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Dawson, Ashley

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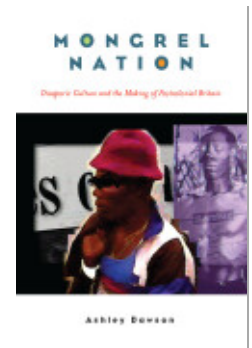
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“In the Big City the Sex Life Gone Wild”

Migration, Gender, and Identity in Sam Selvon’s
The Lonely Londoners

ON A FRIDAY EVENING IN LATE AUGUST 1958, a Swedish woman named Majbritt Morrison fell into an argument with her Jamaican husband Raymond as they left the Latimer Road underground station in London’s Notting Dale neighborhood.¹ People congregated as the Morrisons’ dispute grew more heated. The conflict was suddenly transformed when a man in the crowd began shouting racial slurs at Raymond Morrison, apparently believing that it was his duty to protect a white woman from a threatening-looking black man. Majbritt Morrison stopped arguing with her husband and began defending him from this attack, leading some members of the crowd to turn on her, calling her a “nigger lover.” A group of the Morrisons’ West Indian friends arrived as the shouting escalated and a fight broke out. Although no serious injuries resulted from this scuffle, it was the initial spark in the first major racial conflagration of postimperial Britain.

The night after the Morrisons’ fight, crowds spilled out of local pubs in Notting Hill, brimming with beer and antiblack feeling. Spotting Majbritt Morrison on her way home down the high street, a crowd chased her to her house, volleying taunts of “black man’s trollop!” and throwing milk bottles. When Morrison stood her ground outside her house and refused police orders to go inside, she—rather than the members of the marauding crowd—was arrested. The mob made off

down the road, smashing windows in a side street and preparing to attack a house party organized by one of Britain's first sound-system operators, Count Suckle. The police, arriving just in time to stop this attack, dealt with the conflict by escorting Count Suckle and his friends out of the neighborhood. This apparently confirmed the impression of many in the crowd that their actions were helping purge West London of blacks. Mobs numbering in the hundreds roamed the streets of Notting Hill during the following nights, attacking any West Indians they could lay their hands on. Despite the eerie calm that reined over the rest of London during the rioting, groups of primarily young working-class men flooded into the streets of Notting Hill from surrounding parts of the city and began wreaking havoc. Although a few members of the white community defended their black neighbors, during the rioting the majority of the neighborhood's whites kept a complicit silence as lynch mobs roamed their streets. Neofascist organizers were quick to capitalize on this quiescence. Oswald Mosley's Union Movement circulated leaflets and held public rallies in the area. The perils of miscegenation featured prominently in the propaganda disseminated by such groups. For instance, National Labour Party leader John Steel was quoted as saying: "We will be a nation of half-castes. The result is that the nation will possess neither the rhythm of the coloured man, nor the scientific genius of the European. The only thing we will ever produce is riots, just as do the mixed races of the world."²

The Notting Hill riots, as this week of violent mayhem came to be known, were a watershed for Britain. They shattered the long-standing metropolitan illusion that racial conflict was un-British. It suddenly seemed that Britain was destined to face unrest on a scale not so different from that experienced by former settler colonies like the United States and South Africa during the late 1950s. Moreover, the riots established some of the fundamental themes of racial antipathy that would characterize postimperial Britain. The gender of immigrants (until 1955, 85% were male) was a pivotal issue in this regard. As the conflict over the Morrisons' interracial marriage and the propaganda disseminated by neofascist leaders demonstrates, anger over sexual relations between black men and white women was a crucial catalyst of the riots. Agitators such as John Steel played on fears that sex between Englishwomen and black male immigrants from the Caribbean would create a mongrel population in Britain. Notwithstanding their formal rights as British subjects, in other words, black migrants were viewed by the neofascists,

by many members of the political establishment, and by much of the populace in general as a threat to racial purity and, consequently, to national identity.³ White women such as Majbritt Morrison who consorted with black men were likely to be stripped of their racial identity.⁴ As they had been in Britain's colonies, black masculinity and sexuality became the subject of lurid interest and concern during the initial decade of mass migration from the Commonwealth, with particular alarm concentrating on the charged erotic relations of black men and white women.⁵ The profound anxiety created by the blurring of boundaries separating the metropole and the colonies that characterizes postimperial Britain is, in other words, displayed in particularly stark form in the arena of sexual relations.

Stereotypical images of black men's potent sexuality and concerns about white women's potential infidelity to the race-nation had a direct impact on state policy during this period. The war against Nazism and fascism, with their overtly biological constructions of racial hierarchy, had rendered explicit racist appeals illegitimate in post-1948 Britain. However, notions of sexual conduct helped blur the line between biological and cultural notions of difference. Parliamentary opponents of immigration from the Commonwealth nations could avoid overt racism by alluding to supposedly insuperable cultural differences between postcolonial subjects and native Britons.⁶ Hoary stereotypes dating back to antiquity that represented non-Europeans as given over to sexual abandon so excessive that it bordered on the bestial permeated public discourse in surprisingly frank terms. Sexual mores were seen as a vital index of broader cultural differences, with critics objecting to the "completely promiscuous method of breeding" that "tropical peoples" imported into Britain.⁷ Through this focus on the sexual, the "culture bar" was substituted for the color bar. In the process, the image of Britain as an embattled nuclear family replaced that of imperial Britannia as the mother of a geographically dispersed extended family of colonial peoples. Racist violence such as the Notting Hill riots was viewed by many mainstream commentators and legislators as the logical outcome of aversion to the foreign cultural practices of colonial subjects.⁸ The deplorable racist attacks that took place during the riots could only be prevented, it was argued, through the diminution of Britain's black population. By 1962, when an immigration act that effectively transformed postcolonial migrants into second-class citizens was passed, such arguments had largely prevailed.

The evident continuities between colonial and postcolonial subordination in Britain ensured that heterosexual self-assertion was a crucial component of the immigrant experience for many West Indian men.⁹ Moreover, Britain offered male migrants occasions to assert their self-worth in the arms of white women, opportunities for experiences of sexual and emotional intercourse that were far more severely policed on colonial terrain. As Frantz Fanon put it, “When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.”¹⁰ This urge to self-realization through sexual entanglement was particularly strong for Anglophone Caribbean male migrants, who had been exposed to the powerful assimilatory pedagogy of the British colonial education system without encountering the full panoply of racial terror to which African-American men were regularly submitted.¹¹ For Fanon, however, this strategy of revenging oneself on the colonial apparatus through sexual conquest, predicated as it was on the desire to merge with or at least be validated by whiteness, is animated at bottom by dependency and deep self-alienation.¹² Like many recent critics of metropolitan racism, however, Fanon largely neglected to consider the impact such attitudes would have on women.¹³

To what extent is Fanon’s gloomy portrait of mental colonization borne out by the experience of migrants to Britain? Published contemporaneously with Fanon’s work and two years before the Notting Hill riots, Samuel Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* depicts the first generation of overwhelmingly male immigrants from the Caribbean struggling to cope with the stereotypes and prejudices they encountered in Britain. Of late, Selvon’s work has been celebrated for its account of West Indian resiliency within the urban metropolis. Recent critics have argued that British cultural hegemony was significantly unsettled and undermined through the postimperial encounter with migrants from the colonies.¹⁴ Selvon’s work is certainly noteworthy for the confidence with which it draws on the creolized forms of Caribbean vernacular culture, calypso foremost among them. Yet celebratory readings of Selvon’s work in particular and of the impact of early waves of migration in general tend to underemphasize the forms of institutional racism and structural exclusion faced by migrants to Britain.¹⁵ *The Lonely Londoners* depicts the impact not simply of racism in housing and the workplace but of racial fetishism in the sexual arena. Selvon thereby underlines the damaging effects of racism on immigrant cultures on both a material and a psychological plane. Moreover, Selvon’s jocular accounts of the escapades

of "the boys" in the face of such racism encouraged his overwhelmingly British readership to empathize and even identify with West Indian people such as those found in *The Lonely Londoners*. To stress the hybridizing impact of migration alone is therefore to miss the role of Selvon's novel as an intervention in an increasingly racist public sphere in Britain during the mid-1950s.

In contrast with the relentlessly misogynist writing of the so-called Angry Young Men, Selvon's depiction of the pathos of macho values among the black immigrant community prepares the ground for a critique of black men's complicity with structures of patriarchal subordination in Britain and its colonies.¹⁶ As is true at present, popular culture was the most important site for the articulation of such attitudes.¹⁷ After World War II, calypso music became one of the dominant forms of popular culture on a global scale, fostering pan-Caribbean exchanges, rejuvenating the recording industry in both the United States and Britain, and catalyzing the growth of Hi-Life music in colonial West Africa. This chapter therefore begins with a discussion of representations of black male identity in calypso music of the 1940s and 1950s. My discussion of the specific historical roots of the extravagant braggadocio of the period challenges pathologizing assumptions of a timeless black machismo. When calypso artists and their audiences traveled from the Caribbean to Britain, they brought their attitudes about gender power with them, values that Sam Selvon represents with great clarity and pathos in *The Lonely Londoners*. Selvon's work foreshadows many subsequent texts that deal with issues of masculinity, sexuality, and identity fragmentation, including George Lamming's *The Emigrants* and *The Pleasures of Exile*, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, and Andrew Salkey's *The Adventures of Catullus Kelley*. Through its exploration of racial inequality and gender power, Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* offers a powerful call for an egalitarian and postimperial Britain.

CALYPSO, MASCULINITY, AND POWER

Calypso music has its origins in the stick fighting that accompanied the canboulay festival in colonial Trinidad. Centering on the ritual burning of cane fields during the era of plantation slavery, canboulay also included fights between rival groups of slaves using long sticks or staves. These street skirmishes were propelled by secret African martial soci-

eties as well as by the plantation-based fraternities that succeeded them following the Middle Passage.¹⁸ Indeed, the most frequently cited derivation for calypso is *kaiso*, which is in turn a corruption of an expression of approval similar to “bravo” in the West African Hausa language.¹⁹ Stick fights were preceded by ritual boasts in which a griot-like figure called a chantwell taunted members of the opposing band with stories of his leader’s physical prowess. The fights themselves were accompanied by kalindas, biting satirical songs sung by the chantwell and a chorus that belittled their opponents and promoted their own band. The by turns outrageously boastful and wittily barbed verses of the kalinda were traditionally composed extempore by the chantwell. This tradition of improvised bravado and satire remained a core of calypso music following emancipation in the mid-nineteenth century, becoming known in Creole as *picong*, from the French term *piquant* (stinging, insulting). The calypso is thus grounded in hyperbolic assertions of masculinity that were forged in the context of the systematic emasculation administered by the institutions of racial slavery.

After emancipation, calypso songs became an integral component of the carnival tradition, which consisted of a mas’ band or group of revelers wearing masquerade costumes. These bands paraded through the streets accompanied by a chantwell and chorus singing the band’s praises and mocking rival groups. British colonial authorities, who repeatedly sought to suppress the Creole institution of carnival during the second half of the nineteenth century, not surprisingly became the butt of the chantwells’ satirical verses. Calypso songs increasingly addressed topical and potentially inflammatory subjects such as the difficulty of life for the denizens of the urban slums known as barrack yards. In 1883, for example, the colonial government passed a ban on drumming, an Afro-Creole practice on which kalinda depended, in an effort to abolish practices associated with carnival. Kalinda singers subverted this proscription, however, by substituting bamboo instruments that provided rhythmic accompaniment to the kalinda for traditional drumming practices. By the end of the nineteenth century, the calypso tradition had become a central venue for the expression of popular discontent with colonial subjugation, often using forms of satire and indirect insult to challenge British cultural and institutional power.

At the same time, calypso songs gained increasing autonomy from the carnival itself with the establishment of the tent, an informal arena set up so that a mas’ band could practice its songs prior to the annual

carnival parades. Just as pioneering figures of the Trinidadian literary scene such as Alfred Mendes and C. L. R. James began writing about the barrack yards, calypso singers expanded the topicality of their material by focusing in more detail on the everyday lives and vicissitudes of the poor.²⁰ Calypso singers, or calypsonians, were by this time singing mainly in English, reflecting the Anglicization of Trinidadian society in general, although the English spoken in the tents was a highly creolized form that included many elements of French and West Africa patois. One of the greatest of these calypsonians, Chieftain Douglas, was also responsible for the transformation of calypso from impromptu sessions held in mas' camp tents to formalized, programmed, and commercially sponsored events.²¹ Competition among the calypsonians, deriving from the days of the chantwells, was institutionalized in 1939, when the first island-wide Calypso King competition was held. Although the British colonial population and the small black middle class remained aloof, French Creole intellectuals began supporting calypso, seeing it as a genuine expression of indigenous national identity.

The calypso aesthetic saturates *The Lonely Londoners*.²² Selvon's debt to the genre is most evident in the novel's apparently loose-knit string of humorous anecdotes depicting the lives of flamboyant characters in London's Caribbean immigrant community.²³ To this appropriation of the structure of calypso ballads, Selvon adds adaptation of the pervasive use of melodrama, satire, and irony that characterized the calypso tradition. In addition, in *The Lonely Londoners* Selvon creates a narrator whose synthetic Creole dialect overcomes the dichotomy between popular and literary tradition that marked his first two, Trinidad-based novels.²⁴ Selvon's creolized narrative voice and adaptation of the calypso tradition served as a beacon to Caribbean intellectuals of the period, many of whom joined Selvon in exile in Britain during the 1950s.²⁵ If residence in the colonial metropolis magnified the legacy of cultural schizophrenia bequeathed by colonialism, Selvon's calypso aesthetic offered a paradigm for a populist cultural nationalism that resonated strongly with the intellectuals of his generation.²⁶ Selvon's appropriation of calypso allowed him to commandeer the British novel and transform it into a vehicle for the expression of postcolonial Caribbean identity.

While *The Lonely Londoners* pioneers the creolizing strategies with which members of the West Indian renaissance of the 1950s and 1960s reworked the English language and the metropolitan literary tradition,

it also depicts the mutability of British identity. Selvon's protagonists inhabit the capital city, using the famous sites of the metropolis as conjure words to define their upward mobility.²⁷ Britain does not, however, offer the boundless opportunity that in many cases inspired the immigrants' departure from the Caribbean. Confronted with London's numbingly cold winters and the institutional racism of the color bar in housing and employment, Selvon's characters band together in the basement flat of his protagonist, Moses Aloetta, in order to swap tall tales of their misadventures in the metropolis. The social solidarity embodied by the men's storytelling circle is an important antidote to the isolation and frequent humiliation they experience in their everyday lives in Britain. Indeed, Selvon's characters overcome the petty loyalties to their natal islands in the Caribbean and to Africa in the name of a more cosmopolitan sense of diasporic unity forged through the picaresque tales they tell one another in Moses' basement. Although their rambunctious camaraderie cannot be equated with the kind of political organizing that unfolded following the Notting Hill riots, the social solidarity depicted in the novel establishes the bonds of trust and mutuality upon which such organizing would be built in the following two decades. This small community of men therefore constitutes a kind of seed or microcosm of the unity developed by black Britons in the face of racism.

Although *The Lonely Londoners* celebrates the resiliency of Moses and his comrades, the novel also lays out the flaws of a resistant cultural nationalism grounded in misogynistic, homophobic bonding between men.²⁸ Confronted by pervasive forms of racist stereotyping and discrimination, the community of male immigrants depicted in the novel all too often responds with forms of masculine self-aggrandizement that hinge on the debasement of women, both white and black, as well as on overt forms of homophobia. Like many other aspects of the novel that have been celebrated by critics, this reflex is grounded in the calypso aesthetic.²⁹ Indeed, there are strong parallels between the braggadocio of calypso songs of the era and the treatment of women in the novel by male characters. Selvon's depiction of masculine bonding, misogyny, and homophobia in *The Lonely Londoners* testifies to the potent influence of popular traditions such as calypso on the identity of immigrants to Britain.

Despite the gradual commercialization of calypso during the early twentieth century, calypso singers themselves lived precariously in

Trinidad. Although calypso music was beginning to be recorded, there was no system of copyright through which calypso artists could gain royalties for their songs. Lacking access to such revenues, calypsonians' primary regular source of income was the prize money available during the annual carnival competitions. However, since the carnival took place only once a year, calypsonians—an almost exclusively male group—often relied on female backers of the tent or mas' band for economic support during the rest of the year. They were consequently seen by much of the conservative Trinidadian middle class as ne'er-do-wells, despite their ability to articulate social grievances in scurrilously amusing terms. While they were only one component of a notably heterogeneous genre, the exaggerated sexual innuendo and rodomontade that had by this time become a standard part of the calypso repertoire reflected these contradictory material and social conditions. Economically dependent on calypso audiences in general as well as on their girlfriends, calypsonians relied on their verbal facility and boastful self-confidence to garner the popularity necessary to survive from one carnival season to the next. Since they tended to be an economic drain on the women who supported them, calypsonians could seldom depend on stable or long-term relationships, let alone on marriage, for economic and emotional support. The braggadocio of calypso music papered over the conditions of economic dependency and insecurity to which the calypsonians were consigned.

If calypsonians tended to cast themselves in inflated terms in reaction to the damaging psychological residues of plantation slavery and colonial underdevelopment, they offered no such boon to women in their songs. Self-inflating descriptions of masculine sexual superheroism were instead twinned in the calypso music of the first half of the century with stinging attacks on women. Calypsonians often sang of their insatiable sexual appetites, describing the many women they left prostrate in ecstasy, begging for more or groaning in agony in response to the powerful lovemaking they had experienced.³⁰ Women were consistently treated solely as sexual objects and denigrated with wittily cloaked put-downs and punning scatological catalogs of their supposed physical and hygienic deficiencies. If a woman sought to assert herself by abandoning her philandering boyfriend, she was subjected to harsh attacks and violent threats for her perceived infidelity. The calypso song thus became a way of disciplining women, who feared the opprobrium that would be brought upon them were they to become the subject of a

blisteringly satirical attack. Such assaults were seldom challenged by society at large; as Trinidadian novelist and critic Merle Hodge notes, "The calypsonian, the folk poet, is assured of heartfelt, howling approval when he devotes his talent to the degradation of women."³¹ Where did this strong streak of misogyny come from? Of course, colonized and enslaved women were, with virtually no exceptions, severely disadvantaged within their societies prior to the advent of colonial rule and enslavement.³² Colonial hierarchies impinged on, grew entangled with, and were to a certain extent transformed by the forms of gender power they encountered. Yet, while the misogyny evident in preindependence calypso lyrics may have reflected interlocking traditions of male gender power, the phallic self-assertion of the calypsonians was a painfully ironic reflection of their acceptance of white supremacist representations of their economic and social castration.³³ The extravagant sexual machismo of the calypsonians can thus be seen as a form of compensatory disavowal. Once dominant notions of castration had been accepted, male potency tended to be asserted through anxiety-ridden and excessive demonstrations of mastery over black women.

Far from being simply heterosexist, however, Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* offers an explicit and prescient critique of these modes of black male style and the cultural nationalism they embody. Selvon engages in this critique by rendering the forms of objectification and fetishization that attended black male immigrants' sexual relations with white English women far more explicit than in calypso music of the time. Sexual relations, often represented as a form of aggressive conquest, are nevertheless accompanied in the novel by a sense of ambivalence and defensiveness. In addition, *The Lonely Londoners* also stresses the hollow character of the sexual adventurism of "the boys," suggesting that their triumphs in the bedroom fail to create truly egalitarian and postimperial relations among the novel's characters. Instead of dismantling colonial power relations, that is, the boys' conquests simply invert those relations through the creation of gender hierarchy. Black male self-assertion ends up mirroring the forms of violence that characterize white supremacist patriarchy. To drive this critique home, Selvon's novel documents instances of domestic violence within the black community and offers an example of a strong black woman who challenges such forms of abuse.

The ballad of Cap, a dissolute Nigerian native who spends his nights partying and his days sleeping, illustrates many of these themes. Cap is

an unrepentant freeloader, a man who hoodwinks a string of European women into supporting him using his personal charm and the women's stereotypical notions of black masculinity. Moses' grudging admiration for Cap stems from the fact that he is able to thrive without submitting himself to the disciplined workday of industrial capitalism. As a kind of sexual con man and trickster, he rejects the dehumanizing routine of manual labor, offering the spectacle of seemingly endless leisure to a man like Moses, who, despite working for nearly a decade in Britain, has little to show for his labors.³⁴ It is no coincidence that Cap's ballad is immediately preceded by Moses' visit with the recently arrived Galahad to the employment office. Like the vast majority of immigrants from the Caribbean, Galahad is a skilled worker, yet the employment office has nothing to offer him.³⁵ Instead, he is banished to an adjoining building to register for unemployment insurance. This place is a devastating reminder of the vulnerability of Caribbean men to the whims of British employers. Black workers were consistently downgraded and deskilled following their arrival in Britain. In addition, British labor unions were uniformly hostile toward black workers, despite the rhetoric of working-class solidarity articulated by national union leaders. Black workers tended to be accused of undermining the unions' closed shop policy and of helping employers break strikes by working as "black legs."³⁶ The sense of identity and stability guaranteed by a good job was consequently denied to many migrants.³⁷ As Moses comments when he and Galahad stand surveying the depressing spectacle in the National Assistance office, "When a man out of work he like a fish out of water gasping for breath" (45). Adding to this prejudice in the private and union sectors, the state itself often railroaded black workers into the least desirable jobs. As Galahad's application is processed, Moses reveals that his colonial origin will be noted in red ink on top of the form. This is to save time, Moses says, so employers who don't want black men working for them won't be bothered with job applicants from the Caribbean. This apparent lack of anger at the exclusion of blacks from all but the least desirable jobs is qualified by Moses' revelation that most of the job announcements were stripped from the walls after a Jamaican man tore up the office in a fit of rage (46). If working-class men's identity was often intimately tied to their pride in manual labor, employment conditions in Britain systematically undermined black men's sense of self-worth, leading to levels of despair and incandescent anger that *The Lonely Londoners* communicates despite its overriding comic tone.³⁸

Cap's flagrant sexual opportunism thus needs to be seen within the context of the systematic humiliation meted out to migrants in the workplace and elsewhere.³⁹ His ability to survive without wages offers a striking challenge to racism in the workplace, not to mention the diverse other forms of prejudice previously anatomized by Moses. Yet Cap's life of apparent leisure is the product of strenuous, increasingly desperate hustling. A promising son of the educated Nigerian elite, Cap drops out of law school in London in order to devote all of his attention to the seduction of English women. After his father cuts him off, Cap lives a totally unstable, itinerant life, dodging from one hotel room to another using his ability to con people into believing that he is the reputable student he once was. Moses calls him "the wandering Nigerian." This nomadic life cuts Cap adrift from the network of black friends he initially made in London. As a result, he comes to depend increasingly on the women he seduces.

Why is Cap so consumed by sexual desire? As Moses describes his antics, Cap is driven not simply by physical need, much less by a hankering for genuine intimacy and mutuality. Instead, Cap achieves a symbolic victory over colonial racial subordination by making his girlfriends dependent on him. His Austrian girlfriend sells off most of her material possessions, for instance, in order to support Cap. She also puts up with his blatant, chronic infidelity. Cap has evidently decided that the arms of a white woman offer a far more immediate form of gratification than laborious and protracted legal studies. Yet this conquest of European femininity fails to confer any sense of self-worth on Cap.⁴⁰ Instead, Cap's sexual drive becomes increasingly compulsive as he wears out his sole suit of clothes, loses his friends, and leaves the life of bourgeois respectability he came to London to achieve further and further behind. When his Austrian girlfriend eventually tires of his parasitism and pushes him to get a job, for example, Cap pretends to have found work but actually goes off hustling other women when he's supposed to be at work (53).⁴¹ He eventually dumps this Austrian for a French girl, whom he marries and then abandons since he has no place to take her on their wedding night. When his friend Daniel—whose address Cap has given the girl—finds Cap, he is paralyzed. Although Moses describes Cap as a kind of hapless, comic trickster figure, his compulsive sexual drive nevertheless indicates the dire need Cap feels to affirm his sense of manhood through predatory sexual relations.⁴² Sitting in the café trying to hustle women, Cap suffers through a dissocia-

tion of sensibility that allows him to forget the new bride who waits for him at Daniel's apartment completely. Like Galahad, Cap's psyche becomes fragmented, his past split off from his present as he strives repeatedly and obsessively to find new sexual partners. Of course, the women he seduces are nothing more than objects in the service of his quest for fresh flesh, a status that the novel underlines through its frequent references to women as "things" and as "cat." Yet in seeking validation through European women, Cap ironically places himself in a position of dependency. Each new sexual conquest holds out a promise of affirmation that is necessarily withdrawn continually since such validation is premised on Cap's self-alienation in the first place. Cap's compulsive hustling may free him from the deadening routines of the workday and may represent a superficial conquest of white femininity, but, as Moses' account makes clear, it does not constitute a triumph over racialized dependency, still less a rejection of gender hierarchy.

Cap is hardly alone in his search for sexual gratification. Admittedly, none of Selvon's characters ever articulate a conception of sexual relations as a form of revenge on a par with Eldridge Cleaver's theory of the political use of rape. Nonetheless, for virtually all the characters, the seduction of European women offers an implicit reclamation of their masculinity, belittled in so many other ways in Britain. Indeed, the majority of the ballads that compose the novel detail the misadventures of Moses and his friends as they search for the "bags of white pussy" they imagine the metropolis offers. Yet by choosing sex as one of their primary means of self-assertion, the characters conform to stereotypical representations imposed on colonized men by Europeans across the centuries. As many theorists of colonial discourse have emphasized, in the "porno-tropics" of empire, black men were represented with dramatically exaggerated phalluses that reduced black masculinity to the level of the genital.⁴³ Such representations were marked by deep ambivalence and splitting. On the one hand, the supposed phallic power of black men produced dramatic levels of anxiety that were often at the root of campaigns of white terror such as lynching. The specter of miscegenation, stemming in colonial contexts from fears over the loss of control of property and labor, produced anxiety-filled, vituperative discourses concerning the mutual attraction of black men and white women. On the other hand, the reduction of black men to sexual fetishes placed them in the passive position of the sex object.⁴⁴ Colonial and racist discourses, in other words, rendered black men as both

hypermasculine and feminine at one and the same time. According to Fanon's nuanced historical materialist analysis of the dependency complex, the chronic ambivalence of these dominant discourses left black men in constant combat with their own self-images.

These ambivalent discourses concerning black masculinity had a dramatic impact on race relations during the early years of migration to Britain, as the sexual escapades of Selvon's characters underline. Recounting his sexual adventures in London, for instance, Moses remarks:

In the big city the sex life gone wild you would meet women who beg you to go with them one night a Jamaican with a woman in Chelsea in a smart flat with all sorts of surrealist painting on the walls and contemporary furniture in the G-plan the poor fellar bewildered and asking questions to improve himself because the set-up look like the World of Art but the number not interested in passing on any knowledge she only interested in one thing and in the heat of emotion she call the Jamaican a black bastard though she didn't mean it as an insult but as a compliment under the circumstances but the Jamaican fellar get vex and he stop and say why the hell you call me a black bastard and he thump the woman and went away. (109)

The Jamaican man described by Moses confronts objectification at the hands of a wealthy British woman. As Moses notes, the white woman's avant-garde artistic inclinations ironically make her particularly prone to indulge in fetishizing fantasies concerning black masculinity.⁴⁵ Despite her passing enthusiasm for her lover, this woman is thoroughly complicit with subordinating discourses of racial difference.⁴⁶ Indeed, as Moses' narrative suggests, there is little chance that the Jamaican will be able to parlay his treatment as a sexual fetish into class mobility or even the acquisition of cultural knowledge. Instead, he is reduced to the level of the genital in an exchange that is, ultimately, emasculating. This objectification elicits a particularly violent reaction not simply because it participates in the racism so evident in other quarters of British society. In addition, the Jamaican finds himself placed in precisely the position that so many of Selvon's migrants attempt to vacate. By reducing women through slang terms such as *cat* and *thing* to their sexual organs, Moses and company treat them not just as objects of exchange between

competing, racialized patriarchies but as split-off, butchered aspects of themselves. Women become the receptacles of disavowed aspects of the men's femininity in forms of gender power intimately tied to racial hierarchy.⁴⁷ When women such as the wealthy artist described above treat Moses and his friends purely as sex objects, they undo this disavowal, forcing the men to confront their emasculated status in the most immediate terms. Expanding on this theme, *The Lonely Londoners* also depicts encounters between Cap and a transvestite (56) and between Moses and a gay man (107–8). Despite being treated in comic terms, both these encounters threaten to unman Moses and Cap by interrupting the position of masculine dominance that they struggle to establish in London. There are certainly significant differences between Moses, Cap, and the other characters, with Cap demonstrating the limit case for the instrumental treatment of women. However, when Moses and his friends perceive themselves as passive and feminized sexual objects as a result of racial fetishism, their response is typically articulated through strong compensatory assertions of their masculinity.

ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES OF GENDER AND RACE

The late 1950s and early 1960s were an era of rampant male insecurity in Britain. The established Left dealt with its historical setbacks through the flagrant misogyny evident in works such as John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*. The behavior of characters such as Cap is not so extraordinary when juxtaposed with works such as Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, with its philandering young protagonist. Although this kind of behavior was celebrated in calypso songs composed in Britain such as Lord Kitchener's hit "Nora," this was not the only model of male behavior available. Traveling with Lord Kitchener to Britain aboard the *Empire Windrush*, Lord Beginner also recorded songs inspired by the taboo topic of interracial relations. Lord Beginner, a member of the so-called Old Guard, often took international events as a subject of his songs, as his song "Mix Up Matrimony" demonstrates:

Racial segregation gone to hell,
They happenin' nowadays I can tell
Mixed marriage seems to have a stronger tide than the pure one

For I don't know why
 The races are blandin' harmoniously
 White and coloured people are binding neutrally
 It doesn't take no class to see how it come to pass
 Coloured Britons are risin' fast

(Chorus)

The organs are always playing
 And the preachers are saying:
 "Please cooperate and amalgamate"
 Oh some are seeing well and the others catchin' hell
 "Please cooperate and amalgamate"

The great part that Seretse Khama played
 We appreciate the move that he made
 The Bamangwato tribe he always thinking of
 He lost his throne for the girl that he love
 For he knew that a good wife today is hard to find
 So he find one so he had to treat her kind
 So if you're in your prime run to the preacher any time
 For your love it is not a crime.⁴⁸

Lord Beginner's song demonstrates the resonance of events in Africa for members of the diaspora resident in Britain, even after the departure of important anticolonial nationalists such as Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, and C. L. R. James.⁴⁹ In 1948, the heir to the Bamangwato throne in Botswana, Seretse Khama, married a white Englishwoman named Ruth Williams while completing his studies in London.⁵⁰ Khama's unorthodox marriage threatened his succession to the throne and generated an international diplomatic crisis. Khama's uncle and guardian, Tshekedi, declared the marriage a breach of Bamangwato custom and, along with other influential elders who feared the tainting of bloodlines and potential erosion of territorial sovereignty, threatened to disinherit Seretse. When the Bamangwato nevertheless granted Seretse the chieftaincy in 1949, Tshekedi led a group of dissenters into voluntary exile. The British government, anxious not to alienate South Africa's recently elected apartheid regime, from whom it wished to purchase uranium for the manufacture of nuclear weapons, sided with Tshekedi and banished Seretse and his wife. The diplomatic storm that erupted over Seretse's marriage nearly brought down the British government at

the time, but was ultimately resolved in the name of personal love instead of ethnically pure succession.

"Mix Up Marriage" suggests that Seretse's ultimate triumph resonated powerfully with some members of the diasporic community in Britain. Defying not only the customs of his own people but also the forms of racial segregation being installed in South Africa at the time, Seretse offered a model of individual devotion rising above the inflexible and exclusionary dictates of blood, belonging, and bureaucracy. This is not to say that the issue of dependency was not a factor in Seretse's marriage, but rather that Lord Beginner chooses to emphasize Seretse's courage and devotion to his wife rather than the Manichaean vision of racialized sexual relations presented by other calypsonians in Britain. Indeed, "Mix Up Matrimony" extrapolates from the Khama affair to cast mixed-race relationships as a form of antiracist activism. Yet, although Lord Beginner's song stresses the liberty to choose a romantic partner exemplified by Seretse Khama and experienced to a certain extent by black men in Britain during the early and middle 1950s, the song cannot fully escape the issue of gendered power relations. If, in the utopian rhetoric of the song, "white and coloured people are binding neutrally," such relations constitute a form of upward mobility for black men in Britain, who consequently "are risin' fast." This reference to what Fanon called "lactification" inevitably raises concerns about the injunction to "cooperate and amalgamate." Is this a form of racial suicide? Does the song, with its belief in the racial goodwill of the established church, not reflect the naive faith of colonials in the "mother country?" While these concerns are subordinated to the song's message of free choice and refusal of ethnic essentialism, questions of assimilation and identity nevertheless lie not very deep below the surface of Lord Beginner's song.

Unlike Lord Beginner's work, Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* contains not one example of an interracial couple able to overcome the barriers introduced by the combination of gender power and racial hierarchy. For Selvon, discourses of difference apparently seemed insuperable during the 1950s. Even Galahad, whose name connotes sexual purity, describes his encounter with a white girlfriend using the violent, dominating metaphor of a "battle royal" (93). The equation of domination and sexuality is most evident, however, not in relation to white women such as Galahad's girlfriend but in relation to black women. If white women offer an ambivalently regarded avenue to assimilation or

revenge on British society for its racial discrimination, black women's sexuality is openly perceived as a threat in Selvon's text. Not only can black women potentially cuckold their partners, but their sexual agency can also rupture the binary oppositions that are integral to racial antagonism and the exclusionary dynamics of ethnic solidarity.⁵¹ Although very few black women are represented in Selvon's novel, when they do appear, their sexuality is a pivotal issue and is closely policed. The novel thus demonstrates the extent to which incipient black male nationalism reproduces the violent gestures of white supremacist patriarchy.

The ballad of Lewis is crucial in this regard. Rather than simply acting as narrator for this ballad, Moses takes an active hand by persuading his gullible friend Lewis that women in London habitually engage in adulterous trysts while their husbands are at work (68). Lewis responds by going home and beating up his wife, Agnes. Each time Moses equates the cosmopolitan life of the metropolis with women's sexual infidelity, Lewis resorts to unprovoked domestic violence. When Lewis eventually asks Moses whether he's doing the right thing, Moses replies that he never claimed that Agnes was herself engaging in this kind of behavior. "Women in this country are not like Jamaica, you know," Moses announces, "they have rights over here, and they always shouting for something" (69). Moses thus seems to spur Lewis to gratuitous violence solely in order to gull his friend, perhaps teaching him not to be so trusting, and consequently passive and effeminate, in the future. Yet this ugly incident of masculine assertion allows Selvon to demonstrate women's solidarity in the face of domestic violence. Tolroy's aunt, Tanty, who appears to be completely naive during the Waterloo Station scene at the beginning of the novel, intervenes repeatedly on behalf of Agnes, offering her shelter after she's been attacked by Lewis, encouraging her to leave him after his unwarranted beatings, and ultimately advising her to bring him up on charges of assault. As far as she is concerned, Tanty says, legal action is the only measure that will make Lewis stop his abusive behavior (72). Tanty's advise to Agnes is particularly significant since black women in Britain have often been told to keep quiet about their personal affairs and accept domestic violence in the name of family and community unity in a racist milieu. By using the British legal system against such abuse, Tanty suggests that challenging patriarchal violence, rather than undermining solidarity, is an integral aspect of defending the black community.⁵²

CONCLUSION

The Notting Hill riots of 1958 offer a now nearly forgotten flash point that illuminates the birth of modern British racism. During the ten years that preceded the riots, colonial discourses of racial difference had been redeployed and fine-tuned in the metropolis, establishing the foundation for manifestations of British racism to this day.⁵³ In his account of the riots in *Absolute Beginners*, Colin MacInnes creates a fictional editorial that typifies this redeployment of racist discourse. Although the editorial, written by a toffee-nosed journalist who snubs the working-class narrator earlier in the novel, begins with complaints against black immigrants who scrounge off National Assistance, it clinches its case through an argument that highlights the centrality of sexuality to racial discourse:

Then there was the question of women (Old Amberly certainly went to town on this woman question!) To begin with, he said, mixed marriages—as responsible coloured persons would be the very first to agree themselves—were most undesirable. They led to a mongrel race, inferior physically and mentally, and rejected by both of the unadulterated communities. . . . The well-known propensity and predilection of coloured males for securing intimate relations with white women—unfortunately, by now, a generally observed phenomenon in countries where the opportunities existed—led to serious friction between the immigrants and the men of stock so coveted, whose natural—and, he would add—sound and proper instinct, was to protect their women-folk from this contamination, even if this led to violence which, in normal circumstances, all would find most regrettable. But this was not all: it was time for plain speaking, and this had to be said. The record of the courts had shown—let alone the personal observations of any attentive and anxious observer—that living off the immoral earnings of white prostitutes, had now become all too prevalent among the immigrant community.⁵⁴

Written in response to rioting in Nottingham, Amberly Drove's editorial is clearly part of a groundswell of racism that led one week later to the Notting Hill riots in London. The key ingredient of such racial discourses was the representation of black men as an internal threat whose

sexual liaisons with white women promised to make Britain a mongrelized nation. Black men were not simply reduced to the realm of the physical but were explicitly associated with contamination. By suggesting that black men are not simply responsible for miscegenation but also for the pimping out of white women, Drove's editorial adapts paradigmatically colonial discourses concerning racial purity to a urban, working-class, metropolitan context. Two years prior to the Notting Hill riots, the Suez Crisis had signaled the definitive deflation of Britain's pretense to postwar imperial stature by the new global hegemon, the United States. When the riots tore apart the working-class zones of West London, the colonial chickens finally came home to roost in Britain.

The riots had a galvanizing impact on Britain's black community. The vague sense of futility and despondency with which Selvon closes *The Lonely Londoners* was transformed by crowds of marauding white youths. During the riots, informal neighborhood groups such as the clutch of men who gather to "coast lime" in Moses' basement were galvanized to form self-defense organizations. The turning point in the riots occurred when a group of West Indian men and women, organized by Frances Ezzrecco, Michael de Freitas, and Frank Critchlow, burst out of a building under siege wielding improvised weapons such as knives and Molotov cocktails and chased off the marauding white crowd. This counterattack, which took place on the fourth day of rioting, finally pushed the police to take a more active role in suppressing the lynch mobs that had previously roamed the neighborhood virtually unmolested.⁵⁵

In addition to challenging the tacit acquiescence of the police, the successful self-defense effort led by Ezzrecco, de Freitas, and Critchlow underlined the need for new forms of autonomous organizing within the black community. In his account of the riots, George Lamming states: "The West Indian, until then, had an implicit faith in the Law, and some ancient certainty that the police would be on his side. Where the Law was concerned, the West Indian was colour blind. . . . I recall a feeling of utter stupefaction; for I had argued in America—a year before—that it was difficult to draw parallels in spite of prejudice, for Georgia or Alabama just could not happen anywhere in England."⁵⁶ The naive trust in the justice of British law that the Caribbean community harbored was shattered by the riots of 1958. This led to a renaissance of political organizing after the hiatus following the departure of anticol-

nial activists such as C. L. R. James and George Padmore after World War II. Frances Ezzrecco and Michael de Freitas formed the Coloured People's Progressive Association and went on to be two of the most important exponents of black nationalism in Britain during the 1960s. Claudia Jones, the Caribbean-born radical who arrived in Britain after being deported from the United States for her activities on behalf of the Communist Party, used the recently founded monthly *West Indian Gazette* as a mouthpiece for these organizations. Faced with the failure of Britain's liberal establishment to condemn and defend them from racism, black communities began questioning their allegiance to the "mother country." Their faith in British justice sorely tried by the conduct of the police, magistrates, and government during the Notting Hill riots, black activists and intellectuals turned away from the project of assimilation and began the search for forms of commonality that came to be known as Black Power.⁵⁷ Self-defense and pride in black culture were thus intimately connected. The Notting Hill carnival, founded by Claudia Jones in the months following the riots of 1958, exemplifies this blend of autonomous cultural and political organizing.

The Lonely Londoners is an important document of immigrant life in Britain prior to the galvanizing events of 1958. Selvon's novel contains an exhaustive catalog of the forms of discrimination endured by Caribbean migrants as they sought housing and employment in Britain. Perhaps more significantly, however, *The Lonely Londoners* also documents the impact of racist discourse on migrants' attitudes toward the "mother country." Arriving in Britain filled with illusions about gaining access to metropolitan capital and culture, migrants quickly found that discourses of colonial difference had not disappeared, as the rhetoric of British "fair play" suggested they would. This process of disillusionment was nowhere more apparent than in the charged arena of sexual relations. *The Lonely Londoners* suggests that success in the metropolis was signified for many of the predominantly male migrants during the first decade of mass immigration from the Caribbean to Britain by sexual conquest. Drawing brilliantly on the calypso tradition, Selvon's novel sets out a series of ballads that depict the picaresque adventures of "the boys" as they attempt to conquer white womanhood. Although the novel does not offer a substantial account of working-class white women's subjectivity, it does document the travails of their black male lovers. For the men Selvon depicts, sexual conquest was the paradigmatic way of asserting their masculinity in the face of the myriad forms

of humiliation and alienation meted out by racist discourses and institutions in Britain. Moreover, accounts of their sexual adventures with white women were an important vehicle for male bonding. Moses' narrative is, in fact, an extended example of the kinds of calypso-influenced ballads exchanged among "the boys," who meet in his basement and attempt to stave off the chill of London's weather and social conditions through amusing stories.

Like many calypso singers, most of Selvon's male characters approach sexual relations as a form of anticolonial struggle. Cap, Galahad, and Moses thus see white women as symbolic embodiments of dominant European culture. By gaining mastery over white women, Selvon's characters strive to overcome the forms of racist denigration they experience in everyday life in the metropolis. These conquests are necessarily marked by ambivalence and anxiety. By choosing the terrain of sexuality on which to assert themselves, the characters of *The Lonely Londoners* often fall victim to the very objectifying and emasculating discourses that they seek to invert. In addition, all too often their sexual adventures reproduce hegemonic patriarchal masculinity. The implications of this ultimately misogynistic strategy become most clear when the binary relations of black men and white women are interrupted through the presence of black women. Although Selvon's novel is a profoundly androcentric text, it does gesture toward the destructive impact of patriarchal violence within the black community. As a result, while documenting forms of alienation that characterize the period before the advent of Black Power, *The Lonely Londoners* also suggests the importance of challenging hegemonic gender roles within the nascent autonomous black public sphere.