

# “ ‘It ain’t have no sort of family life for us here’ ”: Community and its Discontents in Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*

Kirk Greenwood<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>DeSales University

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## Abstract

Sam Seldon’s *The Lonely Londoners* depicts an emergent collectivity of black immigrants who lead literally and metaphorically subterranean lives in 1950s Britain. Against the backdrop of a city undergoing an ambivalent transition from colonial metropole to postmodern cosmopolis, Seldon’s “boys” remain largely inscrutable to and estranged from not only white Londoners but also one another. Critics have associated a depoliticized preoccupation with the everyday and eschewal of critical consciousness in Seldon’s work with widely critiqued features of Anglophone modernism. The present analysis suggests several reasons why political collectivity remains elusive to Seldon’s black male immigrant characters. Specifically, they face discriminatory access to the labor market and social services, loci of possible solidarity with working-class white Londoners where formal political resistance might be coordinated. These systemic pressures combined with an atmospheric racism cause many of the boys to internalize the racist, individualist, consumerist, and heterosexist attitudes and behaviors of the dominant white culture, which they adopt as survival strategies, in effect undermining black group identity and cohesion. If a note of optimism is to be sounded amid the many challenges to inter- and intraracial community the novel presents, it is in the potential undoing of black cultural nationalism that cultural theorist Paul Gilroy sees as a crucial step in the making of an egalitarian, convivial postcolonial world. The novel contests the homogenizing impulses of essentialist identity politics by portraying the heterodox, sometimes paradoxical, affinities that emerge between characters and communities.

“‘It ain’t have no sort of family life for us here’”:

Community and its Discontents in Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*

At the opening of Sam Selvon’s novel *The Lonely Londoners*, the protagonist Moses Aloetto is waiting to meet Galahad for the first time at Waterloo station when he is approached by a reporter from a London newspaper who has misidentified him a newly arrived Jamaican immigrant. When the newspaperman inquires about “conditions” in the colony, Moses responds gamely, pretending to be Jamaican even though he is Trinidadian and “don’t know a damn thing about Jamaica” (12). After “warming up” with a fictitious story about how his house was destroyed by a hurricane, Moses shifts into the register of political complaint and enumerates some of the common grievances of the black immigrant community in London: “We can’t get no place to live, and we only getting the worse jobs it have—” he begins telling the reporter. Before Moses can finish the sentence however the reporter interrupts with a curt “‘Thank you’” and “hurrie[s] off.” The narrator explains that “Moses was sorry” to be cut short, because “it was the first time he ever really get a good chance to say his mind, and he had a lot of things to say” (13). Moses’ testimony about the injustices of black immigrant life in London is silenced by the disinterested reporter and wider public of white Londoners he represents.

A second episode from later in the novel illustrates how black characters’ complaints about systemic discrimination in the housing and employment sectors are censored in public fora, not only by agents of the dominant white culture, but by members of the black immigrant community themselves. Galahad, by now a familiar of the social circle of West Indian “boys” centered on Moses, is goaded by the protagonist

and another character, Big City, into joining the “big discussion on the colour problem” at Orator’s Corner in Hyde Park (82). Galahad is reluctant to opine publically on the issues of race relations, but feels pressured to do so after Big City arranges for him to speak on the platform. As Galahad struggles to express himself, Big City shouts him down with a series of catcalls that range from comical—“Talk louder man.... We can’t hear you”—to racially charged—“The people can’t understand you boy.... Talk good English,” and “Tell them about the time the foreman call you a nigger” (83). Big City’s public embarrassment of Galahad results in a long-standing enmity between the two that is only resolved during a moment of mutual hedonism at a fete (102). The ironic silencing of Galahad’s attempt at political speech shows the tendency for internal group dynamics to replicate forms of discursive violence imposed on the boys from the outside.

Critic Nick Bentley has proposed that *The Lonely Londoners* documents a “lack of political articulation amongst black subcultural groups” in 1950s Britain (44). According to Bentley, black immigrants from the colonies were “marginalised not only from mainstream white culture, but also from the primary bodies of political opposition to dominant power frameworks” in Britain, including the left politics and civil society (44). Bentley argues that Selvon’s fiction purposely eschews a politics of representation aligned with a “broadly left agenda of socialist and Marxist discourse” (44). In a series of interviews conducted the late 1970s, Selvon rejects the view that colonial writing need necessarily be politically “committed”:

Being described as a committed writer does not appeal to me because it too often amounts to limiting your scope and range. Freedom of topics, of perspectives, of style is essential to the writer. I do not share the idea that West Indian or Third

World writers should necessarily be committed to a cause.... Too often so-called commitment restricts the quality and universal scope of a work. (Fabre 71)

This problematic of political commitment registers in *The Lonely Londoners* in the downplaying of overtly political messages and the depiction of black characters' alienation from formal channels of political complaint and redress in Britain. The characters instead pursue "strategies of survival focused on individualistic, hustling, anti-authority practices, rather than collectivized politics" (Bentley 44). While Bentley critiques these individualistic practices for their tendency to "reproduce, rather than challenge, many of the stereotypes present in mainstream white culture" (42), other critics attempt to recuperate such "urban survival methods" and "everyday adjustments and improvisations" as politically efficacious (Dyer 110). Rebecca Dyer for instance asserts that the novel's "migrant characters' everyday lives—the trajectories of their walks, their gatherings in small rented rooms, their manipulations of 'proper' English—are political acts" (113). Other "everyday practices" of resistance Dyer catalogues include "finding adequate housing, keeping menial jobs, enduring cold weather, and staying in touch with widely scattered friends and family" (109). Mark Looker similarly applauds the mobility and freedom Selvon's characters achieve in London "not just by settling there, but by appropriating the city... using the city and its monuments for their own purposes, creating new centres, renaming and reinventing the city in their image" (72). For him, Selvon's characters "act upon their social and physical environment; they change the city as much as it changes them" (79).

Despite this optimism, Dyer is careful to note that everyday strategies of resistance may be "incomplete in their ability to alleviate the hardships of actual

immigrants' lives in London" (113). Lisa Kabesh picks up on this loosely acknowledged implication of Dyer's argument by interrogating what she calls the "multivocality" of everyday practices of resistance, whose unpredictable outcomes "might reify strategies of power, might transgress, might experiment and might even comment upon modes of transgression" (4). For her, the everyday forms of resistance Selvon's black immigrant characters enact are incomplete and self-defeating because they promote an "individual mobility that precludes and even anaesthetizes the desire for collective, anti-racist movement" (11). Kabesh's skepticism about the political affordances of the everyday practices and lifestyle choices of Selvon's "boys" suggests a return to Bentley's desire to locate more concrete forms of political collectivity in the novel. This analysis suggests several reasons why such collectivity remains elusive. Selvon's black male characters face discriminatory access to the labor market, workplace, and social services, which undermines solidarity with working-class white Londoners through which formal political resistance might be coordinated. In addition, systemic pressures and banalized racism cause many of the boys to adopt survival strategies that internalize racist, individualist, consumerist, and heterosexist ideologies from dominant white British culture, fracturing group identity and cohesion. *The Lonely Londoners* depicts a host of black immigrant characters who lead literally and metaphorically subterranean lives in the metropolis, remaining largely inscrutable and estranged not only from white Londoners but also from each other. If a note of optimism is to be sounded amid the seemingly insuperable challenges to inter- and intraracial community presented in the novel, it lies in the potential "undoing" of identity politics and cultural nationalism that theorist Paul Gilroy sees as a crucial step towards the formation of an egalitarian and

convivial postcolonial British society (88). Ultimately, Selvon's novel supports Gilroy's impulse to resist the homogenizing, essentializing pressures of black cultural nationalism through its lucid depiction of "complex, tangled, profane and sometimes inconvenient forms of interdependency" between its characters and communities (45).

Critic Roydon Salick illustratively describes inequitable division of labor in the world of the novel in which "immigrants arrive to accept the most menial jobs, refused by whites, at which they slave away, saving penny by penny, to gain some small measure of security and respectability in a London that equally invites and repels them" (124). Despite Salick's loaded description of black immigrant workers 'slaving' away for meager wages, the labor market in Britain is even more systematically oppressive to black workers than this description implies. Kabesh explains how a "segregated workforce" is managed in London through "capital and the state working in tandem to keep whites in skilled jobs and push blacks into manual labor" (6). Industrial-bureaucratic efforts to maintain this segregated workforce are evident at the employment exchange, where clerks put a "'mark on the top in red ink'" of the case files of black jobseekers. As Moses explains to Galahad, the mark "'J-A, Col.'" means for instance that "'you from Jamaica and you black,'" which in turn determines where an individual can apply for work (30). The employment exchange also screens businesses to "'find out if the firm[s] want coloured fellars" (30). Moses says that before this system of racial taxonomization and screening was implemented, the agency would send black jobseekers to businesses, only to have the management "'send them away saying it ain't have no vacancy'" (30). According to Moses, British management "'don't tell you outright that they don't want coloured fellars, they just say sorry the vacancy filled'" (30).

Black workers who do manage to obtain employment in the manufacturing and service sectors perform menial, labor-intensive jobs that “relegate [them] to an alien otherness, or even a kind of invisibility” in the eyes of white London society (Looker 66). The case of Ma, one of the novel’s few black female characters, illustrates how this “type of work affords a view never seen by most Londoners, who know only their city’s dressed-up surface” (Dyer 116). Ma’s job as a dishwasher at Lyons Corner House involves washing “cup and spoon and dish and glass for five pounds a week” (65). The job isolates Ma physically and socially from the restaurant’s white patrons by confining her “in the back, in the kitchen” (65). Ma’s relationship with the restaurant’s white patrons is mediated by the ““dirty wares”” and ““mountains of washing”” returned to her through a small “square hole” in the wall that separates the kitchen from the dining area (65). The narrator explains that it is only “from the washing up [that] Ma form an idea of the population of London” (65). Though Ma “get to know the regular faces” of the restaurant’s white patrons, she “get to know cup and dirty dish and spoon” even better (65). And there is no sense that the restaurant’s patrons get to know Ma. The segregation of black workers from white customers is underscored when Tanty Bessy unexpectedly appears in the restaurant’s dining area, where she is “talking so loud, and all the customer looking at she” (67). Ma is as startled as the white patrons by the disruption this misplaced black body presents to the segregated geography of the restaurant. Ma’s confinement to the back of the dirty kitchen is a metaphor for the “colour bar” (13), which restricts blacks’ access to the labor market, obscuring them from the view of mainstream white culture and obscuring their own view of London’s society.

Black immigrant men are similarly exploited and obscured by their discriminatory relationship to the means of production, inhibiting them from forming cross-racial class identifications with Britain's white working poor. The case of Cap, a one-time law student and "promising son of the educated Nigerian elite," illustrates the point that "black workers were consistently downgraded and deskilled following their arrival in Britain" (Dawson 37-8). When Cap goes to the employment exchange seeking a job that might "reflect remotely his aborted legal background" (McGuire 246), he is sent to a railway station to obtain "storekeeping work for seven pounds" a week (35). When Cap arrives at the workplace, the "fellar in charge" escorts him to the "back of the station" where he offers Cap a job lifting and sorting a "big junk of iron" and "thick, heavy cable" for "six ten" pounds instead of seven (35-6). The narrator describes the isolated working conditions in the train yard in similar terms to Ma's commercial kitchen. The job site is "real grim" and hidden from the view, such that "people who living in London don't really know how behind them railway station does be so desolate and discouraging" (36). Faced with the unwelcomed prospect of doing grueling manual labor in cold, foggy working conditions for unequal pay, Cap backs out of the job and out of the workforce altogether. Commenting on the discriminatory bait-and-switch Cap experiences, Moses says: "'They send you for a storekeeper work and they want to put you in the yard to lift heavy iron. They think that is all we good for, and this time they keeping all the soft clerical jobs for them white fellars'" (36). According to Looker, the station manager's attempt to foist manual labor on Cap reveals a desire to "transform Cap into a tool," which reinscribes historical perceptions of the black body as "useable" (66). Looker situates the black Londoner's relationship to the means of industrial production within a



history of the ongoing dehumanization and instrumentalization of the black body originating in slavery. In the same way British “colonialism in the nineteenth century appropriated the black body to the machine of agricultural production, so the imperial city transforms its black citizens into objects” of industrial production (Looker 66). The image of Galahad emerging from the London tube after a long night’s work, “eyes red and bleary, and his body tired and bent up like a piece of wire,” is that of a black body that has been consumed through the industrial process, like “a piece of wire” (70).

Critics Ashley Dawson and Richard McGuire interpret Cap’s dehumanizing encounter with employment discrimination as a trauma that produces the symptoms of indolence and indifference to work that characterize him throughout the novel. Dawson records how “Cap’s psyche becomes fragmented” in the context of the “systematic humiliation meted out to migrants in the workplace” (38). McGuire likewise contends that Cap undergoes a process of “psychic fragmentation, and withdrawal into dissipation and a transitory, hand-to-mouth existence,” precipitated by “London’s hostility and alienation” at the railway yard (241). By dropping out of the workforce, Cap is able to avoid the “dehumanizing routine of manual labor” to which his fellow immigrants subscribe, but his life is reduced to an undignified, “strenuous, increasingly desperate hustling” (Dawson 37, 38). The survival tactics Cap engages in—borrowing from friends and not repaying them (43), fencing one girlfriend’s property (38), marrying another woman and living off her earnings (44), even capturing and eating seagulls from a dormitory window (121)—are hardly empowering in the way Dyer or Looker presume. When Moses calls Cap “the wandering Nigerian, man of mystery” (35), he indicates his

estrangement from both “the life of bourgeois respectability he came to London to achieve” and the “network of black friends he initially made” (Dawson 38).

Moses and many of the other black male immigrants make their living under marginal and labor-intensive conditions, doing menial ““night work”” in factories (52). Like Ma’s dishwashing job, and the railroad work offered Cap, factory work is “hard” and degradingly pointless—Moses’ factory job involves “getting pot scourers read for packing” (51). Unskilled or deskilled black workers remain separated from their white counterparts, as “mostly is spades they have working in the factory, paying lower wages than they would have to pay the white fellars” (51). This segregation of the workforce is intensified by nighttime hours black laborers are hired for. According to McGuire, the novel’s black male immigrants “work in marginal, nocturnal occupations, keeping them trapped in the fringes of the society in which they live” (McGuire 237). The alignment of discriminatory hiring practices, segregated working conditions, and nighttime hours, ensures that the black working class is “largely *unseen*” by mainstream white society and “largely unknown to many of those who, in sunlit hours, frequent the city and claim it as their domain” (McGuire 247).

Systemic employment discrimination not only reduces the quality of life of individual black people, it also disintegrates a nascent class consciousness among black workers, and with it the possibility of political solidarity with the white working class. In describing the “Working Class” neighborhood of Harrow Road where Tolroy and his family settle, the narrator states: “Wherever in London that it have Working Class, there you will find a lot of spades” (57). Enforced segregation in the workforce apparently does

not extend to certain racially integrated poor neighborhoods like Harrow Road, Notting Hill, and Bayswater where immigrants reside. Racial hostility in these residential areas is a fact of life to which Moses in his role as de facto “welfare officer” to recently arrived black immigrants is particularly attuned (9). At one point, he ruminates on a racist sign in Bayswater that reads ““Keep the Water White”” that caused a friend of his to get into a fight (73). Looker confirms that “most landlords in London during this period avoided renting to people of color, and if they did, often charged unreasonable rents or let only for short term” (64). Nevertheless, the novel implies that a countercurrent of racial tolerance in certain neighborhoods is what enables Moses to guide newcomers to hostels that “take in spades” and avoid those that would “slam door in your face” (9). Racial tension in working-class neighborhoods is paralleled by “a kind of communal feeling with the [white] Working Class and the spades, because when you poor things does level out” (59).

The narrator tentatively hints at the possibility of politicizing the affinity between working-class blacks and whites with the observation that the dismal Harrow Road landscape is dotted with “buildings that have signs painted like Vote Labour and Down With the Tories” (58). According to Bentley, however, the novel’s awareness of the class struggle embodied in the representative politics of the “Labour and Tory parties is projected as external to the concerns of this subcultural group” (Bentley 44). At the end of the novel, Moses and Galahad engage in a conversation with rare political overtones. After Moses glumly remarks on conditions of urban anomie, Galahad suggests that Moses ““contact the Party”” to arrange a refreshing ““holiday”” in Berlin or Moscow (116). Galahad quickly decouples this reference to Communism from its radical political

implications, however, by insisting that the ““free trips”” the Party is offering have ““no strings attached, you don’t have to join up or anything”” (116). Rather than envisioning Communist affiliation as a means of resisting racial oppression in Britain, Galahad presents the Communists’ offer merely an opportunity for recreation and stress relief, to be enjoyed as a matter of everyday survival in the manner proposed by Looker and Dyer. Later in the conversation, Galahad idly comments that black workers ““had better chances when the Socialists was in power,”” and asks Moses if he ““ever vote”” (117). Moses responds: ““I always go and put my X, man. And I always canvassing for Labour when is elections”” (117). The fact that Galahad inquires for the first time about Moses’ political commitments more than a year into their relationship confirms Bentley’s intuition that practical politics are relegated to the margins of black working-class experience. According to Bentley, Moses’ activism “appears to be an isolated practice, not general amongst the group” (44). Doubts about the political loyalties of the well-heeled black characters Daniel and Harris, who may ““vote Conservative,”” further emphasize the extent to which the black community is alienated from working-class political identity (118). Moses and Galahad’s political discussion is soon displaced by more practical concerns as Galahad leaves to ““collect the rent”” at the welfare office (118). Bentley concludes that the novel records a “lack of organised political struggle within the black subcultural group,” which he sees more as an effect of the “privileging amongst left politics of class concerns over issues of race” than of an inherent apathy on the part of black workers.

The tenuous “communal feeling” the narrator sees linking working-class blacks and whites in neighborhoods like Harrow Road, is complicated, if not entirely belied, by

Galahad's experience at the welfare office. In contrast to the working world, in which black and white workers are discriminatorily segregated by job type and shift, the welfare office brings together the unemployed of both races, but does so in a way that ultimately fails to resolve racial animosity or foster class-based identification. According to the narrator, the welfare office is a "place where a lot of men get together to look for work and draw money from the Welfare State while they ain't working" (29). Critic Lewis MacLeod describes this emotionally fraught environment as "a kind of purgatory, a space between spaces, which houses both the prospect of salvation and the spectre of financial and psychological insolvency" (162). It is this desperate, haunted "atmosphere" that "hit Galahad hard so he had to stand up against the wall for a minute" upon entering the welfare office (29). Galahad reacts with physical aversion to the pervasive alienation and confused, contradictory emotions of "hate and disgust and avarice and malice and sympathy and sorrow and pity" that animate black and white jobseekers alike (29). In this liminal space, the ubiquitous feeling that "everyone is your enemy and your friend" (29) produces an "uneasy," "divided, schizoid psychology" (MacLeod 162) in both black and white jobseekers, shattering the possibility of group cohesion and action. According to MacLeod, the "unrevealed current of sympathy" that is palpable in the narrator's description of the working-class neighborhood of Harrow Road is undone in welfare office, where "common hardships do not seem to foster any serious sense of community" between jobless blacks and whites, but instead cause them to "view each other as competitors in a contest" (162).

The bureaucratic atomization of the working class into discrete units of labor ensures that available avenues of resistance remain individual and unprogrammable, as is

evidenced in Moses' account of the "'Jamaican fellar [who] come in and get ignorant and start to make rab'" (30). Moses is unable to read this discouraged jobseeker's impulse to "'tear up all the files and papers they had on the counter'" and "'make a snatch at one of the clerk behind'" in political terms—as a desperate, unfocused, but nonetheless morally justifiable, protest against conditions of chronic unemployment and state indifference. While Dawson reads the Jamaican man's "fit of rage" as an appropriate response to "employment conditions in Britain [that] systematically undermined black men's self-worth, leading to levels of despair and incandescent anger" (37), Moses dismisses the man's "'bawling out and cursing and getting on like if he mad'" as the outburst of a psychological deviant (30). The failure of Moses and other unemployed workers of both races to interpret the political implications of the man's gesture as a potential basis for class mobilization serves to stymie collective action and enable state repression, as "the police had was to come and take [the man] away" (30).

Despite Moses' apparently reliable factory job, the fact that he knows about the disruptive episode with the Jamaican, combined with the fact that acquaintances at the welfare office expect "he on the dole" when he enters with Galahad (30), suggests his own precarious employment history. The circumstances under which Moses was fired from a previous position "working in a railway yard" (13) illustrate the way white racism undercuts working-class solidarity. White railway workers turned the principal tool of working-class mobilization against a minority worker by threatening to "go on strike unless the boss fire Moses" (13). Dawson confirms that "British labor unions were uniformly hostile toward black workers, despite the rhetoric of working-class solidarity articulated by national union leaders" (37). She elaborates that white union members

often accused black workers of “undermining the unions’ closed shop policy and of helping employers break strikes” (37); yet the action taken against Moses seems to be motivated by an arbitrary racial hatred that flows across class lines, from workers to boss. The resolution of the episode epitomizes what Moses calls the “the old English diplomacy” (24), whereby white Britons cover over their racial animus in a veneer of genial liberality: “the boss call Moses and tell him that he sorry, but as they cutting down the staff and he was new, he would have to go” (13). A banalized racial ideology that pits white workers against their black counterparts persists alongside, and as an effect of, the discriminatory regulation of the labor market that occurs at the employment exchange, welfare office, and on the segregated job site. These institutions and practices “divide the working classes in racial terms, and therefore mak[e] it more difficult to organise a working-class political movement that includes racial distinctions” (Bentley 44). The mutuality the narrator claims exists between the black and white working classes in residential contexts ultimately fails to coordinate a unified relationship to the means of production.

The ideological cleavages that divide the black and white working classes are internalized by the black immigrant community, splintering its collective identity and cohesion. Dyer asserts that black individuals in the novel are constantly “in danger of becoming estranged from one another, undercutting the community’s kinship and friendship networks as well as their political effectiveness” (Dyer 116). This assessment runs counter to the critical tendency to valorize Moses as a centripetal force within the black community. Moses typically earns praise from critics for his status as a savvy “veteran” (17) of London’s discriminatory labor and housing markets, which has

furnished him with keen survival instincts he freely imparts to others like Galahad. Looker for instance suggests that through Moses' "knowledge of where to live, to find work, he has measured the rhythms and mastered the beat of the city" (78). He further celebrates the protagonist's "knowing wit, his emotion, his imagination which resists the relentless hostility of the world around him" (78). Salick goes so far as to insist that Moses lives up to his "biblical namesake, [as] a leader of an exiled community, guiding those of the same metropolitan faith, from the unearthly desolation of Waterloo station to the stark rigors and fleeting pleasures of London" (128). Yet, despite Moses' "nine-ten years" (9) of experience navigating institutionalized racism in Britain, he seems only partially inoculated to the worst mystifications of racial ideology. His evaluation of the discouraged Jamaican jobseeker at the welfare office as unruly and "ignorant" replicates the racist stereotype of the "'frenzied' African, who was considered to be capable of running amok at any time," whose roots Gordon Rohlehr has traced to the colonial plantation system (qtd. in Okawa 21).

In contrast to critics who highlight the centripetal force Moses exerts on the black immigrant community, Kabesh notes the degree to which he is implicated in Britain's system of racial control. She calls him an instrument of "disempowering dispersal" (6) in his role as de facto "liaison officer" (8) to recently arrived black immigrants, who he "disperses blacks across the city to counter white fears surrounding immigration and miscegenation" (Kabesh 12). While Kabesh reads Moses' "scattering the boys around London" (Selvon 9) as a possible resistant "tactic" (4) intended to neutralize white aggression, the rhetoric surrounding Moses dispersal of black bodies belies an internalized racial animus. He uses a racial slur when describing the undesirable influx of



black immigrants to the Bayswater section of London where he lives: “‘Too much spades in the Water right now’”(9). The narrator later explains that Moses “don’t want no concentrated area in the Water—as it is, things bad enough already” (9). Moses’ perception that “things bad enough already” refers both to the intensification of white racism following on recent waves of black immigration, as well as to bad behavior of black men themselves, which Moses credits with provoking the white backlash.

Moses’ desire to separate himself geographically from the new immigrants “invading the country by the hundreds” reveals his disidentification with these newcomers, who he characterizes as increasingly “desperate” (8). Moses further evinces an internalized prejudice when he interrogates Galahad about “what kind of fellar he really is”: a “hustler” or an “ants” (the entomological metaphor signifying someone who accepts government assistance without looking for work) (21). When Galahad reassures Moses that he is “a born hustler” (25), Moses responds “‘I wish it had plenty of other fellars like you... but a lot of parasites muddy the water for the boys, and these days, when one spade do something wrong, they crying down the whole lot’” (25). Moses’ claim that many “spades” are “parasites” iterates a racist “stereotype of West Indian irresponsibility” (Looker 70), even as Moses seeks to distance himself personally from that stereotype. The rhetoric of contagion through which Moses casts fellow immigrants as “parasites” betrays an “unacknowledged fear of contamination” he evidently shares with whites (Ramchand 224). The first “ballad” Moses tells Galahad is of the ne’er-do-well Cap, who he calls “the most shiftless and laziest fellar in London” (35). In the course of narrating Cap’s story, Moses reiterates his position that “‘is fellars like that who muddy the water for a lot of us.... One worthless fellar go around making bad, and give

the wrong impression for all the rest” (35). This moralistic discourse paints Cap as a social parasite *par excellence* whose “smiling,” “innocent face masks a ruthless determination to survive and exploit” (Ramchand 227). While Moses’ rhetoric evinces an uncertainty about whether Cap is an exceptional case or the norm among black immigrant men, he is nevertheless insistent on differentiation himself from those who might embody the lazy, “shiftless,” “worthless” stereotype. In doing so, he engages in an intraracial othering that diminishes the possibility for racial solidarity.

Moses’ internalized prejudice signals some of the “ambivalences and ambiguities” that Bentley says “problematise the construction of a collective black immigrant identity” in the novel (41). In Bentley’s reading, Moses’ stereotyping is part of the novel’s complicated “construction of black identity as formed through the dominant culture in Britain,” particularly through stereotypes of black “criminality, sexuality and miscegenation” (42). Looker further identifies ways in which the novel reproduces “middle-class clichés about lower class rootlessness,” as well as stereotypes of the black male as a “subhuman criminal or exotic sexual animal” (69, 70). MacLeod describes a tendency for the discriminatory interpretations of “Selvon’s boys as ‘a bunch of lazy loafers’” to be taken up by the critical discourse (161), as when Ramchand, in one early treatment of the novel, censures the characters’ abounding “irresponsible non-moral behaviour” (227). Despite the useful interventions of these critics, none have observed the degree to which negative stereotyping penetrates Moses’ own discourse, or that of other self-hating black characters in the novel. In his ballad about Cap, Moses references the Nigerian’s brief involvement in a used car “racket,” in which dishonest Englishmen employ Africans to purchase new cars “saying they leave the country” in order to “get

away from a big set of purchase tax” (34). Later, the assimilationist black character Harris raises the “stereotypical association of black subcultural activity with the use of illegal drugs” (Bentley 42) when he insists that Five-Past-Twelve “has some weed on him” at the fete at St Pancras Hall (99). According to Bentley, Five-Past-Twelve is indeed a “character who survives through involvement in illegal drugs,” but drug dealing is not typical of Moses’ social circle (42-3). In fact, Moses avers that “English fellars” may induce black drug dealing because they “like weed more than anybody else, and from the time they see you black they figure that you know all about it, where to make contact and how much to pay” (104). By implicating white drug users and con men in networks of criminal activity mainstream white discourse stereotypically associates with marginal black identity, the novel invites readers to see through the prejudiced views espoused by some of the black characters themselves.

If Moses occasionally engages in the negative stereotyping of his fellow black immigrants, and attempts to distance himself from them rhetorically and socially, Harris enacts this behavior at its self-hating fringe. The narrator describes Harris as “a fellar who like to play ladedda” by affecting “English customs” (95). He dresses like “some Englishman going to work in the city, bowler and umbrella, and briefcase tuck under the arm, with *The Times* fold up in the pocket so the name would show” (95). The effort Harris puts into making sure the masthead of the high-brow newspaper he carries faces outward as he promenades through London, as well as his effort to speak “proper British English” over the heads of his West Indian compatriots, reveals his desire to “efface any perceived markers of ethnic and cultural difference that would prevent him from fitting into British society” (Okawa 22). Harris performs his carefully crafted persona for the

benefit of white “bigshots” who he comes in contact with through his work as an event planner (95). Harris makes his living selling tickets to “little fetes” to white audiences who are allured by markers of black primitivism such as “steel band music” and the surfeit of exotic black bodies Harris strategically includes in the festivities (95, 100). At the fete Harris organizes at St Pancras Hall, he is “primarily concerned with making sure that all of his distinguished British guests are having a good time” (Okawa 20). To that end, he treats his white and black guests discriminatorily, “greeting all English people with a pleasant good evening and how do you do, and a not so pleasant greeting for the boys” (96). The narrator suggests that Harris’ discriminatory attitude towards the boys is motivated by a “fear” that they “make rab and turn the dance into a brawl” (96). Though Harris’ suspicion that Five-Past-Twelve possesses marijuana turns out to be founded, his anxiety about an outbreak of violence proves to be unfounded since a brawl “never happen in a big way” (96). Nevertheless, Harris twice gives Five-Past-Twelve a stern talking-to (96, 106). Okawa links Harris’ “patronizing attitude towards his fellow compatriots at the dance” to the “goal of securing social and economic stability and a prominent place in London society” (21). This affected social climber stakes his economic survival and mobility on his ability to alternately exploit and distance himself from stereotypical black identity.

While Harris’ middle-class pretensions and striving are haunted by the inalienable awareness that his “face is black” (94), the character Bart exhibits similar tendencies towards intraracial stereotyping and cultural disavowal due in part to his pride in his “light skin” (45). The narrator explains that when Bart “first hit Brit’n, like a lot of other brown-skin fellars,” he sought to obscure his colonial heritage by “telling everybody the

he is a Latin-American” (45). Bart initially distanced himself from those in the community he felt were “too black” (45). Consorting with the boys in public, he would affect an “embarrass air” that signaled: “‘I hear with these boys, but I not one of them, look at the colour of my skin’” (47). Bart shares Moses’ worries over the growing influx of black immigrants to London, which the narrator says “give him more fear than it give the Englishman, for Bart frighten if they make things hard in Brit’n” (47). Bart’s racial disavowal, like Harris’, appears to be motivated by feelings of economic and social precarity. Perhaps on account of his light skin and Latin-American alibi, Bart is able to secure a coveted “clerical job,” which “he hold on to it like if it is gold, for he frighten if he have to go and work in factory” like many of the novel’s other black characters (47). The simile linking Bart’s privileged office job to “gold” indicates another facet of his personality—Bart is a “born miser” (Fabre 216). His avarice, as much as his disavowal of black colonial identity, strains Bart’s personal relationships and isolates him from the community. MacLeod describes him as “an austere and industrious worker who values money over friendships” (167). The pressures of the discriminatory labor market consolidate a “hard, unfeeling stoicism” in Bart that serves as a foil to Cap’s improvident, hustler persona, but is no less self-interested, cynical, or paranoid (MacLeod 167). The narrator describes Bart as “always saying he ain’t have no money, afraid somebody might want to borrow” (46). Despite the personal wealth Bart accumulates through his miserliness, he continuously mistrusts even of those who do not intend to borrow from him. His case illustrates how the market economy in the metropolis breeds cynical social relations that corrode the “trust” economy immigrants are accustomed to from the West Indies, where, as Tanty Bessy explains, business owners provide credit to customers

trusting they will be repaid (63). Bart is a limit case for the preoccupation with work and money that drives many of the boys. In London's market-driven society, Bart comes to view the "imperative towards capital as an imperative towards self" (MacLeod 161).

Kabesh argues that the "individual mobility" Harris and Bart achieve through their self-interested, mistrustful, and discriminatory attitudes and actions is at odds with "large scale or broad-based social movement and the *systemic* changes it can effect" (8). The individualistic ethos these characters embody is pervasive in the black immigrant community, dissolving social ties and hampering fellow-feeling. Salick suggests that the "hostile environment" of London "sets immigrant against immigrant, compatriot against compatriot in a vicious struggle for survival" (125-6). This mercenary ethos is illustrated most sharply in the image of the opportunistic black landlord "hustling tenants" on the platform in Waterloo station at the beginning of the novel (12). The usurious "Jamaican fellar" is known to pack "five-six fellars in one room," charging each of them one pound per week (11-2). According to Dyer, this landlord victimizes "black tenants who have few housing options due to prevalent discrimination" in London, thus instantiating "exploitation *within* the group" of black Londoners (121). Moses, for his part, does not intervene to prevent the ingénues from being exploited; instead, he smiles wryly at their misfortune, knowing it is born of an innocence of the code of merciless individualism that rules life in the metropolis. Remarking on this episode, the narrator says: "When it come to making money, it ain't have anything like 'ease me up' or 'both of we is countrymen together' in old London" (12). Moses relays the individualist credo that "every man his own" to Galahad as he forcefully tries to instill an ethic of self-

sufficiency in the newcomer: “‘It ain’t have no s— over here like “both of we is Trinidadians and we must help out one another.” You going to meet a lot of fellars from home who don’t even want to talk to you, because they have matters on the mind’” (21). This image of self-involved West Indian immigrants hurriedly pursuing their private interests, indifferent their countrymen, emphasizes the extent to which there is “no island fellowship to be found between migrants in London” (McGuire 238). Moses’ advises Galahad to “get settled” by finding housing and employment quickly to avoid being taken advantage of (21).

Moses, Bart, and Harris each prioritize economic self-sufficiency to varying degrees as a means of coping with the employment discrimination and social marginalization that wreaked havoc on Cap’s personality. The constant threat of unemployment galvanizes many of the boys as “work-obsessed people, constantly thinking about jobs, work conditions, and the wages that come with them” (MacLeod 161). MacLeod cites employment as a constitutive factor in black working-class identity because of the role it plays in determining “where a man lives, what he eats, where he goes, and to an important degree, whom he knows” (161). In describing the pervasive feeling of angst at the welfare office, the narrator confirms that in London “a job is all the security a man have”: “A job mean place to sleep, food to eat, cigarette to smoke.... when a man out of work he like a fish out of water gasping for breath” (29). This simile also overidentifies the consumption of commodities—“food” and “cigarette”—with “breath,” and life itself. This conflation of consumption with survival, lifestyle with life, suggests the “depoliticized individualism promoted through consumerism,” which Kabesh sees problematically structuring the lives of many of the novel’s characters (11).

This nexus of individualism and consumerism is symbolized by the consumer products Galahad uses when “dressing up” for a date, including “Cherry Blossom” shoe polish, a “new pair of socks—nylon splice in the heel and toe,” “woollen underwear,” “a white Van Heusen” shirt (69), and the “haircream jar” (70). The brand-name labels of some of these products anticipate the advertising slogans, “drink coca-cola, anytime is guinness time,” that saturate the panorama of Piccadilly Circus, where Galahad goes on dates (74). Dyer explains that “walking through the city in his expensive new clothes and thinking about the young woman he has a date to meet under the big clock in Piccadilly tube station, Galahad is aware only of the exciting and pleasant side of London” (126). The buoyancy he feels at such moments requires a disavowal the structural inequalities that prevent him from finding work suited to his skills as an electrician (70). The narrator’s assertion that “one of the first things he do after he get work was to stock up with clothes like stupidity” implies that Galahad’s disordered and compulsive buying habits may be symptoms of a disavowed frustration with the condition of underemployment (69). This voracious consumerism reveals that Galahad is beholden to the same “prospect of individual upward mobility” and “imperative to ascend capitalist society’s class hierarchy” that motivates Harris’ pretentiousness, Bart’s miserliness, and the Jamaican landlord’s victimization of newly arrived countrymen (Kabesh 13). Selvon ironically juxtaposes the image of the dandified Galahad with an image of him emerging from the London tube after a long night’s work: “He have on a old cap that was brown one time, but black now with grease and fingerprint, and a jacket that can’t see worse days, and a corduroy trousers that would shame them ragandbone man” (70). The deteriorated



condition of Galahad's work clothes emphasizes the disposability of the consumer products he invests in, and invests himself in.

While iterative practices of work and consumption provide structure and an illusory sense of purpose to Galahad's life, his "reductive material obsessions obscure the possibility of communal feeling" with his fellow black immigrants (MacLeod 164).

Kabesh worries that Galahad is a salient example of an individualist and consumerist mentality that dangerously "strips the desire for freedom of both its political power to unite a political and social community as well as the potential for such a community to achieve political gains" (10). On his way to meet his white girlfriend Daisy, with "three-four pounds in the pocket, [and] sharp clothes on," Galahad passes by Orator's Corner where he is waylaid by "one of the boys," who wants him to "'listen here to the rarse this man talking, about how colonials shouldn't come to Brit'n, that the place overflowing with spades'" (73-4). Preoccupied with thoughts of his date, Galahad brushes past the man, saying "'I ain't have time, man, I late already'" (74). In prioritizing personal pleasure seeking over consideration of a political grievance articulated by a fellow member of the black community, Galahad shows he has evolved into one of London's self-involved individualists with "matters on the mind" that Moses had previously warned him of. In responding with callous indifference to the man in the park, Galahad simply recapitulates the disinterest Moses shows him when he attempts to share his "theory about Black": "'Is not we that the people don't like,' he tell Moses, 'is the colour Black'" (73). Moses cynically dismisses Galahad's earnest philosophizing, telling him: "'Take it easy, that is a sharp theory, why don't you write about it'" (73). Having his

ideas rebuffed by a friend and potential ally puts “all thought like that out of Galahad mind,” and he wholeheartedly pursues the mindless hedonism of the Circus (73).

The everyday forms of victimization black male immigrants inflict on one another are intensified in their relationships with black and white women. Many critics have attended to the troubled gender relations in the novel. Bentley for instance describes a “tendency in *The Lonely Londoners* for male characters to construct their marginalised and subcultural identity through assertion of their masculinity” in ways that contribute to the “re-marginalisation of women” (43). In her comprehensive study of black male sexuality and misogyny in novel, Ashley Dawson argues that Selvon self-consciously constructs and critiques an “incipient black male nationalism [that] reproduces the violent gestures of white supremacist patriarchy” (44). Black women are presented as uniquely vulnerable to forms of victimization and neglect black men routinely mete out to one another. Dawson observes how Moses gratuitously goads his “gullible friend Lewis” into inflicting “unprovoked domestic violence” on his wife Agnes by telling him that in Britain it is common for black women to commit adultery while their husbands are at work (44). Moses’ malicious entertainment instills paranoia in Lewis and perpetrates an even more vicious second-order victimization on Agnes. The black male obsession with ““White girls”” causes black women to be neglected and marginalized within the immigrant community, as Tanty Bessy observes in conversation with her nephew Tolroy: ““Your own kind of girls not good enough now, is only white girls. I see Agnes bring a nice girl friend from Jamaica to see us, but you didn’t even blink on she. White Girls!”” (57). The disinterest of black men towards black women diminishes the women’s economic stability pushing some into prostitution. In the stream-of-consciousness paean

to “sex life gone wild” in the city during the summer months (93), the narrator observes the link between black males’ indifference to black women and the prevalence of black female prostitution:

it have a lot of dark women who in the racket too they have to make a living you could see them here and there with the professionals walking on the Bayswater Road or liming in the park learning the tricks of the trade it have some white fellars who feel is a big thrill to hit a black number and the girls make them pay big money but as far as spades hitting spades it ain’t have nothing like that for a spade wouldn’t hit a spade when it have so much other talent on parade. (91)

The fetishistic “thrill” white men receive from engaging the services of black prostitutes is mirrored in the boys’ interactions with white women. Metonymic references to these women as “talent” and “craft” (73) connote that many of them are sex workers as well. The mutual participation of black and white men in the underground sex trade illustrates “black men’s complicity with structures of patriarchal subordination in Britain” (Dawson 31). The fact that on her date with Galahad, Daisy “look different than when she in the plant with a pair if jeans and a overalls on,” disheveled hair, and “grease and dirt” on her hands (74-5), implies that besides prostitutes the boys primarily interact with white working-class women who are subject to economic and social depredations similar to their own. Before Galahad immigrates to Britain, he is told that ““it have bags of white pussy in London, and you will eat till you tired”” (74). This image of the objectified and consumable white female body rhetoricizes heterosexual black males as “pursuers of women who are figured as passive prey” (Kabesh 9). White women are further objectified as “fresh blood from the country districts” (91) and “pretty pieces of skin”

(86), emphasizing the importance of racial markers such as “blood” and “skin” in consolidating colonial male desire. Selvon’s boys direct rhetorical violence and sexual aggression towards white women because they see them as “symbolic embodiments of dominant European culture” (Dawson 48), whose conquest equates to anticolonial resistance (Dawson 48). Imagined and enacted fantasies of sexual domination become the boys’ “paradigmatic way of asserting their masculinity in the face of the myriad forms of humiliation and alienation meted out by racist discourses and institutions in Britain” (Dawson 47-8). Dawson critiques such strategies as counterproductive to the goal of creating “truly egalitarian and postimperial relations among the novel’s characters” since they simply redistribute the social victimization experienced by black immigrant men to white prostitutes and working-class women (36).

This analysis has sketched Selvon’s depiction of an internally fractious, ambivalent, implicated, and deeply fraught black male identity in *The Lonely Londoners*. At first blush, it may seem difficult to recuperate the ethical and political value of any representation of black immigrant life in Britain that includes such paradoxical features, or to assimilate it to a teleology of egalitarian antiracist movement. The racial hatreds and discriminatory pressures operationalized by state apparatuses like the employment exchange and welfare office produce psychological defenses and ideological arrangements in the novel’s characters that induce routine forms of intraracial othering and victimization within their community. The everyday practices Selvon’s boys engage in are all too often complicit in rather than resistant to the received racial narratives of mainstream white society. The problematic “mode of black male style and cultural nationalism” Dawson sees animating the boys’ aggression towards women (36) usefully

gestures towards the work of theorist Paul Gilroy, who has called for overcoming “austere and authoritarian versions of black nationalism” through a utopian articulation of postcolonial cosmopolitanism and conviviality (139). According to Gilroy, the diffuse and conflicted forms of community typical of Selvon’s generation of colonial migrants were superseded in the 1960s and 1970s by a “self-consciously militant and militaristic approach to black solidarity” associated with Black Power (139). Gilroy is critical of the way black nationalists “seized the discursive categories through which their subordination has been transacted or imposed and lodged them in the centres of their ‘wounded’ solidarity” (59). Black nationalism pursued political gains by imposing an artificial the “hypersimilarity of clone identity” on members of the minority in-group (71). Gilroy raises the imperative of countering the streamlining tendencies of black nationalism through a “carefully cultivated degree of estrangement” from essential identity (78). To the extent that Selvon constructs a heterogeneous and at times divisive black immigrant identity, he enacts an “exilic suspicion” of narrowly defined communities based on reductive racial and ethnic labels (88). Far from being merely anachronistic, Selvon’s counternarrative contributes to the urgent ethical and political task of locating the “irreducible value of diversity within sameness” (75).

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