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Muddling the Middle: Cynical Representations of Ethnic Relations in V.S. and Shiva Naipaul

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13: MUDDLING THE MIDDLE:
CYNICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ETHNIC RELATIONS
IN V.S. AND SHIVA NAIPAUL

KEVIN FRANK

Diversity needs the presence of peoples, no longer as objects to be swallowed up, but with the intention of creating a new relationship. Sameness requires fixed Being, Diversity establishes Becoming. Just as Sameness began with expansionist plunder in the West, Diversity came to light through the political and armed resistance of peoples. As Sameness rises *within* the fascination with the individual, Diversity is spread *through* the dynamism of communities. As the Other is a source of temptation of Sameness, Wholeness is the demand of Diversity. You cannot become Trinidadian or Quebecois, if you are not; but it is from now on true that if Trinidad and Quebec did not exist as accepted components of Diversity, something would be missing from the body of world culture.

— Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*

What I offer here is part of a larger project focused on how Caribbean writers deal with "race" and ethnic relations in the context of creolisation. In this work I am less concerned with Caribbean authors' ethnic or racial affiliations than I am interested in discovering which of our writers show us a way forward, both in the sense of what we may become and what may be most becoming of us, as we, Caribbean people, continue on our quest for transformation from fragmentation to wholeness. (Just for the record at this point, I find Trinidad's Earl Lovelace and Guyana's Harischandra Khemraj, who regrettably has only produced one novel, to be at the forefront of showing us a progressive path.) The nature of creolisation as an essence of Trinidadian and Tobagonian and, more broadly, Caribbean culture, despite the legacy of both open and more subtle resistance to that process, makes it a fertile patch of ground for evaluating the Naipauls' - Seepersad and his sons - contributions to the Caribbean literary tradition, our cultural formation, and our ongoing pursuit of ontological transfiguration.

While it may not be obvious to a tourist, the casual observer if you will, it should be transparent to those with a more discerning eye, with a Carib eye (to borrow a phrase from Edgar Mittelholzer), that in many parts of the

Caribbean, racial beliefs underlie suspicions, resentments, fears and loathings (including, in some instances, self-loathing) that fester just beneath the surface, waiting for the right conditions to erupt. This is especially true in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, where elections have historically been the times when the right conditions are concocted. Shiva Naipaul could well be referring to these two societies in particular when, in *Journey to Nowhere*, he speaks of "lethal resentments and no less lethal visions frothing to the surface everywhere in the English-speaking Caribbean".¹ We saw again the face of *apanjaat* or "vote for your own kind", which means voting in accordance with your racial or ethnic affiliation, leading up to the May 2015 elections in Guyana, and you would have seen it again in Trinidad and Tobago's elections some months later, in September of the same year.

The outcomes of these elections are beside the point. That is politics, the business of gaining and holding governmental and hegemonic power, and the first job of the politician is to be elected. Some may feel that some politicians seem to think that their *only* job is to be elected. But, again, that is politics.

What about our writers? Shouldn't our writers be above such politics? How do the Naipauls (father and sons) write about creolisation and about racial and ethnic relations? When V.S. Naipaul writes the foreword to his father's *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories*, he mentions a crucial ideal in his father's approach to writing, picked up from Gault MacGowan, editor of the *Trinidad Guardian* and supporter of Seepersad Naipaul's writing. This ideal is quite meaningful in examining what all three Naipauls offer the Caribbean literary tradition with respect to the problem of "race", through their representations of both intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic relations:

In 1951, my father wrote to me: 'And as to a writer being hated or liked – I think it's the other way to what you think: a man is doing his work well when people begin *liking* him. I have never forgotten what Gault MacGowan told me years ago: 'Write sympathetically'; and this, I suppose, in no way prevents us from writing truthfully, even brightly.'²

In the line, "I think it's the other way to what you think", we have an insight into V.S. Naipaul's view which, on the evidence over his career, could be summed up as follows: "A writer is doing his work well when people dislike, perhaps even despise him." He continues,

It was through his journalism on MacGowan's *Guardian* that my father arrived at that vision of the countryside and its people which he later transferred to his stories. And the stories have *something of the integrity of the journalism*. [...] There is reformist passion; but even when there is shock [...] there is nothing of the protest – common in early colonial writing – that implies an outside audience; the barbs are all turned inwards. This is part of the distinctiveness of the stories. I stress it because this way of looking, from being my father's, became mine. [my emphasis]³

Here, Sir Vidia suggests father's, connected, and truth that does not precisely as a literary critic of his virtue is somewhat odd, especially by his father's journalism under MacGowan's stewardship for drama"⁴ that unsettled escaping from Devil's Island of journalistic sensation: something strikingly different with a literary heritage, still with an outside audience, especially have come from his travels said to have been written for an audience.

Additionally, in "The End of *Newsweek* (1981) and later in Charles Michener begins his review of *Among the Believers*

Naipaul the writer now flows the celebrated sensibility – stated but finally unexpressed is] a deep emptiness in Naipaul's phenomenon is making a distant concern and more

There is something quiet that makes it meaningful in his father's sympathy as a writer former. Establishing the sense of reference for his conversion critics charged Naipaul his produce his wounding, with West Indian intellectuals at *The Middle Passage* appeared as one of Naipaul's castigations about racial assertion: 'In promptings... in the realisation the attitude of other to the I Gordon Rohlehr perhaps just many things with which V. S. Naipaul's Negro-Creole world in Trinidad of his younger brother.

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Here, Sir Vidia suggests that there is a link between his work and his father's, connected, among other things, to journalistic integrity, to truth that does not preclude sympathy. Of course, here he is writing as a literary critic of his father's work, and the appeal to journalistic virtue is somewhat odd, especially as it pertains to fiction, even if informed by his father's journalism. Moreover, as he puts it, the "journalism" under MacGowan's stewardship at the *Guardian* was one with a "taste for drama"⁴ that unsettled some: "Voodoo in backyards, obeah, prisoners escaping from Devil's Island, vampire bats."⁵ This seems more the material of journalistic sensationalism than journalistic probity. Still, there is something strikingly disingenuous about V.S. Naipaul aligning himself with a literary heritage, such as his father's, not concerned particularly with an outside audience, especially given that some of his greater successes have come from his travel writing, works which cannot reasonably be said to have been written with the native or local as the primary, intended audience.

Additionally, in "The Dark Visions of V.S. Naipaul," first published in *Newsweek* (1981) and later in the collection, *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul*, Charles Michener begins by referring epigraphically to Edward Said's review of *Among the Believers* in *New Statesman* (1981). Said assesses,

Naipaul the writer now flows directly into Naipaul the social phenomenon, the celebrated sensibility on tour... [He] carries with him a kind of half-stated but finally unexamined reverence for the colonial order. [There is] a deep emptiness in Naipaul the writer for which Naipaul the social phenomenon is making others pay... All this to promote an attitude of distant concern and moral superiority in the reader.⁶

There is something quite revealing in the idea of "making others pay" that makes it meaningful in examining Naipaul's claim of inheriting his father's sympathy as a writer. The latter seems irreconcilable with the former. Establishing the setting and further inscribing the thematic frame of reference for his conversation with Naipaul, Michener writes, "Some critics charged Naipaul himself with cruelty after he began to travel and produce his wounding, wounded reports on the West Indies and India. West Indian intellectuals attacked him for narrowness and arrogance after *The Middle Passage* appeared in 1962".⁷ Michener rightly describes this work as one of Naipaul's castigating books, and he adds that it is "precocious about racial assertion: 'Negro racialism... has profound intellectual promptings... in the realisation that the Negro problem lies not simply in the attitude of other to the Negro, but in the Negro's attitude to himself'.⁸ Gordon Rohlehr perhaps puts it best when he observes that, among the many things with which V.S. Naipaul "has not come to terms [is] ... the Negro-Creole world in Trinidad".⁹ As we will see, the same could be said of his younger brother.

In "The Adventures of Gurudeva", the story that lends its title to the entire collection, Seepersad Naipaul's ethnic outlook seems best represented in Schoolmaster Sohun's views regarding creolisation, assimilation, and authenticity. Cautioning Gurudeva in his fight against Pundit Biswas, in his insistence upon his version of orthodox Hinduism, Sohun declares,

In a country such as the West Indies, Western culture and habits are the passport to progress. You people want to build a little India of your own in Trinidad. You are trying to dance top in mud. It cannot be done. The difficulty lies in the fact that you are too much of a majority to assimilate, too much of a minority to dominate. On every hand you are pressed by Western influence. You cannot be entirely Oriental, nor entirely Occidental; you can no more be entirely Western than you can be entirely Eastern; neither a hundred per cent European nor a hundred per cent Indian. You will be distinctly West Indian."¹⁰

At this moment, what appears as only an intra-ethnic and related religious problem has tremendous implications for inclusive, holistic Trinbagonian and, more broadly, Caribbean identity formation. The schoolmaster makes the case for embracing creolisation and locating one's authenticity in the reality of that fully mixed heritage. However, there is an equally great significance in his speech. He rightly identifies the majority/minority complex hindering the assimilation process and underlying the quest for political domination that plays out in various ways and at various times, but especially – and not without aspects of the carnivalesque – during election times, when the struggle for ascendancy is further energised by "race"-baiting.

In a later edition of his seminal work, *The West Indian Novel and its Background*, Kenneth Ramchand explains his addition of a chapter on Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*:

This essay on Lovelace's novel of 1979 is included in this new edition as a new chapter, and inserted after the discussion of *A House for Mr. Biswas* because it takes the argument forward from *Biswas* into a discussion of Indian-African relations and towards an exploration of the place of cultures other than European and African in the making of the creole culture of Trinidad and Tobago. These are crucial issues.¹¹

These are pivotal matters, and they are as pressing today as they were at the time Ramchand wrote those words, if not more so. What Ramchand means by taking the argument forward from *Biswas* is that in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, "Naipaul shows his Indians confronting, not the Africans themselves but the city where the Africans are in the majority".¹¹

It is in the confrontation with the Africans, that is with "blackness" – that inescapable presence in the creole continuum – that there is a marked, albeit understandable difference between Seepersad and both of his sons. Naipaul, the father, writes before the "Black Power" movements that

appear to disturb his sons. Th in the Caribbean and its liter critique of R. M. Lacovia's culture is African-based, it Indian, Indian, Chinese). T based on a static concept".¹³ ing the very problem he is foundation of the culture v culture African-based, even is in itself a stagnant formu given Cudjoe's good intent, spread throughout the cult

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appear to disturb his sons. This "blackness" problem pertinent to creolisation in the Caribbean and its literary tradition is at the heart of Selwyn Cudjoe's critique of R. M. Lacovia's reading of V.S. Naipaul: "While Caribbean culture is African-based, it is suffused with many other elements (East Indian, Indian, Chinese). Therefore, it is irrational to set up guidelines based on a static concept".¹³ Of course, Cudjoe unwittingly risks replicating the very problem he is addressing in his privileging of Africa at the foundation of the culture when he unquestioningly declares Caribbean culture African-based, even while granting there are other elements. This is in itself a stagnant formulation and it is both ironic and contradictory given Cudjoe's good intent, for suffusion would mean all the elements are spread throughout the culture, including at the base of the culture.

A telling interview pertinent to examining V.S. Naipaul's inheritance of the sympathetic writing hand is his response to Bharati Mukherjee's and Robert Boyers' question concerning *The Middle Passage*. They asked: "But it was said, when it appeared, that you were approaching the country with preconceived conclusions – that you went to confirm expectations rather than to explore what was before you".¹⁴ Naipaul responds,

Yes, there were complaints. In the 1960's people were shouting for certain political movements in those places I visited, so when I stepped in to say that this is stupid, that this is just routine, nothing more than public affairs, those who were shouting did not approve. [...] And you know, I think that the books of real writers, even *when they are reporter's books*, must be judged on their ability to stand up. [my emphasis; here is that journalism link]¹⁵

Regarding a book's ability to stand up, one question is, stand up for what, or for whom? I am being somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Nevertheless, it is one thing to insist upon the test of time as a measure of literary merit; it is entirely another to evaluate standing up for higher principles, such as objective, holistic truth instead of narrow, jaded, personal truth as objective moral judgment.

This dilemma is a particular point of contention as Naipaul continues his retort to the accusation of seeing with a predetermined eye:

If *The Middle Passage* is found untrue today, 18 years later, then I will debate what seems untrue... I refused to go in with preconceived notions ... Don't tell me... that I shouldn't have said what I say about the illiterate black man shouting for racial redemption and found to get nowhere. Will you say they have gotten somewhere? ... I say they've taken several large steps back to the bush. And it's surprised me. I never thought that after 300 years of the new world an African people could return to the bush.¹⁶

Mukherjee decries, "What is amazing to me is the confidence with which you can say that the objective truth is they have returned to the bush."¹⁷ Naipaul explains,

I'm being very provocative, but I'm also speaking with a lot of bitterness. And much unhappiness. Because it is not pleasant to see the place where you were born destroyed, and that is the bottom of it. There are no institutions, nothing to refer to any longer. You cannot refer to any idea of law, or honesty about public money or the rights of all men, because racialist politics in a way rejects all these values.¹⁸

Of course, a partial truth exists in Naipaul's complaint: racialist politics do undermine the rights of all men, and he is provocative, unhappy and bitter, which he apparently was at the time of writing *The Middle Passage*. This is precisely why he could not help but go in with preconceived notions, and why he could not do otherwise than to see and write unsympathetically and cynically, meaning in the interest of his own group.

There are many rich moments in *The Middle Passage* where V.S. Naipaul's acrimonious, self-interested, and group-interested political views are on display. But one that stands out prominently and serves the purpose is his summation of the problems with "race" in Trinidad. Despite the appearance of an all-round condemnation of racialism in the work, ultimately, Naipaul represents Indian racialism as benign, in stark contrast to baleful African racialism. "Though now one racialism seems to be reacting on the other," he surmises, "each has different roots."¹⁹ The point is in the contrast as he carries on: "Indian politicians have created Indian racialism out of harmless egoism", whereas the Negroes' racialism is the result of prejudices "inherited from the white man." Moreover, seen as "the sentimental camaraderie of skin which provides the cheap thrill of being 'African'", the connotation regarding Negro racialism is that it is pernicious. That idea is driven home in the violent threat of Negroes demonstrating upon Lumumba's death, who "were singing hymns, which contrasted with the violence of their banners and placards."²⁰ A related problem is that Naipaul's partial truth suggests that the peril of racialist politics is one-directional, emanating solely from African people in the new world – "the black man shouting for racial redemption." It is a cynical position, through which he can distance himself and his ethnic group from the pitfalls of "race" that permeate his society and all in it. It is a self-serving, captious position through which he can claim a moral superiority and align himself with the supposed moral superiority of his main readers, the outside audience, while confirming their expectations.

"Black Power" similarly discomposes the imagination of Sir Vidia's younger brother, Shiva Naipaul, resulting in misanthropic compositions on those he sees as the Other. A good case in point is Shiva's journalistic jaunt, *Journey to Nowhere* (first published as *Black and White*). He clearly projects himself as a writer in the journalistic tradition when he declares, "Journalists, I was aware, were not generally welcome in Guyana,"²¹ which brings us to the consideration of his objectivity and whether he measures

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up to his father Seepersad's ideal of writing sympathetically, which is connected to the notion of fairness or impartiality in pursuit of truth. However, the way in which Shiva depicts racial conflict raises questions about his objectivity and suggests that his sympathy is decidedly one-sided:

Fourteen years earlier when I had left Trinidad for England, British Guiana had been caught in the toils of yet another bout of racial warfare between blacks and Indians. The Mighty Sparrow (Trinidad's top calypso singer) was singing: 'I don't care if the whole of B.G. burn down/ I don't care if the whole of Bookers burn down...' But Guyana's troubles had started long before that. I was eight years old in 1953 when, in fear of a Communist takeover by the People's Progressive Party led by Cheddi Jagan, the Constitution was suspended and British troops landed. From then on, the place became indelibly associated with unsavory tumult and drama.²²

What is left unsaid here, the dangling connotation, is that the unsavoury tumult is the direct and sole result of "the excesses of an unrestrained and cynical black supremacy",²³ led by Forbes Burnham. This view is confirmed when he tells of his conversations with the PPP (Cheddi Jagan happened to be away, so Janet Jagan stands in as the party's representative). He concludes, "A child could understand that the PNC was a black-supremacist party of the worst kind, a projection into public life of savage instincts and gangster ideology. But not, it appeared, the PPP".²⁴ On the one hand, he condemns the PPP for being naïve in not seeing the PNC as he sees it. On the other hand, that childish association with naïveté connotes the PPP as innocent of such racial-supremacist ideology and savage instincts. The message is in the double entendre of "But not, it appeared, the PPP."

Shiva Naipaul's representations of ethnic relations in Trinidad are also *parti pris*. For instance, speaking of the disdain for agriculture that developed among both Indo- and Afro-Trinidadians, he describes the problem in a manner consistent with his fear stemming from the "Black Power" movements: "These attitudes were reinforced after the coming of Independence when the government put in power by urban-minded, 'coolie'-despising blacks, ignored the Indian-dominated countryside, a process brought to completion by the onset of oil-fed prosperity in the late sixties".²⁵ Statements like this insinuate that Trinidad is unambiguously partisan, with cliquish, "Black Power", Afro-Trinidadians detesting Indo-Trinidadians, and not the reverse. Indeed, later in the same essay, Shiva implies such feelings and actions would have been beyond him and, by extension, those like him: "The clannish, hierarchical Hindu past known to the older members of my family... had all but dissolved by my day, been split up into its various, often warring, fragments, each of which rigorously pursued its own interests".²⁶ In other words, disintegration of clannishness, discontinuity with the past, and the warring fragments implies the impos-

sibility of a common cause and the improbability of any corollary that approximates the threatening Black Nationalism, such as East-Indian tribalism.

Much like his brother Vidia's portrayals noted above, Hinduness and East Indianness seem unblemished by anything resembling political motive: "For a while yet, our 'Hinduness', our awareness of ourselves as members of an exclusive and important clan, Brahminical princes among the Hindu community, came to life once a year or so when we all gathered for some days in my uncle's house".²⁷ He concludes, "India, as represented by its ties of caste and clan and shared memory, lasted less than sixty years in Trinidad." However, his anodyne account of East-Indian nationalism and antipathy is discordant with that of Joseph P. Farrell's who, borrowing from Daniel J. Crowley's work, posits that East-Indian nationalism in Trinidad was a direct response to their creolisation: "This high degree of assimilation and loss of ancestral culture has alarmed some of the East Indian elite and had led to a greatly increased emphasis on separate Hindu and Moslem schools, where Hindustani is taught, the Indian anthem sung, and various others attempts made to stimulate Indian nationalism".²⁸

The apex or, better, abyss of Shiva Naipaul's "Black Power" anxiety, which impairs his objectivity and reveals his ethnocentricity comes, arguably, when he writes about Rastafarianism. Note, for example, the apocalyptic vision (somewhat reminiscent of the fears expressed in Yeats' "The Second Coming") as he opines, "Between the visit of Haile Selassie and the funeral of Bob Marley a great deal had happened; a great deal had come to fruition in Jamaica. Most portentously, the Rastaman had crawled out of the shadows of nightmare and been crowned a king: a phoenix risen from the ashes of the Black Power era".²⁹ Here, "shadows" and "nightmare" and "ashes" paint a clear picture of what, from Shiva's perspective, "Black Power" augured and augurs, as already malignant. It spawns the ominous Rasta. This kind of rhetorical play for the benefit of his largely non-Caribbean readership is further evident when he proclaims, "In 1970, to the far south of the Caribbean Sea, Trinidad, that most innocent land of the calypso and the humming bird, was recovering from the recent shock of a mutiny by its fledgling army, some of whose officers had been inspired by Black Power ideology."³⁰ Of course, no honest Trinidadian, regardless of "race" or ethnicity, would be under any illusion about their island nation being a land of innocence, particularly in association with what is at times a most ribald local musical tradition, the calypso. But like his brother, Shiva Naipaul's primary audience is outside, and is likely to miss the evidence here of someone "playing mas", if you will, through rhetorical craft. Locals or those otherwise in the know would see it for what it is, a pappy show, nonsensical, but not inconsequential.

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writer estranged from his homeland: "The assumptions of affinity I took away with me in 1964 have ceased to be tenable".³¹ It is the construct of a litterateur alienated from those he views as Other – if there ever were any attachments in the first place: "The evolutions and convolutions of 'black consciousness' (I am, when all is said and done, of Indian ancestry) have nothing, as such, to do with me. I recoil from the degraded ideologies that would reclassify me as 'black.'"³² Coming from a society suffused in creolisation that recoils from anything "black" is precisely why Shiva, like his brother Vidia, is unable to write objectively about racial or ethnic relations. Indeed, they have both sided with the outsider, their outside audience, as is indicated by Shiva's summation of his externalisation: "A new marginality has been thrust upon people like myself by the assorted wog-doms that have come into being during the last twenty-five years – those penitential states of mind that are equated with 'liberation'. Marginality is sad. But, in my case, it is a sadness beyond my control."³³ "Wog" is the key to understanding Shiva's declaration of his allegiance here, with the British, his former colonisers: the pejorative term is, after all, mainly British for a dark-skinned foreigner.

Derek Walcott approaches V.S. Naipaul delicately regarding his racial representations in a 1965 interview, originally published in *Trinidad's Sunday Guardian*: "Do you think that having lived in Trinidad, in a multi-racial society, has helped you to achieve a more balanced perception?"³⁴ Naipaul's response seems surprisingly noncommittal: "I really don't know..." However, seen through the lens of his cynical perceptions, his answer is not surprising. The cynical eye informing Naipaul's representations of race in *The Middle Passage* is remarkably similar to that of his brother Shiva in *Journey to Nowhere* and *Beyond the Dragon's Mouth*. Both of Seepersad's sons turn to cynicism in their psychosocial analyses of racial problems. For example, Shiva introduces the racial dynamic at the core of his thesis by referencing Surinam's Indian exodus, a result of pre-Independence fear of "Black Power":

If Guyana, their immediate neighbor, loosed into the world by the British in 1966, was anything to go by, the Hindustanis, the Chinese and the Javanese – these last an exotic reminder of the Dutch colonies in the East Indies – had every reason to be worried and fearful about the implications of Independence.³⁵

The elder brother is more subtle and paints with a broader brush, appearing to label all of Trinidad cynical: "For if such a society breeds cynicism, it also breeds tolerance, not the tolerance between castes and creeds and so on – which does not exist in Trinidad anyway".³⁶ The most important point is the link between cynicism and lack of tolerance. The connection is reinforced as he turns to people's "selfishness" in "the race struggle"/"the Negro-Indian rivalry."³⁷ Both brothers wish to appear above

racial prejudice. However, the synergy of their self-interest and their racial belligerence/race baiting undermines that desire. Subjective and pessimistic, Vidia and Shiva favour one side in the Indo- and Afro-Caribbean racial antagonism. The fact is, no racial ideology is innocent or benign. In writing more for an outside audience, neither brother inherits the father's ideal of the writer as journalist, writing truthfully, which does not preclude writing sympathetically.

Endnotes

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