

## CHAPTER 24

### TRICKSTERS OF THE WATER: SAM SELVON'S WEST LONDON AND THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE

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Sam Selvon moved from Trinidad to London in 1950. He would become known as one of the first and defining novelists of the Windrush generation, telling in pioneeringly creolized voices of the struggles, yet spirited survival of the West Indian arrivals. Ambivalence characterizes Selvon's assessment of his time in London, as it does the mindsets and trajectories of many of his characters: 'It was always a struggle to survive in London, not only because of my non-whiteness, but money,' he would reflect; yet 'I got out of London what I had hoped for. Let me put it that way. Walking the streets of London and looking at the landscape [. . .]'<sup>1</sup> Selvon's protagonists likewise wander across London, but it is the 'little worlds' of Notting Hill and Bayswater ('the Gate' and 'the Water'), where so many of the Windrush generation settled, with which he is most strongly associated and where so many of 'the boys' of his London stories and of his 1956 novel *The Lonely Londoners* live, in the cramped bedsits into which decaying Victorian townhouses were converted.<sup>2</sup>

Like Bar 20 and Fred in his story 'Basement Lullaby' (1957), Selvon first took a damp basement bedsit in Bayswater. He wrote *The Lonely Londoners* over six months 'sat in a friend's house in Ladbroke Grove'; but Moses Aloetta, the central character who holds the narrative together, is again based in a lower room in Bayswater, symbolically hoping to rise to an upper floor.<sup>3</sup> Selvon's experiences of living in London for the first time, without any security, gave him first-hand knowledge of the wider struggles faced by the Windrush generation. Successes and setbacks went hand in hand: he might have been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship that took him to America in 1955, but back in Bayswater he was cleaning bars in small hotels.<sup>4</sup> When his novel *Turn Again Tiger* was published in 1958 with some publicity, he was recognized 'swabbing out the shithouse' at a club in Paddington. Selvon discovered that 'my life in London taught me about people from the Caribbean, and it was here that I found my identity.'<sup>5</sup> That paradox is at the heart of Selvon's representations of the migrant experience. The identities which emerge are characterized by their in-betweenness, formed by gains and losses, discoveries and confusions, progress and retrogression.

Selvon was born in Trinidad in 1923. His parents were themselves migrants, English and Hindi-speaking Christian Indians who had moved to the island from Madras; his maternal grandfather was Scottish.<sup>6</sup> Selvon grew up in the city of San Fernando, thinking of himself as part of a generation 'who grew up Westernized [. . .] who are Creolized as it were.'<sup>7</sup> Leaving school at fifteen, he worked as a wireless operator during the Second

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World War for the Royal Naval Reserve, and began writing to pass the long periods of inactivity. After the war, he worked as a journalist for the *Trinidad Guardian* in Port of Spain, and began to publish sketches of island life. He was working on his first novel, *A Brighter Sun*, while crossing the Atlantic in 1950. Although set entirely in Trinidad, the coming-of-age narrative demonstrates the development of Selvon's international consciousness. The protagonist, Tiger, is initiated into the workings of the empire by his friend Boysie, on a first visit to Port of Spain. He asks Boysie:

'When I used to work in the canefield, and help make sugar, it went to England too?'

'Yes, man.'

'You think the people who eating sugar over there does think about we who making it here?'

'You does tink bout who make de shoes yuh wearing?''<sup>8</sup>

But, like Tiger, Selvon precisely *does* think about such questions as where products, and people, and culture more broadly, originate, where they end up and what they become.

So Selvon moved to London with such questions in mind, in search of new experiences and hoping to advance his writing career in the UK, together with a host of other



**Figure 24.1** BBC Caribbean Service: Caribbean Voices. © BBC.

Caribbean writers all seeking a wider audience and publishing success in the 'Mother Country'. He joined many, including V. S. Naipaul and George Lamming, in broadcasting on *Caribbean Voices*, the BBC radio programme which gave a platform to Caribbean writers. Meanwhile he completed work on *A Brighter Sun* between the Bayswater basement and an office in the Indian Embassy, where he worked for a spell as a clerk. Like Tiger, Selvon seemed always caught between worlds; it was a struggle to be accepted at the embassy: 'how could I be an "Indian" if I did not come from India[?]'.<sup>9</sup>

Selvon's 1957 volume of stories, *Ways of Sunlight*, charts some of the changes which were taking place to Selvon the writer: the stories represent first Trinidad and then London, in sections with those names, composed mainly in those locations, and demonstrating stylistic and thematic developments. Ambivalence was always one of Selvon's greatest narrative tricks: the opening 'Trinidad' story, 'Johnson and the Cascadura', begins, 'There's a native legend in Trinidad which says that those who eat the cascadura will end their days in the island no matter where they wander.'<sup>10</sup> It sounds like straightforwardly detached narrative commentary, but the story is ultimately undecided about what laws are in operation: 'some people have their own beliefs and others other'. Meanwhile, in the opening 'London' story, 'Calypso in London', we hear, 'Mangohead come from St Vincent, and if you don't know where that is that is your hard luck. But I will give you a clue – he uses to work on a arrowroot plantation. Now I suppose you want to know what arrowroot is, eh?' (*Sunlight*, 125).<sup>11</sup> Rather than pretend to orient the reader, the creolized narrative voice is abrupt, irreverent, rhythmically complex and multilayered. Such a new voice, which is typical of the London stories, demonstrates how it was writing in, of and to London that Selvon's already accomplished verbal dexterity would fully flourish. In moving to, and writing of, London, Selvon imports and heightens his narrative ambivalences, keeping alive multiple possibilities and tantalizing his readers with what is given, transformed and withheld. The origins of such multiplicities can be traced back to distinctly Caribbean forms, chiefly the trickster tale and the calypso – forms whose own origins are complex and uncertain, and whose impulses can be contradictory. Imported to London, these forms, like Selvon's characters, persist through both adaptation and resistance, becoming expressive of the London migrant experience; and they are figured too, we suggest here, in the particular forms that Selvon's creolized language takes.

A tension between being given your bearings and being denied them is a hallmark of Selvon's London writing. While the London narrators often assume ignorance of the Caribbean on the part of the reader, and may not be willing to help, familiarity with London is usually taken for granted; but the familiar can turn strange, and our expectations are continually being performed and adjusted. 'Down by Ladbroke Grove,' the narrator begins in 'Obeah in the Grove,' 'and I don't mean the posh part near to Holland Park, but when you start to go west: the more west you go, the more worse things get – it have a certain street, and a certain house, and in front the house have a plane tree, and one day if you pass there and you look up in the plane tree, you will see a green bottle dangling on a piece of twine, and a big bone stick up between two branch' (*Sunlight*, 167). We are led from the named to the unnamed, to a scene or scenario that sits somewhere

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between the specific and the general, just as Selvon's characters sit somewhere between individuals and types, just as his stories themselves sit somewhere between the real and the emblematic.

The reader who encounters this story in *Ways of Sunlight* has already had an initiation into obeah and the practice of perfecting spells by hanging enchanted objects in trees in the Trinidad story 'The Mango Tree'. Ma Procop is an outsider figure, seen as an eccentric in her village. She uses the identity cast upon her to protect her fine mango tree by hanging bones and bottles from its branches: her trick doesn't lie in sorcery, but in creating the illusion of magic to ward off potential thieves. But another superstition ends up having still more ambivalent agency in this story: a boy and a girl climb the mango tree in spite of the semblance of obeah, and in spite of another belief, that, as the boy puts it, 'if girls climb fruit trees, the fruit will be sour' (*Sunlight*, 99). Some of the fruit *does* end up being sour, but, in the absence of any guarantees, we are left to wonder whether the curse has come true, and how to interpret the story as a whole.

If the mango tree is symbolic of Ma Procop, surviving in spite of adversities (even if the struggle has turned her sour), then the London plane tree of 'Obeah in the Grove' might have a symbolic connection with the story's West Indian protagonists. London plane trees are a hybrid species and a product of migration. Formed from *platanus orientalis*, the oriental plane, and *planatnus occidentalis*, the American sycamore, their hybridity makes them stronger, able to withstand the harsh London climate. The story sees 'the boys' – Buttards, Fiji, Winky and Algernon – move into a tenement house whose white owners welcome them with open arms and charge them hardly any rent; but of course it's too good to be true, and it's a racist ruse on the part of the owners to use 'the boys' to scare away existing tenants so they can sell the house, which is in a bad way. 'The boys' trickery, in contrast to Ma Procop's, lies in their *belief* in obeah: before leaving, they hang the bottles and bones, on which Fiji has performed spells. The house becomes unsellable, all but collapsing, and further misfortunes for the owners follow. This time the narrator does take a stance, declaring 'that house have the vengeance of Moko on it' (*Sunlight*, 174), and dismissing our questions, but not obeah itself: 'Now you and me ain't going to argue about obeah. I have other things to do.' But, with the house already having been in a bad state, the story has precisely been set up to cause us to ask questions. Like the plane tree, and like the West Indian characters themselves, the story exists somewhere in between absolutes. At the same time, it demonstrates the possibility of reversals: Trinidadian English and Trinidadian beliefs appear to become stronger in London than they were in Selvon's Trinidad; characters go from being disempowered, taken advantage of, to achieving at least the perception of power.

The protagonists of this story, like so many of Selvon's male Caribbean characters, are trickster figures, whose origins lie in the particular incarnations of trickster tales that arrived on the islands through the slave trade. The Atlantic crossings of the Middle Passage brought anthropomorphic tales to the New World from West Africa, and it was tales of the Akan figure Anansi the spider that took particular hold in the Caribbean. In common with other tricksters from cultures across the world, Anansi is able to use his resourcefulness to outwit those in a more powerful position; the stories

therefore have particular resonance in the context of slavery. Yet tricksters can also exhibit moral ambivalence, and Anansi sometimes uses his powers of trickery unfairly, which can necessitate the moral resolution of the stories lying in Anansi himself ultimately being tricked. Tricksters are thus agents of change, who, in Esther Priyadharshini's terms, 'jolt the world out of established or habitual modes of being'; but the results of those disruptions might not straightforwardly bring change for the greater good.<sup>12</sup>

Carnivals are often dominated by a trickster spirit. In Trinidad, the modern carnival evolved from its colonial origins to become a festival for the dispossessed, the opportunity to speak back to the colonizers. After emancipation in 1834, the Canboulay, an imitation of the colonial Mardi Gras, named after the French *cannes brulées*, became the dominant version of carnival, and was marked by contests including stick fighting and the singing of kaisos: call-and-response songs with syncopated rhythms, which again have their roots in West Africa. Canboulay turned the world on its head, suspending, if only for its duration, the colonial orders. In the twentieth century, the contests became musical. The kaiso evolved into the calypso, songs with upbeat rhythms and melodies, which can reflect the bravado but belie the struggle articulated in the lyrics. Calypsonians would compete to become the Calypso King (or Calypso Monarch today), displaying their wit and bite – *picong* – often by taking on topical themes in a satirical vein. In the spirit of reversals of the hierarchies, calypsonians typically give themselves mock-noble or mock-heroic names like The Mighty Destroyer and Growling Tiger. From the start, Selvon cast himself as a calypsonian, publishing his early sketches in Trinidad under calypsonian aliases such as Big Buffer and Ack-Ack (referring to the noise of anti-aircraft gunfire, and capturing the spirit of attack that can characterize political calypsos). He takes his cue from the calypsonian's dexterity in his wit, satire, reversals, distinctive language use and syncopated rhythms. Like the calypso, Selvon's writing is bittersweet: he can 'laugh kiff-kiff' (*Londoners*, 138) and at the same time give bite.

'Calypso in London' brings the traditions of the trickster and the calypso together. While 'Obeah in the Grove' reflects on the challenge of finding housing, this story begins with two further common difficulties encountered by the Windrush generation on arriving in London: finding profitable work and coping with the climate. Mangohead, the protagonist, is another trickster figure, who at the story's start finds that he can no longer continue with his job as a road worker: 'One frosty morning while he was digging, he lift up a spadeful of dirt to throw up on the bank, and when he throw his hands over his shoulder, as if his hands cramp and couldn't come back' (*Sunlight*, 125–6). Knowing that his friend Hotboy is a keen calypsonian, he tries to distract him with a calypso so good he will agree without thinking to lending Mangohead money he has no hope of getting back. Mangohead's first attempt draws on his personal experience:

It had a time in this country  
 When everybody happy excepting me  
 I can't get a work no matter how I try  
 It look as if hard times riding me high.

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But Hotboy is unimpressed: 'Lord old man, you can't think of anything new? You think we still in Trinidad? This is London, man, this is London. The people want calypso on topical subject' (*Sunlight*, 127–8). Once again, Caribbean forms seem to become heightened in Selvon's London. So, in order to give his calypso more bite, 'Mango, as if he get an inspiration, start to extemporize on Nasser and Eden and how he will give them the dope – the best thing is to pass the ships round the Cape of Good Hope' (*Sunlight*, 129). It's a telling contemporary reference: in riffing on the Suez Crisis of 1956, Selvon is calling attention to a pivotal moment in the turning of the fortunes of the British Empire, giving precise political contexts to his many symbolic reversals.

The story can be read as both a calypso and a trickster tale. There's the literal calypso Mangohead and Hotboy go on to finish together. There's the way their calypso takes on and aims to better calypsos back in Trinidad, which recalls the spirit of the carnival competitions. There's the way Mangohead tricks Hotboy; and once again a complication of the initial trick: at the end we hear from the narrator that Hotboy has told Mangohead 'that he sell the calypso. But up to now I can't hear it playing or singing anywhere' (has Hotboy ended up quids in or not?) (*Sunlight*, 131). Then there's the way the story functions as a kind of calypso in inculcating Britain both at home and in its place in the wider world. Finally, the story plays its own kind of trick on Britain by intervening in the representation of London and in the representation of the English language.

In Selvon's best-known London work, *The Lonely Londoners*, published in 1956 and whose composition overlaps with some of the stories of *Ways of Sunlight*, in-betweenness operates at both local and structural levels. Although labelled a novel, the work seems as much a collection of interlinked vignettes, which follow the fortunes of a cast of West Indian characters trying to 'get on' in London but often struggling to 'get by' (*Londoners*, 88). Selvon is clearly influenced by his experience of the short story form, developing his folkloric style, his gift for sketches with improvisatory qualities, and his seamless movements between instance and generality and between the real and the typic. The longer form allows for more sustained exploration of the trickster and carnival tropes of opposition and reversal, and of the states of liminality and feelings of ambivalence with which they are associated.

With a wider cast of characters, Selvon is able to explore different strategies for responding to the city. Moses, from Trinidad, has been in London for ten years; like his biblical namesake, he is a leader (although, uncertain of the future, including his own, he is limited as a prophet). He holds 'the boys' together, and in the process holds the book together. At Harris' St Pancras Hall fete, prototype for the 1959 Caribbean Carnival that would inspire the Notting Hill Carnival (discussed elsewhere in this volume by Leighan Renaud), a clue to Moses' character is revealed when he becomes an informal 'master of ceremonies with the boys, giving them all the latest lowdown and ballad as they coast a drink' (*Londoners*, 114). Moses is continually there for support and advice, absorbing their stresses, although it also takes its toll. They gather in his Bayswater room on Sunday mornings for their own version of a Sunday service, 'coming together for a oldtalk', keeping alive their West Indian identities and finding relief from the fragmented loneliness of city life (*Londoners*, 138).

The degree to which the characters hold onto their pasts, and bring them to bear on their London experiences, varies. There are those who attempt as complete an assimilation as possible: Bart, for example, who uses his 'light skin' to try to pass as 'a Latin-American' (*Londoners*, 61); and Harris, who 'like to play ladedda, and he like English customs and thing' so that 'when he dress, you think is some Englishman going to work' (*Londoners*, 111). Such satirical caricatures are underpinned with serious sociological critique of the limitations and racism motivating such responses: Bart is 'frighten for the lash' (*Londoners*, 61), while Harris' performance is always incomplete: 'Only thing, Harris face black' (*Londoners*, 111). At the other end of the spectrum, and in a spirit of resistance, there is Tanty, who refuses to adapt her behaviour, rather insisting that London itself adapts; so she installs a Caribbean system of credit in the backstreet grocers by sheer force of insistence: 'Where I come from you take what you want and you pay every Friday' (*Londoners*, 79). Names are an indicator of reseeing and remaking the city. When Henry Oliver, himself newly renamed by Moses as Sir Galahad, first hears he will lodge in Bayswater, island life is on his mind: 'Is a bay? It have water?' (*Londoners*, 35). Similarly, Tanty makes sense of, and fears, London buses in relation to her experience of the sea in Jamaica: 'I feel as if they would capsize' (*Londoners*, 82). The initiated make the city their own through abbreviation, speaking of the Grove, the Gate, the Water, the Arch and the Circus; but only, as Moses tells Galahad, after 'you living in the city for at least two years' (*Londoners*, 35). Pushing renaming further still, Big City, always deferential to big city life, refuses to accept his habit of confusing names, so that we end up with 'Nottingham Gate' and 'Gloucestershire Road' (*Londoners*, 95). Perhaps Galahad's 'miracle of metabolism' (*Londoners*, 123), his inability to feel the cold in the winter when everyone else is suffering (and its reversal: that he starts to feel cold in the summer) functions as an allegory of resistance, of not adapting to the new surroundings.

Galahad nonetheless undergoes transitions and transformations from his arrival at the start of the novel, fresh off the SS *Hildebrand* and meeting Moses at Waterloo station. His first strategy is to 'play boldface' (*Londoners*, 39), but he ends up getting lost on Queensway and 'a feeling of loneliness and fright come on him all of a sudden' (*Londoners*, 41), resulting in a kind of identity crisis: 'a feeling come over him as if he lost everything he have' (*Londoners*, 42). Thereafter he is always divided between his feelings of awe for London's fame – admiration for the 'big romance' of being able to say 'I was in Oxford Street' – and at the same time his acute sense of London's problems, chiefly its racial injustice. The odds are against the new arrivals; this is a London that 'divide up in little worlds' (*Londoners*, 74) and whose inhabitants are unable to see 'how other people does affect their lives' (*Londoners*, 76). In Praed Street a notice appears reading 'Keep the Water White' (*Londoners*, 89); such division can be reversed only in Big City's fantasy of striking it rich: 'I would put a notice on all the boards: "Keep the Water Coloured, No Rooms For Whites"' (*Londoners*, 97). The divided city leads to divided identities. Galahad becomes inured to discrimination; in a variation of Frantz Fanon's 'Look, a Negro!' revelation in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Galahad kindly addresses a small child who has singled him out with 'Mummy, look at that black man!', only to face, in a more complex performance still, the mother's embarrassment 'with so many white people around' (*Londoners*, 87). As in

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Fanon, such episodes lead to reification: Galahad comes to think of 'the colour Black' as a distinct person that 'causing botheration in the place' (*Londoners*, 88). The racialized self has become fully divided.

Sir Galahad is of course a calypsonian moniker, alluding to the Arthurian romances. A prominent calypsonian at the time, who brought calypso to the United States, was called Sir Lancelot; Selvon would doubtless have been aware of his work, especially since he visited the US just prior to writing *The Lonely Londoners*. In the legends, Galahad is Lancelot's illegitimate son, and he's one of the knights who manages to reach the Holy Grail. In this context, the male protagonists of *The Lonely Londoners* become a version of the Arthurian knights in their quests for their own versions of the Grail: food – at times a quest for survival – but also in their quests to fulfil their sexual appetites. In their episodic adventures, these latter-day knights, tricksters of the Water and of the Gate, reinvent both the romance form and the picaresque novel.

When 'the vengeance of Moko', as in 'Obeah in the Grove', falls this time upon 'the boys' one winter, Galahad and Cap grotesquely literalize the animal traditions of the trickster tale in order to get by. Selvon delights in combining the allegorical form with London specificity: Galahad snatches a pigeon near an entrance to Kensington Gardens, 'as soon as you cross over the zebra, a little way down from Queensway' (*Londoners*, 124) (such an area, with the 'iron railing there, so you can't get right up to the birds', still exists, at the entrance opposite the Queensway crossing). A little further west, Cap ensnares seagulls from his 'top room in Dawson Place, near the Gate' (*Londoners*, 134). While such tricks can be read as quests for survival, 'the boys' empowerment also takes the form of sexual conquest, which generates some of the ugliest scenes in the novel. Moses, Selvon acknowledges in interview, is a 'very strange, ambivalent figure'; 'he's almost an Anansi spider character'.<sup>13</sup> The trickster's ambivalence perhaps explains how Moses can both be a moral compass to 'the boys', yet play cruel tricks on women, and trick Lewis into thinking Agnes is having an affair, leading him to abuse her. It can be difficult to find many ways out of the novel's sustained patriarchal focalization, although awareness of the ambivalence of the trickster figure and the patriarchal nature of the calypso (and that of the European courtly) tradition with which Selvon is working provides potential distancing.

A vital aspect of Selvon's success is his command of the language form in which he writes. He said that he spent two of the six months it took to complete *The Lonely Londoners* working on its language, drafting firstly a series of 'wonderful anecdotes' with 'most of the dialogues in dialect', but found 'I could not really move' with the main narrative 'in straight English'.<sup>14</sup> Yet once he started using his distinctive form 'of Caribbean language' for the whole, the composition 'just shot along'.<sup>15</sup> Although Selvon had employed creolized English in the narrative sections of earlier works, especially in the short stories, he suggested he was not 'quite conscious of it' until working on *The Lonely Londoners*. The language deepens the connection between the disparate characters; it facilitates the representation of West Indians as what Selvon referred to as a 'third race', a concept which he felt also allowed him to give voice to Caribbean characters who are Black as well as Indian.<sup>16</sup>



Again, we find in-betweenness emblemized in this creolized language: it is adapted to facilitate wide readership. As Selvon explained, 'I really try and keep the essence, the music of the dialect'; 'I don't do any phonetic spelling, and I try to avoid some words or phrases which I feel would be very difficult for an audience outside of the Caribbean to follow' (115). But there is also something strange in employing such vernacular-orthography at all: to write a version of an entirely spoken language is a paradox and unique challenge.

Both the concept and the specific linguistic feature of hiatus create further bonds between the language and the characters. For the characters are in hiatus between the Caribbean and London, flats and jobs, women and commitments; types of English. Hiatus is an experience they have to accommodate at every turn, and which involves remarkable adaptations of language and culture. Hiatus is broadly understood as a 'break in continuity' but it has a precise definition when it comes to language. Phonologically, hiatus is having two adjacent vowels in different syllables, as in 'a apple'. Reading that aloud is uncomfortable, so languages have evolved to restrict hiatus with consonants – 'an apple' – or by changing the sounds of vowels when they are next to each other, like 'cooperate'. Another example is 'the ear', which is said as one word, because the vowels turn into a diphthong – two vowels in one. This is all for prosodic purposes: to make the language flow. Adapting to or accommodating an uncomfortable state of hiatus, then, is not only a core theme of the novel – migrant limbo – but lies in the language itself. The reader is also left in the dislocation between the letters on the page and the true sound of this musical language.

In *The Lonely Londoners*, we see what appears to be untreated hiatus everywhere: when 'the boys' come together for 'a oldtalk', for example. How would you pronounce that? What we fail to see on the page is that hiatus in Trinidadian English is usually tackled with glottaling. To glottal is to use a glottal stop, 'a form of plosive in which the closure is made by bringing the vocal folds together', between the two vowels – almost a catch in the throat which acts like a consonant.<sup>17</sup> Here, the sound would have the same function as an 'n', as with the glottal in 'A&E'. Creolized forms of English use adjacent vowels more often, but they adapt the vowel sounds in innovative ways. Speaking fluidly with Caribbean oral rhythms is the priority. Glottaling is the usual choice but is hard to express on the page in the prose form. An arguably accurate written version of Trinidadian English would have to use phonetic alphabets and markings. For example, the phonetic transcription of 'a old' in Trinidadian English is 'aʔ ɔl', where 'ʔ' is the glottal stop in the International Phonetic Alphabet. The glottal stop could also be transcribed with an apostrophe, so Selvon might have written 'a'ole talk', but it is still unclear how to pronounce the vowels there.

Language for a migrant is survival – is quick communication, adapted to accommodate the experience of being between cultures. The migrant story is a succession of hiatuses dealt with creatively and quickly, and this is reflected in the vernacular, where hiatus in language is creatively dealt with, using sounds that have no corresponding letters or marks for the page in standardized written English. The reading experience would be very different with a diacritical alphabet – more clinical, less accessible, but a text made

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to be read aloud. As it stands, the Standard English speaker cannot pronounce the many adjacent vowels because Selvon does not provide a roadmap for pronunciation, but the text is readable on the page. This suggests to the reader that they cannot truly engage with the migrant experience. The reader is an outsider pressing their ear to the door, trying to hear and mouth the intimate sounds between friends together in a foreign land.

*The Lonely Londoners* moves – in spite of many digressions, its own migrations – from winter to summer; that summer fully flourishes in an extended passage set for the most part in Hyde Park, phrased in a single sentence. The grammar collapses; boundaries and conventions are made soft and malleable. No commas or periods separate the words, let alone markings around hiatuses: ‘summer does really be hearts like if you start to live again you coast a lime by the Serpentine and go for a row on the river or you go bathing by the Lido though the water never warm no matter how hot the sun is’ (*Londoners*, 106). The passage might be read as an interlude in Selvon’s attempt to fit any ‘standard’ conventions around grammar or novels. Like a Russian nesting doll, this is a hiatus within a hiatus, drawing attention to the idea of a ‘hiatal’ or in-between state. The passage functions as a kind of quasi-Shakespearean green space in which greater freedom, greater subversion is possible, including from European literary precedents; once again we are in the tradition of the Trinidadian calypso, performing freedom by taking on and outwitting colonial precedents.

The passage is a celebration of the awakening of the natural world, and of being reminded ‘what it like to see blue skies like back home’ (*Londoners*, 102), but more than just a counterpart to the brutal winter and to cramped bedsit living, this summer in the park is the site of far more transgressive reversals, of the ‘big thrills’ on offer (*Londoners*, 107). Trees now ‘have clothes on’ (*Londoners*, 102), but ‘girls throw away heavy winter coat’ (*Londoners*, 101). By night ‘the world turn upside down’ (*Londoners*, 109) and Hyde Park’s history as Henry VIII’s deer park becomes reinvented as a contemporary ‘happy hunting ground’ (*Londoners*, 107). For this extended sentence is also a release from the pent-up city: ‘everybody look like they frustrated in the big city the sex life gone wild’ (*Londoners*, 109).

The sexual freedoms of the park provide a kind of levelling: ‘it ain’t have no discrimination when it come to that in the park in the summer’ (*Londoners*, 104); high and low unite in sex, but this is first and foremost a patriarchal alliance, bringing together ‘all sorts of fellars from all walks of life’. Both sex workers (who prove good at ‘business’ (*Londoners*, 104)) and ‘the boys’ (who are seen to collude in the fetishization of people of colour (*Londoners*, 108)) appear to be able to benefit from the discriminatory practices at work; perhaps that can be read as an attempt to pull in different directions, to blur the question of who is hunting whom, although it is far from finding a way out, including from the celebratory tone.

‘That is life that is London’ this hiatal section sings (*Londoners*, 109), but it ends with a contrast between Galahad, appreciating the ‘sweetness of summer’, and Moses ‘who frighten as the years go by wondering what it is all about’ (*Londoners*, 110). Increasingly it is Moses who is brought into focus, and the speed of oscillation between feelings of euphoria and of despair intensifies, as we enter his mind. Should he save up and try to

return home or not? Feelings of paralysis come upon Moses when he senses he is 'getting no place' (*Londoners*, 98), that it is 'like he unable to move his body' (*Londoners*, 141). While Selvon uses the winter to emblemize stagnation, he also uses the transition from winter to summer to represent the push and pull of this debate about going or staying: 'I will wait until after the summer, the summer does really be hearts' (*Londoners*, 141). When Moses comes closest to being a prophet, looking beneath the surface of things as he looks into the Thames in the novel's final scene, he is speaking also of the artistry of the novel and its own wanderings: 'Under the kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts, he could see a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same spot' (*Londoners*, 141). And when we hear that he has learnt of the literary success of 'all kinds of fellars writing books', we sense that perhaps Moses is in fact the implied author of *this* novel (*Londoners*, 142). Though Selvon's own in-betweenness has notable differences, it intersects with that of Moses: Selvon would describe living in London as living 'in two worlds. Hanging about with Moses and the boys, and at the same time hustling to earn something with my writing.'<sup>18</sup>

States of in-betweenness are everywhere in Selvon's writing of London. They can result in frustration, loss and alienation; they might also hold sources of strength in their potential to bring about new forms of identity. London has, after all, been the constant site of such reinvention through the power of cultures colliding. Selvon ultimately demands of his reader the ability to navigate multiplicities, which in their potential for disorientation create textual experiences to mirror those of the migrants. And if we can't keep up with it all, if the ultimate trick is on us? 'Well that is your hard luck.'<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

1. See Sam Selvon, 'Finding West Indian Identity in London', *Kunapipi* 9, no. 3 (1987): 37; and John Thieme and Alexandra Dutti, "'Oldtalk": Two Interviews with Sam Selvon', in *Something Rich and Strange: Selected Essays on Sam Selvon*, ed. Martin Zehnder (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2003), 75.
2. See Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (Harlow: Longman, 2005), 74. Future references to this text will be given in parentheses in the main body of the text.
3. Selvon, 'Finding West Indian Identity in London', 37.
4. *Ibid.*, 36–7.
5. *Ibid.*
6. See 'Sam Selvon: Interview with Reed Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla', in *Tiger's Triumph: Celebrating Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta and Anna Rutherford (Hebden Bridge: Dangaroo Press, 1995), 122–3.
7. *Ibid.*, 120.
8. Sam Selvon, *A Brighter Sun* (Harlow: Longman, 1996), 88.
9. Selvon, 'Finding West Indian Identity in London', 36.
10. Sam Selvon, *Ways of Sunlight* (Harlow: Longman, 1981), 11. Future references to this volume will be given in parentheses in the main body of the text. This story was originally published

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in 1948. For a bibliographic chronology by Susheila Nasta, see Sam Selvon, *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose 1946–86*, ed. Kenneth Ramchand and Susheila Nasta (London: Longman, 1989), 226–48.

11. Originally composed in 1952 as ‘Calypsonian’ and set in Trinidad; the London setting is added for the 1957 version.
12. Esther Priyadharshini, ‘Thinking with Trickster: Sporadic Illuminations for Educational Research’, *Cambridge Journal of Education* 42, no. 4 (2012): 547–61.
13. ‘Sam Selvon: Interview with Reed Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla’, 117.
14. Michael Fabre, ‘Samuel Selvon: Interviews and Conversations’, in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1988), 66.
15. Thieme and Dutti, ‘Oldtalk’, 74.
16. ‘Sam Selvon: Interview with Reed Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla’, 116, 119.
17. Arthur Hughes, Peter Trudgill and Dominic Watt, *English Accents and Dialects* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 43.
18. Selvon, ‘Finding West Indian Identity in London’, 37.
19. Selvon, ‘Working the Transport’, *Ways of Sunlight*, 132.