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IMMIGRATION, POSTWAR LONDON, AND THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN SAM SELVON'S FICTION

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> *In the grimness of the winter, with your hand plying space like a blind man's stick in the yellow fog, with ice on the ground and a coldness defying all effort to keep warm, the boys coming and going, working, eating, sleeping, going about the vast metropolis like veteran Londoners.*
>
> —Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*

Like Sam Selvon's thrice-recurring African Caribbean character Moses Aloetta, I will begin in Waterloo station, the first London destination of the Caribbean migrants whose Atlantic-traversing ships had just docked in Southampton. In the 1956 novel *The Lonely Londoners*, Moses initially appears while on his way to meet a friend of a friend at the station of "the boat-train," a point of arrival and departure where Moses experiences "a feeling of homesickness that he never felt in the nine-ten years he in this country" (9). The narrator explains that the station attracts Caribbean-born Londoners because there they "see familiar faces, … watch their countrymen coming off the train, and sometimes they might spot somebody they know" (10). With this opening scene, Selvon introduces readers to a nondescript public space that was fast becoming a Caribbean gathering site and that was serving in the 1950s as the smaller-scale, British equivalent of New York's Ellis Island. The "desolate station" of Waterloo, one of the London Underground's and British Rail's many stops, would without Selvon's novel remain an unremarked and uncelebrated point of contact between migrants and their destination city (17).[1] This first glimpse of Moses winding his way through the city streets leading to Waterloo station illustrates Selvon's strategic use of mundane situations and sites in London. By depicting actual

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London sites and placing migrant characters within them, Selvon stakes his and other colonial migrants' claim to the geographical location most symbolic of British imperialism and culture.

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, with its focus on "the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline'" (xiv–xv), provides a useful starting point for an analysis of the fiction produced by colonial and postcolonial migrants. The process of settling in London has been portrayed by a number of fiction writers from the British West Indies as a disillusioning immersion in the everyday concerns of finding adequate housing, keeping menial jobs, enduring cold weather, and staying in touch with widely scattered friends and family. These pursuits are perhaps not as dramatic as the moments immediately leading up to and following the life-changing voyage, but migrants' fictional representations of the city have political significance. These writers' portrayals reshape London's culture while their Caribbean-inflected voices rework the "Queen's English" and respond to white-authored journalistic and literary treatments of the city. Although, as producers of fiction who sold their works to London publishers, Caribbean writers clearly did not rely on a "clandestine form" to get their message and voice across, their subtle reworkings of the novel and short story genres and of the often-used setting of London illustrate their "dispersed, tactical, and make-shift" responses to earlier British literature set in the city.

In the introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau explains that the necessity of bringing "to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society . . . is concealed by the euphemistic term 'consumers.' Everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others" (xiii; emphasis in the original). The men and women who migrated from the British West Indies to London following World War II had been—prior to their migration—the "consumers" of an ideal of Englishness that was being exported from Britain to its colonies. And these postwar migrants' "poaching" can be seen as their simultaneous borrowing, critique, and transformation of the metropolitan culture—their reworking of the very language, literary genres, and way of life that had been valorized during their colonial

schooling. As actual London residents, these migrants, though still "the dominated elements of society," as de Certeau puts it, were consumers of existing culture but also its creators, involved in a *poiesis* of their urban surroundings. They became both the chroniclers and practitioners of everyday life in the city.[2]

This essay will focus on the portrayals of both migrants and London in Selvon's fiction, a body of work that prominently features a number of the everyday practices that de Certeau has suggested are significant. Selvon depicts his central character, Moses, as a wanderer of the city—particularly of public urban sites—and as a humorous storyteller who uses the Trinidadian vernacular and numerous place-names to recount his and other migrant characters' London experiences. Thus, Selvon emphasizes, like de Certeau, the subverting possibilities of such everyday activities as walking and talking. Selvon touches as well on the practice of reading, a subject that de Certeau also treats. Moses often speaks directly to the reader of the London fiction, and in *Moses Asending* (1975) engages in the writing of his memoirs—a metafictional, everyday practice that assumes a present or future reader within the novel. De Certeau's idea of the ways in which a reader can become an active agent in a text is particularly applicable to Selvon's London-set fiction. During the act of reading, de Certeau argues, a "different world (the reader) slips into the author's place," leading to a "play of spaces" (xxi). Selvon, as reader, had from an early age slipped into British authors' places. Through the educational system in colonial Trinidad, Selvon was exposed to the "masterworks" of British literature, and later, as a writer depicting London in fiction, Selvon reworked the setting and alternately assumed—to comic effect—the occasionally pompous diction of the nineteenth-century British writer and the Creolized spoken English of Caribbean migrants in postwar London. Selvon's portrayals of London and of black migrant characters' urban survival methods illustrate the everyday adjustments and improvisations that were necessary for his generation of colonial migrants. As a result, Selvon contributes his characters' London to the existing body of works set in the city. The London that Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, and Woolf had previously portrayed is, in Selvon's fiction, being remade and its story rewritten through the incorporation of migrants' narratives.

Selvon's repeated fictional use both of Caribbean migrants' spoken language and of rented properties, landlords, and tenants brings to mind de Certeau's description of a spoken text as "habitable, like a rented apartment" (xxi):

> Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; as do speakers, in the language into which they insert both the messages of their native tongue and, through their accent, through their own "turns of phrase," etc., their own history. (xxi)

In Selvon's London-set oeuvre, which consists of *The Lonely Londoners*, *Ways of Sunlight* (1957), *The Housing Lark* (1965), *Moses Ascending*, and *Moses Migrating* (1983), migrant men and women are often depicted within rented rooms or negotiating lease agreements as either landlord or tenant. Like the renters in de Certeau's analogy, the characters furnish these temporary homes "with their acts and memories," both of which help to make these small sites within London their own. Similarly, Selvon's migrant characters make spoken English their own by introducing Caribbean adages, "turns of phrase," and accents.

In *Novels of Everyday Life*, Laurie Langbauer defines the everyday somewhat differently from de Certeau, whose theory she criticizes for its "strategic cleverness" (3). Langbauer's criticism does seem warranted in that, for de Certeau, the very real hardships of those "caught in the nets of 'discipline'" can be perhaps too easily compensated for by the simple acts that make up a life (xv). Critics who, following de Certeau, attach great political significance to a walk through city streets or a conversation in "broken English" may downplay the urgency of migrants' painful everyday experiences, which Selvon depicts compellingly, if not without humor. Without adequate housing, food, or respectful treatment within their adopted city, Selvon's migrants would find only partial solace in what de Certeau calls the "increased deviousness, fantasy, or laughter" of "immigrant workers" who do not have "the same critical or creative elbow-room as the average citizen" (xvii).

Selvon's use of recurring themes and characters provides his fiction with the quietly continuing and closure-less aspects that Langbauer has usefully delineated in her study of the novels of the everyday. To Langbauer, the everyday is "the special province of a particular form," the nineteenth-century series novel:

> [P]recisely because of their expansiveness, their repetitiveness, their complication of closure, those linked novels that are part of extended series seem to mirror and carry properties often defined as essential to everyday life: that it's just one thing after another, going quietly but inexhaustibly on and on. (2)

Selvon's London fiction, particularly his Moses trilogy, was written in serial form and thus exhibits the requisite "complication of closure" that Langbauer recognizes in novels of the everyday. Moses' recounting of one migrant's tale after another is noteworthy for its "going quietly but inexhaustibly on and on," though not for over eight hundred pages in the manner of the nineteenth-century novels that Langbauer analyzes. Rather, Selvon's writing resembles an oral storyteller's continuing tale. Selvon wrote often for oral presentation, which may help to explain his fiction's conversational narrative style and his interest in the types of everyday stories that would entertain a broad audience. He authored twenty radio plays for the BBC and wrote two screenplays, one of which became the 1978 film *Pressure*, directed by Harold Ové (Nasta, 4–5). The striking originality of Selvon's London-set fiction results from his attempt at capturing Caribbean migrants' spoken language. Because Selvon's narrators typically speak in this lingual form, dialogue seems to overtake the narratives. Characters are introduced and embellished on, only to resurface later in the same work, in other works, or even in a different genre,[3] just as a storyteller might continue a storyline from a previously told tale or place listeners' favorite characters in new situations, rather than create an altogether new fictional world.

I will argue that in Selvon's early London fiction, specifically in *The Lonely Londoners* and the short story "My Girl in the City," migrant characters' movements throughout the city and their various uses of its place-names and public sites played a part in the creation of a new "immigrant" London in the immediate postwar years. Selvon's 1950s London is a place of contradictions and stark contrasts, and the migrant characters' multiple reactions to the city illustrate its ability both to charm and to belittle new residents. The migrant characters' everyday lives—the trajectories of their walks, their gatherings in small rented rooms, their manipulations of "proper" English—are political acts much like those described by

de Certeau, however incomplete in their ability to alleviate the hardships of actual immigrants' lives in London. I will also analyze Selvon's London of the 1970s and 1980s. In *Moses Ascending*, London becomes through Selvon's depiction the city of the Black Power movement, of illegal South Asian immigrants, and of "second-generation" Black Britons speaking in what Moses calls a "high" accent (17). Selvon's satirical look at black home ownership, landlordism, and memoir writing provides his revised—but still politically attuned—1970s view of the London of migrants' everyday lives and of their evolving lingual patterns. In his later London fiction, Selvon uses his portrayal of the city to provide a subtle and humorous critique of British prejudices, institutional racism, and Black Power politics while also satirizing Moses, who initially opts out of the collective black struggle.

SELVON'S 1950s LONDONERS

Selvon was himself among the economically strapped and geographically isolated Caribbeans who migrated to Britain in large numbers after World War II. Considering how recently Selvon had arrived in London—in 1950, just six years before the publication of *The Lonely Londoners*—it is not surprising that the urban setting of that novel contains characters and features of Trinidad, the place of his birth, childhood, and young adulthood, as well as the place where he began to see himself as a writer. Selvon's original home and his adopted home were remarkably intertwined when he migrated, despite the great physical distance between them. Trinidad did not achieve self-governing, postcolonial status until 1962, and before that, Trinidadians and other West Indians were—legally, at least—considered full subjects of the British crown. Thus, Selvon's London-set fiction was not produced—as Salman Rushdie describes diasporic writing in "Imaginary Homelands"—while "out-of-country and even out-of-language" because English-speaking Trinidad could not be considered politically or even culturally "outside" the United Kingdom (12). Like many other migrants of the immediate postwar years, Selvon was not a border-crossing "immigrant" in the strictest usage of the word, nor was he considered British, as his mixed reception in the mother country soon made clear.

Perhaps as a reaction to his discovery that many white Londoners desired a racially homogeneous city, Selvon began to form a new identity and to emphasize his connections with other Caribbean migrants of African and South Asian descent. Much like Caribbean writer George Lamming, who migrated on the same ship as Selvon in 1950 and who has written that West Indian—and later Caribbean[4]—identity was "born in England" (214), Selvon claims living in London helped him to develop a better understanding of and an affection for the culture and people he had left behind physically. He writes that "more than anything else, my life in London taught me about the people from the Caribbean. . . . I was discovering a pride, a national pride, in being what I am, that I never felt at home. That was one of the things that immigration meant to me" ("Finding," 60). Once Selvon had realized his writer's dream of migrating to Britain, his allegiance shifted as he began to value the geographical region that he had previously seen as a less important aspect of his cultural background. Selvon insists that while in London, "far from assimilating another culture or manner I delved deeper into an understanding of my roots and myself" (61).

Selvon pays tribute to his homeland and its people through his fiction in his portrayals of the everyday lives of the diverse migrant community in London and in his attempts at capturing their spoken language. Selvon, who is a South Asian Trinidadian, does not differentiate in his fiction among Caribbeans based on their ancestry, and most of his lovingly drawn characters are of African descent. Exhibiting a highly tolerant, broadminded attitude considering the often divisive racial climate of the island where he grew up, Selvon did not situate himself in a racial pecking order among migrants to Britain. Perhaps that is the reason that Lamming, who is African Caribbean, has never taken issue with his fellow migrant writer's portrayals of African Caribbean characters—quite the opposite. As Lamming comments in *The Pleasures of Exile*, "Selvon never sneers at his characters. He is always with them in what they are doing, the foolish things as well as the beautiful things" (229).

Selvon's broadmindedness is evident not only in his depictions of a diverse migrant community; his interactions with other Caribbean-born writers in London—including fellow 1950 arrivals Lamming and V. S. Naipaul, whose politics could not be more different

from one another—indicate that Selvon's tolerance extended beyond his fiction writing. Lamming thought of him as "the least political of us all," and Selvon certainly sounds apolitical when he claims to write only "for a little rent money, and the chance to change the monotonous half pint for a little shot o' whisky from time to time" (quoted in Lamming, 43). Naipaul recounts in a letter to his family that he had had a good-natured argument with Selvon, who believed writers of fiction must make an effort to enlighten their readership: "Selvon thought that writers had to instruct. I told him he exalted the members of the fiction-manufacturing class. Fiction, I told him, is the imitation of an action meant to entertain" (43–44). While these two anecdotes appear to offer contradictory glimpses of Selvon's attitude toward his writing, both his practicality and his desire to comment on social issues are evident in his London-set body of work, which is playful *and* serious. Selvon strove to be entertaining in order to interest publishers in his work and to sell his books to a wide audience, but he also inserted important messages about race relations in Britain.

Selvon has claimed that this wide intended audience did not include Caribbean people and has hinted that depicting migrants in London was his method of informing white Britons. As Austin Clarke explains in *A Passage Back Home: A Personal Reminiscence of Samuel Selvon*, the readers Selvon had in mind while writing his fiction were not the people back home in the West Indies, although they were hearing his stories on the BBC's radio program, *Caribbean Voices*. In an interview with Maria Zoppi, Selvon reveals his desire to inform a wide range of readers about the lives of Caribbeans at home and abroad: "what I try to do with my work is try to universalize it. . . . I never wrote for Caribbean people, I wrote to show Caribbean people to other parts of the world and to let people look and identify" (quoted in Clarke, 76).

Throughout his London-set fiction, Selvon emphasizes the races and classes seldom being portrayed by other writers of the period as well as the sites where these underrepresented groups could be found. His fictional London is made up of separate "worlds," and only one of these counts as the "real" city, of which privileged Londoners remain unaware. For example, in *The Lonely Londoners*, Selvon's narrator explains that this "real world" is where "men know

what it is to hustle a pound to pay the rent when Friday come" (57). In Selvon's depiction, postwar migrant characters' type of work affords a view never seen by most Londoners, who know only their city's dressed-up surface. When Cap, a Nigerian migrant who has been getting by without any money, answers an advertisement for a storekeeping job, he is, because of the color of his skin, told the job has been filled and then offered a heavy-lifting railway job for lower pay instead. While visiting his prospective job site, Cap is exposed to a side of the city that only the working poor are privy to:

> The people who living in London don't really know how behind them railway station does be so desolate and discouraging. It is another world. All Cap seeing is railway line and big junk of iron all about the yard, and some thick, heavy cable lying around. . . . It look like hell, and Cap back away when he see it. (36)

Additionally, Selvon's narrator makes it clear that in London these "worlds" of rich and poor are, for the most part, cut off from one another, that

> the people living in London . . . don't know what happening in the room next to them, far more the street, or how other people living. London is a place like that. It divide up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and you don't know anything about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers. Them rich people who does live in Belgravia and Knightsbridge and up in Hampstead and them other plush places, they would never believe what it like in a grim place like Harrow Road or Notting Hill. Them people who have car, who going to theatre and ballet in the West End, who attending premiere with the royal family, they don't know nothing about hustling two pound of brussel sprout and half-pound potato, or queuing up for fish and chips in the smog. (58)

In *The Lonely Londoners*, Selvon revises the text of the city by inserting—in the compelling voices of the Caribbean migrants—descriptions of the living conditions of poor migrant workers, whose experiences were fast becoming constitutive of London life. At the same time, Selvon suggests that migrants were themselves in danger of becoming estranged from one another, undercutting the community's kinship and friendship networks as well as their political effectiveness. Migrants were becoming Londoners in that they too were less

and less aware of "what happening in the room next to them, far more the street" (58). This change in loyalties becomes clear when Moses gives another migrant a warning on his first night in London: "You going to meet a lot of fellars from home who don't even want to talk to you, because they have matters on the mind" (21). In *The Lonely Londoners*, however, Selvon brings these scattered migrants together in a single narrative. He interweaves migrants' individual stories, captures the swiftly changing community as it existed in the 1950s, and describes London and Londoners from migrants' perspectives and in their unique voices.

In order to provide this new angle on London, Selvon chose to narrow his focus to migrants' specific concerns and views of the city. As Raymond Williams writes in reference to Jane Austen's "socially selective landscape," certain sites that are part of a setting are, because of the constraints of the novel form, emphasized while others are ignored or blurred beyond recognition (168). Most of the countryside in Austen's fiction "becomes real only as it relates to the houses which are the real nodes; for the rest of the country is weather or a place to walk" (Williams, 166). Selvon, too, selected certain "nodes" in the landscape to be his novels' fully described settings while paying less attention to those sites that are irrelevant to the stories he is trying to tell. Thus, guided by Selvon's depictions, readers often find themselves imagining the interiors of Waterloo station and migrants' rented rooms, while London's wealthiest boroughs and the well-appointed drawing rooms of the British elite seem to exist only tangentially.

In contrast to Austen's characters, however, the characters in Selvon's fiction, by virtue of their positions within London's social hierarchies, have no choice but to pay occasional heed to other classes and races. Austen's network of propertied families seems only minimally aware of the nearby workers, their homes, and families as well as, in *Mansfield Park*, the colonial plantation laborers whose existence ensures her characters' continued wealth.[5] In Selvon's fiction, the geographical distance between England and colonial laborers has been shrunk to fit within the perimeters of London. As a result, Selvon's migrant factory workers and street hustlers are repeatedly confronted with unwelcome reminders of the "nodes" they might otherwise choose to ignore. Moses must sift through various rented

properties in an effort to find landlords willing to rent to black colonial migrants, and he loses a much-needed factory job due to the racism of white coworkers who threatened a mass walkout if he is allowed to continue working among them. Still, although Moses must maneuver through an urban thicket of racist employers and slumlords, his attention is firmly fixed on his own and his fellow migrants' narratives. He makes his characterization of the city dependent on his characterization of young black men and on their verbal renderings of that literary space.

The city, as it is portrayed in *The Lonely Londoners* and in most of the London-set stories included in Selvon's collection *Ways of Sunlight*, is a place 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. The importance of having friends from back home is made immediately clear in the first scene of *The Lonely Londoners*, in which a newly arrived Trinidadian seeks out Moses on the advice of a mutual friend. This friend had warned, "it all well and good to play boldface in a small place like Trinidad, but when he land in London it would be different, and he would be sure to need a friend there" (23). The necessity of making and keeping migrant friends is a theme to which Selvon returns often in the novel, which is entirely comprised of descriptions of the various men and a few women whom Moses has come across during his decade in London. Throughout Selvon's humorous and episodic London-set fiction, he reuses characters and, with each successive work, reinvents their relationships with one another and with their new city.

While humorously describing the events and places that compose postwar London, the storyteller narrator revises the literary setting that had been depicted by Selvon's predecessors. The novel's first words, "One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London," may remind readers of an oral story's conventional beginning, "Once upon a time" (7). Yet, the opening line also has the ring of T. S. Eliot's description of the "Unreal City" of London in "The Waste Land," a resemblance suggesting that *The Lonely Londoners* is in part Selvon's highly conscious response to previous literary representations of the city. Selvon follows his allusion to Eliot's

bleak, modernist London with migrant characters' comic version of urban life—one that is shaped by Selvon's narrator's manipulations of "proper" English and literary style:

> This was a time, when any corner you turn, is ten to one you bound to bounce up a spade. In fact, the boys all over London, it ain't have a place where you wouldn't find them, and a big discussion going on in Parliament about the situation, though the old Brit'n too diplomatic to clamp down on the boys or to do anything drastic like stop them from coming to the Mother Country. (8)

As this passage illustrates, the narrative voice in the novel is that of a West Indian migrant using the vernacular of Trinidad, a language that Selvon spent months perfecting while writing the novel: "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 in a bus and let the language do the writing" ("Finding," 60). Selvon's description of the novel's language as "like music" is one indication that his fiction is modeled on the oral tradition, and his recurrent substitutions of the word "ballad" for "story" in his London-set fiction is another. The above passage also illustrates Selvon's tendency to portray jokingly the serious issues facing immigrants to Britain. The perception that around every corner one could "bounce up a spade" seems to speak to the fears of a white audience unsettled by rising migration from the colonies. Selvon uses the Caribbean narrative voice both to describe the effects of the majority race's perceptions on individual "immigrants" and to transform written English by committing to paper a language that was being spoken in the London of the 1950s.

As Selvon's novel makes clear, if the perceived large numbers of Caribbeans in London alarmed white Britons, each migrant would be viewed with suspicion. That seems to be a concern of Moses, who reacts by spreading new arrivals throughout a number of boroughs rather than finding them lodging within an existing "immigrant" enclave, because "he don't want no concentrated area . . . as it is things bad enough already" (9). The official reaction to West Indian migration is another theme that Selvon's first London novel touches on. The mid-1950s was indeed a time when "English people starting to make rab about how too much West Indians coming to the

country" (8), but the Parliament had not yet decided whether to dispense entirely with its liberal, inclusive rhetoric and to bar entry to the men and women who were daily disembarking from ships onto British soil.[6] *The Lonely Londoners* was written during the period when the debate was ongoing, and the hopeful—or perhaps sarcastic—statement that "old Brit'n too diplomatic to clamp down on the boys" had yet to be tested for accuracy.

While it could perhaps be argued that *The Lonely Londoners*, with its nonstandard English and its unemployed and occasionally lawbreaking characters, reinforces racist stereotypes of migrants from Britain's West Indian colonies, Selvon's portrayal of the city and of the young black men who settled there obliges white British readers to rethink their perceptions and to question representations of the new arrivals that were appearing in newspapers. As Michel Fabre argues, Selvon's fiction "is an achievement because it maintains a mellow, humorous, mildly satirical tone which manages to endear the West Indians to the reader without ridiculing the British too much" (217). Additionally, because Selvon's novel "for the first time spoke London in a strong West Indian accent" (Ball, 12), the city's depiction can itself be seen as a form of resistance and a method of creating room for new characters within what de Certeau calls "the clear text of the planned and readable city" (93).

By creating characters with whom white readers could sympathize, Selvon exposes them to migrants' probable readings of urban culture and of white Londoners' treatment of them. For instance, when Moses tries to explain British anti-immigration sentiment to a black migrant who has sought his advice, Moses' perspective counters popular misconceptions: "Well, as far as I could figure, they frighten that we get job in front of them, though that does never happen" (23). Additionally, by likening British "politeness" to American business owners' refusal of service to black customers, Moses makes clear how similarly black men and women were being treated in both nations prior to the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Providing a depiction of British racism that the official rhetoric would not admit to, Moses explains: "In America you see a sign telling you to keep off, but over here you don't see any, but when you go in the hotel or restaurant they will politely tell you to haul—or else give you the cold treatment" (24).

Selvon's criticism in *The Lonely Londoners* is not directed solely at xenophobic or merely uncomprehending white Britons—even if they were his intended audience. Using Moses' voice of experience, Selvon critiques the behavior of new migrants along with their "hosts." His portrayal of the migrant community as internally diverse challenges the misconceptions of white Londoners, many of whom believed that colonial and postcolonial migrants were all alike: "these days when one spade doing something wrong, they crying down the lot" (25). One way that Selvon portrays differences among "the boys" is by showing the exploitation *within* the group. For instance, Moses comments on the graft of Jamaican landlords who overcharge black tenants who have few housing options due to the prevalent discrimination. Selvon also unflatteringly portrays a number of "the boys" taking illegal advantage of social services or relying on employed white women to provide for them. Attributing migrant misbehavior to the harshness of London life, however, Selvon's novel illustrates that the changes to loyalty often occurred as a result of the new environment: "When it come to making money, it ain't have anything like 'ease me up' or 'both of we is countrymen together' in the old London" (11–12).

Moses has developed an alternately comic and despairing approach to life in London—exhibited in his practical jokes, world-weariness, and (occasionally) bleak satire. Early in the novel, he takes readers, along with a new arrival from the West Indies, on a tour of the city. Moses gives them a taste of how humorous his proffered urban tour will be when he slips into the role of the trickster and acts the part of a new Jamaican arrival. His Jamaican-impersonating trick on a journalist illustrates both the "lumping" of immigrants that many white Londoners were guilty of *and* Moses' playfully subversive attitude toward serious issues such as British racism and the practical living problems affecting the new arrivals: "Now Moses don't know a damn thing about Jamaica—Moses come from Trinidad, which is a thousand miles from Jamaica, but the English people believe that everybody who come from the West Indies from Jamaica" (12). By depicting the reporter hurrying off when Moses tries to explain to him the actual problems confronting West Indians in Britain, Selvon also illustrates the bias of white journalists who seek out "news" merely to reinforce the prejudices of their readership.

Although Selvon uses humor and an inventive narrative style in order to critique British racism and to stake a claim to London for Caribbean migrants, Moses' humorous exploits are not politically advantageous for all the migrant characters in *The Lonely Londoners*. I suspect Selvon wanted his readers to laugh at Moses' cool detachment and to appreciate both Selvon's and his central character's nonjudgmental manner of storytelling, but Moses' jokes sometimes have drastic consequences for the women of the novel. For example, readers are let in on Moses' joke when he tells Lewis, a gullible coworker who has just arrived from Jamaica, that stay-at-home wives are routinely unfaithful while their husbands work. It is difficult to find the situation humorous, as Selvon seems to be prompting readers to do, when the upset young husband leaves work in order to return home to beat his wife. Although Moses knows that his insinuation has led to domestic violence, he does not intervene and refuses to take responsibility for the consequences of his words. He simply reminds his coworker after a series of these beatings, "you only suspect your wife, you don't know anything for sure," and to Lewis's comment, "But you tell me when fellars have night work other fellars go round by the house when the wife alone," Moses responds, dismissively, "My mouth ain't no Bible" (53). In cases such as this one, the light tone Selvon maintains and his apparently unqualified approval of Moses in this novel can be troubling, at least for contemporary readers. Not only does the storyteller narrator's social commentary never focus seriously on the plight of migrant women, the women are often made the butts of Moses' jokes or are portrayed as the downfall of formerly unfettered male characters. But, in Selvon's defense, since the perspective is unwaveringly male, the storyteller's voice has the ring of an actual person with prejudices and shortcomings. Women are certainly not absent from *The Lonely Londoners*: they appear often, as migrants' lovers, wives, meal tickets, and in the case of Tanty, as a hanger-on, lured to London by a male relative's bragging letters home about the good pay and living conditions.

While at Waterloo Station, Moses watches with amusement as his Jamaican friend Tolroy greets several uninvited family members, including Tanty, an old woman who has unselfconsciously brought her way of life with her. When a journalist asks her several pointed questions about what she plans to do in London, she does not hesitate

to answer, as her less trusting nephew has done. Agreeing to have her photograph taken, Tanty illustrates that hers is a communal identity when she insists "you can't take me alone. You have to have the whole family" and then calls "out as if she calling out in a backyard in Jamaica, 'all you come and take photo, children. The mister want a snapshot'" (15). It is hard to pin down Selvon's attitude toward this character, for Tanty is portrayed as someone capable of making her environment change to suit her values and needs. She will soon be encouraging Agnes, Lewis's abused wife, to leave her husband and to press assault charges against him. Tanty will also be instrumental in getting a grocer in a mostly Caribbean neighborhood to offer credit to customers who are living paycheck to paycheck. Selvon's portrayals of her irrational fears of public transportation and of "she big mouth" seem to poke fun (66), but Tanty is unarguably a woman who does not shrink from her challenging new life, even though she is elderly and not exactly welcome in Tolroy's cash-strapped household.

As the earlier discussion of Waterloo station illustrates, reconstructions of Caribbean culture were in the 1950s finding their way into the public spaces of London. One example of such a reconstruction is the music of the Caribbean, which is kept alive in the new location by Tolroy, who "always have this guitar with him, playing it in the road and in the tube, and when he standing up in the queues" (11). For Tolroy, playing Caribbean tunes serves as a connection to home and as a way of making common urban annoyances such as standing in lines bearable, and his guitar playing transforms others' experiences of London streets as well. Another indication that Caribbean culture is transforming the city is the change in products available in the markets serving migrant customers:

> Before Jamaicans start to invade Brit'n, it was a hell of a thing to pick up a piece of saltfish anywhere, or to get thing like pepper sauce or dasheen or even garlic. . . . 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. (60–61)

Selvon depicts a few Jewish tailors also beginning to cater to Caribbean young men like Galahad, who spends his hard-earned money on sharp new clothing.

While documenting migrants' transformations of London's cultural scene, Selvon gives readers—of the 1950s and later—a sense of the city as it appeared to migrants of color who arrived not long after World War II, particularly regarding their attitudes toward policing. When a new London arrival, Galahad, attempts to make a trip to the employment exchange alone, a "feeling come over him as if he lost everything he have—clothes, shoes, hat—and he start to touch himself here and there as if he in a daze" (26). While in the daze brought on by the strange environment, Galahad is told to "Move along now, don't block the pavement" by a policeman, whose approach sends the formerly self-assured young man into a "panic"—"though he ain't do anything against the law" (27). Selvon's narrator explains that Galahad's reaction is a result of Trinidadians' longstanding fear of policemen, who "would find something wrong that they do and want to lock them up" (27). In part, Black Britons' distrust of policemen can be traced to colonial abuses in the West Indies where "the role of the police . . . was that of an occupying force—and not that of the 'friendly bobby'" (Webber, 241), but this "distrust" also anticipates later clashes between migrants of color and the British police. For example, in 1958, only two years after the publication of *The Lonely Londoners*, antiblack "racial disturbances" erupted in Nottingham and Notting Hill, which led to intensified policing of London boroughs with high migrant populations. And, in the early 1980s, it was the British police who were largely responsible for the violent uprisings of black residents in Bristol, Brixton, Toxteth, Handsworth, and Tottenham (Layton-Henry, 129). Still, Selvon's portrayal in *The Lonely Londoners* suggests that Caribbean migrants of the 1950s did not see the police as threatening. For the most part, Selvon's characters seem to like and respect London policemen. For example, Tanty asks a policeman for directions and is treated very kindly, and Galahad is actually surprised that the police allow speakers to criticize the government at Orator's Corner near Marble Arch. Even the poorest of migrants are not afraid of the police, according to the narrator, who explains "some of them old fellars so brazen that though it against the law to beg they passing the old cap around" (60).

Many other everyday aspects of London life besides black migrants' interactions with the police are presented in *The Lonely Londoners*, allowing Selvon—through his narrator's unique voice—to

comment on the hardships migrants faced in the 1950s. The first section of the novel focuses on Galahad's first few days of contact with his new city. The bus queue and the employment exchange are two public spaces that test Galahad's ability to adjust to his new environment. Enforcing the unwritten rules of urban conduct, locals disapprove of Galahad's behavior when he pushes his way to the front of the queue. The conductor corrects him "'Ere, you can't break the queue like that, mate,'" "an old lady look at him with a loud tone in her eye," and a young woman tells her companion that "'They'll have to learn to do better, you know'" (28). That Galahad's act could cause so many reactions indicates the hurdles that new arrivals were required to jump to be considered Londoners, just as the wording of the corrections—we don't do that "here," "they'll" have to do better—indicates the outsider status to which black men and women were automatically assigned, despite the conductor's friendly use of "mate." Similarly, in the employment exchange where Moses takes Galahad to get him registered with the Ministry of Labour, the desperate atmosphere "hit Galahad so hard that he had to stand against the wall for a minute" (29). The narrator describes the space where "a lot of men get together to look for work and draw money from the Welfare State" as a place "where hate and disgust and avarice and malice and sympathy and sorrow and pity all mix up" (29), a description that could also be applied to Selvon's depiction of the city as a whole—if not for the beauty of London's landscape and place-names.

Despite the problems that Galahad initially has in the city, he soon begins using place-names at every opportunity in order to connect himself to the glamour that certain areas of London represent:

> He had a way, whenever he talking with the boys, he using the names of the places like they mean big romance, as if to say "I was in Oxford Street" have more prestige than if he just say "I was up the road." ... Jesus Christ, when he say "Charing Cross," when he realise that is he, Sir Galahad, who going there, near that place that everybody in the world know about (it even have the name in the dictionary) he feel like a new man. (67–68)

Although London had demoralized him when he first arrived, Galahad's sense that he is a "new man" is oddly also a result of his relationship to the city. As the above passage indicates, Galahad connects

London's "big romance" and "prestige" to his own identity—since he has by this time become a Londoner at ease on Oxford Street or Charing Cross. Even the nickname Galahad, which Moses gives the newly arrived Henry Oliver on his first day in London, is an indication of the strong influence of British culture—particularly the literary aspects of that culture, including tales of legendary medieval knights—on Caribbean migrants educated in the colonies. Unlike Galahad, Moses is no longer stirred by the city's well-known sites and place-names, and his character offers a striking contrast to wide-eyed new migrants. Moses sounds wearied by his experiences when he tells his protégé, "Ah, in you I see myself, how I was when I was new to London. All them places like nothing to me now" (69).

By focusing on a single evening in Galahad's life, Selvon is able to expose readers to the everyday joys and sorrows of this new location for Caribbean migrants. Piccadilly Circus symbolizes all that Galahad loves about London, and it continues to affect him as it did when he first arrived: "that circus have a magnet for him, that circus represent life, that circus is the beginning and the ending of the world" (74). While walking through the city in his expensive new clothes and thinking about the young woman he has a date to meet under the big clock in Piccadilly tube station, Galahad is aware only of the exciting and pleasant side of London, until a child's stare reminds him that he is seen racially. When he smiles and tries to be friendly, "the child cower and shrink and begin to cry" (71). By this stage in the novel, Galahad has established himself in London; yet, unlike the more jaded Moses, he seems still to appreciate its beauty. But Selvon will not let his character exist in a fantasy city. The narrator brings up the cold looks that Galahad receives and ignores when he puts his arm around his attractive white date, and the meanness of Galahad's room contrasts sharply with the extravagant public spaces the couple wander through together. When Galahad talks the woman into taking the bus home with him, he is ashamed when he opens the door to "a whiff of stale food and old clothes and dampness and dirt" (76). And when she claims to have trouble understanding him, the puzzled Galahad answers "'Is English we speaking'" (77). Yet, the stares and communication troubles do not affect him as powerfully as his near swoon at the thought of being precisely where he is: "Galahad Esquire, in all this, standing there in the big city, in London. Oh Lord" (74).

An affection for the famous and emblematic spaces of London is also evident in Selvon's short story "My Girl in the City" (1957), which seems to be an exception among Selvon's London-set works in terms of tone and narrative voice. "My Girl in the City" features London prominently: the setting ranks high enough to be included in the title with the other object of the narrator's affection, "the girl." Serving as much more than a setting in this story, the city is a presence that permeates everything—the narrator's love relationship as well as his efforts to write.

Because the narrator's experience of London is intertwined with a discussion of the process of writing, this story appears to be more autobiographical than any of Selvon's other works of fiction. The narrator provides readers with a fragmented list of the everyday events and aspects of urban life that inspire him as a writer, and by doing so he illuminates the choices that he makes as he crafts a story set in London:

> Hurtling in the underground from station to station, mind the doors, missed it!, there is no substitute for wool: waiting for a bus in Piccadilly Circus; walking across Waterloo Bridge: watching the bed of the Thames when the tide is out—choose one, choose a time, a place, any time or any place, and take off, as if this were interrupted conversation, as if you and I were earnest friends and there is no need for preliminary remark. (181)

As the passage illustrates, the unnamed, first-person narrator, like Selvon, must fit the demands of writing into his daily life in the city. Hinting that this story, too, will be told by an informal storyteller, the narrator describes the relationship with readers that his style will require, that of "earnest friends," who have been engaged in an "interrupted conversation" with him (181). Thus, the story seems to call for a close and nonhierarchal relationship between storyteller and active listener similar to that of Moses and "the boys" in *The Lonely Londoners*. At the same time, however, this reference contradicts—or at least complicates—Selvon's assertion that he wrote with the intentions of showing Caribbean people to the rest of the world and universalizing their experiences. Selvon's other London-set fiction clearly shows that the "earnest friends" that Caribbean migrants relied on and conversed with were in most cases other Commonwealth migrants.

The above passage also illustrates Selvon's tendency to drop the names of London's geographical and architectural features—Piccadilly Circus, Waterloo Bridge, the Thames—thus creating atmosphere by bringing up recognizable sites, many of which come to readers with imperialistic associations and literary precedents attached to them. Interspersed with London place-names are Selvon's portrayals of migrants' sensual experience of London: its crush of bodies, its public transportation's sights and sounds, and its cold and damp. Selvon similarly intertwines his narrator's obsessions for his "girl" and his drive to express himself in speech and in writing with landmarks' names. In this way, the narrator makes these emblematic sites his own; he transforms London by adding a new life story to the many that have preceded it. Yet, despite his desire to speak out, the city occasionally overcomes and silences him: "I got in precious words edgeways, and a train would rumble and drown my words in thundering steel" (181). It is difficult to untangle the narrator's feelings—he seems as much in awe of his "girl" as he is dumbstruck by his urban environment: "sometimes it was as if I was struck speechless with too much to say, and held my tongue between thoughts frightened of utterance" (187).

Unlike *The Lonely Londoners* and the other stories in *Ways of Sunlight*, "My Girl in the City" does not contain a written reproduction of Caribbeans' spoken language, nor are race issues discussed, although the narrator implies that he is a migrant when he mentions how new the city is to him. It was 1950, the narrator tells his "girl," when he first "queued in this country," and these relatively mundane situations—such as a first queue—are precisely why he loves the place. When she asks "But why do you love London?" he replies:

> You can't talk about a thing like that, not really. Maybe I could have told her because one evening in the summer I was waiting for her, only it wasn't like summer at all. Rain had been falling all day, and a haze hung about the bridges across the river, and the water was muddy and brown, and there was a kind of wistfulness and sadness about the evening. The way St. Paul's was, half-hidden in the rain, the motionless trees along the Embankment. But you say a thing like that and people don't understand at all. How sometimes a surge of greatness could sweep over you when you see something. (186)

The "surge of greatness" that the narrator assumes others will not understand is perhaps Selvon's explanation of London's appeal for a young man raised in the tropics but deeply moved by urban landmarks like St. Paul's and the Embankment and by the rain, haze, and muddy brown river of his strange, adopted city.

As Selvon wrote much later, from Canada where he eventually resettled, his early desire to move to Britain had been heightened by his imagining a "landscape which had possessed me from schoolday reading of the English poets" ("Finding," 58). Indicating his ambivalence toward the place where he had lived for nearly thirty years, Selvon cryptically states that "the land did not deceive me, as the people did" (58). Selvon's comment that the land was all he imagined while the British people had been a disappointment is, I believe, a sentiment that is made concrete within the fiction that he set in London in the 1950s. Using the forms of the novel and the short story, Selvon discusses the everyday racisms that he recognized around him, juxtaposing that political discussion with a loving description of various urban sites. As a result, Selvon's first London novel provides readers with a necessarily complicated portrait of 1950s London. It is a city of ill-informed and sometimes cruel "native" residents, but it is also a city of beauty and promise—a city where the spoken language of the Caribbean, the nicknames of African Caribbean young men, and Anglo-Saxon place-names create a rich intermixture of the old and the new, the colonizer and the (formerly) colonized—a new multiracial London that Selvon has helped to describe into existence.

1970s LONDON: MOSES AS MEMOIR-WRITING LANDLORD

Twenty years after the publication of *The Lonely Londoners*, a period of reverse immigration was underway. According to Selvon in "Finding West Indian Identity in London," "By the mid-70s most of the writers of the postwar efflorescence of Caribbean Literature had left London-England. I myself was growing restless" (60). This restlessness is evident in Selvon's lackadaisical description of London in *Moses Ascending* (1975), which is set primarily in the early to mid-1970s in Shepherd's Bush, a borough in west central London. In contrast to

Selvon's 1950s fiction, the second novel to feature Moses as central character contains few tributes to London's geography and climate and few place-names.

Another possible manifestation of Selvon's own restlessness is the fact that Moses, who in this novel plays the part of the first-person storyteller and whose position can thus be loosely connected to Selvon's authorial role, is no longer portrayed as the voice of wisdom among "the boys." He considers himself an integral part of London, having been there twenty years: "in my own way I am as much part of the London landscape as little Eros with his bow and arrow in Piccadilly, or one-eye Nelson with his column in Trafalgar Square, not counting colour" (44). Despite Moses' connection to highly symbolic public sites in London, Selvon suggests that his recurring character has become an anachronism, which is perhaps another indication that Selvon felt his own moment in London had passed. Galahad, a character who had relied heavily on Moses in *The Lonely Londoners*, now claims their roles have reversed. He tells Moses: "I have noticed that you look as if you ready to retire, but I am with it man. You will need me to cope with current events and the new generation of black people" (3). Moses, who has by the 1970s internalized the values of capitalist, white Britain, is particularly uncomprehending of the antiracism politics and militancy of this new generation, who demand rights and respect within the country they had been born into. It is probable that Selvon is in this instance at odds with his character. Austin Clarke argues that *Moses Ascending*'s first-person narrator's beliefs and actions should not be taken as Selvon's own, because "beneath the misleading simplicity of his [Selvon's] language and plot, a very serious altercation [is] going on between writer and character" (75).

Moses begins his "ascent" in the novel when he has the means to purchase a house belonging to Tolroy, another of Selvon's recurring characters, who is moving back to Jamaica. Moses sees the house as a source of income, since he plans to let out the spare rooms, but the desire not to have to answer to a landlord is his strongest motivation for buying his own place: "After all these years paying rent, I had the ambition to own my own property in London, no matter how ruinous or dilapidated it was. If you are a tenant, you catch your arse forever, but if you are a landlord, it is a horse of a different

colour" (2). Having been a harassed tenant since he first arrived from Trinidad, Moses is able to justify his purchase, even though he learns the house has "a five year lease, two of which gone, and it was due for LCC demolition" (1). Additionally, Moses' figure of speech, "a horse of a different colour," suggests that the racist hierarchy that normally affords white Britons the superior position will be humorously reversed in this novel—even if incompletely and temporarily.

After buying the house with money saved from his years of manual labor, Moses abruptly parts ways with his roommate and friend, Galahad. Immediately assuming a new property-owning attitude, Moses claims he would have "preferred a mansion in Belgravia or a penthouse in Mayfair, without too many black people around" (3). He relishes the power that he imagines he will have over the tenants in the new house:

> I was Master of the house. I insert my key in the front door lock, I enter, I ascend the stairs, and when the tenants hear my heavy tread they cower and shrink in their rooms, in case I snap my fingers and say OUT to any of them. (4)

Moses thus "ascends" from the basement flat he had been sharing with Galahad to "the penthouse" of his own property. But along with Moses' excitement in his new position, Selvon hints at Moses' residual compassion for the poor. A man like Moses, who has suffered racist treatment and who has lived on next to nothing, cannot entirely harden himself to those in his former position. Thus, Moses claims not to be "one of them prejudiced landlord what put No Kolors on their notices. . . . It was also my policy to avoid any petty restrictions for the tenants who was giving me my bread" (4). Despite these measures, Moses is seen as a traitor because he has decided to break with his old friends: "the rumour went around town that I was a different man, that I had forsaken my friends, and that there was no more pigfoot and peas and rice, nor even a cuppa to be obtained" (4).

Moses' method of running the house is reminiscent of that of a nineteenth-century wealthy Englishman, a comparison that Selvon uses for comic effect. Moses acquires a butler of sorts, a penniless white man from the north of England named Bob. Turning the typical colonialist power arrangement on its head, Selvon depicts Bob submitting to Moses' choice of names for him. Bob is variously called

"my man Friday," "servant," "au pair," and "lackey" (4, 5, 9, 75). The first term, since it is used by a Caribbean-born black man, suggests a reversal in terms of race and of colonizer-colonized. The native islander has supplanted his master in that Moses plays the part of Robinson Crusoe to Bob's "Friday." In the case of "au pair," Bob's position relative to Moses appears to be gendered, as well as one of a temporary, live-in employee to his employer. The "au pair" job title connotes a young, female, and, in most cases, foreign nanny. Since Moses is actually the foreign-born one of the two men, his use of the "au pair" designation in reference to Bob is another of Selvon's humorous reversals. The blatancy of "servant" and "lackey" will perhaps remind readers of some employers' terminology for the men and women that they hire to do their dirty work. Selvon depicts Moses' joking assumption of the upper-class position as an improbable racial reversal. Not only was such a reversal highly unlikely in 1970s Britain, but the blithe usage of these demeaning terms by a man who had himself been tagged a "servant" and a "lackey" comes across as an absurd joke.

In his subservient role, Bob cleans and runs the household, handles tenant problems, cooks, mixes drinks, and waits on his "Master" and his guests hand and foot. Despite their relationship of master and servant, Moses sees his hiring Bob, who like his master has migrated to the urban hub from the provinces—colonial or otherwise—as an indication of his concern for the lower classes: "Witness how I take in poor Bob, and make him my footman, when he was destitute and had no place to go when he land in London" (25). Yet, by making his beneficiary his "footman," Moses ensures that the existing, virtually feudal class system is maintained—even if it is reversed in terms of race.

Adding to the effect of Moses as man of leisure, Selvon jokingly depicts his struggle to put together his memoirs. The narrative voice, which is in the first person and from Moses' perspective, is an unlikely blend of Caribbean-British 1970s slang and the stilted language of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century man of letters. In his introduction to *Moses Migrating* titled "A Special Preface by Moses Aloetta Esq.," Selvon describes the language of *Moses Ascending* as "a kind of hybrid mixture of ye-olde and what-happening" (xi). Comically hinting at the epistolary novel tradition and echoing a common

apostrophe of conventional English novels, Moses speaks to his "Dear Reader" or "Kind and gentle R" throughout the novel (25). Adding to the humor are Moses' exaggerated efforts to reach a conservative, white readership. In one aside, following the departure of a large group of Indian immigrants, Moses uses a pompous tone to address presumably anti-immigrant readers: "Those of you who take up your cudgels against these poor unfortunates, who lobby the House of Commons and write letters to Members of Parliament, who march in protest waving banners and shouting imprecations on their heads, cannot understand my mixed emotions" (89).

Having captured postwar working-class immigrants' spoken English in his first London-set novel, Selvon's language use in *Moses Ascending* marks only a partial departure. Selvon continues to use the new narrative style he had developed in the 1950s, but the language of his 1970s fiction understandably reflects the changes to migrants' speech patterns brought about by their living over twenty years in a city with its own wide range of accents and spoken variations of English. As in *The Lonely Londoners*, the pronoun usage in *Moses Ascending* is not grammatically "correct"; "what" is often substituted for "that," subjects and verbs rarely agree, but men are no longer "tests," and a woman is no longer referred to as "it" or "the thing." In place of these comparatively quaint expressions is the slang popularized in the 1960s and 1970s throughout the English-speaking world. The men are after "white pussy" or "black pussy," and women are sometimes simply "cunts" or "frowsy English girls" (79).[7] These phrases, which contain obvious sexual references to women, are evidence of the historic social changes of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when there was a loosening of constraints on sexuality. But it is possible that Selvon also meant this phrasing to suggest a class identity. Contradicting his image as proper landlord and gentleman writer, Moses uses the language of the streets and is neither condescending nor chivalrous in his dealings with women. Thus, Moses simultaneously desires his tenant Brenda sexually and respects her for her powerful position in the Black Power movement. He comments on her shapely thighs, while admiringly touting her as a "new breed of Briton" with a "high" accent (25).

Moses also quotes and misquotes canonical English literature while trying to make sense of contemporary race and class issues. For

example, echoing a Shakespearean character, Moses cries out "God's blood" (8) while imagining the hard work that black workers are expected to do. When he is arrested, he attempts to tell the policeman, "Unhand me, knave," but manages only a stereotypically unlearned response: "Let me go, man, I ain't done nothing" (36). Moses' on-again, off-again pompous tone has the effect of reminding readers of the strong influence of British culture on the migrants who had been schooled in the colonies. Before many migrants left their homelands, they had been taught by teachers who valorized the very word choice and tone that Moses uses in jest. Selvon's black migrant character satirizes nineteenth-century literature by attempting to live it—with his butler and his memoir writing—and to speak it, discussing contemporary race and class issues using the language of "serious literature."

While mixing Trinidadian phrasing, seventies slang, and formal, literary English, Moses exhibits a disdain for those who interrupt him in his new landholder's idyll, but Selvon's sympathy for poor, black working people comes through nonetheless. Moses' initial delight in having Bob bring his tea to him in bed every morning is tempered by his remembering all the black workers who routinely rise to go to work before the rest of London's population. Selvon's sarcasm is evident when Moses suggests that the black worker ought to see his before-dawn and after-dark toil as his ownership of the otherwise sleeping city:

> Instead of moaning and groaning about his sorrows, he should stop and think and count these blessings reserved solely for him. He should realize that if wasn't for him, the city would go on sleeping forever. He should look upon himself as a pioneer what preparing the way for the city's day, polishing the brass and chrome, washing the pots and pans. As he banishes the filth and litter, he could thunder out decrees in the Houses of Parliament and his voice would ring through the corridors and change the Immigration Act and the policies of the Racial Board. . . . Oh, the ingratitude, the unreasonableness of those who only see one side of the coin, and complain that he is given only the menial tasks to perform! (5–6)

While Moses challenges early-rising black workers to "change the Immigrant Act and the policies of the Racial Board," it is noteworthy that his suggested method is no more than a futile gesture. There

clearly will be no lasting effects resulting from workers' thundering out decrees in empty buildings. In this section of the novel, Selvon seems to be using Moses' admonition—"Oh, the ingratitude, the unreasonableness"—as a spoof on racial uplift narratives, which challenged exploited black people to stop complaining about their back-breaking work, poor housing, and precarious citizenship status and to make the most of the position they had been offered.

Although Moses describes the black worker as the "harbinger who will put the kettle on to boil," the one who "holds the keys of the city, and [who] will unlock the doors and tidy the papers on the desk, flush the loo, straighten the chairs, hoover the carpet" (6), his understanding of the type and hours of work does not provide him with complete sympathy. Selvon's depiction illustrates the conflicted position in which Moses finds himself, as the owner of property. He no longer has to rise with the black working class, so he tries diligently to put a positive spin on difficult, thankless jobs. Even though readers get Selvon's message by reading between the lines in Moses' muddled assessment of black workers' plight, Moses himself seems to miss the point. Thus, when Black Power activists ask him for a donation of time, money, or space in his house, he refuses to contribute, leading his former friend Galahad to scold him: "As soon as a black man start to get out of the ghetto and into the castle, he turn a blind eye to the struggle" (11). Galahad also reminds Moses that his rise in social standing through property acquisition does not affect his position in the British hierarchy based on race: "You can buy a house or a limousine, and eat caviar and best end of lamb, but you can't get a white skin if you beg, borrow, or steal" (12).

Moses eventually contributes to the Black Power organizers and to illegal immigrants from South Asia who are entering the country through Holland, but he does so grudgingly and claims to have ulterior, self-serving motives. Moses allows Brenda, a leader in the Black Power movement, to live in his basement without paying rent, but he makes it clear that his reasons for asking her to stay are purely sexual: "I got to thinking that in for a penny, in for a pound, and that it might not be a bad idea to have she available on the spot" (26). He soon finds his control of his tenant slipping away and his sexual designs on Brenda laughably naive when she begins to conduct meetings, plan marches, and produce a radical newsletter under his roof.

Although he participates in the Black Power march on Trafalgar Square that Brenda and Galahad organize, Moses never admits that his presence is the result of a conscious decision. He claims to have taken the bus to nowhere in particular and to have elected to get off near Trafalgar Square because there was a traffic jam. Similarly, Moses later grudgingly helps undocumented immigrants from India and Pakistan by allowing them to stay in his house for a few days after their arrival. A tenant in Moses' house named Faizull initiates this "underground railroad" by using a comic combination of threats—delivered via a telegram with the message, "IF LANDLORD NOSY EXTERMINATE HIM"—and bribery in the form of £20 a head to press Moses into service (62).

Having made a great deal of "blood money" for housing the South Asians, Moses is able—with Bob's help—to pay the bail when Brenda, Galahad, and a visiting American Black Panther are arrested during a meeting (77). With this gesture, Moses is finally acting on behalf of his race and his class: "'These are My People,' I say grimly. 'No Englishman with black blood in his veins can stand aside and see innocent victims hang'" (96). Despite this minor breakthrough in his race consciousness, Moses calls himself an outraged "Englishman," a national identification that perhaps ought to be more conflicted under the circumstances. Moses claims to go to the Black Power meeting for the purpose of getting material for his memoirs, the same reason he gives for getting involved with the illegal "Pakis" (58). During the meeting, the police surround the building and break in with dogs, which attack those gathered to hear the speakers. As Moses is fleeing the scene, he at first tries to think of a justification for the raid but is finally overtaken by anger:

> I was beginning to get vex now; my dignity was affronted as I imagine myself pelting down the road terror-stricken when I didn't do nothing at all. . . . My blood begin to boil. I had half a mind to get back there and ask the Inspector himself what was the meaning of this outrage? "How dare you intrude on this peaceful gathering," I would say, "and strike terror into the hearts of these innocent people?" And I would ask him for his name, number, and rank, and report him to the Chief of Scotland Yard. (95–96)

Moses' vexed response contrasts with his reaction to an earlier arrest, when he had blamed Galahad for his imprisonment and scoffed

when Galahad asked if the police had tortured him. Still, Moses' desire to demand answers from the Inspector and to report the injustice to the Chief of Scotland Yard indicates his belief that institutional racism and police brutality can be remedied by going through the "proper" channels.

In contrast to what is, for the most part, a positive portrayal of the metropolitan police in *The Lonely Londoners*, the plot twists and characterizations in *Moses Ascending* indicate just how combative and repressive the police had become in their interactions with black residents by the 1970s.[8] Yet, Selvon portrays Moses as being reluctant to acknowledge the racism of the police force. Even when Moses learns that Brenda had been "stripped and searched, and grilled relentlessly," he finds it difficult to believe that the police are out of line: "Being a loyal subject of Her Majesty, I was still not satisfy that there wasn't a purpose for the swoop" (99). With this scene, Selvon again uses humor to criticize the police and the British government by allowing readers to see around Moses' obtuseness. When Brenda tells Moses what the police were trying to get out of her—"Who were the dope peddlers in the district; if I did any prostitution; how long BP has been in the country; how often we hold these clandestine meetings; what was the history of the Party, and a host of other irrelevancies" (99)—Selvon nudges readers toward reacting to the unjustifiable police behavior while Moses continues to be "so earnest in [his] quest for justifying the raid" (99).

Moses may have risen from "the basement brigade" to the penthouse of a dilapidated building in Shepherd's Bush, but his racial difference still marks him as inferior within a Britain still suffering from colonial conceptions of race. Despite his status as landlord, Moses' class position is apparently difficult to change permanently. His memoir writing is a good indication of his predicament—his feeling trapped between his responsibilities to his people and his desire for recognition and respect from the dominant culture. When Brenda gains access to Moses' carefully guarded manuscript, she is highly critical. She sees his writing as primarily useless, as art for art's sake that fails to make a much needed political statement. But Brenda also attacks Moses for "hanging his hat too high"; she claims no proper London publishing house will accept writing with so many deviations from the Queen's English. Hinting that his failure to write

well might mar white Britons' perceptions of his race, she tells him, "You should be ashamed to be the author of such an ignorant, unschooled piece of work" (105).

Moses is unable to hold on to his position of authority, as his shifting relationships with his tenants indicate. Bob, who Moses finally decides to treat as an equal, manipulates his landlord and former "master" into relinquishing the penthouse suite to him and his new wife, and Brenda soon blackmails the now *de*scending Moses into exchanging Bob's former room for the basement, where she has been living. Thus, by the novel's end, Moses is no longer a man of leisure imagining his tenants' shrinking in fear at the sound of his landlordly step. He has returned to a basement flat, the very housing situation he had sought to escape by buying his own place. Moses anticipates critical remarks from "black power militants," who might choose "to misconstrue my Memoirs for their own purposes, and put the following moral to defame me, to wit: that after the ballad and the episode, it is the white man who ends up Upstairs and the black man who ends up Downstairs" (139–40). In that the end of the novel corresponds to the period of time "after the ballad and the episode," the choice of words suggests Selvon's *Moses Ascending* is, like *The Lonely Londoners*, modeled on oral storytelling. Providing more evidence that Selvon's novel is inspired by the structure and content of oral tales is Moses' answer to critics who might arrive at a defamatory "moral." "I have an epilogue up my sleeve," he says, treating the story of his London exploits as a continuing and often retold tale (140). With each retelling, Moses suggests, he has a chance to get the story right. Because he has been narrating in the mode of an oral storyteller, in other words, Moses will have another go at righting racial oppression as he tweaks the ending and replaces his "descent" with a positive racial message. Of course, like virtually all of Moses' comments, this promise cannot be taken entirely seriously. If Moses has gained the power to envision new endings from the storyteller role, he has also diminished his credibility as a serious commentator because readers have been prompted to look around for the joke and to distrust Moses' intentions precisely when he makes his most portentous statements.

Although a number of critics have argued that Selvon is critical of the Black Power movement in *Moses Ascending*, the social

commentary in the novel is actually in keeping with the concerns of activists, whose "unified militant action and the relentless demand for justice [were] replacing the begging-bowl syndrome of the black liberal era" (Sivanandan, 63). Mervyn Morris writes in the introduction to the Heinemann paperback edition: "Black Power, developing strength in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is ridiculed in *Moses Ascending*" (viii). Edward Baugh similarly argues in his review of the novel that Moses' supposedly dismissive mention of Lamming, Salkey, and Baldwin is meant as Selvon's "delicious point of oneupmanship as he playfully delivers a kick in the pants of some of the current in-crowd" (137). Because these readings do not take into consideration Selvon's subtle and humorous methods of critique, I believe they miss the real target of Selvon's satire, which is Moses. Instead of taking aim at the Black Power activists and the authors they were reading for inspiration, Selvon implicitly criticizes Moses for opting out of the antiracism struggle.

Still, Selvon's portrayals of the activists are not always flattering. Following the Trafalgar Square rally, Galahad is portrayed as a conniver who refuses to pay Moses' bail in order to create an unwilling martyr for the Black Power cause. And Selvon portrays particularly negatively the Mercedes-driving Black Panther from America, who absconds with the British Black Power organization's funds.[9] As in his earlier fiction, Selvon does not present blacks as a unified group, nor does he shy away from depicting the black community's internal conflicts or the hypocrisy of some black leaders and activists. Yet by illustrating the degree to which his central character is influenced by colonial-era conceptions of race, Selvon calls into question all of Moses' readings of events and people. When Moses admits he has never heard of Lamming and Salkey, Selvon's voice seems to be coming through in Galahad's reprimand: "You don't even know that we have created a Black Literature, that it have writers who write some powerful books what making the whole world realize our existence and our struggle" (43).

Still, for many of today's readers, *Moses Ascending* can seem insufficiently adamant in its antiracism stance, particularly when the novel is compared to more overt forms of literary resistance. In the mid-1970s, the Jamaica-born "dub poet" Linton Kwesi Johnson was, like Selvon, producing written texts based on migrants' spoken

language and was even reciting his work to musical accompaniment in London clubs and thus was able to reach a wide audience—including young black Britons who did not routinely sit down to read novels. Johnson's impassioned response to racism, *Dread, Beat, and Blood,* was published in 1975, just a year before *Moses Ascending*. In the Black Panther-inspired poem, "Time Come," Johnson's speaker directly addresses white Britons, warning that "vialence" is "burstin outta mi" (38–39).

As my earlier discussion of Selvon's portrayal of the British police in *The Lonely Londoners* indicates, black migrants' militancy had been much less pervasive during the early stage of Caribbean settlement in Britain. Perhaps because Selvon's generation had learned at an early age how to coexist with—and in some cases to valorize—the British, they were not as direct in their rhetoric as were Johnson and other dub lyricists. Still, Selvon's lighter tone, his strategic use of humor, his reworking of the London setting, and his reproductions of Caribbeans' spoken English are acts of resistance that have been nevertheless effective in calling racist beliefs and behaviors into question. Selvon's humorous fiction may in fact do a better job of reaching readers troubled by the descriptions of violent retribution contained in Johnson's work.

In the third novel of Selvon's Moses trilogy, *Moses Migrating*, Moses returns to Trinidad, "repatriating" himself in a move that seems to play into the hands of anti-immigration politicians, such as Member of Parliament Enoch Powell, who in his now-infamous "River of Blood" speech of 1968 called for a moratorium on legal immigration and for government-subsidized repatriation of Black Britons. Race relations problems were hurting the white British population instead of immigrants of color, according to Powell, who argued that "[t]he discrimination and the deprivation, the sense of alarm and of resentment, lies not with the immigrant population but with those among whom they have come and are still coming" (133). In the first pages of *Moses Migrating*, Moses writes Powell directly, asking him to make good on his offer to subsidize the repatriation of Black Britons and promising to name the business he plans to launch in Trinidad "Enoch-aided Enterprises" (1). The letter to Powell illustrates Selvon's comic approach as well as Moses' characteristic refusal to rise to anger over racism. He continually attempts to use

the system for his own purposes rather than overtly decrying its abuses. Despite the anti-immigrant stance of British politicians like Powell and Margaret Thatcher, who was in power when this third Moses novel was published,[10] Selvon depicts Moses' ambivalence about his return to Trinidad. He elects not to sell his Shepherd's Bush house in case he may later wish to "come back to the land of milk and honey" (7), and by the end of the novel, Selvon has him doing just that.

In the final pages of *Moses Migrating*, Selvon illustrates the effects of new laws that had restricted immigration considerably since Moses' first move to London. From the 1950s through the early 1980s, when this final Moses novel was published, a number of immigration bills had passed through Parliament, most notably the Immigration Act of 1971, which sharply curtailed Commonwealth residents' right to enter. This bill, which replaced the Aliens Restriction Act of 1914 and the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968, required prospective immigrants to prove that they had ties to Britain through birth, naturalization, or descent. The rise of the National Front, which was founded in 1967, the British public's outcry after 27,000 Ugandan Asians were admitted in 1972, and the popularity of anti-immigration politicians like Powell had changed British race relations for the worse. Illustrating the effects of these new laws and of the racially divisive atmosphere of early 1980s Thatcherite Britain, Moses is held up in a queue in Heathrow's customs, and it is there that Selvon leaves his recurring central character—forever stuck in immigrant limbo and again in a site of Caribbean migrants' arrivals and departures, this time a London airport instead of the Underground and rail station at Waterloo.

Notes

I would like to thank Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter for reading earlier versions of this essay and providing helpful revision suggestions.

1. Despite the greater convenience of air travel for contemporary long-distance migrations, London's Waterloo station continues to play a role in the actual lives of immigrants. See, for example, Michael Horsnell's March 2001 article "Stowaways Found under Eurostar" in the *Times* (London). Hornell writes that nine undocumented migrants from China, including a three-year-old child,

were discovered in Waterloo station on a Eurostar train that had originated in Paris. During the three-hour ride, the stowaways had endured extreme cold in the external luggage compartment where they were hidden.

2. De Certeau's French title, *L'invention du quotidien*, more accurately than the English reflects his idea of the everyday being invented as it is performed.

3. Selvon reworked the plot and reused many of the characters of his novel *The Lonely Londoners* and anticipated *Moses Ascending* in his 1969 collection of seven one-act plays, *Eldorado West One*.

4. Although "Caribbean" is now more commonly used in discussions of the literature of the former British West Indies, members of the 1950s generation of migrants often refer to the region by its colonial name and to themselves and their migrant characters as "West Indians," particularly in their early writing.

5. Yet, as Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, despite the vagueness of Austen's references to colonial outposts, she manages to make it clear that these spaces influence life at home: "According to Austen we are to conclude that no matter how isolated the English space (e.g., Mansfield Park), it requires overseas sustenance" (89).

6. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which made entry to Britain dependent on having an employment voucher, was not passed until 1962, but an Immigration Control Act was drafted in 1954. That act was never passed, but it was perhaps being discussed in Parliament at the time Selvon was writing *The Lonely Londoners*.

7. Clarke writes that Selvon was slapped onstage by an enraged black woman during a reading of *Moses Ascending* in London. The woman, known as "the Dancer," objected particularly to Selvon's sexual references to white women. Clarke claims Selvon never fully recovered from the humiliation of this public attack (106).

8. In "Police and Thieves," Paul Gilroy provides an in-depth analysis of Black Britons' treatment by the police and describes the 1970s version of what is now often called "racial profiling": the "sus law," "in which any Afro-Caribbean youth is assumed to be criminally inclined and anyone of Asian appearance is adjudged an 'illegal immigrant' until they can produce acceptable documentation to the contrary" (147).

9. Mervyn Morris, in the notes to his *Moses Ascending* introduction, writes that Selvon's depiction of BP may have been modeled on Stokely Carmichael, who took the name Kwame Ture. Ture was a Trinidad-born Black Power leader who interested Britons in the movement during his visit to London in the 1970s (xvii n.6).

10. Thatcher writes in her 1995 autobiography, *The Path to Power*, that she "strongly sympathized with the gravamen of [Powell's] argument about the scale of New Commonwealth immigration into Britain" (146). She too believed that immigration "threatened not just public order but also the way of life of some communities, themselves already beginning to be demoralized by insensitive housing policies, Social Security dependence and the onset of the 'permissive society'" (146).

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