uninterrupted movement and explore wandering themes of erotic behavior and thirst.<sup>100</sup> While this isn’t the only diffusion of Joycean technique in *The Lonely Londoners*, it is the most obvious homage. It’s a moment that breaks open the novel, which has thus far been shrouded in fog and dolor to genuinely celebrate the city. Sexual desire defines much of the content of this sentence, but its conceit is formed by a far more bucolic longing. The narrator writes:

Every year he vowing to go back to Trinidad, but after the winter gone and birds sing and all the trees begin to put on leaves again, and flowers come and now and then the old sun shining, is as if life start all over again, as if it still have time, as if it still have another chance. I will wait until after the summer, the summer does really be hearts.<sup>101</sup>

Although Selvon is ambivalent about how characters like Moses, Galahad, and Cap found themselves in London, he finally provides some insight into why they are seduced to stay in the city. It’s quite ironic that summer and sunshine are what keep the boys around, since they migrated from the tropics where balmy weather and clear skies are famously overabundant. These natural features—the warmth, foliage, and flowers—however, are reminders of the Caribbean and upon their seasonal arrival it feels like the Caribbean fits in London. The atmosphere suggests that there is a part of home that belongs in this alien city. Plus, with agreeable temperatures, London contains the best of both worlds to these West Indian migrants—the warmth of the past and the opportunities of the future. Summer becomes the time

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<sup>100</sup> Kiron Ward, “Hypercanonical Joyce: Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, Creative Disaffiliation, and the Global Afterlives of *Ulysses*,” in *Textual Practice* 36, no. 2 (2021): 326–47, doi:10.1080/0950236X.2022.2003088.

<sup>101</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 137.

where these characters can be themselves outside on the streets and parks, especially after spending the whole novel bundled up inside basements. Under the sun, Caribbeans can relish as Caribbeans in London, and this unlocks a sense of hope and renewal. Optimism is discovered in the air, "... as if life start all over again, as if it still have time, as if it still have another chance." Most importantly, the nostalgia for home disintegrates, and this creates a new complexity in identity, a new authenticity, which deserves new expressions. "Summer as hearts" materializes in an unfiltered and unbound language that searches for unexpected ways to reach for new, true, postcolonial senses of self. Hall writes, "Not until we get really inside and hear what the true self has to say do we know what we are 'really saying.'"<sup>102</sup> In the summer, Selvon attempts to hear what *The Lonely Londoners* is "really saying" by stretching and complicating modes of representation.

The "summer as hearts" episode disturbs an already unconventional novel by upending the speech and legibility that *The Lonely Londoners* has established for the entire narrative. Selvon has spent two-thirds of the book developing a complicated experience, where the hybridized language wrestles to make space for the marginalized immigrant community in London. The city is unforgiving, but the characters find comfort, commonality, and camaraderie in their shared but stratified experience. Selvon realizes, even in his experiment with language, dialect and standard English aren't everything. Language isn't a binary. It is a spectrum that can expand further to complicate identity, whether its West Indian, British, or both. Hall writes:

Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write—the positions of enunciation. What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say, 'in our own name,' of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place. Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact,

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<sup>102</sup> Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," 64.

which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term ‘cultural identity’ lays claim.<sup>103</sup>

Selvon enunciates the community of West Indian immigrants in London from the perspective of a novelist and artist. Though he shares experiences similar to his characters, he did arrive into the new country as a worker, his representation of the boys is marked by a certain craft and design. For beginners, the language of the novel that is taken to reflect the everyday speech of Caribbean London intentionally evokes literary qualities. As much as Selvon brings literature into the West Indian vernacular, he also pulls it away from the West Indies to establish this novel as a work of international appeal. This is an intentional negotiation by a writer who, by the time *The Lonely Londoners* was published, had by years left the blue-collar workforce to focus on his art full-time. This is not to say that the novel is dishonest, these differences simply elucidate the complications of representation—which can never be exact. Moses might be Selvon’s mouthpiece, but he is primarily a fiction and a character of a different background than Selvon. Moses, for one, has been in London for four to five years longer than Selvon and, unlike the author, is professionally trapped in the same cycle of menial labor. Moses can speak for Selvon, but Selvon can’t entirely speak for Moses. Maybe a better way of reading and understanding *The Lonely Londoners* is that, rather than capturing the West Indian immigrant experience, it enables this experience to be something more than just West Indian. Or British, for that matter.

The “summer as hearts” sequence is most crucial because language and context are upturned. Selvon’s balanced play of vernacular and literary English is purposely overdone, and the delicate and melodic push and pull of these two registers are stretched so far apart that the dynamic between the Caribbean and England is unrecognizable. At this moment, not just the

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<sup>103</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 257.

weather and land, but especially the English people are altered. The narrator says, "... how the old geezers like the sun they would sit on the benches and smile 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 faces in the winter ..."<sup>104</sup> Summer feels like, finally, there is some semblance of social harmony between the British and the immigrants. This episode consists of rapid-fire interactions between Black Londoners, mostly Moses, and white Londoners. None of these anecdotes, however, escape Selvon's tragicomic scrutiny and social commentary. "Summer as hearts" turns out to be a calypso within the larger calypso that is the novel, where desire rhymes with race to cruel effect. The core themes of *The Lonely Londoners* resurface with an uncanny density and speed, as if Selvon chooses to zoom in and hyper-focus on the crucial problems present at the time. Hall writes, "... one has to remember that the issue of race provides one of the most important ways of understanding how this society actually works and how it has arrived where it is. It is one of the most important keys, not into the margins of the society, but right into its dynamic centre."<sup>105</sup> Even when the Black Londoners are welcomed by the white Londoners, they are not exactly accepted. There is always a negotiation present. Nearly all of the stories in "summer is hearts" are tales of cruising and sex-work—exploited sex-workers, exploitation by sex-workers—where Black men are targeted and Black sex-workers are mistreated by white pimps. Several of these stories are concerned with the fetishization of Black people. Yet this fetishization isn't always erotic. One of the most degrading moments is when Moses finds himself in London's high society. The narrator writes:

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<sup>104</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 92.

<sup>105</sup> Stuart Hall, "Teaching Race," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, (Duke University Press, 2021), 135.

... the higher the society the higher the kicks they want one night Moses meet a nice woman driving in a car in Piccadilly and she pick him up and take him to a club In Knightsbridge where it had a party bags of women and fellars all about drinking champagne and whisky this girl who pick him up get high and start to dance the cancan with some other girls when they fling their legs up in the air they going around to the tables where the fellars sitting Moses sit down there wondering how this sort of thing happening in a place where only the high and mighty is but with all of that they feel they can't get big thrills unless they have a black man in the company and when Moses leave afterwards they push five pounds in his hands and pat him on the back and say that was a jolly good show ...<sup>106</sup>

The humiliation Moses feels from this Gatsby-esque evening isn't momentary, but a microcosm of Black culture in postwar London. This instance is filled with layered and sophisticated insight, because Moses is appreciated not for his labor but for his presence and more specifically his ability to perceive. The upper crust gets a thrill out of being seen by the other, as big a thrill as drugs, for they pay strangers of color to attend their shindigs. Likewise, the thrill can be the proximity to Blackness, otherness, that the wealthy choose to achieve with money—the transaction of which is humiliating already, but even worse when it's worth mere pocket change. The microcosm here isn't one of capital or class, though there is a clear delineation between people, but of culture and its atomic center. This moment, and “summer as hearts” as a whole, reveals that a certain paradox is at play in Selvon's art. Is *The Lonely Londoners* a Black novel read by white people? Or is it a novel about London from a Black perspective? The book can be appreciated for its achievement with representation, but this same quality makes it vulnerable to fetishization. After all, what is literary publication in England if not a temporary appearance in London's high society? The thrill of *The Lonely Londoners* for white readers could not have been much different from the partygoers in the brief segment mentioned above in “summer as hearts,” where Selvon's work provides them with serious proximity to the lives of the other.

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<sup>106</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 100-101.

The initial critical response by the English press to *The Lonely Londoners* was, expectedly, kind of abhorrent. There were many reviewers who faithfully performed their roles as gatekeepers to the British cultural consciousness, and they upheld a discretionary caste system which influenced some regrettable misreadings of the novel. Selvon was praised for his “exotic themes,” “curious language,” and the novel’s characters were perceived as “those happy-go-lucky people from the sunshine of the West Indies.”<sup>107</sup> These are among some of the more positive responses to *The Lonely Londoners*, and even they fail to take note of the political themes of xenophobia, racism, or poverty. Meanwhile, the discontented critics were at a loss at the novel’s immaturity, artlessness, and how it apparently lacks self-consciousness.<sup>108</sup> J. Dillon Brown writes, “The reviewer for the *Surrey Comet* concludes, after reading the novel, that there are only three options for viewing the immigrant characters of *The Lonely Londoners*: with disinterest, pity, or distaste.”<sup>109</sup> Such commentary is a sign of a culture that’s keen on fetishizing minority groups. It’s the mark of a society that’s irrationally fixated on the presence of Black people, endlessly fascinated by their appearances, movements, and bodies but completely ambivalent to their interests and struggles. During the “summer as hearts” sentence, Selvon reflects on this odd obsession. The narrator says:

... the cruder you are the more the girls like you you can’t put on any English accent for them or play ladedda or tell them you studying medicine in Oxford or try to be polite and civilise they don’t want that sort of thing at all they want you to live up the films and stories they hear about black people living primitive in the jungles of the world that is why you will see so many of them African fellars in the city with their hair high up on the head like they ain’t had a trim for years and with scar on their face and a ferocious

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<sup>107</sup> Brown, “A Commoner Cosmopolitanism: Sam Selvon’s Literary Forms,” 128.

<sup>108</sup> Brown, “A Commoner Cosmopolitanism: Sam Selvon’s Literary Forms,” 129.

<sup>109</sup> Brown, “A Commoner Cosmopolitanism: Sam Selvon’s Literary Forms,” 129.

expression going about with some real sharp chicks the cruder you are the more they like you ...<sup>110</sup>

Selvon brings up an interesting binary where, for Black Britons, the options are to either assimilate or consciously dissociate with English culture to fit into society. His commentary is in regards to sex, where the less British a Black man seems the more this man is desired by white women. There is no in-between these modes of representation, no hybrid of the two. Perhaps this is why the hybrid language of the novel was misunderstood by so many English reviewers, because hybridity dilutes the purity of Britishness—especially in literature. For them, novels should either represent dialect or be properly presented in polished Queen’s English. This way there is a simple method to place or categorize good and bad literature, or British and West Indian literature. Since Selvon is more interested in complicating such binaries of national identity and expression, he was mindlessly fetishized then quickly ignored as a writer thereafter—without any positive influence into how West Indians are represented in London. Brown writes, “The novel thus seems to have strengthened the sense of perceived difference between English and West Indian people, perhaps even reinforcing British expectations of ‘natural’ and ‘simple’ writing and a childlike immigrant people.”<sup>111</sup>

This specific conflict between representation and fetishization adds complexity to *The Lonely Londoners* as a cultural product, and situates the novel’s legacy in problematic territory. Though it’s not a concern that’s unique to Selvon. Hall writes (1988), “The struggle to come into representation was predicated on a critique of the degree of fetishisation, objectification and negative figuration which are so much a feature of the representation of the black subject. There was a concern not simply with the absence or marginality of the black experience but with its

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<sup>110</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 100.

<sup>111</sup> Brown, “A Commoner Cosmopolitanism: Sam Selvon’s Literary Forms,” 129.

simplification and its stereotypical character.”<sup>112</sup> Selvon attempts to represent Black experience, its marginalized existence in postwar London, authentically with his hybridized use of dialect. The lasting reputation of *The Lonely Londoners* is its ability to build intimacy and dissolve boundaries between the West Indian experience and the English reader. Yet, as a novel, it lacks overt complexity in terms of structure, plot, and character. Can Selvon avoid fetishization with language alone? It’s foreseeable that access to the slang, rhythm, and dialect of Caribbean London, along with the community’s impoverished lives and their regrettable behavior, can all be perverted by bad actors like conservative pundits. Still, it’s arguable that Selvon’s use of language can ward off fetishization, even with some obvious limits. First, the position of Black culture, and especially Black popular culture, in the UK is preternaturally incongruous. Hall writes, “It is this mark of difference inside forms of popular culture—which are by definition contradictory and which therefore appear as impure, threatened by incorporation or exclusion—that is carried by the signifier ‘black’ in the term ‘black popular culture.’”<sup>113</sup> As a pioneering work of Black British popular culture, *The Lonely Londoners* exists in a sort of limbo. The state of purgatory is a running motif in the novel, mostly because it’s an analogy that enlightens the difficult social and psychological condition of West Indians in London, but it suits the greater reputation of the novel as well. Selvon’s ballads and sketches are put together crudely, relayed without lessons or morals, and are told in a non-standard language. Therefore impurity lasts in form, content, and style. Contrarily, it’s this very same quality that makes *The Lonely Londoners* an innovative novel. When considering form and content, Selvon’s work is no more

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<sup>112</sup> Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, (Duke University Press, 2019), 247.

<sup>113</sup> Hall, “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” 90.

unrefined than something like *On The Road*, Jack Kerouac's classic novel from the same era. Both books are picaresque in spirit and light in plot, with unconventional characters who oftentimes find themselves in nefarious situations. Obviously, there are two great differences between the two books. *On The Road* is written by an American and positioned at the forefront of the counterculture movement in the west. Meanwhile, Selvon is Black and his book a mere artefact from a very specific historical moment. *The Lonely Londoners* has been crude in a culture which only allows white writers access to crudity as avant-garde expression, therefore its modernism is perceptively limited. As a result, it's important to hinge on the language of the novel, which consistently defies categorization and fetishization.

Selvon's prose in *The Lonely Londoners* is neither dialect nor English, but hybrid. The definition of this term needs to be dissected to fully understand the importance of the novel. Hall explains, "Hybridity is not a reference to the mixed racial composition of population. It is really another term for the cultural logic of *translation*."<sup>114</sup> To consider the weight of translation is to accept all of its meanings. Translation is the convergence of one language into another language, or a form into another form.<sup>115</sup> It is the transference of a person, thing, or title from one place to another.<sup>116</sup> Then, it is the transformation or alteration of a person or thing.<sup>117</sup> The language of *The*

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<sup>114</sup> Hall, "The Multicultural Question," 113.

<sup>115</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "translation (n.), sense I.1," December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7389299969>.

<sup>116</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "translation (n.), sense II.8," December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5211422148>.

<sup>117</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "translation (n.), sense III.17.a," December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7617309046>.

*Lonely Londoners* isn't simply about migration and change. It is in fact the very expression of migration and change. Selvon translates two separate places for readers on opposing sides of the ocean; he translates West Indians into England; and translates London into a city of Black residents. Like so many novels, Selvon captures a moment in history with language, but what makes *The Lonely Londoners* most remarkable is that it captures, more specifically, this history as it wavers. Hall writes, "I think cultural identity is not fixed—it's always hybrid."<sup>118</sup> The virtue of Selvon's prose is that it dislodges perceptions of both West Indian and British cultural identities to make way for new, undiscovered notions of being and becoming. In the novel, the "summer as hearts" episode is an articulation of *différance* that pushes the diaspora towards the elusive point of arrival where, as Hall writes, "we will at last know exactly who it is we are."<sup>119</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

*The Lonely Londoners* stands as a precursor of significant transformation that takes place in the latter half of the twentieth century for both British and West Indian cultural landscapes. It's a novel where readers can feel and find the demographic and linguistic shift that continues to evolve into the present day. As Selvon participates in both the arrival of calypso and the West Indian literary renaissance, he has a hand in sculpting the image of England that's recognizable currently by chicken tikka masala, grime, and "wagwan?"—just as much as the country is known for landed gentry or Rolls Royce. Culture, by definition, is prone to cultivation. Hall explains:

Culture is a production. It has its raw materials, its resources, its 'work-of-production.' It depends on a knowledge of tradition as 'the changing same' and an effective set of genealogies. But what this 'detour through its pasts' does is to enable us, through culture, to produce ourselves anew, as new kinds of subjects. It is therefore not a question of what

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<sup>118</sup> Hall, "The Formation of the Diaspora Intellectual," 205.

<sup>119</sup> Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," 64.

our traditions make of us so much as what we make of our traditions. Paradoxically, our cultural identities, in any finished form, lie ahead of us. We are always in the process of cultural formation.<sup>120</sup>

This short excerpt strikes at the core of Hall's theory of cultural difference, where cultural identity never finds finality. Instead, culture and identity are both constantly in a state of deference, transforming due to change and production as trends, histories, and demographics fluctuate. This concept feels complicated, but it is only because cultural identity is inherently complex. The genealogy behind any cultural movement or work of art contains multitudes. It is important to note that the resources and raw materials that produced *The Lonely Londoners* had been active since at least the sixteenth century and collected from four separate continents. Calypso can be traced back to West Africa. The West Indian novel emerged in the Caribbean amid the collapse of the plantation economy. Selvon himself is of South Indian descent. Then, of course, this specific novel came to sight in London. This unique lineage isn't a consonance of four separate histories or cacophonies, it's a singular movement forced by colonialism. A comic, non-linear novel written in hybridized English about the isolation and thrills Black immigrants experience in the capital of the United Kingdom is a logical product of a culture shaped by violence, exploitation, and globalization. *The Lonely Londoners* is just as essential of a British novel as something of the realist tradition like George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, except in the fact that it gives exposure to the hidden figures of the narratives that made the empire so robust. Selvon's ability to sever these narratives—formally, stylistically, and linguistically—allows the reader to get a glimpse into the contradictions and complexities that add up to postcolonial London.

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<sup>120</sup> Hall, "Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts from Abroad," 222-223

The formal play with structure, along with the thematic insinuations of *The Lonely Londoners*, aren't easy to digest—despite Selvon's comic tone. English readers were quite frustrated with the lack of narrative coherence in the book. An initial review in the *Surrey Comet* refused to consider *The Lonely Londoners* as a novel, mainly because they faulted Selvon's denial to analyze the position of his characters.<sup>121</sup> Naturally, this isn't a totally preposterous complaint by the critic. It's understandable that white readers in the 1950's approached this novel to find an answer to why there were suddenly so many Black people in England. To Selvon, there is no need for a reason. As Moses says, "In fact, we is British subjects ... we have more right than any people from the damn continent to live and work in this country, and enjoy what this country have, because is we who bleed to make this country prosperous."<sup>122</sup> The idea that colonial subjects have as much right to belong in the "mother country" was alien to the English. Selvon's decision to present West Indians in London without any sentimental context is a subversion which challenges the fiction of British nationalism that presents the empire as the heroic center of the world. He gives his Black characters the agency to emigrate and settle for their own whims and benefits, and so decenters Great Britain to empower the West Indians. Another critique, from noted poet John Betjeman, was about the lack of a "connecting narrative" in *The Lonely Londoners*.<sup>123</sup> It's been mentioned already that Selvon deliberately wrote a plotless fiction with unresolved themes. These choices challenge ideas about nationalism, especially when compared with the structure standardized by the nineteenth century realist bildungsroman, where a discernible dramatic arc ends with the protagonist's destined position in their respected

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<sup>121</sup> Brown, "A Commoner Cosmopolitanism: Sam Selvon's Literary Forms," 129.

<sup>122</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 21.

<sup>123</sup> Brown, "A Commoner Cosmopolitanism: Sam Selvon's Literary Forms," 129.

society. These types of novels, popularized in England by Victorian writers like Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and Jane Austen, provide readers with a blueprint on how to assimilate into a national identity through careers and marriage. Selvon, therefore, deconstructs the building blocks of the accepted novel to present characters who are systemically outcast from the very same societies these previous novels seek to populate with relatable heroes. He sees no narrative route toward acceptance for his Black characters, especially in the pathways and story structures established by his nineteenth century predecessors. There is a difficulty in hanging onto a plotline in *The Lonely Londoners*, which ends in a series of unresolved character arcs, because Selvon is more interested in presenting his disillusionment with the United Kingdom—both the fiction and the nation. He pulls apart traditional definitions of England in this novel so future generations of Britons can put together some surprising and unfamiliar ways to articulate Englishness instead.

Contemporary England has changed significantly since the Windrush years. Third, fourth, and fifth generation Black Brits comfortably associate with their Britishness, Blackness, and Black-Britishness to complicate any simplified image or identity due to their embrace of difference.<sup>124</sup> This translates to how Black British artists transform culture in England—through visual arts and music most notably; media where figures like Steve McQueen (director of the movies *Hunger* and the Academy Award winning *12 Years a Slave*), FKA Twigs (musician behind the Mercury Prize finalist *LPI*, *Magdalene*, and *Eusexua*), and David Adjaye (architect of the National Museum of African American History and Culture) have shaped their respective fields to critical and popular acclaim—where modernity and complexity in form and content is appreciated rather than feared. The legacy these artists carry is directly tied to the Windrush

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<sup>124</sup> Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” 80.

years, and, as far as works of art go, *The Lonely Londoners* is a forerunner in this exercise of complicating static identity and form. It might seem like a stretch to claim that Selvon is directly responsible for this evolution, but his role in the cultural process isn't insignificant. When literature is isolated from the overall cultural milieu, Selvon's influence can be located as a predecessor to major contemporary writers like Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen, Zadie Smith, Andrea Levy, Guy Gunaratne, among many others. Therefore, his contributions are quite vital to the image of Black British culture as a whole. As Nasta concludes, "Selvon's improvisations in this his first London novel forged a shift in perspective which would not only change the way the city was seen, but 'Englishness' itself."<sup>125</sup>

With *The Lonely Londoners*, Selvon unlocks the language and structure to recreate England, especially for people of color. In the twenty-first century the literary canon has grown to include Gunaratne's potent and subversive *In Our Mad and Furious City*—the 2018 Dylan Thomas prize-winner, a contemporary tale of violence and poverty in multiracial London, where social divisions feel evermore severe and urgent. It's no coincidence that one of the three protagonists of the novel is named Selvon. Gunaratne places Selvon alongside major American writers Junot Díaz and William Faulkner, due to their uncompromising interpretations of language. He says, "All these writers encouraged me with their work to try and approach voice with rhythms and energy in mind."<sup>126</sup> Then there's Smith's dazzling 2000 debut *White Teeth*, now

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<sup>125</sup> Nasta, "Introduction," vii.

<sup>126</sup> Guy Gunaratne, "Man Booker Longlisted writer Guy Gunaratne speaks about his electrifying debut novel," interview by Sana Goyal, *Mint Lounge*, <https://lifestyle.livemint.com/how-to-lounge/books/man-booker-Prize-longlisted-writer-guy-gunaratne-speaks-about-his-electrifying-debut-novel-111644473792800.html>.

considered as classic of an evocation of London's diversity as the nineteenth-century fiction of Dickens. Such works have now become cornerstones of Caribbean, British, and global culture. Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* is central to their genealogies. His contributions to literature and art are pivotal because they helped inaugurate the process of cultural disintegration in England, where the brittleness of nationalism and identity are exposed through language and form to enable new, hybridized ways to express and capture the modern world.

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