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## Making sense of memory in the writings of the Caribbean diaspora: Sam Selvon's London calypso

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Sam Selvon's use of the conventions of Trinidadian calypso in his novel *The Lonely Londoners*. It considers Selvon's use of calypso in the creation of a narrative voice expressing the dilemma of Caribbean immigrants in London as paradigmatic of the ways in which aesthetic experimentation traces new trajectories of migrant experience, thus problematizing binary visions of cultural displacement. Particular emphasis is placed on Selvon's use of narrative voice to integrate the sounds of calypso, producing a sonic background that gives aesthetic shape to the discordant experiences of his characters. This use of calypso transforms the novel into a cultural performance of memory through which two aesthetic forms, the novel and calypso, become the locus of a remotivating of collective memory.

### KEYWORDS

Sam Selvon; calypso; collective memory; voice; creolized language

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Sam Selvon's 1956 novel *The Lonely Londoners* stands as a literary landmark in the creation of what a number of critics have begun to call Postcolonial London (see James and Harris 1993; McLeod 2004; Ball 2004; Esty 2004; Dawson 2010). Selvon came to London in the 1950s as part of the Windrush generation, a term used to designate the people who migrated from the Caribbean on a ship called the MV *Windrush* in 1948. Selvon was one of a group of West Indian writers who arrived in London during the same period, including George Lamming, Andrew Salkey and C.L.R. James. He is credited by Mark Looker with having set the pattern for literary representations of Caribbean London by "bringing together literary sensibility with the obdurate material and social realities of post-war London." According to Mark Looker (1996),

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*The Lonely Londoners* recasts the urban novel, gives it a new shape and a new language which rehistoricizes the new city – its geography and its monuments, its people and their struggles, their energy, their humor and vitality. Like an afterimage imprinted upon the eyelids, the colonial dream lingers here as a counterpoint to and commentary on lived reality. (60)

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Looker further contends that although Selvon's novel was not the first novel published by an immigrant from the Caribbean (George Lamming's *The Emigrants* was published in 1954), it was Selvon's novel that "created a new way of looking at the city, as both material and cultural artifact" (1996, 216n2). Selvon's novel does not record the achievements of

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ambitious men seeking fortune and adventure in the metropolis; as its title suggests, it is rather a tale of loneliness and frustration. The title even suggests by its sonorities that loneliness is inherent in the city itself. 40

Although Looker's analysis of Selvon's novel dates from the end of the 20th century, the process of rehistoricization which he describes argues for the continuing relevance of Selvon's fictionalization of the experience of immigrants from the Caribbean in London. While the field of diasporic studies has developed in ways that make it possible to establish correlations between widely disparate geographical and historical situations, Selvon's focus on language as a synecdoche for the processes of translation and transcoding involved in the migrant experience gives it a paradigmatic function in the study of diasporic literature. As Hélène Buzelin (2000) points out in her study of the questions raised by the translation of the novel into French, the "syntactic fusion" used Q2 by Selvon in the creation of his fictionalized Creole makes it possible to illustrate the impact of language in the smallest details without sacrificing the legibility of the language for the non-Creole reader (208). It questions the process of hegemonic linguistic domination by measuring and exploring the gap generated by attempts to penetrate a new environment using a supposedly familiar language, in this case English, which has been defamiliarized through its association with an unfamiliar context. From the perspective of Barbara Cassin's (2016) discussion of translation, Selvon's use of Creole highlights the "force and intelligence of the difference between languages" (38) by situating the subject of his novel in the fictional space that emerges between standard and creolized forms of English. 45 50 55

*The Lonely Londoners* is an episodic novel in which an anonymous narrator tells, in anecdotal fashion, stories revolving around a series of Caribbean men seeking housing, work and women in post-war London. At the centre of the stories, functioning in a sense as the pivot around which they turn, one finds Moses Aloetta, a man from Trinidad who has been in London for a number of years and serves as friend and counsellor to what we might call Caribbean "lost boys." The homodiegetic narrator uses a markedly oral style and the language he speaks, which has been the object of ample commentary, is strongly influenced by Trinidadian Creole (Looker 1996; Thieme 2003; Fabre 1988a; Nasta 1995; Bentley 2005; Buzelin 2000). Another important feature of the novel is its reliance on the Trinidadian calypso, which informs both its structure and themes. This feature has also been commented on and analysed by many critics, several of whom will be referred to in this article (Fabre 1988b; Forbes 2005; Decouvlaere 2010; Rahim 2005). 60 65 70

My focus is on the calypso as a cultural performance of memory, a stylistic innovation that allowed Selvon to inscribe the Caribbean within the literary space of London, thus making it a vehicle for the representation of a Caribbean diasporic cultural identity. As Paul Ricoeur (2000) emphasizes in his discussion of Maurice Halbwach's work on collective memory, memory belongs to the group. We need others, Ricoeur (2000) tells us, in order to remember (146–163). The notion of collective memory has become one of the cornerstones of diasporic studies, opening numerous avenues for the exploration of the social and historical contexts in which cultural memory is forged. While Selvon appears to be shaping the identity of a group of men from the Caribbean through their confrontation with an unfamiliar context, he is in reality at the same time weaving their apparently random encounters into a collective fabric which expresses their identity as a group. He is recreating the Caribbean home in the very process of imagining London as 75 80

the site of an emigrant experience. This is essentially what Susheila Nasta (1995) is expressing when, in referring to Selvon's London novels, she writes:

Through the encounter with London, it became possible to move, on the one hand, towards a more fully realised picture of the world back home and on the other, to define and establish a Caribbean consciousness within a British context. (82)

In the same way, Lisa Kabesh (2011) describes "the penetration of black cultures into British culture" as "mutually transformative" (n.p.). It is this double movement both forward and backward in time that is one of the distinguishing characteristics of collective memory in the literature of diasporic populations.

In order to demonstrate the functioning of calypso in *The Lonely Londoners* as a form of cultural memory, I will emphasize the distinction between sight and sound, between the visible and the audible. I argue that calypso serves as the foundation for specific features of the narrator's voice, which in turn influence the reader's experience of the narrative. While both the visible and the audible are discursive constructions generated by the text, I wish to demonstrate that they function in counterpoint and that it is through the performance of the narrative voice that calypso becomes a background for the representation of the Caribbean as collective memory. This approach relies on studies of orality in fiction, on the notion of voice as it is used in psychoanalysis, and also on studies of sound as an element in cultural contexts and its relation to emotion.<sup>1</sup> These approaches, even if they cannot be applied in a strictly scientific sense, can enhance our awareness of sound in its relation to emotion and memory and make it more audible in literary terms. They can also provide an interesting alternative to the emphasis on space and on mapping as approaches to the sensual experience of diasporic populations. Looking at the narrative voice in terms of its production of sounds related to calypso makes it possible to distinguish between the overt meaning produced by the narrator's words and the form that he gives to them; it is in this gap between meaning and form that the impact of the diasporic experience can be felt. This method can also make the underlying calypso more audible to the reader, beyond the explicit references to Caribbean music which appear in the text. Thirdly, it can help us to understand the functioning of Selvon's imitation of Caribbean Creole and to perceive its relation to the way in which the story is told, in a sense to clarify the link between language and form.

As a musical form, calypso functions in ways that are similar to other forms of music developed by members of the African diaspora in the New World. Joycelyne Guilbault (2007), in her work *Governing Sound: The Cultural Politics of Trinidad's Carnival Musics*, quotes Hollis Liverpool's conclusion that "[t]he calypso was not the descendant of any one particular form of song, but owed its origin to the numerous songs, rhythms, and dance traditions present in Trinidad during the time of African enslavement" (30). There are a number of important characteristics of calypso that are helpful in understanding this musical form as an integral part of Trinidadian culture. From a musical point of view, a calypso song is composed of a 16-bar stanza and an 8-bar chorus, although in some cases the stanza and chorus are of equal length (Guilbault 2007, 156). Like many forms of popular music, it is highly flexible and adaptable; Guilbault refers to the description of calypso given by an artist named the Mighty Sparrow, who emphasized its capacity to create a balance between tradition and change (155). She quotes a description of calypso made by the Mighty Sparrow that gives a good idea of the music's vitality and its favourite themes:

You see calypso is about life. It is about sex, violence, love, social and political commentary, it is about jobs, about shelter, about world issues. And you have different kinds of people singing it, people from different backgrounds, from different levels of education, giving the art all of its infinite variety. (quoted in Guilbault 2007, 155) 130

Gordon Rohlehr (2001) expands on this definition by mentioning other functions that “also include the calypso as a sort of medium for news, gossip, scandal, that is to say, the calypso as popular newspaper narrating things which happen from day to day” (65). 135 Rohlehr also emphasizes the social function of calypso in its relation to contexts of conflict and competition that were originally related to the stick fight, a form of martial art, saying that “everything that takes place in the social and cultural contexts in Trinidad possesses some element of conflict and is reminiscent of a stick fight” (2001, 60). He points out that the celebratory and competitive aspects of the music can also be traced back to the stick fighting tradition, 140

where skill, dexterity, and aggressiveness were integral features of performance. In other words, performance itself was inseparable from competition, confrontation, facing the enemy, *sans humanité*, with stick in hand or with the rapier of the word or the sawn-off shotgun of the tenor steel drum (Rohlehr 2001, 62–63) 145

He also refers to the presence of masking, a notion that is fundamental in all African American and Afro-Caribbean forms of artistic expression, the idea that the artistic form functions as a mask through which the situation of the slave can be expressed indirectly.<sup>2</sup> This aggressive, competitive aspect has been carried over in the calypso and steel band competitions that characterize carnival in Trinidad. 150

Even this rapid description of calypso makes it clear that the music itself constitutes a form of collective memory in which an initial diasporic experience, based on the confrontation with a hostile environment, has been embedded and transformed into a vehicle for integrating new experiences. It should also be pointed out that the populations emigrating to England took the calypso with them, not simply in their baggage, but in the form of living performers. One of the passengers who boarded the *MV Windrush* in 1948 was Lord Kitchener, already a star in Trinidad, who opened his own club in Manchester and did not return to Trinidad until 1963. As the title of one of Kitchener’s songs, “London is the Place for Me,” indicates, the calypso, transplanted in England, continued to adapt and to integrate the experiences of Caribbean populations in Great Britain (Guilbault 2007, 9). 155 160

In considering Selvon’s use of calypso as an underlying form shaping his presentation of the experiences of Caribbean immigrants in Great Britain, I am looking at the music not only as a specific structure and a repertoire of themes, but also as a universe of sounds that enables the characters to communicate with each other and to get their bearings in a city which remains essentially indifferent or even hostile to them. The voice of the narrator functions as a channel for the transmission of an audible culture, based on oral forms of communication. Therefore an understanding of Selvon’s use of calypso requires particular attention to the relationship between the characters and the narrator who, in a sense, will set their stories to music. It is the narrator who organizes the representation of the Caribbean diaspora in London, a group to which he belongs, but from which he stands apart as a performer. He is producing a text, a song about Caribbean London, which is both a confrontation with the present and a testimony to the power of the past 165 170

and of the memory of the Caribbean. Just as the calypso can be seen as representing forms of social interaction that characterize Trinidadian society, the narrator's calypso in Selvon's novel serves as a vehicle for the representation of social interaction within the context of London. 175

In order to grasp the nature of the relationship between the narrator and the characters, it is necessary first of all to understand the world of words in which the characters are immersed, the way in which they rely on language in their attempts to deal with an unfamiliar environment. Moses Aloetta, who has been in London for 19 years, serves as a guide to newcomers, and it is in the newcomers' relationship with Moses that the reader discovers their inability to decipher what they see around them and the extent to which they rely on Moses's explanations. This becomes clear when Galahad tries to go to the labour exchange by himself. Alone in the London crowd, he is panic stricken: 185

Q4 Galahad make for the tube station when he left Moses, and he stand up there on Queensway watching everybody going about their business, and a feeling of loneliness and fright come on him all of a sudden. He forget all the brave words he was talking to Moses, and he realise that here he is, in London, and he ain't have money or work or place to sleep or any friend or anything, and he standing up here by the tube station watching people, and everybody look so busy he frighten to ask questions from any of them. (Selvon [1956] 2006, 23) 190

In the meantime, Moses, who knows very well what is going to happen to Galahad, shows up to rescue him. When Galahad tries to push his way onto a bus without queuing, Moses steps in to remind him that "I tell you to take it easy [...]. You not in Park Street waiting for a trolley" (25). After accompanying him to the labour exchange, Moses warns Galahad about practising the kind of verbal boasting that people use in the Caribbean. He refers to this type of boasting by using expressions like "grandcharge" and "big talk": 195

When they was outside and Galahad showing him the unemployment card, Moses say, "Keep that careful, and don't go about the place making grandcharge when you ain't have work. One time a fellar was trying to impress some girls in a café, talking all kind of big talk and saying how he have a big work in the government service. Same time he put his hand in his pocket to take out something and the unemployment card drop out." (29) 200

Most of the story revolves around the boys' attempts to survive, to get by in London by using what the narrator calls "the soft tone," and the ways in which Moses is obliged to rescue them by explaining what he has learned from experience. The boys come to him to tell their stories, to ask for advice. He in turn relays stories about other people. The verbal habits of an entire community emerge through these exchanges, revealing a social context characterized by banter and boasting and captured in terms like "giving him a ballad," "coasting lime," "big oldtalk," "giving tone," "making rab" and so on. The repetitive nature of the boys' conversations and the use of Creole terms draw attention to the importance of words and conversation as a shield protecting the boys from the assaults of a hostile world, most of which are expressed in visual rather than auditory terms. This aspect of Selvon's fictional world has been noticed by Curdella Forbes (2005), who says, in talking about the boys, that "their aim is to extend a space of absence by filling it not so much with silence as with noise, a drowning out" (88). She evokes "the stunned stammer of the boys' conversations in Moses's room" (89). 205 210 215

Selvon's use of the narrator's voice to organize in poetic terms the perception of his characters is not totally different from the way in which a heterodiegetic narrator may be used to comment on the presentation of a fictional world, giving it depth through subjectivity. The innovative aspect of the narrator's discourse lies in the way in which his use of the language and the rhetorical conventions of calypso organizes them into a system of representation with auditory and performative qualities. His discourse is both an interpretation and a performance; it is the tension between these two dimensions that prevents his narrative from slipping into a simple description of a difficult process of integration. 220 225

One important aspect of Selvon's use of the narrator as calypso artist is the creation of a distinction between seeing and hearing in the experience of the immigrants. Selvon's use of a highly audible homodiegetic narrator inverts the dominant role often played in fiction by visual descriptions attributed to a heterodiegetic narrator. It draws attention to the narrative voice as both sound and sense, giving a certain priority to the former. In his discussions of orality and literacy, Walter Ong (1982) points out that the essential difference between sight and sound lies in the positioning of the perceiving subject. Sight, he explains, is the separating sense; a person can only look in one direction at a time. Sound, on the contrary, is what he calls the "unifying sense" because it envelops us and seems to come simultaneously from inside and outside the listener (71). The boys in Selvon's novel surround themselves with sound as a protection from the solitude which is often expressed through visual perception. Cap, who is actually Nigerian, but spends so much time with West Indians that he ends up speaking like them, undergoes a shock when faced with the visible reality of what London offers him in terms of employment: 230 235 240

The fellar take Cap to the back of the station, and behind there real grim. The people who living in London don't really know how behind them railway station does be so desolate and discouraging. It like another world. All Cap seeing is railway line and big junk of iron all about the yard, and some thick, heavy cable lying around. It look like hell, and Cap back away when he see it. (Selvon [1956] 2006, 35) 245

In this passage, the narrator's use of internal focalization obliges the reader to share Cap's isolation. The narrator gives poetic form to the expression of Cap's shock by using alliteration ("desolate and discouraging") and by suggesting a comparison with hell. The solitude that is expressed visually is, of course, also a way of drawing attention to the visibility of the West Indians as coloured people, which is the real source of their problems and which no amount of talking can make disappear. One evening when Galahad is going to meet a date, feeling great – "The sky blue, sun shining, the girls ain't have on no coats to hide the legs" – a child suddenly says, "Mummy, look at that black man!" (76). Although Galahad has become used to this type of incident, he remembers another time when he heard two men talking about "how these black bastards have the lavatory dirty" and in desperation he begins talking to the colour of his hand: 250 255

Colour, is you that causing all this, you know. Why the hell you can't be blue, or red or green, if you can't be white? You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world. Is not me, you know, is you! (77) 260



In the situation involving Galahad, the narrator uses direct quotation to suggest how Galahad's reaction takes the form of apostrophe in an essentially rhetorical gesture. The use of apostrophe produces a repetition of the word "you" which vocalizes the split in the speaking subject produced by the awareness of his colour. In both cases the frustration contained in a social situation based on the visible finds expression through mechanisms characteristic of poetry (alliteration and apostrophe) that transcode the experience in terms of sound. 265

There are other ways in which the narrator's discourse can be understood as a calypso performance. I will begin with aspects that affect the surface of the text before pointing out ways in which his discourse reflects the aesthetic assumptions underlying the calypso as cultural expression. Selvon's anonymous narrator establishes from the beginning a style that is marked not only by the use of Creole vocabulary and syntax, but also by forms of emphasis and repetition that are derived from the calypso ballad.<sup>3</sup> His style of narration owes its effects as much to sound and rhythm as to meaning. In his opening presentation of Moses Aloetta going to Waterloo station to welcome a new group of immigrants, the references to the "soft heart" of Moses function as a refrain, producing a Moses who could be a character in a calypso ballad, emphasizing a particular trait that transforms him into an artistic representation, almost a caricature. This opening passage sets the tone for a narration based on a series of portraits in which humour and exaggeration serve to represent the characters in ways that suggest a resemblance with calypso heroes. Selvon was able to select traits of Trinidadian English which foreground the difference between standard and creolized language without slowing down the rhythm of the text or making it difficult for a speaker of standard English to read. At the same time, his use of Trinidadian syntax places emphasis on the anecdotal structure of the stories by highlighting expressions like "It had a fella." The following passage is a good example: 270 275 280 285

*It had* a Jamaican fellar who living in Brixton, that come to the station to see what tenants he could pick up for the houses that he have in Brixton. This test when he did first come open up a club, and by and by he save up money and buy a house. The next thing you know, he buy out a whole street of houses in Brixton, and let out rooms to the boys, hitting them anything like three or four guineas for a double. When it come to making money, *it ain't have* anything like "ease me up" or "both of we is countrymen together" in the old London. [...] And whenever a boat-train come in, he hustling down to Waterloo to pick up them fellars who new to London and *ain't have* place to stay, telling them how Brixton is a nice area, that *it have* plenty Jamaicans down there already, and they would feel at home in the district, because the Mayor on the boys' side and *it ain't have* plenty prejudice there. (Selvon [1956] 2006, 67) my emphases) 290 295

In this passage, the use of "it had," "it have" and "it ain't have," along with the emphasis on verbs of action ("come to," "save up," "buy out," "hitting them" and so on) sets up the underlying rhythm of the text. This effect is reinforced by the absence of markers of the verb tense, in other words the use of the base forms of verbs. This is a characteristic of Creole that Selvon uses to good effect because it focuses attention on a series of actions, underlining movement without deflecting the reader's attention from the action itself. Furthermore, this creolized language, by its unfamiliarity to a speaker of standard English, draws attention to itself, thus producing a "sound" in the reader's mind that gradually takes precedence over the "sense" of what is being said and that can be associated with the narrator's voice.<sup>4</sup> It was 300 305

precisely this “sound” of Trinidadian English that Selvon heard in his mind when he was writing the novel. Selvon himself commented a number of times on his use of dialect. In an interview with Michel Fabre (1988a) he said:

When I wrote the novel that became *The Lonely Londoners*, I tried to recapture a certain quality in West Indian everyday life. I had in store a number of wonderful anecdotes, both about Trinidad and immigrants in London. I had wonderful anecdotes and could put them into focus, but I had difficulty starting the novel in straight English. The people I wanted to describe were entertaining, but I could not really move. At that stage, I had written the narrative in English and most of the dialogues in dialect. Then I started both narrative and dialogue in dialect and the novel just shot along. It was not difficult to understand because I modified the dialect, keeping the lilt and the rhythm, but somewhat transformed. (66)

This quotation demonstrates the effect that Selvon achieved by making the narrator speak in what he calls dialect. It contributes to transforming the narrator into a performer, giving him the possibility of establishing a connection with the reader in the same way that a calypso singer gauges his performance on the reaction of his audience.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, it signals the effacing of the distinction between a standard voice, considered as normative, and a voice speaking in dialect, treated as subaltern.

The narrator’s use of Trinidadian English also fulfils an important function in transforming Creole into an expression of Caribbean culture. The way in which the narrator uses words gives priority to their functioning as cultural signifiers over their role as vehicles for the expression of a specific meaning. Selvon’s narrator thus assigns a poetic function to language, using it in a way which draws attention to the words themselves.<sup>6</sup> Seen in terms of Bakhtin’s description of the polyphonic nature of the novel, he is creating an image of Trinidadian Creole which serves to identify the group.<sup>7</sup> It is through this poetic function that Creole is aestheticized and becomes a vector of Caribbean culture. The difference between Creole and standard English becomes the locus of a transformation which contributes to the creation of a poetic image of the Caribbean. And it is through the poeticization of his own language that the narrator becomes a singer of calypso and his narration becomes a song. A demonstration of this can be found in the narrator’s use of the expression “coasting lime,” a Creole term for chatting or talking.<sup>8</sup> The narrator uses the term so often that the reader comes to grasp its meaning and its function as a metaphor for the importance of conversation and verbal exchange in Caribbean culture. The novel becomes, in a sense, an occasion for the narrator to “coast a lime” with the reader.

There is a direct relation between the narrator’s use of Trinidadian English and his structuring of a string of anecdotes into a song about coasting lime in London. It is precisely this bridge between language and event that allows the narrator to transform the lives of the boys into a calypso about living in London. Just as the narrator negotiates a special relationship with the reader, the boys try to make a place for themselves in London by talking, by using what the narrator calls “the soft tone.” There is therefore a continuum between the narrative and discursive levels of the novel. The narrator weaves the mundane events of the boys’ lives into what becomes a song, thus, in the words quoted from Rohlehr above, using calypso as “a popular newspaper narrating things which happen from day to day.” This is the integrative function of calypso, and it is through his use of this function that Selvon allows his story to function as calypso.

If one looks at the narrator's function in creating a background of calypso sounds, one can say that the reader is encouraged to listen to the voice of the narrator by being drawn into it through the Creole language he uses, thus suspending the temptation to analyse or judge and allowing the reader to be carried along by tone and rhythm. Expressed differently, one could say that the specificities of Creole vocabulary and syntax, which may attract the reader's attention upon their first use, become, through repetition, a musical background that leads the reader to perceive the events described from a different perspective. It is through the use of visual images in passages of internal focalization that the narrator in a sense breaks the spell and forces the reader to pay attention to the most disturbing aspects of the boys' life in London. There is a tension between meaning and form which can be seen as a reflection of the masking function that is the most essential aspect of musical forms like the calypso and the blues. It is precisely the music in the narrator's voice that functions in this case as a mask, hiding, or rather softening, the ideological message in his description of postcolonial London.<sup>9</sup>

There is a final dimension that clearly demonstrates the narrator's role as a performer of Caribbean culture. In a scene that takes place in Hyde Park, the narrator adopts a stream-of-consciousness technique to describe the coming of spring to London, mimicking passages that are characteristic of modernist English fiction. The narrator puts on an eight-page performance in which there are no breaks, just one long run-on sentence. One is reminded of Molly Bloom's monologue in *Ulysses*. Although the reader cannot help being seduced by the narrator's voice, the events he relates stand in striking contrast to the jubilant tone. After rhapsodizing about the pretty girls and the blue skies he begins to recount a series of anecdotes about the girls who hustle in the park and the men who either pay for their services or simply spy on them "with their hand in their pocket" (Selvon [1956] 2006, 96). He reveals the seamy side of sexual behaviour in London, pointing out in particular the stereotypes that make blacks sexually attractive as primitives. He repeatedly says that people would "cork their ears" rather than listen to what he has to say. The narrator is producing a parody of a style belonging to English culture in order to seduce the reader into listening to a story that reveals the darkest side of the West Indian experience in London. This is his most brilliant performance, for it reveals his capacity to use a typically English style to produce the same type of social criticism that is the mainstay of the calypso. More importantly, it shows to what extent Selvon was aware of the many levels on which the cultural distance between the Caribbean and London could be observed. While the calypso uses a form familiar to the Caribbean audience to talk about topics which also belong to their sphere of experience, here the narrator parodies an English form in order to expose and foreground what makes West Indians stand out in London, namely their colour. It is only by looking at the narrator's performance throughout the novel in terms of calypso that one arrives at a reading of the "summer is hearts" passage which situates it correctly as a performance involving mimicry, parody and masking. In spite of the rather biting irony of this passage, it also involves a certain degree of humour to the extent that the narrator is demonstrating that if he can sing like the Mighty Sparrow, he can also sing like Virginia Woolf or James Joyce. Finally, this passage is inspired by the nostalgia for the Caribbean that the narrator feels when spring comes to London. By producing a sound familiar to any reader of English literature, Selvon reveals the extent to which the memory of home is an emotional experience, based on

sound, sight, smell and touch. He produces a nostalgia for the Caribbean accessible to people who have never been beyond Britain.

Writers from the Caribbean have continued to write about the experience of the diasporic populations in Great Britain, extending and expanding on the experience of Selvon's boys. An interesting echo of Selvon's London can be found in Caryl Phillips's (2010) novel, *In the Falling Snow*. In this novel, the main character is a descendent of the generation of men pictured by Selvon. Keith Gordon is a social worker trying to make sense of his life in a world in which the problems faced by Selvon's boys have to some extent been overcome, but from which they have not entirely disappeared. Floundering in both his personal and his professional life, Keith is also to some extent estranged from his father. When his father is hospitalized for a heart attack, Keith rushes to his bedside and listens as his father talks about the past and about Jamaica. The rhythm and imagery of his monologue is reminiscent of the narrator's "summer is hearts" speech in *The Lonely Londoners*. His story, told in the same partially creolized language heard in the mouths of Selvon's characters, is a powerful reminder of the relation between sound, language and emotion.

In making the distress and the nostalgia of his characters audible, Sam Selvon created a compelling model for representing the ways in which memory haunts the lives of those who have been separated from the sounds of a shared culture. From a theoretical point of view, his forging of a narrative voice characterized by the rhythms and language of calypso, while at the same time absorbing the fluidity of modernist prose, demonstrates the ways in which aesthetic forms migrate along trajectories that modify the perception of the migrant experience. Far from remaining trapped in the gap between the homeland and an alien city, or on the contrary registering the submission of one language to another, Selvon's novel continues to fascinate readers as an example of the "creative polyphony" to which Françoise Kral refers in the introduction to this volume. It explores the limits of the translatable, suggesting the ways in which the very attempt to translate one culture in terms of another modifies our perception of both.

## Notes

1. The work of the anthropologist Jack Goody (1986) has been highly influential in the study of the distinction between writing and orality, making it possible to have, by contrast, a clearer perception of the functioning of orality. Walter Ong's (1982) study has also been widely used in examining the effects of orality in literary texts. The notion of voice in psychoanalysis and the applications of this concept in literary contexts can be found in Dolar's (2006) discussion. The French historian Alain Corbin (1999) has devoted attention to the relation between sensual experience and history in his investigation of sound in relation to the use of church bells in France after the French Revolution.
2. This idea has been developed with respect to Caribbean culture by Edouard Glissant (1997). Glissant uses the term "detour" to identify various subversive strategies.
3. Keith Warner (1983) points out that in Calypso, repetition "ensures that the calypsonian has his audience in full control, not unlike the repetition used by the preacher" (35).
4. Dolar has explored the ambiguous relation between sound and meaning in the notion of voice as an approach to the definition of voice in psychoanalysis. His discussion of voice in relation to language (2006, chap. 1, "The Linguistics of the Voice") suggests interesting perspectives on the way in which a writer may tinker with the intelligibility of language as a way of emphasizing its complex relationship to sound.

- Q5 5. Fabre (1988) has drawn attention to this feature of Selvon's use of dialect: "Stylistically, *The Lonely Londoners* is an achievement because it maintains a mellow, humorous, mildly satirical tone which manages to endear the West Indians to the reader without ridiculing the British too much. The distance between conflicting audiences is thus bridged. [...] Selvon's problem lies less in stressing West Indian specifics than in reducing the distance between the European reader and the protagonists" (217). 445
6. Jean-Jacques Lecercle (2015) has brilliantly demonstrated how Selvon produces "a form of poetic subversion of the Standard dialect by a dialect that is socially and politically dominated by other dialects" in his analysis of a line from *The Lonely Londoners*. He shows how the use of Trinidadian English reinforces the laconism of the sentence "Only thing, Harris face black," thus giving the sentence "an illocutionary force" (n.p.). 450
7. Bakhtin (1981) refers to the idea of creating an image of a language in his discussion of discourse in the novel: "If the subject making the novel specifically a novel is defined as a speaking person and his discourse, striving for social significance and a wider general application as one distinctive language in a heteroglot world – then the central problem for a stylistics of the novel may be formulated as the problem of *art de langage*, the problem of representing the image of a language" (336). 455
- Q6 8. According to Richard Allsopp (2003), this use of the word "lime" can probably be traced back to World War II: "The term seems to have originated in *Trin* during World War II, evidently applied to white American sailors from the naval base who hung around bawdy-house areas in groups. The verb to lime seems to have been a popular (shifted) back-formation from 'limey', as a Derogatory term for a white person of low class" (348). 465
9. Fabre refers to this function when he talks about "a mellow, humorous, mildly satirical tone which manages to endear the West Indians to the reader without ridiculing the British too much" (1988, 217). 465

### Disclosure statement

- Q7 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author. 470

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