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Hearing Voices in George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* and Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*

This essay examines the problematic status of voice in essays and fiction written by postcolonial writers. In the light of Mladen Dolar's study of the ambiguous nature of voice as "the vanishing mediator" between sound and sense, we look at the way in which Lamming's essays attempt to come to terms with the paradoxical relation between sound and meaning. In confronting the silence imposed on the writer by the colonial situation, Lamming reveals the existence of voices which characterize for him the "noises" of the Caribbean, but which he is unable to integrate into the expression of a cultural identity. His companion on the voyage to England, Sam Selvon, demonstrates in his novel *The Lonely Londoners* that fiction is a medium better adapted to the creation of truly Caribbean voices because of the way in which it allows the sound of the voice to participate actively in the creation of sense.

At first glance, the essay, as a literary exercise, would appear to offer an unproblematic occasion for a writer to speak in his own voice, to drop the masks of persona and narrator. In the essay, writers talk about their artistic practice, discuss their relation to the world and situate themselves with respect to their predecessors and contemporaries. In an article entitled "La voix de Michel de Montaigne," Giovanni Dotoli attempts to demonstrate that Montaigne conceived the form of the essay as an avenue for the voice, as an extension of the body. According to Dotoli, Montaigne wished to "exist elsewhere than on paper." For Montaigne, "the best book is the one which is able to keep the voice of the author intact [...], which preserves the physical trace of what is said."¹ However, as the deconstructive and postmodern discourses of recent years have demonstrated, nonfictional voices are no less contrived than fictional ones. The author's own voice is always a fiction, no matter what the generic framework in which it appears. What then, one might ask, can be learned from reading a writer's essays, if they cannot be expected to give us clues as to his position in a world of complex relations between the invented and the real? This is the question implicitly underlying the examination of the essay in the literary production of postcolonial writers, for whom the need to balance creativity with an explanation of their particular situation makes itself felt with particular force. In this paradoxical situation, the question of voice does not lose its pertinence but is, on the contrary, posed with even greater force precisely because of the expectations about the nature of voice associated with the form of the essay. The Barbadian writer George Lamming's collection of essays *The Pleasures of Exile* will be used here as an example of the dilemma surrounding the search for the

1. My translation. Giovanni Dotoli, "La voix de Michel de Montaigne," in *La Voix: Hommage à Pierre Brunel* (101).

postcolonial writer's voice, but the arguments developed converge at numerous points with those which can be applied to writers like V.S. Naipaul, J.M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, Nadine Gordimer and George MacClennan.

Voice constitutes the impossible horizon of all texts, for a written text can find a voice only through performance, and even in such a case, the voice of the text is likely to be a borrowed one. The relation of voice to textuality is metonymic; the word "voice" stands in for the principles that organize the text, that allow it to function as a coherent whole. The notion of voice, as we use that term, lies clearly on the side of reception rather than production, which helps to explain why we perceive the unity of a text's effect in terms of voice without being able to pin down easily what is meant by the word. Genette's system of narrative voices provides a way of describing the position or locus from which a text is produced in relation to the reader and to the world that is being represented.² But while Genette's use of the term 'voice' allows for clarity, it does not fully account for the way in which the reader hears, or perceives, that voice; a successful use of narrative voice implies a capacity to produce effects which largely exceed the specific source, or position, from which the narration is produced. Mladen Dolar's use of the term "acousmatic" in reference to voices coming from an unidentified source helps to account for or describe this phenomenon, although once again, if we use that term in reference to a textual voice, we are resorting to an image.³

The fact that the word 'voice' inevitably implies using an image to describe the functioning of a text does not mean that the term has no real use or validity as long as we employ it with some understanding of its position and limits. I am using the word in this essay to designate the human voice in its material dimension, what Dolar calls "the vanishing mediator" (15), which makes the production of meaning possible without being identifiable or describable in terms of meaning. I will be looking at the ways in which the human voice as a dimension of the body, producing the sounds perceived and understood as speech, functions as the outer limit, the vanishing point in texts which find their validity by creating a space for the voice as sound, as presence, as event. The voice can only be heard by functioning as a position in the signifying system of a written text; it can be given phonetic, syntactic, narrative or thematic form. However, as I will attempt to demonstrate in relation to the essays of George Lamming and the fiction of Sam Selvon, the signs pointing to a voice in the text both *evoke* and *convoke* the functions of the human voice in a living and ephemeral context. They do not function as the shadow of some real, essential voice hiding behind the shifting

2. Genette deals with the notion of narrative voice in Chapter five of *Figures III*.

3. The term "acousmatic" is used by Michel Chion in his book *La Voix au cinéma*. According to Dolar, Chion borrowed the term from Pierre Schaeffer's *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966). Dolar explains that Larousse defines the word "acousmatic" as "the noise we hear without seeing what is causing it" (60-61).

forms of textuality, but rather as a counterpoint to the creation of meaning, what Dolar would call “a blind spot of making sense” (16).

In discussions of Caribbean literature, and postcolonial literature more generally, the notion of voice is often conflated with identity. While this essentialist use of the term is misleading and has been decried and deconstructed by critics, the historical reasons for this confusion between voice and identity need to be kept in mind.⁴ As I will attempt to show in relation to George Lamming’s collection of essays, *The Pleasures of Exile*, Lamming was literally hearing voices when he wrote these essays: the voices of his childhood friends, of his schoolteachers, of people he had met in his travels in Europe, Africa and America. One of the curious aspects of Lamming’s approach was to create space in his essays for these voices, capturing them in boxes much like the wooden *tonnelles* used in the Vodun rites he refers to in the introduction. While he points out that for the Haitian peasant, “[t]his ceremony of the Souls is regarded [...] as a solemn communion; for he hears, at first hand, the secrets of the Dead” (9), Lamming also explains that these ceremonies are forbidden by the law. He uses them as a metaphor for a process which would make the voices of the Dead audible, but at the same time he defines himself and his fellow West Indians as the dead, as those who, because they are descendants of slaves, have not gained the awareness that is the condition for being alive.

Lamming’s approach to the question of voice is interesting precisely because of the historical moment from which he speaks. *The Pleasures of Exile* was published in 1960, and the essays cover what Lamming describes as “the ten years since that morning in mid-March when Sam Selvon and I left for England” (211). The two writers took the same boat to England and Lamming describes Selvon on the boat: “Sometimes he would be seen working in odd corners: a small gray typewriter on his knees and long black locks of hair fallen forward, almost screening him from view” (212). Lamming shows that he was sensitive to what would prove to be Selvon’s real talent as a writer, in particular his capacity to grasp the essence of the Caribbean vernacular and shape it to the demands of a fictional voice as I have defined it, a voice that bends the reader’s ear as well as his/her mind. Through an examination of the different approaches to voice that one finds in Lamming’s essays and in Selvon’s fiction, it is possible to understand the way in which the notion of voice would evolve in Caribbean fiction in the years following the two writers’ arrival in England.

The position in time from which Lamming speaks is important for a number of reasons. The arrival of a group of writers in London at the beginning of the 1950s marked a turning point in Caribbean literature, for it was as exiles in London that writers like Lamming and Selvon, but also V.S. Naipaul, Edgar

4. In his discussion of voice in the fiction of William Faulkner, Stephen Ross gives a clear presentation of the way in which the question of voice has been treated in philosophy and literary criticism. He explains the role of structuralism and poststructuralism in the “depersonalizing” of the implications of voice. (Ross 7)

Mittelholzer, Michael Anthony and Andrew Salkey discovered what it meant to be “Caribbean” or “West Indian” writers.⁵ These writers would eventually follow different paths in their search for a Caribbean literary identity, but the way in which they expressed themselves, particularly in their essays, casts interesting light on the choices they would make in the future. If one looks forward, beyond this particular “historical moment,” a term Lamming often uses, one sees, of course, that voice has become an increasingly useful tool for bringing fictional narrative closer to the experience of life in the Caribbean. Over the past sixty years, writers have found a variety of ways of using orality and vernacular language to reflect the role of sound and performance in the shaping of fictional narrative. The same is true in poetry and the theater, as writers like Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott have clearly demonstrated. However, in spite of the experimentation in the area of language and voice which has marked Caribbean fiction, Selvon’s use of an invented vernacular in *The Lonely Londoners* stands as one of the most successful adventures in the area and can provide important clues, if it is examined in the light of recent discussions of voice, to the nature and functioning of voice in fiction.

A comparison of Lamming’s conception of voice in his essays with Selvon’s use of voice in his fiction sheds light on the problems posed by this notion and the way in which the question would evolve in the years that followed. In the introductions to the current editions of *The Pleasures of Exile* and *The Lonely Londoners*, Sandra Pouchet Paquet and Susheila Nasta use the term “voice” recurrently and the word carries its usual cargo of ambiguity. Paquet affirms that Lamming’s “dissenting voice is personal and collective” (ix). She asserts that “the controlling ‘I’ of this multivoiced text is a plurality of texts” (ix). She also says:

The author as narrator and subject of the text is a highly visible and audible presence. The narrating “I” is authoritative, combative and judgmental and is identified with the author quite explicitly. [...] Self-focus enhances rather than diminishes authority; it serves to establish the author’s credibility in an original cultural space of his own creation. (xi)

Paquet is using the word “voice” in the habitual way, as the mark of the author’s presence in the text, of his position as speaker and source of the discourse being produced. However, the way in which she uses it tells us something about the gap between this essentially metonymic use of the term and the other pole of its meaning, the literal one which is both hidden and revealed by the play of textuality. She describes the author as “a highly visible and audible presence” and the use of these two terms is particularly revealing. Lamming’s logic throughout

5. To the above list, given by Louis James in *Caribbean Literature in English*, can be added other names included by Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh in *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, namely Wilson Harris, Kamau Brathwaite, John Hearne, Jan Carew, V.S. Reid and Derek Walcott, whom the authors identify as “male, educated, middle class and—with very few exceptions—based in England at this time” (216).

this collection of essays is indeed highly visual. It is only by situating himself, by locating himself within a system of textual relations that Lamming can describe his peculiar position. He says, for instance: "The West Indian occupies a most unusual position in all these social and racial blocks. In relation to the African, the American Negro, and to Western culture he is, in a sense, a peripheral man" (34). This spatial logic of center and periphery has, of course, become the central paradigm of postcolonial discourse. Lamming is important because he helped to define the very terms in which the cultural dilemma of the Caribbean would be perceived. However, in adopting an essentially spatial logic, Lamming allows us to see that there is something which disrupts this logic, in spite of the way in which the author constantly banishes it to the edges of his discourse. This element is precisely the voice defined as noise, as the locus of the sensual, as the trace of presence and event rather than of distance and meaning.

Mladen Dolar's discussion of the paradoxes surrounding the notion of voice in *A Voice and Nothing More* provides a useful framework for examining the disruptive nature of voice as "the instrument, the vehicle, the medium" through which meaning is achieved. Dolar compares voice to Wittgenstein's ladder, an element "to be discarded when we have successfully climbed to the top—that is, when we have made our ascent to the peak of meaning" (15). Dolar's approach is Lacanian and he uses concepts such as desire, drive, and what Lacan called "lalangue" to demonstrate the location of voice at the intersection of sound and meaning, or in Lacanian terms, as "the pure alterity of what is said," the invisible underside of analysis (160). In the course of his examination of the paradoxes of voice in linguistic, physical, metaphysical, political and ethical contexts, Dolar presents a model for taking into account the uses of voice in particular cultural contexts, where it is explicitly thematized. But he also offers a model for exploring the way in which a written text deals with its impossible other, the voice which it both conjures and excludes.

It is in his discussion of Freud's treatment of silence, which he calls "the third and most paradoxical of Freud's voices" (152), that Dolar offers an approach to silence which can be useful in understanding the relationship between visibility and audibility in Lamming's paradigm for the postcolonial situation. Dolar points out that for Lacan, there are three registers of silence, the symbolic, the imaginary and the real:

There is symbolic silence to start with, silence as something which ultimately defines the symbolic as such. The symbolic, at its minimum, is reducible to an alternation of presence and absence—already with Saussure the definition of the signifier as a merely differential and oppositional entity entails that language can not only use the opposition between various distinctive traits, but rely on the opposition between something and nothing, the presence of a trait and its absence. [...] We have to hear silence, for example, as the absence of a phoneme, in order to get the meaning, so symbolic silence represents the specificity of the symbolic order as such, its structuring principle. (152-153)

Much of the silence evoked in postcolonial fiction and criticism is quite obviously of the symbolic nature evoked here by Dolar. It exists as a position already inscribed in the discourse which structures the colonial world. Dolar's definition makes it possible to understand that voice, as it is often defined in literary terms, is not an answer to symbolic silence, but only its structural echo. The voices used by Caribbean writers are often borrowed voices that express the influence of European models. It was only when Caribbean writers were able to grasp this idea, however unconsciously, that they began to listen to the sounds produced by their own culture. In "What the Twilight Says", Derek Walcott makes precisely this point: "My generation had looked at life with black skins and blue eyes, but only our own painful, strenuous looking, the learning of looking, could find meaning in the life around us, only our own strenuous hearing, the hearing of our hearing, could make sense of the sounds we made" (Walcott 9).

Lamming's spatial logic is his admission that he has indeed detected the symbolic silence which defines his position. He realizes that his existence must be deduced from the colonial paradigm, as a position within a pre-existing structure. This is precisely why he uses *The Tempest* as the essential intertext in his endeavor, as the literary expression of the colonial structure he is exposing. He says: "Moreover, I am a direct descendant of Prospero worshipping in the same temple of endeavour, using his legacy of language—not to curse our meeting—but to push it further..." (15).⁶ In *The Pleasures of Exile*, Lamming relentlessly pursues his exploration of the West Indian writer's "absolute dependence on the values implicit in that language of his colonizer" (35), a dependence which leaves him locked in a position from which he cannot become visible, even to himself. In the cultural, geographical and historical space of the Caribbean, Lamming sees himself in the position of Caliban:

Caliban cannot be revealed in any relation to himself; for he has no self which is not a reaction to circumstances imposed upon his life. [...] In all his encounters with his neighbours—whether they be Kings or drunken clowns—Caliban is never accorded the power *to see*. He is always the measure of the condition which his physical appearance has already defined. (107)

However, in spite of this essentially spatial and visual approach, Lamming's essays, like the Haitian *tonnelle*, are inhabited by voices which are not his, and which do not so much fill the symbolic silence he describes as suggest the necessity of searching for a different paradigm, one that takes into account the sounds that fill the island and that can be accounted for in terms of Dolar's definition of voice. Lamming himself quotes the famous speech by Caliban:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not. (ctd in Lamming 108)

6. Lamming is referring here to Caliban's remark in Act I, scene 2 of *The Tempest*: "You taught me language, and my profit on't/Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/For learning me your language!" William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (77).

A careful reading of the essays makes it possible to uncover numerous references to noise and sounds and their relation to life in the Caribbean. But the essays need to be “sounded” with an ear attuned to the conditions necessary for “the hearing of our hearing” to which Walcott alludes. Even in using *The Tempest* as the paradigm for the colonial paradox, Lamming seems to sense that Caliban’s encounter with Prospero needs to be seen not only as a model of the colonial relation, but also as a metaphor for another voice, one which would correspond to the Caribbean position. Caliban’s voice needs to be perceived not simply as “noise”, but as a sound with the potential for carrying new and alternative meanings.

In order to hear the voice which has been silenced in Lamming’s essays, it is necessary to recognize the distinction between the writer as narrator of his own text and as the subject of his discourse. In the essay form, there is often a gap between the discourse produced by the narrator about the world, about the subjects he is treating, and the autoreferentiality through which he positions himself in relation to the reader and to the discursive context in which he develops his arguments. The informality implied by the genre, with its suggestion of a casual conversation between writer and reader, may partially mask a certain incongruity between the discourse produced by the narrator and his position as character in the world he is describing.⁷ While the relation between the two may appear harmonious, the author’s references to himself and his own experience serving as examples to illustrate his demonstration, there may also be signs of dissonance. In the case of Lamming, it is not a question of looking for a voice that could be identified with the unconscious, but of observing Lamming’s assumptions about the place of the human voice in cultural representations and comparing them with the role he assigns to voice and to sounds in his own experience. At certain moments, Lamming seems to “hear” his own voice as if it were outside of him. This allows him to recognize the nature of his Caribbean voice. What at first glance appears to be anecdotic, a form of static in the flow of discourse, may in the end reveal a more profound concern with the status of the voice in Caribbean culture.

Lamming’s most obvious allusions to the importance of voice can be found in his references to the “Caribbean Voices” programs broadcast by the BBC in the 1950s. Beyond the fact that this program gave airspace and recognition to Caribbean writers, it created the possibility of interactivity, an occasion for dialogue among the writers themselves. The work of the Caribbean writers was discussed on the airwaves by English writers and critics. Lamming says:

The West Indian writers would meet in the same house and listen to these programmes. Then they would wait for the closing announcement in the hope that next week’s programme would include some of their music. Since the radio was not mine or Cecil’s or Clifford Sealey’s, and there was no way of avoiding the

7. In this respect, the tension between narrator and character described by Philippe Lejeune in his analysis of autobiography in *Le pacte autobiographique* is applicable to the essay as a nonfictional genre.

commercial intrusion which followed, the writers, furious or elated according to the critics' recent judgment, would ramble to Down Town Port-of-Spain [...] And all the way they were tearing Fuller and Calder Marshall to pieces. (66)

In the next paragraph he gives a sample of their conversation, imitating the sound and syntax of their speech: "'Who the hell he think he is...?' 'Is all right for him sitting up there talking 'bout we don't take more time...' 'Is what we got to get is a native critic...' And so on" (66). Lamming both dramatizes and dialogizes the moment, giving it the potential to offer an alternative to the binary logic which underlies his essays.⁸ The BBC is, of course, the voice of England, both literally and metaphorically. In the essay "Evidence and Exile," he describes being asked to cover the death of George VI for the BBC. He was criticized for the gravity of tone that was heard in his voice:

Later someone complained in the studio that I was reading it too gravely—as though he couldn't remember what had happened at Windsor. A similar complaint would not have been made if I were reading a poem about that Windsor burial; but my script was NEWS, and NEWS demands a mechanical neutrality of tone whether the voice is giving messages about dying or delight. (51)

Lamming's inability to find the right tone of voice is related to the fact that he is experiencing the ceremony as someone from outside English culture, and is therefore emotionally affected both by the event and by the way in which it encapsulates English culture and history: "A poor student of history, I get the feeling, on these occasions, that it is here in the context of this drama which is at once religious and political; it is in the fact and overtones of ceremony that we may get some glimpse of the past" (51). The moments when Lamming hears himself speaking in a Caribbean voice draw attention to the unspoken aspects of his situation as a foreigner and a black man in Britain. They express in terms of sound what remains invisible in the written text, in particular the role played by color. It is color that represents the excess, the visible surplus in black/white relations. Although color can be represented textually only by language, it cannot be hidden or avoided in real life. It is thus to a large extent the source of the symbolic silence to which the Caribbean writer succumbs. What good is language, once color has spoken? Lamming's sensitivity to the importance of sound and voice can be seen as a reaction to the symbolic silence which determines his place as a writer from the colonies. In a description of his first visit to the Institute of

8. The relation colonizer/colonized is essentially a binary relation and determines a whole series of other relations which affect the Caribbean writer: the relation between center and periphery, between black and white, between standard and creolized English, between oral and written forms of expression. All of these binary relations are explicitly or implicitly present in Lamming's essays. It is this type of binary logic that Caribbean critics in particular have attempted to combat. Edouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* and Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island* are good examples of strategies that attempt to counter the polarizing dichotomies which determine the colonial position.

Contemporary Arts, he uses the relation between sight and sound to open a space for what might be called his voice. He describes his shock at seeing Dame Edith Sitwell and describes his reaction as the “kind of surprise which overtakes the eye” (57). He then goes on to define his own ambition as a corollary to this visual surprise: “Indeed, it is the kind of surprise with which a poet tries to conquer the ear.” In the essay entitled “A Way of Seeing,” he describes his first experience of reading one of his poems at the I.C.A. He includes the poem he read, which he willingly admits was rather “green.” While the poem is visible to the eye, the reader can only take the writer at his word when he says, “I read exactly as I would have done in the West Indies” (62). He goes on to describe the moment in more detail: “After all, it was my poem. I had made it. It was my own trumpet; and I knew the keys. If I were afraid to blow it, whom could I expect to do it for me? So I made a heaven of a noise which is characteristic of my voice and an ingredient of West Indian behaviour. The result was an impression of authority.” The poem, while uninteresting in itself, stands in for the absent reading, the unheard voice, which the writer nonetheless identifies as producing “an impression of authority” (63). Whatever the quality of the poem, Lamming implies that its performance, which is what really counts for him, was West Indian. Once again, he uses the moment, the event, the occasion as a means of creating a space for the living voice, even if it can only be represented *in absentia*. He goes on to describe the evening from his Caribbean perspective, describing an argument about a poem seen as an attack on T.S. Eliot:

The place really started to get like Notting Hill, except that there were no knives. [...] To me, fresh from a noisy island, it was magnificent fun; for it's exactly how we would behave on similar occasions, with the sole difference that our arena in the West Indies would have no seniors. We were, like the Haitian army, all important officers. (63-64)

Lamming's essay raises more complex questions about race and culture, the I.C.A. representing a certain cultural blindness related to snobbery. He clearly says that “the I.C.A. is not concerned with culture as a national enterprise in expression” (78). This was, of course, the crux of the issue for Caribbean writers, who were searching for some way to reconcile culture as national expression with the need for a more universal appeal. The use of the Caribbean voice was an important part of this dilemma, as can be seen in Kamau Brathwaite's use of what he called nation language.⁹

The place that Lamming assigns to the voice as a dimension of the Caribbean experience is interesting for what it reveals about his own difficulty in finding an appropriate medium of expression. His use of the essay form reveals a split

9. Brathwaite explained his use of the term nation language by saying: “I don't use the word dialect anymore because it has too many connotations of things that are debased... I prefer the term nation language because it does not have any connotations of debasement or inferiority or colonialism”, ctd. in Laurence Breiner (xvii).

between the narrative voice through which he tries to answer the symbolic silence of the colonial position and the voice that he hears when he speaks as a West Indian or that he perceives when he hears West Indians speaking around him. While the essay form allows him at certain moments to don the mask of the Caribbean man, it permits him at the same time to distance himself from his position as a Caribbean speaker by taking on the role of the objective observer and critic.

Lamming's companion on the voyage to London, Sam Selvon, adopted a different approach to the representation of what Lamming would have called "a noisy island." In his essay "The Occasion for Speaking," Lamming addresses the question of West Indian writers and their place both in the Caribbean and the literary world in general. He evokes the importance of "the discovery of the novel by West Indians as a way of investigating and projecting the inner experiences of the West Indian community" (37). He hails Selvon as one of the most gifted writers of his generation and pays tribute in particular to "the taste and sound" of his prose. While his designation of Selvon and Vic Reid as "peasant" novelists may appear curious, Lamming had clearly identified the problems that would be posed by the adaptation of the novel to the experience of the Caribbean. In 1956 Selvon published a novel entitled *The Lonely Londoners* based on the experience of Caribbean immigrants in Britain in the 1950s. The most striking quality of this novel is the use that Selvon makes of the voice of the homodiegetic narrator, who recounts the experiences of a man named Moses and of the Caribbean newcomers whom he initiates into the mysteries of 1950s London.¹⁰ The narrator speaks from within the Caribbean community, but he is not identical with Moses, the principal character. The use that Selvon makes of this narrative voice reveals his awareness of the paradoxical position of the human voice in its relation to meaning. Mladen Dolar, evoking Alain Badiou's assertion that "there are only bodies and languages," defines voice as what "holds bodies and languages together" (cited in Dolar 59) but in a relation which is not a simple continuity. Rather than being paralyzed by his inability to make himself heard in an unfamiliar context, Selvon exploits this space between sound and meaning, making the creation of an audible Caribbean voice the object of his fiction.

Much of the discussion of voice in fiction, particularly the analysis of effects of orality, is an attempt to analyze the use of sound effects in terms of the signifying system of the text. This is, of course, an important dimension of the question, and Selvon does indeed make an extremely effective use of the sounds and particularly the rhythms of what Susheila Nasta calls a "creolized voice" (vi). However, Selvon's most important contribution to the use of orality in Caribbean fiction, seen from the perspective of Lamming's dilemma and his obsession with symbolic silence, is his capacity to capture the "noise" of Caribbean dialogue and place it at the center of his fictional project. He does not allow himself to be hindered by the fear of

10. In this instance I am using the term "voice" in the narratological sense as the position from which the narrator speaks.

disconnecting sound from meaning, of failing to interpret Caribbean habits of dialogue within the context that has shaped them. By placing his characters in an unfamiliar context, he makes language, and particularly the characters' search for a language capable of capturing their experience, the subject of the story. The following description of a man named Galahad is typical:

But for all that, he getting on well in the city. He had a way, whenever he talking with the boys, he using the names of the places like they mean big romance, as if to say 'I was in Oxford Street' have more prestige than if he just say 'I was up the road.' And once he had a date with a frauline, and he make a big point of saying he was meeting she by Charing Cross, because just to say 'Charing Cross' have a lot of romance in it, he remember it had a song called 'Roseann of Charing Cross'. (71)

A comparison of Selvon's novel with Lamming's *The Emigrants* reveals the impact of this difference in approach. While Lamming attempts to imitate the sounds of Caribbean speech in a novel that follows the characters in their voyage to England, Selvon concentrates on imitating the rhythm and syntax of the vernacular in order to capture the characters' attempt to come to grips with their experience, linguistically speaking, in an unfamiliar context. The voice of the narrator, while "creolized" in terms of sound, does not become involved in analyzing the meaning of the events with which Moses and the "boys" are confronted. His comments and opinions, while not entirely absent, are kept to a minimum. It is the job of Moses, as mentor and elder, to interpret the experience of the newcomers to London. This distinction lies at the core of the seductive quality of a highly fluid voice which conveys the sensuality and musicality of the Caribbean vernacular without taking full responsibility for the meaning it is to convey.¹¹ The voice thus acquires a "body" precisely by being disembodied in the sense that it is not identified with any character involved in the meaning of the events being related. This type of homodiegetic narrator, who becomes the voice of a community, has been used by other writers, in particular by Toni Morrison in her novel *Jazz*. But Selvon's particular gift is a sense of balance, a capacity to refrain from intervening or moralizing, a willingness to simplify, or as Susheila Nasta says, to "distil [...] the ordinary language of the people" in order to allow the voice to perform, to become an instrument that can be used to play a variety of tunes. The most stunning performance of this voice is the narrator's evocation of summer in the city in a long passage reminiscent of Molly Bloom's

11. In an interview with Michel Fabre, Selvon talked about his search for a language appropriate to the experience of West Indian life in London. He started off by writing the narrative in English and "most of the dialogues in dialect," but was not satisfied with the result. When he began writing both narrative and dialogue in dialect "the novel just shot along." He explained that he was attempting to convey "the flavour and essence of Trinidadian speech through the creation of a 'modified dialect'." Michel Fabre, "Samuel Selvon: Interviews and Conversations." (Nasta 66)

monologue in *Ulysses*. The reader recognizes the tune although he has never heard the Caribbean version before.

The symbolic silence that Lamming saw as the necessary condition of the Caribbean writer, determining the way in which he would represent his experience, is not absent from Selvon's novel. The boys arriving from the Caribbean do not possess the key to surviving in London, and their dialogues are an endless litany of inappropriate responses to misunderstood situations. Their banter and disputes are a reaction to the inescapable physical reality that the text can only capture in words, their color. While the city constantly confronts them with their mistakes, with the consequences of their misunderstandings, the narrative voice picks up their words, weaving even their misperceptions into a flow of sound that is joyful and inclusive:

Big City come from an orphanage in one of the country district in Trinidad. When he was a little fellar, he hear some people talking about the music the norphanage band does play. But instead of hearing 'music' Big City thought he hear 'fusic' and since that time nobody could ever get him to say music. (83)

While the narrator points out the confusion between "music" and "fusic," he reproduces the elision of "an" and "orphanage" without comment. In the same way, he points out the incongruity between language and the color of the characters, making it a part of his discourse: "At mention of police Cap turn white, which is a hell of a thing to see" (38). By distinguishing the voice of the narrator from that of Moses, who is the pivot of the action, Selvon gives this voice a curiously acousmatic quality, revealing his grasp of the complexity of narrative voice as both a position in a fictional structure and as a vector for the human voice in its physicality. He creates a pathway for bringing a Caribbean voice, noisy, disruptive and comic, a voice coming from outside the non-Caribbean reader's experience, into the novel. By making judicious use of intertextuality and of narrative patterns well known to the reader, such as the initiation of the outsider to the rituals of an unfamiliar context, Selvon permits the reader to become accustomed to an unfamiliar voice, making it appear to come from inside of him.¹²

It should not be assumed that Lamming's essays express his final position on the use of Caribbean voices. He made innovative use of voice in his first novel *In the Castle of My Skin*. However, the confrontation between Lamming's essays and Selvon's fiction makes it possible to better understand the particular problems

12. The novelist Caryl Phillips has made the same observation in a different way. In an essay devoted to Lamming and Selvon, he explains his attraction to Selvon's fiction: "[i]n Selvon's fiction there was a sense of being both inside and outside Britain at the same time." Caryl Phillips, "Following on: The Legacy of Lamming and Selvon," (Phillips 234). Dolar sees the ambiguity of voice, its position both inside and outside the consciousness of the listener, as one of its fundamental characteristics: "[v]oices may all be heard in the head, without an external source, because we always hear the voice inside the head, and the nature of its external source is always uncertain the moment we close our eyes" (79).

related to the use of voice in Caribbean literature. Every genre sheds fascinating light, from a comparative point of view, on all other existing genres, for all genres are practiced by writers both because of the limits they impose and for the sake of the boundaries which they tempt the writer to overstep. Lamming's essays in *The Pleasures of Exile* were an exercise in seeing clearly, in situating himself with respect to the world he had left and the one in which he had settled. This exercise has been practised by many Caribbean writers. V.S. Naipaul expressed his biting and sometimes painful vision of his homeland both in fiction and in numerous essays. He clearly expressed in his essays his inability to see how the sounds and rituals of his "noisy island" could be used to forge a cultural identity for Caribbean people. While he often went "against the grain," he gradually became the grain against which other writers defined their identity.¹³ More recently, Caryl Phillips, well-known for his novels of the African diaspora, has used the form of the essay as a way of continuing the conversation between Caribbean writers and their fellow artists the world over. Like many others, he does not spare Naipaul. Interestingly, he chooses to talk about Lamming and Selvon in the same essay, as if this pair, whom Susheila Nasta describes arguing over the use of the same typewriter on the boat taking them to England, had come to represent a moment in time which is essential to an understanding of the terms in which Caribbean literature needs to be read.

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13. A reference to Cécile Girardin's paper on V.S. Naipaul, "'Such Plotting! Such Symbolism!': Narratives of Power in V.S. Naipaul's Essays", also delivered at the SEPC New Literatures panel held within the framework of the Congress of the SAES in Bordeaux (May 2009). In this paper she underlined Naipaul's interest in the depiction of landscape, which could be seen as a sign of his entrapment in the visual logic which dominates Lamming's essays.

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