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**AT HOME IN THE DIASPORA: DOMESTICITY AND NATIONALISM  
IN POSTWAR AND CONTEMPORARY CARIBBEAN-BRITISH  
FICTION**

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**AT HOME IN THE DIASPORA: DOMESTICITY AND NATIONALISM IN  
POSTWAR AND CONTEMPORARY CARIBBEAN-BRITISH FICTION**

**BY**

**KIM CAROLINE EVELYN**

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE**

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION**

**OF**

**KIM CAROLINE EVELYN**

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**UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND**

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## ABSTRACT

This project investigates the ways in which home is conceptualized and represented in sixty years of the literature of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain by balancing texts from the post-World War II period with contemporary texts and considering how the diaspora has been imagined and reimagined. Making a home of a diaspora—typically considered as a collection of scattered and ostracized migrants—requires a conceptual leap, act of agency, and, sometimes, a flight of imagination. Through the imagery of domesticity and the rhetoric of nationalism, literary analyses of representations of diaspora allow us to explore the imagined constructs of diasporic homes. This project explores how each presents a way of claiming a place as home and illustrates the literary tradition's meaningful focus on migrants' ability to create homes or to claim oppression-resistant spaces and lay claim to the nation. In doing so, these texts illustrate that instead of necessarily being a marker of displacement, the diaspora has the potential to provide a sense of home to people removed from their countries of origin.

After the Second World War, migration from the British West Indies (the contemporaneous term) to Britain, the “mother country,” increased unprecedentedly as Britain held out the promise of belonging through its colonial hegemony and legal British nationality for colonial subjects, yet migrating black British subjects were overwhelmingly socially excluded. The governmental, political, and popular rhetoric of this exclusion contributed to the level of racism migrants encountered in all areas of life and by 1962 they had been reframed and redefined as invasive foreign immigrants through the debates, bills, acts, memoranda, government reports, editorials, and biased

reporting. The literature of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain takes this up as a central thematic concern and, in representing the diaspora, depicts it as shaping Caribbean and black British identity while providing insight into a remarkable confrontation between colonial subjects and colonial power.

Literary criticism concerning diaspora texts often focuses on psychological exile, authenticity, or the immigrant writer as a privileged intellectual abroad. Diaspora studies inclusive of the British Caribbean diaspora tend to fall into two groups: those with sociology-based foci on the dispersal of peoples longing for their nations of origin; or cultural studies-based examinations of the significance and experience of nation and multiculturalism. The cumulative result of these approaches has been an emphasis on fragmentation or rupture. This is important, yet the literature of the Caribbean diaspora also represents displacement as potentially unifying as the diaspora itself becomes a home to its members. "At Home in the Diaspora" rethinks experiences of diaspora and contends that migration is not plainly a matter of displacement because diasporic connections complicate the ways in which we can understand displacement.

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## **DEDICATION**

To Paul and Jen who have always done their best so that I can do mine.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
Introduction: Narrating and Navigating a Sense of Home.....	1
Chapter 1: Claiming a Space in the Thought-I-Knew-You Place: Trajectories of Domesticity, Diaspora, and Home in Sam Selvon’s <i>The Lonely Londoners</i> and Andrea Levy’s <i>Small Island</i> .....	32
Chapter 2: A Diaspora of West Indians “Born in England”: George Lamming’s <i>The Emigrants</i> .....	72
Chapter 3: “My Heritage Forbade Me to Stand Still”: Political Identity, the State, and Welfare Homes in Beryl Gilroy’s <i>Boy-Sandwich</i> and Joan Riley’s <i>The Unbelonging</i> .....	111
Chapter 4: Speaking Home and History: Zadie Smith’s <i>White Teeth</i> and Narratives of National Belonging.....	155
Conclusion: Home Fictions.....	193
Bibliography.....	198

## Introduction

### Narrating and Navigating a Sense of Home

Following the Second World War, British West Indian emigration to the “mother country” increased at an unprecedented rate and established the presence of a large West Indian diaspora in the UK. At the same time Britain attempted, in Robin Cohen’s words, “to bolster the myth of a racially exclusive [white] British identity,” (*Frontiers* 18). The conflict of these two worlds—the British political world struggling to define, reify, and defend the idea of a homogenous (white) Britain and the world of emigrant West Indians and other Commonwealth citizens pursuing new opportunities in Britain in the face of pervasive racist oppression—gave rise to new concepts of home, nation, and identity. The symbolic inaugural event of postwar Caribbean migration is the 1948 arrival of 492 West Indian migrants to Britain aboard the *Empire Windrush*. Using 1948 as a launching point, this project examines six decades of the literature of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain and issues of immigration, emerging black British identities, political rhetoric, and major politicized events over those decades informing it as a literary tradition. In “At Home in the Diaspora,” I investigate the ways in which home is conceptualized and represented in this literary tradition and argue that instead of necessarily being a marker of displacement, the diaspora has the potential to provide a sense of home to people removed from their countries of origin.<sup>1</sup> Making a home of a diaspora—typically considered as a collection of scattered and ostracized emigrants—requires a conceptual leap, act of agency, and, sometimes, a flight of imagination. Literary analyses of representations of diaspora allow us to

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<sup>1</sup> I am not arguing that this is the case for all diasporas or that this is some sort of solution for people living in exile or struggling for rights of abode in contested territory. This potential is hard earned within the Caribbean diaspora in Britain and is represented in the diaspora’s literary tradition.

explore the imagined constructs of diasporic homes through the imagery of domesticity and the rhetoric of nationalism: both present ways of claiming places as home. In Homi Bhabha's words, I seek to study the diaspora "through its narrative address" ("Introduction" 3). I do so by studying literature that responds to and exposes the incongruity of collective senses of national belonging.

One of the events that has become symbolic of collective national belonging through the diaspora's self-narration is the *Windrush*'s arrival. In June 2013, on the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Windrush* docking at Tilbury, a change.org petition was launched to call for an annual "Windrush Day" on June 22 to celebrate British multiculturalism. Its supporters included author Zadie Smith, Cultural Studies titan Professor Stuart Hall, and a number of prominent scholars, artists, organizers, and activists. The arrival of the *Windrush* has come to signify postwar Commonwealth migration to England and, by extension, the origins of the black British community. As representatives of a symbolic moment in collective memory, emigrants on board the *Windrush* are often thought of as Britain's first black residents, which is not the case. As Peter Fryer has shown in his expansive work, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, there have been black Britons in the UK for centuries—regardless of Queen Elizabeth's declaration that there were too many "blackmoores" in England and that they "should be sent forth from the lande" in 1596 (qtd. in Fryer 10). Many black slaves were brought to Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, other black Britons were free people whose narratives supported abolitionist movements, and still others were seamen based in Bristol, Cardiff and other coastal areas in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Public discourse—

journalistic, political, literary—about British national identity, race, and citizenship has made the *Windrush* symbolic in the collective consciousness.

On that important *Windrush* anniversary, Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron commented that the ship's arrival had marked a "transformation of this country into the richly diverse nation it now is" and that these "early migrants did so much for our country, and paved the way for their children and subsequent generations to make enormous contributions to Britain in the 21st century" (qtd. in "Prime Minister Pays Tribute" n.pag.). His remarks came a mere eleven weeks after the death of former PM Margaret Thatcher and are a far cry from her claims in 1978, a year prior to being appointed PM, that Britons were "really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture" (n.pag.). The comments of the two Conservative Party leaders—a party often associated with its anti-immigrant stance—take two distinct rhetorical approaches to the construct of British national identity: a positive, inclusive approach focused on growth, and a negative and exclusive approach focused on an imagined threat of invasion.

Thatcher's rhetoric of invasion closely echoes that of Enoch Powell in the 1960s during which time the United Kingdom was gradually adjusting its immigration policies and practices in several subsequent immigration and nationality acts—a project which Thatcher's government continued. In his famous 1968 "rivers of blood" speech, Powell claimed that entire towns "across England will be occupied by immigrants" (374). In many ways, this rhetoric of invasion and occupation by the "settlements" of a so-called "alien element" is a carry-over from the Second World War, but legally migrating Commonwealth citizens were now constructed as the new

domestic threat Powell claimed would use the then upcoming Race Relations Bill to “dominate the rest with...legal weapons” and change the character (that is, racial character) of Britain thereby supposedly threatening British national identity (379). The construct of national identity is tightly linked to the conceptualization of home as domestic spaces (personal homes) and nations (homelands) are both conceptualized, vary in stability, are bordered and territorial, and are defined and delineated by the rhetoric of inclusivity and exclusivity. As Kathleen Paul explains in *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era*, “the populations of the West Indian isles had been encouraged to think of Britain as home, as the cultural and political center of ‘their’ empire” (114), therefore, upon their entry to Britain, migrants from the West Indies were unprepared “to be treated as members of a separate sphere of Britishness” based on differences in race and culture (120). The rhetoric surrounding the immigration of West Indians (and other colonial populations) drew upon race to distinguish the “sons and daughters of the empire” from “immigrants” who would supposedly drain the social welfare system.

The writers and texts I study in this project are representative of the Caribbean diaspora in the UK even as they complicate the idea of an evolving diaspora. First, in addition to the internal movement of indigenous Caribbean people, the Caribbean itself is a diaspora of African, Indian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and European peoples and each of its cultures is multicultural. Second, the term “diaspora” is commonly used to refer to a body of people displaced from their region or nation of origin. Because of this, diasporas can be seen in contrast to “home” nations, but a diasporic community can function as a home in itself for those who emigrate as diasporic

subjects become at home with, and in, communities of movement and relocation, and define their identities by their shifting subject positions. This approach might seem paradoxical because we tend to think of homes as stable and permanent *places*. Yet the diasporic community becomes home because the idea of home is itself an abstract, fluctuating, and often-unstable concept—as Rosemary Marangoly George points out in *The Politics of Home*, “fictionality is an intrinsic attribute of home” (11). Defining home would be counterproductive because home is a construct and, like other constructs, it means different things to different people at different moments. Work like “At Home in the Diaspora” allows us to examine some of our dearest assumptions and aspects of our lives that are taken for granted, like the stability of home.

In this work, the emphasis on the imagery of domesticity in Caribbean diaspora literature is directed by the literary tradition’s focus on migrants’ ability to create homes and their involvement in forming a communal diasporic home, which is often reliant upon domestic spaces or the ability to claim a space as an extension of the claim to a nation or as symbolic of the nation and diasporic experience. The idea of nation itself is conceptual and fueled by nationalist traditions and rhetoric. The *concept* of nation is not merely defined by legal borders and documents of identity; rather, these are things that help enforce the sense of nation through the dichotomy of inclusivity and exclusivity. As Benedict Anderson has shown in his 1983 work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, nations are imagined communities based on their members’ ability to imagine their common bond and common national story—basically a collective project of imagining their

nationalism and telling it.<sup>2</sup> Literature, particularly fiction, is a fertile ground for researching this and asking questions of how a diaspora operates, represents itself, and is conceptually formed by that representation.

“At Home in the Diaspora” explores questions of nationalism, the idea of home, and the inclusivity/exclusivity that these concepts share. In doing so it joins a number of crucial concerns in Caribbean literary studies: authenticity; the idea of the immigrant writer as a privileged intellectual abroad; the split between emigrants and their communities of origin; the unease of emigrants in new countries; the sense of rupture or fragmentation for communities, families, and individuals; and the more autobiographical idea of West Indian writers fictionalizing their lives in Britain in order to depict West Indian emigrant communities grappling with physical and psychological exile. We live in bordered, physical spaces—both national and domestic—but for any mode of habitation to become home takes the conceptual leap and imaginative act that literature, particularly fiction, captures by both its form as story and its content featuring characters narrativizing their identities and experiences.

This project rethinks experiences of diaspora and displacement: migration is not

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson’s work is remarkable in its enduring use in theories of nationalism. Anderson describes the development of nationalism through the rise of the novel and print journalism (both of which emphasize simultaneity—that is, members of an imagined community understanding themselves as moving through time in steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity). For Anderson “Print-language is what invents nationalism” (134) because it “gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation” (44) meaning that nationalism relies on the construction and idea of antiquity for a narrative of nation going as far back as possible. This requires a community bonded in their shared story—an essentially literary project. Paul Gilroy takes issue with Anderson’s emphasis on the value of print culture because it does not acknowledge the role of the perceived value of biological difference and kinship to constructs of nationalism. He argues that Anderson’s theory does not work in the British or Caribbean contexts because Britishness is constructed on racial exclusion and that despite their intimate familiarity with British conventions and print culture, West Indian communities in Britain are “continually described in military metaphors...the enemy within, the unarmed invasion...alien territory and new commonwealth occupation” or as “a bastard people occupying an indeterminate space between the Britishness which is their colonial legacy and an amorphous, ahistorical relationship with the dark continent” (*Ain’t No Black* 45).

plainly a matter of displacement because diasporic connections complicate the ways in which we can understand displacement and I examine these complications instead of emphasizing cultural estrangement or privileging the experiences and ideologies of authors.<sup>3</sup> The displacement of migration certainly has the potential to be divisive by separating family members, by causing “brain-drain” in the Caribbean as skilled and highly educated people leave, or through the racist or anti-immigrant climates that often greet emigrants. Yet I find the literature of the Caribbean diaspora also frequently represents the displacement of West Indians as potentially unifying in that they construct communities of Caribbean emigrants at home in the diaspora, without a bordered territory, by being away from their original homes together.

For Anderson, the meaning of nationalism relies on the construct of a sense of antiquity underlying a narrative of nation that goes as far back as possible and the nation must also be imagined as “‘historical,’ [looming] out of an immemorial past” in order for the concept of the nation itself to work (11). This is what Bhabha describes, in his essay “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” as being “poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past” (294). The struggles and tensions of the present become the narrative of the nation overcoming its challenges and the defining narrative of its people and their senses of nationalism and collectivity. Studying concepts of home, nation, and diaspora through literature is immensely valuable as it speaks to the expression of national identity. Importantly, Stuart Hall reminds us that “identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past, that is to say it is

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<sup>3</sup> See Margaret Paul Joseph *Caliban in Exile: The Outsider in Caribbean Fiction*, 1992; J.A. Brown-Rose *Critical Nostalgia and Caribbean Migration*, 2009; and Sandra Pouchet Paquet *The Novels of George Lamming*, 1982.



always about narrative” (“Negotiating” 5). In the case of British hegemony in the West Indies, colonial subjects were encouraged to embrace the narrative of Britishness as their own, to share or stake a share in Britain’s past as part of British colonial identities, and to understand that not only did they have their local island community but also that they were British in a nationalist sense. This hegemonic message was supported by its influence on colonial life, from the spectacle of ceremonial parades, to architecture, sport, education, and the consumption of British goods.

The fact of emigrants’ British subjecthood, granting them British nationality in several subsequent British Nationality Acts, particularly the 1948 act, seemed to confirm their Britishness. Colonial West Indians had a dual, legal condition of belonging—the island and the metropole—and thus they were encouraged to take a stake in the nationalism of the European nation(s) to which they were connected and, especially in cases like Britain’s where colonial people were British subjects, to understand European national histories as their own, and to think of the colonial state as their national state. Britain held out the promise of belonging through its hegemonic practices, by giving the subjects of its empire British nationality, and by encouraging its subjects outside of the United Kingdom to think of Britain as their mother country. When black British subjects decided to accept and secure that promise by migrating they found that they were socially, but not legally, excluded.

Typically we think of motherland as the country, land, or nation of *origin*, meaning the land from which the diaspora has emigrated. However, British cultural hegemony taught West Indians that Britain was their motherland—what a paradox, then, for West Indians *coming to* a motherland that they know intimately but relatively

few—mostly former students or Royal Air Force (RAF) servicemen—had seen. West Indians identifying as British (legally and conceptually) were then interpellated as immigrant or alien by the nation-state—Britain. The danger in this is the destabilization of identity. As Hall explains,

identity is not only a story, a narrative which we tell ourselves about ourselves, it is stories which change with historical circumstances...Far from only coming from the still small point of truth inside us, identities actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognitions others give us. Without the others there is no self, there is no self-recognition. (“Negotiating” 8)

While danger to self-recognition lies in the British view of West Indians as other or alien, there is promise in the notion of diasporic identity, the alternative narrative that provides a communal recognition to step into. If identities are formed partly through memberships in communities of similarly identified people, then senses of belonging are crucial. As citizenship and nationality law changed, the components of West Indians’ citizenship status changed and Britain made it more difficult for colonial migrants to enter the nation. As Paul has shown, the governmental and political rhetoric of keeping black West Indians out of England contributed to the levels of racism and exclusion that West Indians encountered across their experiences in Britain including housing, employment, travel, and the minutia of daily life. By 1962 British West Indians had been rhetorically framed as imposing immigrants rather than legally migrating colonial subjects.

Four major overlapping turns in British-Caribbean diaspora history, politics, and cultural theory influence my project and characterize the texts I study. The first—which is particularly pertinent to the literary tradition of the West Indian diaspora in Britain—is the arrival of “the *Windrush* generation” in the 1940s and 1950s; migrant acclimation to British life and membership in a growing diaspora in Britain; the racist disproportionate access to housing, jobs, and education they faced on arrival; and the dilemma of being indoctrinated to think of themselves as British yet finding themselves othered and excluded. In response to the rejection of the mother country, the *Windrush* generation evolved a West Indian identity *in* Britain. As their diasporic bonds strengthened, they saw themselves as members of a West Indian community and not solely identified with Britain or their individual islands of origin. As George Lamming says, “most West Indians of my generation were born in England” (*Pleasures* 214).

British imperial cultural hegemony meant that many “little Englands” existed worldwide. As Hall points out regarding the imperial hegemonizing tradition, “people are always more Victorian when they’re taking tea in the Himalayas than when they’re taking tea in Leamington—they were keeping alive the memory of their own homes and homelands and traditions and customs” (“Negotiating” 7). By being raised with the dominant colonizing culture in a social system designed to elicit loyalty, colonial populations were deeply entrenched in a concentrated, and often exaggerated, experience of British essentialism. Colonial populations were, therefore, very familiar with the conventions, traditions, and customs of Britishness. The result was a crafted sense of being at home overseas for the British, which was reified when the colonies

were treated as extensions of the British homeland. The ease of feeling “at home,” then, is a form of power. For those in the metropole to think that colonial migrants were unfamiliar with British conventions and values—particularly after the imperial project purposely designed colonialism in this manner in order to bank on the power of hegemony—is to create myths of otherness that draw boundaries around national belonging.

The second turn is decades of legislative attempts to slow and deter the entry of Commonwealth migrants. The 1914 British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act gave all persons born in the dominions automatic British nationality, and provided uniform policies for naturalization of aliens. Thirty-four years later, the 1948 British Nationality Act granted rights of subjecthood to all members of British Empire with common status of “British subject,” a broad British nationality, and created the United Kingdom and Colonies (UKC) citizenship. “British subjects” maintained rights of abode. The act also allowed dominion governments to create local nationalities subsumed under British nationality in an attempt to keep countries like Canada from fully breaking away from British influence. In this year, the Jamaicans aboard the *Empire Windrush* landed and were intercepted by government agents who placed those without intended jobs or homes. In the first few years after this, a few thousand Commonwealth migrants entered annually. As the number of Commonwealth migrants in the UK steadily increased—by 1957 some 40,000 Commonwealth migrants entered Britain annually—legislators devised the 1957 British Nationality Act, which provided additional time for Britons abroad (persons of British origin) to register as domestic citizens (Paul 132). This measure was meant to allow the empire’s

(white) “sons and daughters” in the colonies additional time to claim British domestic citizenship.

The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act made major, sweeping changes. The 1962 act separated migrants into three groups for “A,” “B,” and “C” vouchers: “A” Ministry of Labour employment vouchers for those with jobs; “B” vouchers for skilled or experienced migrants; and “C” vouchers for unskilled migrants. Numbers of “C” vouchers were tightly controlled and the act gave agency to immigration officers to refuse admission to Commonwealth citizens. The thinly veiled racism behind the act was explicitly admitted by Parliamentarian William Deedes in 1968: the “real purpose was to restrict the influx of coloured immigrants. [They] were reluctant to say as much openly. So the restrictions were applied to coloured and white citizens in all Commonwealth countries” (qtd. in Cohen, *Frontiers* 18). In addition to the employment voucher system to restrict entry, Commonwealth citizens could now also be removed within a twenty-four hour period or otherwise be deported by the Home Secretary after a trial. This period also saw the largest wave of Commonwealth migration as people migrated before restrictions were put into effect. Six years later, in 1968, the deportation laws were expanded so that Commonwealth citizens who entered the country illegally could be deported if caught within four weeks.

The Immigration Act of 1971 expanded Britain’s ability to deport even further: Commonwealth citizens’ entire families could be deported along with them, time limits were no longer imposed, and deportees could only appeal after having left the country. One other noteworthy feature of the Immigration Act of 1971 (implemented on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1973), is the introduction of the word “patrial,” “a word apparently not

previously in any dictionary, but rather coined by an official in the Home Office” (Cohen, *Frontiers* 18). This term and its accompanying legislation allowed right of abode to Commonwealth citizens with parents or grandparents born in the UK. This unsubtle measure increased the number of whites in the Commonwealth with rights to live in the UK. The British Nationality Act of 1981 (which was implemented on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1983) used the concept of *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) versus *jus soli* (right of the soil) for the first time so that people born in Britain but not of British parents would *not* automatically be considered British. Citizenship is one of the defining factors of national identity, which, like other forms of identity, is continually in process, continually shifting and being redefined. These legislative changes were reactionary and unfolded in stages influenced by delicate Commonwealth and foreign relations negotiations. The 1980s represent a major moment of shift and attention to what the concept of British nationality means. By defining—or attempting to, because so many statuses and citizenships competed and overlapped—who was British and legally allowed to reside in Britain and have access to its privileges, like welfare support, the sequential legislative acts that opened the decade represent a legal manifestation of the definition of Britishness by explicating who would be legally considered outsider or other. Like all strong self/other defining dichotomies, British and non-British are terms defined rhetorically, socially, discursively, and emotionally in opposition of one another. In order to pass decades’ worth of legislation that would limit the access of Commonwealth citizens to Britain, legislators had to move from the labor schemes that encouraged colonial migration for labor in the 1940s and 1950s to a rhetoric of problematizing migrants, focused on the supposed threat of their

presence, and reframe migrants as immigrants. Paul's extensive study of this in *Whitewashing Britain* shows how politicians gradually created public demand for citizenship reform on this premise.

The third turn is the notion of Britain in "crisis" that fed much political thought, rhetoric, and action from the 1960s through the 1980s, including industrial action, "riots," and highly publicized deportations, as well as the Thatcher years, her Conservative government's attitude toward welfare, and the British government's privatization of public services that follow the anxieties—both genuine and devised through political rhetoric—of the preceding decades. This notion of Britain in "crisis" that came from a number of factors from the 1960s through the 1980s—immigration, recession, racism, rebellious youth culture, industrial action, global decolonization movements, the cold war, sensationalized crime and criminal statistics, over policing and "rioting"—and drew upon concepts of moral panic and social anxiety. For politicians like Powell and the authors of the Immigration Acts of 1962, it was the arrival of Commonwealth "immigrants" that constituted a threat. As Houston Baker explains,

Globalization of markets and new technologies left Britain in a backwash of postindustrialism. Full employment gave way to massive unemployment. Immigration—seen in the postwar years as a source of menial labor and a sign of postwar democratic pluralism—became a threat to jobs and to the British 'way of life.' (4)

Then there was global decolonization, the rise of discourses of mugging as a street crime blamed on black youth, the Cold War, recession, violence, and industrial action.

It is not surprising, then, that by the 1980s rhetorical appeals to the crisis had “proved a powerful rhetorical device, framing the actions of the [Conservative] Thatcher governments against a gallery of apocalyptic alternatives,” a device that “require[s] an active process of narration” (Saunders 25).

Again, immigrants became targets in response to the supposed public panic emphasized by the Conservative party: deportation laws changed and numbers of deportees increased by hundreds every year: “from 1,044 (1987), 1,639 (1988), 1,820 (1989) to 1,976 (1990)” (Cohen, *Frontiers* 52). One famous deportee, Joy Gardner, lost her life in a confrontation with Metropolitan Police in 1993: police forcefully admitted themselves into her flat, “then cuffed, taped and gagged her after a violent struggle. Paramedics from the London Ambulance Service were called when she had stopped breathing. Despite there being ‘no vital signs of life’ she was, grotesquely, placed on a life-support machine at the hospital” (Cohen, *Frontiers* 53). The resulting furor from the community required the intervention of MP Bernie Grant (then the only black representative from London) and the suspension of the special deportation unit of the police. Another diasporic literary text, Benjamin Zephaniah’s “The Death of Joy Gardner,” expresses the outrage of the community:

They put a leather belt around her  
13 feet of tape and bound her  
Handcuffs to secure her  
.....  
She's illegal, so deport her  
Said the Empire that brought her



She died,  
Nobody killed her  
And she never killed herself.  
It is our job to make her  
Return to Jamaica  
Said the Alien Deporters  
Who deports people like me (11)

Zephaniah's work emphasizes both the rhetorical tools of government officials and legislative discrimination ("Said the Empire," "Said the Alien Deporters"), the paradox of inclusion and exclusion (with the rhyme "brought her" and "deport her"), and the administrative habit of refusing blame ("Nobody killed her"). The Gardner case and the community's reaction to it display two of the common features of diaspora that Cohen describes in his work: a strong ethnic group consciousness and a troubled relationship with host societies. When the two are combined, we can see how the state's threat to one is a threat to all.

Throughout decades of the state revising citizenship and nationality laws and problematizing the migration of Commonwealth subjects, diasporic communities maintained bonds as a form of resistance to social and legislative exclusion. These bonds generated political movements for representation and the protection of social rights. The 1950s emigrant experience is frequently characterized as keeping one's head down and doing one's best despite the difficulty of discrimination in Britain. The *Windrush* generation is often described as slow to be involved in political movements and preferring to look out for the wellbeing of their own families, which is not a fair

representation. While it took time for this generation to see itself as West Indian, rather than divided by island, they were socially and politically active and this activity grew in the early to mid 1960s. At first, as Mike and Trevor Phillips explain, the political groups representing West Indian emigrants “on the ground were a mixed bunch” of bodies set up in government race relations and immigration legislation—the Commonwealth Immigrants Advisory Council, the Race Relations Board, and the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants—which were staffed by people who were engaged in forms of local activism, “notably church groups, liberal academics, and voluntary organizations” (221). These groups took on discriminatory housing as their first major cause of political movement in order to ensure access to fairly priced, safe homes in good condition. Updates to housing legislation meant that representatives could monitor the Rent Register to be sure that landlords adhered to fair, Rent Tribunal-fixed rents and “would immediately inform the Town Hall [if a rent had been raised] so that [the landlord] was forced to put it back,” making this strategy “a major weapon to be used by and on behalf of the West Indian Community” (qtd. in Phillips 222.) At this time the growth of groups like the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination, the Notting Hill Social Council, the West Indian Development Council, housing associations, and equal opportunity committees politicized a number of middle-aged Caribbean people who had been active in working-class trade unions and who then “established a tradition which was based on the unions or on local elections [which] led the next generation of black politicians to their...entry into British politics” (Mike and Trevor Phillips 223).

Throughout the 1960s, the Phillipses explain, “Caribbean migrants became black people...and by the end of the seventies we had begun to share the same assumptions about our national status as our white compatriots. That is to say, we became black Britons. This was a fundamental change, driven by the generation who had arrived as children, or had been born in Britain” (256). The younger generation’s concept of identity had real implications on their communities’ political activism. In the early 1970s education replaced housing as the major political cause. Parents had assumed that their children were being properly educated but gradually learned that black students were regularly ignored or treated as intellectually inferior in schools. Parents countered this institutionalized racism with the Black Parents’ Movement and Caribbean Education and Community Workers’ Association and by creating supplementary schools and a West Indian Student Centre. The other major political movement stemming from the second generation’s sense of black British identity was a more confrontational, highly-visible political public life that included anti-National Front campaigns and the street-level defense of Caribbean communities. The Phillipses explain that by the late 1970s, “the racists who had ruled the street corners only a decade previously were challenged and harassed everywhere they appeared. Britain was still riddled with racist values, but it was now obvious that the migrants no longer existed on the margins” (267). As we shall see in the third chapter, in the early 1980s this would shift to confrontations with systemically racially discriminatory policing practices.

The last turn, as it resonates through this work, is developments in cultural studies from the 1990s on that include diaspora studies in the discipline, shifting it

from being primarily studied the realm of social studies and making it a core field of inquiry in studies of multiculturalism and globalization. While the term “diaspora” comes from the Greek *speiro* (to sow) and *dia* (over)—ancient Greeks saw diaspora as a product of migration and colonization—the history of the Jewish diaspora sets the stage for the study of diaspora itself. According to Cohen’s overview of diaspora studies, *Global Diasporas*, the following are key common features of diasporas:

1. “Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions”
2. “alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambition”
3. “a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements”
4. “an idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation”
5. “the development of a return movement that gains collective approbation”
6. “a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate”
7. “a troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance at the least or possibly that another calamity might befall the group”
8. “a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement”

9. “the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism” (26).

Cohen is careful to explain that not all diasporas exhibit every feature of this list, but that generally these are the characterizing features of diasporic communities. A number of these features are self evident for the Caribbean diaspora in Britain and are evident in the novels of the diaspora, such as the dispersal from a homeland in search of work or a troubled relationship with the “host” society. Yet others when considered in relation to the Caribbean diaspora in Britain reveal why this diaspora is so fascinating.

The “collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements” and “the idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance” are highly complicated ideas in this case. If we think of Africa as the homeland of Afro-Caribbean people we come up against colonial hegemony, which stereotyped Africa and African peoples as uncivilized or inferior.<sup>4</sup> We see this ideological baggage in Lamming’s novel *The Emigrants* and in Joan Riley’s novel *The Unbelonging* as Afro-Caribbean characters believe that African characters are beneath them. As part of the hegemonic processes of imperialism and colonial ideology, Britain denigrated the places of origin of colonial peoples and supplied itself as an ancestral homeland through the observation of its traditions, passing on its national values, teaching its history and culture, and securing allegiance through its symbols of power. Colonial people were taught that they were Britons but once in Britain were told to go home. For centuries there have been

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<sup>4</sup> If we think of the Indian subcontinent as the homeland of Indo-Caribbean people, again, we come up against the imperialist hegemonic tropes of pre-partition India and Indians as exotic and servile.

Caribbean people for whom their islands of birth are their ancestral homes regardless of where their ancestors originate or where they fit into the prevailing colonial system or its legacy.

As a field of inquiry for sociology, migration studies tend to historicize, quantify, and describe. As a field of inquiry for cultural studies, diaspora studies shifted away from sociology and provided new ground for theorizing nationalism, cultural identities, hybridity, globalization, multiculturalism, and race. As Cohen says in 1997 of these changes initiated by the growth of the cultural studies field in the 1990s, “Migration scholars—normally a rather conservative breed of sociologists, historians, demographers and geographers—have recently been bemused to find their subject matter assailed by a bevy of postmodernists, novelists and scholars of cultural studies” (*Global Diasporas* 127). Cohen’s description of scholars “bemused” but “assailed,” reflects the feeling that this area of sociology is under attack by cultural theorists. He continues, “A reconstitution of the notion of diaspora has been a central concern of these space invaders” (*Global Diasporas* 127). Clearly the space within scholarly borders is under threat of invasion as migration scholars grapple with ideas of inclusivity and exclusivity of fields of study and, interestingly, this approach calls to mind the dominant British culture’s response to Commonwealth migrants. Cohen then explains that for cultural theorists, “the collective identity of homeland and nation is a vibrant and constantly changing set of cultural interactions that fundamentally question the very ideas of ‘home’ and ‘host’” (*Global Diasporas* 127). This calls to mind the work of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy in particular, whose works heavily contribute to this project.

While, as I mentioned earlier, I refrain from offering a firm definition of home precisely because it is an abstract, conceptual, fluctuating, and unstable idea, a brief overview of other terminology is necessary here. I regularly use the term “Britain,” to evoke the British state, and when referring to its empire, and its colonial hegemony. Similarly, “British” is meant to evoke a larger, interconnected sense of nationalism. This is, of course, different from a specifically English nationalism. Where I use “England,” I do not do so interchangeably with “Britain.” Rather, I use it to specify the delineated nation of England or in making direct reference to a character’s use of the word. Additionally, I use “United Kingdom” or “UK” in much the same sense in which I use “Britain.” I use “Great Britain” sparingly as an emphatic rhetorical device. I also use the terms “West Indian” and “Caribbean” to connote and evoke separate things. Generally, the terms “West Indian” or “West Indies” are used here with reference to a specific period or period-specific identity or when referring to the diction of authors, politicians, or other sources. The term “Caribbean” has come to replace “West Indies” and “West Indian” in discourses about the region and its people, and I use it generally when I am not using “West Indian” as a contemporaneously specific term. The terms “migrants,” “emigrants,” and “immigrants” are used throughout this work. I use the terms “migrants” or “migration” to emphasize the British citizenship or subjecthood of people moving to Britain from the Caribbean. “Immigrants” is a loaded term used by politicians and in the media to problematize the movement of people from the margins to the metropole and I use it to refer to that problematization. I use “emigrants” as a word that fits with changing citizenship and nationality legislation and rights and in resistance to the negative connotations of the

word “immigrants,” to which, it is worth noting, it has a strikingly similar *Oxford English Dictionary* definition. The term “black” has meant different things at different times in Britain. During the boom of Commonwealth migration from the late 1940s to late 1960s it referred to people of African and Southeast Asian descent and, once reappropriated, helped bond the community of ostracized emigrants as a “political category” (Hall, “Frontlines” 127). In more recent decades in Britain, “black” has come to refer to people of African or Afro-Caribbean descent, specifically, and by extension to the interconnectedness of the African diaspora. The term “black British” refers to a more recent identity formation solidified by second and third generation black Britons as a way of claiming a national identity that their parents or grandparents were excluded from.

Clearly history and cultural studies are important fields to this project. To develop the trajectories between literature, history, and cultural studies, I balance literary texts from the immediate post-World War II period with more contemporary texts from the 1980s through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to see how this diaspora has been imagined and reimagined. Because “At Home in the Diaspora” thinks about the diaspora-representing project of fiction—a project that forms over time with a necessary sense of time—moving from the postwar period to the contemporary is important for understanding concepts of home, domesticity, and nationalism as they are imaginatively narrated in a literary tradition. I chose to limit the scope of “At Home in the Diaspora” to works coming from within the diaspora, by diasporic authors, that take up and depict the diaspora’s confrontations with British hegemony and social exclusion, and are set in Britain, specifically in London, though some of the



novels include other settings as well. The movement of this project transitions through literary representations of historical contexts, rather than being strictly chronological, which is why it opens with a study of Andrea Levy's 2004 treatment of the *Windrush* generation in the 1948 setting of *Small Island*. Most of the members of *Windrush* generation of emigrants were male while their wives and children often emigrated later, yet the novels studied herein include female characters as the bearers of culture, diaspora community builders, and the agents of improving the stuff of everyday emigrant life in Britain. Additionally, as part of the contextual movement of this project, political movements and movements of identity are also attended to as they inform the literary works. "At Home in the Diaspora" draws from a wide range of theoretical work: postcolonial studies, cultural studies, African American cultural and literary studies, Caribbean studies, diaspora studies, and European philosophy. I discuss Signifyin(g), interpellation, discourse, and narrative theory.<sup>5</sup>

The four chapters of this dissertation explore this diasporic literary legacy. In chapter 1, "Claiming a Space in the Thought-I-Knew-You Place: Trajectories of Domesticity, Diaspora, and Home in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*," I examine how questions of British nationalism, constructs of the diasporic home and community, and the ways in which the British community is narrated by Afro-Caribbean migrants continue to preoccupy writers of the Caribbean diaspora. This chapter pairs one of the earliest texts in the literary tradition of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain—Samuel Dickson Selvon's 1956 *The Lonely*

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<sup>5</sup> I see my role as a postcolonialist as one that allows me to draw from multiple schools of thought because imperialism, postcolonialism, and the study of power structures have global interest and should not be limited by geographical origins of thought, if such a thing can be classified.

*Londoners*—with one of the most contemporary texts—Andrea Levy’s 2004 *Small Island*—in order to examine the trajectory of representations of the *Windrush* generation. These two novels bookend the literary tradition in a number of remarkable ways: Levy is a female author and produced a contemporary text in the legacy of the male-dominated tradition Selvon helped start, Selvon’s novel primarily follows a community of West Indian men while Levy’s follows West Indian and British communities, men and women, and, especially important, the two novels confront and depict issues of domestic space and community-building in response to highly contested issues of national belonging.

*The Lonely Londoners* shows the bonds of the imagined diasporic community to which membership is predicated on being West Indian (regionalism instead of nationalism). Their community is largely constructed on dialogue, on “oldtalk,” and on the boys getting together to share information or gossip. In the course of “oldtalk” they narrate their imagined community into being and develop the collective senses of origin and home required of diaspora formation. “Oldtalk” in postwar *The Lonely Londoners* parallels other forms of speech in contemporary *Small Island*: Caribbean characters speak more precise English than Britons yet struggle to be understood, smooth talking gets them ahead, and there is a deeply meditative quality to the narration as characters reflect on their experiences. In *Small Island*, Levy’s characters migrate from Jamaica to Britain in 1948 and one of them, Gilbert, sails on the *Empire Windrush*. Gilbert observes the spectacle of arrival, remarking that “the Mother Country—this thought-I-knew-you-place—was bewildering these Jamaican boys,” and focuses on the unrecognizability of the Mother Country to the migrant who has

been taught to exalt Britain and think of himself as British (175). The state's refusal to recognize the nationality of black British subjects and fulfill the its obligations to them is one catalyst in the formation of the diasporic community as an experience characters bond over, and a subject of narrations of the nation from the margins. The domestic spaces in these novels become spaces of promise and security as characters fight to claim them, keep them, and use them as diasporic hubs. Levy's success with writing strong female characters into the literature of the diaspora as the agents of an improved quality of life Signifies heavily upon Selvon's often sexist and lonely male characters.

Chapter 2, "A Diaspora of West Indians 'Born in England': George Lamming's *The Emigrants*," focuses on the use of constructs of oppression-resistant Caribbean diasporic identity through the novel's depictions of domesticity and characters' speech acts, which trouble assumptions about the exclusivity of national belonging. Collectively shared narratives of experience create a sense of home through stories that connect migrants over shared experiences of Caribbean life. This sense of shared history bonds the diaspora, which, in turn, becomes a home in itself. In addition to diasporic bonding, homeplaces where diasporans can gather and domesticity also figure in the dialogic narrativizing of identity and in illustrating the hegemonic tensions between the emigrants and the "mother country." There are two major examples of this in *The Emigrants*. The first is in the British-manufactured domestic articles that link the emigrants in Britain to the Caribbean within their first few hours in Britain as they watch the industrial landscape go by on the train for London. In this scene characters' voices compete and overlap as they excitedly narrate their

experiences of arrival. In a display of British hegemony, the emigrants discuss what lies ahead, mimic British language patterns, or relate what they see through the train windows—factories that produce items for domestic consumption—to their colonial experiences of Britain yet their analyses do not spare Britain from critique. The result is a diasporic bonding in Britain that carries the on-ship community formation— inclusive of female emigrants—forward to the city. The second key use of domesticity is in the contrast between the domestic (and other intimate) spaces of the emigrant community and the homes of middle class Britons they visit, particularly in the tension between middle class propriety, ingrained discrimination, and liberal British values. British homes become both the site of this meeting of imperial attitudes with the homecoming of the colonial migrant *and* representative of what the men hope to earn in Britain mashed up with the nation’s failure to welcome them.

The third chapter, “‘My Heritage Forbade Me to Stand Still’: Political Identity, the State, and Welfare Homes in Beryl Gilroy’s *Boy-Sandwich* and Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging*,” takes these two novels from the late 1980s as its focus to explore various forms of the state-sanctioned oppression of the decade, including oppression within state welfare systems, and the diaspora’s resistance to it. Much of the rhetoric of exclusion concerning Caribbean migrants was based on their supposed draining of and dependence on the British welfare system. These texts are concerned with those living in the welfare system’s institutional homes by no choice of their own—children and the elderly—and this chapter investigates representations of people forced to live on the very system that is held against them. The living spaces of these texts trouble the ability to make a domestic space as a site of resistance to the challenges of

emigration as these welfare homes are shared spaces of habitation outside of the control of residents. Complicating these ideas of welfare and immigration is the 1980s social and political climate. The novels are characterized by social tensions of the 1980s, particularly between the state and the people, especially black British communities. For the second-generation characters in both novels the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* is in the past while black British identity and politicized, socially active youth culture are very much present, intertwined concerns. The decade and the novels are informed by discord, Thatcherite welfare debates, conservative rhetoric, an increasingly politicized and policed generation with a new relationship to the British nation, and the romanticization of the Caribbean as safe and stable home.

As a girl, Riley's narrator, Hyacinth, is especially vulnerable. She escapes her brutally abusive father after he brings her to London from Jamaica and is placed into a children's home where she is the only Afro-Caribbean resident. She feels the effects of racism acutely in the negligence and brutal ostracization she experiences in the system. She clings to concepts of the Caribbean as home and memories of relatives, viewing her life prior to arrival in Britain as significantly better and resenting her forced life in Britain. Her lack of agency tests and complicates the idea of being at home in the diaspora. If, as Cohen claims, all diasporic communities "acknowledge that the 'old country' ...always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions [and] a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with the others of a similar background" (*Global Diasporas* ix), then *The Unbelonging* tests any understanding of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain and diasporas in general

because, while Hyacinth idealizes Jamaica, having clung to a romanticized idea of the country, she is alienated from her diasporic community and has no community of similar background. Without being a connected member of the diasporic community, Hyacinth is never able to be at home.

Gilroy's characters—an elderly couple—have a different experience of the British welfare system. Evicted from the home they own because it is to be demolished, Clara and Simon Grainger must first confront an angry mob outside of their home chanting “Nigs out!” and “No more wogs!” before being removed by the police and taken to a home for the elderly where they are the only two people of West Indian origin (2). The negligence they experience as Clara's mind deteriorates and the home's workers steal Simon's possessions amplifies their nostalgia for their Caribbean home and they cling to it in response. Again, this novel challenges the concept of being at home in the diaspora, but their family members and the rest of their Caribbean community still maintain the network central to diasporic identity and to their sense of community despite their removal from it. Their grandson, Tyrone, the socially active and politically empowered narrator, fights for their right to care in the state-run system. When the family decides to return “home” to the Caribbean, Tyrone discovers that he is British and that, despite the consistent, systemic racism he faces there, Britain is his home.

Chapter 4, “Speaking Home and History: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Narratives of National Belonging,” explores the construct of interconnected immigrant communities at home in the diaspora through speech acts and reliance on oral histories. In the course of talking with one another, characters narrate their experiences

of belonging or exclusion, effectively narrating themselves as members of larger immigrant communities while clinging to oral histories. The Caribbean diaspora is one of many diasporas in multicultural London and, at the same time, part of other communities which are inspired by it and borrow from it. The oral histories of the novel lend themselves to the development of political consciousness, constructions of diasporic identity, and a sense of habitation in cosmopolitan Britain. The characters share a need to construct (or reconstruct) celebrated pasts and past homes that will counteract the discrimination and difficulty of life in Britain and validation for the decision to emigrate. For the Caribbean diasporic characters, this is possible through the narratives of female characters who maintain some sense of inclusive and strong family identity for subsequent generations.

As Bhabha puts it in his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, “the problem of inside/outside must always itself be a process of hybridity” (4). Smith’s characters are social outsiders who navigate their experiences through narrating them to make sense of the incongruity of their legal inclusivity and social exclusivity as hybrid Britons fighting to understand the incongruity between national belonging and the impulse of their countrymen to exclude them—like Irie, born to a Jamaican mother and a British father but excluded because she is considered nonwhite and, therefore, her Britishness is questioned. Smith’s characters constantly tell stories in attempts to navigate this and her narrator takes us through family histories that subtly prod two primary questions: who is British and who belongs? Smith’s brilliant satire emphasizes the illogicality of the quick, readymade, and typically racist answers of exclusion and differentiation.

Ultimately “At Home in the Diaspora” questions and troubles an array of assumptions about home through the study of literature, a medium that exposes the ways in which identity, history, nations, and culture are formed by narrative. Home is a fiction, after all, and a highly contested one, both in terms of domestic spaces and in terms of national belonging. Some of our favorite euphemisms for belonging involve our concepts of home—to feel at home, to be at home—thus, the concept of home is imbued with a sense of belonging through the fusion of feeling and language. The idea of belonging is also the basis of the promise of homogeneity and why people so defensively cling to the idea of homogenous national communities when they feel that their sense of belonging is threatened. When British West Indian migrants are excluded and told to “go back home” on account of their difference, this is a defense of homogeneity. Studying the conceptualization of home through the imagery of domesticity and rhetoric of nationalism is fertile ground for exploring the sources of our beliefs about who we are, the value we put on origins, and the relationship of community to identity by examining a diaspora, a literary tradition, and a hegemonic ideology that together expose the fabrication of our values.



## Chapter 1

### **Claiming a Space in the Thought-I-Knew-You Place: Trajectories of Domesticity, Diaspora, and Home in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island***

In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*

Henry Louis Gates Jr. presents his theory of Signifyin(g) as a literary theory and system of rhetoric and interpretation recurring within African American and African diasporic vernacular and literary traditions. While the texts Gates analyzes are specific to the African American literary canon, his work speaks to Caribbean literature in both its representative figures and interpretive frame. Specifically, using the figure of Esu-Elegbara (or Legba, the gatekeeper between humans and the gods and a recurring figure in African, Caribbean, African American and other African diaspora literatures), Gates explains that across and within literary tradition African American authors repeat specific tropes, Signifyin(g) upon one another and upon European or American canonical texts, but with a difference. He calls this tropological revision (xxv). In this practice, he explains, “authors produce meaning in part by revising formal patterns of representation in their fictions,” a process that “simultaneously involves a positioning or a critiquing both of received literary conventions and of the subject matter represented in canonical texts of the tradition” (113). This phenomenon can also be seen across the literary tradition of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain in a number of diverse ways as Caribbean diasporic texts signify upon British texts and upon one another. We find it in George Lamming’s modernist style that in many respects signifies upon Virginia Woolf’s experimental style, as carefully detailed in J.

Dillon Brown's *Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel*. It appears in Zadie Smith's crafty use of language that echoes both Dickensian vernacular and the speech patterns of 1990s urban Britain, as H. Adlai Murdoch explores in *Creolizing the Metropole: Migrant Caribbean Identities in Literature and Film*. Sam Selvon opens *The Lonely Londoners* in a mood reminiscent of the opening of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This practice of tropological revision—repetition with a difference—is extra-acute with the relationship between Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), two of the most notable novels of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain.

In both novels, focus rests on the unrecognizability of the Mother Country to West Indian migrants, who must “come to terms with the idea of London as an illusion, as a dream built on the foundations of the colonial myth” and, in their confrontations with their lived sense of hegemonic Britishness, foster the “birth of a Caribbean consciousness” (Nasta “Setting Up Home” 80).<sup>6</sup> From the state's refusal to recognize the nationality of black British subjects rises the formation of diasporic identity. While the migrants struggle with this confrontation, the domestic spaces of *The Lonely Londoners* and *Small Island* become spaces of promise and security as characters fight to claim them, keep them, and use them as diasporic hubs where they can maintain their dignity in the face of discrimination. Levy's work signifies upon the literary tradition of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain and particularly well on Selvon's novel. Not only is she a female author responding to a literary tradition inaugurated by

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<sup>6</sup> Caryl Philips describes this as “the contradictory tension engendered by... attraction to and rejection by England... a sense of being both inside and outside Britain at the same time... the uncomfortable anxieties of belonging and not belonging,” from which rises the formation of diasporic identity (*A New World Order* 234).

men, but *Small Island* is set in the same post-World War II Britain and follows both West Indian and British communities, both men and women, and, especially important, confronts and depicts issues of claiming a domestic space as a refuge and an act of resistance in response to highly contested issues of national belonging. Levy's work signifies upon this practice in Selvon's work by carrying her representations of diasporic formation from dialogue (as what takes place between Selvon's "boys") to a form of domesticity that can provide autonomy and security. Not only are Levy's diasporans gathering in degraded housing to discuss their experiences, and by extension bonding diasporic connections, but her work is also much more heavily invested in the improvement of living conditions as both refuge and freedom. Because of the roles of female characters in their homes, this results in women being written back into the postwar London of Caribbean migrants as more than sexual conquests, matrons, or victims of domestic abuse: they become equally invested in resistance to the racist oppression experienced outside of the home.

By contrast, *The Lonely Londoners* is one of the early novels of the literary tradition of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain and primarily follows a community of West Indian men as they make a home of a diaspora in the face of discrimination and ostracization. Selvon's male-centered community of characters—"the boys"—congregates in Moses's bedsit on Sunday mornings "like if they going to church" for "old talk" and to share information, news, or gossip (138). This practice exposes the links between nation and narration as they actualize their diaspora through their dialogic discourse. Moses's room and the city in general become places "where kinship and friendship networks are necessary for new arrivals' survival and where

gossip and imaginative storytelling serve both as inexpensive forms of entertainment and as a way of keeping homesickness and loneliness at bay” (Dyer 118). Not only are the characters using “oldtalk” to form diaspora, but the text itself (in addition to others of its time) is involved in narrating the lives of this often ostracized community and in diaspora formation by its very existence. As Murdoch puts it, “The caravan of what would become a Caribbean literary vanguard adopted as its *raison d’etre* the literary re-presentation of the Caribbean experience, both to their home... audience and to a wider world... The twin thematic axes [being] representing Caribbean life as it was (at home) and as it had become (abroad)” (134). If this was the incentive for the literary vanguard (authors including George Lamming, Sam Selvon, E. R. Braithwaite, V.S. Naipaul, Beryl Gilroy, or Andrew Salkey), then Levy and her generation of writers (including Zadie Smith, David Dabydeen, Caryl Phillips, Roger Robinson, or Kwame Kwei-Armah) are producing work in what Gates calls “literary succession” by “rewriting the received textual tradition... [altering] fundamentally the way we read the tradition” (*Signifying* 124).

Levy signifies upon a number of tropes of Caribbean-British literature: the cramped and unhygienic housing, difficulties finding work, implied and explicit racism, Caribbean vernacular, the ideology of the mother country, and the metropole. The novel also signifies upon historical and media accounts, political speeches, and personal testimony so that as one reads these other texts alongside the novel, one hears the experiential echoes back and forth. This is clearly a feature of Levy’s meticulous research: in his review of the novel, “Roots Manoeuvre,” Mike Phillips describes it as a “historically faithful account,” adding that

the sheer excellence of Levy's research goes beyond the granddad tales of 50-year-old migrant experience, or the nuts and bolts of historical fact. Her imagination illuminates old stories in a way that almost persuades you she was there at the time [and yet] her reliance on historical fact gives Levy a distance which allows her to be both dispassionate and compassionate. (n.pag.)

Historical *narrative* underlies the novel's significance to issues of nation and identity since the very idea of nation and the construction of identity both rely on producing accounts of the past. Anderson argues that the idea of the nation is predicated on the ability of its nationals to imagine it as looming "out of an immemorial past" (11), while for Stuart Hall, "identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past...it is always about narrative" ("Negotiating" 5). In the case of the diaspora, novels like *The Lonely Londoners* and *Small Island* present the narratives of an ostracized community and its claim to a place: in Levy's case it is through a tight connection with the narratives of the community's past, while for Selvon's novel it is in the narratives of the moment. *Small Island* was published 50 years after the first of these diasporic novels and its perspective allows it to draw upon the community's past and changing narratives. *The Lonely Londoners* was published at a formative time for both the diaspora and its narratives. Comparing these representations and re-presentations of diaspora allows us to explore the imagined constructs of diasporic homes through the imagery of domesticity and the rhetoric of nationalism that offer ways of claiming a place as home. The articulation of this diaspora—its necessary speaking-into-being or discursive formation—is found in both the characters' dialogue

and the novels themselves as acts of writing, thereby both validating and making meaning of these narratives of diasporic community.

*The Lonely Londoners* follows West Indian migrants as they make their way in London, consolidating their diaspora, searching for employment and housing, taking in the features of London life that they had long known without directly experiencing—such as Waterloo Bridge or Piccadilly Circus—and confronting the difficulties of the racist postwar climate. By the end of the novel, Moses Aloetta, the principle character and narrative focalizer who seems to have merged with the omniscient narrator, muses about writing a book about the experiences of the Londoners “what everybody would buy” (142) and decades later Selvon published other two novels that follow Moses: *Moses Ascending* (1975) and *Moses Migrating* (1992). In the former Moses describes a prior text that sounds like *The Lonely Londoners*—“I have chronicled those colourful days in another tome” (44)—and describes himself writing his memoirs—“my philosophizing and my analysing and my rhapsodizing...showing the white people that we, too, could write book”—lending an even greater sense of authority to the voice of the trilogy (101). The third novel opens with “A Special Preface by Moses Aloetta Esq.” in which Moses says that “the author has often been asked how much of the books is himself, or the fictional character, or the actual person who inspired him” and goes on to describe someone somewhat like Selvon or Lamming, both of whom left the Caribbean in order to become writers: “Of the factual human being that Moses was based upon, I know that under the welter of adversity, and the wonderment of living in the heart of the Mother Country after coming from a small island known only to map-readers, was the yearning to be a

writer...instead he was a master raconteur” (x). Moses then says “I sat down to write *The Lonely Londoners*” and gives an account of writing it that echoes what Selvon has said about his use of the “nation language” (Kamau Brathwaite’s term) of the English-speaking Caribbean (xi). Now we have an author (Selvon), a fictional author-character (Moses Aloetta Esq.), and a character-narrator that has progressed from a third person narrator/narrative focalizer and character to a first-person narrator (Moses Aloetta). The trilogy is, then, not only a series of the diaspora’s novels but two diasporans’ novels—Selvon and Aloetta—as a metafictional practice in which the novels assume their readers (Dyer 110). Ultimately, not only are these novels about the origination of diaspora but these texts also actively generate diaspora. In *The Lonely Londoners*, the diasporic community centered on Moses accrues (rather than having the characters arrive together, as in Lamming’s *The Emigrants*) giving the novel an even more diasporic structure as the community grows.

Criticism on *The Lonely Londoners* tends to focus on Selvon’s masterful and distinctive use of Caribbean vernacular or nation language and the novel’s ballad or calypso style of depicting episodic scenes that accumulate to represent the characters’ experience.<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Dyer describes the style this way: by “depicting London in fiction, Selvon reworked the setting [of so many British masterworks] and alternately assumed—to comic effect—the occasionally pompous diction of the nineteenth-

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<sup>7</sup> One early view is G.R. Coulthard’s 1959 claim that the novel, “sufficiently English enough to be understandable but retaining much of the flavour of Trinidadian speech, is made up of a series of incidents and anecdotes...with little attempt at emotional or psychological depth” (37). This claim is obviously unapologetically Eurocentric and overlooks much. Susheila Nasta, one of the leading scholars of Selvon’s work, explains that “the novel was often mistakenly regarded as being simply an amusing social documentary of West Indian manners. As such its primary intention was to reveal with pathos and compassionate irony the humorous faux pas of the black innocent abroad,” however, the “literary decolonization” of the style is in its language and form that subvert British conventions and reflect the disillusionment of the migrants (84).

century British writer and the Creolized spoken English of Caribbean migrants in postwar London” (110)—clearly a Signifyin(g) practice. Additionally, the novel Signifies upon the British literary tradition by adapting a Signifyin(g) cultural form (calypso) in aid of its Signifyin(g) practices (melodrama, irony, satire). In a chapter of *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making Postcolonial Britain*, Ashley Dawson points out that the novel’s “calypso aesthetic” allows Selvon “to commandeer the British novel and transform it into a vehicle for the expression of postcolonial Caribbean identity” (33).<sup>8</sup> Graham MacPhee refines this point brilliantly in *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* when he argues that as an effect of this practice the novel “decentre[s] the privileged Eurocentric viewpoint” (120). This is because “To employ standard British English for the narrative voice would be to set up a hierarchy of experience between the language of the characters and that of the narrative voice, which would decentre and devalue the experience of the West Indian migrants” (MacPhee 121). Thus the narrative device allows the narrator to be firmly situated as a member of the diaspora. This destabilizing tradition connects Selvon’s body of work to that of other Caribbean authors who have written with similar approaches to language like the aforementioned Brathwaite, Lamming (whose

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<sup>8</sup> For David Ellis, the novel’s ballad style enabled Selvon “to describe a migrant underclass which displays enormous diversity in terms of ethnic and national background, individual personality and purpose of migration” (222). Kenneth Ramchand, in “Celebrating Sam Selvon,” describes the novel’s language as Selvon “push[ing] his linguistic experiments beyond the boundary set by a sound colonial education...open[ing] up the way for succeeding generations to write and speak in the language of the islands” (48). In “Finding West Indian Identity in London,” Selvon describes the writing process as wrestling for two months “with standard English to give expression to the West Indian experience: I made little headway until I experimented with the language as it is used by Caribbean people. I found a chord, it was like music, and I sat like a passenger on a bus and let the language do the writing” (60).



approach to collective voice we will explore in chapter 2), and Wilson Harris for whom language is a power structure to be destabilized, thereby freeing up possibility.<sup>9</sup>

Like Selvon's characters, Levy's Caribbean characters are participating in the postwar construct of this Caribbean diaspora in Britain as they migrate from Jamaica to Britain in 1948. One of them, Gilbert, is meditative and insightful like Moses, but with less bravado and more sensitivity. As a privately-educated former Royal Air Force (RAF) "driver-cum-coal-shifter" disillusioned with provincial life in Jamaica after serving in Britain, Gilbert sails back to England on the *Empire Windrush*, the ship typically thought to represent the first wave of West Indian migration to Britain. Gilbert observes the spectacle of arrival in that "the Mother Country—this thought-I-knew-you-place—was bewildering these Jamaican boys" (175), but his most important meditation on the unrecognizability of the "Mother Country" is this: "soon you will meet Mother [but] The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she... She offers you no comfort... No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, 'Who the bloody hell are you?'" (116). Gilbert's meditation reveals the disappointment of the migrant who has been taught to exalt Britain and think of himself as British, as the offspring of this beautiful, refined Mother, but also the unrecognizability of black migrants to "Mother" and Britain's reluctance to accept black subjects. Gilbert then asks, "how come England did not know me?" (117). The experience of this refusal to recognize the nationality of black British subjects and fulfill the state's obligations to them is what Joan Miller Powell astutely describes as "the disaffiliative nature of the colonial experience" in her review of the novel (201).

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<sup>9</sup> In this regard, these Caribbean writers are similar to other postcolonial authors, such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o who privilege nation language over European languages.

It is also one catalyst in the formation of the diasporic “nation” within a nation, an experience the migrants bond over, and a subject of narrations of the nation from the margins. Gilbert’s experiences are closely in keeping with those of Selvon’s male characters who experience, in Dyer’s words, “a disillusioning immersion in the everyday concerns of finding adequate housing, keeping menial jobs, [and] enduring cold weather” (109).

This disillusion, while most frequently felt by male migrants (because men made up most of the *Windrush* wave of migration), was not exclusively so and Levy writes women back into the diaspora’s narrative as fully formed, complex primary characters. Women are often treated as sexual conquests by Selvon’s Londoners, who refer to them as “crafts” and try to sleep with white British women.<sup>10</sup> The exception in *The Lonely Londoners* is Tanty, a relatively minor character whose age and domestic role afford her a position of community leadership and strength. Tanty arrives in London with her family to live with her nephew, Tolroy. While the other women in the extended family work, Tanty stays home to make a homeplace in a neighborhood with its “old and grey and weatherbeaten” houses,

the walls cracking like the last days of Pompeii, it ain’t have no hot water, and in the whole street that Tolroy and them living in, none of the houses have bath... The street does always be dirty [and] It always have little children playing in the road because they ain’t have no other place to play... [Where] the poor people buy tulip and daffodil to put in the dingy room they living in. (73-4)

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<sup>10</sup> It is important for us to note that this expression of sexism is also a form of imperial ideology, which defined women’s roles as supportive of, secondary to, and accessible to men and put a premium on the beauty of white women.

As neglected as the neighborhood is, and as dingy as its residents' domestic lives are, it is also becoming somewhat more comfortable for the West Indians living there as

The grocery it had at the bottom of the street was like a shop in the West Indies... Before Jamaicans start to invade Britain, it was a hell of a thing to pick up a piece of saltfish anywhere, or to get thing like pepper sauce or dasheen... But now, papa! Shop all about start to take in stocks of foodstuffs what West Indians like, and today is no trouble at all to get saltfish and rice... stock up with a lot of things like blackeye peas and red beans and pepper sauce, and tinned breadfruit and ochro and smoke herring (77)

In the shop "it does be like a jam-session there when... all the housewives go to buy... getting on just as if they in the market-place back home" (78). The connections between food and home are clear here, especially when we remember the effects that sensory experiences (like the flavors or smells of food) have on our bonds to places and feelings of comfort and belonging. Foods that are hard to find, or have been previously, are even more prized for people far from home. Additionally, the shop's stock speaks to the movement of food in the colonial experience: salted cod and smoked herring are European preparations for preserving fish then transported to the colonies; breadfruit was brought to the Caribbean from Tahiti as a filling food for slaves; and ochro (okra) is West African and Southeast Asian in origin and took well to the climate of the Caribbean. It is here, while taking care of her domestic role in this grocery, that Tanty becomes a leader when she convinces a grocer to allow customers to purchase items on credit and pay weekly because that is what is done where she

comes from. Eventually “Everybody in the district get to know Tanty so well that she doing as she like,” demanding the best, freshest products and insisting that her bread be wrapped rather than handled by the shopkeeper, a British habit that also shocks Hortense in *Small Island* (79). Linda Kabesh notes that “While the fraternal relationship shared amongst the boys creates the conditions for their politicization, it is in fact Tanty—a woman excluded from this fraternal solidarity—who proves the most effective agent of change...Tanty works to challenge systemic forms of exclusion and oppression that act upon her community” (12). In *The Lonely Londoners* Tanty is an exceptional woman, but Levy signifies upon this aspect of the diasporic literary tradition by following Gilbert’s wife, Hortense, as closely as her male migrant protagonist hereby forming a trajectory in the representation of women.

Hortense’s outlook is very much the product of her upbringing in a middle class culture of hegemonic Britishness, but despite her naiveté in regard to the greatness of Great Britain, she is quite cunning and savvy in other areas, especially regarding her social position as a woman. When she learns that Gilbert, at the time a casual acquaintance, wishes to return to England and that he wishes to sail on the *Empire Windrush* but cannot afford the fare, she arranges to cover his fare in exchange for marriage so that she can follow him to London, because “a married woman might go anywhere she pleased” (83). Both characters want to pursue better opportunities in Britain: for Gilbert it is a chance to pursue better work and training, while for Hortense it is jointly to escape Jamaica, find a teaching position, and to step into the British middle class life and home she feels destined for.

In addition to Hortense and Gilbert Joseph, the novel follows Queenie and Bernard Bligh, an English couple separated during the war. Again, Levy is Signifyin(g) upon the Caribbean male-dominated literary tradition by making *Small Island* a more broadly British novel, rather than a London or migrant novel, one in which the colony, the city, the countryside, the war, and the empire all figure. *Small Island* then interrogates the ways in which Britain relates to a range of people, not only in the London migrant experience, and is able to raise many more issues and questions of nation and belonging. In Bernard's absence during and after the war Queenie rents rooms in their London house and becomes the only landlady on her street to rent to black West Indians, including Gilbert and Hortense. This dynamic becomes one of the ways in which the novel signifies upon historical events and political rhetoric, as I explain below. On his return Bernard becomes a figure of stereotypical British homogeneity and then, as his attitude very slowly begins to change, a figure of grudging acceptance.<sup>11</sup> It is in the Josephs' rented room that Bernard figures most prominently.

As Dyer points out, quoting Michel de Certeau, "migrant men and woman are often depicted within rented rooms or negotiating lease agreements as either landlord or tenant...the characters furnish these temporary homes 'with their acts and memories,' both of which help to make these small sites within London their own" (111). Levy's work signifies upon this practice in Selvon's work by carrying this a step further from dialogue to domesticity. *The Lonely Londoners* focuses heavily on

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<sup>11</sup> In her review of *Small Island*, Laura Albritton describes Bernard as the novel's flattest character. He is an unpleasant character and a slow-to-adapt man whose entire value system—the ideology that for most of his life has placed him in a position of white nationalistic patriarchal power—is being eroded by the war, his wife's agency, and a nation changing around him.

the loneliness and isolation of life in a mother country that rejects its colonial “children.” Notably, the narrator reflects that he can see “a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement” under all of the laughter (141). He describes unemployment, poor housing conditions, desperation, the difficulty of everyday life, and the pervasive racism underlying it all. The novel closes with an image of the men “jostling in the crowd, bewildered, hopeless. As if, on the surface, things don’t look so bad, but when you go down a little, you bounce up a kind of misery...As if the boys laughing, but they only laughing because they afraid to cry” (142).

Yet this is also a novel of diasporic connections and the interactions between people. It is a novel about Moses, as the seasoned Londoner helping newcomers, and about community in spite of the loneliness of city life. Moses’s small single room is so routinely filled with “the boys” that “when he come home and can’t sleep, is as if he hearing the voices in the room, all the moaning and groaning and sighing and crying, he open his eyes expecting to see the boys sitting around” (138-9). Their bond is in speech: in narrating their lives to the only others who will listen and understand they create a community of inclusiveness in response to the exclusion they otherwise face. As such, the novel is a sort of memoir of the group, sharing common experiences as well as knowledge about navigating their new positions as members of a community discriminated against in a place that had previously held such promise for them. In 1959 G.R. Coulthard contemporaneously argued that “To Selvon the most prominent feature of the immigrant problem is the cohesion of the group.<sup>12</sup> The West Indians are

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<sup>12</sup> We should be reminded of W.E.B. Du Bois’ question: “How does it feel to be a problem?” from *The Souls of Black Folk* (363). Coulthard, like policy-makers, editors, and other molders of public opinion, is framing “immigrants” as a social problem to be solved. For more on this subject, see Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*.

depicted as living among their own people, associating...with each other and other coloured people...they return to their group, rather defensively” (37). For Coulthard West Indians are out of place in London. For me, this community that the migrants return to “defensively” provides a sense of home that the city, in general, cannot. Like a family, the men gather in Moses’s room on Sundays. They look out for one another and when things are so desperate that Galahad snatches a park pigeon for supper, he and Moses prepare a satisfying meal of it. This is a community of resistance to racist oppression and a home in itself and Moses’s room becomes its domestic hub. It falls to Moses, the experienced narrative focalizer to provide a diasporic education to the newcomers he usually meets through connections with people from his home-country or immediate diasporic community.<sup>13</sup>

The opening scenes of *The Lonely Londoners* depict this nicely: Moses has received a letter from a friend in Trinidad asking him to meet a newcomer at Waterloo Station and help the newcomer get settled, he does so grudgingly for it means leaving his nice, warm bed to meet someone he does not know, but Moses goes “*for old time sake*” (23, emphasis added). Moses’s decision to receive and help this newcomer emphasizes his sense of obligation to his countryman in Trinidad, but also to his diasporic community in Britain as he will intercept its newest member and give him information on finding work and lodging because he knows “which part they will slam door in your face and which part they will take in spades” (25). Moses grumbles about it, but helps because “he used to remember how desperate he was when he was in London for the first time and didn’t know anybody or anything” (25). That he goes for

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<sup>13</sup> I refer to him as the narrative focalizer because of that narrative shift between third and first person as it blurs with Moses’s thoughts.

“old time sake” flags the use of the past in the construction of diasporic connections and identity and the importance of the past in diasporic experiences. Moses has one foot in his home country and helps a countryman at the request of another for the sake of that old relationship. Yet “old time sake” also reveals how home-grounded nationalisms sculpt the new diaspora: because Moses came in the *Windrush* wave of emigration, he is in a position to provide a diasporic education and mentorship to newcomers but while he does this he maintains his gruff and standoffish exterior because he sees the newcomers as making life even more difficult for those who have been in London for some time as “every shipload is big news, and the English people don’t like the boys coming to England to work and live” (39) and “big discussion going on in Parliament about the situation, though the old Brit’n too diplomatic to clamp down on the boys or do anything drastic like stop them from coming to the Mother Country. But [it is in the headlines and] whatever the newspaper and the radio say in this country, that is the people Bible” (24). For all of his caution and complaint he bonds to his Caribbean community: “Sometimes, listening to them, he look in each face, and he feel a great compassion for every one of them, as if he live each of their lives, one by one, and all the strain and stress come to rest on his own shoulders” (139).

Waterloo Station then becomes a point of diasporic connection (not just a point of arrival or departure) where members of the diasporic community will gather whenever a boat-train coming in with passengers from the West Indies [because] they like to see the familiar faces, they like to watch their countrymen coming off the train, and sometimes they might spot



somebody they know...And they would start big oldtalk with the  
travellers, finding out what happening [in the Caribbean]. (26)

In this West Indian imagined community oldtalk, news, and newcomers keep diasporans connected to the community back home. The imagined community, to use Anderson's term, is so strong that they ask after people the newcomers do not even know and "questions they can't answer, like if they know Tanty Simmons who living Labasse in Port of Spain, or a fellar name Harrison working in the Red House" (26). The community's dependency on oldtalk, fresh news, and on narrating lives sustains the diaspora's dual time—a term Bhabha uses in "DissemiNation" to describe the present being dependent on the narratives of the past to for the sense of collectivity. In his essay "The National Longing for Form," Timothy Brennan argues that "The 'nation' is precisely what Foucault has called a 'discursive formation'—not simply an allegory or imaginative vision, but a gestative political structure" (46-7). Brennan's comments are useful in understanding the construct of British nationalism that increasingly legally and discursively excluded black British subjects and is a major concern of postwar West Indian fiction that figures the West Indian diaspora as a "nation" within the British nation. Ultimately, Caribbean migrant novels write marginalized imagined communities of Caribbean (im)migrants into the master narratives of the nationalisms of colonizing "Mother-Countries" by narrating a migrant "nation" within a nation.<sup>14</sup>

Diaspora has the potential to provide a sense of home for people removed from their countries of origin instead of necessarily being a marker of displacement, and homemaking in the face of housing discrimination is a significant accomplishment.

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<sup>14</sup> This would also extend neo-colonizing economic powers like the United States.

Domesticity, with its history planted in the lineage of sexist ideology that relegated it to the female members of a household, becomes a form of resistance as it helps migrant communities carve out spaces under their control.<sup>15</sup> Just as making a home of a diaspora requires a conceptual leap, act of agency, and a flight of imagination, so too would making a home of the dilapidated tenements in which migrants found themselves, where, indeed, both Selvon's and Levy's characters live. Homemaking is a special preoccupation of *Small Island* and homes become sites of resistance, to use bell hooks' term. In a different context she argues that the construction and maintenance of homeplaces by African American women took on a radically political dimension as the construction of sites of resistance where black communities could "freely confront the issue of humanization," and restore "the dignity denied...in the public world" (42). hooks' theory revolves around African American women's experiences as domestic workers in white households, their work obligations to see after the domesticity of others, and their capacity to return home to give more of themselves to their families and their own domestic environments. In *Small Island*, Hortense's circumstances are quite different—as she has trained as a teacher in Jamaica, seeks work in that field in London, never becomes a domestic worker, and her dreams of life in Britain revolve around her own domestic role in her life with her husband—yet I see the domestic space of Levy's novel is treated similarly to what hooks describes. Its promise, striving for it, and constructing it offer ways of navigating and escaping the daily racism that characters confront in Britain.

The migrants aboard the *Empire Windrush* arrived to a complex social reality:

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<sup>15</sup> This is why one of the most heartbreaking and terrifying forms of racist violence in 1980s in London was the neofascist practice of breaking windows and tossing petrol bombs into the homes of migrants.

a country that needed their labor yet treated their presence as problematic—the great cosmopolitan acceptance of Britain struggling with the racism that built its empire.<sup>16</sup> In keeping with the sense of accuracy the Mike Phillips feels in reading *Small Island*, those aboard that ship, like Levy’s character Gilbert Joseph, were generally still enlisted, former RAF, or otherwise middle class, often educated, Jamaicans who could afford the fare. They were well aware of a lack of opportunity in the Caribbean and many later returned to the Caribbean to participate in decolonization. Many who had lived in Britain during the war also found that the pace, ideology, and economy of Caribbean life no longer suited them. Despite their relatively high level of education and skills, their service to the “mother country,” and the real need for their labor, they repeatedly found themselves excluded from work or housing, often “having to settle for a lower job status than they had enjoyed” in the Caribbean (Fryer 374). For these first arrivants to be suddenly told by potential landlords that there is no availability, or to see signs reading “No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs,” or to be told that neighbors or other tenants would object to their presence became widespread.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, one newspaper article describes them as “Five hundred unwanted people...fleeing [because] Many of them recognise the futility of their life at home” (qtd. in Mike and Trevor Phillips 53). However, another headlined its article on the *Windrush* passengers “WELCOME HOME” (qtd. in Fryer 372).

<sup>17</sup> Migrants like Cecil Holness, who migrated from Jamaica and served in the RAF, commonly describe their housing searches like this: “in those days, it’s either two or three of you in a room, in those days, as a black man, it’s very hard to get a room, you wouldn’t get one. They always put on the board. ‘Black—Niggers not wanted here’ or ‘No Colour,’ things like that. So its very hard to get a room” (qtd. in Mike and Trevor Phillips 89). Other migrants, like Jamaican William Naltery, a former RAF air gunner, describe an experiences in which landlords blame the prejudices of neighbors or tenants for their own acts of discrimination: “I was sent to one place, and the fellow took all the time in the world to show me around it, say, ‘Well this is the room, that I have for rent.’ Then, having shown me around the house...he said, ‘Well I can’t rent you the room, you know...if I let you have it the rest of my tenants will go...I have nothing personal against you, but that’s the way it will be’” (qtd. in Mike and Trevor Phillips 91). Otherwise landlords simply refused to let black men view the rooms listed for rent as Holness once experienced right after getting married in 1949:

I rang the bell and this white lady she came out and I said, ‘Good afternoon, madam,’ and the moment when she answered the door you know it’s like as if she’s so frightened because she

Eventually the result of this exclusion was that the working-class Caribbean population of the city became concentrated in what Peter Fryer describes as “squalid, overcrowded slums” with no protection from exploitative landlords (378). In later years, the homes of Caribbean migrants and their families would come under attack by the bricks and petrol bombs of the National Front and other neofascists. In a context where access to basic housing is a challenge and safety within one’s home was not guaranteed, and experiences ranged from being “looked upon as a kind of curio” (Mike and Trevor Phillips 37) to physical attacks and police harassment, the ability to make a home of a single-room bedsit or council flat becomes an act of radical resistance to racist domination. Kabesh sees *The Lonely Londoners* as a text that “clearly calls out for social movement, for the building of community ties where racist exclusions make community necessary for survival” (8)—the domestic spaces that offer protection and comfort foster this community of survival and make this sense of mutual support into a social movement in itself. As hooks explains, “An effective means of white subjugation of black people globally has been the perpetual constructions of economic and social structures that deprive many folks of the means to make homeplace. Remembering this should enable us to understand the political value of...resistance in the home” (46). Thus it is important to see the value of Hortense’s domestic goals and achievements as subversive acts of agency in a nation that was redefining its national identity against her very presence. She provides what hooks calls “access to private space” where she and Gilbert “do not directly encounter

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didn’t expect to see a black man...she said ‘All right, come into the room.’ And then...she say, you know, in that nice sugary way to say, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry. You are just five minutes late. The room is taken.’ So I said to her, ‘Madam, do you see that telephone kiosk down there?...That’s where I was phoning from and I did not see anyone come to your door like that.’ So she paused for a while and said, ‘Well, I don’t want black people.’ (qtd. in Mike and Trevor Phillips 90)

white racist aggression” (47). The fact that their housing options are limited (Gilbert is fortunate to have found Queenie as a landlady) is a product of the racist climate, but the couple manages to make their single room a homeplace. They only directly encounter racist aggression in their domestic space when Bernard returns.<sup>18</sup>

As we shall see below, the British hegemonic reality of Hortense’s domestic sensibility, best seen in her dysfunctional colonial training in “proper” British ways and her attitude toward class, further complicates this context, but in her partnership with Gilbert she begins to come into her own. This idea of homeplace as a site of resistance that hooks details and that I see in *Small Island* is not one of violence (though that also certainly happened historically with, for instance, “race riots”), but is one of everyday communal resistance of the sort that restores dignity and builds diaspora. Both Selvon and Levy use this motif of domestic space as refuge and site of resistance, but Levy’s work signifies upon Selvon’s in two primary ways: 1) not only are Levy’s diasporans gathering in degraded housing to discuss their experiences, and by extension bonding diasporic connections, but her work is also much more heavily invested in domesticity and the improvement of living conditions; and 2) as I mentioned above, Levy writes women back into the scene as viable, fully-formed characters. The novels are forty-eight years apart and Levy has the entirety of those five decades of British-Caribbean diasporic history to signify upon in furthering the trajectory of this literary tradition.

I am particularly interested in five turns of the novel. The first is the Queenie’s role as a landlady and her character as a Signifyin(g) foil for the old-age pensioner in

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<sup>18</sup> When Bernard returns, he demands their eviction. Queenie refuses, making their stay contentious and tense. In a complex reversal of the common sensationalized rhetoric of the day, the West Indians’ home is in some sense invaded by the Briton.

Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech. The second is a moment when Hortense describes her domestic desires in relocating to Britain and the third is the series of moments in which she finds her perceptions of that life unrealistic while attempting to adjust to and improve upon their domestic conditions. The fourth turn I pursue is Bernard's return to the shock of black lodgers in his home and demands them out in an expression of his war-addled outlook, racism, and position of white male privilege. And the fifth turn is the Josephs' realization of the opportunity of having their own home and new-found ability to take steps toward a homeplace free of the racism and degradation they face outside of the home, and now inside with Bernard's presence.

Through her depictions of neighborhood racism as an extension of national views on race and nationalism, and through Queenie's status as landlady, Levy signifies upon Enoch Powell's now famous "Rivers of Blood" speech from 1968 in which he outlines what he considers to be the solution to the "preventable evil" of Commonwealth immigration (the politicians' term for non-white immigration): ending the "influx" of migrants and promoting their "outflow." The hyperbolic and fear-mongering speech features the story of a presumably fictional an old-age pensioner who

lost her husband...in the war. So she turned her seven-roomed house, her only asset, into a boarding house. She worked hard and did well, paid off her mortgage and began to put something by for her old age. Then the immigrants moved in. With growing fear, she saw one house after another taken over [and] her white tenants moved out. The day after the last one left, she was awakened at 7am by two Negroes who

wanted to use her 'phone to contact their employer. When she refused...she was abused and feared she would have been attacked but for the chain on her door. Immigrant families have tried to rent rooms in her house, but she always refused...She is becoming afraid to go out. Windows are broken. She finds excreta pushed through her letter box (378).

Powell's metaphorical parallels are fairly simple, but that is often how racist rhetoric functions: the old-age pensioner is at once an aging Britannia, a symbol of vulnerable femininity, and of a generation to be respected and revered, especially because she is a war widow having done her "bit," presumably sacrificing her family in the service of the nation. As a symbol of the nation, her adaptability, hard work, and saving go beyond her own merit to symbolize the industriousness of Britain. This is followed by the ominous statement "the immigrants moved in." As nationalist rhetoric would have it, their presence threatens her hard-earned resources, which are symbolic of those of the British state itself. Powell uses militaristic language that calls upon images of the Second World War when British soldiers fought to prevent the takeover of Britain in an attempt to illustrate the seriousness of an invasion of immigrants. This woman is told that she is prejudicial and called a racialist by chanting "wide-grinning piccaninnies" (378). Powell does not condemn her or think that this way of being is offensive, insulting, outdated, or a detriment to the nation itself. Instead, she is depicted as the victim to an upcoming Race Relations Act because she refuses to let rooms to black tenants. Only a flimsy chain on the door now under threat of attack from immigrants protects her home and her person, and she is afraid to step out into

public space. The home represents the nation while the chain and the door represent what Powell considers loose immigration policies. Both the descriptions of windows broken and “excreta pushed through the letter box” indicate that the home is being infiltrated by the threat from outside despite her best efforts at securing it, again a parallel to the nation itself. In particular, the letter box as an object of daily life linked to the state through the Royal Mail becomes a striking image of the threat of the supposedly dangerous invasion of the country by immigrants. It is worth noting that, along with window breaking, this was a common intimidation tactic used by neofascists terrorizing West Indian homes as in Cecil Gutzmore’s recollection that in 1958 “groups of white thugs...with the approval—tacit and sometimes active approval—of the Metropolitan Police Force, attacked black people in brutal and destructive ways [one of which was to] put shit through their letter boxes” (212).

Queenie is left with her husband’s family home when her shell-shocked war veteran father-in-law, Arthur, dies and Bernard is missing after the war. Being resourceful, she prepares the house in order to let rooms to lodgers. Throughout the war she helps at a rest center for families whose homes have been bombed and loans out furniture from the Bligh family home to rehoused bombing victims, a gesture that makes Bernard furious because his classism triumphs over his patriotism. She has a keen eye for wrecked houses and typically describes the aftermath of bombings in terms of surreal damage to homes rather than in terms of fear:

A house had had its front sliced off as sure as if it had been opened on a hinge. A doll’s house with all the rooms on show. The little staircase zigzagging in the cramped hall. The bedroom with a bed sliding, the



sheet dangling...A wardrobe open with the clothes tripping out from the inside to flutter away. Empty armchairs sitting close by the fire. The kettle on in the kitchen with two wellington boots by the stove. (251)

Her vision of this house as a doll's house reveals that it is not quite real to her, as one would imagine it wouldn't be after experiencing a bombing in the open street. The familiar details of everyday life abruptly stopped—the wellingtons by the stove, the kettle on—reinforce the invasiveness of the war on the “home front.” After Bernard enlists and is posted to India, Queenie's coworker at the rest centre suggests that she house three RAF pilots, because they “deserve a bit of home comfort,” and Queenie agrees (239). One of them, a black Jamaican man named Michael Roberts (Hortense's second cousin and old love interest), brings a change over Queenie when they have a brief affair that, in many ways, infuses her with new life and youthfulness, in addition to influencing how she sees black Britons. Her relationship with Michael and the fact that she met Gilbert during the war when he found and returned a lost Arthur, impact her decision to rent to West Indian tenants later, including Gilbert and Hortense, despite the objections and malicious gossip of her neighbors. As a woman her on own in a large house with her husband missing after the war, by renting to black West Indian tenants young Queenie becomes the ultimate foil to and the novel's signification upon Powell's old-age pensioner.

The pensioner has lost her family “in the war” whereas the stray bullets of off-duty American soldiers—an “accident” of war, rather than service—killed Queenie's shell shocked World War I veteran father-in-law and her husband has simply neglected to return home after demobilization, having “deserted” his marriage and his

home. This Signifyin(g) act—Powell’s valiantly “sacrificed” men contrasted with Levy’s disillusioned, aimless, wrecked, and murdered soldiers—is a remarkable commentary on ideas of war and nationalism. Both Powell’s old age pensioner and Queenie turn their homes into boarding houses in response to the absence of members of the male labor force in their lives, but the old-age pensioner refuses to rent to black applicants while Queenie selects her tenants based on need: she sees renting to her white female tenant, Jean, as taking her in and Gilbert as being in a position in which “no one else would take him in” (97).

The contrast between Queenie “taking in” tenants stands in stark contrast with the one sentence on which Powell’s description of the old-age pensioner’s situation pivots: “Then the immigrants moved in” (378). The catastrophic meaning underlying this sentence is seen in the reaction of one neighbor, Mr Todd, to Queenie’s arriving West Indian tenants which she reads as a “motley mixture of outrage, shock, fear, even” (94). He tells her “these darkies bring down a neighbourhood... The government should never have let them in. We’ll have a devil of a time getting rid of them now,” which is precisely Powell’s stance (98). Mr Todd cannot give an explicit reason for his fear, just as Powell’s speech does not contain a concrete or explicit reason why the permit of the “preventable evil” of the “influx” of Commonwealth migration is “like watching a nation busily heaping up its own funeral pyre” (375). Mr Todd’s claim that migrants come “For the teeth and the glasses” because the National Health Service is “Giving things away at our expense” (93) echoes Powell’s implicit claim that while migrants are entering “instantly into the possession of the rights of every citizen [including] free treatment under the National Health Service... the existing

population...found themselves made strangers in their own country [when] They found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth” (377). Mr Todd had been helpful to Queenie with domestic repairs, but “Gilbert moving in had put an end to all that. Darkies! I’d taken in darkies next door to him. But not just me. There were others living around the square. A few more up the road a bit. His concern, he said, was that they would turn the area into a jungle” (95). By this, presumably, he is implying a noisy, dangerous, unfamiliar place, like the quiet street that becomes “a place of noise and confusion” in Powell’s speech. This illogical fear is based on difference, as though that in itself explains things: it is a fear of change, regardless of whether it is legitimate or not. Because the concepts of Britain and Britishness rely on the perceived value and defense of seemingly stable tradition, politicians like Powell emphasize the past, such as when he evokes “a thousand years of English history,” in contrast to the threat of change, for instance, when he talks of “homes and neighbourhoods changed beyond recognition” (377). This is all a part of defining Britishness as an ancient thing that “immigrants” cannot appreciate, understand, or integrate into in a historical moment when this very idea (national identity) is undergoing a redefinition in response to Commonwealth migration. The drama and tension of change and possession are teased out in Powell’s speech. For example, we see it in his description of the old-age pensioner losing her neighbors as “she saw one house after another taken over [and] her white tenants moved out” (378), a moment which *Small Island* signifies upon with Queenie’s neighbor Blanche who lists her house for sale and tells Queenie it was her husband’s decision because “this country no longer feels his own [and] she had her two little girls’ welfare to think of...Forced

out, she felt. All those coons eyeing her and her daughters up every time they walked down *their own street*” (97-98 my emphasis).

Additionally, the novel signifies upon Powell’s speech in the contrast of Gilbert’s politeness and Hortense’s generally “proper” middle class attitude with the jungle stereotype and the rudeness they each endure from the people they encounter outside of their single room. Some of the more significant moments of this happen when white children point and stare at black West Indian characters in the street, signifying upon Powell’s “wide-grinning piccaninnies” (378). One such incident occurs with James, a fellow West Indian in the RAF, “standing with military bearing surrounded by English children—white urchin faces blackened with dirt, dried snot flaking on their mouths—who yelled up at him, ‘Oi, darkie, show us yer tail’” (117)—so much for those quiet streets! Frantz Fanon famously analyzes the phenomenon of white European metropolitan children treating black people in their cities as spectacles in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In his discussion of the fixing gaze of the other that reifies him as an object among objects, Fanon argues that “As long as the black man remains on his home territory, except for petty internal quarrels, he will not have to experience his being for others” (89) but once “given the occasion to confront the white gaze,” however, the image of his body becomes “an image in the third person” (90).<sup>19</sup> Undergoing tropological revision, this experience echoes across texts from Fanon’s—“Look! A Negro!” (91)—to Galahad’s experience in *The Lonely Londoners*—“Mummy, look at that black man!” (87)—and on to the British children who call after

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<sup>19</sup> This experience of one’s being for others is what W.E.B. DuBois called in another context and another time “double consciousness.” Fanon distinguishes between white Creoles and whites as part of this argument about home territory and says that there will be tensions between groups in the Antilles, but “there was nothing dramatic about them” (90).

Gilbert, “It speaks, Mummy, it speaks” (138). Hortense’s colonial-constructed image of Britain’s refinement is rudely fragmented when, first, a pointing child announces “Look! She’s black. Look, Mum, black woman” and his mother stares while admonishing the child, and second, a group of young men start calling out “Golliwog...Oi Sambo...Yeah, you, darkie” (276). Shocked, Hortense is left to wonder, “What sort of English person could call out so coarse?” (276). Gilbert’s politeness is stretched when people passing the couple in a little square—a boy Gilbert shoos away, an old man with a cane, a woman, and a man with a dog—gawk as they go by and it is all he can do to restrain himself. When two little children run up to touch Hortense’s skin he explains that “People always stare on us” and, to boost Hortense’s mood, jokes that “The King has the same problem” (383).

Hortense’s hegemonically constructed colonial image of Britain’s refinement had been the ultimate influence on her decision to migrate and it now threatened by her experience of life there. The depiction of the deciding moment itself is accompanied by an image of what a modestly suburban, secure British domestic life could be like for her:

England became my destiny. A dining-table in a dining room set with four chairs. A starched tablecloth embroidered with bows. Armchairs in the sitting room placed around a small wood fire. The house is modest—nothing fancy, no show—the kitchen small but with everything I need to prepare meals. We eat rice and peas on Sunday with chicken and corn, but in my English kitchen roast meat with two vegetables and even fish and chips bubble on the stove. My husband

fixes the window that sticks and the creaky board on the veranda. I sip hot tea by an open window and look on my neighbors in the adjacent and opposite dwelling. I walk to the shop where I am greeted with manners [...] politeness, [...] and refinement [...] A red bus, a cold morning and daffodils blooming with all the colors of the rainbow. (83)

Hortense is clearly invested in the idea of her gendered domestic role, but as a strong female character she is exercising an act of agency in this leap of imagination. She does not dream of a mansion, or a domestic staff. Her dream is solidly middle class—note that her dream dining-table only seats four, not eight or twelve. She wants feminine details in the tablecloth embroidered with bows and she sees herself as the home cook. Curiously she says nothing of work although she is trained as a teacher. She expects a restrained, refined life with a husband who does repairs and polite, friendly shop owners. The shopkeepers she imagines greeting her with respect and politeness frustrate her later in the novel as they handle her bread with their hands and cannot understand her, although others admired her diction in her college during the course of her British-colonial education. Hortense grapples with daily class discrepancies and her speech is a very difficult one for her. Taught to speak “the Queen’s English” in school, she finds herself unable to communicate with everyday Britons.

In other ways her dream continues to reveal her English education as a young woman raised in a colony: she knows to expect a fireplace, a cold morning, red buses, she is familiar with British meals—roasts and fish and chips—and with the close proximity to the neighbors, though her dream of a verandah on the house might be

unrealistic. She is familiar with the idea of daffodils as British flowers, though clearly she does not know much about them as she imagines them blooming with all the colors of the rainbow. (We can also link this to Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Lucy* in which Lucy is required to memorize Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and cannot connect with her education because she is wholly unfamiliar with daffodils.) Hortense imagines a cold morning, with a fire going, but with a window open, revealing that she knows little of cold spring mornings, the need to trap heat indoors, and the futility of feeding a fire while encouraging a draught. Hortense compares her Jamaican Sunday meal with what she shall prepare in her "English kitchen" and imagines "roast meat with two vegetables and even fish and chips bubbl[ing] on the stove." I concede that hot oil bubbles when frying, but it really does seem as though she expects any meal to bubble on the stove and this is confirmed later in the novel. This is the hegemonic British upbringing and education at work and it complicates Hortense's act of domestic resistance because even as she resists racist oppression in Britain, the values that guide her are still British, yet despite her misconceptions, Hortense's determination and agency promise that her dream can be fulfilled. Even Gilbert, watching her cook later in their single room in London, reflects on what she should have access to: "Hortense was huddle up on the floor over a pan on the wretched gas ring. Her young back should not have been folded like a crone's—it should have been standing haughty and straight at a good cooker" (364). Hortense's other difficulty is that while she believes her training to be thorough in the ways of British life (and therefore in all things of value), she is in fact quite ignorant of many aspects of this life.

Hortense is shocked on her arrival to find that Gilbert lives in a single room, at the dirty, shabby conditions of the room with coin-operated heat, one gas ring, and one sink, and to find the waste-filled bedpan that Gilbert occasionally uses instead of walking to the ground floor to use the toilet. She had expected him to have a house to himself, which is understandable as it was fairly common for West Indians of the time to own their own homes in the Caribbean, even if they rented the land that their houses stood on, or to live in single-family buildings. The day after her arrival her disillusionment continues. Gilbert tells Hortense where she can find eggs and potatoes and asks whether she can make some chips for him while he is at work. In this moment he is acting on the promise of a more comfortable domestic life, with a wife who can cook for him. She replies “Of course,” but later must admit that she does not know how to prepare them and asks their landlady, “Can you perchance tell me... How do you make a chip?” (191). What he finds when he returns, he says, “is not chips” and asks, “How you don’t know what is a chip?” (264). We learn that though Queenie described chips as “a potato cut up small” and tells Hortense that the English like to eat eggs with chips, she neglected to describe how to cook them (by frying), and Hortense places the cut up potato in a pot to boil and, remembering her British-colonial education, boils the egg, rather than frying it. She thinks she is clever: “I had in mind to watch how this man I had married would eat the egg. [In domestic science Miss Henry] had showed we girls the proper way to eat an egg. Sliced across the top with a knife [...] and only the uncouth could be found dipping a slice of bread into the yolk” (266). Yet for all of this colonial education in proper manners, Hortense still lacks an education in everyday English life. Ultimately Gilbert goes out to buy fish



and chips and returns with the food and a real education in British life: “Not everything,” he tells her “the English do is good” (271). Gilbert and Hortense have different ideas about the authoritative value of British food: Gilbert is expecting something more like a pared-down fry up (with potato and egg only) while Hortense is going on advice straight from two British women—Queenie and her former teacher.<sup>20</sup> For Hortense, this meal has even more value as a test of Gilbert’s class status, but it is her ego that is deflated for not knowing how to prepare this British meal. In fact all of her meals are generally so terrible as to run even the freeloading Kenneth (brother of the other Jamaican tenant, Winston) from the room and the “pile of mess on a plate” is so indistinguishable as food that Gilbert reflects “Not one thing did I recognize to start nyam” but suffers it anyway because of Hortense’s strict manners (369).

Ultimately Hortense’s manners and Gilbert’s politeness lose to Bernard’s racist belligerence on his return. While Queenie remains steadfast in the stream of the neighborhood resentment for renting rooms to black West Indians, when Bernard returns he is set against their presence. With his return the racism outside of the single-room lodging infiltrates the homespace they have cultivated as a site of resistance to it. Their home can no longer be a refuge or defense, and the entire house loses its role as a diasporic hub as other black West Indian tenants are forced out. In confronting Queenie, Bernard slaps his palm on the table and demands “did they have to be coloured? Couldn’t you have got decent lodgers for the house? Respectable people?” to which Queenie responds “They pay the rent. And on time. Gilbert was in the RAF

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<sup>20</sup> For an examination of “the interconnection between food and the sense of belonging to an English nation” in Levy’s novel *Every Light in the House Burnin’* see “The Empire Bites Back: Food Politics and the Making of a Nation in Andrea Levy’s Works” by Njeri Githire.

during the war...this house is no palace. It got really run down during the war. I couldn't fix it up [and] They were willing to pay good money to stay in those dingy rooms..." (360). Bernard counters by referring to Mr Todd who is moving because he "Says the street has gone to the dogs. What with all the coloureds swamping the place. Hardly like our own country anymore" and demands that the tenants have to go (360). Masterfully, *Small Island* manages to echo the words of two of the best-known British anti-immigrant politicians in these last two sentences: Margaret Thatcher and the aforementioned Enoch Powell. The word "swamping" recalls Thatcher's 1978 comment that Britons were "really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture" (n.pag.). Of course, Mr Todd's comment brings to mind Powell's comment about Britons finding themselves "made strangers in their own country" in Powell's speech (377).

Bernard promptly starts harassing the black tenants to leave. He ruminates on the situation, opining "The recipe for a quiet life is each to their own" by which he does not mean that he should let Gilbert and Hortense be, but that

The war was fought so people might live amongst their own kind.  
Quite simple. Everyone had a place. England for the English and the  
West Indies for these coloured people...their place isn't here...These  
brown gadabouts were nothing but trouble...These people belonged in  
hot climes. It would be a kindness to return them to the backward place  
they came from. (388-9)

In these thoughts Bernard becomes a figure for the exclusionary redefinition of national belonging and oversimplifies a complex issue by placing people where they

belong, as though they are pawns to be moved about. At the same time he thinks that it would be a “kindness to return them” (echoing Powell’s call for repatriation or “re-emigration” as he calls it) he also calls the Caribbean “backward,” an insulting but implicit acknowledgement of the lack of opportunity there. By claiming that West Indians belong in “hot climes” Bernard draws upon pseudoscientific claims about racial types, a reference reinforced by terms like “their own kind” as though the Josephs are categorically different to him.

Bernard enters the Josephs’ room in their absence, invading their domestic space, and the language of his thoughts in the moment repeats this racial typing. Though he knows that they are out, he knocks anyway because to him blacks are “Volatile creatures. No need to arouse them more than necessary” (387). He takes in their room:

There was a huge trunk blocking most of the doorway. Hardly room to turn. I banged a shin trying to navigate between the bed and chair. A curious smell of gas. I wondered if they knew how to use it properly. Can’t be too careful. Checked the tap but it was firmly off. The unpleasant odour clung like dirt. Tatty cloth sprawled over the bed. Armchair limp and wounded—riddled with holes. Dead flowers in a jam-jar. The place was a disgrace. (387)

The huge trunk is Hortense’s, used to bring her possessions for her new life in England across the Atlantic. When Bernard checks the gas we know that he is looking for a premise for eviction because he knows his racism is not reason enough, though it is pervasive enough to make him doubt that West Indians know how to use the gas

safely. The unpleasant odor may be gas, or it may be Hortense's terrible cooking, but either way its lingering emphasizes the fact that the small attic room lacks the necessary ventilation of a space in which the everyday life of two people takes place. The "tatty cloth" on the bed is one of Hortense's prized possessions, a blanket given to her by the woman who lodged her in Ocho Rios before departing for England with its "bright Caribbean colours...The yellow with the red, the blue with the green" (187). It was a blanket the woman had knitted "from when the King first announce to the Empire that we were at war. And I finished the thing as they all dancing in the street in joy of the conflict over" (88-9). It is colorful and special, but Bernard sees it only as tatty. The armchair, which belongs to the Blighs and is provided by Queenie, is a recurring piece of furniture: it is where Gilbert keeps things he is not using and, due to the limited space of the room, it is where he sleeps until Hortense is comfortable with sharing a bed.

When Gilbert and Hortense catch Bernard in the room, Bernard's attitude toward national belonging merges with his view of domestic exclusivity, illustrating the ideological overlap between homes and nations as possessions with territorial borders and rights of access. In the confrontation, Gilbert

tells me that this room—at the top of my house—does in fact belong to him...According to this darkie I could not just come into *his* room. Somehow I needed *his* permission. I think not. 'I can go anywhere I please in my own house,' I told him. That started him off. Rent, he shouted. Said he paid plenty of rent. 'I'm not interested in what you pay,' I said. 'This is my house.'...Had the nerve to ask me how I got

into the room...My house, and I've a key to every room...Still told me to get out. Raised his voice. Unnecessary, of course...I fought a war to protect home and hearth. Not about to be invaded by stealth...It was his privacy he started ranting about next. Said he paid rent therefore he deserved—yes, deserved—privacy...What he deserved was to be thrown on to the street. Him and all the other ungrateful swine. He came towards me then. Eyes bulging like a savage's...‘You're going to have to leave...now I'm back and we intend to live respectably again’  
(389-90)

The entire exchange is a dispute over the right to a space that functions, like Powell's pensioner's home, as an extension of the nation. In the first few lines of the above excerpt, Bernard unreasonably argues that because he owns the space it cannot be Gilbert's and that he, Bernard, is perfectly within his rights to go wherever he pleases, even into the Josephs' private domestic space, previously a homeplace improving in stability. It is notable that Bernard does not do this to Jean who may be a prostitute. The words “this darkie” reinforce just why he is pursuing the Josephs. Like the nation itself, first he believes that their claim to this space is unfounded. When Gilbert rightly points out that he pays rent he is, again, told that the house is Bernard's because Bernard does not believe that this gives Gilbert any rights. Likewise, he does not believe that Gilbert has any right or reason to be upset as he finds Gilbert's raised voice unnecessary. His comment that he “fought a war to protect home and hearth” and is “not about to be invaded by stealth” makes the most direct link between the house and the nation by drawing upon the often repeated domestic metaphor of the

nation as a house: “hearth and home.” Gilbert moves from his right to the space and his payment for it to his right to privacy and, again, Bernard does not find this argument compelling. Because he has firmly made the link between the nation and the home, in his mind the Josephs and all other black migrants need to leave, not just his home, but also the nation because they do not to deserve to be there. Bernard then reads the anger in Gilbert’s face as savagery, so sure is he in his firm possession of his home and his ability to determine its “respectability.”

The confrontation comes to violence when Bernard makes a derogatory comment about Hortense’s housekeeping. He says

“‘But look at this place—it’s a disgrace.’ The woman started muttering then. Couldn’t understand a word. Just caught something about trying to make the room nice... ‘Well my dear,’ I said, ‘you could try harder.’ I didn’t see it coming, it happened too fast. He pushed me hard on the shoulder. Shouting at me, this bloody darkie, to get out...Hotheaded blighters, these dark immigrants...Told me the place was falling down. ‘Rubbish,’ I said. Even Hitler only left it a little shabby. Nothing like the slum these people were hell-bent on” (391)

Bernard’s hearing was impaired during the war, so Hortense may not have been muttering at all (she has also been practicing her BBC received pronunciation standard English and is proud when fewer and fewer Britons ask her to repeat herself). Gilbert well knows the difficulty in keeping the single room in good condition when it is so shabby to start with, and knows how hard Hortense has tried to create the standard of living she believes she deserves. His frustrations with Bernard peak when he insults

their attempts to make the best of the space and transform it into a safe and comfortable homeplace. Leaning on racist stereotyping, Bernard defensively views the Josephs and all black migrants as hotheaded slum-dwellers. When Queenie comes in, she shouts at Bernard to shut up. His reaction displays the destabilization of his automatically assumed position of privilege: “Took the wind from me, I admit...Shouldn’t have to hear that from your wife...Especially in front of coloureds” (391).

Bernard’s invasion of their space becomes the catalyst for actualizing their goal of having their own home. A member of their diasporic community and former tenant at Queenie’s, Winston, plans to buy a house and comes to Gilbert with an offer: “I wan’ you come fix up the place, Gilbert. You can come live there with your new wife. Other room we board to people from home. Not English-woman rent. Honest rent you can collect up. And then you see the place is kept nice” (414), adding, “All the boys I met since we come, it is only you I trust. You find me this room” (415). Clearly, by boarding “people from home,” this house is to become a safe, diasporic homeplace by housing members of the diaspora in a space free of the pervasive racism of the nation outside. Gilbert is to become caretaker because of the trustworthiness he established by finding another member of the diaspora a place to live—a very remarkable point. Their friendship was not groomed on-ship during the journey, or on the job, or even from simply circulating in the same diasporic circles, but was cultivated through finding a home—or a close proximity to a home—for another in a climate of discriminatory housing practices. When he sees the large house and garden, he sees a “palace” though it is in need of repair. Gilbert prepares for a fight with

Hortense, expecting that the house will disappoint her exacting standards and is infinitely pleased by her enthusiasm for fixing the house up and getting into a home under their control, a homeplace that can operate as a diasporic retreat. Her comments on the house reflect her imagined suburban English life: in a leap of imagination, she rushes to the fireplace and suggests “two armchairs here in front of an open English fire” (417)—not simply a fireplace, but “an open *English* fire” revealing that England and domestic ideals remain inseparable for Hortense, stemming from her gendered British-colonial education. Hortense’s dream is a fiction of an English home based on the colonial ideals instilled in her, but one she increasingly gets closer to realizing; after all, as Rosemary Marangoly George says so succinctly in *The Politics of Home*, “fictionality is an intrinsic attribute of home” (11).



## Chapter 2

### A Diaspora of West Indians “Born in England”: George Lamming’s *The Emigrants*

This chapter focuses on George Lamming’s 1954 novel *The Emigrants*, another literary antecedent of the tradition of Caribbean diasporic literature and a remarkable illustration of the construct of Caribbean diasporic identity and the fluidity of the concept of home. Between *The Emigrants* and the more contemporary novels we are left with a generational continuity from Lamming and Selvon’s emigrants to the young black British protagonist of Gilroy’s novel and onward to Irie in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*. In the previous chapter, with Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*, we saw the ways in which domesticity is relevant to the construct of an oppression-resistant diasporic community identity. In *The Emigrants* this appears in a more tenuous way: through the relationships of domesticity to dialogic constructs of diasporic identity that lend themselves a sense of habitation in an increasingly cosmopolitan Britain. In *The Emigrants* the ability to narrativize experience and identity means the ability to begin to answer questions of national belonging while collectively shared narratives of experience create a sense of home through far-reaching connections to the Caribbean. In the novel, a new sense of shared Caribbean history and experience bonds the diaspora, which, in turn, becomes a home in itself. Domesticity, as a trope of the concept of home, figures in *The Emigrants* in two major ways. Both highlight, expose, and illustrate the hegemonic tensions between the emigrants and the “mother country.”

The first is in the British-manufactured domestic articles that linked the emigrants to Britain when they were in the Caribbean and are familiar in their first few hours in Britain. The moment that represents this best in the novel is what I consider “the train scene,” a poem on the occasion of arrival in which characters’ voices compete and overlap as they excitedly narrate their experiences of arrival in the real time of the novel and in which the diasporic bonding of the ocean journey carries on via train toward the city. Some are already jaded, but several have yet to be disillusioned by experiences of the “mother country” and spend the duration of the ride analyzing their new experiences as they happen. While British passengers question their belonging in England and display their ignorance of the Caribbean and its people, the emigrants discuss what lies ahead, mimic British language patterns, or relate what they see through the train windows—factories that produce articles for domestic consumption—to their colonial experiences of Britain, yet their remarks do not spare Britain from critique. The second key use of domesticity is in the contrast between the domestic (and other intimate) spaces of the emigrant community and the homes of middle class Britons they visit. The best example of this is a scene in which Collis, a writer, visits the home of a tire factory personnel manager and his wife during which the conflicts between middle class propriety, ingrained discrimination, and liberal British values unfold. The tension between Collis’ resistance to British hegemony and his own politeness and the tension between the couple’s wish to be good hosts and their innate imperial discrimination make for an awkward, strained scene. The British home becomes the site of imperial attitudes clashing with the colonial emigrant’s homecoming *and* representative of the middle class life that the

emigrants hope for confronting the nation's failure to welcome them. In both of these examples, domesticity and nation are intertwined. In the first it is through the domestic articles that represent Britain abroad and in the second it is through the British nation's middle class ideal.

*The Emigrants* is highly dialogic as it is invested in the characters' speech and the discursive effects of that speech on community formation. The narrative technique that Lamming uses to develop this theme is one he uses elsewhere in his work: a collective and ambiguous sense of narrator and narration, which, in his introduction to *In the Castle of My Skin*, he calls

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

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

The effects of this technique are threefold: first, it is the recipe for personal escape; second, it is a mode of narration that allows an author to channel experience into his work; and third, and most important to my view of *The Emigrants*, Lamming's mode of narration echoes the means of diasporic community formation, much like the "old talk" of Selvon's characters in the previous chapter. For the emigrants, to identify as British (in citizenship and self-identity) is to *not* identify as immigrant. The nation-state—Britain—then interpellated them as immigrant or alien, giving rise to one of the major conflicts in this literary tradition: the destabilization of identity. While colonial identity is destabilized by the British view of West Indians as other or alien, there is also promise in the notion of a new, alternative diasporic identity, one that really was blooming with the growth of its diaspora in Britain.

Referring to the "*Windrush* generation" of the postwar years—a microcosm of which he fictionalizes and follows in *The Emigrants*—in another passage from *The Pleasures of Exile* worth quoting at length, Lamming explains that:

It is [in interactions between West Indians] that one sees a discovery actually taking shape. No Barbadian, no Trinidadian, no St. Lucian, no islander from the West Indies sees himself as a West Indian until he encounters another islander in foreign territory. It was only when the Barbadian childhood corresponded with the Grenadian or the Guianese childhood [in conversation] in important details of folk-lore, that the wider identification was arrived at. In this sense, most West Indians of my generation were born in England. The category West Indian, formerly understood as a geographical term, now assumes cultural

significance....years later I would hear West Indians arguing about being West Indians [and, in these arguments, to] be a bad West Indian means to give priority of interest and ambition to the particular island where you were born. It is bad because your development has taught you that the water which separates us can make no difference to the basic fact that we are West Indians; that we have a similar history behind us...So the discovery had taken place, partly due to the folk-lore and partly due to the singing, and especially to the kind of banter which goes between islander and islander. (214-5)

As we shall see below, Lamming's narrative technique mirrors or parallels diasporic community formation with the use of overlapping voices, Caribbean vernacular, and Caribbean linguistic devices such as Signifyin(g), and his direct reference to "folk-lore," jokes, storytelling, singing, and banter in *The Emigrants*—all oral traditions and speech acts put into writing.<sup>21</sup> I read the dialogic formation of the diaspora along the lines of Michel Foucault and Edward Said's ideas of discourses as constructive (rather than the dialogue as performative utterance in the manner of J.L. Austin). Like other abstract things, the diasporic community is formed discursively. Here it is through speech and dialogue and this practice becomes all the more valuable in response to the discursive formation of emigrants as alien outsiders (a discourse of the powerful).

Lamming represents this oral, dialogic formation in writing in his fiction and essays

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<sup>21</sup> For Gates and the scholars who follow him—such as Roger Abrahams, Geneva Smitherman—Signifyin(g) includes the employment of several speech patterns and oral traditions including metaphor; hyperbole; punning; joking; redirection; talking with great innuendo; cajoling, needling, and lying; talking around a subject; indirect argument or persuasion; implying; humor; rhythmic fluency and sound; and introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected among many, many others. Indeed, Lamming's use of a collective narrator is one used across the African diaspora in varied ways, in both print literature and oral culture, as in Toni Morrison's use of collective voice or Zakes Mda's use of the point-of-view of the "all-seeing eye of the village gossip," for instance.

where the former illustrates what the latter explains. Benedict Anderson has shown the nation to be an imagined community as a product of legal, literary, religious, and journalistic discourses. The diasporic community within the nation functions similarly but with a significant difference: first by oral construct and then in print with the novels of the diaspora and other texts. The power of the British representation of Caribbean people is forced to exist alongside their representations of themselves and their diaspora. In a Bakhtinian sense, the word “dialogic” refers to novels’ relationships or conversations with other texts—something I illustrate in this project to some extent by thinking of the textual relationships of the literary tradition of the Caribbean diaspora in the UK. In this chapter the term “dialogic” primarily refers to the dialogue in the novel and the dialogue of the community. Dialogical discourse, for Mikhail Bakhtin, as a concept that acknowledges multiple languages (rhetorics, essentially), comes from a listening speaker and is influenced by social context. As we shall see, these ideas become even more complex in the appearance of the poetic form within a novel producing the dialogue of overlapping voices in a written form (for Bakhtin, the literary representation of speech as an image of language).

Bhabha has argued that “complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ . . . make them the immanent subjects and objects of a range of social and literary narratives,” thereby producing the nation *as* narration (“DissemiNation” 292). Similarly, the formation of a Caribbean diasporic identity, of the idea of being West Indian rather than British or from a specific territory, produces a diaspora *by* oral narratives. Instead of the public artifacts of written and mass-printed discourse (legal, literary, religious,

and journalistic) forming the national imagined community, the dialogic, oral, intimate discourses of diasporic experience form the West Indian community that Lamming then represents in writing.

The manner in which Lamming handles orality, speech acts, and dialogue—how he handles the telling—directly correlates to the process of diasporic formation in those initial *Windrush* years and illustrates how the texts of this tradition are texts of the diaspora beyond their authors' or characters' biographies. Shared community identity makes a group of individuals who may never have previously left their islands of origin into a diaspora in the new island (England). For Lamming, in the new island they discover one another in an act of recognition between islanders encountering one another in another territory. Discovering their shared collective community identity allows the diaspora that we see in the later texts to form.<sup>22</sup> For Sandra Pouchet Paquet, easily the leading scholar on Lamming's work, "emigration is not simply the result of economic necessity; it is part of the cultural mandate of colonization [because it] is a paradoxical journey to the 'Mother Country' and away from self and homeland" (30). Generally Pouchet Paquet reads *The Emigrants* as a novel of exile and estrangement, of "the alienation and disconnection of the individual who has lost touch with the historical and political forces that shape his society," which it is in many ways (31). Yet the diasporic formation ingrained in the novel also emphasizes that the estranged, depressed characters are those who are unable to maintain the diasporic bonds

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<sup>22</sup> By using Lamming's essays and Stuart Hall's scholarly work that includes his personal experiences of diaspora, I am following a postcolonial theoretical tradition of bringing experience to bear in analyses of society, culture, and politics. Notable examples of this are also found in the works of Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant, Aimé Césaire, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Where I use the essays of fiction writers it is in this tradition of experience-in-thought rather than thought as detached or impersonal; when dealing with issues such as these, it *is* personal and these texts are representative of the intellectualization of experience.

necessary to resistance and survival—they cannot take refuge in the “we.” Lamming’s comment that islanders did not think of themselves as West Indians until they encountered one another in another territory is also remarkable for how it has changed form since then. Today there is a much greater sense of collective identity within the Anglophone Caribbean, influenced, no doubt, by the increased ease of travel and work around the Caribbean, advances in telecommunications and regional business, the short-lived West Indies Federation (1958-1962), the University of the West Indies (UWI), the role of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), and to the ideas of the emigrants who formed worldwide diasporas while maintaining strong connections to the Caribbean.

Some of this ability to recognize regional kinship and form a diaspora originates in shared experiences and communal identification, as Lamming describes, but some of this also comes from the effect of interpellation from outside, from the British grouping West Indians under one title. In “Negotiating Caribbean Identities” Hall describes his own interpellation to becoming to an “immigrant” instead of the “kind of black Englishman” his mother raised him to be. He argues that “identity is not only a story, a narrative which we tell ourselves about ourselves” but that “Far from only coming from the still small point of truth inside us, identities actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognition which others give us. Without the others there is no self, there is no self-recognition” (8). This extends to others within our own communities as well—the “discovery” that Lamming describes—and from without—the interpellation Hall describes. As Anderson has shown, imagined communities form through their



members' ability to imagine their common bond and common story (11). Hall's story of interpellation is this: "When I first went home in the mid 1960s, my parents said to me, 'I hope they don't take you to be one of those immigrants over there.' And the funny thing is, I'd never called myself, or thought of myself as an immigrant before. But having once been hailed or interpellated, I owned up at once: that is what I am. In that moment I migrated" (8). Hall's experience demonstrates how the nation interpellates the diasporic nation within it as immigrant, creating a classification of people considered other or outside of the nation's boundaries of automatic belonging. Hall emigrated in 1951 as a United Kingdom and Colonies citizen from Jamaica. It took over ten years and a comment from his parents for him to consider himself an immigrant, what the British would take to be "one of those immigrants." By saying "in that moment I migrated" while being at "home," Hall describes the complexity of identity formation by emphasizing that it is a process.

Bhabha describes "terms of cultural engagement" similarly, explaining that "whether antagonistic or affiliative, [they] are produced performatively: 'difference' is not so much a reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the tablets of a 'fixed' tradition as it is a complex ongoing negotiation" ("Frontlines" 270). This production takes place in the narratives that form and inform identity. In the first place identity and culture are processes. Secondly, how identities and cultures interact is often determined by the ongoing negotiation of the construct of difference. Third, '-isms' are produced in these negotiations—some of them negative, like racism—and are processes themselves, not fixed, but ever changing, malleable to their historic moments. As Paul Gilroy argues, "Even within a single social formation at a particular

phase of its development racism will not be an unbroken continuous presence” (*Ain’t No Black* 149). This process of change and malleability describes how the “new racism” has developed from the old: instead of treating race as a biological category, “new racism” treats it as a cultural issue for which skin color is used as a marker (which is not to say that the old biological racism has been replaced).

Just as Hall, Bhabha, and Gilroy argue that meanings of identity, culture, and race are always in process, when Lamming explains that “the category West Indian [was] formerly understood as a geographical term [but] now assumes cultural significance,” he is pointing to the fact that culture and meaning are not fixed entities, but are always in process and undergoing shift, meaning that the category “West Indian” is formed narratively and discursively, and “undergoes interesting changes” (*Pleasures* 214-5). For Lamming, one of those changes is the later alignment with a global African diaspora, rather than limiting communal ties to West Indian people. In fact, he looks ahead to this in *The Emigrants* as two of the novel’s main characters are Africans in the community of West Indians the novel follows. Gilroy’s outline of this process in *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* is extremely useful here and worth quoting at length:

Black expressive cultures affirm while they protest. The assimilation of blacks is not a process of acculturation but of cultural syncretism [and black cultural expressions] draw on a plurality of black histories and politics [producing] a diaspora dimension to black life [in modern Britain where] non-European traditional elements, mediated by the histories of Afro-America and the Caribbean, have contributed to the

formation of new and distinct black cultures...Some derive from the immediate history of empire and colonization in Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent from where post-war settlers brought both the methods and the memories of their battles for citizenship justice and independence. Others create material for the processes of cultural syncretism from extended and still-evolving relationships between the black populations of the overdeveloped world and their siblings in racial subordination elsewhere. (156)

In the section of *The Emigrants* titled “Rooms and Residents,” some two weeks after Lamming’s emigrants arrive, they are suspicious of Africans and regard them with the same disdain as the English, thinking of them as backward, savage heathens. The novel illustrates that this is the extent to which the West Indians have absorbed British cultural hegemony. They are then also extremely offended to be taken for African or at the suggestion that all black people are of the same culture. Two years later, however, in the section titled “Another Time,” this has changed and African characters are very much aligned with the West Indian community of the novel, particularly as Azi (African) and the Governor (West Indian) are running a nightclub together.

Hall also shares his experience of being interpellated as black in Britain in “Negotiating Caribbean Identities”:

the word ‘black’ had never been uttered in my household or anywhere in Jamaica in my hearing, in my entire youth and adolescence—though there were all kinds of other ways of naming, and large number of people were very black indeed. So it was not until...my parents said to

me, “There’s all this black consciousness, black movement in the United States, I hope it’s not having an influence over there,” and I realized I had just changed my identity again. I owned up once more and said, “Actually you know, I am exactly what in Britain we are starting to call ‘black’”... identity shifts with the way in which we think and hear...and experience [historical circumstances]. (8)

For Hall this was a sense of joining a collective identity in the 1960s. For Lamming and his characters at the end of the 1940s and the start of the 1950s, collective identity—diaspora—provided a sense of refuge. His comment above illustrates that the easiest way to deny your own personal difficulty is to identify with the general situation and take refuge in the sense that it is happening to a collective “we” and in this, then, diasporic connections are forged in order to live better within a community, whether the agents of this are consciously aware of it or not.

For some critics, Lamming’s accounts of these lived experiences are so close to those of his characters that they pursue his work through the lens of biographical criticism. One such critic is Margaret Paul Joseph who, in her work *Caliban in Exile: The Outsider in Caribbean Fiction*, sees the figure of Caliban in both Lamming and his characters. Shakespeare’s Caliban is an important figure for representing the tropes of slavery and colonization in postcolonial theory and Lamming has written a number of essays that develop this trope. Joseph’s argument is that authors who “depict West Indians who struggle to come to terms with physical and psychological exile...betray their own sense of Otherness [through their fiction], and in an alien environment the Other is also the Outsider” (2). For Joseph, Lamming’s fiction “depicts not only [his]

characters' physical displacement but also indicates [his] own experience of England' (15). Certainly those biographical elements are there—in *The Pleasures of Exile*, Lamming echoes language between the novel and the essays, and Lamming has said as much about his literary works—but I find it more valuable to ask what the text *does* than to look for evidence of its author's experience.<sup>23</sup>

Joseph's point about outsiders is relevant here, as illustrated in the Introduction, because West Indians found themselves socially excluded. Lamming's characters are social outsiders who navigate their experiences through narrating them to make sense of the incongruity of their legal inclusivity and social exclusivity. One stunning example of the narration of this attempt to make sense is Lamming's train scene in which the emigrants travel to London via train shortly after arriving in Britain. The emigrants' experiences are narrated in voices that overlap, build up, and interrupt one another in confusion and learning through observation. The pages of this scene are laid out unlike others in the novel, in columns that project and recede from the margins (a form that mimics the process of migration itself).

One of the tenets of this project is that fiction is fertile ground for asking questions of how a diaspora operates, represents itself, and is conceptually formed by that representation. In terms of the plotline of *The Emigrants*, Lamming's train scene provides us with a moment that carries the conceptual leap and imaginative act that conceptualizes home from the port of arrival to the city of residence by capturing

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<sup>23</sup> "Journey to an Expectation," the last chapter in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), reads as a sort of "prologue" to *The Emigrants* (1954). Passages that echo those in the novel include "The voyage was over. The captain would soon turn the stowaway over to the police. England lay before us, not a place, or a people, but an expectation" or "The emigrants were largely men in search of work. During the voyage we had to know each other very well. The theme of all talk was the same. It had to do with some conception of a better break. We lived between the deck—which was a kind of camping ground—and the communal dormitory where we slept, wrote letters, or simply wondered what would happen" (212).

characters as they turn their identities and experiences into narratives. It is a moment, positioned as it is between the port and the city, that is situated between a looming national past—including the legacy of colonialism—and the future of diaspora building. Characters in *The Emigrants* start this diaspora building on ship in the first half of the novel.<sup>24</sup> In the first section, titled “A Voyage,” characters share quarters in gender-segregated dormitories and form friendships. Some are unnamed (the Jamaican, the Trinidadian, the Barbadian), while others go by their last names (Collis, Dickson, Higgins), and others go by nicknames (the Governor, Strange Man, and Tornado).<sup>25</sup> At this point the novel follows only three women closely: Queenie, Lilian, and Ms. Bis (who does not go by her first name, Ursula, and later renames herself Una Solomon to avoid being recognized as the woman about whom a popular and scandalous calypso was written). Some are students, Collis is a writer (and the character most commonly identified with Lamming himself), others are going for work, but they are all on their way toward what they hope will be “a better break” and as they get nearer to England they find that “the need for company became greater. It happened to all of them” (88). After they collectively read news reports about housing shortages their prospects feel bleaker and Tornado’s warnings about the poor hospitality of England toward West Indians sink in.

Once Higgins learns that the cooking school he planned to attend has shut its doors he is in the same situation as the others: going with no concrete plan other than to find “a better break.” The other men feel that “the fraternity had widened” because

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<sup>24</sup> Though it has no real relevance to my way of reading these texts, I find it fascinating that Lamming and Selvon traveled together and formed their friendship on board.

<sup>25</sup> The unnamed characters—those named for their countries of origin—may well be the same as the named characters. Such is the nature of the narration.

Higgins “was now a part of their bewilderment and there was nothing they could do but receive him...They would stand together and fight together. The world was against them, and from this awareness they had taken a strength more terrible than the sun” (91). For the second time, they feel that “They were a group. *Those who had met and spoken* belonged to the same situation. It wasn’t Jamaica or Barbados or Trinidad. It was a situation that included all the islands. They were together” (77 emphasis added). The concept of being West Indian solidifies for the characters in moments like this. They shed their island rivalries and recognize something common to their shared identity. The process is the formation of diaspora and enables them to then be at home in this concept. The sense of belonging to the situation, Lamming’s narrator says, happens for those who have spoken—the speech act, the narrativizing act then, is the catalyst for this diasporic bonding.

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

Some of the men had just enough to pay the fare from Plymouth to Paddington. The officials asked what would happen after they reached Paddington, but no one answered with conviction...They were bewildered by the exhibition of adventure...For a while the movies seemed truer than they had vouched for, the story of men taking ship with their last resources and sailing into unknown lands in search of adventure and fortune and mystery. England had none of these things as far as they knew. [Then] the officials thought of the islands the

passengers had come from, and the whole spectacle seemed more fantastic. These islands...that made up an archipelago of unutterable beauty had bred lunatics. How could sane men leave the sun and the sea where it was summer all the way, abandon the natural relaxation that might almost be a kind of permanent lethargy, to gamble their last coin on a voyage to England. England of all places...They could not understand what England meant to these men. (108)

They do not understand that for the emigrants “England was not only a place, but a heritage,” and evidently were also unable to imagine what life might be like for these West Indian passengers, mostly men, who would have few options for work or further education in the West Indies (237). While there is an element of adventure for the emigrants, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes that they have made the journey in search of “a better break,” not mystery. Indeed, the sense of familiarity they feel toward Britain because of their cultural hegemony is a motivation for their journey and is abruptly and often desperately confronted by a sense that Britain as a “mother country” does not know its colonial “children.” We see this in conceptualizations of home throughout these sixty years of the literature of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain. We see it in this 1954 novel with Lamming’s character, the Governor, who remarks “England, you don’t know me. I don’t know you” (271) and, as illustrated in the previous chapter, we see it fifty years later with Levy’s *Small Island* character, Gilbert, who echoes this by asking, “how come England did not know me?” in her 2004 novel (117). Of course the daily lives of these passengers had not been spent in idyllic relaxation as the officials imagine; the islands were only lethargic lands of



Lotos-Eaters for those who could afford to travel there for a little colonial exotic holiday to forget the stress of their own daily struggles. Of course the West Indian passengers would have known the pleasures of life in the tropics in their recreational time, just as the officials have their recreational pleasures in Britain. This moment emphasizes that because Britain is mundane and common to the officials, they cannot see the adventure that the passengers see in it, especially when the low temperatures on the day of arrival are contrasted with the Caribbean climate. Rather than realize that their experience of their island as familiar and mundane might be similar to the passengers' experiences of their islands, the officials' thoughts leap immediately to boyhood images of adventure. In this passage Lamming draws us remarkably to the Victorian obsession of adventure and exploration, a trope that may have done as much to further the Victorian imperial cause as the supposedly moral motivations of spreading Christianity and civilization. For the officials, the West Indian passengers are so many mad Kurtzes headed toward dreams of riches in the heart of England: London.

Lamming's demonstrations of cultural hegemony in the train scene follow these Victorian values superbly. As we have already seen, for Anderson, the meaning of nationalism relies on the construction and idea of antiquity for a narrative of nation going as far back as possible (11). If we take this into account, in order for Britain to have been constructed as a "mother country" for West Indians, their lives and everyday experiences had to be discursively presented as an extension of the great British national project tied to a longstanding British heritage. This is the process of imperialism and it cannot begin to function without cultural hegemony replacing

physical violence—as Lamming says in *In the Castle of My Skin*, “the colonial experience of my generation was almost wholly without violence...The Caribbean endured a different kind of subjugation. It was a terror of the mind; a daily exercise in self-mutilation” (xxxix). Part of the daily terror of the mind of cultural hegemony is colonial education: colonial schoolchildren were encouraged to understand that they belonged to or in Britain in a nationalist sense and were educated to take a stake in, celebrate, perform, and internalize British nationalism in school and in public demonstrations of pomp, such as parades. In addition to their education, in their daily lives—significant parts of which took place in the intimate spaces of their homes—colonial subjects experienced what advertising executives might call the “brand recognition” of Britishness: the brand recognition of British culture and the British products that were exported worldwide, often manufactured from raw materials originating in the colonies, and often marketed using national symbols. We cannot neglect that the export of British-manufactured products is one of many modes of cultural hegemony.

The train scene appears as a section of the novel’s first part titled simply “The Train.” Because of its title, length, and form, I treat it as a poem. What Bakhtin would consider to be the “pseudo-objective” authorial voice of the narrator has been troubled by the collectivity of the narration, but now it drops away leaving just the comments of the train’s passengers (590). Once the train journey to Paddington Station begins, the emigrants’ excitement rises in waves of overlapping conversation concerning what they are immediately experiencing, where they are heading, their plans, the advice of more seasoned emigrants who have experience living in England, and what they view

out of the train windows punctuated by repeated requests that “PASSENGERS KEEP THEIR HEADS WITHIN THE TRAIN” that reflect the novelty of the train ride and of seeing England. The frequent repetition of the announcement in all uppercase letters suggests an already growing frustration of the mother country with the emigrants for whom the train ride is a novelty rather than par for the course. Significantly, the rail system is also a symbol of Britishness that, for economic as well as cultural reasons, was carried throughout the empire. An extension of the cultural significance of this travel by rail is the landscape. As the emigrants travel through an industrial area, they spot the manufacturers of products they use in their daily domestic lives:

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

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

These well-known British brands are articles of cultural hegemony. Some, such as the razor blades and face cream cited above, are used in very intimate domestic settings. The comment, “All those women back home / depend on what happen in there” to refer to the Ponds face cream factory really makes this explicit. On the one hand, it’s a gentle but sexist joke to think of “all those” women depending on their face cream and jokes are speech acts which bind us, as Lamming points out. On the other, this comment reinforces the foreign, imported product dependency of the colonial West

Indies even into the most intimate parts of people's lives. Additionally, the phrase "back home" indicates the transitory nature of this moment: "home" is back there while London and the future are ahead. Even if London becomes home later, the duality of the migrant experience allows for two homes or a dual sense of home. As articles used in the most intimate spaces of domesticity that are, in this scene, treated as commodity spectacles, these products place the empire firmly in the private space of the home. In her work on soap, advertising, race, and empire, Anne McClintock as examined the role of products linked to the imperial mission by their manufacturers and advertisers in "the mass marketing of imperialism as a global system of signs" (61). Accompanying the products, she argues, is an ideology of British middle class status that was exported across the empire as a rank that colonials should endeavor to meet. The consumer spectacle of British products was not only about creating colonial dependencies on imported goods. The use of the products created a sense of hegemonic Britishness through this system of signs of Britishness and this took place in the home. As McClintock points out, "Domesticity denotes both a space...and a social relation to power" (34).

Also remarkable here in terms of the spectacle of commodities is the insistence on showing and looking with the repetition of the word "look" because the emigrants are recognizing that they share similar experiences with one another through their use of these products and are experiencing the continued discovery of the shared fact of being West Indians with similar histories, even if those shared histories are expressed as simply as being intimately familiar with the same merchandise. They are acknowledging that they use the same personal items in their own personal domestic

spaces. The comment “all yuh shaving you say you / shave you do cause o’ that place” expresses familiarity between the speaker and the listener and indicates that the speaker is referring to previous conversations between them. Shaving may seem like a minor annoyance in life, but clearly some conversation about personal hygiene—an intimate topic—has previously taken place between the two travelers sharing this exchange. In the pages prior to this, but still in the train scene, the emigrants take to referring to one another as “ol’ man” and in this moment add “partner,” two terms that suggest the bond now cementing itself. Men and women who may have made the decision to emigrate alone are, by this point, situated in a sense of community.<sup>26</sup>

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

They make life there. Life. What life partner.

Where you say they make what.

Life partner. Read it. Hermivita gives life.

You ain’t see it.

In the same direction, look, they make  
death there, ol’ man. Look. Dissecticide kills  
once and for all. Read partner. Look what

---

<sup>26</sup> We could read the use of “ol’ man” as some form of colonial mimicry of British speech patterns, but we also need to take into account the complex cultural hegemony that takes place at the level of language. This scene marks its first appearance and it is not sustained throughout the rest of the novel. It lends its speaker an air of authority, but the reader can take it ironically as many of these men are discussing things with which they are not entirely familiar.

they make. (372-9)

This is a moment of skillful punning that allows a subtle critique of England to perform as a joke: a moment of Signifyin(g) upon England, to use Henry Louis Gates' term. The critique is made subtler and at the same time more poignant in its humor. The speaker's insistence that the listeners read the signs for themselves reinforces the need to authenticate the experience. The tragic joke here is that England is so strong as to have powers of life and death, but the more serious underlying commentary is that "in the same direction" the emigrants are heading toward the promise of good lives or the failure of an enterprise that could be the end of them. "Hermivita" appears to be a product of Lamming's deft punning rather than a real product. Its name may be a combination of the name Hermes, the Greek messenger god and protector of travelers and poets, and *vita* for life in Latin. As a product it is probably kin to Bovril (beef concentrate) and Marmite (yeast extract), two products that have come, through marketing, to represent Britishness around the world, both marketed as health and strength boosters thereby linking Britishness with a certain robustness. As a product directly linked to imperialism by its manufacturers, Bovril's Victorian-era advertisements capitalized on the imperial mission and it was often marketed as the stuff to keep explorers and adventurers healthy when they could not be sure of adequate nourishment. Likewise the name "Dissecticide" is a skillful pun. We may assume that it is an insecticide formulated to rid the home of six- and eight-legged pests, but in his characteristic brilliance Lamming gives us more. The word "dissect" in the name refers to cleaving something in two, "cutting it asunder," or displaying something in that manner for scrutiny and analysis ("dissect"). The product's name

calls to mind this process of migration, the separation from home and the journey to a place that will offer no easy sense of belonging, and that will, in fact, reject the emigrants. There is a parallel, then, between a product meant to rid your home of pests and the British attitudes we see elsewhere in the novel when the emigrants are excluded, harassed, told to get out of England and go back where they came from, as well as a parallel between the scrutiny of dissection and emigrants later having their communities and patterns of migration held up to governmental analysis and policing.<sup>27</sup> A product for use in the personal domestic space of the home then metaphorically extends to the national level.

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

They make everything here on this side.

All England like this.

Everything we get back home they make

here, ol' man

.....

Why they doan' make these  
things themselves back home?

We ain't got the buildings man,

we

ain't got them big buildings.

Look,

---

<sup>27</sup> See Kathleen Paul's *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* and Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: the Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* in particular on this subject.

partner, look toothpaste. You not  
looking good. You doan' want  
to say you see dese things. Look  
good man. (380-423)

These lines begin with a statement made with a sense of wonder—"They make everything here on this side"—that is at once hyperbolic and expresses the novelty of seeing this industrial area and the manufacturers of "everything," that is, familiar products. The line that follows it—"All England like this"—seems to come with the authority of a more seasoned emigrant, perhaps a person returning from a trip back to the West Indies but it, too, is hyperbolic and clearly not literal. Instead, it speaks to their impressions of this large, industrialized place. The comment that "Everything we get back home they make / here" speaks to that sense of colonial consumer dependency on the metropolis and is spoken with an authority that then comes under scrutiny in the question "Why they doan' make these / things themselves back home?" The immediate answer that there aren't the big buildings for it references the infrastructure of colonies that had for hundreds of years been dedicated to crops like cotton, tobacco, and sugar. (Of course this has since changed and all sort of products are manufactured in the Caribbean today, particularly in Barbados, Trinidad, and Jamaica.) The comment about not having the buildings is all the more poignant as it follows the comment of another emigrant who is struck by the number of buildings: "The buildings. Perhaps / there might be work in the buildings. Too / many buildings. Must be work" (395-7). The emigrants are already connecting large-scale manufacturing with their ability to secure work and wellbeing. The speaker chastises



the listener for “not looking good” and asks “You doan’ want / to say you see dese things”—a question, despite the period instead of a question mark. Here the speaker is offering the listener the sort of authority that comes with experience and with seeing things for oneself. The comment expresses the excitement that the speaker is projecting onto the listener, an emotion that overrides any true sense of inquiry concerning why these products are not made in the West Indies as we see when the speaker brushes the question off to point out the toothpaste factory. Granted, some of this excitement stems from being in England, a place that many of them feel deep attachment to and cannot believe that they have reached, but the excitement particular to this industrial area and the brands manufactured there originates in their discovery of the sources of things so familiar to their daily lived experiences. In this scene every experience comes to the reader through its expression by the speakers. Because there is no third-person omniscient narrator, the scene has an immediate, urgent feeling. Its oral quality makes it a narrative of community identity. For Pouchet Paquet the emigrants’ “uninhibited response and cries of recognition reveal the thoroughness of the colonial process that supports [a structure in which the] emigrants have been educated to an appreciation of England as the industrial power that provides for all their needs” (34).

Emphasis on the value of *seeing* things marks this poem with lines like “Gawd bless my eyesight. Never / thought I would have see where those suspenders come from” and “Tell Edna you see wid your own / eyes where they mix up the lipstick / she use an’ she’ll say you tellin’ lies” or “you see that / yeast. They make yeast there...My Gawd, yeast” that show the excitement of spotting the familiar, intimate

things of daily life (401-412). These lines also provide terrific commentary on the dependence of colonies on the metropole and the awe with which the emigrants have been hegemonically encouraged to regard Britain. Yet they are more remarkable for the humor in being bowled over by yeast or suspenders, particularly with the line break between “bless my eyesight” and what follows. The speaker who never thought he would see where his suspenders originate probably literally never thought about seeing the suspender factory and this makes the seriousness of his statement hyperbolic and dramatic.

The emigrants’ urgent need to see everything is juxtaposed against the attitudes of the Britons on the train. At the poem’s start an emigrant to observes one man in particular who only stares ahead as the train ride continues and whose “eyes don’t wink when he / pull that pipe an’ he lookin’ only Gawd / knows where he looking like he ain’t got eyes / in his head...is the way they is in dis / country” (3-7). Later when the emigrants face questions from a British passenger who demands to know why they have come and whether there isn’t work for them “at home” one emigrant’s smart retort is that if the British man went there he would be made inspector of police, commanding so much power that it would take possession of him and he would no longer know himself. The speaker adds that “In the land of the blind... / ’Tis the other way round. In the land o’ / de one eye the blind is king. / You see, partner, if you can’t see, we’ll all / start thinkin’ that’s w’at we got eyes for, / not to see” (200-11). The comment critiques the relationship between the “mother country” and its colony, showing that the powerful do not have the edge but have convinced the powerless to follow them nonetheless. It speaks to the hegemonic practices of colonization as well

as the colonial mimicry of the colonized. The emigrants are aware of the significance of arriving in a place they revere, and that generates this urgency to see things and report to those at home, like lipstick-loving Edna. One emigrant sums it up in this line “I never thought ah would have set eyes on England” (133).

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

Would you have a cup of tea? With or  
without?

(What she mean with or without.)

Milk and sugar?

(What she mean milk an’ sugar.)

.....

Say Tornado what wrong wid dese people  
at all? You doan’ mean to say people drink  
tea when it ain’t got milk. They ain’t that  
poor...dey ain’t so poor they can’t spare a  
drop o’ milk in they tea, an’ what kin’ o’

talk is dis about with or without. Is it ol'  
man that they doan' like sugar. What wrong  
wid dem at all. With or without. O Christ  
Tornado, will take a long time 'fore I forget  
dat...with or without.

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

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

being shocked by the habits of those they encounter abroad and colonial familiarity with Britain in the same breath (59-60).

When another speaker tastes their tea they are convinced that the woman serving them has lied saying that the woman “swear to my face she put as if she think ah / doan’ know what sugar taste like, me, / ...who been eating sugar before ah / drink tea” (21-24) and Tornado has to explain that “p’raps if you been lookin’ / when she servin’ you might ah see somethin’ in the spoon, but what it is you won’t taste, / not in yuh tea ’cause sugar ration in this / country” (30-34). The speaker relies upon and takes offense based on their experience of living in a place where sugar is available as one of the main exports while Tornado, who has served in the R.A.F. during the war, must clarify this shortcoming of the great nation. These and the other experiences of Lamming’s emigrants are informed by a postwar period that both welcomed and shunned them, a period that Levy would later take up, and one that continues to inform the later literature.

Lamming develops another skillful pun on this milk and sugar moment several lines later. Lilian comments to Tornado that the “ground feel harder than back home” and asks “W’at dat mean”? (154-5). Tornado says is that it is “strange ground” to which her foot “got to get acclimatised,” and she answers by quoting Exodus 3:5: “Take off thy shoes from off thy feet / for the place thou standest is holy ground” (158-9). That Lilian quotes from Exodus is remarkable in itself given that the emigrants are in the process of their own exodus from the colony to the “mother country,” the importance of the Jewish diaspora to studies of diaspora in general, and the employment of the story of Israelite slaves in Egypt to speak of many forms of

oppression worldwide, including the Atlantic slave trade. Yet following her consternation over the absence of milk and sugar, this takes on even more significance for in Exodus Chapter 3 God introduces the plan to bring his people to the land of milk and honey (in 3:8 and 3:17). Lamming's irony is marvelously precise because this "holy ground"—Britain—is no land of milk and sugar. Instead of taking the Biblical quote seriously, Tornado brushes it off with "People doan' go barefoot here...better tell yuh toes to make peace wid / yer boots" (160-2). Tornado has, of course, already experienced coming to Britain for the first time as an airman. His flippant response speaks not only to his having done this before, but also to his experience of not being impressed by it—he has learned that this is a difficult country and is jaded. For Tornado to shrug off the special excitement of arrival is for the novel to subversively shrug off the special shine of the "mother country" by focusing on the practical rather than the symbolic. These lines make commentary on prioritizing survival in Britain over reverence for it, particularly as the comments about strange or holy ground call to mind the national hymn of England, "Jerusalem." The hymn, written by William Blake and later set to music, opens "And did those feet in ancient time / Walk upon England's mountains green" before going on to imagine the holy city on "England's green & pleasant Land" (1-16).

Lamming does not limit the Signifyin(g) to the Bible and Blake, however. The emigrants later Signify upon Charles Kingsley's 1857 poem "The Last Buccaneer" by replacing "OH England is a pleasant place for them that's rich / and high, / But England is a cruel place for such poor folks / as I" (1-4) with "England's a pleasant place / For those that are rich and free / But England ain't no place / For guys that look

like ye” (307-310). This improvised calypso finishes with a line from Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter’s 1933 song “Goodnight Irene”: “Good night Irene, Good night” and a calypso riff “Pam, pan, paddan pam pam” (311-312). The improvisation on Kingsley’s poem becomes a serious but tongue-in-cheek warning to the men treated as the first wave of West Indian emigrants.<sup>28</sup> Calypso is, of course, well known for punning and Signifyin(g) on serious, socially conscious issues. For example, Lord Kitchener, a Trinidadian calypsonian whose work is mentioned in this scene, traveled to England on the *Empire Windrush* and many of his songs speak to both the difficulty of life in and reverence for England with characteristic humor.

The speech acts of the train scene— calypso improvisation, Signifyin(g), joking, punning, explanation, admiration of the scenery, wonderment, and affected authority—confirm the bonds the men made on the ship and carry them forward to the city. The major achievement of the scene is, of course, that the controlled form of the poem reads as spontaneous dialogue. The next section of the novel, “Rooms and Residents” follows the characters as they are adjusting to life in London. It takes readers into various migrant spaces: the hostel where many of them live, Lilian and Tornado’s basement room, the community barbershop (also in a basement), and the unlicensed home hair salon. The barbershop is a space of continued dialogic diasporic construction. What took place on the boat and on the train now has a locus here. At the barbershop the men gather for banter, political debates, and social observations on “the times.” Similarly, the hair salon maintains dialogic diaspora building for female

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<sup>28</sup> While the *Windrush* generation is often cited as the first generation of West Indian or black emigrants to Britain, black settlers have been in Britain for a great deal of its history. From African soldiers in the third century AD, to black slaves and their descendants, and on to black seamen, particularly in Liverpool, there is a long history of black Britons.

characters who joke, talk about the past and “home,” and analyze people and their actions. Lilian and Tornado’s basement apartment is not only a communal space, but a refuge as they help Dickson, a fellow migrant who distanced himself from the rest because of his sense of superiority over the others. When Britain knocks him down, the others help him despite his previously standoffish attitude. In *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing*, James Procter argues that this space “functions as a sanctuary, an escape from the outside world [yet it] limits the communal sense of belonging to [its] private, internal, subterranean boundaries” (42). The hostel in which Collis and other emigrants stay is also communal, but in a different way. They are bound by the rules of the hostel, have their familiar routines with the staff and with one another, take advantage of one another (locking other hostel residents out and having sex in their rooms), and look out for one another (scamming meals for others) while there. The British domestic spaces of the novel contrast starkly and uncomfortably with the migrant spaces. The British spaces may be larger, cleaner, and safer, but they lack warmth and a shared spirit.

One such example is the home of a middle-class white British couple that Collis visits. A friend of his in Trinidad, Arthur, an English welfare officer, “had shown some concern about Collis’s immediate future in the new country, and knowing his finances and the difficulties he might encounter” and had given him the address of his sister and her husband, the Pearsons (138). Mr. Pearson is “a man of great influence” in personnel at a tire factory where “his chief business was to supervise the conduct of the staff” (138). This detail is incredibly relevant to the scene that follows as the Pearsons, Mr. Pearson in particular, are obsessed with conduct and Collis, in a



sense of awkwardness, also becomes obsessed with their conduct and his. On arrival he is “received...with a gracious bow,” but this graciousness gives way to suspicion and discomfort as the scene progresses (138). Collis is led straight to the living room where the Pearsons are fastidiously attentive and “plugged the switches and turned on an electric fire [and] turned on the table lamp in the corner” despite the light already being good, and pour three glasses of sherry (138-9). Once Mrs. Pearson leaves the room “to see about supper” a sense of awkwardness begins to descend on Collis and Mr. Pearson, leaving Collis to look “round the room, trying to invent opportunities for compliments [as] It was the sort of room which announced the occupants’ propriety” (139). The Pearsons’ domestic space is comfortably middle class:

A square room with grey distempered walls, and a white ceiling marked out in squares by thin slabs of brown board. The telephone was on a shelf built into the walls above the radio, and there was a television set in another corner. A photograph of Mr. Pearson hung over the mantelpiece, and above the photograph, a polished rifle suspended by thin straps of leather. This was a relic of some other time. The room seemed persistent rebuke to the rudimentary shelter he found at the hostel. It was not only a habitation, remote and warm as the womb. It was an entire climate. The conveniences were natural elements...Mr. Pearson did not sit in the chair. He belonged to it. (139)

Readers easily get the sense that it is not only the rifle that is a relic of some other time, but that perhaps Mr. Pearson, his photograph, and their place in the home—the

male head of household in the living room while his wife prepares dinner, his portrait displayed in a show of propriety upon a mantle where it looks down upon the living space—are relics of a changing Britain. The rifle, which would have no practical use in a suburban neighborhood, reads as either a relic of country manor life or as a relic of empire. The entire room, with its conveniences and feeling of authority, displays the status of the family to themselves and to their guests, its “propriety” a show of decorum. The unstated but visible and unquestioned authority of Mr. Pearson as revealed by the room rebukes Collis’ accommodations in the shared hostel where he lives with other emigrants. Collis is still transitory (indeed, the hostel shuts its doors later in the novel), his shelter “rudimentary,” and this room contrasts with his feeling of being unsettled in its feeling of “habitation,” so much so that, to him, it becomes an “entire climate” specific to the Pearsons. Collis feels drawn to the television, “the first he had seen,” and hopes the Mr. Pearson “would turn it on after they had supped” (140). When he observes the Pearsons he finds that “they functioned like things which worked according to the laws of their environment,” an environment which is its own climate in which conveniences are natural elements, a remark that indicates that their behavior is governed by their domesticity, rather than the home being governed by them (140). “For each,” we are told, “the other’s speech was an unconscious act of reassurance. They understood each other” (140).

As the scene continues, this becomes starkly contrasted with how Collis is understood by Mr. Pearson. The continued awkwardness gives way, finally, to a total loss of propriety when Mr. Pearson takes a phone call from the tire factory and the play of speech and silence in this situation of being an emigrant hosted in a British

domestic space take on further significance. Collis feels “the change which had come into Mr. Pearson’s voice...a grumble, thick and ominous” when he takes the call

(140). Collis overhears him say

He was the only one you took on yesterday...the police insisted on questioning the others...Whenever I’m absent. Did the police say what happened?...He wouldn’t give them any details? Were the others involved? That’s what you’d expect them to say...You’ve got his name. We’ll wait and see whether the police come back. But you won’t take the man back to work. Remember...If he turns up send him home.

(140-1)

Some of the men in Collis’ diasporic community had recently sought employment at Pearson’s tire factory, so this detail “he was the only one you took on yesterday” suggests that the worker in trouble with the police could be one of Collis’ friends or acquaintances. Mr. Pearson’s attitude toward the emigrant employees mirrors comments made by I.G. Cummings at the Colonial Office as ministries prepared for and panicked over the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* and the colonial migrant passengers aboard. In his notes, Cummings comments that “there had been a spot of bother between one group of the Colonial workers, that is among themselves, and that [Morton Jewell, MBE] recommended to the firm that they should be got rid of if they were ‘bad eggs’ and an unfavourable influence on other Colonial workers” (Colonial Office n. pag.). We can imagine that “a spot of bother” between white, British workers would not automatically result in dismissal because they could be “unfavourable influences” on one another. Cummings and Jewell exemplify government

representatives worried about “repercussions in Trade Union circles resulting from [a] fairly large employment of Colonial persons” and are representative of governmental discrimination even as they worked to find employment for Colonial workers (Colonial Office n.pag.). In governmental communication with industry, these messages would have filtered down until they became policies that personnel managers like Pearson implemented. This side of Mr. Pearson’s conversation also reveals that the tire factory is not likely to defend, protect, or take the side of its migrant employees. While heavy policing practices weren’t yet as dominant in the 1950s as they would become in the 1980s, the several moments of policing in *The Emigrants* repeatedly reveal the prejudiced treatment of black residents by the constabulary. We do not know exactly what the police wanted the man for, but from what we have in the above conversation, it appears that the police wanting to question him is enough for the tire factory to dismiss him.

Following this telephone conversation, the two men regard one another uneasily as Mr. Pearson begins to take his frustration out on Collis. In this exchange in the living room, Mr. Pearson makes Collis a representative of the black community in Britain. He abruptly asks “Does Arthur like the people out there...I mean the native people” as though he cannot imagine *choosing* to go to the West Indies and work with the people there (141). For Collis, “the question seemed irrelevant and unwarranted” and he does not “understand why in the circumstances he should have chosen to impose his mood on him” (141). Collis begins to understand better when Mr. Pearson asks “Why do so many of your people come here?” and the two men begin “eyeing each other secretly and with a growing suspicion” (141). At this point, Mr. Pearson’s

decorous conduct is gone, replaced with sullen anger and misgiving as he wonders how well Collis knows his brother-in-law. As Collis gradually becomes aware that Mr. Pearson's change toward him is influenced by his phone call about a West Indian worker wanted by police, he realizes that Mr. Pearson "was one who quickly defined the other, [who] proceeded to make social intercourse an encounter between a definition and a response [and] Collis understood that he did not then exist for Mr. Pearson, [that] he was a fixed occasion, harmless...until some urgency like the telephone call informed it with danger" (142). Mr. Pearson only adjusts his outlook as he muses that "He didn't know the man whom the police had been enquiring about, but the foreman had said that he was one of the new ones. He had probably arrived with Collis" and at the thought of Collis, "embarrassed" by how he has treated him, decides to "resume his hospitality" and "continue the role in which he had received Collis earlier," the role of gracious host (142-3). When his goal of showing Collis his garden in order to restore his hospitality is thwarted by Collis' obliviousness and his wish to view the television, Mr. Pearson stalks silently out to the garden, leaving Collis to feel "how difficult it would be to communicate this failure of understanding to Mr. Pearson" (146).

Just as he has made Collis representative of West Indians in Britain, Mr. Pearson, a man who "had an uncanny way of producing this effect of enormous distance between himself and the other" makes himself representative of the nation that on the one hand tries to play gracious host, and, on the other, remains suspicious and reserved (146). Collis resists being interpellated by Mr. Pearson's projection onto him, to "step into the place of the recognition," to use Hall's wording, and rebels with

his own awkward behavior in an extended visit to the lavatory during which he smokes a cigarette and then, as if in warning, flushes the toilet three times to announce that he is reentering the living room. As though this was not tense enough, Mr. Pearson later reenters the living room to find Collis looking at the photograph above the mantel where “he got the feeling that if Mr. Pearson were present he would commit some act of violence. He would have liked to kick him in the stomach, not in anger, but as a way of evoking some genuine emotion [and] clenched his fist against [the photograph] as though he were going to wipe out the nose” in another gesture of rebellion to the situation, another failing of conduct and decorum (147). If the photograph expresses Mr. Pearson’s status and propriety, Collis’ gesture expresses his own irreverence of it. Constrained as they are by social circumstances and their own self-awareness, neither man is able to communicate and both are left with uncomfortable and impolite gestures to signify their experiences.

Collis’ failure to communicate with the middle-class British Mr. Pearson contrasts sharply with the constant level of community-forming speech between members of his West Indian diaspora. Two years later the characters who have been most absent from the dialogic formation of diasporic bonds fare the worst, though Britain is hard on all of them. Dickson, the teacher, becomes mentally unstable after being exoticized and objectified by British women; Higgins, whose ambitions of culinary school were destroyed on-ship, cannot seem to find solid work, and struggles to be a regular member of the community becomes a shell of himself once he is arrested on a false accusation of selling drugs and believes that he is being followed; and Una unfeelingly claims to have murdered her closest friend. These characters are

so focused on themselves as individuals that they do not make meaningful contributions to the group and therefore do not have the core sense of being a part of something larger, of taking true refuge in the “we.” The “we” is always there to give support and rescue a fellow migrant, but the characters who hold themselves separate are never truly part of it and, as a result, their migration destroys them.

Through these representations of the relationship between domesticity and nation, we can trace the development of diasporic identity in the face of ostracization, first through speech acts that claim familiar British-manufactured domestic articles and then through feelings of exclusion and discomfort in the British home in which imperial attitudes disrupt the emigrants sense of homecoming to the mother country. By both of these gestures—diaspora formation and discovering the social exclusion of life in Britain—the diaspora comes to function as a home in itself.

### Chapter 3

#### **“My Heritage Forbade Me To Stand Still”: Political Identity, the State, and Welfare Homes in Beryl Gilroy’s *Boy-Sandwich* and Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging***

“I too am struggling to claim my place, my identity, my share...I belong, regardless of those who say I don’t”—Tyrone Grainger, *Boy-Sandwich*

The ability to secure a sense of belonging and being at home in Britain may have been more contested than ever for members of the Caribbean diaspora in the 1980s, the decade in which Joan Riley’s 1985 novel, *The Unbelonging*, and Beryl Gilroy’s 1989 novel, *Boy-Sandwich*, are set and were written. As Gilroy’s narrator Tyrone Grainger indicates in the above epigraph, the struggle to claim a place and an identity—markers of belonging and being at home—regularly came up against state efforts to frame black Britons as outsiders. Three of the state’s most remarkable methods of exclusion were over policing black and supposedly “immigrant” neighborhoods, enacting restrictive citizenship legislation that redefined Britishness, and diminishing the availability and quality of welfare services, including the privatization of formerly state-run institutions. *Boy-Sandwich* and *The Unbelonging* are heavily informed by these three major social tensions, so that when read together they reveal the complexity of the clash between direct state interventions in the Caribbean diaspora’s ability to claim or make British national and domestic homes and the ways in which both the diaspora and constructs of the Caribbean, in turn, serve as home. The two novels respond to these three state interventions with representations of politically aware and socially active youth, depictions of the



development of black British identity, and frank portrayals of the dereliction of the welfare system as it concerns the most vulnerable members of the Caribbean diaspora.

These three state interventions will be explored more fully below, but bear describing very briefly here. Over policing black and supposedly “immigrant” neighborhoods was a discriminatory tactic with origins in the state’s failed 1950s attempts to prove that there were higher crime rates in black communities in order to pass Commonwealth migration restrictions (Carter et. al. 29). This sparked decades of public discourse concerning so-called “black crime.” By the 1980s statistics were being manipulated to justify increased police presence in black neighborhoods, including stop-and-search practices (Clarke et. al. 11). Police invasion into black communities destabilized the ability to make secure homeplaces as refuge or resistance to social oppression. As we saw in the Introduction, the 1981 Nationality Act was a major work of restrictive citizenship legislation, which introduced the idea of British citizenship based on lineage rather than place of birth. Because nationality informs our senses of belonging to a place and ability to make a home of said place, a law that threatened to conceptually delegitimize the nationality of heretofore British citizens threatened to destabilize their claims to the nation as home. 1970s and 1980s recession and decades of discriminatory hiring practices led to disproportionately high unemployment in black communities, especially among young people who, as unemployed school leavers, had to draw welfare rather than unemployment benefits. The society that had stereotyped black emigrants as coming to Britain in order to take advantage of the welfare system forced black communities to take welfare assistance. This was also a period marked by major welfare cuts and the privatization of several

government institutions fueling discrimination, underfunding, and a lack of proper oversight in institutional homes. For people working to create nourishing domestic homeplaces, access to work or a welfare benefit makes a significant difference. In Paul Gilroy's words, through the shift toward over policing, this period was characterized by "The transformation of the welfare state in the direction of control" ("Police and Thieves" 174). Additionally, second and third generation black Britons claiming their social rights found it unacceptable to be regularly offered the "shit work" their emigrant parents or grandparents had had little choice but to accept while watching white peers secure better jobs. This, the state's prejudicial nationality legislation, and regular police harassment influenced the ostracization of younger members of the diaspora and their further development of a sense of collective black British identity in response and in resistance.

These are the circumstances against which the characters in these two novels struggle to secure senses of identity and belonging. In Beryl Gilroy's words, the novels feature characters who are "oppressed, ignored, aged, or discounted through the systems in which they find themselves" ("Diachronics" 240). Participating in the construct of the diaspora as home has the potential to counteract this systemic neglect. Lamming and Selvon's novels leave us with emigrants still struggling to establish or maintain diasporic homes in a hostile London. Some manage because of their diasporic connections while others, by great contrast, are increasingly isolated, leading to homelessness and mental illness. Some sixty years later, Levy's *Small Island* reintroduces women and illustrates the possibility of domesticity as a form of resistance in a closed and discriminatory housing market. Between these two periods

in the tradition Gilroy and Riley's novels reveal the depths of the fissures between the state and the people, especially black British communities, and the romanticization of the Caribbean as safe and stable home. An understanding of their social context is crucial. To that end, this chapter features a great deal of emphasis on the decade's events and climate because of the closeness of fictionalized events to personal and historical accounts in the literary tradition of the Caribbean diaspora in the UK and because the events and movements of the 1980s pervasively inform these novels without explicit description, what Beryl Gilroy has described as writing the truth in order to lift the "social blindfold" ("Fact-Fiction" 394). To illustrate this relationship between lived and fictionalized events, I move between the novels and the social context to highlight the contrasts between state's implicit and explicit denials of black Britons' claims to British homes and the diasporic bonding that makes the diaspora itself a home. The concept of home means a number of things in these two novels. The terrible conditions of the welfare homes point to the disparity of calling them "homes" as they offer none of the security, refuge, and comfort we tend to associate with home. Additionally, home is not a stable concept in either novel. While the Caribbean home is a healthy construct for middle-aged and elderly characters ready to return after decades in Britain, it fluctuates for younger characters who cling to it as an answer to British social oppression, find it unfulfilling, and realize that either Britain has become home or they are entirely estranged from any sense of belonging.

When she is brought to Britain by her abusive father, Hyacinth Williams, Riley's narrator, clings to her imagined construct of her Jamaican home as a mental refuge, comparing it to the brutality of her life in London. As part of his abuse, her

father teaches her to distrust whites in positions of authority. While this is meant to manipulate her into keeping her abuse secret, his emphasis on the dangers of whites is informed by the social climate of the time, particularly the tension between the mostly white Metropolitan Police and men in black communities who were routinely harassed. When Hyacinth finally escapes him in her teens, she is placed in a children's home where she is the only black resident and acutely feels the effects of racism in terms of the negligence and brutal ostracization she experiences in the system. Hyacinth dedicates her efforts to her education in order to return to Jamaica once she ages out of the system. Her isolation by her father and in the welfare system denies her relationships with other young people from the diaspora. As a result, she has no sense of black British identity, youth culture, politicization, or connection to a broader, collective diasporic identity—a characteristic that marks her in sharp contrast with the young adults she meets in college. Hyacinth clings to her childhood understanding of Jamaica as home and memories of relatives, views her life prior to arrival in Britain as significantly better, and resents her forced life in Britain. She cannot see that the Jamaica of her mind is a construct, even when she meets other Jamaicans and is confronted with their more current knowledge. It takes her return to Jamaica to upset her image of it, an event that undermines and erodes her sense of self, leaving her rootless and unbelonging.<sup>29</sup>

By contrast, it is the grandparents of Gilroy's teen protagonist who have an experience in the welfare system—but it is not unlike Hyacinth's. Evicted from the home they owned because it is to be demolished for the gentrification of the

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<sup>29</sup> As we shall see in this chapter with Gilroy's character Tyrone and in the fourth chapter with Zadie Smith's character Irie, this romanticization of the Caribbean home for youth of Caribbean descent also extends past those who, like Hyacinth, have experience living in the region.

neighborhood, Simon and Clara Grainger must first confront an angry mob outside of their home before being taken to a sheltered home for the elderly where they are the only two black and West Indian residents.<sup>30</sup> Their daughter-in-law points out that after the couple has “been in this country long, paid their taxes, did dog-work...England owe it to them” but what they actually get is neglect and open hostility as Clara’s mind deteriorates and the home’s workers steal Simon’s possessions (4). Again, this novel illustrates the concept of being at home in the diaspora so often at play in this literary tradition. Their family members and the rest of their Caribbean community maintain the network central to diasporic identity while the Graingers are removed to the state-run home for the elderly. Similarly, in her work on the novel, Anita Harris argues that when the Graingers “maintain connection with their island through psychological and symbolic returns to the homeplace, they defy neutralization of their cultural existence” thereby maintaining their diasporic identity (199). The institutional home as an extension of the power and space of the state fails them spectacularly while the promise of their Caribbean home, the memories and objects they treasure from it, and their community connections provide some remaining sense of dignity.

One member of the diasporic community who looks out for the couple is their grandson, Tyrone, the novel’s intelligent young adult narrator. His grandparents and parents maintain more Caribbean identities but he sees “the Island” as an escape from the violence and repressive state apparatuses of Britain. However, upon traveling there with his family for their return, he realizes that he is British and comes to embrace that identity, knowing that Britain is home for him. Second-generation identity provides a

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<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Tyrone picks up a Jamaican accent in the speech of the matron of the home and describes her as “a creole who has come home” (51).

means of being Caribbean with a difference *and* British with a difference. Characters like Riley's Hyacinth and, as we shall see in the next chapter, Clara of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, pose an even more complicated set of generational identitarian questions because they migrated as children. The common sociological approach would dictate that they should be considered second generation Britons because their first generation parents made the decision to migrate. However, their foundational experience of life in the Caribbean also marks them as first generation.

Tyrone's journey of identity and coming into a sense of black Britishness—something that the reader can anticipate ahead of him—is an example of what H. Adlai Murdoch calls the “hybrid modernities of contemporary Britishness,” which are “identitarian hybridities [that] increasingly destabilize...current notions of nationality and belonging” (3-4). Tyrone's generation complicates the identity of the Caribbean diaspora in the UK. If the tradition has been that members of the Caribbean diaspora both differentiate their community from the dominant British culture and reshape that culture from within, then postmigratory second-generation diasporans forming a collective black British identity further this complex set of relations. Murdoch notes that in Britain the

strategic and specific use of the term ‘black,’ meant to subsume a plethora of political and ethnic attitudes, positionalities, and differences into a single, overarching political and ethnocultural signifier, works to expose and destabilize false but fixed assumptions of ‘race,’ ethnicity, and nationalism [and that] living in and with the metropole produces a pluralized perspectival framework [in which] Not only are there a

number of ways of being Black British...but the boundaries of Caribbeanness...and Britishness are continually being stretched, subverted, and redefined. (44-5)

The term also functions as a reappropriation of the imperialist designation; a term once broadly applied as a means to divide people of European descent from people of Southeast Asian or African descent, came to be used as a term of unity and political solidarity in the face of racist oppression in the UK, though over time “It has moved away from political definitions of black based on the possibility of Afro-Asian unity and towards more restricted alternative formulations which have confined the concept of blackness to people of African descent” (P. Gilroy, *Ain't No Black* 39).

By the early 1970s, police, judges, politicians, and media houses had constructed an image of black street crime concentrated in the symbol of the mugger. In a fragile time of economic recession, high unemployment, and vigorous discourse about immigration and immigrants, the increasing use of terms like “mugging” became emblematic of a great many imagined threats in one: an affront to the British values of law, order, and private property; the danger of random attack whilst going about one’s business in a “newly” dangerous public space; the loss of hard-earned money in a time of economic uncertainty; and, when combined with the racial implications of the term “black crime,” a stereotypical threat of young black men. John Clarke, Stuart Hall, et. al. have closely analyzed this phenomenon in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* and illustrate, contemporaneously in 1978, that mugging, as a discursive construct, had come to be

unquestionably identified with a specific class fraction or category of labour (black youth) and with a specific kind of area...the classic urban 'trouble spots', presenting problems of welfare support, of crime prevention and control—but also of social discipline and public order...where the squeeze on welfare and public expenditure, on education and social support, most effectively bites [and because of the discriminatory practices of decades] Overwhelmingly, in the large cities, they are also the black areas. (338)

The construct of Britain in crisis—economic, ideological, cultural—bolstered conservative rhetoric and, by the late 1970s, helped to usher Thatcherism in, a political approach and ideology that particularly emphasized “more policing, tougher sentencing, better family discipline, the rising crime rate as an index of social disintegration, the threat to ‘ordinary people going about their private business’ from thieves, muggers, etc., the wave of lawlessness and the loss of law-abidingness” (Hall, *Hard Road* 55). The excessive policing of black communities, facilitated by an outdated 1824 Vagrancy Act that allowed police to stop and search people they merely suspected of mugging, perceptions of social “crisis,” and the effects of 1971 and 1981 immigration legislation generated major tensions.

One of the major tensions was generated by the introduction of the concept of patriality in this immigration legislation. Patriality law allowed right of abode to Commonwealth citizens with parents or grandparents born in the UK thereby increasing the number of whites in the Commonwealth with rights to live in the UK. As Ian Baucom has shown in *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of*



*Identity*, this concept discarded the tradition of thinking of British citizenship as “a territorial principle” and replaced it with the idea that “Britain was, henceforth, a genealogical community...by defining Britishness as an inheritance of race” (8). Tensions concerning over policing, welfare cuts, and changing citizenship ultimately gave way to a number of disturbances like the 1981 Brixton “race riots.” (I use quotation marks to emphasize the importance of remembering that one person’s spontaneous protest or social unrest is another person’s riot, and that the dominant discourse largely treated the events in Brixton on April 10-12, 1981 as “race riots.”) There had been a long history of events like this and there would continue to be throughout 1981, but the events in Brixton were different because of two factors: the revolution was televised—people all over could see dramatic footage of buildings burning and young people fighting policemen in riot gear—and the use of petrol bombs—which some people ascribe to the example of protestors in Northern Ireland, an association that implicitly paints protesting British youth as “terrorists.” It was “an instant audio-visual presentation...of scenes of violence and disorder...the like of which had not previously been seen in this century in Britain...demonstrating to millions...the fragile basis of the Queen’s peace” (Scarman 1).

It also exposed the fragility of claims to Britishness. Because the law is a national institution, representative of the state, and touted as a great national symbol of Britishness, negative interactions between the judicial system and black Britons call assumptions of Britishness to reckon. In the context of “representations of the law as a national institution,” Paul Gilroy explains, “black law-breaking comes gradually to be seen as proof of the incompatibility of blacks with Britishness” by the often

sensationalist and fear mongering mechanisms of popular thought: the public rhetoric of the police, politicians, and press (*Ain't No Black* 13). In these mechanisms the image of the “black criminal” comes to be treated as representative of black British communities as police disseminate and reproduce their own questionable figures of “black crime” thereby, Paul Gilroy argues, elevating the idea “to sociological credibility, even analytic status, and mobilized it not only in the struggle to police the blacks themselves, but also as part of securing the consent of white citizens to police practices which they might not otherwise find acceptable” (“Police and Thieves” 146). Because of the value of law and order to the construct of Britishness, for black British citizens to be framed as law-breakers is to be framed as outsiders.

A prime example of this is “sus” law (suspected person), which legalizes the treatment of young black men as suspects without evidence of crime and treats them inequitably while providing the police themselves with legal protections. Beryl Gilroy illustrates this in *Boy-Sandwich* when Tyrone recounts this experience as a twelve-year-old:

*Each day as I walked home* I was stopped by a young policeman, Constable Keeler—who years later, promoted to sergeant, was to officiate at my grandparents’ eviction. He picked me out of the group and ostentatiously searched me on the pavement... ‘No lip out of you, sunshine.’ His voice, though soft and jokey, was dripping threat. His smile was menacing, yet friendly... ‘You stop me every day. You pick on me. Why?’ ‘Don’t you know why, sunshine? I’m only doing my

job.' I felt vulnerable and powerless and hurried home. (47, emphasis added)

This sickening interaction illustrates the difference between the safe space of home and the vulnerable space of the pavement for young black men who are targeted by police who determine that it is their “job” to harass them daily in a culture that identifies them as potential criminals. When this daily harassment regularly takes place in its victims’ neighborhoods, it becomes an even more pervasive method of destabilizing the claim to a national or domestic home. Tyrone, feeling vulnerable and powerless, rushes home to his father, but “Anger had tripped my throat and I could hardly talk [and] He turned on me” (47). Tyrone exposes his father’s inability to provide an improved life for his son when he runs to him. His father’s reaction speaks to his own frustration because he, too, is searched daily and feels powerless to protect Tyrone. He asks what Tyrone is fussing for and describes the police as “trash with power,” in order to dismiss him (47). Tyrone’s father has been absorbing the same message—the message that he is vulnerable to the policing of the state—through his daily harassment and through losing a son, Goldberg, who was killed on the pavement by a flying brick that the police never traced. The experience of daily police harassment affects Tyrone profoundly: he describes himself as having “wilted” before his peers, refusing to attend school, and desperately attempting to make himself sick in order to remain at home (47-8). His grandfather, Simon, is of a generation that was politically active in the process of diaspora formation and helps his grandson by turning to the West Indian Standing Conference, an anti-discrimination organization formed shortly after the 1958 Notting Hill “riots” in which West Indians were attacked

by racist nationalists. With a representative from WISC, Simon and Tyrone visit the police station where Simon argues that Tyrone “is not a villain...He is a decent child from a decent home” (48). Keeler never stops Tyrone again but he “was still terrified, distrustful and fearful of whites [and the] encounter with the police left [him] feeling disembodied and anxious and marked [him] for years” (48).

The law that allows Constable Keeler to search Tyrone is the outdated 1824 Vagrancy Act, as mentioned above. In a 1979 debate concerning amendments to the act, Member of Parliament John Fraser, representative for Norwood, one of the constituencies covering Brixton, argued for the abolishment of the “sus” offence in the Act. In his argument he describes it as “the grossly unsatisfactory nature of the offence of being a suspected person,” pointing out that “it injures [the] relations [of the police] with the public, [because] effective policing depends upon confidence in the police and co-operation between them and the general public” (1809-10). Fraser adds, “In London, a substantial proportion of those arrested are black. In one age group the figure is about three-quarters. That figure is wholly disproportionate to arrests of black people generally” (1810). While Fraser’s attempts to respond to police statistics that purported to justify increases in policing, including stop and search practices, are vague, his point illustrates the absurdity of the law—charging people with being suspect, “not of committing a crime or even attempting to commit a crime, but of ‘frequenting or loitering in a place of public resort with intent to commit an arrestable offence’”—and reveals its disproportionate use against black communities (1809). Fraser explains that the law is found “alongside such offences as telling fortunes, lodging abroad in a tent, and exposing one’s wounds in order to obtain alms”—all

laws designed for “suppressing the symptoms of poverty” (1809). When the rhetoric of political discourse—from politicians, police representatives, and the media—routinely situates poverty and crime as particularly black social issues, the control of the law is directed at black communities.

Two years after Fraser made these remarks, “sus” laws facilitated “Swamp ’81” a mass stop and search police operation, the unfortunate name of which appears to originate in a comment made by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher the year before she was elected: “people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in” (n. pag.). Thatcher draws upon two important rhetorical strategies in this comment. In the language of 1980s “new racism,” the term “culture” replaced “race,” and racial discrimination could try to hide in supposed cultural difference. The “the British character” is drawn upon in an attempt to define a deeply historic concept of Britishness exclusive of black Britons while also claiming to be fair by calling upon democracy and law. Within the first four days of the campaign, 943 people were stopped and searched by police (P. Gilroy, *Ain't No Black* 104). In April, at the height of the campaign, violence erupted in dramatic clashes between youths and police. Clashes continued through the summer when hundreds of young people attacked police, burned cars and buildings, and looted in the Brixton “riots.” Brixton, thus, is a highly symbolic locale for Caribbean and black British communities because it represents both the state’s oppression and the community’s resistance to it.

Spontaneous disorderly protest—mass conflict with police dubbed “race riots”—was then conflated with mugging—individual crime—by the term “street crime” so that “they become indistinguishable manifestations of the same basic difficulty: the black population” (P. Gilroy, *Ain't No Black* 106).

The protests of that summer were not the first of their type in the city’s history, nor would they be the last, but as a decade the 1980s seem to have been characterized by them because of their visibility and their historical factors—recession, the movement from welfare state to control state, the coming of age of an increasingly politicized generation with a new relationship to the British nation, and decades of work by community organizers and local-level politicians to improve circumstances.<sup>31</sup> The riots would be characterized as random, spontaneous deviance or crudely reactive, but a number of factors indicated something more purposeful: participants commenting to reporters that the “riots” were in protest of the community’s limited access to the rights of citizenship, including over policing; the high selectivity in terms of what property was destroyed by participants (a shopping complex versus a welfare rights center); crowd censorship of participants who attempted to attack the wrong targets or participants fighting amongst themselves; hostility to journalists from media outlets known for their negative representations of black communities; and the violence was self-contained and did not generally spread beyond symbolic community boundaries (P. Gilroy, *Ain't No Black* 238-243). The conservative response was to

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<sup>31</sup> Most recently we watched via the twenty-four hour newsfeed as parts of England, particularly London, burned in the August 6-9, 2011 “riots.” Paul Gilroy notes that “the rioting of summer 2011 returned us to a host of questions that had been left pending by the general failure to come to terms either with 1981 or the morbid, postcolonial politics of race, class, and nation that animated it” (“1981 and 2011” 551). The events described in this chapter—over policing, state-sanctioned oppression of black communities, social unrest, violence, burning, and looting—feel familiar as we watched the 2014 events in Ferguson, MO the night that it was announced that Officer Darren Wilson would not face charges concerning the death of Michael Brown.

condemn the civil disturbances on the basis of their criminality: arson and other forms of destruction of property, theft (looting), and violence. In fact, as Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher made comments that consistently implied “that anyone who suggested a cause for the riots was in some way seeking to excuse them” (Benyon 5). It is important to note that the state’s ongoing refusal to acknowledge a political element to some aspects of crime is indicative of “a response by the state to collective political action which it does not wish to legitimate” (P. Gilroy, “Police and Thieves” 150).

Most analyses of the events take state-sanctioned repression and over policing as primary causes of the political resistance (other, interrelated causes include poverty, poor housing, citizenship legislation, unemployment, a discriminatory educational system, and widely spread racial discrimination). Even the official report by Lord Scarman following the inquiry into the disturbances—a document written by a member of the lawmaking ruling class after months of inquiry and the receipt of evidence from a range of interested parties—found that “oppressive policing over a period of years, and in particular the harassment of young blacks on the streets of Brixton” to be an overwhelming cause and that “the disorders, like so many riots in British history, were a protest against society by people...who saw in a violent attack upon the forces of law and order their one opportunity of compelling public attention to their grievances,” while still acknowledging that even these two arguments could not describe the situation in full (1-2). As we see in Tyrone’s comment above, his daily harasser—the beat cop who “used to sus-search [him] every single day just for fun” (2)—became the cop officiating his grandparents’ eviction, a scene that is

handled very poorly by police who only step between the black family and a racist mob at the last moment (3). Clearly Constable Keeler is never reprimanded for doing his “job” of harassing black youth and is ultimately promoted to a position of maintaining “order”—if order means protecting the hate speech of a racist mob and only thinly protecting the lives of black community members when they are physically attacked by said mob (3). After smiling as the racist mob yells “No more wogs! Out!” Keeler remarks to the Grainger family that “free speech is what we British are all about,” implying that by insisting that the police disperse the racists, the family is not British (2). Additionally, Keeler refers to the eviction as “this unpleasant business” and another policeman foolishly tries to explain to Simon that their home “is a building site now” (3).

Gilroy’s ability to write sparing, highly impactful prose like this evokes a sense of injustice for her reader and illustrates an almost inarticulable underpinning fear of the repressive state apparatus embodied by policemen. The shifting popular conceptions of criminalized black youth from stowaways, pimps, and drug dealers from the 1950s to muggers, illegal immigrants, and radicals through early 1980s allowed police, politicians, and sensationalist media to drive public opinion and fear in decades that seemed to be defined by social and economic tension and decline. Increasingly, even as “sus” operations continued, “The ideology of the solitary ‘dark figure’ was less and less appropriate to the reality of large-scale confrontations, and the racial connotations of ‘mugging’ would have to be qualified by the growth of ‘white’ street crime” (P. Gilroy, “Police and Thieves” 159). In political and sensationalist discourse, the rioter grew to be a figure that threatened to destabilize the



state, rather than a figure that represented the people's reaction to the state's failing, rejecting, and over policing them. As Paul Gilroy points out in his study of the 1981 and 2011 disorders, "the 1980s disorders fed the militarization of policing and the instrumentalization of law and order" ("1981 and 2011" 551). Beryl Gilroy's depiction of a white mob as a threatening group guaranteed free speech—with voices that will be heard and have political representation—needles the important differences between the frustration of a civil disturbance pinned on black "rioters" who then come under attack by police in the name of law and order and the protections afforded to hate speech of racist white mobs such as those organized by the National Front and other neofascist groups.

Similar to the chants of the racists and comments of the police at the Graingers' eviction, Riley's protagonist Hyacinth, is taunted with cries of "Kill the wog!" on her school playground and is mercilessly told "You blacks had better learn that you are in our country now!" by a teacher (16-17). Her schoolyard bully, Margaret, tells her that she should "go back to the jungle" (19). In a display of classic psychological projection, she is horrified when Hyacinth replies that Margaret's father is black. Margaret is, of course, small fry when compared to Hyacinth's greatest danger: her father, Lawrence, who routinely physically abuses her with beatings that include the use of a strip of old tire, kicking her in the small of her back, down a flight of stairs, and between her shoulder blades, all while smiling and maintaining an erection. To a lesser extent, her stepmother, Maureen, also represents a danger to her, particularly as Maureen tries to protect her sons from their father at Hyacinth's expense. When Hyacinth starts menstruating Maureen warns Lawrence to leave

Hyacinth alone and leaves, offering to take Hyacinth along, but Hyacinth's mistrust is so deep that she refuses, and stays. Her father's abuse turns even more explicitly sexual, as Maureen knew it would, repeating a pattern he started with Hyacinth's cousin who previously lived with him. Like Gilroy, Riley also imbues her novel with a deep terror of state-sanctioned repression, but through the figure of Lawrence who has absorbed the lesson of discriminatory policing practices and passes them on to Hyacinth as a way of securing his own position of abusive authority.

Hyacinth is so traumatized that she wets her bed every night, but when she has opportunities to tell those who could help, she is so brainwashed by her father's threats as embodied by white authority figures and her own experiences of schoolyard violence that she simply cannot speak. When a doctor asks whether she is fearful of her father she thinks "her father had warned her about white people—how they hated black people, how they would trick them and kill them. Even at school she saw that—how the black kids were treated, how she was treated and, if she needed more evidence, look how afraid [her father] had been of this man" (30). Of course, Lawrence is deferring to the doctor's authority and is afraid that Hyacinth will expose his abuse, but Hyacinth lacks the emotional intuition and maturity that would allow her to see this. Her life of physical and emotional abuse and lack of empathic, intuitive models have stunted her development of these cognitive abilities. Her domestic climate has even prevented her from making friends, "even with those black children who wanted to" because "She could never take them to her house, could never invite them round with the casualness that they flung invitations" (31-32). When a teacher, Miss Maxwell, stops her to gently ask what is the matter, adding "I realize that it must

have been hard for you to adjust, coming to a strange country, but it is three years now, and I am sure everyone has tried to make you feel at home,” she reveals just how little attention has been paid to Hyacinth in the school (49-50). Though Hyacinth “wish[es] she could tell the teacher what it was really like being in England,” she cannot because “She was probably like all the rest anyway, deep down underneath it all” and “her father’s words came to her—‘You think you get bad treatment here?’ he often asked. ‘Well let me tell you, if you run go tell the white teacher them going to take you away... They don’t like neaga in this country. All them white people smile up them face with them plastic smile, and then when you trust them, them kill you” (50-1). Not only is Hyacinth afraid to have others know what her father and her home life are like out of shame, but she believes this intimidation and cannot bring herself to tell out of fear: “She felt sick with fear, trapped, sandwiched between the hate and spite of the white world and the dark dingy evil that was the house of her father” (51).

When Lawrence’s ongoing sexual abuse turns to attempted rape in Maureen’s absence, Hyacinth strikes out at him and manages to give him a disorienting kick before running as fast as she can from the house. She stops a half mile from home, knowing she should call someone, but the thought of calling the police “frightened her almost as much as going back. ‘They don’t like neaga here.’ The words came back to her, echoing in her head every time she tried to build up the courage to make the call. Instead she stayed where she was, looking longingly at the phone booth” (64). When she finally calls, “She wondered if they would kill her straight away, or if they would torture her first like her father said, [her] fear of the white world juggling with the horrible image of that swollen exposed lump” (64). She moans to herself, “Please

don't let me die. I want to go home [to Jamaica]" because she has accordingly built up a safe, happy memory of her Jamaican home as a mental refuge during her years of abuse in England (64). Read together, *The Unbelonging* and *Boy-Sandwich* profile the strained relationship between black British youth and the state, revealing, in Hyacinth's case, how detrimental disconnection from the diaspora can be on the psyche and, in Tyrone's case, how much a bond with other diasporans can help in the face of extreme violence and police ambivalence. We see this well in the example of the fire scene in *Boy-Sandwich*.

A string of events revealing the friction between black communities and the police is thought to have led to the Swamp '81 campaign and, subsequently, to have added fuel to the 1981 Brixton civil disturbances. The first event was a fire in a house on New Cross Road in Deptford that January, which caused the deaths of thirteen young people. This event came to be known as the New Cross Massacre because it was believed that the fire was the work of neofascists who petrol bombed the house full of young black men and women attending a party. Paul Gilroy notes that the term "black party" to represent loud, sound system-fueled debauchery "had become such an entrenched sign of disorder and criminality, of a hedonistic and vicious black culture which was not recognizably British" (*Ain't No Black* 102). Second, the police discounting a racial motive and failing to investigate thoroughly, as well as the media's indifference or negative portrayals of victims, and the silence of the ruling class concerning the deaths and the community's grief, inspired thousands to demonstrate in a march from Deptford to central London that March.<sup>32</sup> According to

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<sup>32</sup> The community was especially frustrated over Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Queen Elizabeth's silence over the New Cross Massacre, particularly when compared to their swift

Mike and Trevor Philips, “For West Indians the Deptford fire became emblematic of the treatment that the black migrants and their children had endured for thirty years” (324). To the police, the strategic route of the march past institutions of black oppression and through black neighborhoods was an embarrassing symbolic defeat. A month later the police responded with Swamp ’81. Beryl Gilroy fictionalizes the fire in *Boy-Sandwich*, writing the victims as “the Streatham Twelve,” “young martyrs to xenophobia and hate,” and making it, in many ways, the catalyst for the Grainger family return to “the Island” (84).

Having just taken his mother home, Tyrone drives to a house party where his girlfriend, Adijah, is running a sound system with her brother, Dante. The scene is worth quoting at length:

I can see people dancing close...young couples argue and bargain and giggle, while others grasp opportunity where it knocks. Everyone sounds vibrant and happy. The music stops and starts again. Hips sway to soca...It seems to be the last dance, a medley of pieces.

And then there is a terrific sound of breaking glass and fire and flames intermingle with screams of terror. The flames split into strands which seize and devour anything in their path, as if guided by a devilish intelligence. The house burns freely and resolutely. I can see silhouettes of writhing bodies engulfed with flames. I run to the house calling for Adijah but there is only the impenetrable darkness of thick

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condolences to families and victims of a fire at a discotheque in Dublin a few weeks after the fire in Deptford.

smoke...People scream and hurl themselves out of windows but there  
is no escaping (75)

The description of the fire is spare, poignant, and startling. Gilroy's use of parallels, rhythm, contrasting soft and hard sounds, and the unnerving pivot on the word "And" help to reproduce a microcrith of the surprise victims felt. The first few lines lull the reader, not just by their content—couples interacting, people dancing, hips swaying, the fun of soca music and giggling—but also by their rhythm with calypsoesque phrases like "argue and bargain and giggle," and soft 'a' sounds in words like "dancing," "happy" and "soca." Following this, "a terrific sound of breaking glass and fire and flames" is effectively shocking. The disturbing parallel and repetition between "I can see people dancing" and "I can see silhouettes of writhing bodies" is particularly sharp for readers familiar with "winin'" or "wukkin'" to soca music: the pleasure of swaying hips and dancing closely abruptly turns to bodies writhing in pain. Gilroy effectively uses the rhythm of repeated sentence structures in a way that highlights the contrasting content of the sentences, as with "Everyone sounds vibrant and happy" and "People scream and hurl themselves out of windows," or the parallel sentence structure of "The music stops and starts again" with "The house burns freely and resolutely." The foreshadowing of "It seems to be the last dance" comes to fruition in "there is no escaping." As I mention above, one of the many compelling features of this body of literature is the closeness of fictionalized events to personal and historical accounts. We saw this in the Chapter 1 discussions of Andrea Levy's signification upon history and Mike Philips' comments on the historical accuracy of *Small Island*. As we saw in Chapter 2, in his essays Lamming analyzes the discursive

process of diaspora formation and depicts it in his literary works. Here again there is this relationship, specifically between Gilroy's fictional Streatham fire and personal accounts of the Deptford fire. Harry Powell describes coming around a corner to see "that there was, kids, really...jumping out of the window—the fire was blazing—screaming...people were screaming and laying hurt, broken limbs" (qtd. in Philips 327).

Ultimately Tyrone watches policemen and firemen arrive, holding the crowds back as "People desperately scream the names of their children—all from the black community" and Tyrone recalls a huddled group of men he had seen, "gleefully savouring the destruction...their hard eager faces as they watched the ordeal of these people who to them were unbelonging and had to be destroyed" (76). Because the Deptford fire was thought to have been set purposefully but never investigated, it is important to note that the social climate had created circumstances in which community members felt that a racist fire-bomb attack on a party was highly probable and believed that it had happened. Ros Howells, one of the contributors to Mike and Trevor Philips' *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain*, explains that "Whether it was a deliberate attack on the black community or not that was how it was seen" (340). Another contributor, Darcus Howe, former editor of *Race Today* and a coordinator of the New Cross March, similarly tells the Philipses that

The suspicion was that it was a racial attack. A lot of that was happening in the country at the time, in the East End of London, everywhere. So it seemed perfectly reasonable to believe that the place has been fire-bombed. I genuinely believe that, and everybody believed

that at the time. A policeman told Mrs Ruddock [whose house it was] on the night of the fire that there was a fire-bomb—from his mouth came the words. (337)

Gilroy writes this belief into her fictionalization of the event by having Tyrone recall seeing the attackers. With his typical insight, Tyrone ponders “why, nearly forty years after the coming of my grandparents to this land that was the source of their beliefs about life and civilised living, people burn others, deny others’ capacity to feel and applaud their terror and their death” (76). Tyrone’s closeness to his grandparents and his growing political awareness lead him to reflect on the differences between the struggles of the *Windrush* generation and the issues facing his. In particular, he acknowledges the hegemonic work of colonialism by acknowledging that Britain is the source of his grandparents’ “beliefs about life and civilised living.” The contrast between this idea of civilized life and the reality of brutal racism becomes part of the map of ideological differences between the generations.

His interactions with his grandfather bear out the gap between the two generations, exposing the political fault lines: ““You fought yesterday, Grandpa. On the streets of Notting Hill?’ I ask with some bitterness.<sup>33</sup> ‘Why do you think the young people are fighting today in Brixton, Bradford, Sheffield, Bristol, elsewhere?’” (93). Simon replies, repeating the tropes of politicians, sensationalist media, and police in a popular mode of dismissal: “Because dey is lazy and wicked...dey smoke ganja...dey don’t care to work. Dey care to beg and mug people. Dey get too much free food in de school and dey not mannersable. Dey disrighteous...Dey never know naked poorness”

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<sup>33</sup> This is a reference to the 1958 Notting Hill “riots.”



(93). Tyrone's response reflects not just the politics of his youth culture, but his side of the generational gap: "I am one of the young ones. Look at me and bow down in shame before me. You're talking about me and my generation of young people... Old age is the shadows. I am young. I am real. I know what I am... You don't care how strangers treat you. We do. You don't care what happens to you. We do" (93). His comment unfairly reflects a distinction that is often made between these two generations: that the *Windrush* generation put their heads down and tried to adjust in order to live with some level of comfort and dignity, which often meant an outward appearance of acceptance, while their children and grandchildren were more willing to more actively demand and secure their rights and privileges as Britons.<sup>34</sup> The *Windrush* generation may have been more accepting, but this characterization is unfair. They were socially active and formed a number of associations to represent and help members of the community, pooled their resources where they could, and demonstrated on the streets of Notting Hill, which was at the time a rundown neighborhood where West Indians paid high rents to live in shabby single rooms due to racist housing practices across the city. More fairly, Tyrone also acknowledges his link to the activism of his grandparents' generation when he comments, "My heritage forbade me to stand still" (38). Not only is he referring to the migration from which his heritage is formed—the forced migration of African slaves, the voluntary migration of his grandparents—but his heritage will not allow him to stand still and passively observe injustices. Like his grandfather, he must act.

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<sup>34</sup> See: Clarke et. al. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*; the Scarman inquiry report of the Brixton disturbances; Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*; Philips and Philips *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain*; and Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, among others.

Tyrone's activism includes being present for his grandparents as the representative of their best interests in a discriminatory welfare system. Tyrone must find ways to make an livable home for his grandparents as they "have constructed an acceptable model of home for him" (B. Gilroy, "Diachronics" 241). In this endeavor he often uses the language of unions to make the staff of his grandparents' welfare home defer to him, including telling the Assistant Matron to contact his union representative when she threatens him with hers. In a written complaint to the home, responding to their attempts to dissuade him from visiting, he reminds the Matron that "this is a 'democratic country' in which I am allowed to make a 'democratic decision' to visit my elderly relatives whom I fear are in danger of being intimidated. All this sounds like a union minute and as a consequence they stop trying to lid me in" (26). Another form of his social activism involves picketing a store that still sells golliwogs, despite his grandfather's assertion that it will get him nowhere (50). As Tyrone opines, "I *too* am struggling to claim my place, my identity, my share...I belong, regardless of those who say I don't" (30 emphasis added). His comment is clearly cross-generational and evokes his grandfather's struggle and his father's frustration. A sense of belonging is a highly contested factor, as we saw above with Tyrone's comment about the mob that he blames for the fire, and with it comes a sense of just entitlement, Tyrone's major political motivator, as we shall see shortly in discussing welfare homes.

Tyrone is a member of a politically conscious peer group and family—at the eviction his mother yells "Injustice!" while his grandfather shouts "Persecution in de name of de Union Jack" at the racist mob. By contrast, Hyacinth has no access to

political awareness through her family or through her peers who continue to isolate her after she is placed in a children's home. Additionally, because Hyacinth has maintained her childhood understanding of Jamaica as a cushion for the traumatic blow of isolation and abuse in England, she has not kept in contact with her family "back home" or maintained a familiarity with Jamaican politics. Hyacinth's schooling also neglects to cover Jamaican politics or current affairs. As a result, when she goes to Aston University—as part of her belief that education will allow her to afford her return to Jamaica—and is finally surrounded by other black students, including Caribbean and African students, who are politically informed and active, she cannot relate to her peers.<sup>35</sup> Hyacinth's lack of social consciousness falls into roughly three areas that are all severely impacted by the imagined construct of Jamaica that she clings to defensively: her unfamiliarity with events and politics in Jamaica, her unfamiliarity with and distance from a sense of African diasporic identity, black British identity, or cultural heritage, and her British colonial view of Africa. Hyacinth has constructed an identity to hide the "shameful secret of her past," claiming that she has come from a "good background" and has supposedly been in England for just a few years (109). Unfortunately she knows little about Jamaican current events and, despite her constant struggle not to reveal this, her ignorance betrays her.

When Hyacinth develops a friendship with a Jamaican student, Perlene, she is "stung" by Perlene's criticism of Kingston and defends the city. Perlene's response illustrates how unfamiliar Hyacinth is with the current conditions in her "beloved

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<sup>35</sup> In the 1980s Aston University was being developed despite governmental cuts to higher education. Thatcher visited to see a new science park on the campus and was told by local Labour Party councilor, Clive Wilkinson, whose company had invested in the science park, that she was neither invited nor welcomed.

city”: “you must wear blinkers...you don’t even read the headlines in the papers...political madmen a mash up Kingston with the gun-war” (110). Hyacinth’s construct of Jamaica is so firm that she refuses to believe anything other than what she has chosen to remember from her childhood perceptions. Anything outside of this is a challenge to the fragility of that construct, to the psychic cushion Hyacinth maintains for herself, and to her senses of identity and purpose. Hyacinth can only glance at the Jamaican papers that Perlene has sent to Aston because “she found it hard to believe what they were saying,” while, on the other hand, she could see why British papers would say negative things about Jamaica—“white people never did like Jamaicans” (110). Her disconnect from Jamaica is so pronounced that “It was only since meeting Perlene that she found out [Manley] was Jamaica’s prime minister, and it had taken her even longer to realise that he was not the Norman Manley that her aunt had often talked about, but his son. Not that she let on about her ignorance” (110).

In addition to trying to keep her past a secret, particularly the shame of her father’s abuse and her years in the welfare system, Hyacinth struggles to keep her political and social ignorance secret. Conversations that start to fill the gaps in her cultural, political and social awareness help only if she can control her humiliation and defensiveness. She is often “left feeling exposed and small” yet she courts these conversations and “learning more and more about black people” despite her fears that Perlene will learn how ignorant she is (112). When Sir Walter Rodney comes to their campus to deliver a lecture, Perlene has to educate Hyacinth about him. The two women attend his lecture and Hyacinth is struck by the truth of his observations of racism in Britain, but defensive when he critiques Jamaica because she is dearly

protecting her idealized concept of her homeland. Any criticism of Jamaica is detrimental to her construct of it and she will not accept any negative portrayal of the island. The lecture's title, "Racism in Britain and its Echoes in the Caribbean" makes Hyacinth bristle and think, foolishly, "There was no racism in the Caribbean" (115). Rodney's comments on Caribbean racism annoy her because she feels as though her "own country was being condemned...She herself could remember Jamaica perfectly and the one thing she had to say about it was that racism did not exist there" (117). When Perlene tells her that Rodney is right about Jamaica as an example of Caribbean racism, it evokes in Hyacinth a "panicky feeling that what she was saying might be the truth" because of her deeply ingrained denial concerning Jamaica (117).

When Perlene comments that even though Manley is Jamaican he has no real interest in African people, Hyacinth is completely confused and asks "Why should he care about Africans anyway?" because "As far as she could see, Jamaica had enough problems without taking on other people's as well" (111). Perlene's response points to Hyacinth's lack of exposure to the concept of African diasporic identity: "You better realise that's it's Africans like you and me who represent Jamaica's future" (111). There is a clear slippage here in their ability to communicate about this because Hyacinth does not have the knowledge or awareness that Perlene assumes of her. While it is explicit to the reader, Hyacinth is still hiding it from Perlene and rebuffs her huffily: "Anyway, I am not an African...I am a Jamaican, of course; or a West Indian if you prefer" (112). Perlene laughs "mirthlessly" and asks, "Can't you see how they brainwash you?" (112). A significant component of this brainwashing is in her derisive view of Africans, especially since "she found the idea of Africans having

civilisations too far-fetched to believe” (113). Fortunately, Perlene often provides her with books and pictures to convince and educate her, forcing her to rethink her worldview. Unfortunately “She still could not bring herself to consider people from Africa her equals” (113). For instance, Hyacinth usually avoids men because of her traumatic past, but when she is with her Zimbabwean friend, Charles, she feels safe because she thinks of him as beneath her. Hyacinth has absorbed the empire’s myth of an uncivilized continent as part of a colonial hegemony that encouraged the residents of British Caribbean colonies to think of themselves as British—a self-perception that is rudely confronted with the experience of emigration. Hyacinth’s ignorance stems from her adolescence in state welfare homes for children where she was the only black resident, treated very badly, and had no contact with black communities.

When Hyacinth is enrolled in the welfare system after escaping her father, she is first sent to a reception home outside of the city where she is supposed to stay for only a few weeks. She stays there for over a year watching other children come and go while hearing that “there was never anywhere suitable for her” (72). School hours are her only refuge as she is left quite alone there. At the home, her baths are supervised, making her

feel naked and ashamed of her blackness, as one of the large red-faced women watched her with unblinking eyes. She knew everyone whispered about her hair, how grey and straw-like it was. It was not her fault that she could not find a big enough comb, that there was no oil to rub into her scalp. She was afraid to tell them that twice a week was too often to wash her hair, afraid they would call her dirty and blame it on

her blackness...It was awful being different...people in the village near the home would nudge each other and stare. (68)

Hyacinth's sense of agency is so crippled by her background that she cannot speak up for herself and, based on the existing pattern of neglect, discrimination, and ill treatment in her past, anticipates only negative responses. Her treatment in the home is so awful that the house supervisor refers to her "openly as 'nigger' and 'wog'" (68) and "they let her know she was not wanted, did not belong" (69). It is at this time that she has the "dawning understanding that she was living in a charity home" and returning to Jamaica, which had previously been an escapist coping mechanism, "became a passionate force [because] That was where she belonged. There her colour didn't matter, for everyone else was the same" (68). Clearly we can read the origins of some of her future misunderstandings of Jamaica here.

Without a diasporic community to function as a home, Hyacinth is left to state welfare homes and to face the nation's racism on her own. With no oppression-resistant homeplace, she is especially vulnerable. One such example is with a social worker who interviews her at the reception home. For each of his questions Hyacinth "knew he was lying; he was angry at her honesty" (70), or "sensed his dissatisfaction with her answers, sensed it and was suspicious," or thinks that "He would look down on me [and] probably tell the staff and make them treat me worse" (71). When she cannot emotionally process the questions about moving to the UK or her childhood with her aunt, she abruptly blurts out "You don't like black people...None of you do. You hate us. You hate me" (72). As Meredith Gadsby has argued in her work on the novel, without "a mother, or mother culture, to teach her daughters survival skills

necessary to challenge the ‘mother country’s’ insults, inequalities, and injuries”—not to mention basic self confidence, reasoning, or the ability to question—Hyacinth is left to draw emotionally immature, experiential conclusions based on her past and informed by her inability to trust (120).

Hyacinth’s experiences emphasize the need for a sense of a safe domestic space or a diasporic home for emigrants in the UK. When she is moved to a children’s home, Littlethorpe, Hyacinth is hopeful, but the dusty, neglected home which “had an air of dirt about it, a dinginess that clung to the worn and faded carpet, the discoloured wallpaper and the musty-smelling, ageing furniture” disappoints upon arrival (73). Littlethorpe is an example of how the state least serves its most in-need citizens, an example of Thatcherite welfare cuts in its dereliction and terrible staff, and a place in the literary legacy of Dickens and Brontë. On meeting the “house-parent,” a woman who contemptuously identifies herself as “Auntie Susan,” Hyacinth feels “A sudden longing to be with black people. . . mingled with her usual sense of shame and guilt about her colour” (73). Instinctively she knows that this home will not be better for her and compares being new at the home to coming to England. Once more going to school feels liberating, but at the home she is ignored by the staff, “trapped, and desperate as she became the butt of jokes and cruelties, both within Littlethorpe and among children from the surrounding homes” (74). Without a safe domestic space or a diasporic home Hyacinth is isolated, struggling with her sense of self-worth, consistently defining herself against a world that hurts and neglects her, and has no model for resistance. Her reaction to Susan’s comment that she will not allow her to “establish jungle law” in the home illustrates the dueling senses of inadequacy and



defensiveness that Hyacinth consistently struggles with: “sick with shame, hating the way the woman always lumped her in with other blacks. She knew she was different from other black people, even if she did look like them. She was not violent” (76). Even as she rejects the hate of the racist white establishment she has, at fourteen years old, absorbed that establishment’s message about black violence.

While Hyacinth must consistently defend herself in the welfare homes she lives in, Tyrone must be the champion for his grandparents as they are forced into the welfare home for the elderly. Their situation is ironic: as the image of the welfare scrounger became more popular in conservative rhetoric—having long been established as an anti-Commonwealth immigration tactic—the Graingers are forced into the very system emigrants were accused of relocating to take advantage of. We should be reminded of Queenie’s neighbor in *Small Island* who claims that the immigrants are coming for the teeth and we will see Zadie Smith’s tongue-in-cheek answer to accusations of emigrants coming to live off the dole in Britain in the next chapter. As the figure of the welfare scrounger repeats in political discourse, so it repeats in literary treatments of this discourse. Elderly characters are also a recurring trope in the literature of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain and in political rhetoric about the diaspora. As we saw in the first chapter, Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech features a pensioner whose way of life is threatened by both the “immigrants” next door and the upcoming Race Relations Act. As we shall see in the next chapter, the elderly are portrayed as resolute matriarchs, nosey racists, or equated with an intolerable imperial past. Historically elders have even appeared alongside looters during “race riots,” such as the 1980 disturbances in Bristol, to collect what they could

from a supermarket (P. Gilroy, *Ain't No Black* 99). Their positive roles include to providing a link to a Caribbean past that enriches their family and a sense of diasporic history that can combat nationalist constructions of British history that glorify the state to the exclusion of its colonial and postcolonial citizens.

Thatcher's long period in power is heavily characterized by the privatization of public services, including the sale of council housing, cuts to welfare and education spending, an industrial action. As Prime Minister "critics routinely called her a 'fascist' and the satirical programme *Spitting Image* developed a running joke in which Thatcher took instructions from an elderly Adolf Hitler" (Jackson and Sanders 11). The rhetoric surrounding welfare cuts was often couched in a sense of pervasive social crisis to be remedied by the moral principles of ending a culture of decline and promoting self-reliance. As Robert Saunders has pointed out in his work on Thatcherism, crises "require an active process of narration," which does not mean that the issues are not real or serious, but that crisis is largely a question of public construct, so "That it became the hegemonic narrative was Thatcher's first great achievement, and served as a foundation" for the measures her government would put in place (25). One of the most skillful aspects of Gilroy's writing in *Boy-Sandwich* is her depiction of the way this rhetoric of crisis has worked on the neofascist mob attendant at the Graingers' eviction and the irony of their forced entry into the welfare system despite decades of self-reliance, having been self-employed as a tailor and seamstress, and having owned their own home. As Tyrone's mother argues, "England owe it to them," but unfortunately England does not meet its debt (4).

Like Hyacinth, Clara and Simon are neglected in their welfare home, The Birches, a “sheltered accommodation” recommended by their social worker because it “offered communal facilities, allowed personal possessions and admitted people of all races,” though the Graingers are the only black residents (4). The Birches is the sort of place where tea is “administered,” not served (49). There are three major concerns in terms of the quality of life Simon and Clara experience at The Birches: physical conditions of the home, theft, and neglect. Tyrone observes that the chair his grandfather chooses has “Little thorns of horsehair [that] push their way out of the upholstery as if trying to reach the light [and its] wooden arms have become worn and smooth” (5). The chair is a sign of the home not having the funding or interest to replace furniture, but what is worse than an old chair is the layer of “dust thick as paste on the pictures hanging on the wall” (9) and the bowl of decomposing fruit on the table in their room in which “the oranges are rotten and ageing, the apples grub-infested [and] the bananas look like fingers covered with large neglected sores” and from which comes “an overwhelming smell of decay” (13). Tyrone looks further and finds that his grandmother, whose mental state has been unstable since the eviction and who has always been a bit of a hoarder, has a dresser drawer “full of rotten food—bits of cheese, ancient slices of fruitcake and chopped-up corned beef and Spam” (13). He empties it and complains to the caregiver who ignores him in order to say that she can get a good price for some of Simon’s photographs.

Other than his sewing machine, Simon’s most prized possessions are his camera and his photo album, which Tyrone describes as “a beacon to his past” (14). The album’s pages are “overburdened with photographs” that Simon uses to illustrate

his “talk of those yesterdays when he kept his many assignations with destiny, across seas and oceans and in the countries beyond” (5). This not just for the sake of memory or nostalgia; he tells Tyrone, “if I tell you where I come from, you would know where you must go” (5). The album is the Grainger family’s diasporic history curated. The caregiver wants to sell photographs of Tyrone’s great grandparents that Simon keeps in the album, “the ones with black people dressed up like Victorians,” because, she thinks “They must have been going out to a fancy-dress ball. Blacks are mostly naked. Aren’t they?” (14). This conversation prompts Tyrone to take the album home with him, but the photographs are not the only possessions under threat of theft. Some of Simon’s clothes go missing and, after hearing another resident say that the staff sells the clothing, Tyrone decides to make an inventory. When residents or their family members ask about their pension money they find it difficult to get an answer from the caregivers, “There is no proper system of accounting, no questions can be asked and no one knows what becomes of the amounts which should be paid to inmates each week...Grandpa’s money was kept in a plastic envelope in a tin and then it silently vanished” (65).

Clara’s hoarding tendencies make it harder for the staff to steal from her as she always carries her most prized possessions around with her in a giant bag: “thimbles of all sizes, pinking shears, scissors, tape-measures, boxes of pins, scraps of jewellery and her money...her doubloons...she says her father gave her [and] a pair of shoes she wore to a dance in 1952,” which was shut down by the police (11). In addition to all of these things, she carries a small “linen bag full of Island earth, which she brought with her and has always kept with her. It is as sacred as her cross and her Bible” (13). After

his encounter with the caregiver who wanted to sell his family photographs and hearing that the staff sells the residents' clothing, Tyrone decides to take Clara's possessions home as well, though "already her watch has disappeared" (18). Sadly the staff does not stop at theft: they neglect the residents and try to extort money for the very tasks they are employed to do. During one visit Simon begs Tyrone to give Juney, one of the caregivers, five pounds because he does not have his pension money. He explains: "Clara leave in de bath too long. She cold. I try to take her out but I couldn't and Belladora [another resident] went out so no one give me a hand. You must give Juney five pound to help us...If you don't pay you get by-pass. They leave you sittin' in de water till dey done watchin' television" (17). This heartbreaking experience prompts Tyrone to search for Juney; he finds the staff drinking and reports them to the town hall, but "at the town hall no one really knows how the homes are run. They have every confidence in the staff, they tell me. The town hall is in fact afraid of the unions" (18). This is a remarkable example of the neglect of the caregivers at The Birches as well as the state system that enables them to take advantage of the residents. In another scene Tyrone learns that his grandmother wants her hair to be washed but has been told that she must wait because, according to the Matron, "We are not used to her sort of hair. It takes effort and understanding. We can't exactly put a comb through it, now can we?" (51-2). Tyrone points out that Clara has rights, including the right to be kept clean, which prompts the Matron to ask why he must always wear "a hair shirt trimmed with politics" (52).

The trauma of being forced from her home and the experience of neglect in The Birches leave Clara deeply unsettled and she begins to turn inward, settling into a

regressive form of dementia that returns her to her past in the Island. Living in the past Clara calls to and feeds her imaginary cat and “polishes” her prized jardinière by moving her hands in a circular motion in the air. Eventually she begins to improve, having “moved from spasms to spans of clarity. She is becoming part of things. She forgets her burden-bag from time to time, and sits in the garden among the birds and flowers, and notices the clouds... We have not abandoned the old people after all!... They are living, thinking people again” (57). This improvement and stability are due to Tyrone’s activism on their behalf. By being a thorn in the side of the establishment, complaining and demanding the proper treatment of his grandparents, and saving their things he has helped them immensely. He has not abandoned them; because of his sense of social entitlement and his determination they keep their connection to their diasporic home rather than losing hope completely in a state welfare home.

After the deaths of some of Clara and Simon’s friends at The Birches and the fire that leaves the community reeling in grief, Tyrone suggests that the family return to the Island. They agree to go together, and to take Goldberg’s cremated remains with them for a proper burial. Before their return, Tyrone spots an article about his grandparents in a local paper:

Under the headline ELDERLY COUPLE RETURN TO CARIBBEAN are my grandparents. The writer says they have worked hard all their lives and have been given sheltered accommodation, but now...their return home [is] possible. They are to be commended for the wonderful example they are setting to other elderly people of ethnic minority origins. The writer makes it

clear he wants all old black people to follow my grandparents' example and go home. There is not a word about the eviction months before. (95)

A well-meaning fellow resident of The Birches arranged the profile in the newspaper. The language of the writer brings Enoch Powell's calls for repatriation to mind while the novel's depiction of the press joins a popular trope of the literature of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain. Selvon's Londoners, for example, talk about how the British treat the newspapers as the Bible when journalists sensationalize emigration and Selvon's Waterloo Station scene parodies this with Tanty posing with her entire family for a press photographer on arrival to London. The return is a complex decision for the family. Simon, for one, "feels he is doing something grievously wrong—betraying a lifelong acceptance of service to his country, betraying the destiny of suffering" (96), yet Tyrone feels "no regret, no pangs of sorrow. I live here yet I have no feelings about the place. I have always felt an outsider" (97). On their arrival Tyrone announces "We have come home" repeatedly as though he finds satisfaction in the proclamation. Simon and Clara make another major improvement in wellbeing soon after, having "found other strands of security. They have come home" (104). Tyrone realizes that he is nervous about meeting his grandparents' Island peers because he is "haunted by The Birches where time rendered people so helpless that they could only wait for the end...How will they act? Will they be yesterday's people? My idea of yesterday was formed in a throwaway society. I too believe that people could become worthless and useless" (105). The elderly Island people are vibrant, warm, able, and energetic. Their robustness draws a sharp contrast against the

residents of The Birches, just as the Island home draws a sharp contrast to the welfare home.

While his grandparents are rejuvenated by return, Tyrone is surprised that the place he was raised to think of as home does not feel like home. He feels alienated by his Island peers who seem to regard him with suspicion. The distance has allowed him to compare the Island home to the metropolitan home (of which he has always been critical) and to find the Island wanting, at least for himself. His decision to return to London is intensely informed by his sense of identity:

within myself I feel the resonance of some unspoken need... I conclude that it is my need for anonymity. In London I am of no particular importance to anyone. I am unknown except to my family and friends. I have grown up with just an urban identity and come to cherish that. [On the Island] I am trapped—in my family identity, the identity of my community and the identity of my opportunity. In London I had lived another life, grown other feelings, got to know myself as ‘Tyrone’. I know how and where I am vulnerable. I understand my difference.

(110)

Tyrone’s first “return” to the Island that has defined his identity in Britain for so long clarifies his identity for him. He is a diasporan, not an Islander. While he can appreciate the closeness of the Island community and what it has done for his family, particularly when carried across to Britain, he is a metropolitan person, an identity that is freeing even as it consistently shows him where his vulnerabilities are. “By virtue of



growing up so much more 'British' than their antecedents," says Murdoch, the next generation's

ability to integrate into the larger social whole was often more marked, but their persistent doubleness [being Caribbean and British] just as often posed thorny problems of nationalism and belonging, while a tangible inscription in, or framing by, 'Britain' became more marked with succeeding generations. (47-8)

As part of realizing that he is more marked by Britain than the Island, despite the Island's role in his diasporic identity, Tyrone has a moment of clarity in which he realizes that he hates his "misunderstanding of the idea of home" and that he does not belong on the Island, "I know it. I am British and believe it...I want to call myself British for the first time in my life" (115). By leaving Britain Tyrone has discovered that he belongs there and that "whatever he has ingested as home is cognitively irrelevant and spiritually defunct" (B. Gilroy, "Diachronics" 242).

Unlike Tyrone, Hyacinth's return only further destabilizes her sense of identity. After roughly a decade of clinging to a child's view of her imagined homeland, Hyacinth finally returns, bringing her all-encompassing goal to fruition, but the Jamaica she finds is not what she remembers. After securing a postgraduate position at the University of the West Indies Mona campus, Hyacinth is finally able to return to Jamaica. However, something stops her from immediately finding her aunt and her childhood friends, of whom she has been dreaming for many years. It is precisely this: she cannot face what subconsciously she will know is a reality that will crush the fiction she has so defensively maintained for herself. When she finally goes

out of guilt she physically and emotionally recoils from the rows of shanties, the acceptance of another friend's death (till now purposefully pushed from her mind), her aunt's poverty, terminal illness, alcoholism, and her childhood friend's confrontation over her neglect of her aunt. Still emotionally immature, she asks herself "Why must she always come back to so much dirt?" and the memory of her father immediately comes to mind when she is threatened by men crowding the alleyways (136).

As Hyacinth takes the shantytown in, "Her mind screamed rejection...refused the ragged familiarity" (137) and she thinks "This is not reality...The reality is not here, this is the nightmare" (139). Inside her aunt's home she struggles to reconcile what she is seeing—the home of a poor old woman in a city hard-affected by sociopolitical and economic conflicts while she has been away—with her child's-view memories of a safe, protected space and it leads her to think longingly of England, "far away and safe. God, how civilised England seemed now" (138). Her childhood friend, Florence, who cannot excuse what she sees as Hyacinth's abandonment of her aunt confronts her, telling Hyacinth that she has had to care for her aunt, including paying expensive doctor's bills. Hyacinth is so incapable of calm thought that she thinks Florence is begging and offers her two dollars. Disgusted, Florence tells Hyacinth to "Go back whey u come fram," a comment that sparks a spiral of identity crisis for Hyacinth (142). She wonders

How many times has she heard that since coming to Jamaica, or was it since she had gone to England? She felt rejected, unbelonging. Where was the acceptance she had dreamt about, the going home in triumph to a loving, indulgent aunt?...She felt exposed, her blackness ugly and

rejected even among her own kind...She remembered England as a child, the beatings, the jeers. 'Go back where you belong,' they had said, and then she had thought she knew where that was. But if it was not Jamaica, where did she belong? (142)

Hyacinth's sense of rootlessness emphasizes the role of diasporic connections in the creation of a sustaining sense of home. She has equated "going home" with love and acceptance based upon an imagined construct of that home—without actual communal bonds. What is even more remarkable is that she has been so conditioned to associate blackness with rejection that when she is rejected on the basis of personal responsibility she relates these negative feelings to blackness. Ultimately Hyacinth realizes that she would never be free until the child within her is healed, offering the promise of some sort of personal resolution for her (143).

The conflicting senses of identity for young Britons of Caribbean ancestry are especially political in these two novels, illustrating the ways in which identity comes to be a publicly contested issue determined by the claim to a home and a nation and all of the attending benefits of the two as provided by diasporic bonds. The characters of both of novels struggle under the power of a state redefining itself by the control and exclusion of its citizenry rather than their welfare and, as a result, with their national identities. What makes the difference, then, is their ability to find a sense of home within a diasporic community that can resist this state-sanctioned oppression. Without it they are left unbelonging.

## Chapter 4

### Speaking Home And History: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Narratives of National Belonging

This chapter focuses Zadie Smith's 2000 novel, *White Teeth*, which spans the decades covered in the previous three chapters—decades of what is treated as the height of “Commonwealth migration” and the accompanying citizenship legislation, changing forms of racism in Britain, the development of black British identity, and the so-called “crisis.” It is invested in a multi-layered, hybrid metropole of the future heavily informed by the baggage of the past. The novel's constructs of home—the diaspora itself, the homeland, and domestic spaces—and discourses of identity lend themselves to characters' senses of diasporic and personal belonging, and sense of habitation in cosmopolitan Britain. For the characters, the ability to narrativize experience and identity means the ability to begin to answer questions of national belonging. A sense of shared history bonds the multicultural Commonwealth migrant diaspora, which, in turn, becomes a hard won home in itself.

In the novel, the Caribbean diaspora is one of many connected by neighborhood, the shared history of the circumstances of “Commonwealth migration” (i.e. non-white/non-European), and by their children sharing in a sense of twentieth-century multicultural Britishness. Through this multicultural Britishness, Smith “presents us with an alternative discourse to address questions of identity and nationhood. Smith reveals that in today's postmodern millennial world, notions of ethnic and racial identity cannot be defined in terms of ancestry, language, or culture because the cultural hybridization of English society has made concepts of ethnicity

and race indeterminate” (Walters 315). Homelands become touchstones for characters whose identities are questioned and undermined by others attaching this sense of difference to them. Domesticity speaks to national belonging and figures in how characters, particularly Irie for the purposes of my work, see the immigrant symbolism of their homes.<sup>36</sup> Irie’s sharp eye analyzes her mother and grandmother’s domestic and national homes as part of understanding her legacy in the line of Bowden women whose story of strength becomes her survival story of national identity. Her young life is filled with moments of othering by her British community (her father is English, her mother Jamaican) and as a young adult she turns to the Jamaican narrative of family and national identity to fortify her and redefine herself using her concept of homeland. The Bowden women in Britain maintain this narrative of personal diasporic identity, bolstering their fortitude in the face of decades of discrimination in Britain.

*White Teeth* is, of course, a British novel, but it is also a Caribbean diaspora novel and not only because of its author’s Jamaican heritage. As Raphael Dalleo explains, the novel rewrites “British literature—British in material, characters and locale—with a distinctively Caribbean sensibility” (91). Additionally, the novel “shows how Caribbean people have moved into London and made it their own, and how Caribbean culture has become a central part of the culture of the city. Even more than that, the novel depicts London as...a site of creolization, a far-flung island of Caribbeanness” (Dalleo 92). Novels like Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, Lamming’s *The Emigrants*, and Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* depict the arrival of the generation treated as the first wave of Caribbean migrants and their experiences of rejection by

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<sup>36</sup> Irie’s name, in Jamaican creole, means “everything OK, cool, peaceful,” but she has a hard struggle with identity before she truly can be (Smith 64).

the “mother country” they were raised to praise. Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging* and Beryl Gilroy’s *Boy-Sandwich* introduce us to the next generation’s highly politicized black British identity and its confrontations with the state. *White Teeth* features the stories of the residents of a cosmopolitan, postcolonial metropole still struggling with London’s sense of exclusivity while constructing their own strategies of belonging and survival. Over the sixty years of Caribbean diaspora writing in the UK we are left with a generational continuity from Lamming’s travelers to Irie’s fetus at the close of *White Teeth* whose family and community history of migration promises to inform her identity as it does for the generations before. The novel’s stories play out against the backdrop of overturned homogenous definitions of Britishness, a definition that some English characters cling to by excluding others. Smith’s characters are still surviving what Lamming’s characters have survived, as evidenced by the “oldest sentence in the world” uttered by a pensioner annoyed to be sharing the bus with boisterousness ten-year-olds Irie and Bangladeshi-British Millat and Magid Iqbal: “If you ask me[...]they should all go back to their own,” the comment cut off and “retreat[ing] under the seats” as they disembark with Magid chanting “Shame, shame, know your name” at Irie (137).<sup>37</sup> We follow the children rather than stay to hear the pensioner finish the thought that they should go back to their own countries and, because the pensioner is the last to speak before Magid, the rhyme redirects to her: two literary gestures that illustrates the novel’s investment in cosmopolitan Britain and its cunning ability to ridicule discrimination.

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<sup>37</sup> Like Mr. Pearson in *The Emigrants* (see chapter 2), this pensioner sees the children as troublemakers whereas British or white children would probably be treated as rambunctious or as a simple nuisance. If white children about whom she knew nothing were annoying her, I doubt that she would think that they should leave the country.

In her work on the novel, Molly Thompson rightly points out that

Previous generations of migrants, because their roots and history were firmly locatable in the Caribbean...were able to maintain a strong identification and connection with 'home.' However, for their progeny who have been born in Britain, definitions of home have become less distinct [as] subsequent generations have [often] had...to straddle two different, conflicting cultures. Notions of 'belonging' have therefore become more complex (122)

Throughout *White Teeth* Irie and the Iqbal twins are constantly interacting with white Britons who unthinkingly question their Britishness, so comfortable are they in their own sense of it. This includes the old age pensioner on the bus; the Chalfens, a family with whom they spend a great deal of time; their teacher, Poppy Burt Jones; the Jamaican hairdresser, Jackie, who asks Irie if she is Mexican because she is "pale" with "light eyes"; and one Mr. J. P. Hamilton, a war veteran and curmudgeonly racist elderly man that the three are assigned to visit as ten-year-olds for part of their school's harvest celebration.

The three come bearing an "urban picnic" of chickpeas, potato chips, apples, Garibaldi biscuits, a coconut, crusty French bread, and cheese crackers as gifts. When they arrive to Mr. J.P. Hamilton's home with these gifts, the elderly man finds himself "confronted on his doorstep by three dark-skinned children clutching a myriad of projectiles" and assumes that they are there to take from him rather than to give: "I must ask you to remove yourselves from my doorstep," he remarks, "I have no money whatsoever; so be your intention robbing or selling I'm afraid you will be

disappointed” (141) and adds “I really won’t be intimidated...on my own doorstep” (142). His immediate response is influenced by the stereotypes of immigrants as rioters (the projectiles), thieves, or engaged in some illegitimate commerce. Camille Isaacs treats this scene as “the traditional colonial encounter turned upside down” as the children bring “their version of imperial trinkets” that the elderly man has no real use for (44). Isaacs argues insightfully that when Smith refers to the children as colonizers for playing a game in which they announce claims to everything they want as they walk around the city, the novel plays off the conservative anxiety over being “swamped” by immigrants, to use Margaret Thatcher’s term. Elderly characters like Mr. Hamilton and the grumbling old age pensioner on the bus feature in the nationalist, often racist, rhetoric of politicians like Thatcher as a demographic under threat. Luckily elderly characters—like the Graingers in *Boy-Sandwich* or Hortense Bowden—are employed in several of the novels discussed here as the bearers of culture, a representation that offers some relief from manipulative political rhetoric that writes them as victims. Mr. J.P. Hamilton and the old lady in Enoch Powell’s 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech (described in Chapter 1) are examples of this second trope in their shared suspicion: Mr. Hamilton’s reaction to the children on his doorstep in 1985 is similar to Powell’s old-age pensioner’s response to the “Negroes” on hers in 1968.

As though Mr. Hamilton’s suede waistcoat, tweed jacket, gold watch on a chain, signet ring, and voice “from a different era” (141) don’t date him enough, his “four argente medals” and description of killing Congolese fighters during the Great



War date him with more precision.<sup>38</sup> He was likely born just prior to the turn of the twentieth century—his home “filled to the brim with battered and chipped Victoriana” (142), including a “moth-eaten chaise lounge” (143), contains the domestic detritus of the age of his parents making his home a museum for an era driven by imperialism and the relations it determined between people. Mr. Hamilton functions in the novel as a historic touchstone illustrating the fact that racism and culture change over time and are perpetual processes. It would be simple if Mr. Hamilton’s ideas on race were so outmoded as to be labeled “biological racism,” but Smith has given us something more complex in him and he reflects the “new racism” of the 1960s through the 1980s whereby theories and attitudes that link race with behavior were gradually replaced by theories and attitudes that link culture with behavior—at least publicly and discursively—and then use race as a marker of culture, the idea being that whiteness is the marker of a homogenous British culture and that any other skin color is the marker of a newly introduced and “unbelonging” culture, to use Joan Riley’s word (Gilroy, *Ain’t No Black* 60). The result was that racists could attempt to mask their racism in cultural concerns. It is a heavily rhetorical and discursive practice subject to constant changes over time and location. As Hall argues in his well-known lecture on the subject, “Race, the Floating Signifier,”

*race works like a language.* And signifiers refer to the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture to its *making meaning* practices. And those things gain their meaning...in shifting relations of difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a

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<sup>38</sup> This marvelously echoes Lamming’s description of an English character’s muscles decorating his arm “like those impractical coins with which an old ex-serviceman decorates himself” in *The Emigrants* (142).

signifying field. Their meaning, because it is relational, and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but it subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation...to the endless process of being constantly re-signified, made to mean something different in different cultures, in different historical formations, at different moments of time. (8)

Gilroy takes up Hall's argument as part of his 1987 analysis of Britain in these years of crisis: "Racism does not," he tells us, "move tidily and unchanged through time and history. It assumes new forms and articulates new antagonisms in different situations...The idea that blacks comprise a problem, or more accurately a series of problems, is today expressed at the core of racist reasoning" (11) which treats race "as an issue which is marginal to the normal processes by which British society has developed" (14). The novelty of the "new racism," Gilroy says, is in its "capacity to link discourses of patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia, Englishness, Britishness, militarism and gender difference into a complex system which gives 'race' its contemporary meaning...in terms for culture and identity" (45). "New racists" will argue that behavior is determined by cultural values allowing racists to cling to the old stereotypes of blacks as unclean, unlawful, or unruly but claim these as part of the practices of black cultures. One of the results of this is that "Racist organizations most often refuse to be designated as such, laying claim instead to the title of *nationalist*" and using the rhetoric of nationalism to exclude those they consider other or foreign (Balibar 37).

Mr. Hamilton is oblivious to his own racism that links the old (biological) and new (cultural) racisms. This is illustrated in two brief and remarkable turns in conversation with the children that result in the literal and symbolic upsetting of the tea tray. The thread that sustains the conversation is Mr. Hamilton's warning to the children that if they neglect their teeth they will lose them just as he has lost his, a fact that prohibits him from being able to use any of the foods they have brought him, except for perhaps using the milk from the coconut in his tea (as though there would not be a difficult multi-step process of extraction involved). He then contradicts himself and rambles grotesquely on about killing Congolese fighters, taking "the kids on a Conradian journey into the Congo" (Knauer 182). Mr. Hamilton tells the children that "Clean white teeth are not always wise...when I was in the Congo, the only way I could identify the nigger was by the whiteness of his teeth, if you see what I mean. Horrid business. Dark as buggery, it was. And they died because of it, you see? Poor bastards. Or rather I survived, to look at it in another way, do you see?" (144). Irie begins to cry silently as he carries on:

All these beautiful boys lying dead there, right in front of me, right at my feet. Stomachs open, you know, with their guts on my shoes. Like the end of the bloody world. Beautiful men, enlisted by the Krauts, black as the ace of spades; poor fools didn't even know why they were there, what people they were fighting for, who they were shooting at.

The decision of the gun. So quick, children. So brutal. Biscuit? (144)

Irie then whispers "I want to go home," expressing the desire to escape the brutality of his memories for the safety of her home space (144). As we would imagine, teeth

figure prominently in a novel titled *White Teeth* and this moment does not fail us. In this novel obsessed with history and its telling—both personal and national—Mr. Hamilton’s desire to impart wisdom—care for your teeth—quickly becomes a desire to narrate his lived experience while serving tea to the young guests in his home in a gesture like many others in the novel of linking storytelling, speech or orality, and the instrument of these: the mouth. His experience as an agent of empire and war is regretful without being apologetic and the offense he causes Irie goes without acknowledgement or apology.

Mr. Hamilton’s claim that he “could identify the nigger was by the whiteness of his teeth” is obvious hyperbolic racist stereotyping and caricaturing. His comment that “to look at it in another way” he “survived” is especially smug in contrast to the graphic descriptions of men “lying dead there... Stomachs open...with their guts on my shoes” that follow. His description of these violently killed Congolese men as “Beautiful” then aestheticizes black men in death. The simile he uses, “black as the ace of spades” is a clichéd and overused racial slur that we see repeated throughout the literature of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain as calling black Britons “spades” was quite common in the experience of postwar *Windrush* generation. In fact, one of Lamming’s characters explains it rather detachedly to another emigrant in the train scene: “The spades? That’s me an’ you. Spades. / Same color as the card. Ever see the Ace / o’ spades, ol’ man” (113). Equally insulting is that Mr. Hamilton calls these men “poor fools” for not understanding the war they were taking part in. He chooses to ignore the fact that they were enlisted by a colonial power with little choice in the matter and that the colonial power had decided that their lives could be disposable. His

gesture of following this reflection with the offer of a biscuit has the effect of trivializing all that has come before it and indicates that he is not very much bothered by these horrific experiences or what they mean. Mr. Hamilton's flippant offer of a biscuit is a wonderful example of Smith's capacity to be horrifying and funny all at once, exposing the absurdity of racism and illustrating that novel's difficult issues are not sacred.

It is not surprising that Millat, "red-faced and furious" jumps into the conversation at this moment to inform Mr. Hamilton that their fathers were in the British army during the war, after all their war experience is the lasting pride of Samad and Archie, who met while serving together in the Second World War (144). The communication breaks down further as Mr. Hamilton, "genteel as ever," says

I'm afraid you must be mistaken[...]There were certainly no wogs as I remember—though you're probably not allowed to say that these days, are you? But no...no Pakistanis...what would we have fed them? No, no...quite out of the question. I could not possibly have stomached that rich food. No Pakistanis. And the Pakistanis would have been in the Pakistani army, you see, whatever that was...Now you young men shouldn't tell fibs should you? Fibs will rot your teeth. (144)

Clearly his claim that "fibs will rot your teeth is another" of the novel's gestures linking speech and its instrument. In response to the belligerent turn in conversation, Magid steps in as the voice of peace and negotiation: "It's not a lie, Mr. J.P. Hamilton, he really was...He was shot in the hand. He has medals. He was a hero" but Mr. Hamilton only continues "And when your teeth rot—" (145). He is cut off by Millat

shouting “It’s the truth!... You *stupid* fucking old man” and “kicking over the tea tray” in his anger (145). Mr. Hamilton merely rambles on about rotten teeth and attractiveness to women while the children disappear “tripping over themselves, running to get to a green space, to get to one of the lungs of the city, some place where free breathing was possible” (145). For Kris Knauer, this scene amplifies the “contrast between the racialized world of adults and the world of [the children] who are being socialized into it” (181). It also contrasts with the worlds of the diasporic novels that came before it, especially in terms of Millat’s confrontational agency and refusal to defer to Mr. Hamilton.

Mr. Hamilton’s side note that “you’re probably not allowed to say [wog] these days” places him on the ever-changing spectrum of racism and racist language. In this one conversation he moved from using racist slurs like “nigger,” “spade,” and “wog” to cultural racism that stereotypes both Pakistanis and the British based on food. It doesn’t occur to him that Millat and Magid may not be Pakistani because of the use of the conceptual and derogatory term “Paki” for anyone of Southeast Asian descent in discourses of immigration and race. Even the possibility of Pakistani soldiers serving in an army of their own—“whatever that was”—is flippantly dismissed. Mr. Hamilton starts by suggesting that Millat “must be mistaken” but ends by accusing them of lying about their father’s war experience, which incenses Millat and prompts an explanation from Magid who is relying on his sense of truthfulness and logic to maintain his role as the calm peacekeeper. His explanation of Samad’s war story is one of the major family histories that is told and retold by Samad throughout the novel and the defensiveness the boys feel here is not pride in their father as much as it is the defense

of their family identity from negation by Mr. Hamilton who automatically seeks to deny it, after all, the stories we tell shape our identities. This defensiveness of the family history manifests itself in Millat kicking over the tea tray, a symbol of Britishness, hospitality, civilization, and domesticity. By literally upsetting it with his foot, Millat lashes out at Hamilton and symbols of nationalism that seek to exclude him. The children's impulse to run to "some place where free breathing was possible" emphasizes that the past is stifling them, a recurring theme of the novel.

Though they may defend their family history now, as they mature and develop their own senses of agency, Smith's second-generation characters come to feel stifled by the repetition of their fathers' histories as constant narratives of belonging and validity. The Iqbal family has a particularly complex struggle with using family history to establish validity as Samad's great-grandfather, Mangal Pande, is credited—or charged, depending on your view of events, for the colonizer's riot may be the colonial's revolution—with firing the first shot in the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. To Samad, who longs to be connected to great men and great moments because of his frustration with life in Britain and the ways in which his life has dulled since the intellectual and physical prime of his twenties, Pande is considered a hero as the catalyst of the historic event. The colonial revision of the event, however, casts him as a drunken coward who accidentally fired a shot, ran, and was subsequently hanged; yet, as Samad says, "this is not the *full story*...full stories are as rare as honesty, precious as diamonds" (209-210). If we think in terms of Hayden White's explanation of history as narrative, the British cast Pande as a comic character, while Samad tells him as the hero of their family history. Because the colonizer's history hegemonizes so widely

with its perceived authority, Samad only ever sees one work of scholarship that supports his narrative of his ancestor as somewhat of an anticolonial revolutionary and the British version of events dominates. Samad's insistence on repeating the story—it appears several times throughout the novel, sometimes cut off by the protests of the children—seems to allow him to experience bravery by proxy and show the British world around him that he is no docile colonial despite his unremarkable job as a waiter, his (to all appearances) unremarkable friend in Archie, and his guilt at his feelings of inadequacy and religious failing.<sup>39</sup> The narrative of Mangal Pande is as central to Samad's identity as his nationality, religion, and masculinity—indeed, it seems to rescue these other aspects of his identity. By clinging to his family history Samad resists Britishness and the assimilation to either British life or to the immigrant role in British society. Samad's desire is, of course, to stand out, to be recognized as an individual rather than an immigrant, one reflected in his “wanting desperately to be wearing a sign” while serving Anglicized Indian food that reads “I AM NOT A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A STUDENT, A SCIENTIST, A SOLDIER” among other details (49).

Samad insists on historical truth and validity as he constantly retells a story linking him and his family to a major event. Similarly, the narrator's retelling of the 1907 Kingston earthquake, its aftermath, and its fallout for the British empire match historical accounts, including details like the statue of Queen Victoria turned “round

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<sup>39</sup> The children find the stories of their fathers' past triumphs—Samad's ancestor; Archie and Samad's war stories; Archie's Olympic achievements forever forgotten because of a typist's clerical error—supremely “boring.” Jan Lowe suggests that this contributes to the sense that the children have a more forward-looking approach to Britain than their parents ever experienced, including Archie, the Englishman (168). Lowe argues that Archie fulfills Thatcher and Powell's anxieties as a “deculturated English person, without a tribal group identity, mixing only with the immigrants” (177).



by degrees until she appears to have her back to the people” (300). As Philip Tew argues, “*White Teeth* charts various aspects of the history over several hundred years, much of it retrospectively, from the far colonial past through the final stages of the Second World War to the millennium, interweaving the personal, the social and political through the characters’ lives and cultural baggage” (52). The family matriarch, Hortense, was born in 1907 in Jamaica during this earthquake, an event that becomes the family narrative of survival and strength. Hortense’s husband, Darcus, emigrated from Jamaica to London in 1958, leaving her with their daughter, Clara, in Jamaica until 1972:

The original intention had been that he should come to England and earn enough money to enable Clara and Hortense to come over, join him, and settle down. However, on arrival, a mysterious illness had debilitated Darcus Bowden...which manifested itself in the most incredible lethargy, creating...a lifelong affection for the dole, the armchair, and British television. (26)

The narrator’s tongue-in-cheek description of Darcus clearly pokes fun at the common anxiety that migrants were relocating to London to live off the welfare state. Under the supervision of her mother, Clara’s childhood and teenage years in Jamaica and London are spent as an awkward outsider sharing copies of *Watchtower* at school and door-to-door on weekends. At nineteen, in 1975 when then novel opens, Clara has run from that past and meets Archie Jones, a World War II veteran significantly older than she is, recovering from both a divorce and a suicide attempt. They are married and

promptly have a daughter, the aforementioned Irie, who grows up in an environment marked by the legacy of colonial migration.

When Irie and Millat are caught with marijuana at school in 1990 as fifteen-year-olds they are assigned to visit the home of classmate Joshua Chalfen twice a week for a mathematics and biology study group. In the fashion of cultural racism, their headmaster thinks that taking the teens out of their homes to spend time in the home of a respected white, British family in which both parents are scholars will put them in a “stable environment” and keep them “off the streets” because he feels that their “family environments” put them at risk (252). He imagines that this could initiate a new program of “Bringing children of disadvantaged or minority backgrounds into contact with kids who might have something to offer them. And there could be an exchange, vice versa. Kids teaching kids basketball, football, et cetera” (256). This is particularly remarkable in contrast to what he wants Millat and Irie to learn from Joshua Chalfen—mathematics and biology—as the cultural racism inherent in his thinking influences his idea that “disadvantaged” or “minority” students have athletic talents to share instead of academic skills. As Oliver Gross notes, “it is in the schools, offices, on the bus and on park benches where *White Teeth* features the subtler shades of racial prejudice” (41). While the headmaster’s plan is overtly racist to the reader, these supposedly altruistic motivations seem to dull his racist outlook in his own mind.

Irie “enamoured after five minutes” with the Chalfen family is struck that “the channel of communication between [parent and child] was untrammelled, unblocked by history, *free*” (265), but of course, even this is an impression for as much as the parents and children talk with one another, they cling to the story of who they are, a

narrative of the Chalfen identity, by referring to themselves in incessant plurality by their last name, assigning one another roles (like “Mother Chalfen” for Joyce), through a number of assertions—“All Chalfens are healthy eaters” (264), “the Chalfens have always written things down” (280)—or assigning a moniker to their way of thinking: Chalfenism. Even this collectivity—forged in the ways in which the family refers to itself—is fragile, particularly as Joshua ages and becomes disenchanted with the self-absorption of his parents. Irie is so enamored as to be unable or unwilling read Joyce and Marcus Chalfen’s latent and blatant racism in their line of questioning, perhaps because the family is so blunt as to almost seem somehow uninformed and curious rather than explicitly offensive. A botanist and a geneticist respectively, Joyce and Marcus have focused their energies on growing plants, strong children, and genetically modified mice, much to the detriment of their abilities to practice appropriate social behaviors.<sup>40</sup> For instance, upon meeting Irie and Millat, Marcus “openly admir[es] Irie’s breasts” (264) while Joyce comments “you look very exotic. Where are you from, if you don’t mind me asking?” (265). She more than deserves the answer she receives from the teenagers—“Willesden”—and the subsequent mocking Millat gives her in “what he called his *bud-bud-ding-ding* accent”: “You are meaning where from I am *originally*,” deadpanning “Whitechapel... Via the Royal London Hospital and the 207 bus” (265). Millat’s easy response embodies his cocky confidence but also reveals a habit of having to respond to Britons who cannot accept him as British because of his complexion in the context of their lasting imagined sense of a homogenous (white) Britain. He implements multiple speech acts in this answer: sarcasm, joking, and

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<sup>40</sup> For a reading of the relevance of Marcus’ work in genetics as it relates to the anxieties of new racism, see Ashley Dawson’s *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*.

exaggerated performance in the form of the stereotypical accent. Because Joyce is genuinely confused by it all, he manages to Signify upon her and she only joins the joke once everyone else has laughed at her. In an attempt to share with Irie, Joyce plays upon their shared gender and advises her that “monogamy isn’t a bind—it sets you free!” but when she adds “And children need to grow up around that. I don’t know if you’ve ever experienced it—you read a lot about how Afro-Caribbeans seem to find it hard to establish long-term relationships. That’s terribly sad isn’t it?” she once again reinforces her difference from Irie and reveals the undercurrent of unapologetic cultural racism she practices (268). Joyce’s role as “Mother Chalfen” defines her more than her botany work. Her attitude in dedication to family-centered domesticity mirrors the 1980s rhetoric of politicians who fear for the decline of the nation as “infiltrated” by immigrants with “different” family values.

Joyce continues to draw attention to her sense of Irie’s difference from the Chalfens when she later insists that six-year-old Oscar Chalfen “loves having strangers in the house, he finds it really stimulating. Especially brown strangers!” to which Oscar, consistently contrarian to Joyce’s every utterance, says “I hate brown strangers” (271). Both Oscar and Joyce repeat the trope of immigrants as strangers that repeatedly appears in discourses of the nation in the decades preceding this scene. As Chris Waters argues in “‘Dark Strangers’ in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain 1947-1963,” when Britain’s “wartime sense of national unity” began to erode following the Second World War, “questions of race became central to questions of national belonging,” meaning that migration “could not be wholly separated from discussions of what it now meant to be British” and that “the

characteristics of Black migrants in Britain were mapped against those of white natives” resulting in perceived support for the idea of a definition of “essential Britishness” (208). This is what Joyce does by defining her teenaged guests against her family in racial terms. Though the two are born in Britain, Joyce cannot stop herself from excluding them from the definition of Britishness and thereby excluding them from her sense of national belonging. Waters argues that in the process of the postwar redefinition of Britishness against racial and cultural otherness, “one of many attempts to reimagine the national community in the 1950s depended on reworking established tropes of little Englandism against the migrant other, an other perceived as a ‘stranger’ to those customs and conventions taken to be at the heart of Britishness itself” (208). To claim that colonial migrants were unfamiliar with British conventions ignored that, because of British imperial cultural hegemony, a great many many “little Englands” existed worldwide—“fossilized replica[s]” to use Hall’s term (“Negotiating” 7). As Hall points out regarding the imperial hegemonizing tradition, the British in the colonies “were keeping alive the memory of their own homes and homelands and traditions and customs” (“Negotiating” 7). By being enveloped within a dominant colonizing culture designed to elicit loyalty, colonial populations were deeply entrenched in a concentrated, and often exaggerated, experience of Britishness and indoctrinated into its conventions, traditions, and customs. For those in the metropole to think otherwise, particularly after the imperial project *purposely* designed colonialism to bank on the power of hegemony, is to create myths of otherness that draw boundaries around national belonging.

Despite the Chalfens excluding the teenagers from the Chalfen sense of Britishness—or, perhaps, psychosocially *because* of it—Irie wants to be like them.

More precisely she wants to

*merge* with them. She wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfenishness. The *purity* of it. It didn't occur to her that the Chalfens were, after a fashion, immigrants too (third generation by way of Germany and Poland)...To Irie, the Chalfens were more English than the English. When Irie stepped over the threshold of the Chalfen house...She was crossing borders, sneaking into England; it felt like some terribly mutinous act, wearing somebody else's uniform or somebody else's skin. (272-273)

By the use of “merge” we see that Irie wants to be absorbed into Chalfenishness, to be assimilated into what she perceives to be Englishness. This passage is peppered with the rhetoric of nationalism repeated across decades and viewpoints. For Irie Englishness and Chalfenishness have become synonymous for some pure form of identity. The term “purity” echoes the language of white supremacists expressing anxiety over miscegenation—ironic considering that Irie is the daughter of a black woman and a white man. It echoes the anxieties of the racists who wanted to “keep Britain white” in the decades when Irie's grandparents and mother migrated from Jamaica. It suggests that anything other than “pure” Britishness is a stain or blight to the concept of a homogenous white nation. Its use implies that Irie has absorbed the myths and messages of Britain's homogeneity and its specific application to the idea of Englishness echoes the perception of there being an even more heightened

distinction made between the “English race” and other forms of whiteness. The *English* race then becomes a cultural form that Irie feels she lacks access to and to which she wishes to have access. It does not occur to the fifteen-year-old Irie that the Chalfens (né Chalfenovsky) are descended from immigrants because they have become so middle-class English to the core. It also does not occur to Irie that though she sees the Chalfens as “more English than the English,” she is more English than they are in terms of the legacy of birthright and citizenship in her family: her father is English and her last name is Jones, one of the oldest and most common names in the United Kingdom and worldwide (thanks to the Empire); her great-grandfather was an English Captain in Jamaica; and her Jamaican grandmother, grandfather, and mother were all British subjects when they migrated to London. It is purely by issue of race and class that she feels excluded from the sense of national belonging that the Chalfens so automatically experience. These two forms of Englishness undermine the concept of an “English race,” for if *Englishness* is racially specific, how could the Chalfens become so thoroughly English? This turns the ideology that privileges *jus sanguinis* on its head. If Joshua and his siblings are the third generation of Chalfens in Britain, Joyce and Marcus are second-generation Britons and their first-generation immigrant parents would then have emigrated from Germany and Poland during or after the Second World War as refugees or laborers during the active postwar recruitment of white continental workers to fill the labor shortage in England. This active recruitment, as scholars like Paul have shown, was designed to “keep Britain white.” While recruiting workers from neighboring European countries, Britain ran

labor recruitment efforts in the Caribbean and at the same time gradually did its best to deter migration from the “New Commonwealth.”

What’s more, Irie’s feeling that she is “crossing borders, sneaking into England” when she steps over the “threshold” of the Chalfen family home reveals the how affected Irie has been by these social myths and comments like Joyce’s above: all of it contributes to a sense of exclusion or unbelonging. The comment that walking into their home feels like sneaking mirrors the language of domestic and national infiltration used by politicians like Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher. That it feels like mutiny suggests that Irie feels as though, by wanting this sense of Englishness, she is somehow revolting against Clara’s authority. That this “sneaking in” and “mutinous act” makes her feel as though she is “wearing somebody else’s uniform or somebody else’s skin” is also relevant: Irie has absorbed the message that belonging relates to appearance. Uniforms create conformity and homogeneity while expressing rank and the significance attached to complexion allows or prevents one from going noticed or unnoticed.<sup>41</sup>

Irie’s impressions of the home on the other side of that threshold may have roots in the contrast between their easy, automatic feeling of entitlement formed of middle class privilege, intellectualism, and the unquestioned sense of belonging right where they are and her parents’ home where both Archie and Clara Jones keep relics of past lives tucked away. For instance, in her “attic space, a Kubla Khan of crap” Clara keeps everything “all stored in boxes and labeled just in case she should ever need to flee this land for another one. (It wasn’t like the spare rooms of immigrants—

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<sup>41</sup> Both the “mutinous act” and “wearing somebody else’s uniform” refer to Samad who wore his dead commander’s uniform during his service in World War II and whose great-grandfather is the famous mutineer Mangal Pande.



packed to the rafters with all that they have ever possessed, no matter how defective or damaged, mountains of odds and ends—that stand testament to the fact that they *have* things now, where before they had nothing)” (278).<sup>42</sup> “Kubla Khan” here conjures images of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s chasms, caverns and caves as described in his poem by the same name. Unlike other immigrants’ spare rooms, crammed with everything they have ever owned to illustrate all they have now, Clara’s store of her history in objects is tidily organized in case of another upheaval. This practice of hers is a throwback to the meticulous housekeeping of her mother and to her Jehovah’s Witness upbringing of always being prepared for the end. Irie easily contrasts this attic space with Marcus’ home office, a room with

no communal utility, no other purpose in the house apart from being Marcus’s room; it stored no toys, bric-a-brac, broken things, spare ironing boards; no one ate in it, slept in it, or made love in it...Marcus’s room was purely devoted to Marcus and Marcus’s work. A study. Like in Austen or *Upstairs, Downstairs* or Sherlock Holmes. Except this was the first study Irie had ever seen in real life. (278-9)

As with the reference to “Kubla Khan” above, this novel is as obsessed with literary and cultural references as it is with colonial and family history. Whereas Clara’s attic is likened to a land considered to be foreign, Marcus’ study is firmly compared to fictional middle class spaces designed in the British imagination. Irie’s awareness of the symbolism of domestic spaces—an attic filled with the accumulation of the objects

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<sup>42</sup> Archie’s relics are not discussed here, but one prime example is the Hoover vacuum cleaner he keeps after his divorce from his first wife because he takes “all broken things” from their house for “He was going to fix every damn broken thing in this house, if only to show that he was good for something” (8). He fixes the Hoover and then uses it in the New Year’s Day suicide attempt that opens the novel.

of a lifetime, a room strictly for one person and independent of other uses, a room purely for thought and work—and experiences in the Chalfen home brings her rejection of her parents to its climax and she eventually leaves their home.

Just as Clara needed to escape her parents in the 1970s, Irie enters the 1990s with a growing sense of frustration with her parents. Clara and Archie do not share their own pasts with Irie, leaving her with an awareness of the “Jones/Bowden gift for secret histories, stories you never got told, history you never entirely uncovered, rumor you never unraveled, which would be fine if every day was not littered with clues, and suggestions...information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear” (314). This effects Irie’s ability to create her own narrative of identity in response to her struggles with Britishness. She sees other families as “lucky motherfuckers” because for them “every single fucking day is not this huge battle between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be...No attics. No shit in attics. No skeletons in cupboards” (426).

Irie’s lack of understanding of her family because of these major silences means that she does not empathize with her mother. One of the huge battles for Clara, in terms of whom she thinks she should be, is her repeated attempts to “lose” her accent at twenty years old by “filling in all her consonants [although] she always dropped into [Jamaican] vernacular when she was excited or pleased” (54-5). Another example is in Clara’s meeting with Joyce Chalfen who shows Clara rows of photographs of Chalfen-family doctors, psychiatrists, and plant biologists in a “line of dead white men in starched collars, some manacled, some uniformed” who remind her “Of her own grandfather, the dashing Captain Charlie Durham, in his one extant

photograph: pinched and pale...The Bowden family called him Whitey” (293-294). Clearly the description of Durham as “dashing” and the description of him as “pinched” (“pale” is neither here nor there) do not quite reconcile. He may be perceived as dashing in his military uniform, in which case this perception has less to do with the man and more to do with the implicit power of regalia. When Joyce asks which side Clara thinks Irie gets her brains from, “the Jamaican or the English,” Clara, looking at the portraits, says

I guess the English in my side. My grandfather was an Englishman, quite la-di-da, I’ve been told. His child, my mother, was born during the Kingston earthquake, 1907. I used to think maybe the rumble knocked the Bowden brain cells into place ‘cos we been doing pretty well since then...But seriously it was probably Captain Charlie Durham. He taught my grandmother all she knew. A good English education (294)

Here is reference to the family legend of Hortense’s birth, but Clara’s representation of Durham is more relevant. Certainly nothing the reader sees of Durham in the novel suggests that he was “la-di-da,” and her answer that Durham taught Ambrosia all she knew is refuted in the chapter immediately following. Considering that Ambrosia was only involved with Durham for a few months in 1906, that she was a teenager then, and the longevity of Bowden women, she surely did not learn all she knew from Durham. Her education was probably largely experiential and Jamaican. Clara realizes the fiction, the “lie” in her answer and immediately regrets it, biting her lip

in frustration and anger. Why had she said Captain Charlie Durham?  
That was a downright lie...Clara was smarter than Captain Charlie  
Durham. Hortense was smarter than Captain Charlie Durham. Probably  
even Grandma Ambrosia was smarter than Captain Charlie Durham.  
Captain Charlie Durham wasn't smart. He had thought he was, but he  
wasn't...Captain Charlie Durham was a no-good djam fool bwoy.  
(294)

In a moment of semantic satiation, the repetition of Durham's name in Clara's thoughts further serves to strip his name of its power and meaning, as well as the reverence with which she spoke it. Three generations of Bowden women are or have been smarter than he is, the fact of his white Britishness does not make him clever and Irie's intelligence does not come from him—her sharpness (in addition to her strength) is a Bowden woman legacy. By asking Clara to identify the origins of her daughter's intellect in terms of selecting from Irie's English or Jamaican heritages, Joyce is identifying Clara as non-English, as an Other. Clara's answer, "the English in my side," implicitly tries to reclaim Englishness which, instantly, she realizes is unnecessary because she has gotten more from the intelligence and strength of the Jamaican women she comes from than from her English grandfather.<sup>43</sup> It is the pressure of Joyce's question, the implicit questioning of belonging and inclusivity in it, that unnerves Clara. In an attempt to be accepted or validated by Joyce and her sense of Britishness Clara boasts her British ancestor as a representative of her cultural

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<sup>43</sup> It is interesting to note patrilial laws here. As mentioned earlier, the Immigration Act of 1971 introduced the term "patrilial," a word, according to Robin Cohen, "apparently not previously in any dictionary, and coined by an official in the Home Office" to allow right of abode to Commonwealth citizens with parents or *grandparents born in the UK*, increasing the number of whites in the Commonwealth with rights to live in the UK (*Frontiers* 18; emphasis added).

identity and repeats his role in her family history as the narrative of this cultural identity. Joyce's settled, automatic sense of Britishness has the power to exclude and intimidate both generations of Bowdens in a flash. Clara knows better, as we see above, and Irie ultimately comes to that knowledge after staying with Hortense.

Irie flees Clara's household because of the sense of silence there, the  
Jones/Bowden gift for secret histories, stories you never got told,  
history you never entirely uncovered, rumor you never unraveled,  
which would be find if everyday was not littered with clues, and  
suggestions...photo of strange white Grandpa Durham...missing  
teeth...information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear"  
(314)

She turns to Hortense, the keeper of family history, as a way of touching ground, in Hall's terms.<sup>44</sup> By touching ground Irie takes part in what Hall describes as a discourses on identity that suggest "that the culture of a people is at root...a question of its essence, a question of fundamentals" whereby culture supposedly provides "a kind of ground for our identities, something to which we can return...around which we can organize our identities and our sense of belongingness" ("Negotiating" 4). This concept complicates Caribbean identities because the Caribbean is a diaspora itself and its people have global heritages rather than a sense of singular history. Though this may complicate Caribbean identities in terms of the concept of origin, it helps us understand identity as it relates to Caribbean diasporas abroad where the Caribbean is

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<sup>44</sup> This comment about teeth refers to Irie not learning until she is sixteen that her mother wears a set of false front teeth. For Clara, "It wasn't that she had deliberately not told her. There just never seemed a good time," but for Irie "this was yet another item in a long list of parental hypocrisies and untruths" (314).

celebrated and treated as the place of origin (not, of course, to the exclusion of other places). Hall adds that “there is a sense that modern nations and people cannot survive for long and succeed without the capacity to touch ground, as it were, in the name of their cultural identities” (“Negotiating” 4) and that “questions of identity are always questions about representation...identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past...it is always about narrative” (“Negotiating” 5). In this novel, the ability to produce a narrative of one’s identity through personal, familial, and national histories means the ability to begin to answer questions of national belonging. In the case of Hortense Bowden, Irie’s grandmother, this ability means the shoring up of her identity and the Bowden identity in the face of varied trials and opposition.

Hortense creates the family history by which the Bowden women can measure their mettle and draw strength, a story that connects them to Jamaica’s history and to one of its most trying moments: the 1907 earthquake during which she was born. Hortense’s origins become her security in the world by giving her the conviction that she—and other Bowden women—can survive anything. Through her keeping and narrating family history—always a speech act—Hortense says “this is who we are” and her story, which produces in the future an account of the past, becomes material for Clara’s and Irie’s diasporic identities. As the narrator muses “In Jamaica it is even in the grammar: there is not choice of personal pronoun, not splits between *me* or *you* or *they*, there is only the pure homogenous *I*” (272) so that when Hortense speaks to

Clara she says “I and I” instead of “you and me” (272).<sup>45</sup> This overgeneralization on the part of the narrator about Jamaican speech is useful as it reveals the speech-formed nature of the relationships between the Bowden women: through Hortense’s story the family becomes one “homogenous I” across generations. “My mudder was strong-willed deep down,” Hortense says to Irie, “and I’m de same. Lord knows, your mudder was de same. And you de same” (338). Despite Clara’s estrangement from Hortense over marrying Archie, a white Englishman, Irie has absorbed these lessons about the family’s identity rooted in its history and the history of Jamaica. When faced with the detailed Chalfen family tree, “an elaborate illustrated oak that stretched back into the 1600s and forward to the present day” the differences between her family and theirs are laid out and Irie remarks, “I guess my family’s more of an oral tradition” (280).

Unlike other stories from Clara’s life, the Bowden oral traditions come up easily and naturally in everyday conversation, such as when the family is riding out a storm and Clara comments “The quiet is always a bad sign. My grandmother—God rest her—she always said that. The quiet is just God pausing to take a breath before he shouts all over again” (189). Hortense’s mother, Ambrosia’s, proverbial folk language, that explains a storm as God raging, repeats through her granddaughter’s memory and speech. Archie then replies “you Bowdens have seen worse than this! Your mother was born in a bloody earthquake, for Christ’s sake. 1907, Kingston’s falling apart and Hortense pops into the world... Tough as nails, that one” (189). Archie, with his dedication to history, repetition, and pattern has also absorbed his mother-in-law’s life

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<sup>45</sup> “I and I” is a Rastafari term used for the first person singular. The second ‘I’ refers to the presence of the divine within the speaker. The use of ‘I’ as a prefix or as the first letter of words is a common trait of Rastafarian speech patterns—as in the word Irie.

story and, as though speaking it for her absence, repeats it, for this is the message she would deliver in that moment. Additionally, as Tew argues, as a character Hortense evokes colonialism, “linking the present to slavery, the middle passage and the hidden desire of racist order” while her birth invokes “Suffering, death, revolt, violent natural phenomena, riot and conflict [which] generally are all periodic counter-weights and yet contributing elements to Smith’s comic mode” (53).

The circumstances of Hortense’s conception and birth are as follows. As an adolescent, Ambrosia becomes involved with one of her mother’s tenants, the aforementioned Captain Charlie Durham, recently posted to Jamaica in the early twentieth century. Ambrosia becomes pregnant and Captain Durham decides that he wishes to give her “a good English education,” teaching her “letters, numbers, the Bible, English history, trigonometry—and when that was finished, when Ambrosia’s mother was safely out of the house, anatomy...how to read the trials of Job and study the warnings of Revelation, to swing a cricket bat, to sing ‘Jerusalem’,” addition, Latin, “How to kiss a man’s ear until he wept,” and “that she was no longer a maidservant, that her education had elevated her, that in her heart she was a lady,” so “their secret child would be the cleverest Negro boy in Jamaica” (296). The tenants of colonial education—practicality and loyalty to Britain—are obvious here, the process of colonial education being one of several hegemonic practices. Ambrosia is taught practical things like letters, numbers, trigonometry, and addition. The cultural, nation-specific topics that indoctrinate colonial populations include English history, sport (cricket), and singing the national hymn, “Jerusalem.” A Christian education furthers the indoctrination, encouraging colonial populations to share in a sense of loyalty to



Britain through commonality of religious feeling and belief in the Church of England. To that end Ambrosia learns of the trials of Job, who is tested with the loss of everything but does not curse God or question God's will—a striking model for colonial populations to accept what may come from the colonial powers. She also learns the Book of Revelation and its warning to be always spiritually prepared for the end of days, an important lesson for Ambrosia's future in the church of Jehovah's Witness, one that she clings to during the earthquake, and one that she passes along to Hortense and down the line to Clara. Ambrosia's mother believes that this teaching is Durham's generosity, but Ambrosia knows at the time that "When an Englishman wants to be generous, the *first* thing you ask is why, because there is always a reason" (296) and the sexual experiences he "teaches" her reveal this, but so do his comments about her education and the supposed social mobility it gives her. Because he is fathering her child, he needs to "elevate" her, to make her a lady in her heart. He assumes that the child will be a son and heir to the education of his mother. Instead, Ambrosia has a daughter who is taught to reject her father, just as her mother does. History, Hortense, and Clara will remember him as a "no-good djam fool" (294).

When Durham leaves for a post in Kingston where Marcus Garvey is coordinating a Printers Union strike, Ambrosia passes through the home of a friend of his, Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard (the benefactor of the school Irie will attend seven decades later in England) and then ends up under the mentorship of a Mrs. Brenton who teaches her "*the Truth*" of the faith of Jehovah's Witness which will become, in addition to the circumstances of her birth, the other overarching narrative of Hortense's life as she awaits the promised end of the world. Indeed, these bookended

events—her birth and the promise of the end of the world at which time she hopes to join the chosen in Paradise—structure her outlook on life: one event proving her strength from the beginning and the other giving her something to prepare for with robust energy. She uses the philosophy of her birth as fuel for her unending motivation: she “saw it this way: if she could come into this world in the middle of a ground-shaker, as parts of Montego Bay slipped into the sea, and fires came down from the mountains, then nobody had excuses about nothing no how. She liked to say, ‘Bein’ *barn* is de hardest part! Once ya done dat—no problems” (29), just as Archie repeats during the storm.

When Hortense learns that the church leaders have identified the date for the end of the world (again, after several failed predictions) she immediately understands the event through the lens of her origins in survival and wish for her future, not just a future that will see the end of the world, but a future that includes return to Jamaica:

Oh, Irie Ambrosia. I’m so glad you’re here to share dis. I live dis century—I came into dis world in an eart-quake at de very beginning and I shall see the hevil and sinful pollution be herased in a mighty rumbling eart-quake once more. Praise de Lord! It is as He promised after all. I knew I’d make it. I jus’ got seven years to wait...Cho! My grandmudder live to see one hundred-and-tree an de woman could skip rope till de day she keel over and drop col’. Me gwan make it. I make it dis far. My mudder suffer to get me here...and she make heffort to push me out in de mos’ difficult circumstances so I could live to see that glory day...An’ I’m gwan be in Jamaica to see it. I’m going home

that year of our Lord. An' you can come dere too if you learn from me and listen. You wan' come Jamaica in de year two thousand? (339)

Irie's answer to her grandmother is to scream a little, not because she wants to listen and learn about Jehovah, but because she needs that experience of touching ground. Despite having lived in England for just over twenty years, Hortense calls Jamaica home, a gesture that reemphasizes the connection to Jamaica she feels so strongly at the heart of her identity. To Hortense, her grandmother's long life guarantees that she, too, will have longevity for this is the continuous narrative of Bowden women; what previous generations survive is passed on, all are one in the "homogenous *I*." To be born in Jamaica as an earthquake makes people feel as though "the world was ending that afternoon in Kingston" and to return to Jamaica for death in the event that will end the world, "the hevil and sinful pollution be herased in a mighty rumbling earthquake once more," will bring Hortense's life full cycle. Her conviction that her mother gave birth to her "in de mos' difficult circumstances so [she] could live to see that glory day" means that her existence is not random, but has purpose. Even Clara's birth, to Hortense, was God-ordained:

She was the Lord's child, Hortense's miracle baby. Hortense was all of forty-eight when she heard the Lord's voice while gutting a fish one morning, Montego Bay, 1955. Straightaway she threw down the marlin, caught the trolley car home, and submitted to her least favorite activity in order to conceive the child He had asked for...the Lord wanted to show Hortense a miracle. For Hortense had been a miracle baby herself, born in the middle of the legendary Kingston earthquake,

1907, when everybody else was busy dying—miracles ran in the family. (28)

All of these stories of the circumstances of conception and delivery of Bowden women comprise their oral history, the meaning of which is to illustrate their resilience, their specialness, and their belonging to things larger than themselves—family, Jamaica, God—in the face of exclusion in Britain.

In keeping with the psalm that continually runs through Irie's mind, "*early I will seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee*" (437), Irie needs this family oral history as a narrative of diasporic identity to reconnect with and incorporate into her own sense of self. Rejecting her mother and returning to her grandmother's home gives Irie a sense of rootedness and a concept of home that, together, begin to form answers for her: "No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs—this is how Irie imagined her homeland. Because *homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* and *infinity*... And the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning" (332). In response to being excluded from her national home on the grounds of race by others who may have even less claim to it, Irie finds Jamaica. Although she seems to know that a homeland is a construct and not concrete or reliable, from her grandmother she receives the promise of Jamaica as part of the story of her identity. Even with the repetition of the overarching legend of Hortense's birth, Irie has to educate herself about her family's past and uses her time in her grandmother's home to look for answers to her questions of (Jamaican) identity. She tunes Joyce out (and the accompanying questions and pressures of Englishness) by turning her voice on the

radio off after collecting artifacts, reading books, and laying “claim to the past” (331-2).

Hortense’s basement flat (importantly, in Lambeth, a community where many West Indian migrants settled) intrigues Irie who thinks of it as “a place of endgames and aftertimes, fullstops and finales...living in the eternal instant” because of Hortense’s faith and expectation of the apocalypse (327).<sup>46</sup> Irie feels as though she is “hibernating or being cocooned, and she was as curious as everyone else to see what kind of Irie would emerge. It wasn’t any kind of prison [as Clara may have described it]. That house was an *adventure* [where she found] the secrets that had been hoarded for so long, as if secrets were going out of fashion” (330). Amidst “hundreds of secular figurines (‘Cinderella on Her Way to the Ball,’ ‘Mrs. Tiddlytum Shows the Little Squirrels the Way to the Picnic’), all balanced on their separate doilies and laughing gaily amongst themselves” and a tapestry of the blond, blue-eyed anointed “sitting in judgment with Jesus in heaven,” Irie gets a specifically Jamaican sort of home care she has been craving, including remedies that “in most Jamaican households [were] always more painful than the symptoms” (316).<sup>47</sup> One of Hortense’s first gestures on welcoming her granddaughter is to critique Clara’s domestic abilities “Never at home, learnin’ all her isms and schisms in the university,

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<sup>46</sup> The frequency of basement rooms and apartments in the literary tradition of the Caribbean diaspora in the UK is remarkable (with some exceptions at the other extreme like the Josephs’ attic apartment in Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*, the upper floor room where one of Sam Selvon’s characters in *The Lonely Londoners* catches a seagull for supper, or Clara’s attic). In *The Lonely Londoners* Moses has a basement room, from which he ascends in *Moses Ascending* (before descending once more). In *The Emigrants* the men visit a basement barbershop. Here we have the basement flat Darcus and Hortense shared. In a way, Clara has ascended from the basement flat to a whole house with an attic.

<sup>47</sup> These are two more of the several cultural and literary references in the novel. Cinderella is well known and Mrs. Tiddlytum showing the squirrels the way to the picnic appears to be a Beatrix Potter allusion.

leavin' husband and pickney at home, hungry and maga" and put the kettle on (318).<sup>48</sup> Clearly Hortense's criticism is gendered in that she feels that Clara, as a wife and mother, should be home to feed her family. The irony is that Irie feels significantly overweight while her grandmother is describing her as "maga," or skinny, wasting away.

On the night of Irie's arrival, Hortense puts her to bed quoting from Matthew 10:26, "*there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed...nothing hid, that shall not be known*" in a promise of what is to come for Irie in terms of the answers to her questions of origins and the construction of her narrative of identity (319). She unearths all sorts of artifacts for use in this narrative of identity including family photographs, imagining that outside of the basement flat, in a specific angle of the morning light, "it was sugar, sugar, sugar, and next door it was nothing but tobacco" while "presumptuously" imagining that

the smell of plantain sent her back somewhere, somewhere quite fictional, for she'd never been there...She laid claim to the past—her version of the past—aggressively, as if retrieving misdirected mail. So this is where she came from. This all *belonged* to her, her birthright...collecting bits and pieces (birth certificates, maps, army reports, news articles) and storing them under the sofa, so that as if by

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<sup>48</sup> To Hortense the "isms and schisms" that Clara is learning at university disrupt her ability to make a home for her family and the phrase "isms and schisms" calls to mind Bob Marley's "Get Up, Stand Up" in which the "ism-schism-game" of Christianity is critiqued for fooling and oppressing the poor who are taught to turn the other cheek. Ironically and unreflectively, Hortense cannot see her faith for the obsessive and oppressive ideology that it is and cannot see Clara's education as her daughter's liberation.

osmosis the richness of them would pass through the fabric while she was sleeping and seep right into her. (330-1)

Irie uses the sources she finds in her grandmother's home to generate a narrative of national belonging to Jamaica, constructing a historical narrative of self. Irie's English education, which has left holes in her knowledge of the world is complemented and, to some extent, augmented by a romanticized and, in some aspects, very much colonial Jamaica because she uses, in part, a collection of Victorian and early-twentieth century books about the Caribbean including *An Account of a West Indian Sanatorium and Guide to Barbados* (1886), *Tom Cringle's Log* (1875), *In Sugar Cane Land* (1893), and *Dominica: Hints and Notes to Intending Settlers* (1906). Her version of her Jamaican roots gives her something to be possessive over, some promise of inclusion and origins by birthright. Irie coming into her Jamaican identity illustrates how the novel, in Dalleo's words, "undermines bordered constructions of Englishness, but also of Caribbeanness. Caribbeanness is never an essence but rather a process" (93). Smith's description of Irie going "back" to somewhere fictional that she had never been sums up the paradox of migration. Even for first-generation migrants, the homeland is never the same when the migrant returns and the memory of it gradually becomes a fiction as the migrant and the place of origin change. Thus the Jamaica that Hortense wants to return to for the end of days will not be the place she left. This is what Ian Chambers refers to as "an impossible homecoming" for "History is harvested and collected, to be assembled, made to speak, re-membered, re-read and rewritten, and language comes alive in transit, in interpretation" (3). It can be even more true for the children of (im)migrants for whom the place of familial origin is always a fiction

existing in the cultural, collective memory of the diaspora and the family. This is complicated even further for Irie because her father is English. In the process of narrativizing the past and identity, fiction and history become explicitly entwined in the understanding of place and in the novels of diaspora. It does not matter so much that this Jamaica is imagined. What matters more is “the act of imaginative rediscovery” that Irie performs because her cultural identity “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (Hall “Cultural Identity” 224, 225). It may seem naïve that the smell of plantains sends Irie back to somewhere she has never been, or that when she wakes to the sunlight streaming into in her grandmother’s basement living room she imagines an early colonial Jamaica of “sugar, sugar, sugar” and tobacco, but it is not enough to call it naïve (330). In laying claim to “her version of the past” Irie is actively producing her own sense of identity for “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall “Cultural Identity” 225).

Smith’s masterful positioning of historical events, like the earthquake and the 1857 mutiny, in relation to her characters allows them to recite historical moments as their own personal claims to history and identity. Among these claims to history in the name of identity is the claim to (im)migrant history, to some of the greatest movement and mixing of people the world has known. As Smith’s narrator opines, the twentieth-century



“has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment... Yet, despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other’s lives with reasonable comfort... it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English. There are still young white men who are *angry* about that; who will roll out at closing time into the poorly lit streets with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight fist. But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears—dissolution, *disappearance*” (271-2).

That is why the characters feel the need to repeatedly narrate their experiences, to narrativize their lives and identities. The stories we tell last, family histories stubbornly forge on, and these stories give us specificity in the face of anonymity.

## **Conclusion**

### **Home Fictions**

The novels discussed in “At Home in the Diaspora” are six representations of “the century of the great immigrant experiment” in the UK, as Smith’s narrator describes it above (271). The nationalist’s fears of infiltration, the “infection, penetration, miscegenation” of an unwanted element, reveal the implicit relationship between the nation as home front and the self as a unit of the national body of the people and, by extension, the need to defend it from change (Smith 272). The immigrant’s fears of dissolution or disappearance reveal why a sense of being at home is so important for diasporans as it provides recognition and dignity. For the nationalist to tell the immigrant that he or she does not belong, and for the nation to reify this idea in legislation, is to refuse this recognition. By making a home of the diaspora, emigrants maintain some level of resistance to state-sanctioned exclusion.

In many ways, “At Home in the Diaspora” is a project that transitions from male dominated representations of diaspora to representations in which female authors write women back into narratives of community resistance to oppression which are more inclusive and less about the lonely disorientation of exclusion. Throughout the body of work represented in this project we see the oppression of male emigrant or black British characters in limited housing options, violence, over policing, and sexual encounters in which they are degraded. We also see the empowerment of female characters as the bearers of culture, keepers of family history and artifacts, and builders of Caribbean diasporic homes through their domestic roles. Their presence in narratives of emigration determines the diaspora’s ability to maintain its dignity and

understanding of its origins. The most positive representations of diasporic homes are those in which male and female characters value one another and work collaboratively on securing a sense of shared home in the face of state-sanctioned oppression.

The project also moves from postwar authors to authors looking back to a previous generation's experiences and producing reflective representations. Their works illustrate that abstraction is the central problem of home despite our cultural and linguistic habits of treating home as certain and stable; yet this is also the promise of the idea of home because, as an adaptive concept, home can be a number of things and fostered in a number of places. In the novels of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain the diaspora itself figures as home for characters who build and maintain communal bonds. Despite limited access to safe, stable housing, diasporans are repeatedly represented as using these bonds to make basement apartments, bedsits, and hostels into homeplaces they can use as diasporic hubs and sites of resistance. Because of the emigrants' confrontation with British hegemony—understanding themselves as British but being socially excluded by the nation—the nation does not function as an easy or automatic home. The myth of the motherland is exposed and the domestic spaces facilitate the diaspora becoming an abstract home instead.

Each of the novels discussed in “At Home in the Diaspora” plays a role in illustrating this. In Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* Moses' bedsit becomes a diasporic hub as the migrant community faces ostracization in London. Alone in the city they wander aimlessly, but in his room they can retain some sense of connection even as they discuss difficult experiences. Moses becomes a diasporic pedagogue and other sites of connection—like Waterloo station—become spaces where we see the

value of diasporic links to the Caribbean home and to narratives of the past as constituted in “oldtalk.” George Lamming employs these narratives of the past as foundations of diasporic bonding in *The Emigrants* in which island identities become second to a new collective identity of being West Indian and this allows diasporans to take refuge in their relationships. Their bond begins as they cross the Atlantic together but continues on a train into London through their mutual recognition of British brands. The domestic spaces in which they gather and interact are starkly contrasted with the rigidity of middle-class British domesticity. To their detriment, characters who do not maintain diasporic bonds exempt themselves from the sense of a diasporic home afforded by these diasporic hubs.

When Beryl Gilroy and Joan Riley represent the diasporic home in their 1980s novels, it is with attention to politicized black British identity, over policing, and the welfare state as they define the relationship that Caribbean emigrants and their children have with the state. In both novels state-provided “homes” are spaces of neglect and abuse. The abstract diasporic home allows Gilroy’s elderly characters to maintain their dignity in *Boy-Sandwich* and to avoid dissolution or disappearance as other old people fade all around them. Without the diasporic home the narrator of Riley’s *The Unbelonging*, Hyacinth, clings to childish and romanticized ideas of the Caribbean, which are ultimately destroyed upon her return. Over policing and other state-sanctioned forms of oppression present real struggles for the characters. The diasporic home in Gilroy’s novel provides a center of empowered political strength, while its absence in Riley’s work leaves Hyacinth suspicious and at the mercy of the system.

Zadie Smith also takes up the cross-generational sense of diasporic home in *White Teeth* in which teenaged Irie reconnects to Jamaica through her grandmother, Hortense Bowden, in order to gain a sense of self. As the bearer of culture and family history, Hortense's family story provides a narrative of strength for the Bowden women with which they can continue to resist the explicitly racist and outdated exclusion of life in Britain. The novel spans half of the twentieth century and multiple diasporas, retelling historical events with the effect of demonstrating that history, like identity and home, is always a narrative in progress. Andrea Levy's *Small Island* turns the focus back to the *Windrush* generation but rewrites the loneliness of the male emigrants we see depicted in *The Lonely Londoners* and *The Emigrants* into a narrative of multiple postwar perspectives on British life and migration. By including strong female characters and the community's role in securing a safe domestic homeplace as a site of resistance, *Small Island* emphasizes the possibilities of the abstract diasporic home.

In their preoccupations with diasporic experience, Selvon, Lamming, Gilroy, Riley, Smith, and Levy are joined by a number of other poets, novelists, playwrights, and essayists producing work from within the diaspora, including: John Agard, Louise Bennett, James Berry, E.R. Braithwaite, Jean "Binta" Breeze, David Dabydeen, Fred D'Aguiar, Salena Godden, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Kwame Kwei-Armah, V.S. Naipaul, Grace Nichols, Caryl Phillips, Roger Robinson, and Benjamin Zephaniah. In their work Caribbean-British literature becomes a challenge to the master narrative of the value of the British literary canon. By Signifyin(g) upon this canon and producing work that represents people traditionally treated as marginal, their work helps redefine

Britishness itself because a nation's literature is so often held as representative of its people and national character. This literary tradition and the historical context in which it is situated reveal that collective identities and belonging are narratives informed and formed by the fiction of home, a fiction both staunchly defended and earnestly sought. Ultimately studying this literary tradition reveals that our views on our home fictions say a great deal about the ways in which our values are constructed and illustrates the merit in questioning the assumptions that allow us to feel at home.

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