



Voces



Caribbean Literature: The Black Rock of Africa*

Because I am a West Indian novelist, my work has often been used as evidence to support or deny the claims of negritude as an influence in the development of West Indian writing in English. If I assume the role of a critical observer in order to give a view of this writing and the significance of these claims, I am aware of a dual challenge. The first difficulty is whether I, as a novelist-critic, can overcome the demands of that special subjectivity which orders my view.

The second difficulty lies in the complex ramifications of the term “negritude.” Here the critic is dealing with a concept that is open to a wide variety of interpretations, a concept whose ideological content has defied precise definition; and since West Indian writing contains the imaginative revelations of a society that is in a state of transition, the ground continues to be slippery all the way. This transition is marked by a central paradox: the popular demand for total freedom expressed and partially exercised in a context of *diluted slavery*. For, in spite of the constitutional arrangements for political independence, West Indian society is still in the era of emancipation. The phase we call emancipation is not yet over, and the values which inform the most progressive political sentiment do not indicate that the paradox has been grasped.

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* This essay was first published in *African Forum*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1966, pp. 32-52.

It is important to see the function of the literature against the background of this psychological turmoil, for the intellectual classes are still severely inhibited by the cultural rigidities of the imperial indoctrination. The most instructive example is to be found at the highest and, presumably, most active center of intellectual activity—that is, the University of the West Indies where, after twenty years, no room has been found for a department of American studies. A history graduate, therefore, can leave the University of the West Indies with an impressive grasp of the English Tudor period and little knowledge of the American nineteenth century. The same is true of the department of English studies: Neither Herman Melville nor Mark Twain is a sufficiently relevant force to replace the historical urgency of Jane Austen; the study of Anglo-Saxon is considered essential, but the study of the literary transition from the colonial period to the American discovery of its genius in Melville and Mark Twain is considered irrelevant.

Yet the West Indies is to be understood in relation to the development of civilization in the Americas. That is a dilemma which still informs and inhibits the West Indian intelligence in its pursuit of total liberation. At this level of intellectual discovery, Africa has remained a blank. In *The Pleasures of Exile*, I have drawn attention to the difference between a white American's return to Europe and the West Indian's first conscious projection of an Africa in his head. The American's experience of English tombs and French kitchens—however tasteless and dirty—often begins as an abstraction that purifies. Not so the black man of the Caribbean and Africa:

His relation to that continent is more personal and more problematic. It is more personal because the conditions of his life today, his status as a man, are a clear indication of the reasons which led to the departure of his ancestors from that continent. That migration was not a freely chosen act; it was a commercial deportation which has left its consequences heavily marked on every level of his life in the West Indies. Consequences which are most deeply felt in his personal life and relations with his environment: the politics of colour and colonialism that are the very foundation as well as the landmarks of his voyage from childhood to adolescence.

The fracture of personality and the total displacement of images are the treacherous foundations of our education. The fear of the "Africa thing" has its roots in the actual negation of personal experience in relation to education. This is true at all levels of learning. Where African horizons appeared, the negation became a principle:

His [the West Indian's] education did not provide him with any reading to rummage through as a guide to the lost kingdoms of names and places which

give geography a human significance. He knows [Africa] through rumour and myth, which is made sinister by a foreign tutelage, and it becomes, through the gradual conditioning of his education, identified with fear: fear of that continent as a world beyond human intervention. Part product of that world, and living still under the shadow of its past disfigurement, he appears reluctant to acknowledge his share of the legacy which is part of his heritage.

The concept of Africa, reinforced by some familiarity with its history, has not percolated through the vital layers of the West Indian consciousness. Until this happens, no one can say what is the true meaning of Africa for the West Indian people and their intellectual classes. But it is precisely this dilemma that has fertilized the West Indian imagination in the writing of poetry and prose fiction.

I observe three elements in this imagination; embarrassment, ambivalence, and a sense of possibility. According to one's way of seeing, these can be interpreted as examples of contradiction or as complementary forces in the common persuasion about the African presence in West Indian society. For some writers, the fact of that presence is beyond dispute:

*Within your loins I see the seed
Of multitudes
From your labour
Grow roads, aqueducts, cultivation
A new country is born....*

Here, Vera Bell, a West Indian whose native island is Jamaica, is addressing her attention to "the ancestor on the auction block."

E. M. Roach, who is among the most active and competent of West Indian poets and a native of Trinidad, extends Vera Bell's statement into a plea and a cry of positive exhortation:

*O come my spirit from the rancorous dark
Into the bounty of the human air.
Painter, sculptor, poet in whom the seed
Takes leaf and the leaf greens and flowers like fire,
Speak for the old slave hosts; speak out for us
Who are their heirs, griefs molten from their loins.*

But Derek Walcott, with a superbly rich gift nurtured in the soil of St. Lucia, residing in a subtle kingdom of displacement, reveals the starkness and torment of an ambiguous vision:

*Ablaze with rage, I thought
Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake,
And still the coal of my compassion fought:
That Albion, too, was once
A colony like ours. 'Part of the continent, piece of the main'*

If these elements, however contradictory the roles they play, can be said to represent a main stream of preoccupation, there are other tributaries deriving from them. They are particularly illuminating when the writer is a West Indian whose origin is not to be found in the African loins which Roach, Bell, and Walcott acknowledge. Geoffrey Drayton, a poet and novelist whose childhood and adolescence were shaped by the world of a white plantocracy in Barbados, broods on this African presence in the evolution of his feeling:

*She sang, coming up the road,
A song of Halleuias
Shrill upon the night.
Sometimes the wind blew all the notes into a chord
and then again grown amorous of one,
Hung breathless for its longer life.
A song it was of little sweetness
But old as slavery;
And in the cradle-days
My nurse had sung it—
Sadly like this—
As though her world were stall in chains,
As though when dreams come true
One has forgotten all the joy of dreaming them,
And cannot make fulfillment sweet
With tears of empty waking.
Was it yesterday she sang this song?
And in the evening whilst I slept
She taught it to another
Sadly to sing like wind in empty places
Shrill upon the night.*

We cannot consider the statement “she taught it to another” without recognizing an error of omission in Drayton’s evocation of the past. For the real truth is that she also taught it to him. I shall return to the meaning of tributaries when we look at the novelists. At this point, however, it would help to bear in mind the peculiar composition of this world and the contours of cultural conflict that define it. How do the

inner compulsions—as well as the external pressures—of history apply to the West Indian imagination? We are not dealing here with a straight confrontation of Africa and Europe, nor are we dealing with that exclusive encounter between a traditional, indigenous culture and a colonizing power. We are at the heart of what one might call a triplicity of cultural strains—Africa, Europe, and Asia: local populations which can claim no ancestral roots in the soil that was to become their home. With the exception of British Guiana, we are also dealing with islands whose overwhelming majorities are the descendants of African slaves. But they are men who, unlike their equivalents in the United States, would never have known the meaning of the word “minority” until they migrated.

It is the traditional nature of the society, the paradox of a popular will moving toward total freedom yet not wholly emancipated, which contributes to an uncertainty of tone, an ambiguity of vision, and the psychological timidity that restrains the intellect and inhibits the imagination as it prepares itself for some positive act of cultural commitment. In order to see these conflicts at work, we must take a closer look at the writers I have mentioned. In Vera Bell’s poem, “Ancestor on the Auction Block,” there are certain statements that are free of compromise. The poem opens:

*Ancestor on the auction block
Across the years your eyes seek mine
Compelling me to look.*

The eyes that seek are not the poet’s, but those of the ancestor. The imagination is reconstructing its historical past in the shape of slavery, and it discovers a reality that divides the poet’s attention. Clearly, the problem is whether to look or not to look. But this discovery has a weight of personal significance for the poet; it insists that the look of the ancestor, in this live moment of consciousness, be reciprocated. The original doubt, to look or not to look, is uncompromisingly met. Having accepted the task of looking, the poet now risks the full journey of self-enquiry by listing the details of what she finds and the psychological content of their meaning for her:

*I see your shackled feet
Your primitive black face
I see your humiliation
And turn away
Ashamed.*

But it is not true she turns away, for the discovery is felt at too deep a level of consciousness to allow abdication:

*Is this mean creature that I see
Myself?*

And the question contains its own answer:

*Ashamed to look
Because of myself ashamed
Shackled by my own ignorance
I stand
A slave.*

What is she really ashamed of? It is not her closeness to the extended reality of slavery, nor is it altogether the feeling that she is identified, in the eyes of others, with “your primitive black face,” or “your humiliation,” or “this mean creature that I see.” These may all be true; they may be constituents of the emotion, but not its essence.

The real shame is that she has been an accomplice in the conspiracy to slander and deform forever the human worth of that “ancestor on the auction block.” It is the recognition of her role as accomplice in the crime of which she is also victim that constitutes the essential shame. And it is the subsequent failure to tame, intellectually, the furious nature of this shame that leads her dangerously and hopefully to the brink of a freely chosen act of commitment:

*Ancestor on the auction block
Across the years your eyes meet mine
Electric
I am transformed
My freedom is within myself.*

What a shock of meaning is engendered by the sudden transference of duty from one word to another! The eyes which used to seek have now become the eyes that meet.

Yet one feels there is a certain inauthenticity in the whole undertaking. It is not because the poet, in a later stanza, tries to reach a resolution by taking refuge in the felt conviction of a common godhead: “I look into the eyes and see/ The spirit of God eternal.” It is the way the language is working that warns us of a retreat from the electric transformation we were invited to witness. It is indicated by the tired and inoperative task of the definite article “the” in the line “I look you in the eyes.” What has happened to the original confrontation suggested by “your” in the line “Across the years your eyes seek mine”? And why have we been deprived of the encounter whose demands for total identification constituted the promise of that line “Across the years your eyes meet mine”? If the question—to look or not to

look?—has been decided, what remains wholly unresolved is the future of that glance. It is an exhausted emotion, rather than an electric transformation, which declares “My freedom is within myself.” What can be the range and significance of this individual freedom submerged by the swamp of a collective ignorance that holds it shackled to the unfinished era of emancipation?

The element of embarrassment passes into the sense of possibility with E. M. Roach’s poem “Fighters”:

*We were thrown down upon our blood and bone.
Stone heaped on broken stone in alien acres
Of these western shires; all our inheritance
Was man’s first heart, its springing blood,
Its ever springing hope; its greed to eat
Green courage of the careless sun; its lust
To drink to drunkeress of the moon’s wine:
O our poor heart that sprung griefs to green rhythms.
But men grow tall through fighting; our anger and
Our hope attacked that wall which fear and fools
Have built between two skins and fanatic pride
Rebuilds where it is worn and cracked and crumbled.
Some Samsons of our strength poised pride and sinew
And challenged skill and won, and growing skilled
And bitter in their pride struck out again,
Till fame brewed tragic ferment in their blood.*

*I claim their strength and their enfranchised pride,
Reopening stubbornly the dead well
Of history of our wretched race that fell
Through utter hell to man’s last degradation.
Deep down in the deep seam the water’s clear
And clean from the black rock of Africa.
There are bards there and craftsmen, heroes, kings,
And dark ecstatic dancers throng the kraals.*

It is clear what links the two poets. The central preoccupation is the same: Africa encountered in the conditions of the ancestor enslaved. But the perspectives which Roach’s imagination intends to construct are very different. The ancestor does not have to summon him; an embrace has already taken place. Where the human degradation of slavery undermines and complicates the authenticity of Vera Bell’s encounter with the past, Roach hoists a flag to commemorate an inheritance whose human worth is rich enough to compel the attention of the world. The “primitive

black face” that haunts Vera Bell is for Roach the face of “bards, craftsmen, heroes, kings.” The imagination that organizes this experience of the past also serves to reverse the earlier process. His encounter does not rest on a troubled awareness of degradation which must, somehow, be redeemed by the discovery of a freedom within himself. Freedom, it seems, is the original ground; slavery, a brutal but temporary defeat. Pride remains the constant factor. And like Bell, Roach feels the urge to list, in the first stanza, the items that constitute this pride.

In this respect, he seems to share in that special delight of Senghor and Césaire, who would attribute to an *African soul*, through the claims of *negritude*, some of that original ground of being which exposes and reveals the essential *lack* characterizing those who have built everything, whose achievements are situated and imprisoned in a mechanical conquest of nature. But the difference is that Roach does not claim an ideological framework for this feeling. What is it, then, that gives it validity? It is his recognition of struggle, the special and enduring power of resistance symbolized by the ancestors in the second stanza. There is, for me, a special resonance in the use of that word “again” in the line “And bitter in their pride struck out again.” Remove it, and the meaning is fundamentally changed. The poet’s conception of “striking,” qualified by “again,” denotes two stages of action, two orders of anger. The first is born of hope, aimed at the wall that sets up a barricade between man and his freedom. The second stage of anger and action is generated by that “fanatic pride” which ignores man’s hope and strives to rebuild that wall “where it is worn and cracked and crumbled.” It is the wickedness of this intention that contaminates the original anger, child of hope and a sword in the defense of freedom. From now on, victories are soured by bitterness: “And bitter in their pride struck out again/ Till fame brewed tragic ferment in their blood.” Roach goes on to cite the names of men whose skill and pride alternate between these two orders of anger: Peter Jackson, Sam Longford, Jack Johnson, and Joe [Louis].

If there is much to admire in the personal dramas of these heroes, there is also much that demands an opposite emotion. Roach faces this squarely in the third stanza above; in doing so he initiates a fine dialectic of feeling, a harmony of conflicts that open the way to a possible resolution. As you pause to reflect how “wretched,” “fell,” and “utter hell” emphasize the compulsory and irrevocable drift towards degradation, the poet executes a very fine surprise by restoring you to his original ground: “Deep down in the deep seam the water’s clear/ And clean from the black rock of Africa.” The rhythm changes pace; the repetition of “deep” is a grave and considered prologue to the ceremonial evocation of water issuing from and retaining the essential purity of the “black rock of Africa”: “There are bards there and craftsmen, heroes, kings,/ And dark ecstatic dancers throng the kraals.”

Whatever scars of hell history may have inflicted on the ancestors, it is the poet’s faith-felt in that moment of consciousness which contains both his past and his future—that the solidity of that black rock has bestowed some portion of itself,

some diamond fragment from its seam upon the heirs of those valiant and tormented ancestors. And it is the spirit of that clear and clean water, at once specific and universal, which is summoned to fertilize the imagination of the heirs who work with the tools of symbol:

*O come my spirit from the rancorous dark
Into the bounty of the human air.
Painter, sculptor, poet in whom the seed
Takes leaf and the leaf greens and flowers like fire,
Speak for the old slave hosts; speak out for us
Who are their heirs, griefs molten from their loins.
Persist to sheer perfection in the work
Like those who pit their perfect and tough sinew
Against arrogance and hate; art, intellect
May scale the granite wall or tear it down.*

Mr. Walcott's response to this preoccupation with the African presence emerges as an example of the ambiguous vision. But it ripens into something else: that element I have called ambivalence. Still in his early thirties, Walcott has been recognized as a serious poet for more than a decade. He has refined the instruments of his trade, but the whole body of his work reveals an extraordinary consistency of attitude. He has made despair a darling of the senses; an idol of the intellect. Its attractions have the flavor of good food; it is a habit like drink. And in his magnificent poem, "Ruins of a Great House," he finds a theme that fits like a glove his very impressive gifts:

*Stones only, the disjecta membra of the Great House,
Whose moth-like girls are mixed with candledust,
Remain to file the lizard's dragonish claws;
The mouths of those gate cherubs streaked with stain,
Axle and coachwheel silted under the muck
Of cattle droppings.*

This House is at once fact and symbol. It is typical of the old plantation mansion, now in ruins. But this very dilapidation is the trunk from which Walcott's meditation on the justice of time will blossom.

*Farewell, green fields.
Farewell, ye happy groves!
Marble as Greece, like Faulkner's south in stone,
Deciduous beauty prospered and is gone;
But where the lawn breaks in a rash of trees*

*A spade below dead leaves will ring the bone
Of some dead animal or human thing
Fallen from evil days, from evil times.*

It is the intransigent logic of time that exposes the nature and *content* of every human enterprise. In this instance, the enterprise was that historic adventure of men setting out on an alarming voyage of discovery, mixing desire for knowledge with an animal greed for possessions, mesmerized by the promise of gold, eager to convert the earth into a private garden and borne forward always by the murderous hugeness of their appetite.

*A green lawn, broken by low walls of stone
Dipped to the rivulet, and pacing, I thought next
Of men like Hawkins, Walter Raleigh, Drake,
Ancestral murderers and poets, more perplexed
In memory now by every ulcerous crime.
The world's green age then was a rotting lime
Whose stench became the charnel galleon's text.
The rot remains with us, the men are gone.
But as dead ash is lifted in the wind,
My eyes burned from the ashen prose of Donne.*

*Ablaze with rage, I thought
Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake,
And still the coal of my compassion fought;
That Albion, too was once
A colony like ours, 'part of the continent, piece of the main,'
Nook-shotten, rook o'er blown, deranged
By foaming channels, and the vain expense
Of bitter faction.
All in compassion ends
So differently from what the heart arranged:
'As well as if a manor of thy friends ...'*

His preoccupation with Africa finds its place within an acknowledged dualism of heritage: "A spade below dead leaves will ring the bone/ Of some dead animal or human thing." One emotional heritage is rendered through the imagistic memory of some slave rotting in this manorial lake. It is a memory which the accusing ruins of the Great House confirm, bring personally alive, and which plunges the poet into a state of rage. But this sudden and curious passion is soon modulated, redirected—one may even say charmed away—by another and equally active

heritage. That second heritage reveals itself as his historic intimacy with the English language and the liberating influence of John Donne. While feeling the presence of the “ancestral murderers” and the ringing bone of the slave like a sword plunged into his heart, he also feels the oath of reconciliation order his allegiance, as the lines thereafter indicate.

Walcott is a model of the ripened ambivalence that makes impossible demands of the heart, tears it to pieces by a contradiction of origins, and finally offers it the dubious consolation of a liveable despair. It is the sheer strength and certainty of his gift which save this despair from degenerating into an excuse. When he turns directly to Africa, it is not to invoke a history of bards or craftsmen, heroes and kings; it is rather to expose the ambivalence of his trade, as poet, to the brute realities of Mau Mau in his poem “A Far Cry from Africa”:

*A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa, Kikuyu, quick as flies
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.
But still the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:
‘Waste no compassion on these separate dead.’
Statistics justify and scholars seize
The salients of colonial policy.
What is that to the white child hacked in bed?
To savages expendable as Jews?*

Any writer might have meditated upon these horrors in Walcott’s tone, adopting the dual stances of individual distance from, and human concern with, the inherent barbarism of man in what is a concretely political confrontation. But the social past which informs Walcott’s imagination, which is the very fabric of West Indian reality, that past of which the African presence is an inseparable ingredient, demands that Walcott should go one step nearer to personalize, in a very individual way, the depth of his divided vision:

*I who am poisoned with the blood of both
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?*

I have isolated three elements—embarrassment, ambivalence, and the sense of possibility—to show how the concern with Africa operates in the private and highly subjective language of the poet’s thought and feeling. But where the poet strives to achieve a compression of the widest experience through poetic statement, the novelist expands and dramatizes. A considerable body of West Indian fiction provides an opportunity to see these elements as seminal properties of the drama of West Indian imagination. Some novelists, however, have gone further, for what may seem at first an exclusive preoccupation with the African presence through the manifestations of colonialism and racialism develops into a wider and more resonant concern to explore the root and origin of their contemporary reality.

This has been one of the most extraordinary phenomena of postwar literature in the English language. It is so recent, and it happened so swiftly, that the West Indians, no less than others, were taken by surprise. After three centuries of colonization, these islands could make no claim to any indigenous achievement, however minor, in the literary arts. As late as the 1930s there could not have been more than half-a-dozen books of imaginative literature written about these islands by people who were representative of, and rooted in, that soil. But within fifteen years after World War II, there were to appear in England about two hundred such books, which were the work of just over twenty West Indian writers.

I don’t think it is an accident that this kind of creative literary explosion took place when it did. Its source may be found in the collective grievances that were beginning to bear fruit through political action. I, for example, clearly remember being surprised, terrified, and exhilarated by the violence of speech with which simple, anonymous men threatened the traditional agents of power in my island. There were terrible riots and acts of pure liberation; the streets were conquered by the crowd in an orgy of destruction: Crops were burnt, cars wheeled into the sea, and cash registers were smashed (although not a penny was taken); store clerks and their bosses took flight, and important men, both white and black, crawled into hiding like crabs. The island was Barbados; the year, 1937, and I was a boy of nine.

But the same drama was taking place in Trinidad, where the novelists Samuel Selvon and Vidia Naipaul were born; they too were boys then. And a thousand miles north of Barbados and Trinidad, the Jamaicans, with a uniquely sinister sense of terror, heightened this drama. This occurred when the novelists John Hearne and Neville Dawes were boys, when V. S. Reid and Roger Mais were young men. And I am suggesting that the early books these men were to write, though not explicitly political, were, in a way, reports on, and products of, the experiences that had registered on their consciousness then. This was an active stride by the masses towards what we now call independence; and I think that when any people attempt to make this kind of break with the past, they also begin to discover or rediscover who and what they are. It is at this point that the whole question of a national culture

confronts them. In the case of the West Indies, the novel became one instrument used to search for answers, for nationality, and it revealed a need, conscious or unconscious, to forge from the cultural miscegenation of Africa, India, and Europe—which are the elements of our past—an image that is distinctly West Indian.

Now the basic population of these islands is made up of the descendants of African slaves. But after the abolition of slavery in 1834 there was a wave of indentured labor from India. The Indians remained, and both Selvon and Naipaul are of this stock. In his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, a splendid evocation of life in a Hindu household, Naipaul charts the conflict between Indians of different generations in their efforts to relate themselves both to the past, particularly its nostalgia for language and customs which are India, and to the immediate circumstances of life in Trinidad. Here the characters, situations, and immediate landscape are largely Indian, and poor.

This study of a minority attempts to define and crystallize the world of a Caribbean from the points of view of men whose childhoods were shaped in Indian households. Selvon and Naipaul, born in Trinidad of Indian stock, share a tendency with the writers from the other islands who are not Indian: to concentrate attention on the lives of the poor. Even when the writers have had a middle-class background in education, they are drawn instinctively towards the life of men and woman who are, so to speak, from down below. As a result, these novels are dominated by characters who are of the soil, simple, earthy, at once strong and tragic. Their griefs are not built in; their humor is without restraint; the body is not an instrument which embarrasses them. Living is for them an act of complete participation. They are men who have not been caught by the contagion of what, in a more sophisticated world, is called the problem of the self. They are, as it were, the natural barometer that registers the pulse of the community, for they are by their numbers, as well as by their work, the lifeblood of that community.

In dealing with the life of such individuals, the novelist finds himself automatically involved with the life of the whole body politic. These common people, seen from the pinnacle of European privilege as simple natives, are the source of all the beauty and terror and pathos and tenderness that haunt the imagination of the West Indian novelist. They are to him as in evitable and permanent as the earth he walks. This proximity to the raw, unadorned life of his society is an incalculable advantage to any writer. It is one advantage of the West Indian novelist, but it is not an advantage that has to do with the accident of living on islands, many of them very small, where the very smallness blurs the distinction between rural and urban centers. Simple, uneducated people who live on small islands are cosmopolitan in the sense that they are never far from the center of civilized activity. The humblest citizen can be a living witness to the most important occasion.

Those who are familiar with the music of the calypso may be surprised to learn that, apart from its effect on the spine, this closeness to the occasion explains

its great appeal to the local audience. For the calypso is the ballad of social comment. There is not a scandal in town that the calypsonian does not know about, and for him to know of it is to sing it. Politicians and respectable ladies often wish they could pay him to lose his voice; he is the musical counterpart of the novelist.

These novels, like the calypso, exhibit a similar closeness to the soil, an identification, conscious or unconscious, with the community. And when a people in certain political circumstances try to make a break with the past, they will return to the very past they may have rejected, return in order to seize it consciously, to disentangle it from the myths and fears that once made it menacing. They return because this urgency to discover who and what they are demands that the past be restored to its proper perspective, that it be put on their list of possessions. They want to be able to say without regret or shame or guilt or inordinate pride: "This belongs to me. What I am comes out of this."

This gravitational pull of the past on the novelists provides a drama of conflicting views about the actuality of this African presence in the need and feeling of "characters." Hence the example of Mother Johnson in Andrew Salkey's novel *A Quality of Violence*:

Me and you and the rest—a people in St. Thomas all belong to the days that pass by when slavery was with the land. Everybody is a part of slavery days, is a part of the climate a-Africa and the feelings in the heart is Africa feelings that beating there, far down.... I know that, too. We all come down from Ashanti people who did powerful plenty, and we have the same bad feelings that them did have.

It is a view that Miss Mellis, representing the other side of this conflict, is driven to resist. Acceptance and denial constitute a pressure of relationships that bear directly on the event of their daily lives.

Haunted, perplexed by the vivid presence of the past in what is clearly a transitional society, the imagination makes "its" own use of the past: a past whose origin is situated in continents and cultures beyond its own Caribbean shores, of which it may have no direct experience. This journey, within and out; this reciprocity of action between the writer and his immediate neighborhood; this ambiguity set up by the presence of the past and its origin in another landscape, whether it be Africa, Asia, or Europe—all have produced in the West Indian imagination a very special awareness of exile combined with the peculiar restlessness and detachment that accompany it. It is impossible to overestimate the influence that this crisis of identity exercises in every sphere of behavior in the colonized politics and education of the West Indian: self-contempt, lack of confidence, and an organized hypocrisy of superiority assumed by the educated elite as a way of protecting its own assimilation from the contagion of ignorance and blackness of the numerous poor: the

symbolic blackness of those who are seen to be beyond the reach of the civilizing virtues of an imperial tutelage. And the question—who am I?—cannot even be properly formulated because the framework of values that may offer an answer is still a second-hand bundle of ideas and attitudes, imposed at first and now voluntarily accepted on hire. On hire for the duration whose end is a source of much feverish speculation among the radical intellectuals of a later generation.

Color and the spiritual determinants attributed to race provide the sharpest illumination of this crisis. A useful example is the character Shephard who appears as political demagogue and religious maniac in the novel *Of Age and Innocence*. In a dramatic confrontation with a white woman who is now a resident in his native island of San Cristobal, Shephard tries to define the inner realities of spirit which are preparing him for a tragedy of wide political dimensions: “I discovered that I had always lived in the shadow of a meaning which others had placed on my presence in the world, and I had played no part at all in making that meaning, like a chair which is wholly at the mercy of the idea guiding the hand of the man who builds it.” Having given a hint of his original difficulty, he soon reveals—and in spite of himself—the true authority which dictates his preoccupations. Since this meaning is the property of others, it follows that his consciousness is also in their possession. He cannot think of himself, his lack of authenticity, his absence of root, without summoning the other either as judge or accused. But if he likens his essence to that of a chair, it is only to declare that this is not true:

Now take me. I am not a chair, but this meaning placed on my presence in the world possesses me in the same way that the idea of chair is from the start in complete possession of any chair, irrespective of its shape, size, usefulness.... Similarly, the meaning I speak of had already made me for the other’s regard. A stupid me, a sensible me, a handsome me, any me you can think of always remained me. But like the chair I have played no part at all in the making of that meaning which others use to define me completely.

The white woman reminds him of a previous relationship wherein a commitment to love on his part was betrayed, indeed brutalized, by what turned out to be her atavistic curiosity in him as an example of the meaning placed on his presence by that pervasive, and inescapable, authority of which she is a sexual agent. But Shephard, or his essential humanity, now wants to make it clear that he has or is a future: a future which begins with protest and in an attitude of negation. In other words, living is for him a state of emergency without end. He must make a bid for freedom and the conscious possession of himself, but his method of escape is also his certain doom. For history has baptized him with a need to achieve the approval and the ultimate embrace of a spiritual authority which is dedicated to his perpetual

self-imprisonment. The politics and culture of decolonization are tormented by this paradox, and the West Indian sensibility shows the scars of this fracture, reveals the acuteness of this crisis to a degree that is, in my view, unique in the modern world. Hence the dramatic search for identity which, starting with an awareness of having *nothing*, encourages and promotes an appetite for comprehending *everything*. The West Indian artist with a fortunate range of gifts is a man who functions always in a spiritual state of extremism.

Hence, the novelist Wilson Harris, in extending the search into the heartlands of Guyana, writes of the discovery of a young Guyanese, half-Negro, half-Chinese, that all the previous generations in Guyana—whether slave or free, Dutch, English, or Indian—were indeed expatriates in Guyana:

All the restless wayward spirits of all the aeons (who it was thought had been embalmed for good) are returning to roost in our blood. And we have to start all over again where they began to explore. We've got to pick up the seeds again where they left off.... We are the first potential parents who can contain the ancestral house....

This is the dramatic challenge to the imagination in this part of the world: the challenge of containing these conflicting and turbulent houses within a unity of national consciousness.

What is the special claim of this African presence amid these fragments of race and culture? One-third of the Trinidad population is of Indian ancestry, the descendants of former indentured laborers following upon the dispersal of the slaves from the sugar plantation. In Guyana, these West Indians constitute more than half the population. There were hardly any in Barbados; a very small contingent in Jamaica. Traditionally, they have been associated with the burdens of agricultural life; they are of the very soil of the modern West Indies. This statistical proportion of different races will vary from island to island. But in spite of this diversity of people, stratified in this period of transition by the policies of race and colonialism, the African presence—that is, the echoing bone of the slave—under dead leaves or in the manorial lake, the heirs of those ancestors who inspired Roach's claim that "all our inheritance was/ Man's first heart, its springing blood,/ Its ever-springing hope"—this presence has worked its way like oxygen into every ethnic and cultural pore of the West Indian consciousness.

It is this presence—to be found everywhere and in numerical superiority on the islands—that makes for the essential continuity of the West Indian reality. It would be an entirely, inconceivably different world without that presence. Hence, Geoffrey Drayton, a child of the white plantocracy, evoking that world in his largely autobiographical novel *Christopher*:

On moonlight nights the labourers in the plantation villages collected to sing hymns. The hymns were Christian, but the rhythms to which they sang them were African, simple and repetitive, gaining speed and volume as they gained in length. In the churches the Negroes had built for themselves, where untrained Negro priests presided, the congregations beat time with tambourines. At nights, in the open air, drums syncopated. Christopher's body grew taut as he heard the drums begin... He felt his body grow tight and small as their rhythm grew.

In other words, it might not be unrealistic to argue that the emotional structures of the privileged white West Indian have also been shaped by the weight and meaning of the African presence in West Indian society. Drayton, our white compatriot, whom circumstances most regrettably divorced from us in childhood, but who, as poet and novelist, is our colleague, may be seen as evidence of the controversial generalization that the Puerto Rican poet Luis Palés Matos is reported to have stated: "The Negro lives physically and spiritually within us all, and his characteristics, filtered down through the mulatto, influence in a very apparent way every manifestation of the life of our people."

It is, in my view, the essential and pervasive role of the body in consciousness that gives the identification of physical and spiritual such a wonderful accuracy and resonance of meaning. If Drayton, in the story of Christopher, provides us with one example of the pervasive influence of this African presence, Samuel Selvon, the novelist, completes our triplicity with another. It is a point to be developed that as West Indians of Indian ancestry in Trinidad enter the orbit of a local national consciousness, there takes place a creolization of feeling and gesture indistinguishable from the style and rhythm of the black majority. The tone and direction, so obvious and of the earth, in the novels of Samuel Selvon—who is a West Indian of Indian ancestry—constitute no point of departure from the writing of his colleagues who are from the loins of Africa. Here he is in a superb short story, "Calypsonian," rendering to perfection every note of the plebian music that informs the common speech of Trinidad:

They begin to work on the song, and One Foot so good that in two twos he fix up a tune. So Razor Blade pick up a empty bottle and a piece of stick, and One Foot start beating the table, and is so they getting on, singing this new calypso that they invent. Well Ramahut and other Indian fellar who help him out with the sewing come up and listen.

'What you think of this new number, papa?' the Blade ask. Ramahut scratch his head and say: 'Let me get that tune again.' So they begin again, beating on

the table and the bottle, and Razor imagine that he singing to a big audience in the Calypso tent, so he putting all he have in it.

When they finished the fellar who does help Ramahut say: 'That is hearts.'

But Ramahut says: 'Why don't you shut your mouth? What all you Indian know about Calypso?' And that cause a big laugh, everybody begin to laugh kya-kya, because Ramahut himself is an Indian.

One Foot turn to Razor Blade and say: 'Listen to them two Indian how they arguing about we creole calypso. I never see that in my born days!'

Ramahut say: 'Man, I is a creolise Trinidadian, oui.' Razor Blade say: 'All right, joke is joke, but all you think it good? It really good?'

Ramahut want to say yes, it good, but he beating about the bush, he humming and hawing, he saying: 'Well, it so-so,' and 'It not so bad,' and 'I hear a lot of worse ones.'

But the fellar who does help Ramahut, he getting on as if he mad, he only hitting Razor Blade and One Foot on the shoulder and saying how he never hear calypso like that, how it sure to be the Road March for the next Carnival. He swinging his hands all about in the air while he talking, and his hand hit Ramahut hand and Ramahut get a chook in his finger with a needle he was holding.

That presence is there, a magnet in the gravitational pull of the past on our imagination. It is the view of that remarkable mind C. L. R. James that this urgency to make the backward glance is based upon the West Indian need to come to terms with the social past contained in and generated by, slavery. His classic celebration of Toussaint L'Ouverture in that incomparable study of the slave revolt in San Domingo *Black Jacobins*, must have been an expression and a fulfillment of that need. It is a movement of theme and enquiry which will appear time and again in the fiction of many of these writers: John Hearne, Nevile Dawes, O. R. Dathorne, and Sylvia Wynter. It is evident in many of the plays, revealing those elements of embarrassment, ambivalence, and possibility that I have isolated.

The novelist Vic Reid has provided us with another dimension in his book *The Leopards*. He had never visited Africa before he wrote this novel, but the entire work is based on the imaginative conception of an Africa in the context of Mau Mau. The extraordinary and subtly evolving relation between the Kikuyu, Nebu, and

the half-bwana boy is a telling and beautiful example of the West Indian imagination dramatizing the conflict of reconciliation. The boy's mother is the wife of the European whom Nebu has killed. The moment of discovery between man and boy, the bitter journey toward this moment, and the ultimate acceptance of it as fact is a most beautiful rendering of the inner struggle through torn roots toward the final effort of reconciliation:

'I love you, toto?'

The boy said quickly: 'I have thought it out. I know why you love me very much.'

'The young bwana speaks in riddles,' Nebu said gravely.

Paternal shame and a boy's ruthless young demons of denial and contempt are about to be exorcised as they move in spirit around and toward each other, the father trembling on the verge of a joy that could be sealed by one word. And it happens the moment the boy utters it, acknowledging a difficult and inescapable bond of blood:

'Father,' the boy said softly, grinning at him. Through the soles of his feet, he could hear the ocean at Mombasa. The great waves stood straight up in the water, fifty yards out, and tossed their shaggy heads and roared in and shook the beach in their teeth.

The strength and beauty of this prose, realized through a vision that assumes and recreates the unknown, grow from the roots of the West Indian imagination. Born of Caribbean soil, it is fertilized by an awareness of the African presence. If that presence be no more than a ghost, then it is like the ghost that haunted Hamlet, ordering memory and imagination to define and do their duty. □