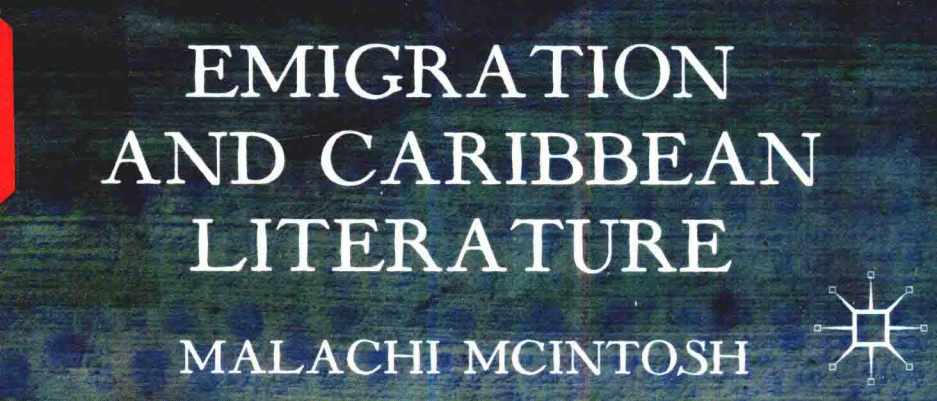


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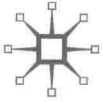
EMIGRATION  
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# Emigration and Caribbean Literature

Malachi McIntosh

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Portions of chapter 3 first appeared in "Lamming vs. Naipaul: Writing Migrants, Writing Islands in the British Literary Field," in *Migrant Identities of Creole Cosmopolitans* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014). Portions of chapter 5 first appeared as "The 'I' as Messiah in Césaire's First *Cahier*," *Research in African Literatures*, 43 (2013). The respective extracts are used with the permission of Peter Lang and Indiana University Press. The cover image, "Castaway," is a detail from the *Tropical Nights* series (2005–) by Christopher Cozier.

First published in 2015 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®  
in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN: 978-1-137-55589-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McIntosh, Malachi, 1980–

Emigration and Caribbean literature / Malachi McIntosh.  
pages cm.—(New Caribbean studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-137-55589-2 (hardback)

1. Caribbean literature (English)—History and criticism.
2. Caribbean literature (French)—History and criticism.
3. Authors, Caribbean—Great Britain. 4. Authors, Caribbean—France.
5. Caribbean Area—Emigration and immigration. I. Title.

PR9205.05.M38 2015

810.9'9729—dc23

2015014405

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: October 2015

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*For Sonia, Claris and Herbert McIntosh, and Arathi R. Papineni.*

## Acknowledgments

**T**his book began its life as a doctoral thesis completed at the University of Warwick with the support and encouragement of Neil Lazarus, Pablo Mukherjee, and Benita Parry. I am thankful and will remain indebted to all three for their aid and ideas. The Faculty of English at the University of Cambridge, and King's College, Cambridge, provided two homes for the completion of this volume, and I am thankful to Helen Cooper, Robin Osborne, David Trotter, and Gillian Weale, among others, for being kind and helpful hosts. Many other colleagues have offered space in their lives and their minds for this work; among them, I am especially indebted to Alison Donnell, John Gilmore, and Sorcha Gunne.

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## INTRODUCTION

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### Island Lives and Metropolitan Eyes

In his 1963 essay, "Roots," Edward Kamau Brathwaite makes the case that the appearance of V. S. Naipaul's novels *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, *Miguel Street*, and *A House for Mr Biswas* marked a significant shift in the body of Caribbean literature. The books' "lightness of touch," "feeling for proportion," "ear," and "power of characterization," as well as their representations of a kind of Indo-Caribbean life long absent from Caribbean letters, are all presented by Brathwaite as marked advancements on the writing of Naipaul's peers and forebears—*A House for Mr Biswas*, in particular, praised for pooling all of these stylistic strengths in a work "whose basic theme is not rootlessness and the search for social identity," and whose main character "is clearly defined and who is really trying to get *in* rather than get *out*," all things Brathwaite marks as singular achievements.<sup>1</sup> For many contemporary readers of both authors, this assessment might strike an ironic note, not least when supplemented with Brathwaite's depiction of V. S. Naipaul as the bearer of "an entirely different kind of sensibility."<sup>2</sup> What is perhaps more intriguing is the fact that, alongside his positioning of Naipaul as a central and preeminent figure within the community of Caribbean writers of the early 1960s, Brathwaite's praise queries the fixation on escape in works that predate *Mr Biswas*. "Roots" not only begs for recognition of Naipaul's writing, it also bends back to inspect the content of the works that heralded their arrival. How is it, Brathwaite asks, through Naipaul's example, that so many of our authors' fictions have been so fixated on "rootlessness," "the search for social identity," escape?

He goes on to address these questions in "Roots" by arguing that these thematic preoccupations are the inheritance of the historical ruptures

of slavery and therefore a sign of the influence of Africa on all of the peoples of the region.<sup>3</sup> This answer rightly calls upon his readers to reflect upon the effects of centuries of deracination on the perception of the authors of Caribbean literature, but its Afro-centered understanding of the region's history and its turn away from the concrete and current realities of the authors he addresses gives it an air of both partialness and partiality. My argument in this book is inspired by Brathwaite's three-pronged question—Why rootlessness? Why social identity? Why escape?—but it takes a very different tack to get to its answers. In what follows, I take the fact that the majority of Caribbean authors up until the time of “Roots” were emigrants as a central and significant factor in their depictions and interest in flight. By combining close reading with close analysis of the intellectual and social contexts from which six of the most influential authors of the era sprung—specifically, George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, Mayotte Capécia, Aimé Césaire, and Edouard Glissant—I argue that the depiction of characters trying to get *out* rather than *in* not only unites what might seem to be a disparate body of writers working in two language traditions but also closely parallels the writers' realities as Caribbean intellectuals based abroad.<sup>4</sup>

### Writing in Resistance

In “Roots,” Brathwaite recognizes the fact that “very few of our writers are really ‘of the people’”; “[t]hey are middle class,” a point with which he also concludes his earlier and somewhat aligned essay, “Sir Galahad and the Islands” (1957).<sup>5</sup> Despite this assertion, one that in “Sir Galahad” comes after a description of the destabilizing effects of residence in London on Anglophone writers' ways of seeing, Brathwaite is ultimately reluctant to distance the emigrant authors of his era from the “folk,” the Caribbean laborers their works most often depict. In dialogue with these ideas, Gordon Rohlehr argues in “Literature and the Folk” (1971) that while authors are not of “the folk”—he too calls them “middle class”—many still usefully deploy folk forms in their writing, despite a gap in background reflected in their tendency to generalize about the Caribbean's masses.<sup>6</sup> In an aligned but earlier effort, Mervyn Morris mused in the short but provocative essay “Some West Indian Problems of Audience” (1967), on the role and shortcomings of Caribbean writers based abroad. And in a similar and even earlier piece “The West Indian Novel of Immigration” (1959), G. R. Coulthard reflected on Anglo-, Franco-, and Hispanophone authors' abilities to

represent their people from overseas.<sup>7</sup> All of these essays showcase the active deliberation about emigrant authors' relationships with their people and the nature of their depictions that animated Caribbean criticism in the 1950s and 1960s. This topic of debate was, however, largely smothered in the "political turn" of Anglophone Caribbean criticism in 1970s, which saw the ascent of an insurgent, assertive, literary study that favored analyses of the radical political potential of literary texts and which had a lessened interest in the effects of authors' geographical locations on their representations, not least, perhaps, because the authors of this criticism themselves were often based or circulated abroad.<sup>8</sup> While French language criticism does not have a similar epochal shift toward the radical, it too has been shaped by interest in authors' political stances as steers of exegesis, with a handful of those who began their literary careers in the 1930s taking central places in what Raphael Dalleo calls its "myth of origins."<sup>9</sup> While interest in the overlap between literature and politics is not problematic in and of itself, within the Caribbean critical field it has led to, at times, formulaic assessments of certain authors, not least those who produce literary criticism that supplements or explains the ostensibly radical content of their creative works, and, alongside this, it has led to a loss of contextual specificity in the assessment of literary texts.

Thankfully, the dominance of an interpretative model that reads authors primarily for their value as avatars of a wider resistance has been destabilized in recent decades, largely through the work of feminist scholars. The pioneering role of feminist thinkers in troubling the legacy of the radical turn is almost certainly attributable to the fact that the androcentric orientation of much mid-twentieth-century Caribbean writing is clear as soon as it is sought and, once detected, instantly disturbs the image of the author as a straightforward representative of mass consciousness. In their sustained unpicking of the words and depictions of intra- and extratextual male hero-figures, several scholars have noted other blind spots in our understanding of the pioneering generation of Caribbean writers that began its work in and around the two world wars. Particularly valuable in this tradition have been Alison Donnell's *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, Curdella Forbes's *From Nation to Diaspora*, and Belinda Edmondson's *Making Men*. Donnell has lamented the fact that far too many contemporary studies have, as a part of the legacy of the 1970s, taken an uncritical stance toward migrant status, viewing it through a transnational lens as "an almost all-encompassing frame within which differences in terms of social relations almost evaporate."<sup>10</sup> In like manner, Curdella Forbes

has called into question the “male middle-class” position from which world war-era Anglophone writing issued.<sup>11</sup> In her lengthy engagement with emigrant authors of this generation in *Making Men*, Belinda Edmondson works to highlight that the migrant “West Indian writer is in a double bind, since he is attempting to establish a national identity for his region through an oppositional relationship to the metropole which yet constitutes his residential base and primary audience” and discovers in this a “tension between their construction of the nation, interpretive community or reading public, and [the body of writers’] self-creation as authors.”<sup>12</sup> In Forbes, Donnell, and Edmondson, there is a shared central tenet that we must take the work of a very distinct group of writers in a distanced location as speaking with a singular voice shaped by their social position and, further, that we must frame our interrogations of their utterances with questions that seek to understand their distinctiveness.

Other more recent studies have followed this lead to interrogate the contexts of articulation of Caribbean migrant authors, rekindling the questions of Brathwaite, Rohlehr, Morris, and Coulthard in analyses of how migrant authors of the world war era came to be able to speak. This book follows the major works in this new tradition, including J. Dillon Brown’s *Migrant Modernism* (2013), Raphael Dalleo’s *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere* (2011), and Gail Low’s *Publishing the Postcolonial* (2011) to ask, in supplement to their studies: What effect did emigration have on the *content* of the literary works of the pioneer figures of the world war generation?<sup>13</sup> By turning to authors and texts from the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean, I work to assert a closer kinship between these two traditions than is often recognized and contend that there are closer representational preoccupations, birthed from analogous social positions, among figures like Naipaul, Capécia, Selvon, Césaire, Lamming, and Glissant than have hitherto been recognized. By inserting Capécia into this frame, an author highly successful in her time but quickly dismissed by other Francophone writers and later critics for having the wrong politics, I attempt to address the forgetfulness that has been an unfortunate product of Caribbean critical preoccupations and its negative effect on our understanding both of individual authors and of the field as a whole.

The argument that I pursue here is that once we break these authors free from their ostensible places in a scale of political value and bracket off their late-career assertions about themselves and each other, we discover several unities in how they were seen and how they were seeing in the inter- and postwar era. While the concerns of all altered over the

course of their careers, a close focus on their first works—informed by a diachronic analysis of the authors' own emergence from an intellectual sphere in the Caribbean—reveals harmonies in their writing that suggest that their early experiences of flight shaped their texts in ways that transcend their differing islands of origin and the branching paths of their mid- to late-career lives. In contrast to the reputations of several of these writers, all of their early works express something less than a wholehearted support for the Caribbean's people and exalt the distanced, intellectual, migrant figure to a status above, as well as beyond, his or her countrymen, into a position analogous to that of the authors themselves. In all but one of the selected authors' first works, depictions of "rootlessness," "social identity," and escape showcase a fixation on the migrant as an exemplary figure. To make sense of these assertions, and to set up the detailed discussions of contexts, individuals, and early works that occupy the following chapters, the remainder of this introduction is dedicated to how we have read these writers to date and what, by neglecting aspects of their peculiar social locations as emigrants in Europe, these readings might have missed.

### **The Emigrant Author as Organic Intellectual**

Our popular understanding of world war-era authors flows out of fact that the development of Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean societies has been a product of unique project within the colonial world, one which relied on successive, destabilizing migratory movements to move it forward. As Sidney Mintz summarizes, with words that find their echoes in most Caribbean studies, the island and littoral zones of the region are unique because they were not

erected upon massive indigenous bases in areas of declining great literate civilizations, as was true in India and Indonesia; they were not mere points of trade, like Macao or Shanghai, where ancestral cultural hinterlands could remain surprisingly unaffected in spite of the exercise of considerable European power; they were not "tribal" mosaics, within which European colonizers carried on their exploitation accompanied by some curious vision of the "civilizing" function, as in the Congo, or New Guinea; nor were they areas of intense European settlement, where new forms of European culture provided an accultural "anchor" for other newcomers, as in the United States or Australia. They were, in fact, the oldest "industrial" colonies of the West outside Europe [...] and fitted to European needs with peculiar intensity and pervasiveness.<sup>14</sup>

The term "industrial" perfectly encapsulates the nature of the early period of Caribbean colonization. Like a chain of factories, the region had its occupants and terrain rearranged willfully with the sole purpose of boosting production and easing distribution in order to maximize European gain. As at the economic base, so too in the discursive superstructure: what were known as the "Tropics," "Antilles," and "West Indies" were reframed, repackaged, and represented to Europe by Europeans for their own sake—the likes of Columbus, Leslie, Long, Dubuisson, Behn, de las Casas, and Lévi-Strauss acting as "outsider-insiders" writing the "West Indies," "Tropics" and "Antilles" in their own image for their countrymen's consumption.<sup>15</sup>

In light of this intertwined history of material and discursive control, it is natural to read the exponential growth of writing from emigrant authors during the world war era as a story of "writing back," of Caribbean peoples finally claiming the means to challenge the hegemony of other migrant "authors" from preceding centuries, as efforts in tandem with the regional political awakenings that led to altered legislative arrangements and formal independence. Flight to London and Paris, and into their thriving publishing industries, can, in this narrative, be read as incidental: as a simple necessity for authors who hailed from regions with high illiteracy rates and correspondingly small reading publics, or as a historical factor that had little influence on representations. Kenneth Ramchand offered a model for this view when he wrote of Anglophone authors that

the nostalgia of the emigré, and the professional writer's awareness of the preconceptions and the ignorance of his foreign readers affect mood, content, and expression to *some extent* but the novelists writing in London seldom depart from a concern with the shape and possible directions of their society, its central issues and causes, its patterns of group life, and the quality of life possible for individuals in it [my emphasis].<sup>16</sup>

In like manner, when speaking of the 1950s' Anglophone boom in her chapter in *West Indian Literature*, Sandra Pouchet Paquet notes that "despite the voluntary exile of most writers published at this time, they were characteristically concerned with the structure and values of Caribbean society."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in his recent assessment of the work of George Lamming, Bill Schwarz has written that "we might savour the paradox of [the] 'whole Caribbean reality' [Lamming's words] coming to life in an anonymous suburban street of Chiswick, in West London. But how else could this have occurred, given the exigencies of

the colonial situation?"<sup>18</sup> According to Edouard Glissant, the colonial history of the Caribbean can be read as "the repertoire of responses of an individual-within-a-country to an Other-Elsewhere," and our standard understanding of the period that came after this—the period from which Glissant and his work were to spring—rests on the idea of an inversion: that the "individuals-within-a-country" began to challenge the "Others-Elsewhere" and speak for themselves, working to resist what Derek Walcott calls the enforced and collective "amnesia" of the industrial phase.<sup>19</sup>

It would be foolish to dismiss the narrative of Caribbean development offered through Mintz, above, or to discount twentieth-century flight from the region as anything other than its direct product, or to underplay the role of European hegemony in the publishing world in the emigration of aspirant authors; however, the standard story of resistance from abroad and work inflected only to "some extent" by migrant status demands supplementation. First, we must recognize that the emergence of Caribbean voices at home and abroad between and after the world wars was more than the Caribbean "people" rising to speak for themselves, but the rise of a particular class fraction and thus an exemplification of a phenomenon described by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*. In the *Notebooks*, Gramsci argues that a newly formed social group always "creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields."<sup>20</sup> To Gramsci, these "organic intellectuals" work to define the group both to itself and to outsiders. But, crucially, there is a necessary gap between the speakers and the spoken-for; in Gramsci's account, one cannot be both a "peasant" and an "intellectual" simultaneously because the two groups are mutually exclusive, fulfilling very different social functions—membership in the "intellectual" caste denying "peasant" identity.<sup>21</sup> This does not mean that an intellectual cannot come from the working class, merely that the "peasant" or "folk" role, with its attendant status associations, is annulled when one ascends to the rank of spokesman.

While nothing can detract from the scale of the efforts of Caribbean organic intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic to speak the situations of their people in the early to mid-twentieth century, we must continue to supplement the standard story to specify the nature of the social cleavage between the representing and those they represented. Writing about Trinidad, with words that apply to the entirety of the Anglophone Caribbean, Bridget Brereton has noted that middle-class

status in the decolonizing era was determined by an individual holding a nonmanual labor job and having "command of European, or British, culture, especially the ability to speak and write correct English"—two criteria Brereton describes as more crucial than either material prosperity or lightness of skin color in offering opportunity.<sup>22</sup> Owing to this, "a fairly prosperous but uneducated smallholder would not belong to the middle class; and an elementary schoolteacher on a miserable salary would."<sup>23</sup> In the French Caribbean, things were much the same, the majority and the middle-class divided along similar lines with the "elite" "differentiated from the masses by its cultural achievement."<sup>24</sup> It is to these separated, educated middle-classes that world war-era Caribbean author-intellectuals belonged. Throughout the region, as in other former colonies, class status closely correlated with education and cultural allegiance rather than income alone, and merely gaining an education could create a social chasm between a student and his parents, the instruction to postprimary level of a non-middle-class child likely to "cause or require" "estrangement from family and village life."<sup>25</sup> Thus, while early, educated, organic Caribbean intellectuals were passionate advocates of the Caribbean people, these writers were fighting a discursive battle on behalf of those who lived very separate lives, lives that, in many cases, the intellectuals did not fully endorse.

In several ways the relationship of these intellectuals to the bulk of the inhabitants of their region was foreshadowed in the first independent Caribbean colony, Haiti, where, throughout the nineteenth century, a newly emergent, newly independent intellectual class fought to wrest discursive control from its former colonizers. The violence of the Haitian Revolution and its implicit challenge to regional European powers resulted in Haiti's status as a "pariah" state after its independence.<sup>26</sup> In an effort to redress this, its intellectuals entered into a hotly contested battle with Europeans to present the country and its people to the world in a positive light.<sup>27</sup> Although they possessed the noble goals of exalting their countrymen in the eyes of others and creating the sense of a unified community through their work, the Haitian intellectuals who composed the stories of the nation were, due to their upbringing and orientation, almost wholly detached from the Haitians they portrayed.<sup>28</sup> Further, due to an extraordinarily low literacy rate, the main consumers of the French-language literature they wrote were not the newly liberated but the select group of the elite themselves and Europeans.<sup>29</sup> The battle for representation was one waged primarily to win other hearts on foreign shores—something epitomized by the fact



that one author, Baron de Vastey, had his works distributed by the foreign minister.<sup>30</sup>

Like the Haitian writers who preceded them, world war-era Francophone and Anglophone intellectuals were, to take Selwyn Cudjoe's words, "caught between the culture of the masses, which they knew partially but shunned, and the culture of the colonizer, which they longed to acquire" or had acquired and wished to display.<sup>31</sup> If we add to this the fact that most notable thinkers of this era—all those who published articles, novels, journals, poems, letters, and speeches that ostensibly wrested the identity of the Caribbean from "Others-Elsewhere"—were often themselves established "Elsewhere" and published for the attention and esteem of "Others," we find encouragement to consider how splits between them and those they represented might be manifest in their texts. As these writers were long-time island inhabitants, they themselves were not "Others" as such, but, in addition to a class-based disjunction on a par with that of their Haitian predecessors, they were subject to a significant physical break between themselves and the people they portrayed. They were not wholly disconnected from the Caribbean, of course, they left their homes alongside many others who fled the overpopulation and economic dependency that were the legacies of the "industrial" period of colonization, but they are marked by the fact that they overwhelmingly presented the rural regions of their countries and peasants' concerns in their earliest works, despite separation from the contemporary realities of rural life by physical location and class status. Although many showcased a clear commitment to elevating Caribbean laborers through their writing and challenging "amnesia" at home and abroad, their distance could only complicate their representations.

### Facing Constraints

The above claim rests on a firm belief that contexts of articulation necessarily shape the contents of literary works and that the social and literary systems into which these authors entered put unique pressures on their compositions. In order to set up a more expansive consideration of why this might be the case, it is worthwhile to consider the manifold constraints these writers faced as new arrivals from far-flung colonies who sought to publish texts about their relatively unknown region while based abroad. For this it is useful to adduce the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about the inherent competition and struggle for power within the publishing world. Bourdieu posited the existence of a