"You have to start thinking all over again": Masculinities, Narratology and New Approaches to Sam Selvon

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Clearly a pioneer in West Indian literature, Sam Selvon has received little of the detailed and sustained critical attention his work deserves. An innovative stylist, one of the first to experiment with "colonial" idiom in (capital E) English and the creator of some of the twentieth century's most enduring immigrant narratives, Selvon remains a decidedly second-tier figure in the West Indian literary pantheon, a lesser-light in the shadow of (among others) Walcott, Naipaul, and Lamming. Despite some suggestions to the contrary, the academy, even the segment of the academy explicitly interested in World (or West Indian) literatures, has not found much room for Selvon.

Perhaps more importantly, the criticism that does exist seems to overlook and/or ignore many of Selvon's particular (and peculiar) achievements, relying instead on formulaic reductions of his work in order to package it neatly into some specific critical category. The basic problem is that Selvon is not a neat writer and his idiosyncratic fictional worlds have not really accommodated any of the more prevalent critical approaches in postcolonial discourse. His explicit critiques of the black solidarity movement (most notably in *Moses Ascending*), his often sexist (or at least sexually reductive) depictions of women, and his ambivalent constructions of both the centre and the margin have, it seems, short-circuited most of the major analytical throughways associated with writers in his position. "His outspoken refusal to ally himself with any one political cause" (Ingrams 35) has made him critically unmanageable and, not coincidentally, critically unattractive. Lacking the critical apparatus to deal with him effectively, critics have opted either to ignore him or to kidnap certain sections of his work and force them into ill-fitting analytical frameworks aligned with particular political projects.[1]

Still, despite all its manifold contradictions, most of the existing criticism recognizes both a pervasive sense of machismo and a preoccupation with stories in Selvon's work, and these commonalities provide some useful points of departure for a critical reassessment of his novels. While previous studies have noted, but not pursued, the decidedly masculinist emphasis in Selvon, the emerging discourse studying masculinities might well provide a particularly illuminating analytical viewpoint on his work. At the very least, discourses of masculinity provide a critical apparatus that approaches (and I think reaches) Selvon in ways that previous racial, geographic, and self-consciously "progressive" analyses have not.

In a similar fashion, certain aspects of narrative theory offer unique perspectives on the more subtle function of stories and myths in Selvon's work. We know, for example, that Selvon thought that "writing a book" could provide a "plaster cast" ("Little Drops of Water" 58) for a human life and that stories can provide "a justification for living" ("The Leaf in the Wind" 56). Such positions clearly intersect with a number of theoretical works concerned with the constitutive power of narrative: the degree to which narrative shapes, moulds, solidifies, and justifies an individual's perception and assessment of his or her life.

This article addresses the first two novels of Selvon's Moses trilogy (*The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending*) in an effort to draw some new and, I think, more productive connections between Selvon and contemporary critical discourses, arguing that many of the most important and rewarding aspects of the novels can be addressed in terms of a distinctly masculine psychology (and even a distinctly, if problematically male, spirituality) and that these masculine impulses are encoded in narrative terms. In *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending* the struggle for masculine legitimacy underscores every character's struggle for a psychologically and sociologically viable sense of identity, and the struggle for that identity is, in some basic sense, a struggle to find a place inside some overriding storyline, some cast, that will frame (and straighten out) his life.

In *Writing Men,* Berthold Schoene-Harwood describes heroic masculinity as an "impossible phantasmatic ideal" (xii), a towering image

that "debilitates individualism" (xii) and encourages a uniform, highly codified set of behaviours. This code of behaviour de-emphasizes internal emotional and psychological matters while highlighting external, quantifiable factors with the result that many critics and theorists think of "manhood" not as a natural, biological fact, but as a contingent, cultural achievement. In *Men in the Public Eye: The Construction and Deconstruction of Public Men and Public Patriarchies*, Jeff Hearn suggests that "men are constructed through public visibility" (3), while in *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities*, Roger Horrocks sees the absence of "inner space" (40), a kind of private, inwardly-focused space of self-contemplation, as a fundamental feature of adult masculinities. Almost all students of masculine discourse recognize that conventional masculine behaviour operates in the realm of "visible, concrete accomplishments" (Gilmore 36), not the realm of private, personal self-reflection and that "accomplishments" are a matter of "approbation and admiration in the judgmental eyes of others" (37).

In his influential book *Manhood in the Making*, and inside the critical framework outlined above, David Gilmore views masculinity as a "mythic confabulation" (226), "a symbolic script" (230) and he identifies what he calls an "imperative triad" (222) of signals inside the structure the mythic script provides. Together, the triad produces "the quasi-global personage" (223) of the Real Man: "Man-the-Impregnator-Protector-Provider" (223). In Gilmore's terms (and, in less explicit terms, in most everyone else's), masculinity has a sexual, a custodial, and a material dimension; the Real Man is sexually potent, financially prosperous, and capable of defending his various territories. Typically, the custodial dimension follows the sexual and material dimensions insofar as the accumulation of property (in terms of women and children as well as houses, transportation and so forth) creates the necessity of their protection. In the case of Selvon's largely dispossessed immigrants this means that Man-the-Protector plays a relatively minor role in their lives, while the preoccupation with Man-the-Impregnator and Man-the-Provider motivates almost all of their behaviour. Impulses toward, and anxieties about, sexual conquest and material advancement underlie almost every episode in *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending*, and

behind these concerns is "a state of acute paranoia" (Schoene-Harwood xii) about masculine legitimacy, about whether any of them can say with confidence that he belongs in the world of real men.

The notion of a "quasi-global" construction of masculinity is, of course, problematic in its tendency to downplay the significance of the local in favour of a seemingly universalist view of "the way men are" around the world, yet, the relationships between colonialism and masculinity are such that notions of a specifically West Indian masculinity are inherently linked to the universalized norms of English Imperial masculinity. In his essay, "Masculinities in Transition: Gender and the Global Problematique," Keith Nurse (borrowing from R.W. Connell) maintains that " a significant measure of the global gender dynamic is a result of the 'export of the European/American gender order to the colonised world'" (4). It is a construction in which "the white male experience is constructed as a universal one [and] the white male is conceptualized as the role model for all times, all places and all peoples" (Nurse 14). Consequently, Linden Lewis' seemingly straightforward assertion that "men in the Caribbean define their masculinity in much the same way as men in any other part of the world" (97) becomes not so much a simple matter of fact as a comment on the dissemination of a singularly defined masculinity all over the world. The "global" nature of imperial notions of masculine legitimacy is itself a kind of imperial legacy working through what Robert Young calls "the colonial desiring machine" (175) and inside a system in which a universalized (European) hegemonic masculinity exists in opposition to "subordinate masculinities [that] have been constructed and represented as *effeminate* and *infantile*" (Nurse 7 original emphasis). Because "black masculinities, in the context of slavery, colonialism and white supremacy, have been constructed as primal, debased and infantile" (Nurse 10), *white* masculinity (naturalized as a global trope) becomes the only desirable masculinity, the one that Selvon's "boys" fervently chase. The result is "mimic men" who are specifically mimicking manhood; their notions of masculine legitimacy are *delivered* to them in the Caribbean, but the ideas are European in origin and they are practised in London. And, as I am trying to suggest, the interactions between "the boys" and the metropo-

lis are simultaneously negotiations with a tenuous sense of masculinity, a sense specifically troubled by material and sexual anxieties.

The preoccupation with money that pervades Selvon's work is indicative of the depth and the degree to which his characters feel the imperative toward capital as an imperative toward self, the degree to which money, masculinity, and a stable sense of self have become inextricably linked. Despite a popular critical opinion that Selvon's boys are 'a bunch of lazy loafers,' they are in fact a work-obsessed people, constantly thinking about jobs, work conditions, and the wages that come with them. In all three novels in the trilogy, there is a sense that money makes manhood, and manhood makes self.

Early in *The Lonely Londoners*, the narrator makes a seemingly innocuous gender designation when he says that "every man on his own" (21) in London, yet the isolation in the novel is a peculiarly masculine one. It is a straightforward substitution of "man" for "human," a gender-exclusive idea of *man* on his own. More importantly, the fear of male vulnerability, in the shadow of the icon of the real man, is a constant source of irritation to Selvon's male characters, characters who are, by their own estimation, "boys." Without any pre-existent support network, the boys know that the search for work is simultaneously a search for a framework to govern their lives. If the role of breadwinner is the male's major role in society, then the job that wins that bread determines his place in the larger society. Jobs determine where a man lives, what he eats, where he goes, and, to an important degree, whom he knows. Without this social and financial determinant, it becomes difficult for the boys to calibrate their position(s) relative to their surroundings, and a sense of doubt and paranoia results.

Selvon directly recognizes this anxiety in the long passage about the welfare office in *The Lonely Londoners* when the narrator says

> a job is all the security a man have . . . when a man out of work he like a fish out of water grasping for breath. It have some men, if they lose their job it like the world end, and when two-three weeks go by and they still ain't working they get so desperate they would do anything. (29)

And anything is what they do. The familiar "fish out of water" construction is a good one here because it reveals not just that a man without a job is in danger of dying but that a job is *the* necessary condition for survival; it makes an inhabitable environment all by itself.

In such a context, the welfare office acts as a kind of purgatory, a space between spaces, which houses both the prospect of salvation and the spectre of financial and psychological insolvency:

> It ain't have no place in the world that exactly like a place where a lot of men get together to look for work and draw money from the welfare state while they ain't working. Is a kind of place where hate and disgust and avarice and malice and sympathy and sorrow and pity all mix up . . . a place where everyone is your enemy and your friend. (29)

To enter the welfare office is unambiguously to "touch bottom" (29), to hit the lowest possible point in a place "like no place in the world," a space totally outside of a man's "natural" element. If a job is the avenue toward psychological if not material stability,[2] unemployment ushers in instability and the divided, schizoid psychology that comes with it, the scenario in which everyone is your enemy and your friend.

Like the British working class who fear the immigrants will "get job in front of them" (23), the men in the welfare office are, it seems, too vulnerable to feel generous. Their common hardships do not seem to foster any serious sense of community, and instead they tend to view each other as competitors in a contest that (as the fish out of water metaphor suggests) is essentially a life and death struggle. Still, underneath this hostility, there is an unrevealed current of sympathy, a friendship hardwired into the enemy. There is an uneasy but recognizable sense of "communal feeling" (59) between the boys and the English working class "because when you poor things does level out" (59) and this unresolved, countervailing impulse accounts for the hybrid mixture of sympathy, sorrow, and pity with disgust, avarice, and malice.

In *The Changing Definition of Masculinity*, Clyde Franklin accounts for such phenomena by asserting that "it is culturally more acceptable for men to respect each other than it is for men to like each other"

(141); if this is so, then the stoic tension of the welfare office is the result of two distinct impulses: a repressed, "culturally unintelligible" (Schoene-Harwood xii) one to directly express sympathy or affection, and a muted, culturally sanctioned one simply to acknowledge or respect the other men they encounter. Moreover, this general cultural conflict is exaggerated for Selvon's immigrants because their masculine identity is automatically under suspicion by virtue of a skin colour that implicitly constructs them in terms of a "subordinate" masculinity. Already figured in a racially problematic, infantalized non-white masculinity, the boys cannot risk the expression of direct emotion lest a *nearly* unintelligible masculinity (compromised by both poverty and racial difference) become irretrievably lost. For them, the impulse toward open emotional expression is suppressed and the "inner space" of the fellow *feeling* is not acknowledged. Instead, emotion is re-routed into channels which will secure some kind of "culturally intelligible" male respect, the most obvious of which is material prosperity.[3]

Not surprisingly, then, Moses thinks shifts in financial and social status should usher in corresponding shifts in his more personal relationships. When he becomes a homeowner and landlord, he becomes preoccupied with his "station" (3) in life and attempts to enforce a "parting of the ways" (2) between himself and his former friends, friends who do not merit his respect in the strictly material, structural sense to which Man-the-Provider adheres.[4] He opts for "public visibility" (Hearn 3) over emotional exchange because emotion is configured as a kind of feebleness, a sign of weakness, a "self-consciousness [that] undermines the masculine assertion" (Schwenger 14). Moses knows he cannot become a real man through friendships; he thinks he can become one through the department of public records, property division. It does not work, of course, and instead of the well-heeled "life of ease and plenty" (*Moses* 100) he hoped to find as a landlord, he finds instead that his "troubles have multiplied tenfold" (100). He has refused to address his private emotional and psychological contradictions and downloaded them onto a physical structure that cannot provide the respect and stability it promised.

But, if Man-the-Provider ushers in an unhappy obsession with material prosperity, Man-the-Impregnator begets (to use an obvious pun) a

similarly vacuous, largely emotionless search for masculine legitimacy. Most of Selvon's characters have preoccupations with work and money that are matched only by similarly overdeveloped preoccupations with the sheer mechanics of the sex act. Excessively aware of Gilmore's belief that "big-balled men . . . tower over and dominate their less well-endowed and more phlegmatic fellows" (41) and "in constant fear of being viewed as wimps, sissies or homosexuals" (Nurse 8), the boys view sex as a means of acquiring an elusive sense of approbation from their peers. And, just as their reductive material obsessions obscure the possibility of communal feeling, their obsessions about sex seem to obscure the emotional component of sexual relations. Although the boys are constantly on the prowl for "talent," this search is never addressed in emotional terms. Instead, they stockpile details about "an ordinary girl tits jump[ing] up and down," and "the quivering and shivering [of] a black backside" (*Moses* 15). Stalled at the level of "erotic acrobatics" and "promiscuous adventurism" (Gilmore 41),[5] they treat sex as a kind of athletic achievement and readily compare statistics with each other in a language that deliberately frustrates sincere exchange. Refusing the depth of emotion to be found in sexual relations, the Selvon character typically engages in a wide breadth of sexual activity that frequently seems aimed at procuring the respect of the other boys, not at any more dubious sense of "satisfaction" in terms of himself or his partner.

But, just as the surface stoicism of the welfare office reveals some severe and subverted emotional tension, the light-hearted attitude about sex cannot disguise the pathology that underlies it. For Moses and the boys, the lack of emotional investment in their various conquests does not really suggest anything relaxed or casual about their approach to sex; it simply differentiates the aspects of sexual activity with which they are obsessed from those with which they are paranoid. They obsess about the parts they feel they can control and they suppress the parts they cannot. In "Sam Selvon: A Celebration," Ramabai Espinet at least partially recognizes this tendency, noting that sex is at once the stuff of "sports and pastimes" and "important enough to form the subject of every 'old talk', lime, or ballad" (58) in Selvon's fiction. Thus, while each girl might be unimportant by herself, the trope of "the woman

as talent" becomes a thoroughgoing preoccupation, one that seems to offer some of the legitimacy they are lacking in almost every other area of their lives.

This schizoid approach to sex, whereby it is both a joke and a means of self-validation, arises from the combination of at least two factors. First, because internal operations are undervalued in "real men," a private emotion like love cannot compete with the idea of sex as public performance. Unable to discuss what they feel for a woman, the boys instead offer details of what they have done to/with her. The result is that sex is at least as much about telling one's friends as it is about satisfying one's lust (to say nothing of romance or sexual communion). The divided approach also has roots that are outside the strictly sexual, but inside the strictly masculine insofar as sexual potency is used to compensate for material shortcomings. Largely stuck in dead-end, low-paying jobs, Moses and the boys are without most of the more obvious material signifiers of masculine legitimacy,[6] and the absence of these signifiers makes them overly interested in the sexual arena because it allows them to be real men without being rich men. They use Man-the-Impregnator to compensate for their failures as Man-the-Provider. Their desire to collect notches on their bedposts arises at least partially from the fact that they probably do not own their own beds. To be blunt, they use the women in their cramped rooms to compensate for the rooms themselves and, in so doing, they hope that one masculine assertion (that a real man is the master of many women) compensates for the absence of another (that a real man enjoys material success in the world).

And, just as hegemonic masculinity differentiates between greater and "lesser" masculinities, the sexual world of the boys is hierarchically structured. Deeply invested in what Aviston Downes (borrowing from Graham Dawson) calls "the 'imagined masculinity' of British Imperialism" (121), the boys view white women as transcendental signifiers of a universalized masculine legitimacy. Their desire for the "bags of white pussy in London" (74) is a manifestation of anxiety about their position in a racially stratified city. White women, as both the vehicle for racial "purity" and the special preserve of white masculinity, operate

as a social leveling mechanism for Selvon's characters, asserting a kind of equality through a common sexual territory. For the black man, Frantz Fanon says, "having" white women means the opportunity to "marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness" (63) and consequently to "be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*" (63). When the black man is "loved like a white man" he proves he is "worthy of white love" (63) with the result that, in *The Lonely Londoners* at least, interracial sex is the only sex that matters. "As far as spades hitting spades it ain't have nothing like that for a spade wouldn't hit a spade when it have so much other talent on parade" (91).

Similarly, just as the black population seeks interracial "talent" as a mechanism of social reorganization, the white (unambiguously "English") population views interracial sex in terms of some kind of escape from the confines of a densely-coded social structure. "It have some white fellars who feel is a big thrill to hit a black number" (91) because of the unrestrained, which is to say "uncivilized," sexuality, they associate with blackness. They do not want to hear that "you studying medicine at Oxford" (92); instead, "they want you to live up to the films and stories they hear about black people living primitive in the jungles of the world . . . the cruder you are the more they like you" (92). In these situations, blackness is constructed in direct opposition to "culture" and is valued for its "primitive" qualities. Perversely, then, black people find their position in the city defined by their relation to the jungle, their place in "civilized" London society dependant on their ability to be suitably crude. As such, a dubious kind of inclusion is offered in the form of the barbaric "other" to English civility, while "true" Englishness remains unambiguously Caucasian and consequently unavailable to Selvon's non-white immigrants.[7]

Because they are operating inside the illusory promise of a "masculinity defined in British imperial terms" (Downes 130) the boys find it impossible to recognize or prioritize their individual internal directives, and as a result they have difficulty resolving the contradictory demands of the public script they are living. When Galahad first dates a white girl in London, the countervailing pressures of sex and money are resolved not in terms of what he feels, but in terms of what he thinks his

public expects. Obsessively aware of his reputation and not particularly concerned about his feminized "emotions" he has difficulty prioritizing the material and sexual dimensions of a tenuous masculine identity. His feelings of "shame to bring the girl in that old basement room" (*Lonely* 76) must be overcome because "the boys would never finish giving him tone for spending all that money and not eating" (76). The point here is that Galahad as a person never enters into his own decision-making process; he just sacrifices one phase of Gilmore's imperative triad for another. He admits his material poverty not for the sake of his lust or his loneliness, but for the sake of his friends and their expectations. Left to his own devices, it seems, he would have preferred to skip the sex in order to deny the room, to secure the girl's respect at the expense of his own gratification. For Galahad and others, image really is everything, and the images they adhere to are the result of much "austere training" (Gilmore 18) in masculine behaviours.

Despite their significance in all the major action of the two novels, the schizoid and divisive impulses of Man-the-Provider and Man-the-Impregnator are, oddly enough, crystallized in the differing experiences of two of *The Lonely Londoners*' more minor characters, Bart and Cap. Together, they demonstrate the fragmentation that Gilmore's triad creates. Bart is a rarity in the novel: a material success, an austere and industrious worker who values money over friendships, a man who would "do without eating himself so he wouldn't have to change [a] pound and ease up [a] friend" (45). In this regard, he is a real success in terms of a hegemonic masculinity that values material prosperity. He is someone who has focused on results rather than internal processes and accumulated a reasonable amount of capital as a result. He has achieved the hard, unfeeling stoicism both Man-the-Provider and Man-the-Protector promote, yet he is something of a comic figure in the world of the boys because of his shortcomings in the sexual arena. Although he has money, and although "Bart thirst for woman, he can't make a note with them, no matter how hard he try" (49). As a result, his heterosexuality is compromised and his other masculine achievements are negated (particularly in his own peer group which manifests some of the "homophobic tendencies found in Jamaican and Caribbean culture" (Nurse 9).[8]

Though financially sound and stoic emotionally, Bart suffers multiple humiliations at the hands of both the boys and the girl he loves, and he leaves the novel a "haggard and haunted" (50) figure, one who is forced to recognize that "his loins are useless," and "that he has failed at being a man" (Gilmore 42).

In contrast, Cap is a sexual dynamo, with "woman left and right" (44), a man who seems to be "defying all logic and reason and convention, living without working, smoking the best cigarettes, never without women" (45). The only character in the trilogy with no interest in work, Cap seems to use his unusual overabundance of sex to compensate for a lack of material prosperity. While all the boys attempt this sort of thing at some minor level, they are always forced to do so within the framework of conventional masculine relations; they spend money in order to pick up women, whether directly through prostitutes or indirectly when entertaining their more legitimate dates. Cap defies this logic and reason because "all the odd money that he need he get from women" (34). Although subject to occasional periods of poverty so severe that he "get so frighten that he start to rattle" (33), Cap has somehow reversed the flow of Man-the-Provider and become the recipient of the provisions of others, most notably the women who continuously flock to him. As a result, he is a thoroughgoing mystery to the rest of the boys who live their lives inside the parameters Man-the-Provider creates. They are deeply vexed by the failed correlation between sexual and material abundance and itemize his material shortcomings in a baffled attempt to understand how "a man" can survive (and even prosper) if he "ain't have nothing, no clothes, no work, no house to live in, no place to go" (40). A threat to the framework which governs the boys' existence, Cap's (relative) success challenges the basic set of assumptions they use to calibrate their place(s) in the world:

> You work things out in your mind to a kind of pattern, in a sort of sequence, and one day bam! something happen to throw everything out of gear, what you expect to happen never happen, what you don't expect to happen always happen, and you have to start thinking all over again. (40)

As the preoccupation with conventions and patterns seems to indicate, the boys think about masculinity in terms that are almost explicitly narratological. They seek out patterns as a means of understanding the world around them, and they are deeply distressed when their patterns seem to disintegrate. In the view of many narrative theorists, this search for meaningful narrative sequences, for reliable patterns of meaning, is, as Nicholas Rescher notes, an effort to find meaning inside a "reality [which] is totally unfocused" (36). While narrative sequences "may not afford an optimal instrument for depicting reality as nature encompasses it . . . the linear flow of narrative fiction with its one-thing-at-a-time focus of attention is singularly well fitted for [the] portrayal of human reality" (36). That is, narrative provides a structure of value which is independent of "reality as nature encompasses it," a framework which is "well-fitted" to human processes of understanding even if it is unequivocally artificial.[9] In this way, the structure of a grand narrative (particularly one dealing with something as fundamental as gender identity) comes to feel real because it is the mechanism by which we make sense of a chaotic and unwieldy environment. It is a story that feels like the foundation of individual identity.

Inevitably then, a narrative structure that encodes the "austere training" of hegemonic masculinity will be a limited and restrictive one, particularly if the subjects of the narrative (the ones "reading" and trying to live inside the story's framework) can never be fully integrated into the world the narrative posits. Speaking of the masculinity encoded in British adventure stories, the Caribbean critic C.L.R. James says that "the principles [the stories] taught were absorbed through the pores and practised instinctively" (35), yet the pores themselves (or more specifically the skin tones that surround them) make it difficult for the non-white colonial to be absorbed *by* the principles he has himself absorbed. If the figure of the Real Man is limiting in a global sense, it is particularly problematic for the boys because "the features of hegemonic masculinity [are] precisely those which were privileged within England in the Victorian and Edwardian periods" (Downes 107). These features do not usually accommodate blackness. The grand narrative of masculine legitimacy functions in a way that orders and limits the world

the boys perceive, yet they can never fully integrate themselves into the story they have been sold. Believing that "the only way around blackness [is] gentility" (Edmondson 30), they appear with "pocket-watch, bowler hat and umbrella" (*Lonely* 124) in an effort to "put on the old English accent" (72), but the "lesser" masculinity inherent in the otherness of being "that black man" (71) is inescapable and scuttles any attempt at a seamless integration into the universalist terms of English manhood.

With an impossible masculine ideal absorbed in their pores, their horizons of expectation have been skewed, and as a result they are baffled by things outside the pattern they have accepted. For Galahad (in his *Lonely Londoners* manifestation) this means a complete (though impossible) renunciation of those aspects of himself that cannot be reconciled with his epic aspirations. Studying the colour of his hand, he begins a kind of schizoid dialogue between two irreconcilable versions of his identity, one hegemonic, one "lesser," between someone he regards as "me" (an entity that can be integrated into universalized manhood) and the adversary of "me," the colour black (which cannot):

> Galahad watch the colour of his hand, and talk to it, saying, 'Colour, is you that causing all this . . . You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world. Is not me, you know, is you! I ain't do anything to infuriate the people and them, is you!'
>
> Galahad talking to the colour Black, as if he is a person, telling it that is not *he* who causing botheration in the place, but Black, who is a worthless thing for making trouble all about. (72)

For Galahad, "Black" is worthless because it fixes him in the world of subordinate masculinities, restricting his access to the grand narrative of masculine legitimacy and the material, sexual, and psychological rewards it promises. For Galahad and the other boys, a life lived according to the terms of epic masculinity is necessarily a truncated one (one that demands that they renounce large parts of themselves), and their obsession with fitting into a particular framework causes them to misread the possibilities (the text) of their own lives and instead to struggle to fit inside the limited parameters posited by a grand narrative of heroic masculine behaviour.

In his fine book, *The Power of the Story,* Michael Hanne recognizes the reductive nature of narrative structures (and grand narratives in particular), claiming that "one of the essential functions" of telling a story "is that it enables us to discard massive quantities of material we deem to be unimportant" (8). Good stories, he says, know how to stick to "the few items which we regard as significant" (8); they take an enormous amount of information and distil it into a recognizable and compelling pattern of valuable signals. Indeed, in Jean François Lyotard's view "narrative . . . is a mechanism . . . for forgetting" (xii), but the problem for Selvon's boys is that they forget and/or ignore everything that does not fit into a quintessentially (and stereotypically) masculine framework. They forget too completely, and they discard some things they would be well advised to keep.[10] And, because "fictions of manhood" (Rosen xvii) are such well-constructed stories, because their narratives are so full of powerful images and so free of boring details, the story becomes more compelling and attractive than "real" life. Perversely, the reductive story becomes expansively interesting. By leaving so much out, narrative *seems* to leave nothing out; it "mystifies our understanding by giving a false sense of coherence and comprehensiveness to a selection of scattered events" (Hanne 11) and signals. Masculinity appears as a complete, and self-contained totality even though its persuasiveness depends upon the fact that it overlooks a great deal. Thus, while living inside a narrative framework promises an idealized life, it tends to produce a diminished one, one with lots of missing parts.

The result in the Moses trilogy is a collection of characters that are forever "watching up at the clock on the Odeon" even though they "have wristwatch" (*Lonely* 74). They are forever attracted to things like the Odeon (things that are brighter, larger, and more visible than the little things they have themselves) because the bigger things seem to promise personal legitimacy and a place in a more satisfying, epic, narrative framework. Divided between large-scale icons and small-scale realities the boys find it difficult to recognize that their own watches do in fact work; and, more bluntly, if they were to look at their own wrists instead of the tower, they would have a much better chance of seeing where they are going. Indeed, the necessity and difficulty of looking

inward to self (however ill-defined that self might be) instead of out-ward or upward to the sky is at the very centre of Selvon's trilogy and constitutes one of the central struggles facing his characters. Stories and legends promising prosperity, respect and sex seduce them into think-ing in terms of "the great city of London, centre of the world" (*Lonely* 121), but what they get is "a lonely miserable city" (*Lonely* 114) which humiliates and marginalizes rather than elevates them. This disjunc-tion causes them pain, but they generally fail to realize that their suf-fering arises from their inflated expectations (which are derived from a skewed horizon of expectation) as much as it arises from the city itself (from the city "*as nature encompasses it").* As their ambivalence about returning home indicates, in *The Lonely Londoners* the lure, the "big ro-mance" (69), of London is too strong to be resisted, even if, in reality, it leaves them "bewildered [and] hopeless" (126). London, as the epi-centre of the Imperial masculinity to which they aspire, has a mythic currency that they cannot resist and they want to live in London for the same reason they want to live inside the story of masculinity; both sound really good and both promise undisputed, publicly affirmed, le-gitimacy. They never really find any sense of inclusion in the grand nar-ratives they are chasing, and although "on the surface things don't look so bad" (126), the preoccupation with surfaces and images is itself a major problem, one which generally blocks the kind of self-reflection that might be productive. Beneath the surface, "you bounce up a kind of misery and pathos and a frightening—what?" (126).

Still, despite all this, Selvon's world is not an entirely apocalyptic one, and there are some efforts to contend with the more subtle subterranean impulses, the "frightening whats" that trouble the boys. Despite the crip-pling and pervasive nature of their relationships with big cities and big stories, the boys are not entirely and hopelessly at the mercy of macho images and grand narratives. They do construct some viable strategies of resistance and these strategies are enacted in some productive spaces. Like most of us, they have their best ideas when they summon the cour-age to deal with their problems directly, and, despite their tendencies toward self-delusion, they are sometimes surprisingly adept at diagnos-ing the nature of their own illnesses (even if they are less successful at

finding fail-proof cures). Aware at some level that their problems are with fracture and with heavy-handed stories, they pursue community and narrative construction as modes of rehabilitation. They combat the chaotic enormousness of the London street by meeting each other in a small, stable basement room, and Moses' literary ambitions are, in their most basic form, an effort to take the reins of his own narrative, to make a plaster cast for his own life that fits the specific dimensions of his bones. And, while Moses' memoirs in *Moses Ascending* are not entirely successful because they owe too much to the structures and conventions of the nineteenth-century English novel, the weekly gatherings in his room are very successful indeed.[11]

While the vast majority of *The Lonely Londoners* deals with fractured and disjointed experiences on the London streets, the novel closes with some prolonged attention to the much smaller, much more stable, space of Moses' basement room. The shift in focus from the macro to the micro also reveals a shift from public to private spaces and, if men are constructed through public visibility, the latter shift also reveals a movement away from the kind of paranoid public performance that usually marks the boys' behaviour, and a movement into some more organic expressions of self. This movement results in the sudden and unexpected feelings of comfort and generosity that the characters experience just before the end of the novel. Selvon spends more than ninety percent of the novel pursuing the theme that "general life [is] really hard for the boys in London" (114), before finally pairing it with a parallel suggestion that getting "together now and then to talk about things back home" (114) mitigates their suffering in an important way. The back-to-back sequence of these observations suggests that "general" life is combated with a kind of *specific* life such that the general world is the purveyor of suffering, while the specific world produces solace. Perhaps more importantly, the "getting together" eases the pervasive sense that "it ain't have anything like 'ease me up' or 'both of we is countrymen together' in the old London" (*Lonely* 12). A community of friends appears inside the London streets and outside the austere construct of male stoicism and urban anonymity. The "talking about things back home" also reveals an ability to resist the universalized territories of a hegemon-

ic English masculinity (the fascinations with Charing Cross, Waterloo Station and so forth) and to tell stories that are more localized and, not coincidentally, more relevant to their individual experiences.

When the boys retreat into Moses' room, they escape a bewildering system of value and participate in one that arises directly from their individual and collective needs. The result is that Moses' room becomes an organic expression of the day hospital Fanon and Geronomi manufactured in Algeria. It becomes its own micro society "with its own multiplicity of relations, duties, and possibilities," a space in which the boys "can assume roles and fulfill functions" (Fanon and Geronomi 715). More importantly, it offers the possibility that they might "confront reality on a new register" (718) and create a new and distinct framework of understanding and thought, a new structure of meaning outside those encoded by the grand narratives of exterior reality.

Indeed, when the narrator suggests that Moses' dirty room becomes like a "church" (*Lonely* 122), he imposes a ritualistic kind of spirituality onto their scattered, frequently vacuous, lives. In several important ways, the boys are seeking salvation and sanctuary and, above all, narrative meaning in their gatherings. And despite Moses' assertions otherwise, they are not just coming now and then, but "nearly every Sunday" (122), and clearly they are coming to unburden themselves, to confess the week's trials. They come "together for a oldtalk" (122) that might help them make sense of things that otherwise fail to do so. And, the specific correlation between their Sunday gatherings and the rites of confession (They come "like it is confession" 122) is appropriate not just because they get to unload their problems, but because of the very specific reversal the act of confession involves. The value of confession, from a theological perspective, is not so much about getting rid of one's sins, as it is about the transition from negative to positive experience. One does not drop his sins off at the church and leave them there; rather, his sins are washed away, or even *transformed* into an avenue for salvation. More than anything else, the confessional is a place where shame can be redeemed, where failure is not just mitigated but put to a very specific and positive purpose, and this, I think, is the real value of the confessions in Moses' room. They take the many hu-

miliations of their scattered existences, and transform them into some-
thing positive. Thus, they make a kind of redemption from the stuff of
their own failures.

That said, an overly liturgical view of things does not accommodate
some aspects of what the boys are up to with their Sunday gatherings.
Their "retreat . . . into the narrow confines of . . . home" (McCulloch
127) is not overburdened by any unreasonable sense of formality.
If these are spiritual exercises, they are exercises of a particularly or-
ganic sort; ones that are not bound up by externally stipulated pro-
cedures but rather reflect the specific needs of the practitioners. The
boys that show up on Sunday have the same concerns as the ones we
see for the rest of the week, but the change in circumstances (the shift
in the narrative frame from the macro to the micro) produces changes
in them. Like most of us, they behave differently at home. But, like
most of us, the content of their behaviour at home is conditioned by
their experiences in the outside world. They are still talking about sex
and money and "fusic," but there is something fundamentally co-op-
erative about their approach when they are all together. Indeed, Moses'
assertion that immigrants "have no sort of family life" (*Lonely* 114) in
London is valid only in the traditional sense. While it is true that there
is no such thing as a traditional nuclear family (and if precedent mat-
ters, that is probably a good thing), the real advantages of "family life"
are located on an emotional and psychological, not a material or so-
ciological, level.[12] Selvon's characters, elsewhere so interested in what
they are told to be and what they are told to want, effect a minor kind
of coup by skipping the overhead of family life and moving directly
toward the emotional and psychological advantages. When they flop
about "on the bed, on the floor, [and] on the chairs" (122), when they
say they have important engagements but "never get up to go" (123),
and when they angle toward free cigarettes and free coffee, they behave
like members of a family because they have all of the benign careless-
ness that only real familiarity and real (though grudging) affection can
produce. As many of us recognize, being with family is not always the
most exciting way to spend one's time, but, when families work, they
provide a framework that is simultaneously deeply private and explicit-

ly communal. They allow for communication that is not necessarily a matter of public performance. And, when the pressure to perform is lessened, people (and fictional characters) start to feel better. This is what happens in Moses' room, and, despite the fact that they are not blood relatives, the boys make up a pretty functional family. Nobody gets in serious fights. Nobody skips church. Nobody misses Christmas. Everybody chips in. Nobody judges anyone else too harshly. To use the stock family terminology, they are "there" for each other, and "there" is an emotional space that can only be discovered when they escape the demands of their public lives.

Thus, the boys find their greatest comforts by emphasizing the emotional over the material, the private motivation over the public directive, the local narrative over the global trope. And, even if this takes place at some subconscious level, their ability to recognize and pursue an agenda governed by "inner space" is remarkable given the number and variety of signals they must fight off before they can get to it. Their meetings also reject the search for "approbation and admiration in the judgmental eyes of others" (Gilmore 37) because they violate almost every tenet directing masculine behaviour. The long-winded, gossip-heavy confessions in Moses' room accomplish precisely nothing in the "real" world and, for anyone interested in "getting ahead" in the world, they also seem to waste a great deal of time; they also invite accusations of softness and vulnerability. The condition of the physical space (its small proportions, its squalor) seems to broadcast the host's material insignificance, and the malleability of the guests (they sit on the floor and expect very little in the way of refreshments—or heat) suggests that they are not used to anything better. Everything about the place suggests failure and weakness and, in voluntarily claiming this space, in choosing to go there, they find a subtle, more discreet form of success and strength which is based on their individual needs and hopes rather than any "quasi-global" iconography. By accepting failure in terms of some of the grander narratives, they begin to construct some more productive stories for themselves and their friends. And, these stories, unlike the ones outside, help them to make sense of their lives and achieve a measure of personal satisfaction and self-identification.

The successful moments inside Selvon's fictional world arise when his characters escape overarching frameworks and instead construct more flexible and idiosyncratic structures of thought and understanding which are specifically applicable to their lives. It might well be time for the academy to use a similar approach with regard to Selvon's novels. The worlds they posit might not fit with any of the grand narratives governing contemporary criticism, but there are several rewarding anecdotal byways and winding critical paths to be pursued. I have tried to explore some of them here. These roads are not straight, the potholes many and you will never reach turnpike speed, but the journeys are interesting. Most importantly, these trips take us to the out of the way places we could not have imagined before we left and show us things we would never have expected. "Sometimes you does have to start thinking all over again when you feel you have things down the right way" (*Lonely* 45).

Notes

1 For examples, see Wyke's strained treatment of "the ethnic reality of skin colour" (103), Barratt's fabricated treatment of sexual politics, Looker's inflated vision of group solidarity, and Salick's curious suggestion that we read the Moses trilogy backwards to make it more politically progressive.

2 Farrell has commented on the fact that "unemployed men commit suicide at twice the rate of employed men" (164), suggesting a clear correlation between unemployment and self-annihilation and bolstering the supposition that male existence can be tied to male employment in ways that go beyond the metaphorical and enter into life and death matters.

3 Ramchand situates these notions in a specifically West Indian context, maintaining that "acknowledgment of the inner life and an embrace of feelings [are] still despised as soft, weak and feminine" and going further to suggest that, to many in the West Indies (and in West Indian literature), "tender emotions [are] womanish and likely to undermine manliness" (322).

4 Despite Moses' obvious and sustained effort at enforcing separation, Looker, for reasons outside the book but inside the preoccupations of postcolonial criticism, insists that Moses buys the house in order to "invent a more inclusive community" (170).

5 Gilmore differentiates between mature and immature masculinity in terms of the self-conscious preoccupation with procreation. Characteristically, mature men are interested in the lasting marker of offspring, while immature men remain focused on the more transitory features of the sex act.

6 They do not have cars or houses or any of the other usual signals that one has "arrived" as a man, although their keen interest in clothes can be seen as an effort to present a reasonable facsimile of affluence in the public sphere. Insofar as this is the case, they are once again de-emphasizing private space while carefully constructing public personas.

7 Paul recognizes the degree to which post-war immigration policies compelled to "admit the reality of a common legal nationality, while at the same time alluding to a more important blood Britishness from which the migrants were excluded" (188). Moreover, she comments "white migrants, the children of the empire, were [considered to be] truly Britons, to be admitted freely 'to the land which they regard as home.' By contrast, British subjects of colour, though they had been educated to regard Britain as 'the Motherland,' were perceived not as children of the Empire but as mere acquaintances" (190).

8 This is not to suggest that Bart is a homosexual, just that his heterosexuality is not performed to an acceptable degree. As a result, his virility is not confirmed and he is vulnerable to the suggestion that he is a sissy (ie: not a real man).

9 The titles of many of the key works in the area of masculinities indicate a preoccupation with quintessentially narratological distinctions between truth and fiction, myths and realities, sequence and change, images and actual events. Consider the titles of Rosen, Pollack, Knights, Schoene-Harwood, Mosse and Gilmore.

10 The most obvious example of this occurs when Moses abandons (forgets) his productive (and not exclusively sexual) relationship with Doris in *Moses Migrating*, but, several smaller instances reinforce the point. Galahad's characteristically masculine desire to reject Moses' offer of help and prove "that he could take care of himself" (*Lonely* 22) places him in a dangerous situation where he almost gets lost, and Lewis' pathological desire to control his wife as property destroys their relationship. In every case, a too-ready adherence to a specific and narrow storyline about masculine behaviour obscures productive possibilities.

11 While writing his memoirs, Moses constantly thinks in terms of the precedents of "other scribes" (*Moses* 63) and takes any critique of his writing as an indication that "the whole structure of [his] work [has] to be altered" (45). His constant mimicking of the narrative techniques he is ostensibly trying to displace mean that his memoirs rarely work as a means of establishing a more idiosyncratic and individualized framework for his life. They simply duplicate, in a literal sense, the wider problems with grand narrative I have been describing above.

12 Actual families and actual family responsibilities are something of a disaster in *Lonely*. Tolroy and Lewis both have difficulty with the traditional role of patriarch inasmuch as any increase in familial responsibility corresponds with some sort of individual crisis. Both are, to different degrees, overwhelmed by the demands of their new situations, unable to measure up to the greater expectations that come with the status of husband or breadwinner.

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