‘From a Distant Witness’: Black Atlantic Temporalities in William Demby’s *Beetlecreek* (1950) and George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953)[[1]](#endnote-1)

In Richard Wright’s introduction to George Lamming’s debut novel *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), he relates, “One feels not so much alone when, from a distant witness, supporting evidence comes to buttress one’s own testimony” (vi).[[2]](#endnote-2) Wright’s notion of a “distant witness” instantiates a heterogeneous mode of black diasporic affiliation, invoked by a renowned African American writer living in exile in Paris since 1946, in praise of Lamming, an Afro-Caribbean author who expatriated to London in 1950. This article compares the ‘distant witness’ of Lamming’s debut, semi-autobiographical coming-of-age novel with that of *Beetlecreek* (1950), African American author William Demby’s first novel, written upon his expatriation to Rome in 1947. Focusing on two works of Cold War-era Black Atlantic fiction, this comparative analysis explores the formal and thematic effects wrought by these avant-garde black expatriate authors. Read in tandem, their shared aesthetic project of bearing witness to their segregated homelands from a position of critical distance generates complex Black Atlantic temporalities that defamiliarize structures of oppression: that of Jim Crow in *Beetlecreek* and colonization in *In the Castle of My Skin*.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Demby and Lamming penned their modernist novels from their respective positions in postwar Rome and London, each electing to write semi-autobiographical, coming-of-age novels with existentialist undertones set in the fraught 1930s of the Global South. With *Beetlecreek*, Demby innovated a black modernist aesthetic that follows the inner desires and thwarted dreams of multiple characters living in a small fictional town in the rural Southern United States during the Great Depression. *Beetlecreek* features an African American adolescent Johnny Johnson and his uncle David Diggs, whose narratives share some biographical resonances with Demby’s own life experiences.[[4]](#endnote-4) *Beetlecreek* dwells often in internal, 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 cadre of Italian artists and filmmakers. George Lamming wrote his experimental bildungsroman, *In the Castle of My Skin*,upon his Windrush-era move to London in 1950, where he worked on the BBC radio program *Caribbean Voices* and formed friendships with other West Indian writers and intellectuals, completing his first novel, like Demby, within the first few years of his expatriation.[[5]](#endnote-5) The reader first encounters George Lamming’s semi-autobiographical protagonist “G” on his ninth birthday, before he appears again in the second half of the novel in his teen years.Through its poetic language and disjunctive form, *In the Castle of My Skin* sustains a defamiliarization of the colonial power structure, subtly undoing what Lamming would later characterize as his debut novel’s project: to present and deconstruct the “tragic ignorance” (“Sea of Stories”) of the colonized in the British Caribbean.

Critical distance shaped the writings of black exilic authors like Lamming and Demby, whose decision to move abroad after World War II was influenced by the forces of racism and a dearth of opportunities at home. 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 ravages of colonial modernity amid the rise of US imperialism. Both writers experiment with form, content, and style to “imagine,” in keeping with Rebecca Walkowitz’s theorization of cosmopolitan style, “that conditions of national and transnational affiliation depend on narrative patterns of attentiveness, relevance, perception, and recognition” (6). Demby’s and Lamming’s respective displacements from their homelands is compelled by a creative impulse—systemic oppression motivates each writer to seek alternative ways of being in and seeing the world. This is not to say that Rome and London afforded unfettered, utopic freedoms or a lack of racism but rather an artistic space from which to deconstruct the status quo of the segregated societies that Demby and Lamming experienced in their formative years.

Reading these authors’ novels beyond national borders and canons and as part of a larger body of Black Atlantic literature reveals their mutual investment in aesthetic defamiliarization as a liberatory strategy. Both novels warrant continued consideration for their formal innovation and politico-aesthetic achievements. *Beetlecreek* maintains a tone of modernist alienation and polyphonic narration that makes strange the US race relations of the 1930s, generating a temporal complexity given the racialized past of chattel slavery and the urgent demands for equity and social justice during the post-World War II moment of its composition. *Beetlecreek* was completed four years before the United States Supreme Court would rule on *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954), initiating school integration and galvanizing the broader US civil rights movement. At the time of Lamming’s novel’s publication in 1953, the West Indian Federation had not yet been formed, nor had Barbados gained independence from the British. Demby’s and Lamming’s shared projects of defamiliarization are integral to a larger project of conceiving a black diasporic voice and a desegregated aesthetic vision. Each novel uses formal methods including internal meditations, dialogue, and metaphors of stagnation and release, to contribute to the work of decolonizing the material and psychic processes of racialized oppression.

Steeped in the modernist registers of experimental language, including stream of consciousness and wandering narrations that move into and across the minds of multiple main and minor characters, both novels contemplate plural modes of being in the world, and they present critical epistemologies espoused by young black characters who come of age in a time of local and global conflict. Demby’s *Beetlecreek* ends on a dire, cautionary note: the violent outcome of rumor and speculation in a small segregated town in the early 1930s, which signals a world moving toward world war, ethnic fanaticism, genocide, and nuclear catastrophe. Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*’sdestabilization of knowledge production is a literary undertaking, opening in the late 1930s and moving into the postwar 1940s by its close, it situates changes transpiring on Barbados against a backdrop of global violence enacted under the nationalist banners of Nazism, Fascism, and imperialism. Lamming’s novel also ends on an ambivalent note, but it is more optimistic than Demby’s, as G. and his friend Trumper set their sights on a futural horizon, albeit one spent outside of Barbados. Notably, in “Sea of Stories,” a meditation written at the turn of the twenty-first century, Lamming remarks upon the interrelatedness of the United States and the Caribbean in the context of US imperialism; in the wake of “the tactical withdrawal of the British” he observes, “the Caribbean returns to its old role of an imperial frontier, now perceived as essential to the security interests of the US.” The politico-aesthetics of Demby’s and Lamming’s debut novels are made all the more temporally complex given the fact that they are penned from Europe at the outset of the Cold War in an era of mounting social liberation and anticolonial movements.

Estranging the US Southfrom Rome: Antifascist Perspectives in *Beetlecreek*

William Demby expatriated to Italy in 1947, having served there in a segregated troop during World War II. Demby wrote his debut novel in midst of Italian society refashioning itself in a moment of antifascism and leftist artistic momentum that defined itself against Fascist doctrines and Italy’s failed colonial ambitions in Africa, particularly in regards to its brutal occupation of Ethiopia.[[6]](#endnote-6) Demby was aware of his unique choice to move to Rome, rather than join the more established African American expatriate community in Paris; he relates that though there were thousands of African American servicemen in Italy during World War II, “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).[[7]](#endnote-7) Such an impression, which stands in contrast to the sizeable Afro-Caribbean population immigrating to London in this period, suffuses Demby’s first novel’s tone of alienation and the shared, though distinctive feelings of isolation that its characters experience. 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.[[8]](#endnote-8) He continued working on the novel while visiting in Salzburg in 1947; *Beetlecreek* came together while Demby stayed in his friend Alex Randolph’s residence in Venice, the Palazzo Ca’Dario, which neighbored Peggy Guggenheim’s palazzo on the Canal Grande.[[9]](#endnote-9) The novel, as I discuss later, makes strange racial oppression through an inversion model—a dynamic amplified by Demby’s own exceptional position as an African American author living in postwar Italy.

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 to whose lifestyle she aspires; 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. When word spreads quickly through town that Trapp has apprehended Johnny on his property, Johnny’s Uncle David Diggs rushes to Trapp’s house to rescue his nephew; 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 and spanning three generations, 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, gesture back to the previous decade, engaging the violent ends of white supremacy, racial oppression, and nationalism.

*Beetlecreek* pursues an inversion model, as it follows the fate of Bill Trapp, 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. Trapp, however, appears not to recognize either the overt or tacit rules of segregation. Following his first encounter with David Diggs, he meets him again for drinks at Telrico’s Café, which serves an African American clientele and is run by an Italian American, Telrico. As an Italian American, Telrico is a liminal figure in the town who cathects with whiteness; nevertheless, “nobody thought of Telrico as a white man, but he never forgot it himself” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 154). For his part, Trapp is energized by his visits with David and Johnny, and he begins a series of kind acts: he gives two white girls cups of cider and two African American girls a wheelbarrow full of giant pumpkins for their church benefit, sharing the bounty from his fecund, Eden-esque garden, which is 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 newfound contact with people. His largesse culminates with his throwing a picnic for the town’s black and white children. The result of this interracial gathering, however, is disastrous, as he is falsely accused of molestation by one of the white girls in attendance and 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).

Alongside this inversion model of injustice, the novel subtly paints a picture of Jim Crow segregation as the strange fruit of the racialized past. The novel takes pains to differentiate the manner in which the allegations against Trapp 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).[[10]](#endnote-10) 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). In contrast, Bill Trapp is ostracized but no formal charges are brought against him—a decision made by both the black and the white parts of town. In another subtle allusion to the racialized past, David Diggs visits with his old flame Edith Johnson in the living room of her childhood home, where 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 Rome, where he lived, worked, and socialized freely with Italians, other Europeans, and Americans, defamiliarizes the practice of racial segregation and white supremacy’s longue durée.[[11]](#endnote-11)

In keeping with the novel’s use of an inversion model, the town’s black adolescent gang, the Nightriders, commands Johnny to seek vigilante justice and punish Trapp as an initiation rite 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). Initially, Johnny resists their peer pressure to join to their gang 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 become a “member” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 166) leads him to capitulate to their demand that he burn down Trapp’s home. Johnny’s violent initiation into manhood subverts coming-of-age narratives and ostensibly leads to Trapp’s death, as Johnny strikes Trapp dead, or at the very least unconscious, and leaves him on his property, engulfed in flames. While Lamming’s G. has ostensibly 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, however marginalized, in a segregated town, recalling Slim’s aforementioned speech in the barbershop.

*Beetlecreek*’s plot takes on double meaning as a cautionary tale about Fascism and white supremacy in light of 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*.[[12]](#endnote-12) The US publication featured an elliptical blurb from Ralph Ellison, a writer whom Demby admired—“it’s a good book.” In a 2008 interview, Demby looked back upon his experiences during this period in Rome and the gap between perceptions of the role of the African American expatriate writer and his own aesthetic priorities:

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)

In conceptualizing a desegregationist aesthetics, his debut novel fabricates complex layers of trauma, loss, psychic devastation and critical resistance across time and space. Again, much of this work in *Beetlecreek* takes place through an inversion model that emphasizes the outsider status of Bill Trapp and which affords several occasions for the novel’s African American characters to compare their collective treatment by authorities and the white majority population against that of Trapp’s when he is accused. Racism suffuses the novel’s Depression-era present, made more temporally complex by its being written from postwar Rome by an African American expatriate and veteran of a segregated troop.

While Lamming’s protagonist G. is presented in the novel as a nine-year old and later as a teenager in the postwar 1940s, Demby’s novel remains temporally rooted in the early 1930s, underscoring feelings of suffocation and dread as it follows teenager Johnny Johnson, whose struggles are juxtaposed with those of his uncle, David Diggs; David assumes the role of the repressed artist in the novel, whose life in Beetlecreek is stymied by Jim Crow segregation. David’s teenage crush, Edith Johnson, returns to town to attend the funeral of her adoptive mother and destabilizes David’s stagnant life. 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 that highlights an alternative mode of being predicated upon departure.

Edith’s stimulating presence awakens in David an awareness of his past experiences and the racialization of his ambitions. The narration reveals how David would walk for miles as an adolescent in Pittsburgh to borrow library books related to painting so that he could emulate them in his own drawings.[[13]](#endnote-13) This form of creative travel and inspiration contrasts the fixity he encounters and which suffocates him upon his move to the segregated town of Beetlecreek. 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 embodied and collective experience. The narration figures social identity in Beetlecreek as 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 existentialist conceptions of being brought forth into one’s body out of the mud—of pulling one’s existence 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).[[14]](#endnote-14)

Written from exilic distance in Rome, Demby characterizes segregation in terms of death and suffocation. The novel gives voice not only to the material reality of segregation, but to its nuanced psychic effects: what David terms “the feeling of the death-grip” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 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,” he observes, to escape their own feelings of “being suffocated” (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 96), and he, too, sometimes joins them in these escape methods. Years later, having lost himself in a loveless marriage, which yields a stillborn child (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 100), David yearns for a more authentic and creative life.

When Edith returns to Beetlecreek, she catalyzes a change in David, who decides to leave town with her for the North. She is a complex character who—like Lamming’s character Trumper who returns to Barbados after living in the US—brings new knowledge to the town from the urban North, reconfiguring Beetlecreek’s status quo and causing characters throughout town to speculate about her experiences. 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 stasis and homogeneity. Moreover, Edith’s apparent hardness, as she tells David, originates in the trauma of having been raped at age thirteen on her way home by an older white man (Demby, *Beetlecreek* 114). While Bill Trapp is demonized and ostensibly killed over false allegations of assault, Edith’s true assailant is never brought to justice, which lends another layer to the novel’s inversion model and nuanced call for social justice.

The “death-grip” of American racism and the peculiar status quo of Jim Crow segregation enter into a compelling dialogue with postwar Italian society. Composed in the shadow of Fascism and while Demby was living in an artists’ commune 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 and parcel of a history-haunted Global South. 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 theorizes the role of the black writer in cosmopolitical terms. While Wright’s fiction has its own project in mind, that of social realism, Demby envisions his aesthetic project in syncretic terms. Traveling the Black Atlantic from Rome to the agrarian US South of the politically-charged Depression era, *Beetlecreek* privileges ambiguity and modernist alienation over triumph or redemption. Such a tone is fitting for the moment of its composition in postwar Italy amid the rubble of defeat and in the aftermath of nationalist fervor underpinning Fascism.

*Beetlecreek* ends on a note of profound uncertainty that is indicative of mounting Cold War geopolitical tensions. Though Edith and David leave Beetlecreek together at the novel’s end, in modernist fashion, the narration takes care to avoid implying 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, imparting a final note of alienation and ennui. Moreover, the pair can hear fire engines in the distance, a reminder of Trapp’s likely death and young Johnny’s uncertain future as his assailant. 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, desegregationist 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, sustained forms of oppression, which are always already preceded by modes of resistance.

Deconstructing ‘Tragic Ignorance’ from London: Alternative Knowledge-Production in the Face of Rhetorical Violence in *In the Castle of My Skin*

Unlike the culminating physical violence against Bill Trapp in Demby’s *Beetlecreek*, which operates according to an inversion model that ultimately serves to defamiliarize the ubiquitousness of anti-black violence in the United States, George Lamming’s debut novel *In the Castle of My Skin* emphasizes the *rhetorical* violence of the colonial experience of his youth in Barbados, also known as “Little England.” *In the Castle of My Skin* engages with multiple systems of knowledge-making—colonial, diasporic, and hybrid, among others—to deliver a sustained deconstruction of what Lamming terms in his nonfiction writing as “the colonial structure of awareness” (*Exile* 36). Of this structure, 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”). Lamming’s minor character Trumper, who departs for the United States and returns to Barbados just prior to the novel’s semi-autobiographical protagonist G.’s own departure to work in Trinidad, differentiates between the African American experience of racialized physical violence and the rhetorical violence of racism on Barbados: the idea, for instance, of “‘Members only’” (Lamming, *Castle* 296) spaces on the island to which black residents could never gain membership. In Demby’s novel, 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 when Johnny attacks Trapp—whereas *In the Castle of My Skin* focuses on the psychic violence of colonialism in order to characterize the colonized’s “tragic innocence” (Lamming, “Sea of Stories”).

Like Demby’s wandering narration, which travels across multiple characters’ consciousnesses, Lamming’s novel refuses a stable narrative perspective, recalling Paul Gilroy’s notion of Black Atlantic cultural production as “stereophonic” (3). *In the Castle of My Skin* opens with G.’s first-person narration, a perspective which returns periodically in the novel, often shifting, notably, into a “we” voice, then moves into the consciousness of other characters, and also deploys an omniscient third-person point of view. This polyphonic novel spends a great deal of narrative space musing on the uses of language in a colonial context, self-reflexively emphasizing the incompleteness of knowledge in Creighton’s village with depictions of the villagers’ forced reliance upon speculation and hearsay to situate their respective experiences in the colonial framework. This narrative strategy 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. Mary Chamberlain duly observes that “[Lamming’s] narratives are interrupted narratives, modelled not on the compulsion of reason but on the convergences of history” (191). A commingling of dialogical perspectives emerges in Lamming’s novel’s experimental style and disjunctive form to challenge a master narrative of colonial paternalism and progress.

At the meta-level, Lamming’s text performs its examination of knowledge production from multiple angles that form an interplay between past and present: from the periphery of the village, from a liminal, proto-national space, and from the exilic space of Lamming’s expatriation to London. These multiple vantage points course through the text, probing modes of knowledge-production and their 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 West Indian literary movement. His anticolonial novel is marked with Bhabha’s Janus-faced metaphor of ambivalence, as the novel casts its critical eye back upon the institutions of slavery and colonization, even as it looks forward to possibilities of independence and structural refashioning. Although nationalism is not presented as an antidote to colonialism in Lamming’s text, its implicit call for independence beckons toward a futural horizon at the novel’s end. Lamming’s debut novel contributes to the period’s work of decolonizing the imagination, and writing from postwar London, he does so from the heart of the waning British empire, amplifying his thematics through critical distance from his homeland.

With its stylistic risks and innovative form, *In the Castle of My Skin* demonstrates a loosening of rigid categories instilled by the colonial apparatus—an artistic achievement that played an integral part in the formation of an emerging literary tradition. *In the Castle of My Skin*, which depicts intimate interpersonal and communal interactions amongst the villagers, puts into practice Lamming’s hope that a West Indian voice and vision would emerge in time, as expressed in his essays such as “The Occasion for Speaking.” 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 characteristic of high modernism. If at least one reviewer likened Demby’s prose to Carson McCullers’ coming-of-age US Southern novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (Holman 289), Brown instantiates several reviews written in preeminent media outlets comparing Lamming’s debut novel to Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The difficulty of Lamming executing his rallying task and vision for the West Indian novel to find its own voice is woven into the very form and style of his experimental debut novel.

At the outset of the novel, G. voices the instability of knowledge and memory, a motif which recurs in the novel in regards to the boys’ colonial education at the village school. On his ninth birthday, which takes transpires amid a catastrophic flood, 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 own memory as a “blank,” speaks to the novel’s broader concerns regarding cultural history and shared memory and the need to tell the story of one’s own past.

In this vein, and reinforcing Lamming’s retrospective sense of his debut project displaying the “tragic ignorance” of the colonized on Barbados, Ngugi wa Thiong’o argues that Lamming’s novel dramatizes a cultural “mutilation and amnesia” (167). Accordingly, when one of the village schoolboys asks his teacher about slavery after hearing an old woman’s remark about the “good and great queen” freeing the island’s slaves, the teacher explains to the class that slavery was something that happened “not here, somewhere else” (Lamming, *Castle* 58). The teacher’s statement performs 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 the effect of this lesson that “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). Repetition and selective reading are integral to the production of colonial knowledge. The novel uses methods of defamiliarization to make strange these processes. In turn, not all of the boys are satisfied with the teacher’s reply; 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’ minds, announcing their increasing skepticism and attendant alternative forms of knowing that exceed the village school’s obfuscating, disciplinary function.

The village school’s mission to inculcate and reinforce a message of dependency on the mother country 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, again, is not entirely regulated in the aforementioned exchange regarding slavery between teacher and students. 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, defamiliarizing examination of the objects—flags, coins, uniforms, books, etc.—that go into maintaining British subjectivity. Such a project takes on a 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: alluded to in the novel as the inevitable end of the “ugly,” which the village shoemaker subtly links to his memories of Marcus Garvey’s visit to Barbados (Lamming, *Castle* 103).

The novel calls attention to the role of optical surveillance to elaborate the mechanisms driving the colonial project of control. 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 oppressive structure, modeling resilience in the face of oppression and a mode of dwelling within this material and psychic realm of domination. Lamming himself points to these dynamics 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 black 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-producing appearance of the constable among the innocent in the village, the inspector’s visit interpellates the teachers and students as incomplete British subjects.

Language is at once a tool of control in the novel 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, however, stands in contrast to the beach, where G. and his friends Trumper, Bob, and Boy Blue, spend time reflecting on their lives and speaking openly about their hopes and fears for the future. The beach—at once a place of dangerous tides and expansive possibilities—is an appropriate locale for the novel’s meditations 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). 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). Language, the boys recognize, has been used on the island to exact control. 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 dominate others 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 over time by virtue of the novel’s aesthetic aims.

Incomplete access to knowledge characterizes a key scene in which civil unrest explodes on the island, spreading from the city to Creighton’s village, as its black inhabitants seek better working conditions and wages. What Demby presents as an individual scandal in the form of Bill Trapp’s allegations takes on communal form during this crisis, which reaches the village in Lamming’s novel. Like the tension between town and city in *Beetlecreek*, Lamming focuses on the gap between village and city. 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). Time and again, *In the Castle of My Skin* emphasizes how information is withheld from the villagers as a method of exerting domination and dampening mobilization. Nevertheless, several villagers join the masses protesting in the city in spite of deadly police force and return with news of what they have seen. Chamberlain details the widespread uprisings in the British Caribbean during the 1930s, noting that the uprising in Barbados in 1937 “[was] the culmination of a century of frustration and a watershed marking the transition from the struggle for emancipation to one for independence” (176).

Decades later, Lamming reflected back on his novel and asserted that although the

villagers in his fictionalized account do not harm the village’s white landlord, who totters weakly through the village, shaken by what is transpiring, in retrospect, he 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”)

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) during this key scene of revolution. The narration notes that during the uprising, “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). Lamming’s novel posits that these fragments, nevertheless, produce alternative knowledges and prompt further speculation regarding a path forward toward a better future.

The novel’s fragmentary, elliptical form, which wanders from first-person perspectives to omniscient narration, demonstrates this theory in practice, hailing an active reader. In this way, Lamming models the undoing of the “ignorance” that the British ruling class hoped to maintain as a method of control in “Little England.” By relaying the experiences of its many characters, Lamming, like Demby, subtly orchestrates a chorus of perspectives without overtly championing any singular framework. As Aarthi Vadde argues, “Lamming, like [Claude] McKay, strove to circumvent the individualism of the liberal cosmopolitan tradition” (135). *In the Castle of My Skin* offers a shifting, polyphonic account of the colonial experience in Barbados, rather than a strictly ethnographic or autobiographical account. Lamming’s polyphonic method privileges acts of imagination and critical inquiry as being at the fore of decolonizing processes.

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. Notably, Lamming scripts Pa and his wife Ma’s exchanges in dramatic fashion, signaling their roles in the manner of dialogue spoken by “Old Man:” and “Old Woman:” and providing elaborate descriptions that operate, in effect, as stage directions.[[15]](#endnote-15) Such a strategy calls attention to their use of dialect, which stands in opposition to the rote memorization of so-called Queen’s English, delivered at the village school. The novel presents Pa’s poetic and lyrical monologue, which he delivers late in the novel in his sleep, as expressive of a freewheeling mode of knowing that exceeds constraint. 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). Ma remains fiercely loyal to the British landlord and to the church to her dying breath, and significantly, Pa’s mystical dream-speech culminates with her sudden death. In light of the fact that it is Ma who finds comfort in the landlord’s presence and in religion, her passing in the wake of Pa’s revolutionary dream-speech suggests the island is taking a new direction, away from colonial modes of understanding, in spite of its dependent position in the novel’s timeframe.

Pa’s dream-speech articulates hope for the future generation and 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 betterment, as heard in the schoolhouse. The promise of independence and a better future, of course, is in tension with the mass departures of young villagers, like G. and Trumper, and, moreover, with the fact that Pa is ultimately sent to live out his days sequestered in the almshouse. 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, Pa’s experience 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 evidences ways of knowing that are in excess of the boundaries of colonial logics, revealing their illusionary nature. The perspectives uttered in Pa’s dream-speech do not necessarily cohere as a whole, in much the same way as the villagers’ fragments during the uprising, for instance, do not coalesce to convey the “whole” story. Nevertheless, they trouble and defamiliarize the “tragic innocence” of the colonized in Lamming’s text. The notion that Pa’s words, as he affirms, are for “those that come after” (Lamming, *Castle* 211) implies that, while the island is in a frustrated position vis-à-vis its independence, liberatory possibilities exist for the island’s future.

In its revolutionary approach to language and its acknowledgment of language’s power to both control and subvert, *In the Castle of My Skin* voices a self-reflexive mode of subjectivity, even as it bluntly highlights the difficulties of carving out such a place within “the colonial structure of awareness” (Lamming, *Exile* 36). G.’s liminal adolescent subject position late in the novel articulates the island’s own shift from emancipated colony toward future independence. He 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 feeling 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.” G. notes the performative aspects of his education—he alone among his friends advances to the island’s high school—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). G. speaks with Trumper just prior to leaving for Trinidad; importantly, Trumper plays for G. a song by activist Paul Robeson (Lamming, *Castle* 295). Trumper reveals his newfound race consciousness, gleaned from his time in the United States, which he assures G. that he, too, will find in time. This layer adds to the novel’s complex temporality, as Lamming writes the novel from London, where he is, indeed, carving out such a community and contributing to the work of building an Afro-Caribbean literary movement that travels the Black Atlantic.

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 formal innovations 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 alternative 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 ultimately advocates for flexible, liberationist modes of meaning-making, as reflected in its experimental prose.

The novel’s experimental style is a call to envision heterogeneous modes of meaning-making. Viney Kirpal argues for reading and appreciating the novel “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 deconstruction of the performativity of colonial identity and presentation of diverse identities that exceed or escape such demands, *In the Castle of My Skin* defamiliarizes the British colonial presence and its impact on the lived experiences of the colonized. By observing the limitations of Eurocentric knowledge models imposed upon the island, it aims to refashion conceptions of truth and history from a critical cosmopolitan perspective that tends toward assemblage and creolization—a self-reflexive perspective, like Demby’s, forged outside of the physical bounds of one’s homeland.

Conclusion

In 1956, Lamming traveled on a Guggenheim scholarship “through the Caribbean and North America, where Langston Hughes was his guide” (Chamberlain 184). Demby visited New York in 1956, where he received a call from his friend 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).[[16]](#endnote-16) Demby’s feeling of reaching the “end of the line” translates into the dramatic shift in style and form that would characterize the black radical literary tradition of the 1960s at large, and Demby’s second novel, *The Catacombs* (1965), in particular, whose aesthetic innovation is a harbinger of transnational 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 postcolonial Ethiopia and postwar 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 “They Surely Can’t Stop Us Now: A Negro Reporter’s Journey Through the Trouble South.” 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* (1956), 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 be in Paris a month after Demby for the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, in which Wright also participated.[[17]](#endnote-17) In Lamming’s talk at the Congress, “The Negro Writer and His World,” he describes the role of the black writer in the world, defining the world in multiple terms as 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 hark back to and cast light on his debut novel’s title (Lamming, *Castle* 261), 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.[[18]](#endnote-18) This constellation of writers and their critical cosmopolitical take on the times form a poignant temporal node in Black Atlantic literary history, urging us to read beyond national boundaries and canons.

Though there is no evidence I have found, to date, that Demby and Lamming ever met each other, their respective connections with Langston Hughes in New York within a year and Richard Wright in Paris within a month of one another help to map postwar networks of Black Atlantic thought. Predicated on a critical detachment from structures of oppression and literary strategies of resistance, their shared project of narrative defamiliarization signals diasporic creative affiliations. 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, however “agonistic” (65) these processes may be, as Nadia Ellis forcefully contends in regards to such affinities.[[19]](#endnote-19) Both winners of the Anisfield-Wolf Lifetime Achievement Award, Demby’s and Lamming’s respective literary and critical contributions hold great relevance for nuancing Black Atlantic literary history and for probing the continued role of transnational artistic production in effecting social transformation and social justice.[[20]](#endnote-20)

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Notes

1. “Black Atlantic Temporalities” alludes to Paul Gilroy’s foundational study *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, which defines the Black Atlantic world in terms of “stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within [its] structures of feeling, producing, and remembering” (3). Though Gilroy does not discuss work by Demby or Lamming in his study, their debut novels are in keeping with his formulation and call for reading Black Atlantic literary production beyond nationalist canons and in terms of their hybrid formations. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Wright’s introduction accompanied the US first edition of Lamming’s novel. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I invoke Viktor Shklovsky’s notion of aesthetic defamiliarization as a formal technique that makes strange the familiar in the face of a “devouring” habitualization: “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception” (12). This article elaborates this formal method as a politico-aesthetic project in Demby’s and Lamming’s debut novels. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Masterton Sherazi’s introduction to Demby’s posthumously published novel *King Comus* (2017) for a biographical sketch of the author’s life. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mary Chamberlain documents Lamming’s friendships with Sam Selvon and C.L.R. James, among others. For detailed analyses of Black Britain and black internationalism in these years, see Mark Matera’s *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (2015) and Nadia Ellis’ *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (2015), which includes a reading of Lamming’s participation at the 1956 Congress of Negro Artists and Writers in Paris in dialogue with James Baldwin’s analysis of the event. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The first Italo-Ethiopian War was in 1895-96 and resulted in the Italian army’s defeat. In 1935, Italy attacked Ethiopia again, claiming it as a colony until Ethiopia secured its independence in 1941. Notably, William Demby traveled to Addis Ababa in 1950 to interview Emperor Haile Selassie for *Epoca* magazine. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. My book in progress, *Nero e Rosso: Desegregationist Strategies in Cold War Rome (1947-1965)*, details the genre-bending work of several African American writers and artists who spent time in Rome in the 1950s and 1960s, including Ralph Ellison, Maya Angelou, Ada “Bricktop” Smith, and Barbara Chase-Riboud. Demby’s closest peer was African American expatriate actor and translator Ben Johnson, with whom he acted in *Il peccato di Anna* (1953), a retelling of *Othello* set in 1950s Rome. Other African Americans artists and performers living in Rome in these years include John Rhoden, John Kitzmiller, Edith Peters, and Katherine Dunham. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Hall (231) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Randolph was a former OSS officer who befriended Demby upon his arrival to Rome. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Notably, Demby’s final novel *King Comus* (2017) centers on an escaped slave, King Comus, a “Buffalo Soldier” whose son serves in the Civil War and whose descendent serves in World War II in a segregated troop with D., a semi-autobiographical character. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Pivano translated other American writers into Italian in this period, including Hemingway and Faulkner. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Demby himself was raised in Pittsburgh in a predominantly white neighborhood until his family moved to segregated Clarksburg, West Virginia, after Demby finished high school, where Demby enrolled in West Virginia State College, an historically black college where he studied with Margaret Walker before enlisting in the Army. Like his character David, Demby recalls visiting the Carnegie Museum, which was miles from his home, at least once a week to “gaze for hours at the works of the Italian artists, modernists like Giorgio de Chirico,” painting his own versions of what he had seen and dreaming of one day moving to Europe (Micconi, “Ghosts” 124). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In college, Demby reviewed Albert Camus’ *The Stranger* (1943) for the Fisk paper, which critics have aptly pointed to as an influence on his debut novel’s existentialist themes. Lamming, too, had ties to literary existentialism: “Simone de Beauvoir introduced *In the Castle of My Skin* to Sartre, who chose to publish it in his series *Les Temps Modernes* in 1958 (Chamberlain 177). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Chapters 4 and 8 in the novel for examples of Pa’s and Ma’s scripted dialogues. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Lamming, too, was photographed by Van Vechten in May 1955. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The gathering was billed in French as “Le 1er Congres International des Ecrivains et Artistes Noires.” *Presence Africaine* printed the proceedings (no. 8-9-10) as they were delivered, in English and in French. Though it is possible that Demby attended the Congress, I have not found evidence to that effect. Attendees included James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ellis argues for recognizing a “*fraternal agony*” (63; original emphasis) between Lamming’s speech at the Congress and Baldwin’s review of the conference, “Princes and Powers.” She persuasively defines the men’s shared search for diasporic affiliation as fundamentally agonistic, predicated on their respective fraught relationships to “‘the West’” (65). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Glissant defines the poetics of relation in terms of an aesthetic and political mode of giving voice to a shared past and possibilities for future liberation. He writes, “What took place in the Caribbean, which could be summed up in the word *creolization*, approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible. It is not merely an encounter, a shock (in Segalen’s sense), a *métissage*, but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry” (34; original emphasis). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. William Demby (1922-2013) received the Anisfield-Wolf Lifetime Achievement Award in 2006 and George Lamming (1927-) in 2013, the year Demby passed.

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