



Volume 5

David Ellis

# Writing Home

## Black Writing in Britain Since the War

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<u>Lilbury</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>Francois</u>	<u>"A"</u>	<u>49</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Lismankie, W. Ireland.</u>	<u>Scholar.</u>
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"	"	<u>Evelyn</u>	"		<u>7</u>						<u>- do -</u>	"
"	<u>BERGER</u>	<u>Andre</u>	"	<u>38</u>		<u>6</u>					<u>c/o Nestles Milk Co. Eastcheap, E.C.3.</u>	<u>Accountant.</u>
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"	<u>WIGNON</u>	<u>Carl</u>	"		<u>61</u>						<u>Seamus Home, R.I.</u>	<u>Marine Engineer.</u>

**STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES**

Herausgegeben von Koray Melikoğlu

David Ellis

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**Black Writing in Britain Since the War**

# STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES

Edited by Koray Melikoğlu

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# **WRITING HOME**

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Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Doreen Edith Ellis



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## Foreword: The Question of an Audience

You say no-one arrives back,  
for the breath once mixed becomes  
an eternal entanglement  
– Berry, *Chain of Days* 49

This book is concerned with the literature that arose from the post-War emigrations from the Caribbean to Britain, tracing its development through the discussion of selected writers until the present day. The focus throughout will be on writers who were either born in the Caribbean or are of Caribbean parentage, and on those texts that primarily deal with life in Britain. The writers selected are those whose body of work facilitates a sense of historical progression within the corpus as well as comparative analysis. The book aims to establish black British writing as a coherent literary tradition, and to suggest some conceptual tools with which to approach it.

There are three sections: each deal with writers whose British-set texts may be associated with certain broad sweeps in the contours of post-War Caribbean immigration into Britain. Thus, Part One focuses on Sam Selvon, George Lamming and E. R. Braithwaite as writers whose works were among the first to come out of the experience of emigration. Part Two features Wilson Harris, Andrew Salkey and Linton Kwesi Johnson and the negotiation of the establishment of the black British as a permanent part of a multicultural population. Finally, Part Three discusses the appraisal of a split black British and Caribbean heritage through the work of Joan Riley, Caryl Phillips and David Dabydeen.

Each chapter is prefaced by an introduction that describes the social, cultural and political milieux particular to the textual analyses. The object of this foreword is thus to provide the conceptual overview which has organised the study of these texts and to consider some of the problematics associated therein.

\* \* \*

The first point to note is that of terminology. The term ‘black British’ as it will be used here is both inclusive and exclusive. For example, is Sam Selvon a Caribbean writer when discussing *A Brighter Sun* (1952), but black

British when discussing *The Lonely Londoners* (1956)? Should the term black British writing include work by British Asian authors such as Hanif Kureishi? Is his Asian heritage more important than Selvon's when neither, after all, was born in the Indian subcontinent? And what of the term 'black'? Selvon and Harris both have South Asian ancestry; Oku Onuora (formally Orlando Wong) has a half-Chinese father, whilst others have the more common descent from the African diaspora. Furthermore, as Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe put it, "[d]oes black denote colour of skin or quality of mind? If the former, what does skin colour have to do with the act of literary creation? If the latter, what is 'black' about 'black'?" (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 10). Even if these questions can be satisfied, can the continued use of this term be justified, or does it serve to circumscribe such writing and writers within the parameters of an imposed genre?

The present state of black publishing in Britain reflects these concerns. The success of X Press with Victor Headley's *Yardie* (1992) has served to illustrate the continued marginalisation of black writing in Britain. Written, printed and marketed without the support of an established publisher it highlights, as an article in *The Guardian* put it,

the consensus within the (publishing) trade [. . .] that, with the exception of authors who are already established as bestsellers in the US [. . .] "black" books can't be sold outside of the major conurbations and even then they can only be sold in relatively small numbers. (Mike Phillips 4)

The clear assumption written into this consensus is that writing by black people is immediately distinguishable as being just that, and that the act of literary creation is indelibly imprinted with the writers' ethnic origin. The further assumption that the demand for such books is relatively small diminishes the number available with the inevitable by-product that those texts that are published assume an exaggerated significance as representations of the black community. Ivor Osbourne notes this potential in *Yardie's* concentration on the drug underworld:

When you start suggesting that gangster activities are the central issue of our lives, that it should be the central subject that black

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writers are interested in, and that this is all black people want to read about, you're reinforcing our ghettoisation, instead of challenging cultural barriers. (Qtd. in Mike Phillips 4)

There is an element of self-fulfillment about this argument. If the publishing houses seek to develop their output of black writers, they will do so using texts that maintain a proven formula, nurturing the assumed readership base. Barbara Burford argues that this publishing, editorial and critical process forms a "cross-cultural filter" which misrepresents the black community as publishers do not "see Black people as the primary readers," but aim instead at a "white liberal academic readership" (36). Certainly, the experience of *Yardie's* success seems to confirm this. Promoted through the black press and other cultural outlets, it subverted the usual promotion campaigns where, as Caryl Phillips notes, black faces are "few and far between" (qtd. in Mike Phillips 4). The burgeoning growth of independent black publishing houses in recent years suggests a determination within the black community to create the space to bypass the filter of the publishing industry and address itself directly. What this suggests is that the relationship between black writers and their audience is crucial to the future development of black writing. It is this relationship, furthermore, which has been a defining aspect since its very inception.

\* \* \*

Part One of this book discusses the literature emanating from what Ramchand calls "the drift towards the audience" (*West Indian* 63). This was necessarily a (white) British audience as the writers from the Caribbean tried to escape the cultural vacuum of colonial hegemony. The literature that resulted was at once influenced by the writers' own experiences of exile and by the demands of the audience which at that time were developing a taste for Social Realism. It was also a period associated with the ideology of integration during which efforts were made to assimilate the emigrants smoothly into the labour force.

The literature that resulted thus had an educative quality about it. Selvon undertook in his Caribbean texts to acquaint the Mother Country and her inhabitants with images of life in the Colonies. In his London texts one can sense through the comedy an attempt to humanise and individualise the

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emigrants in response to the mass perceptions of racist ideologies, both those that had sustained the Empire and those that were a response to immigration. The early work of Lamming and Braithwaite can be read in the same way. “Writing home” at this stage thus indicates the literary representation of the Caribbean and its people to a largely ignorant host population; the writer acting as a “missionary in reverse” (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 83). It is also a gesture towards the theme in this literature of the actual correspondence between the emigrants and their families in the Caribbean. These generally emerge as rose-hued and falsely optimistic accounts of life in Britain as the emigrants tried to attain and sustain the status that such a trip merited in the islands.

The texts discussed in Part Two suggest a shift in audience. Dominated by a sense of confrontation engendered by increasing legislative, social and official racism in Britain and the influence of the Black Power movement in the US, the texts exhibit, in different ways, a determination to resist assimilation and to declare an independent cultural community. Wilson Harris and Linton Kwesi Johnson may appear to be unlikely bedfellows, but in their own ways, they both reject the colonial and neo-colonial demand to “Be British.” “Writing home” here is the creation of an alternative ancestral space, be it the indigenous myths and culture of Central and South America or the spiritual homelands of pan-Africanism. Crucially, this literature was accompanied by discursive practices and ideas which the writer did not seek “to build into” British society (as Selvon did with his use of dialect), but which stood as challenges to that society.

The literature in the final part completes almost a full circle with the texts in the first part. Here, writers who represent a permanent black British population revive the sense of being British, which was the basis of colonial Caribbean ideology and also characterised the early stages of emigration. This revisiting of the theme of identity in the genre provides the space for a reevaluation of the Caribbean social and cultural heritage, and its place in British society.

All three writers maintain a steady dialogue between Caribbean and British life in their texts. The effect of this is to simultaneously highlight the emergence of a black British personality distinct from its Caribbean forebears, and to be critical of that personality as part of British society. Joan

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Riley focusses on the influence of Caribbean patriarchal traditions, and asserts the previously silenced voice of the black woman. Caryl Phillips explores the distance between the two generations of the Caribbean emigrations, and concentrates on the impossibility of return and the establishment of a cross-cultural community. David Dabydeen also argues for a polyglot British identity, which recognises the presence and value of its marginalised figures. The significance of “writing home” in this instance is clear. An unequivocal sense of a permanent presence emerges, not just from a critical appraisal of the Caribbean, but as a positive contribution to British culture and society. The new perspectives on British society which have been a defining characteristic of this literature from the start, assert themselves here as part of a self-critical, multi-cultural society.



## PART 1

### 1.0 Introduction: The First Generation

Mr. Lamming is, so far, the outstanding literary figure of the new West Indian movement: you can't call it a renaissance because it never had a first birth. It seems to be something more than a mere economic migration.

– Richardson, rev. of *The Emigrants* 333

[N]o islander from the West Indies sees himself as a West Indian until he encounters another islander in a foreign territory [. . .] in this sense, most West Indians of my generation were born in England.

– Lamming, *Pleasures* 214

The three writers focused upon in Part One of this book are characterised by their existence as part of the first generation of West Indian writers. E. R. Braithwaite came to England in 1944, and had his first book published in 1959. Sam Selvon and George Lamming arrived together in 1950 and were first published in 1952 and 1953 respectively. This is not to say that they were among the first writers from the Caribbean to be published, but rather to emphasise the primacy given in their literature, and that of their contemporaries, to the pursuit or definition of a West Indian identity. In the ten or fifteen years that followed the arrival of these writers, West Indian literature constituted a veritable explosion upon the British cultural scene. This, however, should not be attributed to a freak generation of extraordinary literary genius, but rather to the complex processes of social, national and cultural change wrought during the post-war years. It may be said that the character of these changes had a direct informing influence upon the way in which this literature was both written and received. Some understanding of the background to this literature is thus essential to its study.

Caribbean literature was being published before the post-war period. Kenneth Ramchand (*West Indian* 3) cites Tom Redcam's *Becka's Buckra Baby* as being the earliest known work of West Indian prose fiction, published in 1903. However, it was not until the Thirties that a significant per-



centage of the books published (on average less than one a year),<sup>1</sup> were published outside the Caribbean. It was at this time that a group of men, later to be associated with a journal called *The Beacon*, began to meet in Trinidad. The importance of this group to the evolution of West Indian literature has only recently been understood. Of particular significance in this context is the ensuing work by C. L. R. James and Alfred Mendes, heralding the “decisive establishment of social realism in the West Indian novel” (Ramchand *West Indian* 65). Although short-lived (1931-1933), *The Beacon* set a precedent for the emergence of similar periodical and journals which sprang up in the early to mid-Forties. *Bim* (1942), *Focus* (1943) and *Kyk-over-Al* (1945) did not only provide organs for the publication of Caribbean writers, they were also the voice for the growing nationalism of the islands. Thus, even before the explosion of West Indian literature upon the world market, two of the most important aspects of this literature were already being established.

However, the significance of this literary background should not be over-stressed. Selvon plays down the influence of earlier Trinidadian writers such as James, Mendes and Gomes, saying, “I only knew these people very vaguely, I never mixed with them. They were a generation behind me, as it were” (qtd. in Nazareth, “Interview” 427). As will be seen, there were other, more pervasive, influences to overcome. Thus, the real significance of *Bim*, and one of the reasons for its continued success, where others have failed, may be sought in its comparative cosmopolitanism.

The island nationalism that the other journals displayed was not the project of *Bim*'s editor, Frank Collymore. A schoolteacher of, and early influence upon George Lamming, Collymore recruited Lamming as a “missionary” to sign up writers in Trinidad when he moved there. This, as Lamming notes, was the first extension of the magazine from Barbados, an influence that was further extended through its connection with the *Caribbean Voices* programme started by the BBC Overseas Service in 1946. Both Selvon and Lamming pay tribute to *Bim*, not only for its existence as the first truly regional magazine in the Caribbean, but for the life line to the BBC that it represented. It served as a pool of material for the programme,

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<sup>1</sup> Figures obtained from Ramchand (*West Indian* 292) show only eighteen books published between 1902 and 1928.

and, as Lamming points out, “[s]ince the program went out to the entire Caribbean, *Bim* was brought to the attention of Jamaica and other places” (qtd. in Munro and Sander 9).

One might say, then, that the greatest significance of *Bim*, in particular, is that it drew the writers from the different islands together and gave them a confidence in their own work that had been absent before. Importance may be attributed to the work of James and his associates now, but at the time, as Lamming put it, “the whole idea of writers coming out of our classrooms was unheard of” (qtd. in Munro and Sander 10). By uniting the Caribbean, *Bim* served to end their cultural isolation. Furthermore, the link with the BBC provided prestige, money and, when the time came, a direction for the impulse to “get out.” Henry Swanzy, the producer of *Caribbean Voices* is recognised as a significant figure in the growth of West Indian literature, and Lamming is careful to point out in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) the debt owed to him by all the West Indian writers.<sup>2</sup>

*Bim* thus served as a catalyst for an emerging West Indian literary culture; it operated as a point of artistic communication between the islands, and established an inter-island literary community. A consequence of this was the dissemination of the idea of emigration. As with the wider migratory movements from the West Indies, there were several “push/pull” factors in emigration. Far more than the influence of the older West Indian writers, the younger generation recognised the influence of the cultural directives of their colonial education. As will be explained more fully in the analysis of Lamming’s work, the colonial experience as a whole served to undermine the acceptance of a West Indian culture in the Caribbean. The middle-classes were taught to deplore such art, while the peasant classes were excluded by a combination of illiteracy and poverty. As a result, the majority of West Indian writers at this time chose to migrate to Britain because they felt that they would be in a better position to have their work accepted. Both Selvon and Lamming claim to have left for England to “try their luck,” but with no specific plans. London was, as Lamming puts it, “the literary Mecca” (qtd. in Munro and Sander 10).

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<sup>2</sup> “Our sole fortune now was that it was Henry Swanzy who produced ‘Caribbean Voices.’ At one time or another [. . .] all the West Indian novelists have benefitted from his work and his generosity of feeling” (Lamming, *Pleasures* 67).

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These emigrants cannot be dissociated from the thousands of other West Indians who left the islands in search of better prospects in a labour market starved of manpower in the post-war reconstruction boom. It was the common inheritance of all inhabitants of the British West Indies to regard Britain as the “Mother Country,” and their reception there was the raw material for the literature of emigration. The difference that *may* be drawn between them is that, in leaving the Caribbean, the writers had already recognised that the West Indian islands could not maintain their existence as colonies of Britain, taking all their social and cultural praxis from that example. The emigrants learnt in practice what the intellectuals had already discovered in theory; the acceptance of British codes and practices did not make them British. It is in this way that the notion of identity became central to the literature of emigration.

\* \* \*

The changing social and cultural situation in Britain is of equal importance to that of the Caribbean. The immediate euphoria of the Allies’ victory in the Second World War served to reaffirm a belief in Empire that cast Britain as the benevolent protector of democracy. However, the Labour victory in 1945 may be seen as a result of the mood in the country that the spoils of war should be shared more equally than could be expected of a Tory government still associated with class privilege. This mood anticipated a notion of classlessness that was intrinsic to the age of affluence, which was significant in many ways to the rise of the West Indian novel.

The consumer boom of the Fifties brought with it the spread of the mass media through the increased availability of television and the cinema. The publishing industry shared in this boom. Stuart Laing notes a rise in the number of new titles published in Britain from 17,034 in 1949, to 25,000 by 1961 (123). Classlessness was closely tied to this process as the images it presented were a departure from the old class-based images of authority that had dominated previously. In particular, the literary scene was being revolutionised by the neo-Realism of the “Angry Young Men.” The fetishised images of working-class life contained therein could not fail to include the figure of the black immigrant. As will be seen, even where the original text failed in this, the film adaptations that were made of many of

these texts imported such images to add to the “realism.” One might point in particular to the original “Angry” text, *Look Back in Anger* (1956), where John Osborne’s additional dialogue for the screenplay included the Asian market stallholder, Johnny Kapoor, Jimmy Porter’s empathy with whom serves to reflect and endorse his own sense of disaffection and alienation.

West Indian literature might be regarded as profiting from this obsession both with realism and a corresponding preoccupation with the idea of sex. Certainly, the early London texts of the West Indian writers, particularly *The Emigrants* (1954) and Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* and *The Housing Lark* (1965) can be read in terms of this literary fetishism. Colin MacInnes’ *City of Spades* (1957) in this sense represents a bridging point between the two writing traditions, bringing to the literature of emigration a more explicit connection between immigrant life and a sordid underworld of drug abuse, pimping and exploited homosexuality.

Commentators recognised the early parallels between the West Indian novelists and the contemporary English scene. A review of *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) immediately situated Lamming’s novel into current English trends, referring to “our more aggressive left-wing writers,” and continuing,

[a] poet like Mr. Lamming achieves distinctiveness as a writer of the people, and the English critic who hears so much echoless preaching of popular realism begins to think that this is far more likely to come from the newly articulate in the Colonies, than it is from our own tired culture. (Pritchett 460)

Maurice Richardson similarly tried to redeem *The Lonely Londoners* from being submerged into the literature of sex and violence, pointing out the appearance of drugs and sexual encounters in the text, but suggesting that it avoids the “Soho sensationalism” of the texts that surrounded it (rev. of *Lonely* 846).

Once established, and once the issues of independence and decolonisation were more firmly rooted in the public consciousness, it was these issues that became the focus for reading West Indian literature. John Hearne’s *The Faces of Love* (1957) was said to display “the confidence of

a new nationalism” (Allen 542), and the use of terms such as ‘the West Indian novel’ became more frequent. Indeed, by 1960, the notion of a West Indian novel had become so entrenched that texts were being criticised for continuing to concentrate on that theme. Writers were being asked to demonstrate that there was more to their literary imagination. V. S. Naipaul’s review of Neville Dawes’ *The Last Enchantment* (1960), even given his declared disparagement of anything West Indian, is characteristic of its time:

The discovery appears to have been made that race and colour, like sex and sadism, are good commercial prospects; and while the effects of the West Indian revolution are being felt more and more [. . .] the oppressed-race theme is being worked more and more feverishly by West Indian writers. (97-98)

He ends the review with, “[n]ow he has written his Negro novel, we must hope that he will write a Jamaican one.” Keith Waterhouse’s review of Andrew Salkey contains similar sentiments, noting, “*Escape to an Autumn Pavement* [. . .] is notable for the fact that it isn’t predominantly about the colour bar or life in exile, but rather about one man’s personal problem” (63).

Thus, although West Indian literature may be regarded as receiving its first publishing impetus for its coincidence with literary trends in Britain, once it was established it was inextricably linked to the notion of West Indian identity. In doing so, however, it exposed its expression to the changing influence of British society. The notion of identity thus becomes not only mutable, but the product of a foreign environment.

It has been the opinion of many historians and commentators that the conception of a West Indian Federation, and of West Indianness as such (as opposed to island identity), was one mooted largely outside the islands themselves. George Lamming may certainly be regarded as one of the greatest exponents of this idea, saying in *Pleasures*, “[t]he West Indies is, perhaps, the only modern community in the world where the desire to be free, the ambition to make their own laws and regulate life according to their own impulses, is dormant” (34-5). For Lamming, the process of colonisation in the West Indies had been too potent to allow any other way of

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seeing than to accept colonial rule. Coming to England served to shake that way of seeing but then left only a vacuum. The absence of “roots,” or recognisable cultural tradition, was most deeply felt when the rejection of the Mother Country left the Caribbean immigrant with no sense of national identity. It is around this national and individual dilemma that the literature of emigration revolves.

\* \* \*

The three writers under consideration here illustrate this dilemma in very different ways. Selvon’s original declared project was to put the West Indies on the map of the popular British consciousness. On coming to England he found an ignorance of his homelands in striking variance with the knowledge of Britain that was part of his colonial inheritance. His first two novels, *A Brighter Sun* and *An Island is a World* (1955), reflect his concern for the West Indies, and promote his notion of creolisation; a process whereby the national identity of the islands is born through the cosmopolitanism of their societies. The Caribbean is unique in its “racial” make-up, and it is from this very uniqueness that a national identity that is not dominated by colonial influences should be sought.

Selvon’s London-set novels reflect a similar idea. The first of the cycle, *The Lonely Londoners* is a text of social integration; it is an artefact of the principal social and political aim of government for the early immigrants. He “builds” his characters into the host society in such a way as to portray them as an intrinsic part of the London landscape. The rest of his London texts, up to and including *Moses Migrating* (1983), catalogue the process whereby integration became displaced by rejection. *Moses Ascending* (1975), for instance, features the legislative and social rejection of the Seventies and the advent of Black Power as a response to this process.

Selvon’s novels conceal some serious reflection upon the condition of the exile through their predominantly comic aspect. He is regarded as the least political of the major West Indian novelists, but his first text is generally credited with generating the first real interest in the West Indian novel as a distinctive literary form.

George Lamming has similar credentials. His first novel, *In the Castle of my Skin*, has been described as “the first West Indian novel to achieve clas-

sic status” (King 9). His texts display a more pronounced political intent, and are concerned with the historical processes behind the ideological maintenance of the colonial relationship. Lamming makes telling use of allegory in his texts, in many of them using the mythical island of San Cristobal as a stage to reconstruct the dramas of colonialism. His first London novel, *The Emigrants*, is split into two parts, the voyage to Britain and the life of the exiles once there. Through this structural form, he illustrates both the tentative steps towards federation as the islanders talk on the deck, and also the psychological trauma of discovering the “reality” of Britain. In *Water With Berries* (1971), Lamming, like Selvon, has progressed from the notion of the emigrant to a violent account of the birth of the black British. The relationship between Teeton (the exile) and the Old Dowager (his landlady), describes the conscious and unconscious ties of dependence still written into black/white relations.

In each of these two writers, an increasing sense of confrontation is present in their texts. Decolonisation and independence, and the various Race Relations Acts passed during the thirty years of their writing had done nothing to diminish the social friction which continued to cast blacks as outsiders. Pan-Africanism, Ethiopianism and the dream of a return to the Caribbean are indicative of the alienation and dislocation of the black individual in Britain, and his/her continued search for identity. The gesture towards the black Briton as a thoroughly integrated subject is evident in the later fiction of both writers, but finds no optimistic resolution.

By contrast, E. R. Braithwaite is often criticised for his unproblematised insertion of the colonial subject into British society. The emphasis here is on the Subject: Braithwaite’s black characters display all the superlative qualities of the White Ideal – the example that the white imperialists were expected to set for the evolutionarily inferior black Other. Perhaps not surprisingly, his first novel, *To Sir, With Love* (1959) remains probably the most popular and well-known account of black experience in Britain to date. For this reason alone it deserves attention, but in this context it is a useful counterpoint to the explorations in identity that figure in the previous texts. *To Sir, With Love* inverts the usual characteristics of the colonial relationship, situating a thoroughly colonised subject into a position of authority over schoolchildren in London. The class-based aspect of colonial-

ism becomes exposed in Ricky's assertion of moral values and codes of conduct.

Like *The Lonely Londoners*, it is a novel about integration, but the indices of the process are completely different. The maintenance of colonial characteristics in this text suggests the transference of such positions into the post-colonial world. This complete misapprehension of post-war society is at the root of Braithwaite's idealised account. The presence of black immigrants in British society not only signalled the end of Empire, it also demanded changes in racist ideologies. Prior to immigration, the more crass opposition of civilised White to savage Black was sustainable. Once everyday contact became more common, however, such binary oppositions became redundant. However, where Lamming uses the Prospero/Caliban metaphor to trace the continued and more subtle forms of colonisation, Braithwaite (arguably) does little more than reproduce them, trying to achieve the same point through a simple inversion.

A study of the film adaptation of Braithwaite's text shows the different ideological use to which that same character can be put. Made in 1967, the film is arguably more sensitive to social change than the novel, but the significance of the black character is noticeably different.

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It should be clear, then, that the constitution of the West Indian identity as it occurs in West Indian fiction is inextricably related to the notion of exile. It should also be clear, from the way in which the literature of exile conveys the notion of identity as a mutable construct, that the influence of foreign perceptions formed in a rapidly changing society is crucial to this mutability. It is difficult to judge the point at which the emphasis ceases to be on the West Indian emigrant and switches to that of the black Briton, but it is this process that is the concern of this first chapter. The significance of the first generation of black writers in this sense is in their experience of Britain from the earliest moment of immigration up to, in the case of Selvon, the very recent past. The search for the identity of exile becomes an experiential process to be read in the continuing dialogue between the Caribbean and Britain.