

Caribbean Space

Lamming, Naipaul, and Federation

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Space, Nation, Exile

Any account of West Indian literature seems to have at its core the question of exile. This is in part because discussions of Caribbean literature have centered to a very large degree on the major writers of the “boom” period of the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of whom spent these decades in England in a condition of self-imposed exile. During this time influential writers such as George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Braithwaite, among others, first emerged, and around these figures both the English Caribbean literary canon and critical approaches to Caribbean literature have been constructed ever since. The identification of the themes and characteristic concerns of the writers of the 1950s and 1960s with Caribbean literature as such understandably has its limitations. Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh are right to point out that a sense of what constitutes Caribbean literature that is based solely on the work of these writers is “limited both in its narrow historical range and in its male and African-Caribbean bias.”¹

In this chapter I will be concerned almost entirely with an examination of

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specific works by two of these boom writers—Lamming’s “The Occasion for Speaking” and *The Emigrants* and Naipaul’s *The Middle Passage*—as well as a brief discussion of C. L. R. James’s *Beyond a Boundary*, written during the boom by a writer who first came to prominence in the 1930s. It is important to make clear at the outset that my analysis of these works is not intended to produce some general theory of Caribbean literature. It is not my intention or my desire here to make a claim about the thematic or formal characteristics of these particular texts that make them representative of West Indian literature as a whole. On the contrary, my interest in these writers and these particular works grows out the fact that I find them to be atypical of the literature of the 1950s and 1960s. As might be expected given my choice of these texts, they are atypical in a way that will allow me to flesh out some of the theoretical issues concerning national literature introduced in Chapter One. Taken together, these works—a critical essay, a novel, a travelogue, and a cultural history-memoir—exhibit a number of different strategies for explicitly “textualizing” space, that is, for representing or otherwise dealing with space within the text as an issue *for* the text. They do so with an explicit political end in mind. Writing at a moment of incredible social transformation—the end of colonialism, the rapid encroachment of modernity and modernization in the West Indies, the growing promise of national sovereignty—these texts constitute attempts to map the present and the future for the West Indies.

In the literature of this period a concern with space is inevitably linked to the nation and to the creation of a national space. In *The Emigrants*, Lamming undertakes an experiment in the creation of the spatial conditions necessary for the nation, while Naipaul’s *The Middle Passage* is one long howl about the nation’s impossibility in the West Indies. By suggesting that these works are atypical, I do not mean to give the impression that there are no other novels of the period that are not in some way concerned with the nation. It is in fact common to characterize this boom period of Caribbean writing with a general pronationalist stance that continues the political work initiated by the writers of the 1930s (such as Albert Gomes, C. L. R. James, and Alfred Mendes) and following World War II by the “little magazines” *Bim*, *Focus*, and *Kyk-over-al*.² In the aftermath of the failed West Indies Federation and the achievement of political independence by the major islands in the 1960s, writers working after the 1960s are seen either as no longer motivated by nationalism or as ambivalent about the results of these earlier national literary projects. It is possible, of course, to locate in any work of literature some indication of the national situation by pointing as much to what is

said as to what is left unsaid, as Stefano Harney does in his examination of Trinidadian literature in *Nationalism and Identity*.³ Harney manages to weave a nationalist narrative through his consideration of a number of novels that are linked mainly by the fact that they are all in some way “about” Trinidad. English Caribbean novels about childhood, such as Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Michael Anthony’s *The Year in San Fernando* (1965), and Ian McDonald’s *The Hummingbird Tree* (1969), have long been seen as metaphors or allegories for the development of the nation, and even the “barrackyard” novels of Roger Mais (*The Hills Were Joyful Together* [1953] and *Brother Man* [1954]) and Naipaul (*Miguel Street* [1959]) can be understood as “national” in the way they articulate the concrete, irreproducible particularity of daily life in Kingston and Port-of-Spain respectively. So the nation is hardly an absent concern of Caribbean literature as a whole during the 1950s and 1960s, a time when, as in so many other colonized regions, movements to achieve national independence assumed a daily importance in social and political life.

If these latter texts are “national” by virtue of their examination of the particular circumstances of life in the islands (in the manner of Anderson’s example of de Lizardi’s *El Periquillo Sarniento*),⁴ the four texts that will form the basis of this section may be seen as operating at the opposite pole from the yard novels. What makes these works unique in their concern with the nation is precisely that they are *not* descriptive, realistic narratives of specific places. These texts are, rather, direct attempts to constitute national *space*, to produce within one text, in other words, the “imagined community” that Benedict Anderson has shown to be most commonly the outcome of a complex, interrelated set of texts and contexts. What interests me in this chapter is the operation of a certain extreme form of national literature that stretches the operation of literature with respect to the nation to its limit.

While there are a number of reasons for these attempts to conjure national space out of nothingness, to quite literally try to fashion the nation through literature, the most important in the case of the West Indies is the project of federation, which forms the broad political context in which all of these works were written. The West Indies Federation was a brief political entity (1958–62) that proposed to join all of the various British colonies in the Caribbean into a new, independent national entity. In the four years that the federation formally existed, it was not yet a fully functioning political entity. Rather, an initial federal framework was established in order to open up more substantive discussions regarding the form of the new national institutions that would be the basis of a

new nation. But the federation failed to materialize because of in-fighting among the islands over such fundamental issues as the nature of the federal constitution, power-sharing arrangements in the new nation, the system by which representatives would be elected, and the like. Richer countries felt that the federation would mean rapid (and unsustainable) in-migration from poorer ones, and so wanted to establish limits on movement between the islands. And discussions on federation were from the beginning threatened by racial concerns: the large East Indian communities in Trinidad and Guyana, for instance, felt threatened by the prospect of a nation demographically dominated by Afro-Caribbean peoples. In the late stages of the negotiations, national leaders used the supposed threat of federation to enhance their own political standing; in essence, the discussions on federation, once started, quickly dissolved into inter- and intra-island politics.

The link between writing and federation is perhaps most explicit in the case of *The Middle Passage* and “The Occasion for Speaking,” which both appeared in 1960 in the middle of the federation’s short existence (1958–62). Both of these texts constitute in their own way a response to the promise and possibility of federation. There is more here than a coincidence of dates: these texts deal directly with the question of how to constitute a common political space extending beyond the geography of specific islands—the question that federation ultimately failed to answer. While by comparison *The Emigrants* appeared at a much earlier date (1954), the issues raised in the novel not only indicate the growing intellectual consensus on the need for federation (a consensus most vigorously voiced by C. L. R. James), but also identify the primary problem that would be encountered by federation: the need to create a means of national identification within an artificially constructed federal body—artificial even by comparison with the supposedly similar Commonwealth federations of Australia and Canada.⁵ Finally, C. L. R. James’s analysis of cricket in *Beyond a Boundary*, which appeared in 1963 when it was clear that the dream of federation was dead, announces the end of this literary experimentation with space and with the nation and suggests the importance of renewed attention to what might be called “place”—the specifics of cultural life in the islands rather than some common essence expressed in terms of a pan-Caribbean federation. For James, this meant that it was necessary to focus on elements of cultural production in the West Indies *other than* literature or the novel. James was no doubt the most outspoken voice in favor of federation as well as one of the critics most insistent about the need for a regional or national literature. In the wake of the end of the federation, *Beyond a Boundary* marks not so much a shift of position as a shift of priorities.

The ambiguous feelings James always expressed about the suitability of the novel as the best mode of cultural expression in the region are heightened in this book as he excavates and describes a practice that is both more “indigenous” and more deeply connected to the daily lives and practices of Caribbean peoples: in the shared love of cricket across the islands, he locates a different site on or through which a certain form of national space might yet be produced. And while James flirts with renewing the nation-space along this axis of identification, he ultimately opts for a politics of place that reveals some of the limits of the literary attempt to produce the space of the nation in the Caribbean.

The literary production of space for political purposes is an urgent issue for many decolonizing countries. The literary desire to produce the nation is expressed, for example, in both the criticism of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka and in the writings of the proponents of negritude (though here the space is pan-African or international) whom both criticize. It is also a central component of much critical reflection about the literary situation of “settler colonies” such as Canada, South Africa, and Australia, where there exist numerous examples of literary attempts to map, name, and domesticate non-European spaces through European languages and concepts. In the Caribbean, however, space inevitably was and is an even more important concept because of the particular circumstances of its geography — its “empirical” space, in other words. The “West Indies” is a space that can only be produced through several apparently contradictory operations: they are a group of islands that do not extend a pseudo-pod toward other, geographically similar islands divided among the colonial powers (for example, a vast gulf of space separates Dominica and Guadeloupe even though the actual distance between them can be measured in tens of miles); at the same time, they include Guyana, a country on the South American mainland, though again, not Belize or Honduras, even though these were also British colonies. The operations of these novels during the period of the establishment of the federation shows a further heightening of these contradictions, as questions of race are introduced into the abstract difficulty of establishing some geographical relation between the countries of the West Indies (since this relation cannot be that of contiguity, which is perhaps the most basic requirement for the establishment of national space). Since even racially the islands are enormously diverse — a fact that Lamming seems at times to forget and that Naipaul sees as precisely the source of the West Indian “problem” — it seems that it is only the common experience with the British Empire that can hold the states of the West Indies together as a common nation. This is an inglorious and troubling basis for a

federation of states intent on declaring their freedom from Empire, and introduces yet another problem that must somehow be accounted for and resolved in the creation of national space.

There is a further contradiction that needs to be addressed: exile. If exile is not the entire story of Caribbean literature, it is nevertheless difficult to analyze the literature of the 1950s and 1960s without considering the meaning and consequences of exile—what Simon Gikandi has called “the ground zero of West Indian literature.”⁶ The scale on which the generation of British Caribbean writers after World War II immigrated to London, the “literary capital” of Empire, is perhaps unprecedented in literary history. Between 1948 and 1953, Edgar Mittelholzer, William Richardson, Samuel Selvon, Andrew Salkey, Mais, and Lamming—a who’s who of a whole generation of writers from the British Caribbean—all made the destabilizing move across the Atlantic; Naipaul, Harris, Jamaica Kincaid, Neil Bissonnath, and others would leave the Caribbean in the years to come, now moving to Toronto or New York as well as to London as the latter’s influence as a literary center declined and as immigration between the Caribbean and Britain became more difficult after the passage of the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill in 1962.

One reason the Caribbean has become a site to which an increasing amount of critical attention has been paid is because it has been seen as a paradigmatic space for the study of colonialism and postcolonialism, a space in which all of the contradictions and ambiguities of the colonial project have been revealed with particular acuteness. This is true of the Caribbean experience of exile as well: the social and cultural logic governing the exile of Caribbean writers reveals the underlying operations of the institution of literature in the colonies more generally (though specific historical differences always have to be taken into account). Unlike the positions of exile that Achebe, Soyinka and other Nigerian writers have had to occupy on and off since Nigerian independence in 1960 (especially following the Biafran conflict), the exile of Caribbean writers was not political (in the restricted sense of this term), but was motivated primarily by social and economic concerns: it was largely the desire of these writers to be *writers*, to write for an audience, and to make a career as writers that led them into self-imposed exile abroad. The economic and social conditions necessary to produce a viable local literature—a book publishing and distribution system, a relatively large and leisured middle-class, a high level of literacy—were not present in the Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s. If Caribbean writing was to be a possibility, then the only option was to go abroad where the conditions for writing were more favorable. The decision to

undertake exile has too often been seen as nothing more than the result of numerous individual career decisions. An assessment of the conditions of possibility of exile will show instead that it is one of the products of an attempt to connect literature and space — to write a *national* literature and a *literature* that is national.

Exile is important for an analysis of the interest in the nation-space in the Caribbean during the period of federation not simply because of the biographical circumstances of most Caribbean writers. I agree with Simon Gikandi, who suggests in his excellent book *Writing in Limbo* that “exile is not a subjective quest by the Caribbean avant-garde to escape the fixed and fetishized places in the colonial.”⁷ What is at issue in the exile of all these writers is, rather, a certain conception of writing as a particular kind of intellectual activity with a unique social and political function. To put this in a different register, what is assumed at the outset by these exiled writers is the whole of bourgeois aesthetics: the historical division of labor that makes writing into a specific career, the idea of literature as a special kind of writing whose privileged domain is that of subjectivity — in other words, a notion of the relationship of the writer and writing to the rest of the culture that from the outset positions its political effectivity within strictly demarcated limits. The distance and autonomy of modernist aesthetics that Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, shows to be yet another element of class distinction in the West reappears here in the emptiness and abstractness of a national space imagined from afar.⁸ For what is imagined in these works is not the specificities of place, a home that would act as a resolution to exile and would also permit a reading of all the contradictory forces that go into the production of place and space, but the creation of a space that would make writing (and politics) possible: the abstract space of modernity so ably embodied in the form of the nation.

Writing Exile: “The Occasion for Speaking”

The interplay between nationalism and exile is like Hegel’s dialectic of servant and master, oppositions informing and constituting each other. All nationalisms in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement.

— EDWARD SAID⁹

Our workers in literature and art must carry out their own work in literature and art, but the task of understanding people and getting to know them properly has the highest priority. How have our workers in literature and art performed in this respect until now? I would say that until now they have been heroes without a bat-

tlefield, remote and uncomprehending. What do I mean by remote? Remote from the people. Workers in literature and art are unfamiliar with the people they write about and with the people who read their work, or else have actually become estranged from them. Our workers in literature and art are not familiar with workers, peasants, soldiers, or even their cadres. What do I mean by uncomprehending? Not comprehending their language. Yours is the language of intellectuals, theirs is the language of the popular masses.

— MAO ZEDONG¹⁰

Exile is one of many tropes in postcolonial criticism that has taken on important epistemic and historical significance. It has been used to describe not only the state of those who have been forced to make the traumatic transition from one land to another but also to refer more generally to any kind of break with an “authentic” relationship, whether to the land, to history, to language, or to place. In this sense, it is possible to suggest, at least metaphorically, that one outcome of the twentieth century has been to make exile a universal condition, whether this takes the form of rootless suburban existence in the West, the collapse of traditional ways of life under the relentless pressures of modernization, or the global diasporic movement of peoples.¹¹ It has also been asserted that this universal condition is one that the figure of the literary or intellectual exile, in particular the postcolonial intellectual, is in a unique position to understand and comment on. As Edward Said writes, “liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, has now shifted from the settled, established and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentred, and exilic energies, whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages.”¹²

Whether or not Said’s vision of the intellectual and the migrant are accurate, in the Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s exile must be seen as the result of a process different from the one he suggests here. The energies of Caribbean exile are not born out of the rejection of the “domesticated dynamics of culture,” a phrase that invokes the nation and national culture. On the contrary, exile is born out of these very dynamics. Critics such as Said and Gikandi have suggested that exile is a necessary first step in the project of decolonization.¹³ Gikandi, for instance, suggests that in the Caribbean the loss represented by exile provides the only conditions from which national consciousness could develop.¹⁴ This relationship between exile and nationalism is reflected in the works that I look at

here. What I will consider is how a missing third term in this relationship—literature—mediates and transforms the connection between exile and nationalism in complicated ways that need to be clearly laid out.

The link between exile, the nation, and literature is perhaps most thoroughly articulated in George Lamming's influential essay "The Occasion for Speaking."¹⁵ Written in the midst of the region's experimentation with federation, Lamming's essay is both the definitive attempt by a West Indian writer to provide a rationale for his self-chosen exile and also a text that has been important in establishing exile as a theme of postcolonial literary studies. The explanation of the causes of exile is couched by Lamming in the Fanonian vocabulary of the psychic pressures of colonialism on the Caribbean subject and, in particular, the Caribbean writer.¹⁶ For example, Lamming points out that the Caribbean writer has no literary history, that writing appears to him as something that exists only abroad, that his language is not "authentic" but borrowed, and so on. These are, for him, the cultural conditions that form the psychic limits and possibilities of writing in the Caribbean; they also form a set of problems that have been described as those commonly faced by the postcolonial writer. These conditions produce two nearly contradictory impulses in Lamming's essay. On the one hand, Lamming suggests that the writer must assume the role of exile because of the enormous number of barriers that stand in the way of the colonial writer that prevent him from being a writer at all. He writes that "these men had to leave if they were going to function as writers since books, in that particular colonial conception of literature, were not—meaning, too, are not supposed to be—written by natives" (OS 27). On the other hand, Lamming articulates the unique role and importance of the novel in producing a regional or national culture in which these very same barriers would hopefully no longer be present. Just as the reasons for exile are described in terms of an oppressive subjective structure that disables writing, the specificity of the novel's task is explained in terms of its ability to identify and counteract these subjective structures. A set of imbedded contradictions develop, a knot of paradoxes that only exile can cut: the impossibility of writing at home until a writing has already taken place that would produce the conditions of "home," i.e., a genuine nation; the writing of texts that articulate a national culture only for an audience that will remain forever foreign to this culture, since it is difficult for these texts to reenter the colonial space they left behind.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon hoped to bring about the end of the "massive psychoexistential complex" created by the "juxtaposition of white and black

“races,” in part through his analysis of it.¹⁷ At the same time, he is aware that “there will be an authentic disalienation only to the degree to which things in their most materialistic meaning of the world will have been restored to their proper places.”¹⁸ Like Fanon, Lamming also identifies two levels on which the legacy of colonialism must be fought. There are, of course, political or economic reasons why, at the time Lamming was writing, the Caribbean was not yet politically independent. In the case of the Caribbean, however, Lamming identifies the real problem as due not to a failure to take definitive political action, but to “colonialism [as] the very base and structure of the West Indian’s cultural awareness” (OS 35). Lamming suggests that for this reason the effects of colonialism on the Caribbean are unique in the entire colonized world: “What the West Indian shares with the African is a common political predicament: a predicament which we call colonial; but the word colonial has a deeper meaning for the West Indian than it has for the African. The African, in spite of his modernity, has never been wholly severed from the cradle of a continuous culture and tradition. His colonialism mainly takes the form of lack of privilege in organizing the day to day affairs of his country. This state of affairs is almost at an end; and its end is the result of the African’s persistent and effective demand for political freedom” (OS 34).

What Fanon describes in *Black Skin* as an ontological condition arising throughout the colonized world based on the structural relationship of race and power between black and white, colonized and colonizer, Lamming claims here uniquely for the West Indies. The movements and actions against colonialism launched around the world following World War II have, in Lamming’s view, not been mirrored in the West Indies because of this “absolute dependence” (OS 35) on the values of the colonizer. With apparent disregard for the prewar efforts of trade organizations and labor unions to bring about representative democracy in the region, and the political gains achieved by figures such as Norman Manley, Grantley Adams, Eric Williams, and Cheddi Jagan in the decade leading up to the achievement of formal political independence throughout the English Caribbean, Lamming writes that in the Caribbean “the desire to be free, the ambition to make their own laws and regulate life according to their own impulses, is dormant” (OS 35).¹⁹ To rectify this requires above all a modification of this “structure of awareness” in the West Indies; and it is the novel that for Lamming has a privileged role in effecting this phase-change of awareness.

For Lamming, the Caribbean is a special case because unlike other colonial countries, “cultural awareness” has effectively become the base to the eco-

conomic and political superstructure (an inversion of the typical relation between these terms), and so like any base-superstructure relationship the former must be changed before significant effects can be seen in the latter. It seems that for Lamming, this is what the novel alone is able to do, a fact that grants the novelist an important and historic role, and, indeed, Lamming says that the advent of the novel in the Caribbean is one of the three most significant historical events in the region (OS 37–38). This claim about the subjective energies of the novel is fraught with problems that reflect the complexities of bringing about (in Jameson's terms) a cultural revolution in the West Indies. For instance, the fact that the subject of the West Indian novel is, as Lamming claims, "peasant" as opposed to the middle-class orientation of the British novel (OS 38), does not alter the fact that the form of the novel, the very idea of its potential effects, as well as its place within the culture — the assumption of its deep link to subjectivity and inner experience, for example — remain middle class and Western. Of course, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o has shown in his own work, "the social or even national basis of the origins of an important discovery or any invention is not necessarily a determinant of the uses to which it can be put by its inheritors."²⁰ Nevertheless, rather than modifying or altering the "cultural awareness" of the West Indian subject, the novel may act in a contrary fashion, reinforcing the damage to the West Indian's awareness, not least through an emphasis on the cultural or political necessity of the novel itself. This possibility can be seen, for example, in Lamming's assumption that it is writing above all else, in a region with neither a large leisured middle class or a high literacy level, that will bring about political change. This causes him to misrepresent the political situation in the Caribbean — to render impulses toward independence "dormant" and to place the West Indian within a desperately disabling psychoexistential complex. But as Gordon Rohlehr writes, "long before the advent of the West Indian novelist, the peasant was visibly working against tremendous odds towards an essential independence . . . writers reflected an awareness which had been there for some time; they could neither create nor restore what was already present in the creative struggle, rebellion and movement of the West Indian people."²¹

What is it for Lamming that the writing of literature is supposed to accomplish that, one would presume, other avenues of experience and activity cannot? And why or how does the novel in particular help to dissipate the West Indian's colonial structure of thinking? The novel, more than any other cultural form, has long been seen by writers, critics, and theorists of varying orientations as being uniquely able to represent and reveal the workings of ideology (Fredric Jameson

has described it as “the privileged instrument of the analysis of reality”²² and also to disrupt this ideology. This is potentially true of even the most retrograde forms of literature, provided they are read in the right way: all literature expresses the political unconscious of its formative moment. This is essentially how Lamming views the operations of the Caribbean novel. In part, Lamming’s way of understanding how the novel ruptures the West Indian’s colonial awareness is through its ability to represent what György Lukács has called “totality.” Gikandi suggests that Lamming is attracted to the novel because “narrative offered a form and strategy for restoring West Indian character to history.”²³ But even more strongly expressed in “The Occasion for Speaking” is the idea that the political work of the novel is conducted through the specific operation of representation: the introduction to the novel of peoples and thematics that have never before been represented in this form. Lamming writes that “the novelist was the first to relate the West Indian experience from the inside . . . for the first time, the West Indian peasant became other than a cheap source of labour. He became, through the novelist’s eye, a living existence, living in silence and joy and fear, involved in riot and carnival. It is the West Indian novel that has restored the West Indian peasant to his true and original status of personality” (OS 39).

By being admitted into the space of the novel, the peasant undergoes a momentous political change. If the novel has the power to give life to the peasant in the way Lamming describes, the importance of the novel for the Caribbean cannot be underestimated. But then again, the claims that Lamming makes for the novel seem excessive and politically suspect. While making the peasant the subject of the novel does have effects above and beyond simply prompting a reconsideration of the appropriate themes and concerns of literature (a strictly disciplinary politics), this shift in representation does not by itself constitute a corresponding shift in the position of the peasant in social and economic terms or, for that matter, in terms of a more general shift of their cultural awareness. Representation does not all at once break up the accreted habits of subalternity to bring about a cultural revolution.

The real appeal of the novel for Lamming is that it also represents a pedagogic technology: it is a means of transmission or education. The novel has the potential to be a didactic form unlike any other: it is a mode of transmission that accomplishes the miraculous feat of passing an incendiary note scribbled by one person to a multitude, enflaming an entire nation as it passes through it. It is because this form has the potential to be so widely dispersed, so universally consumed, that the act of writing a novel or of reading one can become a legiti-

mate way of pursuing politics outside of the determinations of a dominant ideology that always limits the scope of what counts as the space of politics; the expansion of the space of politics in the twentieth century into that of cultural production and reproduction, which has been suggested by thinkers as diverse as Antonio Gramsci and Amílcar Cabral, has helped to reinforce the political viability of these acts. At one point in "The Occasion for Speaking," Lamming laments the fact that while in Nigeria writers such as Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi also have the opportunity to be radio broadcasters, this same opportunity is not available to Caribbean writers, or at least not on native soil (OS 48). It is this, then, that seems to be Lamming's ultimate desire: the novelist as radio host. But while radio has the ability to reach a mass audience even in relatively poor areas of the world, the novel has much greater material and social constraints. This fact is, for Lamming, not something that should concern the writer; it does not mark a failure of the writer or indicate, potentially, the irrelevance of the novel to postcolonial politics. Rather, the lack of an audience for the Caribbean novel is seen as the responsibility of politicians, and it is they who must work to make the conditions for writing possible. On this point Lamming is clear: "These [Caribbean] writers will never be required in the West Indies until their meaning and their contribution have been established in national and political terms. And it is not their job to establish themselves in this way. Their business is to get on with writing their books. The rest must be done by men like Eric Williams, the Chief Minister of Trinidad, and C. L. R. James" (OS 48).

If there is no audience for the Caribbean novel, no native "peasant" audience on whom the novel can work its political effects, the question, "For whom, then, do we write?" must be raised. And while Lamming does pose this question, he does not seem to take it as a major epistemological or political problem. In "The Occasion for Speaking," he acknowledges that the primary readership for the Caribbean novel is a foreign audience, and not the Caribbean middle class, but he passes very quickly from this to ponder the question of whether or not Caribbean writers should market their works in Communist countries (OS 43). Other novelists, much more troubled by the gap existing between the postcolonial writer and his or her readership, have attempted to reconceive the character of the novel, to modify it in some way in order to bring about potentially wider effects, or have attempted to construct a hermeneutic operation or an epistemology of some sort, an interpretive machine that would help to bridge this gap. Perhaps the best-known example of this is Ngugi wa Thiong'o's decision to write novels in Gikuyu, altered not only in terms of their language, but in their form, and

accompanied by a significant effort to overcome the usual problems of distribution to a nonurban, non-middle class.²⁴ Lamming makes no such concessions to his audience: he asserts a connection, claiming that although “the education of these [Caribbean] writers is more or less middle-class Western culture, and particularly English culture . . . the substance of their books, the general motives and directions, are peasant” (OS 38). The identity he affirms between West Indian writers and Western culture is not something that seems to require any sort of theoretical struggle before the peasant can, through the writer, speak in his or her “own” voice. The relationship to the peasant is simply asserted, and the fact that the peasant appears as the dominant subject of the novel — a fact about the Caribbean novel that Rohlehr disputes²⁵ — is, for Lamming, guarantee enough of the necessity of the novel and of its positive political effects.

Realizing the need for more than an assertion of identity between writer and peasant, Lamming has proposed more recently an operation that might bring the novelist and his audience closer together:

I would propose that the essential and supreme function of the critic/intellectual, in our circumstances, is to be a mediator of the text; and the area of mediation must travel beyond the enclave of the specialist and student, or specialist in contention with specialist. It must attempt to travel beyond this domain of mediation to link the human substance of the text to the collective consciousness, the continuing social reality which has, in fact, nurtured the imagination of the writers. So the critic/intellectual, in our circumstance (which requires the compiling, preserving, and disseminating of the native inventory), needs also to cultivate the skills of the journalist, the temperament of urgency so common in the evangelist, intervening in public debate over issues that he or she can easily identify in the literary texts that are mediated.²⁶

But here, too, the text (and it is clear that Lamming is referring to the literary text above all else) remains essential. The literary text remains the starting point for politics, and Lamming’s critic-intellectual must learn to speak to a wider audience in order, ultimately, to lead this audience back to the novel by means of his or her work of “mediation.” If the earlier relationship between writer and peasant was undertheorized, it is now too one-sided: the mass must be transformed so that it may come to occupy the position of knowledge that the literary intellectual already occupies. After several decades of writing by feminist and antifoundationalist scholars that has attacked this notion of the intellectual as the figure who speaks for those who are unable to speak for themselves, Lamming’s view of the intellectual is troubling, to say the least.

My main intent here is not to expose the failings of “The Occasion for Speaking,” to question its claims, or to challenge its politics, but to show how a certain understanding of the function of literature or literary writing produces a specific framing of the nation and of the problem of cultural revolution. Lamming’s essay begins with a division of intellectual labor into the spheres of culture and political economy. From this beginning, a series of conclusions are drawn that together produce the links between literature-nation-exile. There is, first, the idea that the central task with respect to colonialism involves the reparation of a damaged consciousness and subjectivity. Second, until this first task is accomplished, there is no possibility of conducting “normal” politics, as evidenced by the fact that nothing seems to be happening politically (or at least this is his claim). In other words, the politics of consciousness must precede any other politics. Third, the politics of repairing a damaged cultural awareness is seen to take place within literature, particularly in the novel, since it is the space in which individual and social consciousness is somehow represented and, by virtue of the transmissibility of its “message,” the space that is able to turn a subjective politics into a social one. Or at least, it has the *potential* to do so: in the Caribbean, this potential is always delayed because there is no audience that could produce within itself this miraculous transformation. And so, because the entire space of politics is thus closed off, rendered impenetrable, the writer must go into exile. This exile only further confirms the very first and second conclusions, transforming them in the process into a truth about the character of the present that then becomes a guiding principle of intellectual practice.

It is the choice of exile that Lamming sets out to explain; in the process of explaining it, he misrecognizes it and produces it as an epistemological category. What produces the condition of exile — “exile” as opposed to a term such as “emigrancy” — is not, finally, some general structural condition of the (post)colonial subject, but perhaps only one aspect of it that has a resonance within an elite: a belief that literature is *more than* another form of writing, that it possesses almost magical powers that make possible a resolution of political problems at the level of the aesthetic. And this understanding of literature needs to be seen as intimately related to the concept of the nation. When Lamming discusses the life of the peasant as the central concern of Caribbean literature, he does so as a way of connecting the interests of the intellectual (literature) with the authenticity of people (the nation). Lamming makes clear that the responsibility of the novel is to make the Caribbean aware of itself as a national space, perhaps to even create this space for the first time. It is a very particular sense of the nation that is invoked by Lamming, with political consequences for both the peasant and the

intellectual. It seems that the peasant enters the novel only as the citizen of a nation-space in which the writer also has a function. In other words, politics can return to the islands only when the particularities of peasant life, the specific practices and activities connected to life in particular places, have been subordinated or elevated to the more general space of the nation — when the peasants understand themselves no longer as inhabitants of a village, St. Mary's Parish, or even of Jamaica, but as citizens of the West Indies. This is the project of both federation and of Lamming's novel, *The Emigrants*.

The Intellectual's Nation: George Lamming's *The Emigrants*

"This West Indies talk is w'at a class o' doctor call symptomatic."

— GEORGE LAMMING²⁷

The connection between space, nation, and literature in the figure of exile appears with particular force in Lamming's *The Emigrants*. It may be said that all of his novels attempt to deal with the West Indies as whole. Of all the Caribbean novelists writing in the 1950s, only Lamming does not attempt to write the history of a specific place, a particular segment of Caribbean experience. While Lamming's first novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, bears a resemblance to a novel such as Roger Mais's *The Hills Were Joyful Together* in its intimate and detailed depiction of the life of a particular, isolated community, it is important to remember that the novel is set in San Cristobal, a fictional island that appears again in *Of Innocence and Experience*, *Natives of My Person*, *Season of Adventure*, and *Water with Berries*. It is not enough for Lamming to write about a specific place. His aim seems to be to write the history of the West Indies in general through the production of a typical Caribbean island that does not synthesize the differences between each island but, rather, attempts to distill their ontological and epistemological essence.

This process is made apparent in Lamming's use of the Caliban-Prospero relationship as a general philosophical model of the relationship between colonized and colonizer. This abstract model of intersubjective relations is used as the basis for character development in all of Lamming's novels, and as such they often read as the articulation of theoretical or philosophical positions that are exemplified rather than developed through novelistic situations. Since Lamming himself has highlighted the primacy of the Caliban-Prospero relationship in his work in *The Pleasures of Exile*, this is a model that has also somewhat unreflectively

been employed as the primary critical means of reading Lamming's work as an attempt at an extended and consistent analysis of Caribbean experience.²⁸ Lamming's use of abstract models as a means of describing Caribbean experience can be seen as well in his use of the child characters Singh, Lee, and Bob, who appear in *The Pleasures of Exile* and *Of Age and Innocence*²⁹ and relate the story of the resistance of the "Tribe Boys" to European colonization. These children are intended by Lamming to represent allegorically the mixed racial composition of the islands (Singh and Lee, the children of Indian and Chinese indentured workers, Bob, the child of African slaves). These three boys also represent the political future of the islands, a future that is possible only if the internal racial problems of the islands are overcome through the production of such innocent clusters of friends. What is collapsed in the allegorical friendship of these three boys in the imagined setting of San Cristobal is the enormously different racial composition of each West Indian country. The continued Amerindian presence is also forgotten, as is the process of creolization that has made it difficult to assemble such racial "natural kinds" into mixed groups.

Lamming's second novel, *The Emigrants*, constitutes his most explicit attempt to define the essence of what makes up the space of the West Indies as a whole. From what has been said thus far, it is not surprising that this quest for essence should intersect with the project of defining a West Indian nation-state. In part because of the disappearance of the imagined island of San Cristobal and the reemergence of the real islands subsumed within it, *The Emigrants* is uncharacteristic of Lamming's other novels. Like his other novels, it explores one dimension of what will be an attempt (through the "system" of his entire literary output) to provide a complete account of Caribbean experience; unlike them, however, it is composed of an odd assortment of gestures and positions that never manage to cohere into a whole. While this can be seen as a modernist strategy whose intent is to exemplify the state of the colonial mind,³⁰ my reading will suggest that the explanation lies elsewhere. If San Cristobal does not appear in this novel, it is because the task of the novel is to produce this composite island—now called "the West Indies"—not from a more or less abstract determination of what the West Indies might be, but out of the fragments of real islands and the real inhabitants of those islands.

As the title suggests, *The Emigrants* explores the experience of a group of West Indians who emigrate to London in the early 1950s. In one respect, it is possible to view the novel as the natural continuation of the narrative begun in *In the Castle of My Skin*, both in terms of its autobiographical relationship to Lamming's

own life and to the position that *The Emigrants* occupies in the total system of Lamming's novels. In terms of its exploration of the immigrant experience, specifically that of the colonized individual traveling "back" to the center of Empire, the novel is among the first texts to explore the psychological trauma of the racialized encounter with the reality of imagined imperial "home";³¹ indeed, it explores in great detail the way in which the concept of "home" is in fact doubly displaced by emigration. One of the gravest consequences of emigration is that it brings about a total destruction of any notion of "home" or belonging: it is discovered that the new country can never substitute for the home that has been left behind; the home left behind is, correspondingly, nostalgically recreated from afar in such a way that any subsequent return to this place will find it wanting: no longer home, but a place from which the immigrant is also displaced. In its attention to the psychological and philosophical dimensions of the colonial and postcolonial experience, Lamming's novel reads like the English-language literary equivalent of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, a text that appears to have had an influence on *The Emigrants*.

If we see the novel in this context, it appears that its main function is the performance of the kind of sociodiagnostic that Fanon undertakes in *Black Skin*. Since the theme is emigration, this sociodiagnostic concerns the trauma of digging up one's roots in the hopes of transplanting them in more fertile soil elsewhere. With respect to colonialism, a *literary* examination of emigration might be thought to have the advantage of bringing to light all of its ontological effects, the deep homelessness that is felt in both the colonies and in the imperial center from which it was supposed that the meaning and logic of the colonies emanate. And the bulk of the novel largely fulfills these expectations. It is primarily a narrative of the difficulties and disappointments that the group of West Indian emigrants it follows experience after arriving in England with such high hopes. The first sight of England, viewed from the ship after its long journey from the Caribbean, marks perhaps the single greatest moment of crushed expectations in the novel. The imagined glories of England that had no doubt been ceaselessly trumpeted to all of the emigrants during their lives in the colonies crumble in the face of the remorseless reality of the ugly, squat-gray island lying before them:

Beyond the first mild rising of the land a straight and narrow spate of red brick buildings covered the hills, and further on an anonymous greyness that held within it neither hills nor houses. On the other side in the distance there was a moderately high stone construction topped with a metal fan that spun in the wind. It looked like

the old plantation windmills of the tropics and Collis turned to ask his neighbour whether he could say what purpose it served . . .

“It’s a working-class district,” the man said, and Collis, feeling vaguely that he was being drawn into something he didn’t understand, asked the man how he knew.

“You’ll learn,” the man said, pulling the beret tight over his head. The man kept his glance towards the houses, seeing, it would seem, some vision of the past or the future. Collis watched him suspiciously as though he were a dealer on the black market, a detective, or an illicit voyager. (E 99)

England is revealed as a place like any other. Instead of a land that can offer the emigrants the better life that they had hoped for, it bears a resemblance to the plantation economies left behind. Once the real England is substituted for the imagined one — a process that has slowly been taking place as the emigrants learn about housing and labor shortages in England and that is prefigured forcefully when Higgins learns that the cooking school he had planned to attend has been closed — the emigrants also immediately sense that too much has been given up for comparatively little in return. As the emigrants pass through customs, Lamming shifts perspective away from the emigrants to the customs officials, who question the desire of these colonial masses to come to England. Imagined from the side of England, it is impossible to comprehend why the emigrants would leave the paradisaical lassitude of the sun-baked islands for the unpromising chill of England (E 108).

The emigrants have substituted a harsh set of living conditions for harsher ones, a world of perhaps numbing familiarity and limited possibilities for one in which they are marked forever as outsiders by their skin color and foreign accents. Yet while everything about *The Emigrants*, beginning with its title, suggests that the main project of the text is to explore the situation of those colonials that dared to make the trip “home,” the novel’s form and structure necessitate a different reading of its content, one that leads to different conclusions as to what this novel is finally “about.” There is a potential in Lamming’s text for a profound meditation on the effects of modernity on colonized subjects, the effects of its decomposition and recomposition of the subject at the moment when the boundaries between the center and the margin become forever blurred. If this potential is incompletely actualized, it is because *The Emigrants* is only incidentally about emigration. It is, in fact, less a text about the intrusion of modernity on Caribbean peoples, than about the possibilities of space, understood here as the possibility of a West Indian nation of the sort that federation attempted to bring into existence.

The Emigrants is divided into three sections: “1. A Voyage,” “2. Rooms and Residents,” and “3. Another Time.” The last two sections of the novel are set in England: “Rooms and Residents” in the period immediately following the emigrants’ arrival, when most of the characters are living together in a hostel (and then also, in an abrupt shift of time near the end of the section, the period immediately following the closing of the hostel); “Another Time” describes a period somewhat further along, two days in the future that are described (in the title of two subsections) as “Today” and “The Day Before.” In terms of both page length and the novel’s own temporality, the majority of the novel is concerned with describing the emigrants’ experience in England. From even a brief description, it is possible to imagine the contents of these final two sections: the communal life the emigrants experience while at the hostel is broken up once the hostel is closed and the group that traveled together from the Caribbean becomes fragmented as each of them drifts in their own way into the “other time” of a tenuous existence in a racist postwar England.

This is indeed the narrative that guides these latter sections of the novel. But the specific moments or episodes of this narrative betray a different set of concerns. While Lamming shows the progressive alienation experienced by each of the emigrants over the course of the novel, the causes of this alienation are rarely located where one might expect: in the specifics of the racial and class discrimination that the emigrants experience as a result of their loss of community and place. At times it appears as if the episodes in the final two sections of the book are only incidentally set in England: England is more an abstract “backdrop” against which the emigrants’ feelings of alienation are manifested than an active element, a reason for this alienation.³² Each of the two sections builds toward the revelation of the “logic” that links together what appear to be disparate episodes in which various emigrants appear and disappear. It is this logic which is primary, whereas the setting (and causality) of England is secondary.

The major event of the second section appears initially to be Higgins’s arrest for what is thought to be drug possession, which confirms his tragic fall from the position of the most self-assured of the emigrants to the one least able to deal with life in England. At the end of the section, however, it is revealed that the “powder” Higgins was carrying for Azi was burnt bull’s testicles: an aphrodisiac. This “Love Vine” is a concoction made up for Frederick, the main British character in the novel, who is introduced into the narrative once the emigrants arrive in England; it is only through a combination of the Love Vine and the voyeuristic pleasure of watching his wife make love to a black man or woman that he is able to

achieve orgasm. In a novel about Caribbean emigrants, it is Frederick's story and that of Azi, his African friend, that become disconcertingly the organizing principles of the narrative, however minimal this might be; it is this to which the stories in all of the other episodes ultimately relate. The third section is less organized, but its most important story, and the most startling example of plot-resolution in the novel, also concern Frederick. Miss Bis, who emigrated from Trinidad because she had become the subject of a well-known calypso for being "ruined" by a white man, becomes Frederick's lover; Frederick, who is remorseful about having ruined a woman when he served in the colonial office in Trinidad years earlier, decides to marry Miss Bis as a means of restituting his earlier error. Lamming expects us to believe that each does not recognize the other because they have changed so much in appearance in the intervening years — one of the "coincidences" that appear with regularity in Lamming's novels that Simon Gikandi characterizes as a "strategic narrative possibility that allows the writer to deconstruct the colonial vision and to introduce the narrative of Caribbean history into the text."³³ The point, however, is that once again Frederick's story comes to assume more weight than the emigrants': it is brought to the fore, whereas narratives of the other characters' experiences — Queenie, Higgins, and even Dickson — begin to appear with less frequency, growing slowly invisible over the course of the novel.

If the sexual peccadilloes and unusual personal history of an Englishman seem to be the organizing principles of the events in "Rooms and Residents," a fact that detracts from a consideration of what happens to each of the emigrants themselves, it is hard to resist a metaphorical or allegorical reading of Frederick's practices and the nature of his involvement with the emigrants. This is especially suggested by the fact that although Frederick is presented as a friend of the emigrants and is disdainful of the colonial project in which he himself was earlier involved (suggesting at one point, for example, a need for anthropologists to study the strange customs of the English instead of those of the Africans [E 157]), virtually all of the emigrants we meet on the voyage to England are drawn into the web of his perverse sexual practices. In the absence of specific episodes in which the emigrant experience is diagnosed and dissected, that is, specific moments in which the emigrants interact directly with the social environment that they now find themselves in, the presence of Frederick transforms the novel into one that is perhaps no longer literally about emigration, but one that pursues the theme of emigration through a narrative concerning the exoticization, objectification, and debasement of the body of the Other; this is, again, reminiscent of

Fanon's speculations about the sexual politics of race in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and, indeed, the sexualization of the Other figures in one way or another in all of Lamming's novels (most strikingly in *Water with Berries*). Higgins, Azi, Collis, Queenie, and Miss Bis are all used by Frederick in one way or another to satisfy his sexual desire, and with striking consequences; Higgins is psychologically devastated by his run-in with the police over the "powder," Queenie loses her life, Collis drifts into a deep anomie. The fact that the rest of the emigrants also grow more ghostly and ever more psychologically unstable over the course of the novel can be read as evidence of the effects of emigration and colonialism on the ontology of the Other.

Before such a reading becomes feasible (and readings of the novel as a text about psychology and alienation abound), it is necessary to consider the first section of the book and its relation to the sections that follow. That this novel is about alienation appears so obvious that critics have seldom bothered to describe the novel in detail, concentrating almost exclusively on the function of its fragmentary form. There is certainly an abundant vocabulary of alienation and objectification in *The Emigrants*. But it is significant that this vocabulary *does not* begin when the emigrants arrive in England. Rather, throughout the novel, specific characters undergo what can only be described as "existential" crises — crises of the will that manifest themselves in the evacuation of reason or meaning from the world and by the collapse of the ontological into the ontic. There are passages that without warning break away from the narrative: suddenly, living things become objects, characters find themselves transformed into mere things, and the contingency of history becomes an unbearable burden that mocks any human attempt at the production of meaning. Even in the second two sections, these moments of crisis are not only infrequently connected to Frederick's sexual objectification of the emigrants, but Frederick himself is beset by them: which suggests that whatever this crisis is it is a general one, a feature neither of a particular history or society, but of Being as such. In other words, whatever might be the cause of these crises is *already* a condition of the colonial subject, a condition that is not produced by emigration but only intensified by it.

It is then the significance of the first section of the novel that needs to be established. It would be a mistake to see "A Voyage," as simply providing a form of narrative continuity that shows how the main character of *In the Castle of My Skin*, G., makes it to England. This first section is not, in other words, simply a necessary literary passageway between the islands that makes possible a discussion of the circumstances faced by emigrants (circumstances that were faced by

Lamming himself). Rather, it seems to me that it is this section that is the real focus of the novel. For reasons that will become apparent, this focus cannot be sustained once the journey ends in England. The initial “logic” of the novel breaks down once the emigrants arrive, which is why the narrative fragments in the final two sections of the book and a governing logic needs to be located outside of the emigrants to pull the disparate episodes together. Once the emigrants become emigrants by arriving in England, the novel has lost its original direction and momentum, mainly because the project that it undertakes has *already* been accomplished, however paradoxically, however incompletely.

The voyage from the Caribbean permits Lamming to introduce the numerous characters in the novel whose fates will be intertwined when they reach England. The reason for the large number of characters that he introduces appears initially to be an attempt to exhaust all of the various possible dimensions of emigration through the presentation of a set of typical characters: Collis, the writer; Dickson, the teacher; Phillip, the student; the ex-RAF men, Tornado and the Governor; and Higgins, the working man. The emigrant women — Miss Bis, Queenie, and Lillian — are not presented as typical in this fashion. On the contrary, they are either mysteriously unknown (Queenie) or are attempting to render themselves anonymous (Miss Bis). In the end, however, the characters in *The Emigrants* are not meant to represent specific instances of emigrant experience. They are assembled on the ship from their separate islands in order to explore another possibility — the feasibility of a greater Caribbean nation and the means by which such a nation might be brought into existence.

“A Voyage” constitutes a literary experiment in nation-building; the remainder of the novel unintentionally reveals the consequences of this project. The journey to England by ship begins with a series of delays that are significant. When the ship winds its way through the Caribbean, picking up passengers from different islands, there is only waiting. The repeated lines concerning waiting — “We were all waiting for something to happen” (E 5), “We waited to see what would happen” (E 7), “We waited, sure that something would happen” (E 10), and so on — that so enervate the critic Mervyn Morris,³⁴ establish everything that will follow in the novel as the site of agency and action, by comparison. Furthermore, the action that follows is carried out by a group, by a “we,” rather than separately, by a number of “I”s. While Lamming shifts between first- and third-person narrative throughout the novel, these lines of waiting are the only moment in which one character, Collis, speaks for a collective “we.” That it is Collis, one of the characters who “stands in” for Lamming’s own experience as an emi-

grant, who speaks these lines is itself significant. The period of waiting lasts only until the ship has finally left the Caribbean altogether. It arises one last time after the ship sets out from the last Caribbean port in Guadeloupe: "The passengers, grouped or scattered here and there, were like men standing aimlessly at crossroads waiting for something to happen, hoping however that nothing would happen except the usual things: a pleasant voyage, a safe arrival. At the crossroads they would have thrown dice or dealt cards or simply talked, expecting something to happen: gains or losses to be registered; and hoping however that nothing would happen: the police might not arrive and they would return to find their houses where they had left them waiting to be inhabited, playing their part in the pleasant, uneventful passage that began every day with waking and ended always with sleep" (E 25). The prosaic, everyday world has been left behind. Though there is a hope that the voyage will be as uneventful as a night at the crossroads, what is to come is unknown, unpredictable, and hardly uneventful.

In the midst of all this waiting, an unnamed narrator (who is eventually identified as Dickson) recalls his reasons for leaving Trinidad. The central consideration is "freedom." Dickson has already experienced one sort of freedom, which he describes as "a child's freedom, the freedom too of some lately emancipated colonials" (E 8). This is the freedom he experiences as the result of leaving behind "the climate that caught [him] at birth" (E 8), by having left an unnamed island in the Caribbean to teach in Trinidad. Dickson has already experienced one kind of emigration, only to find that the freedom it offers is inadequate. Taking a day off from teaching in order to celebrate his birthday, the narrator stays at home reading a book called *The Living Novel*: "I read it as though by habit, page after page for several hours. The Novel was alive, though dead. This freedom was simply dead" (E 8–9). Later that night while drinking rum with a friend, the means by which he might gain a greater freedom that would presumably no longer be the "child's freedom" of "lately emancipated colonials" presents itself: the chance to leave the islands behind entirely and to begin all over again. Lamming suggests that the freedom for which Dickson searches and, for that matter, the "we" of the immigrants that Collis presumes to speak for, requires a clearing of the ground, a destruction of habit, a reconstitution of the self. This process will in some way also bring the novel back to life, so that *The Living Novel* in the West Indies is transformed into a tautology rather than an oxymoron.

The period of waiting that begins the novel is linked to the phenomenological weight of the Caribbean: even if Guadeloupe is a French-speaking island, its churches Catholic, its architecture a reflection of a different colonial history, the sheer physicality of its existence as one mode of the Caribbean does not yet permit

an expression of the agency possible within the relative freedom of the ship. Once the ship is in open waters, between the reality of the Caribbean and England, the ship becomes “like home; and they regarded its limitations as the limitations of a home for which they were responsible” (E 33). Even as they leave the space of the West Indies behind, they carry with them a sense of it, now displaced to the geography of the ship. It is a space that needs to be constituted anew, given the spatial conditions suggested by the ship. The emigrants begin to speak to one another almost immediately after Guadeloupe has been left behind, and it is through these conversations that this substitute home is built. Emblematically, with the exception of the main characters that have already been introduced, the minor characters are identified only by their country of origin: “Barbadian,” “Jamaican,” and “Grenadian.” The initial conversations revolve around the differences between the small and big islanders, the bigger islanders claiming that they are obviously more cosmopolitan and modern. Each emigrant proclaims the virtues of his own home island. There are debates over where the best beach is located, which island has the best educational system, and so on. In the midst of these friendly debates, the all-too-aptly-named character, the Governor, intercedes: “‘All you down here is my brothers,’ the Governor said. He surveyed the men, cutting his glance where Dickson covered his face with a magazine. Dickson took no part in their discussions on the deck or in the dormitory. ‘All you,’ he said doubtfully, looking quickly towards the Grenadian, ‘an’ that’s why I tell you as I tell you to stop this monkey-talk ’bout big islan’ an’ small islan’” (E 39).

From the moment the Governor asserts that all of the emigrants are brothers, the discussions they have with each other change. Switching from their contentious assertions about the differences between the islands, the emigrants attempt to establish instead the common features of one West Indian people — a startling, and not entirely convincing, shift, brought about merely by Governor’s suggestion of a shared brotherhood. At one point, the Jamaican summarizes what has been said in a form that would have been put to good use as a slogan for the West Indian Federation: “Different man, different land, but de same outlook. Dat’s de meanin’ o’ West Indies. De wahter between dem islands doan’ separate dem. Many o’ man in Jamaica would expound de same view, an’ dere’s a worl’ o’ sea between me an’ you” (E 61).

It is not merely in the content of this section that a concentrated effort can be seen to fashion a West Indian nation. Structurally, the novel enters an unexpected didactic mode when the group begins its discussions. The relatively long speeches made by each character as they put forth arguments and propositions about the nature of the West Indian character necessitates, it would seem, that

long sections of “A Voyage” are transformed into the form of a play. Each character is clearly identified (“Jamaican,” “Strange Man,” etc.) and a lengthy soliloquy follows. The theme that repeatedly arises is that core characteristics connect the Jamaican, the Grenadian, and the Bahamian (the “Strange Man” is the one dissenting voice, and it becomes important for the emigrants to try to include him, to bring him back into the fold) and provide the basis for a larger national body that transcends the differences between the islands. This is made most explicit in the Jamaican’s description of West Indians as “a sort of vomit you vomit up” (E 65). While “vomit” has a decidedly negative connotation, the way in which the Jamaican unpacks this metaphor transforms it into an apt and powerful one, shifting the valence of “vomit” from negative to positive. The metaphor of “vomit” contains the idea of the colonial disregard for the people that Britain forcibly “settled” in the West Indies; it turns this disregard into a source of strength. Numerous peoples, the Jamaican explains, have been vomited onto the Caribbean islands, never to return to the stomachs from which they came. This vomit keeps mixing together over history, stirred by the intervention of the imperial powers, until it begins “gradjally to stir itself” (E 66) and to desire a stomach into which it might be able to once again settle “‘cause it realize that it is expose’” (E 66). The name for this “stomach” is the West Indies rather than any one individual island, since the people who are this vomit are “West Indians. Not Jamaicans or Trinidadians. Cause the bigger the better” (E 66).

As he develops his metaphor of the West Indian as “vomit,” the Jamaican suggests that the realization that the West Indians are a common people can arise only when individuals are separated from their home-islands: “When them stay back home in they little island them forget a little an’ them remain vomit; just as them was vomit up, but when they go ‘broad, them remember, or them get tol’ w’at is w’at” (E 66). The “new home” of the ship provides Lamming with a setting in which discussions about a common West Indian identity can be articulated. It is only under such circumstances that individuals from different islands can be brought together, placed into face-to-face contact, displaced enough from their prosaic environments to overcome the allegiances that they have to their own islands. This displacement into the neutral space of the ship allows them to imagine a larger West Indies—one, for instance, in which the islands are no longer separated by the specific complexities engendered by their very different racial compositions (a substantial Indian population in Trinidad by comparison to Jamaica, Amerindians in Guyana, etc.).

It is paradoxical that the space required for federation, whose possibility is

what this section introduces, can only be imagined as it is being physically left behind. Emigration seems to be a precondition for the construction of a nation-federation: the West Indies can be seen as a potential national space only from abroad. In one respect, this highlights the politically productive aspects of exile that Simon Gikandi has discussed with specific reference to the Caribbean and that Edward Said has explored as a more general feature of postcolonial nationalism. At the same time, *emigration is not the same as exile*, which means that the insights these characters have about the true nature of the West Indies are, in a sense, negated: their heightened awareness of the possibilities of the West Indies is wasted in England. It is not an insight that will go into fashioning a new nation, though the sense of commonality that they discover will find a place in the construction of a new black British identity. Reading this section of *The Emigrants*, one is reminded of C. L. R. James's suggestion that the reason for the breakup of the federation was the inability of its political leaders to break up the "Old Colonial System."³⁵ In *The Emigrants*, the political potential of the West Indies continues to operate under the sign of imperialism. The imagined construction of the new nation is carried out only through emigration, whose very possibility (or necessity) is the result of a political and economic history that is seldom made reference to in the novel.

The latter sections of the novel are so different from what one would expect in a text about emigration because of the paradoxical way in which the West Indian nation is created in the first section. The labor of creating the West Indian nation comes to a climax right before the ship reaches England. It is celebrated with the party that the emigrants hold on board the ship that is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of England on the horizon. At this point, the "new home" that had been built on the ship has to give way to another, much more uncertain home. As soon as the emigrants leave the ship, everything that they have accomplished in terms of building a community is slowly undone. This is perhaps Lamming's point. The freedom that Dickson feels is absent in the Caribbean is not to be achieved through emigration, but only through the formulation of a new space called "The West Indies." The problem, of course, is that it seems that this new space is both realizable only through emigration and yet made *unrealizable* through emigration as well, composed only to be inevitably decomposed. And this introduces another possible reading of the novel: emigration is something that should never have been undertaken in the first place. This is a reading that transforms the existential crises that the characters repeatedly undergo into signs of the loss of the new community that they had just barely established.

It would be easy in the terms of such an interpretation to account for the remarkable formal characteristics of the train ride that the emigrants take from the dock to London (E 110–25). Lamming writes this section of the novel in a manner that suggests the progressive *derealization* of the emigrant self and its attributes in the face of the phenomenological reality of England. The narrative crumbles and instead of a standard page of type, there appear columns of run-on dialogue or stream-of-consciousness notation about the new environment. The voices are mainly those of the emigrants, but sometimes they are also those of British passengers on board the train, who betray in their speech both their ignorance about the emigrants and their own racist attitudes. For the emigrants themselves, the density of sense impressions they encounter in England seems almost too much to bear — tea served without milk; pints of bitter instead of shots of rum; the enormous dimensions of the train; the darkness and cold of April; the factories glimpsed through the windows, fabled birthplaces of so many of the exotic British products that appear in the West Indies as signs of Britishness. This section grows more and more frantic, ending in complete sensory breakdown, a return to primal fears, and a cry in the dark for a lost home:

Weak. Frightened. They said it wouldn't
be so cold. So cold . . . So frightened . . .
so frightened . . . home . . . go . . . to
go back . . . home . . . only because . . .
this like . . . no . . . home . . . other
reason . . . because . . . like this . . .
frightened . . . alone . . . the whole place
. . . goes up up up and over up and over
curling falling . . . up . . . over to heaven
. . . down to hell . . . up an' over . . .
thick . . . sick . . . thick . . . sick . . .
up . . . cold . . . so . . . frightened . . .
no . . . don't . . . don't tremble . . . no
. . . no frightened . . . no . . . alone
. . . no . . . (E 124)

While the collapse of the self reaches a peak at this transitional moment of enormous change, the existential or phenomenological crises that I alluded to earlier do not originate at the moment when the emigrants decisively leave the West Indies behind and enter England. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, these

moments occur regularly throughout the novel, beginning even before the experiment in nation-building on the ship. The first instance arises in Collis's reaction to Queenie in Guadeloupe. Looking at Queenie's body, Collis realizes that he sees it "as an object with its own secret resources that reduced all interest to a sheer delight in the presence of the object" (E 23). Descriptions of experiences in which a character feels as if he is becoming an object (Dickson in the house of Tornado and Lillian [E 205], Frederick's preference for the anonymity of the city instead of the violent singular gaze of an Other [E 171], etc.) or, on the contrary, turns others into objects under his or her gaze (the "master-slave" encounter between Dickson and Collis on board the ship [E 31], Collis's vision of the gross, disembodied fleshiness of Peggy and Frederick [E 217], etc.) are a reoccurring feature of the novel and take place with apparent disregard to the larger narrative. It is important to make clear just how abruptly these crises arise and the degree to which they are described in phenomenological terms. For example, after all of the discussions about the possibility of a common West Indies have been carried out on board the ship, two such crises arise before the emigrants reach England:

Did it really matter? If each had been turned into a mere object it would not have mattered whether there was a place called England. But it was clear from their talk that it was a matter of terrible importance . . . The men sprawled on the deck heedless of what went on around them. Would it matter if they didn't awake? The fact of their sleep seemed a reflection of the accident which would have been their failure to awake.

The sun had sunk beneath the cloud and more men had come out. At that moment there was a gust of wind and by accident, it would seem, Higgins and Tornado had awakened. There seemed no *reason* they shouldn't have remained till they were thrown overboard out of the way to become some other substance. (E 83–84)

Higgins was crying and no one knew, but in his resistance, it seemed that he had become the dormitory itself. He was crying over himself and the others. For in the dormitory it was as though they were in a cage with the doors flung open, but they couldn't release themselves. Beyond their enclosure was *no-THING*. Nothing mattered outside the cage, because there was *no-THING*. So they remained within the cage unaware of what was beyond, without a trace of desire to inhabit what was beyond. It was unnatural and impossible to escape into something that didn't matter. Absolutely impossible, for within the cage where they were born and would die,

the only tolerable climate of experience was reality which was simply an irreversible instinct to make things matter . . . there beyond the water too large for his view was England rising from beneath her anonymous surface of grey to meet a sample of the men who are called her subjects and whose only certain knowledge said that to be in England was all that mattered. (E 105–7)

What do such passages communicate about the experience of colonialism, emigration, and postcolonial nation-building? The cage that Higgins feels himself to be in acts clearly as a metaphor of the colonial condition. The door to the cage is open, and it is possible to leave it. What makes it *impossible*, however, is the absence of any space *outside* of the cage. All that exists outside of the cage is a void, a space without things, a space that is comprised of nothing (*no-THINGS*). This may be an apt description of the false freedom of “lately emancipated colonials” described earlier by the narrator. The impossibility of leaving the cage is formulated as a logical proposition: escape from the colonial cage can only occur if there is a space of things one might enter. Even after all the deliberations about the possibility of a West Indian identity that could ground a West Indian nation, the only space that “matters,” that is, the only space that has matter, appears to be England: England is represented as the inescapable ontological ground of the colonies, so much so that it is only by an extinction of being—to turn into a “mere object”—that England would no longer matter.

As an account of the subjective alienation felt by colonial subjects, their fundamental in-betweenness and dislocation in both the Caribbean and England (and so everywhere), Lamming’s text shows the ontological depth of colonialism’s impact in much the same way as other postwar texts influenced by phenomenology and existentialism (from Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew* to Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*). But if England “matters” so much, the question that needs to be asked, finally, is *who* it “matters” to in this way? In the passage just discussed, Lamming phrases these philosophical worries in the voice of Higgins: Higgins the optimist, the same Higgins who participated fully in the discussions about West Indian identity on the ship. Yet the form of these worries seems entirely out of place in the character of Higgins. These are rather the worries of intellectuals, both the intellectuals on the ship, Collis and Dickson (the other stand-in for Lamming), and of Lamming himself. For these figures, emigration can always be redescribed as “exile,” a movement that is reversible, so that the experiment with nation-building that is conducted on the ship always has the potential to be put to use back in the West Indies. But emigration is not simply

exile in a slightly different form; for the vast majority of the emigrants, the experiences described in this novel will not be followed up by the returns to Caribbean space Lamming describes in *Of Age and Innocence* and *Water with Berries*. Collis and Dickson are the characters that are most prone to moments of ontological crisis that strike at the very essence of their identity. By extending these crises to other characters in the novel—to *all* other characters, including the Englishman, Frederick—Lamming tries to generalize these speculations on Being and the loss of Being, making them characteristics not of specific individuals from specific social backgrounds, but of the colonial condition as such. That there is something disingenuous about this process is indicated in the text itself, which notes the differences that continue to exist among the emigrants even in their attempts to produce a common West Indian nation. While Higgins suggests that he and Dickson are essentially similar in their desire to receive certification in England in their respective fields, Dickson is quick to point out the class differences that separate them:

“I say ah goin’ to study cooking just as you study books,” Higgins said. “An’tis the same r’ally. We got to get certificates like you before we can get a proper position. In the end you an’ me is the same. We all in search o’ papers o’ qualification.

“I’m not a cook,” Dickson said sharply. “I’m a trained teacher with a degree and a diploma in education.” He was very firm and very polite. Higgins propped against the ship’s side and contemplated the question of papers and qualifications. He understood the difference which Dickson was determined to establish between them, but he had a sense of his importance as a qualified cook. (E 52–53)

In his attempt to create the common space of the nation, a space that would be saturated by a singular national essence, Lamming seems forced to elide important differences of class, race, and gender that exist between individuals as much as between the individual islands of the West Indies. It is the men, after all, who are at the center of the debates on the ship, and though it is strictly speaking nowhere made explicit, it is almost certain that these are all Afro-Caribbean men. There is in *The Emigrants* no equivalent to the children Singh, Lee, and Bob, who in *The Pleasures of Exile* and *Of Age and Innocence* represent the hope for a harmonious racial future for the islands. It is significant as well that the characters of Collis and Dickson seldom participate in the debates over the shape of the West Indian nation: they remain aloof and separate from the others. Nevertheless, it is Dickson’s (or Collis’s or the narrator’s) sense of a freedom yet incompletely established—the freedom of the “lately emancipated colonials”—that in *The*

Emigrants Lamming makes equivalent to the colonial structure of awareness he discusses at length in *The Pleasures of Exile* and that becomes the motivating force for emigration for all the characters in the novel. While it is the attempt to overcome this sickness of Being that is suggested as the prime rationale for emigration, it is likely that most of the emigrants are searching simply (though there is nothing simple about it) for a better set of material circumstances than those that would be available to them if they were to remain in the Caribbean.

In contrast to the ontological consequences of emigration, which are shown here to be merely an *extension* of the already necessarily unstable ontological position of the colonial subject, the novel suggests that it is the creation of a new nation that would provide a form in which a new kind of Being could emerge — a Being that is finally whole and feels a freedom that does not have to be sought abroad. But the form of the nation that is imagined in *The Emigrants*, a form that mirrors the conditions necessary for the production of the West Indies Federation itself, shows that there is an unexpected *equivalence* between the subjects of the new nation and the subjects produced by colonialism. It is here that the repeated ontological crises of the novel become most significant. They arise prior to the trip as well as in its midst; they occur immediately after the emigrants reach England and continue to occur even after they have been living there for years. For Lamming, the new West Indian nation is to be produced through the production of an essential West Indian identity that transcends the particularities of individual islands. The result of this process, however, seems to be subjects who do not experience any greater degree of freedom, but who suffer just as greatly from an ontological sickness as do those colonial subjects who choose to emigrate. *Both* are subjects who lack a certain necessary ontological dimension due to the fact that they are disconnected from any definite place — a place in which, for example, relations of class, gender, and race are significant and meaningful, a place of particular histories and specific social relations. The conditions that Lamming imagines for the new nation do not offer a solution to the problems faced by the alienated colonial self; rather, in the terms laid out here, they do little more than extend or reproduce them: the abstract citizenship required for the creation of a federal nation reproduces the abstraction of the colonial subject in the terms of the vicious ontology of colonialism first outlined by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

What this reading of *The Emigrants* highlights is the complex zone of instability in which the project of creating nations comes together with the activities of the writer and intellectual. *The Emigrants* offers an unflinching exploration of the spaces of this zone and, in so doing, shows just how difficult it is to

navigate it. The establishment of a national collectivity in the West Indies has to pass through structures and discourses whose force and logic cannot be undone in any simple way, and certainly not through the desire for such a collectivity alone. As this novel shows, one of the major problems that needs to be addressed is the role and function of the intellectual in the production of this national space. To create the “West Indian” subject that would provide the basis of the freedom that the intellectual seeks—preeminently, in the context of Lamming’s comments in *The Pleasures of Exile*, the freedom that would make the Caribbean a space in which it is, in a sense, possible to write *The Living Novel*—seems to require that these subjects be detached from their specific communities and genealogies in order to fit into an abstract category whose definition *even so* remains paradoxically connected to the logic of imperial space. While it is hoped that in this new West Indian space the freedom that eludes the narrator in Trinidad can finally be found, what is produced instead is an empty idea of freedom—freedom as an abstract, ungrounded category, connected to nothing but the subject him or herself.

What *The Emigrants* reveals is the limits of the kind of national literature that Lamming describes later in “The Occasion for Speaking,” a national literature that is, finally, not about or for the people, but about the conditions and possibilities of producing literature in the space not yet and perhaps never to be known as “the West Indian nation.”

Geographies of Modernity: Naipaul’s Caribbean

The West Indian, though provincial, is perhaps the most cosmopolitan man in the world.

— GEORGE LAMMING³⁶

If I have to describe the universal civilization I would say that it is the civilization that both gave the prompting and the idea of the literary vocation; and also gave me the means to fulfill that prompting; the civilization that enabled me to make that journey from the periphery to the center; the civilization that links me not only to this audience but also to that now not-so-young man in Java whose background was as ritualized as my own, and on whom—as on me—the outer world had worked, and given the ambition to write.

— V. S. NAIPAUL³⁷

There is perhaps no other figure in world literature whose personal politics has been as closely and repeatedly interrogated as that of V. S. Naipaul. If critics have

wondered about Lamming's politics, they are at least willing to concede that his heart is in the right place; with Naipaul, this remains a perpetually open question.³⁸ More than any other author, Naipaul has painted a grim picture of the colonies. He has characterized postcolonial societies as lacking in culture, history, and politics; as inextricably beset by ethnic and racial conflicts that have only become exacerbated with time; as individualistic, materialistic, greedy polities whose nationhood is only an accident of imperial geography; as places in which it is ridiculous to speak of the existence of truly distinctive national characteristics or of the presence of genuine fellow-feeling; and as irrational, disorganized, corrupt countries swimming in real and metaphorical filth. He has been unapologetic about these characterizations. It is perhaps his use of the term "civilization" (which he uses so easily and with such apparent disregard for its historical resonance as a key term in the justification of the colonial project) as an evaluative term that has produced the most diametrically opposed views on the significance and meaning of Naipaul's work. His literary and nonfiction work is dominated by spaces (the Caribbean, India, Argentina, Pakistan, the Congo, the American South, etc.) in which he sees barbarism ruling in the absence of civilization. His views are taken either as being Eurocentric, a prejudice made all the more lamentable by his unquestionable skill as a writer, or as presenting a brave if unpopular assessment of the true state of affairs in the third world. To put this another way, Naipaul's writing is seen either as the literary equivalent of developmental and modernization theories or as its almost exact opposite—as an important corrective to the overly optimistic characterizations of the postcolonial world offered by other writers and critics.

As with all such binaries, the truth is to be found at neither of the poles nor by simply splitting the difference between them. Since he is, unlike Lamming or Wilson Harris, a reluctant theorist of literature and of his own work, Naipaul's politics can be ascertained only by directly examining his writing. I will focus in this section on Naipaul's *The Middle Passage*.³⁹ Written in 1960 in the midst of the political experimentation with the West Indies Federation, and appearing in 1962 when this experiment had all but failed, the text is interested explicitly in gauging the prospects for the nation in the Caribbean, even if it never makes direct reference to the project of federation.⁴⁰ As much as *The Emigrants* is an attempt to imagine the conditions of possibility for federation, *The Middle Passage* tries to deny the possibility that these conditions might exist. As Naipaul will suggest over and over again, the necessary conditions for the existence of a federation, or any kind of national structure, are absent in the Caribbean.⁴¹ But

none of this should be taken as an indication that Naipaul is opposed to the nation. Although of all the writers working in the 1950s and 1960s, Naipaul is the most suspicious of the function of nationalism in the formerly colonized world, he is, nevertheless, as deeply tied to the project of the nation as is Lamming, as well as to the place of literature with respect to the nation. What he sets out to show is not that individual Caribbean nations or even a federation is undesirable, but simply that it is not possible. Naipaul's reasons are similar to those offered by C. L. R. James for the collapse of the federation: the existence of the West Indies as a totality is tied too closely to the spatial imprint left behind by colonialism. What separates the analyses of James and Naipaul is their understanding of the difficulties that exist in the Caribbean that impede the creation of a genuine nationalism. For James, it is a difficulty imposed by historical circumstances that can be eroded with time and effort. Naipaul, on the other hand, turns this difficulty into a kind of ontology. Without exaggeration, he sees the structural conditions of existence in the Caribbean as having doomed it forever. So, of course, the only solution for those with the wherewithal or resources is to leave the slow, sinking shipwreck of these islands, to travel as he himself has to those "civilized" parts of the world that inspired him to write in the first place.

The Middle Passage (1962) is V. S. Naipaul's fourth book, and the first example of the nonfiction travelogues that he has produced with increasing frequency throughout his career.⁴² Though these books are distinct from his novels by virtue of the fact that they record "real" events and processes and are marked by Naipaul's direct commentaries and reflections on politics and history, there are significant continuities of theme and form between Naipaul's novels and his nonfiction works that make them virtually interchangeable.⁴³ This is perhaps best evidenced in *A Way in the World* (1994), a work in which the operations of novel, memoir, and travelogue finally come together. It is important to note that this intersection of different forms does not produce a "new" form that is neither fiction nor travelogue: even though there is a "character" in the book named "V. S. Naipaul" (that is, if it is taken to be a novel), this book does not represent Naipaul's experimentation with a kind of postmodern self-referentiality. After a lifetime of switching back and forth between one form and another, *A Way in the World* represents a collapse of distinctions that always existed only tenuously in Naipaul's work. What is true of Naipaul's latest work is characteristic of his first experiment with nonfiction writing: *The Middle Passage* is a narrative that is in many ways "fictional." It is even unintentionally announced as such in the original foreword to the book. Naipaul suggests that he hesitated to write a nonfiction

book about the Caribbean because “the novelist works towards conclusions of which he is often unaware; and it is better that he should” (MP 6). One imagines that, like the writing of a novel, a travel narrative is only discovered along the way. But perhaps there is something of a problem in trying to stress the fictionality of *The Middle Passage*. For one gets the sense that the dimensions of the story that Naipaul tells in this book have been determined in advance: the plot set out, the thematics developed, the characters chosen. Before he ever arrives in the Caribbean, he has an outline of the complete book in his suitcase to which the reality of his journey must adhere.

All of Naipaul’s writing is characterized by a relentless interrogation of the fate of postcolonial societies. The satiric works written prior to *The Middle Passage* — *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958) and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) (*Miguel Street*, published in 1962 but actually the first book written by Naipaul, is an exception here) — show characters and societies ill-equipped to deal with their rapid emergence into independence. *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira* examine the politics of rural life in Trinidad following World War II. *The Mystic Masseur* narrates the life of the pundit Ganesh Ramsumair, writer of “the first best-seller in the history of Trinidad publishing”⁴⁴ and member of the initial Legislative Council following the achievement of universal suffrage in 1946; in *The Suffrage of Elvira*, Naipaul’s subject is the politics of vote-buying in an isolated county in Trinidad during its second “free” elections in 1950. In both these works, as well as in *Mr. Biswas*, the politics of colonial societies is skewered ruthlessly for its irrationality, decrepitude, and, finally, emptiness. No one, neither the politicians nor their supposed constituency, imagines that the political process has anything to do with political representation as opposed to naked self-interest and self-promotion on the part of officials for whom being elected is merely a sign of distinction, a symbolic medal to be pinned on one’s chest (as well as a means, of course, to plunder the public coffer). *Mr. Biswas*, with its obvious structuring narrative of a search for both a physical and symbolic “home,” has usually been seen as a more generous, less critical work. Gordon Rohlehr, for example, suggests that “*A House for Mr. Biswas* is more profound than anything else Naipaul has written because, for the first time, he is able to feel his own history not merely as squalid farce, but as adventure in sensibility.”⁴⁵ Though this has become an accepted reading, it is also a deceptive one. The disdain for the culture of letters in Trinidad — or, rather, the relentless exposure of the lack of any such culture — that Naipaul exhibits in his narrative

about the autodidact, self-published Ganesh, is repeated virtually unchanged in *Mr. Biswas*. The homes that Biswas manages to secure for himself are always illusory and impermanent, solid enough when seen in the darkness, but nothing more than squalid rat-traps when viewed in the light of day. In the context of these earlier works, Naipaul's first nonfiction book reveals the logic behind his aggressive, dismissive characterization of politics and culture in the space of the Caribbean. What is both lacking and all-too present is modernity. Of all the preselected narrative "tools" through which Naipaul narrates his journey through the Caribbean, it is the measuring stick of modernity — a concept whose meaning is at no point very clearly articulated in the text — that forms the basis of his inquiry into the possibilities of the nation in the Caribbean.

As the subtitle of *The Middle Passage* indicates, Naipaul's travelogue offers "impressions of five societies — British, French, and Dutch — in the West Indies and South America." The "five societies" that are divided among these three spheres of colonial influence are Trinidad, British Guiana, Surinam, Martinique, and Jamaica. His explorations of the first two societies — Trinidad and Guiana — occupies well over half of the book; by comparison, his remaining explorations are perfunctory. One senses this is in part because what Naipaul experiences in the other parts of the Caribbean is for him simply "more of the same": his examination of these first two societies effectively exhausts his critique of the Caribbean. Indeed, when Naipaul leaves Trinidad and Guiana behind, he suddenly develops a much more positive attitude toward the latent possibilities of the remaining colonies, as if he has discharged his wrath entirely over the course of his first two journeys. For instance, what he sees as wholly absent in the British Caribbean, Naipaul finds immediately upon arriving in Surinam: "Nationalism in Surinam, feeding on no racial or economic resentments, is the profoundest anti-colonial movement in the West Indies" (MP 181). When he returns to the British Caribbean, visiting Jamaica at the end of the book, Naipaul remarks again on the comparative failure of nationalism in the West Indies. "Nationalism in Surinam, a movement of intellectuals, rejects the culture of Europe," Naipaul writes. "Ras Tafarianism in Jamaica is nothing more than a proletarian extension of this attitude, which it carries to its crazy and logical limit" (MP 240).

There is a tension that runs throughout *The Middle Passage*, one that is particularly prevalent in the sections on Trinidad and Guiana. As a "travel book," one imagines that the main function of *The Middle Passage* is to mark out and characterize the particularities and unique features of each of these societies — if

not in the exoticizing, stereotypical manner of European travel guides, then with the critical insight of a cultural “insider.” This task is rendered all but impossible or at least insensible in the epigraph that begins the book, which outlines the fundamental logic that drives Naipaul’s investigation. The epigraph is drawn from James Anthony Froude’s notoriously racist account of the West Indies: The West Indies “were valued only for the wealth which they yielded, and society there has never assumed any particularly noble aspect . . . The natural graces of life do not show themselves under such conditions. There has been no saint in the West Indies since Las Casas, no hero unless philonegro enthusiasm can make one out of Toussaint. There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and a purpose of their own.”⁴⁶ Not only are there no people in the West Indies that can be characterized or described: Naipaul also suggests that there is no history in the West Indies. He writes that “the history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told . . . history is built on achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies” (MP 29). What then is the task of Naipaul’s book? What is it that draws him back to the West Indies to write this book — a book funded by the government of Trinidad and Tobago and written at the behest of Eric Williams (MP 6)? If he is not writing about the people or their history, what is it that he proposes to write about?

The Middle Passage performs what can only be described as a “negative anthropology”: instead of paying attention to the mode of existence of a people, it tries to reveal the conditions that would suggest that these people *do not* exist. In doing so, Naipaul perhaps unintentionally raises the question of what it in fact means to fully “exist” as a people. This question is the fundamental one that is posed underneath Naipaul’s travels in Trinidad and Guiana; these societies are measured repeatedly against an ideal sign of human “existence” — the civilized West — and are found to be wanting. The question of what it means to exist is never posed directly but is articulated in terms of Naipaul’s reflection on the nature of Trinidadian modernity, the prospect of a Caribbean nation or Caribbean nations, and, not surprisingly, in terms of the place and function of literature in the islands.

Modernity is the theme of almost the entire section on Trinidad and of *The Middle Passage* as a whole. It is evoked immediately in the opening paragraph of the chapter that details Naipaul’s return home. Seeing Trinidad for the first time after an absence of many years, Naipaul gazes at the car-clogged streets, shoddy concrete houses, and neon signs of Port of Spain, and comes to an immediate opinion about the island that never changes over the course of his stay there: “Ambition . . . not matched with skill, and the effect was Trinidadian; vigorous,

with a slightly flawed modernity” (MP 42). Trinidad has a problem, and its problem is that its modernity is damaged, even if (here at least) only ever so slightly. While the initial impression might therefore be of only a slight difference or deviance in Trinidad’s modernity from some other, unnamed model, Naipaul’s subsequent references to Trinidadian modernity suggest that it is entirely false, an imitative modernity that has rendered the society sterile and unimaginative. Modernity in Trinidad is described by Naipaul as “a constant alertness, a willingness to change, a readiness to accept anything which films, magazines and comic strips appear to indicate as American” (MP 48); postcolonial modernity thus turns out to be the name for that “extreme susceptibility of people who are unsure of themselves, and having no taste or style of their own, are eager for instruction” (MP 50). Much of Naipaul’s description of the problems with modernity in Trinidad stems from an assessment of the thorough penetration of Trinidadian society by American culture. And though Naipaul clearly feels that American popular culture is irredeemable, it is the Trinidadian “pretence of being American” (MP 70) rather than a modernity expressed or embodied by American cultural products that he finds most disturbing.

For Naipaul, the presence of modernity is a positive societal attribute, but only, he suggests, when it develops “organically” out of the soil of the country. “The main, degrading fact of the colonial society,” Naipaul writes, is “that it never required efficiency, it never required quality, and these things, because unrequired, became undesirable” (MP 62). Naipaul associates modernity at least in part with a rationalized, capitalist society, and with the cosmopolitan, non-parochial attitude he believes naturally accompanies it. Insofar as Naipaul sees modernity as in some ways another name for the culture of capitalism, it does not seem as if it would be difficult to import modernity to Trinidad just as easily as American cultural products have been imported to the islands. After all, the rabidly consuming Trinidadian subjects that Naipaul describes, easily impressed by advertising, swayed by the lure of foreign products, seduced by the glamour of commodity consumption, and so on, are in no way specific to the island or to the West Indies more generally. But it is because Naipaul also has a different sense of what modernity entails than just the existence of consumerism that he is able to speak of it as “flawed” in Trinidad. He oscillates throughout this chapter between the position that Trinidad’s problem is that it has no “proper” modernity and the position that Trinidad’s problem is that it is *too* modern. This is an oscillation that is resolved, finally, only through the production of a very strange conception of modernity: that there is no modernity *as such*, only a global collection of various

“modernities” (which is right), some of which are genuine, some of which are false and imitative (which is wrong).

It is only through this conception of modernity that Naipaul is able to articulate one of the few positive things he says about Trinidadian society. There is a way in which “the Trinidadian is cosmopolitan” (MP 83). For Naipaul, the Trinidadian is “adaptable; he is cynical; having no rigid social conventions of his own, he is amused by the conventions of others. He is a natural anarchist, who has never been able to take the eminent at their own valuation. He is a natural eccentric, if by eccentricity is meant the expression of one’s own personality, unhampered by fear of ridicule or the discipline of a class . . . Everything that makes the Trinidadian an unreliable, exploitable citizen makes him a quick, civilized person whose values are always human ones, whose standards are only those of wit and style” (MP 83). Almost immediately, however, Naipaul suggests that “as the Trinidadian becomes a more reliable and efficient citizen, he will cease to be what he is” (MP 83). The contrasting and unstable meanings that Naipaul has assigned to the term “modernity” come crashing together here. The cosmopolitan Trinidadian is, in a sense, a modern citizen; what marks him as a Trinidadian, however, can only disappear as modernity encroaches. In other words, what Naipaul suggests is that *the Trinidadian will lose his characteristic modernity in the on-rush of modernity*—this second sense of modernity now characterized as “all the modern apparatus of the modern society for joylessness, for the killing of the community spirit and the shutting up of people in their separate prisons of similar ambitions and tastes and selfishness” (MP 83).

What makes it possible for Naipaul to articulate both of these positions at the same time—modernity as Trinidad’s saving grace as well as its biggest problem—has a great deal to do with Naipaul’s understanding of the significance and function of literature, both its general function as well as its role in Trinidad in particular. Though there is much in Naipaul’s writing that is difficult to pin down definitively, Naipaul’s relationship to literature is absolutely clear: he is a champion of an unapologetically bourgeois notion of literature. This is a sense of literature that elevates it to a position of unique prominence with respect to its ability to represent and comment on society at large. This is one of the reasons that Naipaul is the Caribbean writer least troubled by the prospect of his self-imposed exile from the islands: it is a writer that he wanted to be, and so he went to the only place that it was possible for him to pursue this calling with any degree of seriousness, London. In his comments in *The Middle Passage* on the necessary

function of the West Indian writer a sense of his vision of literature's function emerges, and it is very clearly an idea of literature that is linked to the idea of "civilization" itself, as he describes it in the epigraph to this section. It is a vision comprised of irreconcilable positions. He suggests that "living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands" (MP 73). The West Indian writer needs to speak the truth about the West Indian condition and the particularity of the West Indian herself. Naipaul claims that this has never happened. This is largely due, he suggests, to the inability of the West Indian writer to escape from the racial divisions that plague the islands. In a sense, Naipaul suggests that *there is no literature* in the West Indies: what is written under the "sign" of literature "has little to do with literature and much to do with the race war" (MP 74). The literature of the West Indies is at its best didactic and "propagandist" (MP 75), since "the Trinidadian expects his novels, like his advertisements, to have a detergent purpose" (MP 74). In short, for Naipaul the problem with literature in the West Indies is that it is *too* particular. It arises out of the specific circumstances of the gulf between the races in the Caribbean, and so lacks what one assumes is the sign of real literature: "universal appeal." It is in this sense that Naipaul's paradoxical construction of modernity reoccurs in his prescriptions for West Indian literature, in the form of the need to write the universal in terms of the particular, but only so long as the particular does not intrude on the universal.

One last point needs to be made before bringing all of this to a conclusion. Not surprisingly, Naipaul also expresses the view that "Nationalism was impossible in Trinidad" (MP 78). Nationalism requires some sense of communal bonding, some idea around which the nation can be imagined. In the Caribbean, one imagines this to be an anti-imperialist sentiment of the kind described by Partha Chatterjee as foundational to all postcolonial nationalism.⁴⁷ Naipaul demurs: "there was no profound anti-imperialist feelings" (MP 45). Not only is there no anti-imperialist feeling, he claims that there is no communal feeling *whatsoever* in the islands: "Everyone was an individual, fighting for his place in the community. Yet there was no community. We were of various races, religions, sets and cliques; and we had somehow found ourselves on the same small island. Nothing bound us together except this common residence. There was no nationalist feeling; there could be none" (MP 45).

As a result of its negative view of the possibilities of the West Indian nation, *The Middle Passage* might seem to occupy the opposite pole from the work of

Lamming. Yet each writer figures the relationship of literature to the nation in a similar way: both react to the same conditions of possibility of literary nationalism in the West Indies. For both writers, the nation, with all that this implies (a universal culture, a “proper” modernity, etc.), represents the existence of a “real” people in the West Indies, a real people with a real history. It is not surprising that Naipaul finds that the nation is not a form that can be attained in the Caribbean. What Naipaul expresses in *The Middle Passage* is not just another example of his relentless negativity when it comes to the prospects of postcolonial societies, which he has always viewed as damaged “beyond belief.” Rather, this conclusion stems, it seems to me, from the impossible conditions that Naipaul sets out for a “true” nation in the West Indies: West Indian society has to have its own unique identity and traditions and is to be criticized insofar as it does not; it must also be able to fully participate in the larger, modern world and is to be criticized to the extent that it remains particularistic. In some sense, what Naipaul insists on attributing to the deep structural conditions of the West Indies alone (again, like Lamming, he insists on its “unique” status even among other postcolonial nations) is in fact the problem faced by all societies in modernity: how to be modern while retaining the particular practices and habits that define a unique mode of communal life. It is a difficult problem. What should be asked here, however, is *why* Naipaul insists on the necessity of modernity in the West Indies. What is it, precisely, that the West Indies lacks in the absence of a real nationalism and a real modernity? And why does it matter so much to Naipaul? The answers to these questions are to be found in the epigraph to this section: the real problem, I would suggest, is not that the people are ontologically incomplete, but (once again) that in the absence of “civilization” there is no possibility of writing in the Caribbean. The theme of exile and its connection to literature thus returns, this time buried somewhat under the trope of an ethnographic investigation of the conditions for existence in the West Indies in general.

The reading of *The Middle Passage* that I have offered here has focused more or less on the substantive critical comments that Naipaul makes about literature, modernity, and the nation. In doing so, it has failed to discuss or to characterize what makes up most of the book: the narrative of Naipaul’s peripatetic journeys through five Caribbean and South American countries. Naipaul wanders: sometimes alone, sometimes with friends (like the Jagans in Guyana), and sometimes with guides that he meets along the way. He complains a great deal: his coffee arrives at his table too slow; the people are philistine and boring; there are endless

red laterite roads to be driven along, with not much to see or do; there is rampant political apathy everywhere; in general, things are worse than he expected, which means, of course, that they are exactly as he expected them to be—*worse* is an adjective that for Naipaul has managed to turn into a noun. When he crosses the border from Guyana into Brazil to visit the modernist city of Boa Vista, this too is found wanting. With the exception of the roads, all of it sounds much like what Naipaul would have experienced on a trip anywhere in Britain outside of London. Yet what needs to be emphasized when thinking about Naipaul's wanderings through the Caribbean in 1960 is not, it seems to me, what he sees and writes down, but the conditions of possibility of the trip itself—and by this I mean the brute historical facts, the "occasion" that led him to return to the Caribbean after a decade in England. The context for this trip is nothing less than federation itself, and in the context of federation there is a willful and unmistakable politics at work in this text. When Eric Williams invited Naipaul, the acclaimed author of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, to come home to write a book on the Caribbean, he was looking for a text that might offer support to the nascent federation. Naipaul produced a very different kind of text from what was expected. But perhaps this difference is not so remarkable as the places that Naipaul visits—not just one island in the West Indies, but *all* of the major islands, and, specifically, the ones most deeply engaged in the debates over the form that the federation was to take; and he visits not just the British Caribbean, but the French and Dutch Caribbean as well. It is as if Naipaul was intent on exhausting the possibility of nationalism *in the entire region*, that is, not only of the West Indies Federation, but of a larger federation that may have eventually included not only the former colonies of Britain, but the whole of the Caribbean. Were this to happen, it would disrupt the lingering remnants of the colonial system—the system that meant that "it was only our Britishness, our belonging to the British Empire, which gave us any identity" (MP 45). And in these deliberations, *size does* matter. When Naipaul suggests that "nothing was created in the British West Indies," it is because "the size of the islands called for nothing else" (MP 27). Federation would overcome the limited spaces of the individual islands, adding to it the vast bush of Guyana that Naipaul concedes to Brazil,⁴⁸ as well as a space of identity even greater than physical space. This possibility has to be denied by Naipaul at all costs: even when there are obvious signs of a West Indian nationalism, he has to affirm that there is no such thing. His understanding of literature depends on it; for the existence of the nation would mean that even those novels with "detergent pur-

pose” might suddenly be placed alongside his own so carefully cultivated style of writing, as equals in the world of literary production, elevating the barbaric to the civilized and rendering the civilized barbarous.

Federation No More: *Beyond a Boundary*

Cricket had always been more than a game in Trinidad. In a society which demanded no skills and offered no rewards to merit, cricket was the only activity which permitted a man to grow to his full stature and to be measured against international standards . . . The cricketer was our only hero-figure. And that is why cricket is played in the West Indies with such panache; that is why, for a long time to come, the West Indians will not be able to play as a team. The individual performance was what mattered.

— V. S. NAIPAUL⁴⁹

What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?

With my excellent batting record, good bowling and fielding, admittedly wide knowledge and fanatical keenness, it was clear that I would play for one of the first-class clubs. The question was: which one? This, apparently simple, plunged me into a social and moral crisis which had a profound effect on my whole future life.

— C. L. R. JAMES⁵⁰

Cricket gives . . . the sense of having hijacked the game from its English habitus into the colonies, at the level of language, body, and agency as well as competition, finance, and spectacle.

— ARJUN APPADURAI⁵¹

C. L. R. James is perhaps the most prominent intellectual to emerge out of the English Caribbean.⁵² In addition to being one of the most important writers in the region — his early novel *Minty Alley* (1936) paving the way for all subsequent literary production in the West Indies — he is the figure (along with Eric Williams) most commonly associated with the cause of Caribbean self-government and nationhood. His early essay, “The Case for West-Indian Self-Government” (1933) — a chapter of James’s pioneering political work, *The Life of Captain Cipriani* (1932), that was later reprinted in pamphlet form — was an extremely influential text throughout the Caribbean for the anticolonial movements that developed both before and after World War II. After spending over two decades in the United States and in England working on a variety of socialist and revolutionary causes, James was drawn back to the Caribbean by the promise of self-

government that he had long advocated. In Trinidad from 1958 to 1962, James was the secretary of the Federal Labour Party, the governing party of the West Indies Federation, and a frequent contributor to *The Nation*, the newspaper of the People's National Movement led by Williams, and though he was interested in the achievement of political independence for Trinidad, it was the hope of a new nation born out of the union of the individual islands that fueled James's political activities and critical writing of this period.

The failure of the West Indies Federation therefore came as an enormous blow to James and led almost directly to his return to England at the end of 1962. Writing in 1958, James claimed that "*Federation is the means and the only means whereby the West Indies and British Guiana can accomplish the transition from colonialism to national independence, can create the basis of a new nation; and by reorganizing the economic system and the national life give us our place in the modern century.*"⁵³ It was clear for James that only a federation of the islands held open the possibility of a genuine movement beyond colonialism through the creation of entirely new political and economic structures that had no relationship to colonial government. James saw that the islands on their own were too small in terms of both population and resources to create true nations: nations that could compete in the international system of nations, nations that differed in terms of their "form" (the nature of political institutions) and their "content" (the identity of the new rulers) from the colonial past. "Without federation," James writes, "the consequences for these islands would be dreadful."⁵⁴ So it is not surprising that James spent much of his four years in the Caribbean speaking and writing tirelessly on behalf of federation.⁵⁵ Nor does his perseverance for this cause come as a surprise. As a last ditch argument for West Indian Federation when all seemed lost, James published at his own expense a pamphlet of letters exchanged between himself and Kwame Nkrumah, the president of Ghana. Nkrumah puts forward an argument to the people of the West Indies that is clearly James's own, but which he no doubt thought would have more impact being spoken in the voice of a successful leader of a West African revolution.⁵⁶ Nkrumah writes in a letter dated June 8, 1962, that "I hope that these leaders will realize that it is not yet too late to save the islands from disintegration in the separate and competitive existence which will result from their failure to federate now."⁵⁷ He makes the reasons for federation even grander than simply that it would save the Caribbean from political anarchy. The success of the West Indies Federation would establish a precedent for the decolonizing efforts everywhere: "The establishment of a powerful West Indian nation would substantially assist the effort we are making

in Africa to redeem Africa's reputation in world affairs and to re-establish the personality of the African and people of African descent everywhere."⁵⁸

While he was in the West Indies working on behalf of federation, James wrote a number of his most important books and essays, including *Modern Politics, Party Politics in the West Indies* (which includes his famous essay on "The Mighty Sparrow") and what is perhaps his definitive statement on Caribbean literature, "The Artist in the Caribbean." The essential themes of "The Artist in the Caribbean" were repeated by James throughout this period, finding their way, for instance, into the middle of his "Lecture of Federation," the concluding remarks appended in 1962 to the original version of "The Mighty Sparrow," and his elegant 1964 eulogy for federation, "A National Purpose for Caribbean Peoples."⁵⁹ James's essay is a meditation on the significance of the artist — and he means in particular, the writer — for the nation. He is willing to claim on behalf of Caribbean writers the mantle of the best writers of English language in the world. What disturbs him, however, is that these writers (he cites Lamming, Naipaul, and Vic Reid) are nevertheless not "great artists": "the product of a long and deeply rooted national tradition" who appear "at a moment of transition in national life with results which are recognized as having significance for the whole civilized world."⁶⁰ In part, this is due to the fact that all of these writers live abroad and write not for a national audience, but for a foreign audience; James argues that they must then "come home" in order to do what only great artists can: the artist "exercises an influence on the national consciousness which is incalculable. He is created by it but he himself illuminates and amplifies it, bringing the past up to date and charting the future."⁶¹

But James claims that the Caribbean writer is also circumscribed with respect to the nation in other ways than by the fact of exile. As proficient and skilled as Caribbean writers might be, they are nevertheless not utilizing a "national form" that has a "national audience." The literary forms in which Caribbean writers write are foreign forms that neither enjoy mass popularity nor have been domesticated and transformed into something particularly "of" the Caribbean. To find this kind of "artist" with the impact that the great artist can have on the formation of the nation, James suggests that one must instead turn to an analysis and examination of two forms that *are* national forms. The first of these is calypso; the great artist of calypso is the Mighty Sparrow. The second is cricket; the great artist of cricket is Garfield Sobers. At first, the choice of cricket seems to be an odd one, since like the novel it is also a "borrowed" form. James clarifies: this is "a

medium which though transported was so well established that it has created a Caribbean tradition of its own.”⁶²

In this context, it is not surprising that the period from 1958 to 1962 marks another important point of development in James’s intellectual career:

Once in a blue moon, i.e., once in a lifetime, a writer is handed on a plate a gift from heaven. I was handed mine in 1958. I had just completed a draft of this book up to the end of the previous chapter [Chapter 17] when I returned to the West Indies in April 1958, after twenty-six years of absence . . . immediately I was immersed up to the eyes in “The Case for West Indian Self-Government”; and a little later, in the most furious cricket campaign I have ever known, to break the discriminations of sixty years and have a black man, in this case Frank Worrell, appointed captain of a West Indies team . . . The intimate connection between cricket and West Indian social and political life was established so that all except the willfully perverse could see. It seemed as if I were just taking up again what I had occupied myself with in the months before I left in 1932, except that what was then idea and aspiration was now out in the open and public property.

The book that James makes reference to is his celebrated analysis of cricket (and personal and political memoir), *Beyond a Boundary*, which was completed during the years in which he returned to the Caribbean to work on behalf of the federation; the book was first published in 1963, shortly after his return to England after the federation’s failure. In addition to writing political columns for *The Nation* while he was in Trinidad, James also resumed writing a sports column on cricket. What James suggests here in the opening paragraph of the final section of *Beyond a Boundary*, “Vox Populi,” is the sudden emergence in the midst of federation of the logic of the entire book he had long been working on: the intimate relationship between sports and national politics in the Caribbean, that had become by the time of federation a visible part of the politics of the region. In the Caribbean, cricket emerges as the site of national politics, a physical space in which the fate of the nation is symbolically displayed in a fashion that is close to everyone’s daily existence and in a form that is clearly understood by all: “I was told of an expatriate who arrived in Trinidad to take up an important post which the people thought should be filled by a local candidate. Such a storm arose that the expatriate had to be sent away. In 1959 British Guiana was thrown into turmoil and strikes over a similar issue and the Governor had to retreat. In cricket these sentiments are at their most acute because everyone can see and can judge” (BB 233).

In “Vox Populi,” James’s specific task is to explore the reasons for the violence that broke out in a 1960 match between the West Indies “national” team and a club team from England. He convincingly argues that it evolved out of a long-standing racial dispute over the captaincy of the team. A less experienced white player was made captain instead of Frank Worrell, one of the great cricketers of his era, who was of African descent. When this incident is placed alongside other racial disputes involving the captaincy of teams in the West Indies (from George Headly to J. K. Holt), a map of the intricate, dialectic relationship between cricket and the politics of the nation emerges:

What do they know of cricket who only cricket know? West Indians crowding to Tests bring with them the whole past history and future hopes of the islands. English people, for example, have a conception of themselves breathed from birth. Drake and mighty Nelson, Shakespeare, Waterloo, the Charge of the Light Brigade, the few who did so much for so many, the success of parliamentary democracy, those and such as those constitute a national tradition. Underdeveloped countries have to go back centuries to rebuild one. We of the West Indies have none at all, none that we know of. To such people the three W’s, Ram and Val wrecking English batting, help to fill a huge gap in their consciousness and in their needs. In one of the sheds on the Port of Spain wharf is painted a sign: 365 Garfield Sobers. If the old Maple–Shannon–Queen’s Park type of rivalry was now insignificant, a nationalist jealousy had taken its place. (BB 233)⁶³

Beyond a Boundary displays James’s undoubted love and intimate knowledge of the game of cricket. But the book represents more than simply the musings of an intellectual enthusiast on a subject of relatively minor importance in comparison to his philosophical, literary, political, and critical output. For James, cricket is fundamental to an understanding of the politics of the West Indies. In the words of Neil Lazarus, “James identifies cricket as a privileged site for the playing out and imaginary resolution of social antagonisms in the colonial and postcolonial West Indies.”⁶⁴ What is thus displayed in *Beyond a Boundary* is an enormously sophisticated example of what might now be referred to as “cultural studies”⁶⁵ — the serious study of what has for too long been seen as “unofficial” or “low” culture, an exploration of the people’s culture that does not assume the disinterested pose of an anthropological treatise or ethnographic monograph. In the game of cricket, James sees culture and politics fused together in the vernacular of the people. In addition to stressing the importance of cricket as a national idiom, *Beyond a Boundary* can be seen as representing for James himself a massive

“un-learning” of all the ways in which he had previously presumed to read the political signs and symptoms of Caribbean culture. The literary, on which intellectuals such as James had placed so much import, is pushed to the margins, while what was marginal emerges as central to the imagination of the nation and intellectual life. He writes near the beginning of *Beyond a Boundary* in a passage that was added to the manuscript during federation:

If you had asked me then, or for many years afterward, where cricket stood in my activities as a whole, I would have without hesitation placed it at the bottom of the list, if I had listed it at all. I believe and hope to prove that cricket and football were the greatest cultural influences in nineteenth-century Britain, leaving far behind Tennyson's poems, Beardsley's drawings and concerts of the Philharmonic Society. These filled space in print but not in minds . . . To my house on personal subscription came a mass of periodicals from abroad. I have to give the list. Not only *The Cricketer*; but the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Times Educational Supplement*, the *Observer*; the *Sunday Times*, the *Criterion*, the *London Mercury*, the *Musical Review*, the *Gramophone*, the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, the *Mercure de France*, for some time the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, the editions of the *Evening Standard* when Arnold Bennett wrote in it, and the *Daily Telegraph* with Rebecca West. I read them, filed most of them, I read and even bought many of the books they discussed. I had a circle of friends (most of them white) with whom I exchanged ideas, books, records, and manuscripts. We published local magazines and gave lectures or wrote articles on Wordsworth, the English Drama, and Poetry as Criticism of Life. We lived according to the tenets of Matthew Arnold, spreading sweetness and light and the best that has been thought and said in the world. We met all visiting literary celebrities as a matter of course. Never losing sight of my plan to go abroad and write, I studied and practised assiduously the art of fiction: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Tchekov, Flaubert, Maupassant and the Goncourt brothers . . . What ultimately vitiated all this was that it involved me with the people around me only in the most abstract way. I spoke. My audience listened and thought it was fine and that I was a learned man . . . What now stands out a mile is that I was publicly involved only in cricket and soccer. I played both of them, but the playing was only the frame. I was a sports journalist. The conflicts and rivalries which arose out of the conditions I have described gripped me . . . Our community was small. I fought the good fight with all my might. I was in the toils of greater forces than I knew. Cricket had plunged me into politics long before I was aware of it. When I did turn to politics I did not have too much to learn. (BB 65)

After *Beyond a Boundary*, what can it mean to write nationalist literature in the Caribbean — literature that speaks of the nation, that tries to bring the nation into existence? *Beyond a Boundary* announces James's refusal to play the game of the third-world literary intellectual who believes in the importance of literature for the purposes of national revolution — literature, and nothing but. At the end of the experiment with federation, James's book on cricket convincingly announces the end of a certain form of literary politics: a form practiced and advocated by Lamming, practiced and decried by Naipaul. For James, it was clear that literature neither had the impact on the formation of the nation that Lamming thought that it necessarily must, nor did it speak to the people, much less of them. In comparison with the discourses of literature, cricket succeeded wildly in the West Indies as a discourse of the broader nationalism that federation promised but was unable to produce. Though competition between the Test Squads of the various countries within the English Caribbean remains fierce, one of the most powerful forces for the national union of the islands remains the enormously powerful emotional attachment to the joint West Indian team. As Neil Lazarus has written, what James came to realize is that "cricket is not only *also* culture, that is, one cultural form among several, but culture itself. It was not only the rare cricket critic who, watching Sobers send a good length ball skimming to cover boundary, felt himself to be in the presence of a national cultural treasure. Rather, this was the experience of the West Indian crowd as a whole."⁶⁶ It is at this point, in this medium, that the intellectual and the people share a common insight into the national body that requires the production of no manifestos or the elaboration of difficult epistemologies to bring them together.

The works that I have looked at in this chapter highlight the paradoxes of modernity and the nation in the Caribbean in the decades following World War II. One of the central issues in creating a national space is the condition of subalternity outlined in different ways by Lamming and Naipaul. Though it seems to offer a potential way out of this condition, literature also complicates it further, raising the necessary and important issue of the function of literary writing in the postcolony and the problematic relationship of the intellectual to the public. Put in another way, the problem that these texts outline is what Jameson describes in "Third-World Literature" as the problem of cultural revolution. By ending with James's *Beyond a Boundary*, I do not mean to suggest that a solution can be found in popular culture that cannot be found in literature. It is too simple to suggest that the problems of creating a Caribbean collectivity

dissolve by turning to the practices and activities of the masses. James doesn't presume to stabilize the zone of instability that Lamming and Naipaul work in and through. Rather, by revealing some of the forces and discourses that produced, for instance, the knot of problems that led to exile, James pushes things in different and potentially more politically fruitful directions for both the Caribbean and the literature in and of the region.