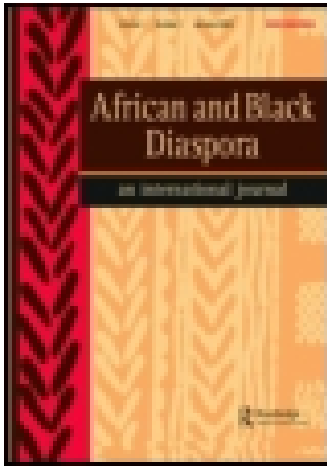


This article was downloaded by: [173.9.31.225]

On: 30 April 2015, At: 13:36

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rabd20>

The imperfect longing: Sam Selvon's The Lonely Londoners and the dance of doubt

Alicia E. Ellis^a

^a School of Humanities, Arts & Cultural Studies, Hampshire College, Amherst, MA, USA

Published online: 15 Apr 2015.



CrossMark

[Click for updates](#)

To cite this article: Alicia E. Ellis (2015): The imperfect longing: Sam Selvon's The Lonely Londoners and the dance of doubt, African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal, DOI: [10.1080/17528631.2015.1027327](https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2015.1027327)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2015.1027327>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

The imperfect longing: Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and the dance of doubt

Alicia E. Ellis*

School of Humanities, Arts & Cultural Studies, Hampshire College, Amherst, MA, USA

This paper explores the social and narrative construction of immigrant identity and diasporicity in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. The stories of the immigrant men in this novel rely on the scaffolding of the narratives by Moses Aloetta, an early migrant to London from the colonial space. Moses depicts the experience of movement as part of a larger lyrical analysis of exclusionary practices embedded in language practices that the men defy in order to claim London as home. The treatment of London as a site in which inclusion is negotiated and the center becomes the eccentric reverses conventional configurations of space whereby the men's stories become the elocutionary point of view in which adaptation and contingency become the locus of life and living. *The Lonely Londoners* offers an aesthetics of modernity and migration located in speech acts – the ballad, the episode, and the lark. This literary creation of a diasporic imaginary calls attention to the various, sometimes conflicting ways in which the idea of home can be invoked and maintained.

Keywords: Sam Selvon; *The Lonely Londoners*; Black Atlantic; immigration; diaspora; language

In his short novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, Sam Selvon (1923–1994), a Trinidadian of Indian descent, offers a literary representation of home and homelessness and a shared exilic identity in the story of a group of men, immigrants from the West Indian island nations (with one exception – a Nigerian named Cap), that were formerly colonial possessions of Great Britain. Selvon's work offers a textually rich and rhetorically singular approach for examining the longing for what is yet to be achieved or even fully imagined in this diasporic space, a critical site on which the question of cultural identity is articulated and made contentious. *The Lonely Londoners* does the intellectual and narrative work of representing the social identities of lives at the seam of dislocation and fragmentation. The grammar of this slight novel is one that is differently voiced and polyvocal yet moody with the disappointments of failed attempts at inclusion. Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* become subjects of diaspora as well as constitutive of diaspora. Voiced by a working-class black vernacular idiom, the stories of the men in Selvon's novel move along the cusp of two cultures. It is the idiom of these immigrant men that tugs at, expands and teases the British-ness out of their experiences and inscribes the diasporic onto the cityscape. Shifting the discursive center from the imperial center, London, to this immigrant group is an inversion of the standard dynamic of the margin and the center. If we were to pause briefly and think of nation-ness as articulated by Homi Bhabha, we are

*Email: aeeHA@hampshire.edu

not witness to a nation ‘coming into being’ as much as we are witnessing a nation that will be transformed and be subject to newness as a feature of the end of its empire:

Nations, like narrative, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation—or narration—might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west. (Bhabha 1990, 1)

In this piece I offer exploratory conjectures rather than a set of absolute diagnoses that would reflect an intimate and fixed interpretation of aesthetic categories that emerged in the first novels of the Windrush immigrants during the late 1940s and 1950s. Other novels that portray the black immigrant experience in the earliest days of Commonwealth emigration range from Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Wilson Harris's (1960) *The Palace of the Peacock*, and V.S. Naipaul's (1967) *The Mimic Men*. These novels – for example, George Lamming's *The Emigrants* (1954) – trace similar themes related to colonialism and exile and how those two structures have shaped the Caribbean consciousness as the primary artifact of cultural imperialism.¹ Selvon's slight novel is a compelling textualization of two groups which often overlapped: the Windrush writers of the 1950s, whose experimental prose style ushered in a new discursive mode of black modernity, and the working-class characters who populated those texts. Selvon experimented with linguistic structures in order to begin this (re) mapping of London after the end of empire. His juxtapositions are emphasized by the technologies of cartography: scale and perspective. I argue that *The Lonely Londoners* inflects the modern semantics of loneliness by reversing the concept of transnational formations to privilege the stories of the arrivants rather than that of the local culture. This brings Selvon's work into conversation with earlier and interdisciplinary concepts of a permanent alterity formulated as the ‘eternal stranger’, by the German sociologist, philosopher, and critic, Georg Simmel (1858–1918).

Selvon presents us with Moses who, instead of providing a stable, integrated narrative of immigration to London after the first wave of Windrush movement, is focused on the piecemeal, the episodic, ‘the ballad’, of the many small disappointments of lives inhabited on the margins of London. The narrative, an exploration of and disputation with the cityscape, is not haphazard but rather shows a disenchantment with the obligation to craft selfhood as an always emerging category of the self in the (new) world of London. *Moses Ascending* (Selvon 1975) and *Moses Migrating* (Selvon 1983), the sequels to *The Lonely Londoners*, demonstrate Selvon's investment in a certain kind of continuity – in the telling of these fractured but compound stories as a polyphonic montage of lives and experiences. This contingent self exists in a state of emergency and must thus be, to some extent, poised at the moment when certainty reveals itself as an inchoate desire, a drive to suture the disparate longings that rise to the top of narratives composed at the periphery. Here, Moses reconciles the often-turbulent desires of the men to create themselves through language with the deliberately hybrid pace of his own narrative process.

In the aftermath of World War II, the British Empire had crumbled but the remnants of its imperial reach remained in the form of its former colonial subjects who arrived and settled in order to survey the mother country.² Thus, the international (the Empire) became emblematic of the national (England). Britain now had to claim, even if it would not include, an increasing immigrant population from its former colonies, people who

were actively constructing a new kind of knowledge about the mother country through their negotiation and manipulation of London. Yet postwar London does indeed become a site where a new construction of nation must come face to face with its historical imperial successes – the colonial is now the post-colonial and the once colonized is no longer an object of language but rather a producer of discourse. He figures forth in his own name and about his own self.

In a voice that is both episodic in its presentation and lyrical in its representation, Moses Aloetta, an earlier arrivant, recognizes the particularity of each man's history and narrates those experiences as individual yet interconnected narrative happenings. The primary voice of *The Lonely Londoners*, Moses creates the narrative space for the solidification of individual identity by shaping the story of each man as a linguistic representation that accesses language even in the midst of invisibility. This free and indirect narrative style or focalization allows Moses to function as the mediator for the multiple perspectives offered by the stories of the men in this immigrant community. As the men make their way through the streets of London, Moses fills out their stories as an aesthetic practice that challenges and resists other exclusionary and racialized cultural systems that would define this group of men without taking into account their individualism as an inextricable component of their new and changing relationship to the city. The former colonial subjects relocate London, the mother country and the image of empire – to the margins of narrative as they pursue a language in which to express themselves. This is a literary exploration of the formation of black identities that comes through as a desire for language and visibility that is underpinned by an uncertainty about the stability that such a revision and extension of identity might offer.

Selvon's narrative technique and the incorporation of non-standard language use such as dialect and slang provide fertile ground to express the experiences of the community of men as they struggle for and achieve voice. Similarly, Derek Walcott (1970), the Trinidadian poet, dramatist and essayist, observed in his essay 'What the Twilight Says' that: 'since art is informed by something beyond its power, all we could successfully enact was a dance of doubt' (8). This dance, a rhythmic movement, a delicate balance of partners, is the syncopation of feeling and form; it is the pace and the gait, the placement of the body and the response of the form to the content, the enunciation of the singularity of narrative lives in which doubt becomes the lived experience and the negotiation of identity.

The urgency of the individual stories in the novel, essentially narratives of discontinuity shaped by Moses, demonstrates the schizophrenic pressures on immigrant identities as part of the staging of national narratives. These men are in a constant state of discomfort: they are tremulous, uncomfortable, disconcerted, and confused by the burden of unceasing accommodation, the eternal burden of the alien, the exile, the outsider, the stranger, and the former colonial subject. Yet that urgency is tempered by the deliberate patience with which the men treat their new homes and the manner in which Moses guides their narrative experiences as important, worthy of expression and central to the construction of a new kind of knowledge as a negotiation of origins.

This essay emphasizes the hybrid and restless nature of Selvon's novel, a text that, in my reading, is part of an intellectual conversation with other texts and literary forms as well with the theorists of cultural studies and of philosophy. *The Lonely Londoners* moves in and out of cultural moments, aligns itself with discursive practices, and then breaks out of static theoretical frames. The narrative lives of Selvon's immigrant men are in constant movement as they associate and then disassociate as part of a process of

identity formation that has very real implications for the text and its context. The rest of this essay falls into sections wherein the complexity and vibrancy of Selvon's novel takes part in multiple twentieth century discursive transactions around genre, forms of enunciation, and cultural origins. Hence, this study of Selvon's novel is also apace with the lives of the men, their doubt, and their urgent need for stability.

Writing a group of immigrant men into visibility in the mid-century brings Selvon's novel into conversation with Paul Gilroy's (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, a text where the analysis of movement, relocation and transformation are the organizational motifs. Indeed Gilroy defines the Black Atlantic as the intercultural and transnational formation of black experiences in the modern world (xi). These social and historical transit zones are also poly-vocal and open-ended and suggest an unfinished and inexhaustible quality to analyses of transnational formations. Given the 40 years that separate their publications, the struggle to articulate identity is very much a part of Gilroy's 'counterculture of modernity', one that signifies struggles to claim space through narrative acts that are also performances of creative resistance. These acts of resistance that Selvon's migrant community commit are constitutive of a new London that has been opened to the potentiality of oppositional discourse in immigrant communities.

In many respects, Gilroy's assertion of black embeddedness in the modern world is prefatory for understanding Selvon's movement of narrativity to the site where the stories of Anglo-Caribbean transnational bodies are prioritized rather than those of established English identities. This is where black British literature is created. This formation is at play with considerations of aesthetic practice and, cultural representations that are fluid, transitional, and cosmopolitan. Thus, Selvon's novel is a pre-figuration of many of the arguments that Gilroy advances such as cultural hybridity and the processes of cultural evolutions, access to ideas and institutions, and institutionalized racism as a form of social confinement. The experience of black people in *The Lonely Londoners* emphasizes how social antagonisms can produce diverse cultural texts that also resist diffusion and simplification by dominant social structures. Selvon's novel and Gilroy's study emphasize transnational formations that deflect, restrict, and deny the exclusionary efforts of the metropole and accordingly revise the history of modernism and modernity.

The form of the novel, with its multiple stories of the male immigrants, does not privilege a particular subject position over another. However, Moses is the narrator and all characters are filtered through his narrative voice. *The Lonely Londoners* focuses on the status – as discrete but interconnected stories – of the immigrant male of the working poor, using creolized English, or in the words of Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1984), 'nation language', (5–6) in addition to a patois, standard English and stream of consciousness serve as its discursive figurations. This textual and semantic investment in subject formation as a part of the unfinished identity of the immigrant demonstrates the salience of language, speech, idiom, and syntax to the maintenance of multicultural identity and its formation and dissemination in the metropolis. These rhythms provide the reader access to of a group of men who find themselves in their own drama and know it as their own drama. Thus, the episodes and the ballads are acknowledgments of the intellectual and poetic labors of attempts at identity formation. Here, Selvon works at a progressive framing and reframing, or perhaps even a refiguration, of the stories of these men as a foregrounding of alternative protagonists as a part of the question of representation. The constitution of identity and aesthetic forms is central to the work of *The Lonely Londoners*. While there is insufficient space to treat each man extensively as a singular characters, one important element of their

accumulative and overlapping stories relies on Moses's scaffolding of the men's experiences of space, place, and perspective. This creates a kind of reversal of conventional spaces whereby the men's stories become the point of view of immigration to Britain.

Invisible cities

If the city disguises the secret of its own ruination and fundamental evolution, then the aporetic nature of Moses' reflections on London signals its apartness from the words that are used to describe it:

One grim evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet. (Selvon 1956, 1)

Selvon's choice to have Moses open the novel in this dream-like manner produces a literary ascent that hinges on the irreality of the location. The opening words of Selvon's novel are attentive to what the city is not. It is not real, it is restless, it is in disguise, and it is strange – foreign even to itself. Thus, the longing for a city which is not even itself marks what, in my exploration, is the perplexity of 'the limits of truth'.³ London is not present in itself, but exists as an uncanny landscape where Moses, the primary interlocutor, and his fellow immigrants must trespass in order to cross and even access the borders of truth. The opening words of the novel are reminiscent of the formalities of the traditional fairy tale but also respond to discourses that represent the modern city as a stream of consciousness diegetic movement of people and language. The restlessly sleeping fog allows the text to continue with this spatial introduction of London that is simultaneously inside and outside, and thus share the status of belonging and not belonging and remain positioned as both proximal and distant.

It is in this space of suture where Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* seems most conversant with Italo Calvino's (1972) *Invisible Cities* when Marco Polo, the Italian explorer, tells the aging leader of the Mongol Empire, Kublai Khan: 'No one ... knows better than you that the city must never be confused with the words that describe it. And yet between the one and the other there is a connection' (61). Earlier in their exchanges, Marco Polo insisted that 'Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else' (44). I want to stop for a moment to suggest that this discursive thread that Marco Polo discovers is worthy of a brief pursuit – a gentle tug at the fibers – to bring us to Sam Selvon's exploration of the incompleteness of longing, that is, its imperfect status, a function of a desiring grammar that remains marked by layers of signification whose real condition, or aspiration, is always aimed elsewhere. This imperfect longing expresses something that is ongoing and never complete, not perfect in itself. Here is where identity becomes the filament – it is born in a past moment and then continues or is repeated as an ongoing and uncompleted action in a revision of London as the colonized space and, in many respects, a literary space. The ideal and the reality pursued in *Invisible Cities* is a discourse – at the object level – that might inform a (re)mapping of diaspora, routed through London and into Selvon's text, whose title already suggests the disappointments that post-war immigrants to London faced – the loneliness that adheres to the city of their dreams. Although Moses recognizes that 'the city' is not the ideal, he remains attached to it as a promise:

What is it that a city have, that any place in the world have, that you get so much to like it you wouldn't leave it for anywhere else? What it is that would keep men although by and large, in truth and in fact, they ... staying in a cramp-up room where you have to do everything – sleep, eat, dress, wash, cook, live. Why it is, that although they grumble about it all the time, curse the people, curse the government, say all kind of thing about this and that, why it is, that in the end, everyone cagey about saying outright that if the chance come they will go back to them green islands in the sun? (134)

The reality of their lives in London might confound these men, but none think of leaving to return to the other 'home'. London remains a phantasm, an irreality. In order to achieve the city, to belong to it, one must remain willful, even unruly when the allure of the city as a conceptual motif crumbles at the edges of the unemployment lines or cracks at the arrival of the boat-train from Waterloo.⁴ This is to say that these immigrants travel to the new non-place and their language becomes filled with doubt and ambiguity as textual or even documentary assemblages. To remain flexible and open to the plasticity of daily life for these men, Selvon does not allow his reader to distinguish between what is merely ludic and what is an actuality of the lived experience of these men. These accumulations of identity are achieved not through architectural or structural artistic work but rather as episodic plot structures that oscillate between formal and informal practices that take place in the privacy of the boarding house room or the public space of the park, the bus stop, and the unemployment office. These are the performances of the new lives that these men fashion for themselves. It is the labor for the nation and national belonging. They are contingent, continuously on the move, and always adapting.

Committed to the narrative lives of texts as we are, the possibility that London, a traditional site of lavish textual ornamentation, might be meaningless and vacant is a shock that resonates in the narrative that Moses Aloetta offers us. Disclosing nothing of his own origins, Moses' voice is the frame of the novel ushers us into the lives of a motley crew of immigrant men from Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, and Nigeria. He is witness, ringleader, and dreamer. While he rarely discloses anything of himself, Moses offers the men a physical and imaginative space to tell their lives, reflect on the past-ness of life, and on the moments of ascendancy that creates the literature that is evidence of black modernity in mid-century London.⁵

In her work on Sam Selvon, Lisa Kabesh (2011) described the novel as 'an enunciative text; it produces the community it describes in the act of writing, recording and mapping its voices and movements' (1) that reveals something of a mapping of mobile lives revealed by the appearance of loose and easy lives led by this motley collection of men who work (sometimes, when they are permitted) hustle and scam (always) and survive using their wits and the talk. The overlapping and interlocking stories of Trinidadian men: 'Sir Galahad', 'Bart', and 'Big City', the (former) Nigerian university student, 'Captain'; the Jamaicans: 'Tolroy', 'Lewis', 'Bart', and 'Harris'; and the one Bajan, 'Five Past Twelve', emerge and remain incomplete and unfinished, not out of a desire to escape the formality of a fixed self, but rather out of the necessity to adapt to the cultural and political undercurrents of their contexts. Their identities are improvised, shaped in the doing. Not one of these men can publically claim London as his own, not with any certainty. They are tense, ready to spring into a new narrative space where they can narrate their own experience in language as acts of storytelling. One of their favorite pastimes, as Moses recollects, is sitting together 'in the grimness of the winter ... 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' (134). Nearly every Sunday morning in Moses' room, these men come together to reveal to each other their stories, the women they saw and the jobs they wanted. They are self-consciously re-enacting their different voices and performing their own content as linguistic constructs of instability, precarity, and the willfulness of their own desires, which may run counter to that of what their new lives might want to give them. The relations of words in the sentence or the principles of their representation are literary marks – indications of feeling. They are scripted in Selvon's poly-vocal composition through the yearning of these men for belonging. That grammar is a kind of knowledge. I would argue that the very grammar of *The Lonely Londoners* is an inscription of desiring subjectivities. These assemblages of unfinished identities demonstrate what Marco Polo called the absurdity, the deceit, and the masquerade of the city, a poor offering if that is all a man may expect.

It is the working-class immigrant story which assumes centrality, as if London were already a black city which had expelled the difficulty of race by sequestering these stories in the single room in a boarding house, waiting for the bus, walking in the park, or attending a fete. That is, the stories are not necessarily formal considerations of race and racial formation but rather they are stories, 'ballads', 'episodes' about 'characters' and the challenge of shaping a new world which allows for the plurality of feeling, telling, and understanding that posit black identities as their central interests. This new concern of literary production – black lives – persists even if these stories remain unfinished, inchoate, and impenetrable articulations of an invisible city. In order to mark our boundaries, it may be useful to return to Calvino for a moment to think about the emperor and the adventurer, both despots of a kind but still remarkable in their unhomed selves:

Kublai Khan responds to Marco Polo: Your cities do not exist. Perhaps they have never existed. It is sure they will never exist again. Why do you amuse yourself with consolatory fables? I know well that my empire is rotting like a corpse in a swamp, whose contagion infects the crows that peck it as well as the bamboo that grows, fertilized by its humors. Why do you not speak to me of this?

Polo knew it was best to fall in with the sovereign's dark mood. 'Yes, the empire is sick, and what is worse, it is trying to become accustomed to its sores. This is the aim of my explorations: examining the traces of happiness still to be glimpsed, I gauge its short supply. If you want to know how much darkness there is around you, you must sharpen your eyes, peering at the faint lights in the distance.' (59)

Genre and periodization

The theorization of black identity as a task of literary scholarship is a vital topic for this reading of Selvon's novel, as is the term 'diaspora' for the spaces which Selvon's immigrants navigate as they encounter the material and social reality of exclusion, targeted at their marked male bodies. As a series of extended racial events that are embedded in the frame of a (white) performance of racial and national superiority, *The Lonely Londoners* is a representation of the function of the idea of 'color' in what the American sociologist Joe Feagin calls the 'white racial frame'. Thus, comments about and criticisms of people of color by the white racial frame substantiate the deep racism embedded in personal, institutional, and national narratives of a recirculating systemic practice of racial exclusion.⁶ In addition to examining racism in terms of a structure, we can also think of Black Atlantic crossings and twentieth-century Black diasporic spaces

as counterweights to structural and individual racisms. These crossings are also in tension with the realization by the English of the ‘problem’ of (black) immigration.⁷

As is often the case, the slender narrative – that text which seems most expendable because of its brevity – has frequently pointed out with lapidary insight the tragedies of our common cause in the twentieth century. In the German, Thomas Mann’s (1912) *Death in Venice* and the Mexican writer, Juan Rulfo’s (1955) *Pedro Páramo* are just two examples of works that expose an intrinsic difference in the movement from one epoch to another, evoking narrative dispositions unsuited to the spirit of the new world coming into existence. Rulfo and Mann remake and disrupt conventional twentieth-century literary topoi through the possibility of discourses that are poly-vocal and multinational. Both texts, flanking the epoch of modernism, represent a decline: the presentation of ghostly texts in which the society as it had been shaped was no longer achievable or desirable. Mann (perhaps unwittingly) and Rulfo (certainly willfully) presented a fractious past imbued with a complex nostalgia, of a slightly different hue, for that inaccessible moment in which narrative and the body grew up and around each other in a thorny relation. Selvon’s novel is shaped by an engagement with and manipulation of the metropolitan space (the former capital of empire) as a new post-colonial London – an urban space that is now inscribed and mapped as diasporic.

To be more specific and perhaps circle in a bit more tightly on the theme of modernity and its ‘others,’ I should clarify that my understanding of ‘modernist’ and ‘modernity’ resides with a post-*fin de siècle* sensibility, that of literary modernism, represented by authors such as Lawrence, Woolf, Beckett, Joyce, Pound, Auden, Yeats, and Eliot. This critical moment represented a passage from a late-nineteenth century realism-cum-naturalism to the fatal nostalgia of a Great War generation that became increasingly cynical and disillusioned – of institutions, people, and even the idea of an absolute ‘truth’ – and instead, became increasingly introspective, disenchanting and focused on decline. Thus, interior monolog and stream of consciousness became the predominant strategic choice of new mode of literary production and social interaction as these writers rejected what had seemed concrete and turned inward in order to imagine possibilities for novel formulations of subjectivity and identity. In the essay, ‘Modernity and Literary Tradition’, the German literary scholar Hans Robert Jauss (2005) wrote:

It (literary tradition) only begins to disclose itself in the historical transformation of the consciousness of modernity, becoming recognizable to us as a history-making force at those points where its necessary antithesis comes to light, in the self-understanding of a new present and its sloughing-off of some past. (331)

Here, Jauss allows for a moment at which we see modernity as a ‘historical repetition’ (329) since it is meant to indicate a distinction between a formerly legitimate self-understanding and the upstart, a new claimant to the validity of a perceiving self as a spatial and linguistic phenomena. In this sense, historicism and consciousness must make common peace in order to move ahead with the task of a new version of ‘modernity’, one that is always trailing its old skin behind it.

Conclusion

Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* presented a framework to examine the formation of political and philosophical paradigms based on the Atlantic as a place of transit and

exchange. The opening epigraphs of Gilroy's study call attention to the plural and hybrid processes of intercultural and transnational meaning-making that are embryonic testimonies of movement, loss, travel, and relocation. He works at creating new ways to talk about culture and identity, which, he asserts, are relational rather than hierarchical through citations of Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Frederick Douglass, and Édouard Glissant. In this context, Gilroy's use of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* ([1882] 1974) is especially noteworthy for its prescient assessment of a rapidly dissolving conceptual language that allows for the realization of 'home' or 'land':

We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us – indeed, we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us ... Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more freedom – and there is no longer any 'land'. (180–181)

Loss becomes emblematic of the modern experience of mobility: 'home' no longer exists as a place to which one might readily return. *The Black Atlantic* demonstrates that cultural and national identities are shaped through the interplay among language, knowledge, and homelessness. Gilroy writes of his own study that is '... rooted in and routed through the special stress that grows with the effort involved in trying to face (at least) two ways at once' (3). By calling attention to the notion of an 'unfinished identity', one that is forced into poly-vocal and poly-visual postures, Gilroy reveals a double consciousness that is both black and European (1). Gilroy's work provided the context, the organizational terms, on which intercultural exchange becomes the method for crafting identities – even those that will remain unfinished. Forty years earlier, Selvon's novel moved on the surface of scale and perspective where any re-mapping of juxtapositions, proximities, and boundaries will present a multi-perspectival network of interrelated accounts. Selvon's *Moses* brings these disparate stories together through the creation of spaces that call attention to various, sometimes conflicting, views about Britain's multicultural formation.

The status of the stranger as constitutive of the home and the inability to move from the foreign to the native demonstrates the instability of identity formation when the subjectivity of the men remains unconfirmed by the larger 'society'. Thus, Sir Galahad, Bart, Big City, Captain, Tolroy, Lewis, Bart, Harris and Five Past Twelve reside in a space where they must create new identities that are consistently undercut by the exclusionary methods that deflect the idea of the immigrant. The instability, disappointments, and what many of these men call 'hurtful' moments are framed by Moses. He tells these narratives of self-creation that by the end of the telling are failed narratives of integration, revealing the gaps and fissures of this new geography. Yet, these narratives of only partial affiliation disrupt and open up spaces for the lives of these men as they negotiate their origins and navigate the city on their own terms. As they discover their own disenchantment, the men's stories change – from tales of resilience to stories of grim determination to hold on to the new 'home'. Thus, Moses seeks to articulate the different ways in which these men can know the "own-ness of their lives, its proper possibility..." (Derrida 1993, 3).

Moses speaks again at the end of the novel about the city – differently voiced in this moment but as lyrical as before:

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. (134)

The city remains opaque and anonymous, a place that lives in the figurative even as its immigrant inhabitants recreate it for the needs of the daily.

The characterizations of the men who struggle to name ‘home’ in Selvon’s novella allow Moses, the narrator, to assess the perplexity of longing for both the ‘here’ and the ‘over there’. The crisis of positionality – both physical and psychic – expressed by Selvon’s characters is an alternating and accelerating *aporia* – in both meaning and understanding. Not merely doubt, but a lack and a limit – something that has been lost or only exists as an indistinct imprint or trace – inform the stories that Moses narrates. The deliberate expansion of the literary space to incorporate otherwise mute life stories created a text that is both ‘separate’ and also well defined. Rhetorically and philosophically, Selvon’s characters voice this tension about the location of ‘home’ (through narration and dialogue) using a creolized yet modernist nostalgic tone in addition to Standard English:

Sometimes, after they gone, he hear the voices ringing in his ear, and sometimes tears come to his eyes and he don’t know why really, if is homesickness or if is just that life in general beginning to get too hard. (136)

To be at a loss, to be incomplete and incompatible, to be caught up in the two-ness of one’s self, to speak from a double-tongued body – these are the spatial and textual structures that are exposed in the juxtapositions of both race and place – as feats of language – ‘... is as life start all over again, as if it still have time, as if it still have another chance’ (137). Thus, terms such as landscape, materiality, perspective, and crisis inform *The Lonely Londoners* as the achievement of what Walcott names, ‘the learning of the look’. As Moses notes in the final pages of *The Lonely Londoners*, there is something to be found, even if it is hopeless, ‘behind the ballad and the episode’ (138) – a telling remark on his own usage and experience as the narrativized life that Selvon advances. The look, the hope, the ambiguity of naming, and inhabiting home were the central concerns of this paper. These historical trajectories shape political and intellectual identities and are part of the negotiation of cultural spaces.

The Lonely Londoners is an analysis of the relationality of narratives of exile, displacement, and other subject-positions in which the self is both material and idiom. This voicing or ‘mapping’ creates an extended yet imaginative appendix to our experience of Selvon’s text, which George Lamming (1960) named separately and beautifully as ‘the occasion for speaking’ about the ‘peculiar pleasures of exile’. When Sir Galahad notices that smoke comes out of his mouth when he speaks in the depths of winter, Moses responds in the only way that is possible, with an imperfect longing: ‘It is so in this country ... sometimes the words freeze and you have to melt it to hear the talk’ (15).

Notes

1. This list includes the reproductions of such immigration in contemporary authors such as Andrea Levy (b. 1956) and Caryl Phillips (b. 1958) who have made their mark on British literature through the recuperation of immigrant stories in many of their works. Caryl Phillips’s describes his reaction to reading Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* as one that generated “...a sense of being inside and outside Britain at the same time. The literature was shot through with the uncomfortable anxieties of belonging and not belonging [...] [that] underscored my life and the lives of many people of my generation in the Britain of the 1970s and early 1980s” (234) in Phillips, Caryl. Spring 1998. “Following On: The Legacy of Lamming and Selvon.” *Wasafiri*, Vol. 29: 34–36. Reprinted in Phillips, Caryl. 2001. *A New World Order: Selected Essays*. London: Vintage International: 232–238.

2. In 1955, immigrants from the West Indies had increased to 18,000. Just a decade later in 1965, those numbers had jumped to 850,000 or 2 percent of the total population in the UK.
3. Derrida engages Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* ([1927] 1962) in order to develop the idea of the limit as a point of closure, border and demarcation – the negation of the being's other. This leads to Derrida's proposal of the idea of the trace or remnant as alternate ways of thinking spatially about being, nonbeing and difference.
4. In opposition to the first wave of immigrants in 1948 who arrived in the port of Tilbury, the train has become the new point of entry to the metropolitan space. The ship of Selvon's immigrants has already docked in Southampton and brought the newly arrived to Waterloo station, one of the London Underground's stops. As an historical counterpoint, the missing ship – now a metaphor for arrival – voids the text of the significance of slaver ship and the reality of the slave trade. While the ship is absent from *The Lonely Londoners*, the replacement of the ship with the train is still a significant marker of another facet of modernity: industrialization, the global market, and genocide.
5. At that time, there were no immigration restrictions for citizens from one part of the British Empire moving to another part since Britain's 1948 Nationality Act gave UK citizenship to people living in her colonies, including the West Indies. The arrival of MV *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury Dock in London on 22 June 1948, with its 492 West Indian passengers, is regarded as a landmark event in British post-war history, marking the beginning of immigration to Britain from Commonwealth countries and colonies (For the complete document of the British Nationality Act, 1948 [11 & 12 Geo. 6.], see chapter 56: <http://www.uniset.ca/naty/BN1948.htm>).
6. Feagin's work calls attention to the all-pervasive institutions of cultural transmission out of which formal structures of representation and information operate. I would like to thank my colleague Susana Loza for bringing Feagin's work to my attention. It has added tremendously to my thinking on racial representation by offering a new model for evaluating how racialized thought and racism dominate everyday life and how it is deployed to confer privilege and virtue (see Feagin 2010).
7. The question of the Colour Bar is addressed early in the novel (Selvon 1956, 7–12) at the Waterloo station when a white British journalist asks several of the newly arrived why so many Jamaicans (and their families) are coming to England. This question is posed regardless of actual national origin and with no real attention paid to the answer. New immigrants and their families were the subject of national news and legislation as well as a racialized resentment that found its ultimate portrayal in Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech delivered to a Conservative Association meeting in Birmingham on 20 April 1968 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html>).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Bhabha, Homi K., ed. 1990. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge.
- Brathwaite, Kamau. 1984. *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, 5–6. London: New Beacon Books.
- Calvino, Italo. 1972. *Invisible Cities*. Translated by William Weaver. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1993. *Aporias*. Translated by Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Feagin, Joe R. 2010. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. New York: Routledge.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harris, Wilson. 1960. *Palace of the Peacock*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Heidegger, Martin. [1927] 1962. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. 2005. "Modernity and Literary Tradition." Translated by Christian Thorne. *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2): 329–364. doi:10.1086/430964.

- Kabesh, Lisa. 2011. "Mapping Freedom, or Its Limits: The Politics of Movement in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*." *Postcolonial Text* 6 (3): 1–17.
- Lamming, George. 1954. *The Emigrants*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Lamming, George. 1960. *The Pleasures of Exile*. London: Allison & Busby.
- Mann, Thomas. 1912. *Death in Venice: And Seven Other Stories*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Naipaul, V. S. 1967. *The Mimic Men*. New York: Macmillan Company.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. [1882] 1974. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Translated by Walter Arnold Kaufmann. New York: Random House.
- Phillips, Caryl. 1998. "Following on: The Legacy of Lamming and Selvon." *Wasafiri* 29: 34–36.
- Phillips, Caryl. 2001. *A New World Order: Selected Essays*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Rhys, Jean. 1934. *Voyage in the Dark*. London: A. Deutsch.
- Rulfo, Juan. 1955. *Pedro Páramo*. Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden. New York: Grove Press.
- Selvon, Samuel. 1956. *The Lonely Londoners*. London: Penguin.
- Selvon, Samuel. 1975. *Moses Ascending*. London: Heinemann.
- Selvon, Samuel. 1983. *Moses Migrating: A Novel*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Spencer, Ian R. G. 1997. *British Immigration Policy since 1939: The Making of Multi-racial Britain*. New York: Routledge. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10057200>.
- Walcott, Derek. 1970. "What the Twilight Says." *Dream on Monkey Mountain, and Other Plays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.