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'The World Has Always Been in Movement': Relational Ways of Seeing in V.S. Naipaul's *A Way in the World*

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Abstract

In a discussion of his 1994 text, *A Way in the World: A Sequence*, Naipaul comments: 'People come and go all the time; the world has always been in movement.'¹ *A Way in the World* consists of a series of separate but interconnected narratives. Drawing on Edouard Glissant's concept of relational identity, this paper explores Naipaul's engagement – on both a thematic and a structural level – with a notion of Caribbean identity that is fluid and multiply-located, based on intercultural contacts within and beyond the region. I argue that Naipaul makes use of the form and the idea of the sequence in order to revisit and review both himself and the Caribbean. In doing this, I suggest, he writes himself into a community of travellers whose journeys are spatially and temporally wide-ranging but at the same time contained within the socio-cultural space of the Caribbean.

V.S. Naipaul describes *A Way in the World* (1994) as follows:

This book is a way of dealing with all the various strands of the Caribbean or New World background, the place, and all the different stages of learning about it, as well. [...] My story does have connections; they are associations. They are inseparable from the background.²

Subtitled – in British editions at least – as ‘A Sequence’, *A Way in the World* consists of nine separate narratives. Shifting between Trinidad and Venezuela, England, and Africa, these narratives are geographically wide-ranging. They also extend through time from the experiences of a seventeenth-century English explorer to the struggles of a post-independence Afro-Trinidadian political leader. Furthermore, as an eclectic assortment of fiction, autobiography, literary criticism, travel writing, and dramatised historical reconstruction, these narratives move between diverse generic frameworks. In temporal, spatial and formal terms, then, this text locates itself in movement. Despite this, Naipaul’s comment on the text firmly situates it within a ‘Caribbean or New World background’. The ‘associations’ connecting the narratives across space, time and style are emphatically *not* translatable to any other social or cultural context; they are ‘inseparable from the background’.

I propose that these apparently contradictory concepts of movement and cultural specificity are integral to Naipaul’s reading of the Caribbean in this text. The simultaneously disjunctive and expansive narrative structure of *A Way in the World* offers a means of exploring the Caribbean as a site of ‘discontinuous conjunction’,³ to use Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s term, and as a socio-cultural space which extends beyond the geographical boundaries of the region. This structure also enables Naipaul to explore how his own movement between the Caribbean and other locations, rather than detaching him from the place of his birth, identifies him with it. He expresses in the passage above an equal concern with the ‘place’ itself and ‘all the stages of learning about it’. His examination of his own development as a writer – familiar material in his earlier texts – becomes, in *A Way in the World*, inextricable from his depiction of the Caribbean. In this paper I will examine how Naipaul revisits and rewrites both himself and the Caribbean, and in doing so reconsiders his relationship to his place of birth.

Several critics view *A Way in the World*, along with *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), as marking a shift in Naipaul’s self-positioning in relation to the Caribbean.⁴ For example, Bénédicte Alliot argues that in these two texts, Naipaul alters his focus from the narrow

context of ‘insular Trinidad’ to a ‘wider, “trans-spatial” frame’, and in doing so attempts to ‘[turn] the political post-colonial subject into an aesthetic trans-cultural model’.⁵ Against Alliot’s ‘trans-cultural’ interpretation, I intend to read this text in terms of Edouard Glissant’s notion of relational identity. Glissant’s model of ‘relation’ moves in opposing directions. On the one hand, it is ‘open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible’;⁶ this fluidity implies a breakdown of national and ethnic boundaries. On the other hand, ‘identity as a system of relation [is] a form of violence that challenges the generalizing universal and necessitates even more stringent demands for specificity’.⁷ According to Glissant’s model, movement towards the ‘universal’ is constantly challenged by linguistic and cultural ‘specificity’ in order to prevent the assimilation of communities into a global system. ‘Relation’ depends as much upon connections between communities as on their mutual acknowledgement of difference. For Glissant, and, I suggest, for the author of *A Way in the World*, the participation of Caribbean communities in an intercultural network of relations allows for a conception of Caribbean space which moves beyond the region. However, this outward movement does not involve the ‘dilut[ion]’⁸ of Caribbean identities. Neither does it, as Alliot claims, entail a shift from politics to aesthetics.

Naipaul states in his 2001 Nobel lecture that his ‘aim has always been to fill out [his] world picture’, and that his travel writing ‘extended [him] technically’, allowing him to ‘take in’ a wider and more complex ‘world view’.⁹ These comments seem to support readings of his work as ‘trans-spatial’ and ‘trans-cultural’. However, the notion of a widened field of vision does not imply, as Alliot proposes, a total change of perspective. In *A Way in the World* Naipaul’s semi-autobiographical narrator constructs his writing self in relation to earlier versions of himself as viewing subject.¹⁰ As I will discuss, this relational process connects, without merging, his subject positions at various stages in his life. The narrator’s more mature ‘world picture’ is thus able to contain, without overwriting, his initial impressions of an ‘insular Trinidad’.

In ‘History’, the narrator demonstrates this idea of a multiple subject position. He looks back and reflects on his previous responses to Port of Spain, aged eighteen as an inhabitant and aged twenty-four as a visitor. He describes a lawyer’s chambers from his adult, visitor’s perspective:

It would have been one of the earliest residential houses, built perhaps in the 1780s, not long after the city had been laid out. I suppose a number of these early houses were as small and squashed as they were because only short stretches of the streets had been made up; bush and plantations would have been quite close.¹¹

The twenty-four-year-old figure positions the building historically in relation to the Spanish conquest of Trinidad, and geographically in relation to surrounding plantations. Unlike the eighteen-year-old figure, who responds to Port of Spain buildings as isolated, aesthetic objects – noticing, for example, the ‘rough grey front wall’ and the ‘pointed reddish arches’ of the Police Headquarters (13) – the twenty-four-year-old figure reads them as part of a larger socio-cultural picture. The eighteen-year-old figure does not question the reasons for the style and size of buildings. For him, the appearance of the Police Headquarters is ‘just what you would expect to find’ (13). This feeling of the appropriateness of the building to the place gives it an illusion of permanence which is undermined by the twenty-four-year-old figure’s imagined excavation.

The eighteen-year-old figure’s inability to locate Trinidad according to spatial or temporal coordinates is shown to be part of a wider lack of awareness among Trinidadians. The narrator’s comment, ‘scratch us and we all bled’ (31), implies that history is present but in a latent state, existing below the surface of not only the town’s architecture, but the consciousness of its people. By drawing attention to the ‘Spanish foundations’, and beneath those the ‘Amerindian soil’, in the commercial streets which have been levelled, the twenty-four-year-old figure appears to correct the narrowness and naivety of his earlier response. His more informed analysis serves to ‘scratch’ the surface of the landscape to show that ‘there had been blood here before’ (41).

However, a later observation on his early attempts to write alters the balance in the relationship between these two ways of seeing:

Sometimes I did Port of Spain scenes. [...] I liked doing those tableaux. [...] Artificial, but everything I worked on in this way stayed with me, and years later some of those descriptions were to be a key to events and moods I had thought beyond recall. (26)

The examples he gives of these ‘tableaux’ focus in on minute details, highlighting textures and effects of light. They therefore contrast with the twenty-four-year-old figure’s remapping of the town, which spans a wider field of vision and imposes the two-dimensionality of a

diagram. While in the case of the Police Headquarters and the lawyer's chambers, our attention was drawn to the limitations of the narrator's first impressions of Port of Spain, here we are shown the importance of those impressions. The narrator's ability to hold on to them while adjusting his perspective – 'they stayed with me' – allows him to construct a version of Trinidad where lived experience is not lost in the more objective vision of the returning migrant. By juxtaposing his two earlier positions, the narrator subjects them both to critique; each way of seeing exposes the blind spots of the other. However, he does not discard those visions but foregrounds them, emphasising their significance as part of his revised understanding of Trinidad. Naipaul's narrator does not, therefore, reformulate his position in relation to Trinidad, but complicates it through an accumulation of perspectives.

Through this sequence of visions, Naipaul's narrator not only deepens his understanding of his place of birth, but also re-associates himself with it in the context of his more complex 'world picture'. In 'History', the narrator comments: 'I came and went irregularly [...] It was from this distance, and with these interruptions, that I saw this place I knew and didn't know, which continued in its state of insurrection' (33). The continuity of the narrator's vision of Trinidad is doubly disrupted, by his own absences and by its political upheaval. In an interview Naipaul reflects on his attempt, in his fiction and travel writing, 'to express the movement of one's soul and of the world'.¹² These two movements, of the traveller and the site traversed, are presented in *A Way in the World* as interrelated. Naipaul's initial journey to England was – at least in part – an effect of the colonial education he received in Trinidad, and a consequence of a social and economic context in which it is necessary to leave in order to succeed as a writer.¹³ Conversely, it could be argued that his cultural and geographic uprooting has contributed to a notion of Caribbean identity which extends beyond the region. As the twenty-four-year-old figure discovers through his archaeological reading of Port of Spain, Caribbean landscapes have long been – and continue to be – multiply inscribed by population movements and intercultural contacts; the migration of Naipaul and other Caribbean writers in the fifties could be seen as a layer of that inscription. The 'interruptions' of the person and the 'insurrection' of the place thus not only reflect but produce and implicate each other.

I have suggested that Naipaul's new approach to the Caribbean is developed in relation to his earlier perspectives. I will now go on to argue that it is also generated through the relation of

his own perspectives and subject positions to those of other writers, historical figures, and fictional characters. In 'Passenger', the narrator charts a trajectory through the 'great chain of changing outside vision' of Trinidad (102), examining the particular motivations of each era of European travellers. Tourists at the turn of the century 'came for the history', whereas interwar tourists came 'to be in places that were unspoilt, places that time had passed by, places, it might be said, that had never been discovered' (73). Both sets of travellers project a false temporality on the island. The Edwardians impose a narrative of imperial history as, in Derek Walcott's terms, an absurd 'vision of progress'.¹⁴ Conversely, the 1930s cruise ship tourists render it ahistorical, reinventing it as an 'unspoilt' aboriginal island, and thus re-enacting Columbus's initial 'discovery'. This 'great chain' of external vision is 'changing' in that the island is continually 'refashioned' (73) according to the needs and concerns of each generation of travellers. However, these visions are also monotonous in their repetition of the myths which have fuelled a series of European conquests of New World locations. They therefore obstruct any real change in external perceptions of Trinidadian culture and society.

In a discussion of *A Way in the World*, Naipaul comments: 'The chain just goes on and on. You have to break the chain at some stage'.¹⁵ This book, in its intertextual dialogue with European travel narratives, could certainly be seen as an extension of the 'great chain of changing outside vision' of Caribbean and New World locations, and indeed critics such as Rob Nixon and Ian Gregory Strachan read Naipaul's work as reinforcing the values and assumptions of Victorian travel writers.¹⁶ I would argue, however, that Naipaul traces the passages of those earlier travellers in order to break that chain. His semi-autobiographical narrator does indeed set his own vision of Trinidad against those of a series of European explorers and travellers, ranging from Christopher Columbus to contemporary tourists. However, in doing so he draws attention to the inaccuracy of those visions. For example, he describes how Columbus imposes a familiar image of the gardens of 'Valencia in the spring' (76) on all the vegetation he sees, erasing the specificity of each Caribbean island; a comparison with Spanish landscapes is 'the only way [Columbus] had' of making sense of a place which was alien to him.

The narrator of 'Passenger' observes: 'Perhaps there is no pure or primal gift of vision. Perhaps vision can only be tutored, and depends on an ability to compare one thing with another' (76). In Columbus's case, the comparison of unfamiliar places with familiar images

is reductive. In contrast, Naipaul's narrator in this section makes use of the 'ability to compare one thing with another' in order to open up a space for new ways of seeing. As a visitor to Trinidad, he attempts to imaginatively reconstruct Columbus's first glimpse of the island, depopulated and stripped of its intervening history. He describes how 'it was hard to hold on to that romantic way of looking' (72), especially when he travelled away from the coast and back into 'a version of the colony [he] had known as a child' (72). From his uninformed childhood perspective, 'no moment of beginning, no past, seemed possible' (72). However, Columbus's professed 'discovery' of the New World inserts the Caribbean into a European historiography which throws the extensive prior existence of its indigenous populations into a void. Both Columbus's 'romantic' perspective and the narrator's childhood 'version' of Trinidad are therefore limited in their grasp of Caribbean experiences. It is through the narrator's comparison of these visions that his narrative works against their limits. By 'hold[ing] on to' both ways of seeing, even as they threaten to erase each other, he deprives both these visions of their power to determine Caribbean realities. In doing so, Naipaul's narrator does not offer an alternative vision, but gestures towards a more complex Caribbean which exceeds the confines of a single aesthetic or conceptual framework.

In 'Passenger', a partial alignment of the visions of Columbus and the narrator both associates those visions, and makes comparison possible. Similarly, the partial identification of Naipaul's narrator with various characters in *A Way in the World* both connects autobiographical and fictional figures, and draws attention to their distinct positions in terms of ethnicity, nationality and class. For example, the narrator's movement between Trinidad and other locations relates him to the itinerant and culturally ambiguous Manuel Sorzano in 'A New Man'. The narrator explores the common ground between himself and Sorzano, and yet he is careful to point out discrepancies. He comments how even the Indo-Trinidadian aspects of Sorzano render him 'in some ways still strange, far from me, because of his religious needs, which I didn't have' (221). They are further divided by their occupations – writer and carpenter – and by their level of education, as is implied when Sorzano asks for help completing his disembarkation form (220). In my reading, the social and cultural distances separating Naipaul's semi-autobiographical figures from fictional figures such as Sorzano play as important a role as the associations between these figures in the text's construction of a diverse and extensive Caribbean space.

In her analysis of *A Way in the World*, Fawzia Mustafa describes the ‘narrative meeting’ in Africa of ‘three Caribbean players’.¹⁷ In her view, the relationship between the trajectories of fictional and semi-autobiographical figures allows Naipaul to demonstrate how ‘[o]nly Naipaul as narrator survives’.¹⁸ According to her reading, Naipaul’s text privileges one way in the world; that of an internationally renowned writer. Against this, I would argue that travel in *A Way in the World* becomes the common practice of a community which exceeds the limits of a literary elite. The text offers an assortment of travellers who are comparable but not identical to Naipaul, and not all of whom are literate or materially privileged. The associative links between the sections do not, as Mustafa would imply, serve to emphasise the success of Naipaul’s life course. Instead they enable Naipaul to widen his textual terrain and extend his perspective from the individual to the collective. In doing so he writes himself into a larger ‘world picture’ of migrants and displaced people who move within the socio-cultural context of the Caribbean.

A Way in the World does not endorse creolising visions or narratives of political affiliation, but it does intimate the possibility of associations across national, ethnic and cultural boundaries. In this text, Naipaul reassesses his relationship to his place of birth according to a revised understanding of the Caribbean as part of a world which is ‘always in movement’.¹⁹ He charts the trajectories of a variety of travellers whose journeys – although spatially and temporally wide-ranging – intersect within a Caribbean socio-cultural matrix. In doing so he repositions himself within a community of ‘Caribbean Players’ which moves beyond the region, and which encompasses social and economic circumstances beyond his own immediate experience. It is through relational connections, between narratives and between semi-autobiographical and fictional figures, that a ‘trans-cultural’ and ‘trans-spatial’ poetics is achieved in this text; a poetics which, to challenge Alliot’s use of these terms, is at the same time ‘inseparable’ from a ‘Caribbean or New World background’.

Notes

¹ Jonathan Rosen and Tarun Tejpal, ‘V.S. Naipaul: The art of fiction’ (interview), *Paris Review*, 40:148 (1998), 38-54 (p. 40).

² Aamer Hussein, ‘Delivering the Truth: An Interview with V. S. Naipaul’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 September 1994, 3-4. Reprinted in *Conversations with V. S. Naipaul*, ed. by Feroza Jussawalla (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp. 154-61 (pp. 154-55).

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- ³ Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, trans. by James E. Maraniss (Durham, USA: Duke University Press, 1992 [1989]), p. 2.
- ⁴ See Timothy Weiss, 'V.S. Naipaul's "fin de siècle": *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*', *Ariel*, 27:3 (1996), 107-24; Caryl Phillips, 'The Voyage in a Way in the World', *The New Republic*, 210:24 (1994), 40-5 (p. 44).
- ⁵ Bénédicte Alliot, 'Transcultural Vision in V.S. Naipaul's Fiction: Looking for a Way in the World in Recent Naipaul', in *Bridges Across Chasms: Towards a Transcultural Future in Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Bénédicte Ledent (Liege: Liege Language and Literature, 2004), pp. 101-14 (pp. 102-3).
- ⁶ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997 [1990]), p. 32.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- ⁹ V.S. Naipaul, 'Two Worlds', in *Literary Occasions: Essays*, (London: Picador, 2004 [2003]), pp. 181-95 (p. 191; p. 193).
- ¹⁰ I will refer to the earlier versions of Naipaul's narrator as 'the twenty-four-year-old figure' and 'the eighteen-year-old figure'.
- ¹¹ V. S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World* (London: Vintage, 2001 [1994]), p. 14. Further references to this edition are given in parenthesis in the text.
- ¹² Alastair Niven, 'V. S. Naipaul Talks to Alastair Niven', *Wasafiri*, 21 (1995), 5-6. Reprinted in Jussawalla, pp. 162-65 (p. 163).
- ¹³ In 'Prologue to an Autobiography', Naipaul makes this point about his writing: 'The career wasn't possible in Trinidad, a small, mainly agricultural colony'. V.S. Naipaul, 'Prologue to an Autobiography', in *Literary Occasions*, pp. 53-111 (p. 67).
- ¹⁴ Derek Walcott, 'The Muse of History', in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), pp. 36-64 (p. 41).
- ¹⁵ Hussein, p. 160.
- ¹⁶ See, for example, Ian Gregory Strachan, *Paradise and Plantation: Tourism and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- ¹⁷ Fawzia Mustafa, *V. S. Naipaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 211.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 212.
- ¹⁹ Naipaul, 'Two Worlds', p. 186.