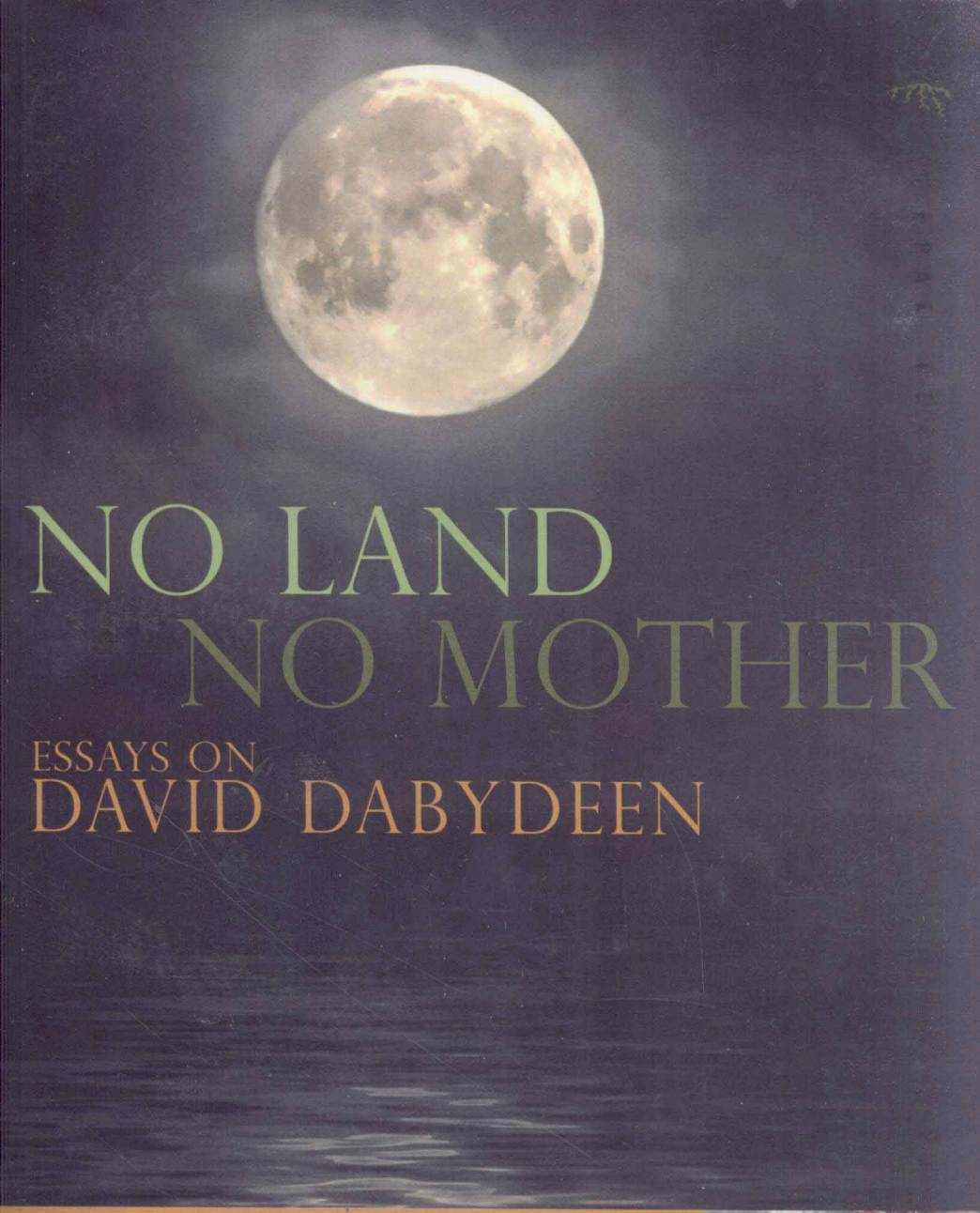
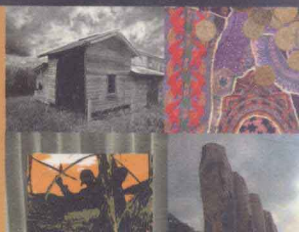


NO LAND NO MOTHER

ESSAYS ON DAVID DABYDEEN

LYNNE MACEDO
KAMPTA KARRAN



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Tobias Döring: 'Turning the Colonial Gaze: Re-Visions of Terror in Dabydeen's *Turner*', *Third Text*, No. 38 (1997) and *Caribbean-English Passages* (Routledge, 2002).

Lee M. Jenkins: 'On Not Being Tony Harrison: Tradition and the Individual Talent of David Dabydeen', *Ariel*, Volume 32, No. 2, April 2001.

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Another version of Aleid Fokkema's article was previously published in J. Arnold, *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*, (John Benjamins, 1997)

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ESSAYS ON THE WORK OF DAVID DABYDEEN

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In memory of Gilbert P. Bartholomew,
for his great love and shared joy for literature,
and his tiresome grandchild.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Dialogue across diversity is perhaps the dominant characteristic of David Dabydeen's prose and poetry. His Guyanese Indian/West Indian heritage and his long location in the heart of British society have combined to produce a hybrid, cosmopolitan personality that manifests itself strongly in his writing. Throughout his work, haunting recollections of a receding Guyanese past blend with a constantly changing postmodern/postcolonial present to release a fertile imagination that ranges freely from the local to the universal. The abrasive and lyrical Creole of the rural peasant folk, together with the imperial structures of Standard English, were the twin beasts of burden that carried his distinctive voice in his earliest writing. Thereafter, through the transgression of linguistic and ethnic boundaries, historical griefs have been reconfigured in liberatory, though never easily redemptive ways in both his poetry and fiction.

The simultaneous habitation of multiple arenas and the refusal to surrender to the dictates of any single loyalty or to be boxed in by time and space are dominant features of current postmodernity. Yet these impulses often collide with a stubborn emotional need for belonging or even some form of racialised solidarity. Dabydeen himself acknowledges a responsibility to confront such issues and engages in a dialogue in his writing between the roles of the cultural custodian and that of the eclectic cosmopolitan. The dialectic between conflict and co-operation, change and continuity provides the moral underpinning for much of his work, whether it revisits slavery and indentureship in a past century or deals with a present day Sita in concert with the enemy.

This book presents the latest collection of critical studies that attempt to engage with the complexities of Dabydeen's writing. It complements the earlier *The Art of David Dabydeen* (Peepal Tree, 1997, ed. K. Grant) in several ways. Whilst looking again at texts discussed in the earlier work, *No Land, No Mother* extends the critical coverage to Dabydeen's third and fourth novels, *The Counting House* (1997) and *A Harlot's Progress* (1999). And, in looking again

at the earlier work, these essays provide stimulating rereadings that are not only in dialogue with the essays in the earlier book, but revisit the earlier work in the light both of Dabydeen's continuing development and the continuing evolution of critical theory. Whilst each of the essayists engages with this body of work from different perspectives, there are a number of common themes. These include Dabydeen's explorations of how to imagine the unimaginable and his subversive relationship to literary tradition. Taking clues from the explicit intertextual references in his work, Dabydeen's writing has been linked to, amongst others, T.S. Eliot, Walcott, Tony Harrison, V.S. Naipaul, Conrad, Sterne, and Wilson Harris. Yet neither a search for particular influences or a focus on the undeniably foregrounded role of intertextuality in his work permits any convenient pigeonholing of the nature of his talent. The value of the essays in this book is not that they engage in a fruitless exercise of classification but that they reveal and celebrate Dabydeen's gift of raising questions, entertaining and provoking thought.

The book has been divided into five sub-sections, each containing two essays that are thematically linked in their engagement with some aspect of Dabydeen's work. Part One focuses in detail on his epic poem *Turner* and theorises the links between this work and the neo-classicist and Romantic concepts of the sublime. It positions the ambiguous nature of the poem within a wider postcolonial struggle to resist the illusion of representation as transparent and reliable and to subvert the cultural authority of hegemonic tropes of Englishness. In the first of these two essays, Aleid Fokkema reads *Turner* within a wider Caribbean tradition of (re)writing epic poetry. She compares Dabydeen's work with that of three other Caribbean writers who have also published epic poems – Derek Walcott, Édouard Glissant and Frank Martinus Arion – and suggests that each of their epics has an intimate linkage to the historically located aesthetics of the sublime. In focusing on thematic preoccupations with issues of exile, wandering and transportation, Fokkema demonstrates how each poem struggles to represent the paradoxical nature of Caribbean identity. In place of the unitary concept of roots as a metaphor for identity, she

makes use of the multidimensional concept of the rhizome as a more fruitful way of comparing the treatment of these issues in these poems. In particular, she reads them (and *Turner*) through the doubleness of the trope of transportation. In this way she connects the central matter of these poems, the actual physical transport of slaves' bodies, to the discourse of the sublime. In exploring the respective treatments of the consoling possibilities of spiritual transport (involving, for instance, the loss of self in communication with the gods) she notes how Dabydeen's *Turner*, denies such consolations in the way the poem constantly negates its own thematic substance: 'no land, no words, no community,/ No mother.'

The following essay by Tobias Döring elaborates upon the use of the sublime in art and focuses in particular on the representation of terror in both Dabydeen's poem *Turner* and in Turner's painting: *'Slave Ship'*. By reference to both Edmund Burke's eighteenth century treatise on the 'sublime and beautiful' and Frantz Fanon's classic works on colonialism, Döring articulates the connections between terror and the exercise of imperial power, and examines their role in the above mentioned painting and poem respectively. He demonstrates that a morbid fascination with aspects of terror was embodied in both the Romantic and, in particular, the neo-Gothic aesthetic of the sublime and shows that this aesthetic was inextricably linked to the discourse of imperialism. Döring then argues that although the characters in *Turner* are ultimately unable to escape their earlier representation as victims, Dabydeen's incisive engagement with Turner's painting still manages to subvert the power of the colonial gaze. By focusing on the necessary role of the spectator in the aesthetic construction of the sublime, Döring shows how Dabydeen engages the reader in a self-reflexive examination of their 'spectating' role.

The essays in Part Two continue the focus on Dabydeen's poetry and expand and complement a number of the theoretical ideas raised in Part One. However, rather than concentrating on the sublime effects employed in *Turner*, the first of these essays attempts a more formal interrogation of the work's poetic form, as well as assessing its properties as an act of cultural reappropriation.

Heike Härting discusses *Turner* as both a diasporic and a postcolonial discourse, locating it in the gaps between 'nation and empire' and as a critique of earlier attempts by Caribbean writers (especially Walcott) to reinvent Caribbean history through processes of amnesiac reconciliation and transfiguration. In particular she looks at how in *Turner* Dabydeen deconstructs the nature of metaphor as a transfigurative device by tracing its role as a rhetorical device embedded in the discourse of empire and representations of race and sexuality. In her rich and complex reading of *Turner*, Härting enlarges our awareness of the multiple possible relationships between Dabydeen's poem, the painting it uses as its starting point and the historical figure of J.M.W. Turner. She shows that Dabydeen disinters the cultural icon 'J.M.W. Turner' from its deadness as a sign of Englishness, cleansed of all cultural and racial ambiguities and deviant desires. Instead of operating as a designator of cultural superiority, she shows how metaphor in *Turner* has been transformed into a trope of imperial crisis.

Madina Tlostanova's essay also explores the ways in which cultural redefinition has been handled in Dabydeen's poetry and shows how his writing both deconstructs and subverts imperial forms of representation through the utilisation of an aesthetics that involves 'unpredictable' and transgressive combinations of the traditional and the modern. She shows how his work serves to undermine the very existence of boundaries and thus removes any notions of stability that may have once been contained within the concepts of 'race' or 'belonging'. In addition to *Turner*, her essay also considers a number of Dabydeen's earlier poems in which she identifies the journey 'cronotope' as one of their main features. In ranging across the themes of intertextuality, boundary crossing, hybridity, imaginative geographies and metamorphosis, Tlostanova's essay most valuably reads Dabydeen's work in the context of a number of other diasporic writers, including Bharati Mukherjee, Abdelwahab Meddeb and, most rewardingly, Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*.

Part Three continues the exploration of Dabydeen's poetic output both in terms of its intertextuality, and through a consideration of his ambivalent relationship to a number of literary

texts from both past and present. Lee Jenkins' essay pinpoints a network of (often self-confessed) linkages between Dabydeen's writing and the poetry of both T.S. Eliot and Tony Harrison. Whilst acknowledging that Dabydeen resists being assimilated into too close a relationship with either of these poets, Jenkins demonstrates that similarities do exist between a number of their thematic preoccupations. In comparing Dabydeen's 'Coolie Odyssey' with Harrison's 'On Not Being Milton' she argues that parallels can be seen in the way that both poems draw attention to their status as poetry, and as a discourse which is remote from the world of the subject matter of the poem, and she contrasts the precise nature of their deployment of specific inter- and counter-texts. In the case of Dabydeen's relationship to Eliot, Jenkins examines both the more explicit references to *The Waste Land* that can be traced in sections of *Turner* and highlights the ways in which both poets have made subversive use of 'explanatory' notes to a number of their poems. She concludes that whilst Dabydeen may justifiably feel uneasy about his links with Western literary traditions, such connections are nevertheless 'unavoidable'. Finally, in commenting on the theme of transformation explored in several of the essays, Jenkins notes that what interests Dabydeen is not the illusion of a redemptive blurring of the interests of the former colonised and former coloniser, but the 'endless transformations' that offer freedom from any fixed identity.

Pumla Dineo Gqola's essay complements that of Jenkins by continuing the exploration of aspects of intertextuality in Dabydeen's writing and his (often deliberately misleading) authorial commentaries on a number of his poems. The essay focuses mainly on Dabydeen's first collection of poems – *Slave Song* – and its gender politics. In particular, Gqola explores Dabydeen's treatment of the theme of black male desire for the white woman, both in the context of historical discourses about slavery and sexuality, and contemporary theoretical discourses on the gendering of sexual desire in writing. She shows how the poet's deconstructive play with various modes of representation successfully subverts stereotypical images of the black male body. She also demonstrates

how the addition of 'explanatory' notes to the poems in *Slave Song* serves not to elucidate but to destabilize, to alert the reader to resist immediate, fixed or monolithic interpretation.

The final two Parts of the book are devoted to an examination of three of Dabydeen's novels – *Disappearance*, *The Counting House* and *A Harlot's Progress*. Both of the essays in Part Four situate *Disappearance* within the wider context of writing about the immigrant experience, and with characters who must deal with the dilemma of being both present yet absent ('disappearing' from view) in the imperial 'centre' in which they find themselves located. Michael Mitchell's essay shows how Dabydeen utilises a number of narrative techniques to disrupt the reader's expectations about what the novel will ultimately reveal or conceal. As Mitchell shows, not only does the novel revel in the absence of the name of the narrator but this 'missing' character is involved in a quest that is clearly never going to achieve the goal of pinning down an elusive, disappearing 'truth'. Mitchell identifies and explores the significance of the overt intertextuality in *Disappearance* in a way that contrasts with the more sceptical reading by Mark McWatt in an essay in *The Art of David Dabydeen*. Mitchell's sustained reading and evident enjoyment of the dialogue with Wilson Harris, V.S. Naipaul, Conrad and T.S. Eliot makes the case that intertextuality is 'less a device than a mode in which *Disappearance* is written'.

Mark Stein's essay provides a more detailed examination of the ways in which Dabydeen's *Disappearance* relates to one of those 'absent' texts to which it refers: V.S. Naipaul's novel *The Enigma of Arrival*. By comparing both their narrative structures and their thematic preoccupations with notions of exile, alienation and the constructed nature of identity, Stein argues that *Disappearance* can in part be read as a re-working of Naipaul's earlier novel. His essay focuses in particular upon perceptions of landscape and Englishness in each novel and demonstrates how both texts subvert preconceived ideas about the ability of language to produce a stable, uniform meaning for coloniser and colonised alike. Stein explores the ways in which both narrators resist assimilation into the cultural 'centre' by insisting on the fluidity of their respective

identities. Stein concludes that as a result of the ambivalent and tenuous positions that they are forced to occupy, a reading of both narratives reveals the fraudulent and artificially constructed nature of the English identity that would wish to represent itself as a 'national' essence.

The final section of the book contains two essays on Dabydeen's narrative techniques for dealing with the paradox of attempting to represent the unrepresentable. Christine Pagnoulle's discussion of *A Harlot's Progress* begins with a consideration of the relationship between Hogarth's engravings of the same title and the novel's narrative structure. She argues that the use of fragments from Hogarth's plates as epigraphs for each part of the novel signals the necessarily fragmentary nature of acts of historical reclamation. She shows how the ambiguous nature of the narrator's identity and the presentation of deliberately confusing alternative versions of events continually draws the reader's attention to the novel's fictional construction and the impossibility of presenting the 'truth' about the past. Pagnoulle shows how these deliberately destabilising acts are part of a dialogue enacted in the relationship between the anti-slavery campaigner, Pringle, and Mungo, the aged African. Whilst the former is trying to co-opt Mungo's story into *his* whitewashed narrative of Christian redemption, Mungo's freedom with 'the facts' is precisely that: an assertion of the freedom of the imagination as the writer's true province.

The concluding essay by Gail Low, a sustained reading of *The Counting House*, shows that instead of engaging in the convention of 'imaginative reconstruction', as do novels such as Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge,* and *Crossing the River* or Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* and *Feeding the Ghosts*, Dabydeen's novel frustrates all sense of redeeming the past or offering some cathartic recovery of the voices of those previously hidden in the partial records of history. As she notes, the epilogue of *The Counting House* is full of negations, and her essay is devoted to exploring why this should be so. With its unpredictable shifts in time and location, coupled with the ruthless nature of its main protagonists, she argues that the novel revels in its own contradictory and pessimistic outlook. However, despite the inherent difficulties in interpretation,

her concluding remarks suggest that *The Counting House* can nevertheless offer a salutary lesson to those who would reduce the sufferings of others to just another sanitised commodity for mass consumption.

Collectively, these essays help the reader to make sense of Dabydeen's multidimensional response to the intersecting worlds he inhabits. In approaching Dabydeen's work in ways that foreground its always questioning, ambivalent, resistant relationships to its multiple points of connection – to Guyana, to a Guyanese Hindu Indianness, to the Caribbean, to Christian doctrine, to Britishness, Black Britishness, to the English literary/cultural canon, to global postcoloniality – these essays make a valuable contribution to seeing Dabydeen's work in a genuinely holistic way. It is hoped that the essays in this book will inspire future research that is dedicated to bridging the divide between those disparate experiences.

Kampta Karren & Lynne Macedo