‘From a Distant Witness’: Black Atlantic Temporalities in William Demby’s *Beetlecreek* (1950) and George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953)

In Richard Wright’s introduction to George Lamming’s debut novel *In the Castle of My Skin*, he relates, “One feels not so much alone when, from a distant witness, supporting evidence comes to buttress one’s own testimony” (vi).[[1]](#footnote-1) The notion of a “distant witness,” situated here by Wright, an African American writer in exile, in praise of an Afro-Caribbean author, Lamming, in an affiliative diasporic mode of solidarity, is at the core of this article. I compare two debut, coming-of-age novels written by black writers from a position of exilic distance in Cold War Europe: William Demby’s *Beetlecreek* (1950) and George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953). With *Beetlecreek*, African American author William Demby innovated a black modernist aesthetic. The novel follows the inner desires and thwarted dreams of multiple characters living in a small town in the rural Southern United States during the Great Depression—among them is an African American adolescent Johnny Johnson, whose narrative shares some biographical resonances with Demby’s life experiences. *Beetlecreek* dwells often in existential reveries, and its thematics focus on interracial relations and racialized violence under Jim Crow segregation. Demby worked on the novel in the late 1940s in Rome, where he was immersed in the antifascist postwar art scene and lived with a leftist Italian cohort of writers, artists, and filmmakers. George Lamming wrote his experimental bildungsroman, *In the Castle of My Skin*,upon his Windrush-era move to London in 1950, completing his novel, like Demby, within the first few years of his expatriation. At the time of the novel’s publication in 1953, the West Indian Federation had not yet been formed, nor had Barbados gained independence from the British. Like Demby’s novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* is set in the 1930s and features a young, semi-autobiographical protagonist named “G.”Through its language and form, Lamming’s novel sustains a defamiliarization of the colonial power structure, subtly undoing what Lamming would characterize, decades later, as the “tragic ignorance” (“Sea of Stories”) of the colonized. Focusing on black Atlantic fiction beyond the US nation-state, this comparative analysis situates these two novels alongside one another to explore how two young black expatriate authors looked back from a position of critical distance upon their segregated homelands in the Global South fictionalizing their youth spent therein.

Both novels warrant continued consideration for their innovation and politico-aesthetic achievement. Their shared projects of defamiliarization are integral to the larger project of conceiving a decolonized black diasporic voice and vision. In contributing to the work of decolonizing the material and psychic processes of racial oppression, each novel uses formal methods, internal meditations, dialogue, and metaphors of entrapment and stagnation. In turn, Demby’s and Lamming’s first novels set into practice critical cosmopolitan thinking, what James Clifford terms a “cosmopolitanism from below” (qtd. in Robbins and Horta 9), regarding the simultaneous ravages of imperialism and the interconnectedness of human life. Both writers experiment with form, content and style to “imagine,” as Rebecca Walkowitz describes in her theorization of cosmopolitan style, “that conditions of national and transnational affiliation depend on narrative patterns of attentiveness, relevance, perception, and recognition” (6). Their respective displacement from home is one of choice—in the sense that neither writer was expelled by the state—compelled by a liberatory impulse. Critical distance shaped the writings of black exilic authors like Lamming and Demby, whose decision to move abroad after World War II in an era of mounting global liberation and anticolonial movements was influenced by the forces of institutionalized racism and a lack of opportunities at home. That is not to say that London and Rome afforded utopic freedoms but rather a space from which to defamiliarize the status quo of the segregated societies that Demby and Lamming each experienced in their formative years.

In comparing Demby’s and Lamming’s black modernist novels, I consider the author’s respective positions in Rome and London in relation to exilic distance and their mutual choice to write coming-of-age novels set in the 1930s with existential undertones. Reading the authors’ novels beyond national borders and as part of a larger body of black Atlantic literature reveals their shared investment in aesthetic defamiliarization as a liberatory strategy. Steeped in the modernist registers of experimental language, including stream of consciousness and wandering narration, both novels spend time contemplating modes of being in the world and present critical epistemologies espoused by black characters. Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*’sbroader destabilization of knowledge production is a literary undertaking, set against a global backdrop of mounting violence under the nationalist banners of Nazism, Fascism, colonialism and imperialism. Demby’s *Beetlecreek* ends on a dire, cautionary note: the violent outcome of rumor and speculation in a small town in the early 1930s casts a wider span across a world moving toward genocide and world war. These stakes are all the more temporally complex given the fact that Lamming’s and Demby’s postwar novels are penned from Europe at the outset of the Cold War.

*Beetlecreek*: Writing the US Southfrom Rome

from an Anti-Fascist Perspective

William Demby wrote *Beetlecreek* in the shadow of the Holocaust and nuclear devastation. He returned to Italy in 1947, having served there in a segregated troop during World War II. Aware of his unique choice to move to Rome, rather than joining the more established African American expatriate community in Paris, he relates that though there were thousands of African American servicemen in Italy during the War, “Indeed, those first years of my return to Rome after the war I had the eerie feeling of being the only Negro in Italy, since I seldom saw another Negro on the streets or met Negros in the intellectual salons I was beginning to frequent” (“An American Negro Survives” II-II). Such a feeling contributes to his first novel’s tone of critical distance and the shared, though distinctive isolation experienced by its characters. In Rome’s stimulating and serious postwar artistic milieu, he continued writing *Beetlecreek*, which grew out of a short story “Saint Joey” that he penned in 1946 while studying with poet Robert Hayden at Fisk University after the war. In college, Demby reviewed Albert Camus’ *The Stranger* (1943) for the Fisk paper, which critics have pointed to as an influence on his debut novel’s existentialist themes. He continued working on the novel while living in Rome and visiting in Salzburg in 1947; *Beetlecreek* came together while Demby stayed alone in his friend Alex Randolph’s villa in Venice, the Palazzo Ca’Dario, which neighbored Peggy Guggenheim’s palazzo on the Canal Grande.[[2]](#footnote-2)

By way of an omniscient, third-person narrator, the novel gives voice to the inner worlds of four characters living in the small, fictional West Virginian town of Beetlecreek in the Depression era: Johnny Johnson, an African American adolescent who comes to stay with his uncle in Beetlecreek, while his widowed mother convalesces in a Pittsburgh hospital, and who is pressured to join the town’s black gang, “The Nightriders”; David Diggs, Johnny’s uncle, who had dreams of leaving Beetlecreek as a young man to pursue his passion as an artist, but who now paints signs for a living; David’s wife, Mary Diggs, who does not understand her husband’s remoteness, and who focuses her time and energies on planning church events and working in the home of a white family whose lifestyle she aspires to; and Bill Trapp, a lonely, elderly white man and former circus worker, whose small, shabby farm is located between the black and white sections of town.

Johnny Johnson is a catalyst for change in the town. When Bill Trapp catches Johnny plucking apples from his tree, rather than punish him, Trapp invites him to his porch for cider. The reclusive Trapp has not spoken to a single person for some fifteen years. Johnny’s Uncle David shows up to Trapp’s house to rescue his nephew when word quickly spreads of his having been caught by Trapp; initially, Trapp asserts that he comes from respectable folks and owns his property, but his assertions of whiteness do not cohere (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 11, 12). He is, as David Diggs knows, an outcast in town. Switching gears, Trapp seizes the opportunity for human contact, and offers David refreshment, and the three characters, two black and one white, share a pleasant evening together. This radical breaking of silence and isolation across racial and generational lines releases a subversive force that flows through the town and culminates with Trapp’s ostensible death by the novel’s end. These thematics, written by Demby after the war, but gesturing back to the previous decade, engage the violent ends of segregation and racial oppression.

*Beetlecreek* pursues an inversion model, as it asks what might happen to a white man who is falsely accused of a sexual crime. In an era of sustained racial violence against African Americans, including a wave of lynchings and wrongful incarcerations, *Beetlecreek* defamiliarizes the rhetoric of crime and punishment in the Jim Crow South. Bill Trapp, however, appears not to recognize either the overt or tacit rules of segregation. Following their first encounter, he meets David Diggs for drinks at Telrico’s Café, which serves an African American clientele and is run by an Italian American, Telrico. Telrico is a liminal figure in the town who cathects with whiteness and its attendant privileges: nevertheless, “nobody thought of Telrico as a white man, but he never forgot it himself” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 154). For his part, Bill Trapp, energized by his visit with David Diggs and Johnny, begins a series of kind acts, word of which spreads through the town: he gives two white girls cups of cider, and two African American girls a wheelbarrow full of giant pumpkins for their church benefit. He begins to share the bounty from his fecund, Eden-esque garden located, again, between the white and black sections of town. Trapp was heretofore an abject figure—when Trapp passes through the African American section of town, the children throw stones at him, spitting at him and calling him a “Peckerwood, peckerwood” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 57), a slur for poor whites. Trapp, nevertheless, remains determined to maintain his contact with people. His largesse culminates with his throwing a picnic for the town’s black and white children. The results, however, of this interracial gathering, are disastrous, as he is falsely accused of molestation by one of the white girls in attendance and, almost overnight, he is branded a “sex-fiend” (151) by the entire town. In his discussion of interracial encounters and the figure of the pervert in early 1950s literature, Tyler Schmidt observes that *Beetlecreek*’s climax “[reminds] us how deeply threatening these desegregationist acts were to the Cold War ideology of containment” (137).

The novel takes pains to differentiate the manner in which these allegations spread through the segregated quarters of town, thereby tracing modes of knowledge production and circulation. In the African American section of town, the townspeople repeatedly allude to the fact that Trapp would have been lynched immediately if he had been a black man. To confirm this point, a named man Slim directly invokes the infamous Scottsboro trials (*Beetlecreek* 151).[[3]](#footnote-3) Addressing a group of black men at the barbershop, Slim says, “Now you turn the tables of this thing […] You just pick up any newspaper from the last few years and read what happened to those Scottsboro boys and you can imagine what’d happen to him! His life wouldn’t be worth a row of pins” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 151). Notably, the novel weaves segregation and slavery’s legacy under Jim Crow into the narrative in subtle fashion by mapping the town. The racialized past, instead, appears in the text in nuanced moments, such as when David Diggs visits his old flame Edith Johnson, who returns to town, in her childhood home; in the living room, there is a picture on the wall “of a Civil War battlement with a regiment of Negro troops lined up stiffly to fight a white cavalry” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 181). Given Demby’s own service in Italy in a segregated troop during World War II, his writing this description from his vantage point in postwar Europe defamiliarizes racial segregation and white supremacy’s longue durée.

In keeping with the novel’s use of an inversion model, the town’s black adolescent gang, the Nightriders, commands Johnny as an initiation rite, to seek vigilante justice and punish Trapp for his alleged perversion by burning down his house. James C. Hall notes the “horrible irony” that the black gang members don black robes and masks calling for violence in an “imitation of the Ku Klux Klan” (“Afterword” Beetlecreek 233). Johnny first resists their peer pressure to join them masturbating together in their gang’s shanty hideout and is repulsed by their leader, notably called “Leader” in the text, who kills a pigeon with his bare hands to impress the other boys. Nevertheless, Johnny’s growing urge to be a “member” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 166) leads him to capitulate to their demand that he burn down Trapp’s home. Johnny’s violent initiation into black manhood subverts coming-of-age narratives and ostensibly leads to Trapp’s death, as Johnny strikes him dead or unconscious and leaves him on his property, engulfed in flames. Unlike Lamming’s young protagonist G.’s apparently optimistic future prospects, Johnny’s fate remains uncertain, but the implications are dire. He is, after all, a black adolescent who attacked a white man in a segregated town. This fact recalls Slim’s speech in the barbershop.

The novel’s plot takes on double meaning as a cautionary tale about Fascism and white supremacy when one considers the context surrounding its publication at the dawn of the Cold War era. *Beetlecreek* was published in English on Rinehart in 1950 and in the same year on a major Italian press Mondadori, translated by Fernanda Pivano as *Festa a Beetlecreek*. The US publication featured an elliptical blurb from Ralph Ellison—“it’s a good book,” a writer whom Demby admired. In 2008, Demby looked back upon his experiences during this period in Rome:

I am almost famous, you know, like … Alberto Mondadori invites me to dinner because I am black! But then you discover that I am a complex black guy. I don’t humor the Italian celebrity who invites me, or who is talking to me. I don’t humor their preconceptions. I want to always challenge them. I understand that they are coming out of Fascism, I am hip, and I want to show another dimension of being black and move the understanding of what it means to be black into the future that doesn’t exist yet, in which there will be a world in which human differences will be defined, but not necessarily in the same way they are being defined now. And race will not be the fundamental one. (Micconi interview)

Again, much of this work in Demby’s debut novel takes place through an inversion model that emphasizes Bill Trapp, a white man’s outsider status. This affords an occasion for the novel’s African American characters to compare their collective treatment by authorities and the majority population against Trapp’s when he is falsely accused. Racism characterizes the novel’s Depression-era present, made more temporally complex by its being written from postwar Rome, in the wake of genocide and nuclear devastation.

David Diggs, Johnny’s uncle, assumes the figure of the artist in the novel; his frustrated experience continually foreshadows that, in coming to stay in Beetlecreek, his nephew Johnny has come to a death-driven place, entrenched in the stultifying Jim Crow South. Significantly, David’s teenage crush, Edith Johnson, returns to town to attend the funeral of her adoptive mother; she is an object of fascination in the African American section of town, having left Beetlecreek for college and later for a life in the city. For David, Edith’s return “brought movement to his life (a life which had become static, caught in the creek reeds, turned rusty and muddy), had importance because it lifted the suffocation from him” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 94). Edith, who enacts David’s wishes to leave Beetlecreek, demonstrates a critical distance as a black female outsider.

Edith is a complex character who, like Lamming’s Trumper, brings new knowledge to the town, reconfiguring its ingrained dynamics. In contrast to Edward Margolies’s early reading of the novel, which presents Edith “as a death figure, having been hardened and corrupted in the big-city Negro ghettos” (176), the narration describes her fierce, anti-hypocritical attitude toward Beetlecreek as generating movement out of stagnation and homogeneity. Moreover, Edith’s apparent hardness, as she tells David, originates in the trauma of having been raped at age thirteen on her walk home by an older white man (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 114). While Bill Trapp is demonized and ostensibly killed over false allegations, Edith’s true assailant is never brought to justice, which lends another layer to the novel’s complex calls for social justice. Though Edith and David leave Beetlecreek together, the novel, in modernist fashion, takes care to avoid the implication that they are bound for a utopic future in the urban North; as their bus departs in the final scene, a divide has already settled between them, ending the novel with a tone of ambiguity and alienation. Moreover, the pair can hear fire engines in the distance, a reminder of Bill Trapp’s likely death and young Johnny’s uncertain future as his assailant.

Nevertheless, prior to Edith and David’s departure, Edith’s stimulating presence awakens in David an awareness of his past experiences and the racialization of his ambitions. The narration reveals how, as an adolescent in Pittsburgh, David would walk miles to borrow library books related to painting so that he could emulate them in his own drawings. This form of creative travel and inspiration contrasts the stasis he encounters and which suffocates him upon his move to the segregated town of Beetlecreek.[[4]](#footnote-4) The result of viewing and making art is that “for a little while he could forget that he was a Negro” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 95). This poses in the novel a tension between art as the idealized vehicle of individual transcendence and its irreducible rapport with embodiment and collective experience. The narration figures social identity as heterogeneous, but relentlessly homogenized, for “up there in Pittsburgh it was being a kid first and it didn’t make any difference that he was a Negro. But when he went to that Negro college, he began to feel it, and along with it, the feeling of being suffocated and unable to move” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 95). This feeling of suffocation, the narration posits, was not about a dearth of “opportunities” or even “civil rights,” but that it “had to do with Death, feeling frozen, suffocated, unable to breathe, knowing there was little to be done about it” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 96). Recalling Sartre’s depiction of existence as the act of being brought forth into one’s body out of the mud, of pulling one’s life into being out of such formlessness, the novel describes the town’s creek where mud and reeds trap endless objects: David thinks, “like the rusty cans, he was trapped, caught, unable to move again” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 95). Written from exilic distance in Rome, Demby characterizes segregation in the mode of Death and suffocation.

Written as the novel was in the late 1940s, prior to court-ordered desegregation, its early 1930s’ setting gives voice to not only the material reality of segregation, but to its nuanced psychic effects: what David terms “the feeling of the death-grip” (96), which “would seem the most natural and permanent thing in the world” (97). The only relief from the death-grip, for David, was in making art, reading, or looking at art books. His college peers would rather engage in “goodtiming with girls or drinking” to escape what he believes is the fact they also feel as “being suffocated” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 96), and he, too, sometimes joins them in these methods of escape. The “death-grip” of American racism and the peculiar status quo of Jim Crow segregation enter into a compelling dialogue with postwar Italian society, as Demby wrote the novel abroad in midst of Italy refashioning itself in defeat and in distinct opposition to Fascism and its failed colonial ambitions in Africa. Composed in the shadow the Holocaust, and while Demby was living in an artists’ commune, which was in view of the ruins of Ancient Rome, *Beetlecreek*’s narrative meditations take up recurrent cycles of oppression. Such critical cosmopolitanism conjures the US South as part of a history-haunted Global South.

In an interview given at age 85, Demby frames his debut novel in these terms:

This was a story that was very sneaky, because it was a novel that was talking about some

elements of racial prejudice, but not really. All the stories were occult, they were not the

stories that people were thinking about. They read novels in the 1950s and what

everybody was looking for, if it was a black novel, was Richard Wright. The problem

was in that; no one was thinking about a Proust in *Beetlecreek* and persons did not

suspect that a black writer was so sophisticated that had had in a very short time

experiences, that he was very quick to understand in a metaphysical way, all of these

problems that were coming out in a middle-class crisis in Europe, and a sexual crisis that

was reflecting itself in Nazism, and Fascism, and even in Communism. (Micconi

interview)

Demby, like Lamming, theorizes the role of the black writer in cosmopolitical terms. In conceptualizing a desegregationist aesthetics his debut novel weaves complex layers of trauma, loss, psychic devastations and critical resistance across time and space. Traveling the Black Atlantic from Rome to the agrarian US South of the politically-charged Depression era, *Beetlecreek* privileges ambiguity and death over triumph or redemption. Such a tone is fitting for the moment of its writing in postwar Italy. Again, the novel ends on a note of profound ambiguity that is indicative of mounting Cold War tensions. As Edith and David leave town on a bus for the North, signs of tension and distance between them is already visible. In the background, sirens blare, en route to the fire at Bill Trapp’s farm. Such violence and the lovers’ emotional detachment from one another is steeped in the logic of segregation. A notion, nevertheless, of mobility, with David and Edith’s departure, and of the destruction of Trapp’s farm, located at the crossroads of the novel’s black and white communities, allows for a simultaneous set of futural possibilities. Like the US South’s uneven modernization, Rome, too, sits at the divide between Northern and Southern Italy, compounding and elaborating Demby’s debut novel’s meditations on social identity and intersectional forms of oppression.

Alternative Knowledge-Production in the Face of Disciplinary Surveillance:

Language as a Double-Edged Sword in *In the Castle of My Skin*

George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* engages with multiple systems of knowledge making and delivers a sustained deconstruction of what Lamming terms in his nonfiction writing, “the colonial structure of awareness” (*Exile* 36). Unlike the culminating physical violence against Bill Trapp in Demby’s *Beetlecreek*, which again, operates according to an inversion model that ultimately serves to defamiliarize the ubiquitousness of anti-black violence, Lamming’s debut novel emphasizes the rhetorical violence of the colonial experience of his youth. Lamming asserted in 2003, “It was not a physical cruelty. Indeed, the colonial experience of my generation was almost wholly without violence. It was a terror of the mind; a daily exercise in self-mutilation” (“Sea of Stories”). Such a philosophy recalls David Diggs’ meditation on the “death-grip” in *Beetlecreek*. Like Demby’s wandering narration, Lamming’s novel refuses a stable narrative perspective and instead emphasizes the incompleteness of knowledge through the villagers’ forced reliance upon speculation and hearsay to situate their respective experiences in the colonial framework. This both underscores the villagers’ predicament and calls attention to the horizontal strategies the villagers use to make alternative meanings in spite of the material and rhetorical limitations imposed upon them by the colonial structure. Like Demby’s novel, in which violence is a perpetual threat—as evidenced by talk of police raids (*Beetlecreek* 17, 20, 145) and the Scottsboro trials, but only punctures the town with Trapp’s assault—*In the Castle of My Skin* focuses on the psychic violence of colonialism. A commingling of dialogical perspectives emerges in the novel’s experimental style and disjunctive form to challenge a master narrative of colonial paternalism.

Lamming’s text performs its examination of knowledge production from multiple angles: from the periphery of the village, from a liminal, proto-national space, and from exilic space, as Lamming wrote the novel upon moving to London. These multiple vantage points course through the text, probing knowledge production and its effects. In “Narrating the Nation,” Homi Bhabha posits that there is “a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it” (359). Lamming was in the unique position of being at the forefront of an emerging literary tradition. His anticolonial novel is marked with Bhabha’s Janus-faced image of ambivalence, as the novel casts its critical eye back upon the institutions of slavery and colonization, even as it looks forward to more utopic possibilities of independence and refashioning. Although nationalism is not presented as an antidote to colonialism in Lamming’s text, independence beckons the formerly colonized toward a futural horizon. Lamming’s debut novel is a vehicle to decolonize the imagination and, writing from postwar London, he does so from the heart of the British empire, looking back, like Demby, upon the 1930s of his youth spent in the Global South.

*In the Castle of My Skin* is an ambitious text that demonstrates a loosening of rigid categories of colonial knowledge with its stylistic risks and innovative form—an artistic achievement that played an integral part in the formation of an emerging West Indian literary tradition. With its keen exploration of interpersonal and communal interactions amongst the villagers, *In the Castle of My Skin* demonstrates Lamming’s hope, as expressed in essays such as “The Occasion for Speaking,” that a West Indian voice and vision would emerge in time. Alongside Lamming’s authorial intentions, the novel effectively represents a diverse range of voices and perspectives. J. Dillon Brown observes that a number of critics have noted that the novel proceeds in elliptical, impressionistic fashion, eschewing conventional narrative plotting and presenting a certain formal difficulty. Brown instantiates several reviews written in preeminent media outlets that compared Lamming’s debut novel to Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In many ways, the difficulty of Lamming executing his rallying task and vision for the West Indian novel is woven into the very form and experimental style of his *avant-garde* debut novel.

Early in the novel, the narrator G. gives voice to the instability of knowledge and memory, which plays itself out later in the realm of the boys’ colonial education at the village school. On his ninth birthday, G. muses, “And what did I remember? My father who had only fathered the idea of me had left me the sole liability of my mother who really fathered me. And beyond that my memory was a blank” (Lamming, *Castle* 11). G.’s profound statement of coming into being as an idea in juxtaposition with his memory as a “blank,” speaks to the novel’s broader concerns regarding history and memory. In this vein, Ngugi argues, reinforcing Lamming’s own sense of his project as displaying a “tragic innocence,” that Lamming’s novel dramatizes a cultural “mutilation and amnesia” (167). One of the village schoolboys asks the teacher about slavery—after hearing an old woman’s remark about the “good and great queen” freeing the island’s slaves—and the teacher explains to the class that slavery was something that happened “not here, somewhere else” (Lamming, *Castle* 58). The teacher’s statement demonstrates the constitutive function of language in the shaping of knowledge. One of the schoolboys expresses great relief upon hearing this information: “Thank God, he wasn’t ever a slave. He or his father or his father’s father. Thank God nobody in Barbados was ever a slave” (Lamming, *Castle* 57). In response to this passage, Ngugi elaborates that “the school kids are discussing slavery as something which belongs to a myth in a distant past. Slavery has nothing to do with them; it happened to others. The school reproduces the notion of Barbados as Little England, a replica of Big England. This is more real, for it is played over and over again in the colonial narrative in books and on the blackboard” (167-68). This emphasis on repetition and of selected reading is integral to the production of colonial knowledge; the novel uses opaque imagery and methods of defamiliarization to demonstrate and make strange these processes.

The novel depicts civil unrest on the island as its inhabitants seek better working conditions and wages. What Demby presents as an individual scandal in the form of Bill Trapp’s allegations, which blurs the lines of black and white in the town by way of a shared object of contempt, takes on communal form in Lamming’s village. Like the tension between town and city in *Beetlecreek*, Lamming focuses on the gap between these two spaces. As word comes to the village of riots breaking out in the city, the villagers find it “difficult to act since everything depended on the fighting in the city which no one had seen [.] … There was fighting in the city. That was what they were all told, and they repeated the words and tried to guess who were fighting whom. But they couldn’t follow it clearly” (190).[[5]](#footnote-5) Time and again, *in the Castle of My Skin* emphasizes how information is withheld from the villagers as a method of exerting control and dampening mobilization. The narrator notes during the riots, “If they had all got together, each putting his bit with the other’s, they might have been able to make a story, but they had to remain with the fragments” (194). These fragments, Lamming posits, produce alternative knowledges and prompt further speculation. The novel’s fragmentary, elliptical form demonstrates this theory in practice. In spite of and against the colonial apparatus, the villagers strive in communion and communication with one another to come closer to what the village elder Pa calls “the facts” (Lamming, *Castle* 192). In this way, Lamming models the undoing of the innocence that the British ruling class hoped to maintain as a method of control.

In its project of estrangement, Englishness is figured in metonymic terms in the novel. The narration theorizes how the iconic Union Jack transmits a subliminal decree: “In every corner of the school the tricolour Union Jack flew its message. The colors though three in number had by constant repetition produced something vast and terrible, a kind of pressure or presence of which everyone was a part [...] They seemed to see a mystery that was its own revelation, and there was, therefore, no need to ask questions” (Lamming, *Castle* 37). The boys’ role as British subjects, as the flag reminds them, is simultaneously a “mystery” and self-evident, which lends them and, by extrapolation, the island’s inhabitants at large, a paradoxical status. John Plotz observes: “Whatever comes from the mother country, home of all objects and of all objectivity, serves in the still colonial sphere as more than a symbol, as a metonymic portion of that mother” (314). Here, the Union Jack stands in for the mother country who hails her dependent child with the diminutive, “Little England.” As a metonym, the Union Jack’s seeming transparency assures the empire’s subjects that there is “no need to ask questions.” This places knowledge production in a regulatory mode, as it is transferred passively from teacher to pupil without space for questioning or skepticism. Nevertheless, Lamming takes care to demonstrate that the boys do ask questions: of their teachers and one another that challenge the colonial project’s authenticity. Such a project takes on deeper resonance, as it is written from war-ravaged London, when England began to retract its colonial reach in the post-World War II era.

The novel calls attention to the role of optical surveillance. Disparate images and effects combine to produce an idea of “The Great” that represents a mode of knowledge production relentlessly conditioned and perpetuated by the colonial apparatus: “The landlord. The overseer. The villager. The image of the enemy. The limb of the law, strict, fierce, aggressive. These had combined to produce an idea of the Great” (Lamming, *Castle* 28). The novel estranges and dissects this structure, which includes the figure of the landlord and the colonial arm, the village school. There is resilience in the face of oppression and dwelling within this material and psychic structure of domination. Lamming himself points to this as psychic violence wrought upon the colonized, affecting one’s perception of one’s self and the world as a form of “self-mutilation” (“Sea of Stories”). Tellingly, the English inspector’s visit to the village school is a key event that inspires dread in the village’s teachers and pupils alike, so that “on such occasions the teachers and boys all seemed frightened, and the head teacher who seldom laughed would smile for the length of the inspector’s visit” (Lamming, *Castle* 35). Like the Great’s anxiety-producing omnipresence and the guilt-inspiring appearance of the constable in the village, the inspector’s visit hails the teachers and students as incomplete subjects.

The village school in the novel stands in to inculcate and reinforce a message of dependency on the mother country that is always already an incomplete process. Highlighting its ironic function and effects, Sandra Pouchet Paquet notes how “supposedly a source of knowledge and understanding, the school functions to perpetuate ignorance, confusion, and a destructive cultural dependence on the mother country among its pupils” (19). The production of knowledge, however, is not entirely regulated in the aforementioned exchange regarding slavery between teacher and students. Not all the boys are satisfied with the teacher’s reply: “He asked the teacher what was the meaning of slave, and the teacher explained. But it didn’t make sense” (Lamming, *Castle* 57). In spite of their teacher’s disavowal of slavery on the island, the boys cannot totally dismiss the old woman’s memory of slavery, nor its oral transmission. The word “slave” haunts the boys, announcing their increasing skepticism and self-reflexivity and alternative forms of knowing that exceed the village school’s obfuscating, disciplinary function.

Plotz explains the transformative potential of “discovering that one’s imaginary motherland, the England that made and shaped one, bears no relation to the England of the English. In other words, by refusing its imaginary hold, one can discover that the seeming portability of the imperial motherland is an illusion” (309). The novel supports such a conclusion regarding the colonial narrative as a collective fantasy with its unrelenting examination of the objects—flags, coins, uniforms, books, etc.—that go into sculpting and maintaining British subjectivity.

Language is at once a tool of control and a potential vehicle of liberation. Certainly, language’s indoctrinating potential is made evident in the novel’s treatment of colonial education. The regimented schoolhouse stands in contrast to the beach, where G. and his friends spend time reflecting on their lives and speaking openly about their hopes and fears. The beach—at once a place of dangerous tides and expansive possibilities—is an appropriate locale for the narrator’s meditation on language and recalls the paradoxically destructive and transformative power of the novel’s initiating flood: “the season of flood could change everything. The floods could level the stature and even conceal the identity of the village” (Lamming, *Castle* 11). Ngugi explains that “in the colonial and even the post-independence school, language plays a crucial role in producing and reproducing cultural dependency on the stamp that certifies the neocolonial mind as being truly made in Europe” (168). Such comments reveal language’s constitutive function and the dynamic whereby those who are educated abroad become “more British” than Barbados’ ostensibly British subjects.

In the novel, language, in its colonial wielding, is opposed to feeling. During one of the boys’ oceanside discussions, language is compared to a knife: “When the feelings came up like so many little pigs that grunted and irritated with their grunts, you could slaughter them. You could slaughter your feelings as you slaughtered a pig. Language was all you needed” (Lamming, *Castle* 154). This passage carries the implication that language has been used on the island to exact control and domination. In this vein, G. thinks, “Perhaps we could do better if we had good big words like the educated people. But we didn’t. We had to say something was like something else, and whatever we said didn’t convey all that we felt” (Lamming, *Castle* 153). G. points both to language’s potential to wield control and to the inadequacy of language to convey meaning owing to its constant deferral. Language is presented here as differential and incomplete, so that “something was like something else.” This revelation, which upsets the young G., is ironically the same dynamic that works to unsettle the colonial project of fixed binaries—for instance, the image of “the Great” versus the villagers, the English inspector versus the teachers. In time, G.’s recognition of language’s constitutive function affords him a degree of critical distance, which suggests that he will not mimic his own educational experience when he begins teaching English in Trinidad at the novel’s end. In its revolutionary approach to language and its acknowledgment of its power to both control and subvert, the novel allows for the emergence of a self-reflexive subject position, even as it bluntly highlights the difficulties of carving out such a place within what Lamming terms “the colonial structure of awareness” (*Exile* 36).

In many ways, G.’s liminal adolescent subject position articulates the island’s shift from colony to transnational space. G. muses, “I remained in the village living, it seemed, on the circumference of two worlds. It was as though my roots had been snapped from the centre of what I knew best, while I remained impotent to wrest what my fortunes had forced me into” (Lamming, *Castle* 220). G.’s experience of being on the “circumference of two worlds” evokes the possibility of change inasmuch as it speaks to a mode of indeterminacy that can breed “impotence.” He thinks, “It wasn’t long before I relaxed into an *old boy* at the High School. I grew as callous as most of the others, and played the role which the *old boys* played” (Lamming, *Castle* 218; original italics). G. notes the performative aspects of his education, which sustains the novel’s critical look at colonial education. As a young man, G. acknowledges the limited choices available to him and his friends in a staccato fashion: “America. The High School. The Police Force. These were the three different worlds where our respective fortunes had taken us” (Lamming, *Castle* 225). Though as a young man G. is receptive to hearing about his friend Trumper’s time in America after Trumper returns to visit the village late in the novel, G. does not seem to subscribe to Trumper’s newfound belief in the power of “the Negro race” (Lamming, *Castle* 295) as a defining answer to the village’s predicament. Trumper serves, as such, as a foil to G.’s character, presenting an alternative, transnational discourse of Pan-Africanism that may find G. later in time. The novel’s underlying resistance to a single model of “truth” can thus be heard in G.’s bittersweet reflection as he prepares for his own departure to Trinidad at the novel’s end: “I knew in a sense more deep than simple departure I had said farewell, farewell to the land” (Lamming, *Castle* 303). G. moves within the Anglophone Caribbean world as he departs to teach English to South Americans in Trinidad. He embarks for a space that is still marked by the British empire, though not necessarily commensurate with the space of his upbringing.

In addition to the varied perspectives G. and Trumper provide as the island’s new and increasingly mobile generation, the novel also depicts the ways in which the village’s elders, particularly the character Pa, make sense of the island’s shifting dynamics. Though his wife, Ma, remains fiercely loyal to the British landlord and the church to her dying breath, the novel presents the poetic and lyrical monologue Pa delivers in his sleep as expressive of a looser, freewheeling mode of knowing. Still, Pa’s dream speech points to the difficulty of such meaning-making finding space on the island, as its content is peripheral to the dominant discourse. Though his words “are fluent and coherent,” Ma “couldn’t follow the meaning.” (Lamming, *Castle* 209). Significantly, Pa’s mystical dream-speech culminates with Ma’s sudden death. In light of the fact that it is Ma who repeatedly finds comfort in the landlord’s presence and in religion, her passing in the wake of Pa’s revolutionary dream speech suggests that meaning production on the island may be taking a new direction, away from colonial modes of understanding. As such, Pa’s words articulate a complex narrative of struggle that addresses the island’s history of slavery, which stands in sharp contrast to the colonial narrative of progress and advancement, as heard in the schoolhouse.

In his dream-speech, Pa warns, “So if you hear some young fool fretting about back to Africa, keep far from the invalid and don’t force a passage to where you won’t yet belong. These words not for you but those that come after” (Lamming, *Castle* 211). Pa’s suspicion of Pan-Africanism, emblematized by Trumper’s character, expresses the novel’s implicit call for consciousness-raising to take place on the island itself, not from afar. This, of course, is in tension with the departure of young villagers, like G. and Trumper, and, moreover, with the fact that Pa is sent to live out his days in the almshouse. This is amplified by Lamming’s own departure for England. The notion that Pa’s words are for “those that come after” implies that, while the island is in a frustrated position vis-à-vis its independence, liberatory possibilities do exist for the island’s future. Pa’s dream-speech articulating the cultural unconscious courses with poetic power, challenging the colonial structure’s binaries with its very utterance. As a village elder, there is a strength and dignity in Pa’s experience that cannot be entirely silenced, even when he is physically removed from the village.

Read within the larger project of the novel, Pa’s dream speech emphasizes how the static colonial model of meaning inadvertently prompts multiple perspectives and ways of knowing alongside of or in excess of its boundaries. These perspectives, nevertheless, do not necessarily cohere as a whole, in much the same way as the villagers’ fragments during the riots, for instance, do not adhere to convey the “whole” story. Decades later, Lamming reflected back on his novel and asserted that although the rioting villagers do not harm the landlord, in retrospect, Lamming felt “the past now seemed more brutal, and I wondered why I had allowed the landlord to go free” (“Sea of Stories”). He goes on:

No white man had been killed in the riots of 1937. But I had taken liberty with other facts, in the interest of a more essential truth. And I have thought ever since that the most authentic response to the long history of shame and humiliation that produced the riots demanded that the white landlord should have been killed: the symbolic end of a social order that deserved to be destroyed (“Sea of Stories”)

By relaying, like Demby, the experiences of its many characters, the novel subtly orchestrates a chorus of perspectives without overtly championing any singular framework. As such, Lamming offers a shifting, polyphonic account of the colonial experience in Barbados, rather than a strictly ethnographic or autobiographical account. As Vadde argues, “Lamming, like [Claude] McKay, strove to circumvent the individualism of the liberal cosmopolitan tradition” (135). Lamming’s polyphonic method privileges acts of imagination and critical inquiry as being at the fore of decolonizing processes.

Over the course of Lamming’s novel, the narrative’s dialogical strands work to unravel the tightly-bound disciplinary and regulatory function of knowledge in “Little England.” Though the novel has been critiqued for “its ungainly style and erratic narrative” (Kortenaar 43), its innovative style and open-ended structure effectively rehearse the instability of knowledge and postponement of meaning in the village. The absence of a central narrative perspective thus articulates a mode of hybridity and ambivalence that underscores the multiple modes of knowledge vying for recognition in the village. Lamming’s novel does not explicitly endorse any one articulation of “truth”; rather, the text presents a fabric of interwoven modes of understanding that commingle without concretizing, which radically contrasts the transcendental signifieds of the colonial project. The novel critiques the colonial enterprise by theorizing language’s constitutive function in the production of knowing subjects and, in turn, ultimately advocates for flexible modes of meaning-making, as reflected in its experimental prose.

Surely, the novel’s experimental style is a call to envision different modes of meaning. Viney Kirpal demands that the novel be read and appreciated “on its own terms as a work straddling different ‘literary’ traditions [oral and written] while remaining firmly rooted in the indigenous” (113). With its sustained attention to the performativity of colonial identity and its suspicion of statements packaged as “truth” or “history,” *In the Castle of My Skin* defamiliarizes the British colonial presence and its impact of the lived experience of the colonized. By observing the limitations of the Eurocentric models that have been imposed upon the island, it aims to refashion conceptions of truth and history from a critical cosmopolitan perspective—one, like Demby’s, forged outside of the physical bounds of one’s homeland and in a self-reflexive mode.

Conclusion

Of his own role in the African American literary and artistic tradition, Demby recalls a visit to New York in 1956, where he received a call from Arna Bontemps, who told him: “Langston Hughes is here. Come with us to Carl Van Vechten’s place, so you can be photographed as a member of the Harlem Renaissance.” Demby concludes: “And that’s the last photograph Van Vechten took of anyone connected to the Harlem Renaissance. I was the end of the line” (Micconi, “Ghosts” 133). Though he was living abroad, Demby saw his work as being in direct conversation with an African American literary tradition. His feeling of reaching the “end of the line,” translates into the dramatic shift in style and form that would characterize the black radical tradition of the 1960s at large, and Demby’s second novel, *The Catacombs* (1965), in particular, whose aesthetic innovation is a harbinger of black experimentalism.

The critical success of Demby’s debut novel *Beetlecreek* led to reporting opportunities for prominent Italian magazines like *Epoca* and American publications like *Harper’s* and *Holiday*. Demby traveled frequently throughout the 1950s through much of Europe, and to Ethiopia and Japan, before returning to the United States in 1956. He traveled through the South, for *Reporter* magazine, where he profiled the grassroots organizing efforts of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in a 1956 article, “They Surely Can’t Stop Us Now.” On his way back to Rome from this trip, Demby visited Richard Wright in his Paris apartment overlooking the Rue Monsieur le Prince; the two discussed the Afro-Asian Bandung Conference held in 1955 in the Republic of Java, and *The Color Curtain*, which Wright wrote in response to the transformative gathering. The two compared the Algerian anticolonial struggle to the black freedom struggle in the United States.

Lamming, who visited the United States in 1955, having worked as a freelance reporter for the BBC, would come to Paris a month after Demby for the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, in which Wright also participated.[[6]](#footnote-6) The two had met in London, and Wright wrote the introduction to the 1953 first edition of *In the Castle of My Skin*. In his talk, “The Negro Writer and His World,” Lamming describes the role of the black writer in the world. Lamming defines three worlds “to which the writer bears in some way a responsibility, worlds which are distinct, and yet very deeply related” (“The Negro Writer” 323): his private world, his social world (that of his home country and culture), and the world of men. His private world, Lamming elaborates, “contains the range of his ambitions, his deceit, his perplexity, his pride, his shame, his guilt, his honor, his need. All these qualities are there, hidden in the castle of his skin” (“The Negro Writer” 324). These remarks, which harken back and cast light on his debut novel’s title, gain resonance as he goes on to explain that these three worlds are, for better and often for worse, inseparable. Tangled as they are, the task of the black writer is “to find meaning for his destiny” and his place in the world (“The Negro Writer” 325), which is, perforce, both a private and public undertaking. In terms of the interrelatedness of the United States and the Caribbean, Lamming points out that in the wake of “the tactical withdrawal of the British … the Caribbean returns to its old role of an imperial frontier, now perceived as essential to the security interests of the US” (“Sea of Stories”). This critical constellation of writers and their cosmopolitical take on the times forms a poignant temporal node in black literary history.

Though there is no evidence that the Demby and Lamming ever met each other, their respective connections with Richard Wright in Paris within a month of one another helps to map networks of black cosmopolitan thought. Predicated on a critical detachment from structures of oppression and literary strategies of resistance, their shared project of narrative defamiliarization signals a black Atlantic creative affiliation. This relational model situates acts of imagination in keeping with Edouard Glissant’s articulation of the “poetics of relation” as being at the fore of decolonizing psychic and material processes. Demby’s and Lamming’s respective literary and critical contributions hold great relevance for adding significant nuances to black Atlantic literary history and for probing the continued role of the imagination and artistic production in effecting social transformation and social justice.

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1. Quoted in Sandra Pouchet Paquet’s “Foreword” (vii) to a reprint of George Lamming’s *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Randolph was a former OSS officer who befriended Demby upon his arrival to Rome. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In a notorious instance of racial injustice, nine African American teens, who came to be known as the “Scottsboro Boys,” were falsely accused by two white women of raping them aboard a train in Alabama in 1931. The men’s trials were botched and heard by racist juries. Though one of the women eventually retracted the charge, the men served prison sentences and were brutalized throughout the flawed proceedings. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Diggs shares some biographical affinities with William Demby, as Demby was raised in Pittsburgh and moved to Clarksburg, West Virginia, with his family after his high school graduation, where he attended West Virginia State College and studied writing with Margaret Walker. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. These events are inspired by riots on Barbados in 1937 (Lamming “Sea of Stories”). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The gathering was billed in French as “Le 1er Congres International des Ecrivains et Artistes Noires.” *Presence Africaine* no. 8-9-10 printed the proceedings as they were delivered, in English and in French. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)