The Sovereignty of the Imagination:  
An Interview with George Lamming

David Scott

Who comes walking in the dark night time?
Whose boot of steel trumps down the slender grass?
It is the man of death, my love, the strange invader
watching you sleep and aiming at your dream.
—Martin Carter, “This Is the Dark Time My Love”

Preface

At the Eighth Convocation Ceremony of the University of Guyana, held on 19 October 1974, the “poems man” Martin Carter gave a lecture entitled “A Free Community of Valid Persons.”¹ It is an address that, justly, has passed into legend. Carter, then only forty-seven but speaking with the authority of more then twenty years of (almost) unimpeachable political commitment and recognized literary accomplishment behind him, reflected on the deepening crisis of cynicism and instrumentalism that had become so deforming a feature of our postcolonial Caribbean politics. Perhaps the crisis

¹. Martin Carter, “A Free Community of Valid Persons,” in “A Martin Carter Prose Sampler,” Kyk-Over-Al 44 (May 1993): 30–32. This special issue was coedited by Ian McDonald and Nigel Westmaas. All quotations are from this source.
was particularly evident—or particularly absurd—in Guyana in those darkening Forbes Burnham years of the cooperative 1970s, but as we were to learn soon enough in the rest of the region, that distinctive experience of postcolonial barbarism was a cruel omen: it was our future, a future that has lasted a long, long time.

The focus of Carter’s disenchantment on this notable occasion was the descent of our politics into, among other perversions, what he called “the exercise of state power which brooks little interference and distorts men and laws in the overt and covert processes of its consolidation and hegemony” (32). Speaking, as he so often did, in the measured meter of a poetic and metaphorical prose, Carter described the emergence of a certain way of thinking and acting that had become prevalent especially among those who had arrogated to themselves the right (and appropriated to themselves the power) to “decide how we should live” (31). Carter was at war with this attitude and the “paralysis of spirit” it induced, its deadening effect on the personality of the ruled. But for Carter this was not a time for complacency or submission. To the contrary, for him there was no better time for the kind of engaged self-criticism that defined the active citizen (as Hannah Arendt would have called her) of a sovereign community. For as he said, “it is precisely in times of crisis that we must re-examine our lives and bring to that re-examination contempt for the trivial, and respect for the riskers who go forward boldly to participate in the building of a free community of valid persons” (32).
George Lamming is one of these “riskers.” There are perhaps few Caribbean writers with a keener sense of the meaning of Martin Carter’s literary-political purposes in this essay than Lamming. This is because there are few Caribbean writers (of any generation of them, and Lamming belongs to Carter’s almost exactly) with a keener sense of the relation between writing and politics, between the moral exercise of criticism and the practical demands of decision making. (Maybe Roger Mais, a generation older, would have recognized its purposes too, for he was also someone of whom it could be said what Eusi Kwayana memorably said in his tribute to Martin Carter, namely that “his poetry was not a political instrument, but his politics was an expression of his poetry.”)² In this lecture, as elsewhere in the occasional prose he had published since the anticolonial days of Thunder in the 1950s, Carter was carrying out a distinctive moral and intellectual function, one that has come to be a recognizable dimension of George Lamming’s practice as a writer. Rupert Roopnaraine aptly describes this function when he refers to Carter’s addresses as “educating people into the habit of thinking.”³

There are, no doubt, many angles at which it is possible to come with advantage at the work of George Lamming, such is its range and its depth, its subtly and complexity, but this is the one that I find the most compelling and the most insistent in its contemporary moral-aesthetic claim on us: the idea of the writer who has assumed the duty of educating her or his public into the habits of thinking. Lamming’s work as a writer and public intellectual is exemplary not for its expression as the wonderful gift of a novelist’s hand (which in any case it is) but for its preoccupation with the problem of the free exercise of the critical faculty, the public function of inducing thought—self-reflexive thought; thought confronting congealed forms of itself—into the social and political life of the community. He has charged himself with this obligation: to pause, to doubt, to question, to wonder out loud about the assumptions, the conditions, the terms, the conventions, the values in relation to which, at any given moment, we pursue the projects we pursue. This is the imagination’s area of sovereignty. For Lamming, a close reader of Sartre’s famous 1948 essay What Is Literature? and its central idea of la littérature engagée, writing is the embodiment of a freedom to choose and therefore an ethical act of commitment.⁴ For Lamming, as a consequence, the sovereignty of the imagination has neither to do with the sequestering of creativity from, nor its absorption

by, the world of affairs—this would be merely bad faith. Rather an authentic sovereignty of the imagination has to do with the active will to refuse submission to the shibboleths that seek at every turn to inspire our self-contempt and our unthinking docility, and to command our understandings of, and our hopes for, what it might mean to live as a free community of valid persons.

George Lamming is, above all, a Caribbean exemplar of the engaged writer. Born in Barbados in 1927, he is a novelist and essayist of large, perhaps incalculable, accomplishment. At the center of his achievement, of course, are his six novels, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), *The Emigrants* (1954), *Of Age and Innocence* (1958), *Season of Adventure* (1960), *Water with Berries* (1971), and *Natives of My Person* (1972), and the long essay *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960). In more recent years, though, as his role as a public intellectual has found the shape and voice that now define his presence among us, his addresses and interviews have been brought together in *Conversations* (1992), and more recently still he has published a small volume of essays, *Coming, Coming, Coming Home* (1995).

The Interview

1937

David Scott: I want to begin with the Barbados of your memory, the Barbados of your childhood and boyhood. Some of the details of that period are of course known, but what would you say is your most vivid childhood memory of the 1930s?

George Lamming: I think the riots of 1937. And I am just about nine or ten. And it would take me many years later to come to understand that one was at the center of something very explosive and very transforming. Because I lived in what nowadays they would call an urban village: Carrington Village. And Carrington Village had a reputation that would almost be the equivalent of August Town [in Jamaica]: poor and dangerous. And so therefore when the riots took place, there was a sense of absolute alarm. For example, I’d gone to school—I was in primary school then—and to our amazement and delight, we were stopped at the entrance by the headmaster and told to return home as quickly as we could. But no explanation was given. This was about eight, eight-thirty in the morning. And we just went back. And on the way back, along what was called Roebuck Street, people were closing the doors of shops everywhere. Suddenly! We don’t know what this is about, but there is some kind of trouble.
DS: So you don’t have an apprehension of unrest in the days leading up to the riots?

GL: No, I don’t recall any unrest leading up to that. It would be through a filter then of reading and so on. But I don’t recall unrest. Clearly that had been going on. One is just, as I say, shocked that what you call ordinary barefoot people could come into a confrontation of that kind with the state. Because by the time I got back home there are police vans with policemen and bayoneted rifles driving through the streets of this village. It’s like witnessing war for the first time without quite knowing what exactly the war was about. That would unfold a little later.

DS: What was your mother’s response to the riots?

GL: Fear. Because what is very interesting here is that my stepfather is a policeman, so I am living in a house in which there is some concern about his safety. But my mother’s response to the riots would have been, “Why are they behaving like that?” In other words, there was no solidarity among the poor about the confrontation. And we romanticize that if we think that is so. In fact there is a scene in Castle [In the Castle of my Skin] which highlights the ambivalence which is at work between villagers who are not sure whether they should be part of this and villagers who want to move forward. There would have been, among a number of people, some alarm about why are they behaving like that. And the reason is, when you look back on it, the Barbados of 1938/1939 is a semifeudal Barbados. It is a Barbados where there is no doubt at all about the location of absolute power. It is a total plantation society and a garrison as well. One of the ironies of geography here is that this poor village is only five minutes’ walk from where the governor lives. So on their way to the governor they’re passing by our house. You didn’t approach Government House in 1938, even on legitimate business. So to see barefoot men storming off to Government House! I think ’37 is probably the most vivid memory of that childhood.

DS: Is your sense that something perceptibly alters in, say, your household, or in the atmosphere of the village after July 1937? Is your experience of yourself and life in the village altered by that experience as you live it—not as you reflect on it later?

GL: No, I wouldn’t think that there is any perceptible difference in what was going to happen. Life returns to a certain normalcy, with this exception: that the riots of 1937 are going to create a political figure in the form of Grantley Adams. Grantley Adams
was no part of the making of the riots of 1937. It was the occasion of ’37 that made him. And he now comes out of that as a voice on behalf of those who had in fact created this disturbance. He comes also with the right credentials. He looks like the overwhelming majority of the population, but he is a man who’s been away and he’s been, of all places, to Oxford, and he’s one of the leading criminal lawyers and so on. He has all the right credentials for that vast black constituency, and therefore he gives respectability to dissent. This would be the change. That all sorts of people who would have kept quiet about things before could now begin conversations with “as Adams said last night . . .” Because he’s then going to become quite an extraordinary charismatic figure.

DS: Much like N. W. Manley in Jamaica?

GL: I would think more so, because Adams’s constituency is absolutely with the bottom of the society, the world down below. I don’t think N. W. Manley captured that world in quite that way. Adams would more have been a kind of Oxford Bustamante. It was as if you would marry Bustamante to the credentials of Oxford.

DS: Do you have a memory of Clement Payne?⁵

DS: In the months immediately following the riots, is there much continued talk in your house between your mother and stepfather, or their friends, about the implications of the riots that you can remember?

GL: No, I can’t remember any talk about that. I think people went back to their lives as if the war was over. But I can tell you that what is going to be very vivid in my memory, coming right after the riots, is the arrival and the investigations of the Moyne Commission.⁶ Now the Moyne Commission comes in 1938, ’39, and a very interesting thing happened in Barbados. Those interrogations took place in public, many of them, in Queen’s Park in the day. Now that was all right; as a boy I went down to Queen’s Park. And what they did was they set up microphones so that the crowd of people outside [could hear]. The commission had the various people summoned inside what is now

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6. On the Moyne Commission in Barbados, see ibid., 123–24.
that theater that you see there [the Daphne Joseph Hackett Theatre], and you heard the questions, and you heard the answer. And what I remember very well is the interventions of the crowd, sort of shouting, “That’s not true! That’s not true!”—whether it was the bishop he was questioning, or whoever. I remember that later it would seem to me a fascinating moment in a kind of popular democracy in which the commission’s exchanges didn’t take place in some enclosed place to which ordinary people had no access. They were out there hearing it and I think this may in some way have influenced some of the exchanges that took place. That investigation in Queen’s Park is an even stronger memory [than the riots themselves]. And I think that in a way it’s the beginning of my formal public education in politics—the listening to those investigations.

DS: You’d have gone to Queen’s Park with friends, presumably.

GL: A group of boys, or one of us going down.

DS: And you would have had conversation afterwards.

GL: Well, we are going to find out what's happening. We are aware that something serious has happened, and people have been imprisoned by now. So we know now what's happening, but it's a question of let's see what's going to happen from here on. And then there would have been discussions; there would have been discussions about that. I think in a way one of the unconscious effects at the time that that is having on you is to be extremely skeptical about the authenticity of the establishment, about the truth of the people who were in charge in the society, their capacity to tell the truth.

DS: Did this lead to any conflict between yourself and your stepfather?

GL: No, because I don’t think that what was happening would have been on our agenda at all. He would have come and gone about his business and I would have gone to school and so on regardless. I don’t remember the events being discussed at school, which is also an in-between thing, because shortly after that, I am going to transfer from the primary school to the secondary school—and then you become more conscious.

DS: I want to come to that in a minute. But before we get there, there is a very interesting moment in a lecture that you gave, I think, in Carriacou, in which, describing this village and your boyhood, you describe it as being not an ordinary village but a “bad
village.” And your description of this is part of an illustration of what you might call the etiquette of class that you are living and experiencing. Can you elaborate a little bit on that?

GL: Yes. A “bad” village in the popular conception of good and bad. . . . When I’m using it in Carriacou, I’m using “bad” there almost as Afro-Americans would use bad in the 1960s, because I’m using “bad” to mean that it was a village characterized by men of extraordinary independence. And the reason for this was that it was a village made up to a large extent of an artisan class. I mean, nobody left that village to go into town about [that is, to buy] shoes. The shoes were made and repaired in that village; there would have been three or four shoemakers—hence the centrality of the shoemaker in Castle. The tailor was in that village, the shoemaker was in that village, the blacksmith was in that village, the seamstress was in that village. In other words, there was something about the village where you had men who were self-employed in their own way. They were dependent on other sources and so on. But they therefore had a kind of irreverence, if you like, that you don’t associate quite often with a man who’s totally dependent on whether he’s going to be employed today and not employed tomorrow. And it’s a village in which on occasion there would be ferocious fights, sometimes fights between women at the open standpipe. Queuing was not a law there in our culture. You got there first, and everybody got there first with buckets to get water. So that was always a scene where there may be fights and then there would be, on occasions, what is now called domestic violence of men, for one reason or another, beating up their woman, the woman they lived with. And I think I gave in Carriacou the example that the nearest police station was really only about two hundred or three hundred yards away, but it took an awfully long time when word got down to the police station that a policeman was required here in Alkins Road or Murrel’s Road or wherever it was. A policeman could have been there really within five minutes, and it might have been an hour or so before he got there. Because, I was told later, there was a big argument, nobody was volunteering to go into that village to resolve any dispute. And in that sense I am not identifying [bad] with the negative word when I am using it there. It carried a certain measure of self-esteem among elements within it. Something also that I reflect on a lot now is the strong proprietary sense which people had in relation to the road in which they lived—an extraordinary sense of space that belonged here. For example, you lived in this road, okay, and

if you saw anybody who lived in the road above you’d ask him what he’s doing here, as though he didn’t have permission to come into this road. And each road had this very odd way of belonging to the people who lived in it. And you didn’t just walk in this road as you pleased, unless we knew who you were.

DS: So that attitude would also be addressed to the state and its apparatus.

GL: As a matter of fact, many of the vanguard of the rioters came out of that village, when you start identifying [them]. After Payne was arrested, meetings were held in that village, open-air meetings were held not down in town but in that village. They had a kind of open area they called the gully, and meetings were held there.

DS: Do you remember any of those meetings?

GL: No, I wouldn’t. As I say, I’m at an age where I don’t really have permission to leave the house at night except on Sundays where church would be involved—whether you went or not. If you said you were going to church, you could go for seven o’clock, and that was cool.

DS: There were times when you were sent off to church and you didn’t go.

GL: Sometimes, for Sunday night service.

DS: And where would you go?

GL: Oh, one would have all kinds of liaisons, with somebody who was going to church but who wasn’t going. It was very funny. Because if you were arranging to meet a girl, what you had to be careful of, if you were asked questions, was to find out what was the last hymn. Because you might be asked what hymns were sung. So you may have actually gone and checked, because the hymns were up on the board, the order in which they would be sung. So you’d try to remember the first one and the last one, so that if you were confronted with where you were, you could say, “at the end of the service was hymn 534, Ancient and Modern.”

DS: As I say, in that lecture in Carriacou you raise the example of the “badness” of the village as part of an illustration of the etiquette of class and of the experience of class.
And as part of an argument that you are making that you don’t learn about class from Marx—you lived it.

GL: I lived it. By the time I came to read Marx it was as though he was reporting on experiences that I had known firsthand.

DS: But there is a contrast that you are making between your experience and the experience of others around you, and the way in which your mother and yourself developed a way of exchanging gestures that would enable you to preserve something about yourself intact.

GL: A conflict is coming up that I am going to be very aware of. When I go to the high school there’s a sense that it was almost a psychological migration, because in Barbados your class and status were determined by a number of things—not only occupation, color, complexion, who your family were, and so on, but an important index was your address, where you lived. So for example, when you went to that kind of school and you lived in my kind of village, on those days—say at the beginning of the term where registers were being taken of who were new people and so on, or if you were in a new form—you would have some boys like myself (I was a scholarship winner otherwise I wouldn’t have been in the school) who were extremely reticent about giving an accurate account of address. So that one of the things you didn’t want to do was to put Carrington Village on that address. That somehow would mark you in the form as being other than okay.

Bim

DS: I am going to come back, of course, to Marx, and to what you take from Marx, in particular your conception of labor. But I want to dwell a little bit on Combermere School, and in particular on your relationship, now I suppose very famous relationship, with Frank Collymore. I think it’s very difficult for someone of my generation to adequately appreciate what Frank Collymore meant to your generation and what Bim meant to aspiring writers of the 1940s and 1950s. Can you tell me about your relationship with Collymore?

8. For a useful history of Combermere School, see Keith A. P. Sandiford and Earle H. Newton, Combermere School and the Barbadian Society (Kingston: The Press, University of the West Indies, 1995).
GL: Well, I try to remember sometimes when it began, because I would become aware of it as I became what you call a big boy in school. He [Collymore] taught English and French throughout most of the school but I’m becoming aware of him from about third form, fourth, fifth form and so on, right to the end. For reasons which may have had to do with the psychological conflicts of moving from that village into that arena of people who may have been the children of civil servants (and that was a very big kind of position to have in those days), I was a restless and very unsettled person in school. I would come within the first three in one term and then somewhere among the last three in the next term. So I had a very difficult relation with many—more than one—of the staff. And I therefore identify the beginnings of my relation with Collymore with him being an exception, and that for some reason or other, in a quite imperceptible kind of way, he came to my rescue. I remember once that I was summoned to the headmaster’s office and told that there had been a request from a number of [teachers]—they didn’t name who—that I should be expelled from the school. I don’t know what the precise offense was, it may have been accumulated and people were getting tired of this nuisance and so on. And he said, “I don’t know what to do, but I will ask Collymore to speak with you.” I don’t remember the details, but I had some talk with Collymore. And then sometime later I am very conscious of him now as this creative person and I am beginning to be conscious of Bim, and at some stage, however it happened, I am given permission to come to his house and use his library.

DS: Edward Baugh has written a very moving portrait of this house and library. Tell me about them.⁹

GL: That house, it’s still there, you can go and see it in Chelsea Road. It hasn’t changed at all. They had a marvelous exhibition some years ago of letters and pictures and people connected to him and so on. It is still there, that kind of bungalow, wide open living room, very modest. Not anything palatial. And in the living room right around he had bookcases with all the glass doors; you had to open the door to get to the books. And to me at that time, because I did not come out of a house with books (the only book in my house would have been the Bible; I would not have been aware of any other books until later, and all library books), Collymore’s library looked to me like a voluminous thing to have in your house—and the paintings. And I think on Saturday mornings I would

go and sit and read and then I could take away what I wanted to take away. Now this even created more trouble in the school. Because when I took away the books from him that I wanted to read, I took them to the school. So when these people came in to teach whatever they were teaching, I was [reading these books]. I think the first two things that I took away from him that I kept for a long time were [H. G.] Wells’s *The Outline of History* and *The Science of Life.*¹⁰ I got so fascinated by them. I think what I was discovering was that there were a people and a history outside something they called the British Empire and Barbados. So I spent about a year or two just reading Wells and the price I paid for that was often being asked to leave the class, because I wasn’t paying attention. The gift that Collymore made to me, which has remained with me, was the gift of reading. I discovered that reading opened a world, a universe, to you.

DS: Was it Collymore’s example to you of reading, or was it Collymore’s encouragement of you to read? And did you have conversations with Collymore about what it was that you were reading?

GL: We would have conversations on occasions, but I think that the distinction that you make is very important. I have a feeling it was largely the example; that it was almost that I was seeing someone I would like to be in relation to books. Now what I made of the books was something else, but for a very long time I found that most of my favorite reading had come from his library. And then I begin to think of writers who I got attached to very early, and that would have been his influence. [Thomas] Hardy, for example, would have been one of those writers, very early. But I think that your point about example, the example of him in relation to books, was more powerful than any kind of guidance, or checking what you discovered in the books. And I must say that that has stayed with me: books are like oxygen. I can’t spend a day without at least three or four hours of reading.

DS: Where does someone like Collymore come from in the colonial Barbados of that time?

GL: Collymore came from what would be called “mixed,” which was very interesting. Collymore would have been perceived generally as white, but he would say he was not.

Later, when I became a man, every time I visited him he would show me family photographs and so on, and you could see along the line, very obviously, colored family in there. But in the Barbados of Collymore’s time, he would not have mixed with white Barbados.

DS: You mean he would have been kept out of, or he would not have voluntarily gone?

GL: He would not have voluntarily gone either, knowing him. In an interesting way, he was not a man given—even when he might have had access to places and so on—to society. He created a world in that house. And people went there to see him. And then what happened is that that house in Chelsea Road became a bridge, because a number of people who went would not—without that house—ordinarily have met each other, or had anything to say to each other. And what is really fascinating to me about Barbados, then and now, is that it is extremely difficult to think of a country, an island so small in which there is such enormous social distance. You have people who live across the road and no real exchange between them.

DS: As I say, Edward Baugh has written a fascinating portrait of Collymore, and one of the things that he says there that I hadn’t known is that 1942 is a very crucial year for Collymore. Suddenly in middle age or near middle age there is a burst of creative activity; he is a part of a dramatic society, and part of Bim, and this is taking place in 1942. And then his volumes of poetry are being published through the 1940s. This is clearly a very creative, generative moment for Collymore himself.¹¹

GL: The Bim thing is very interesting, because he didn’t start Bim.

DS: It was a man by the name of E. L. Cozier.

GL: Right. But what is interesting in this story is that social stratification is a critical factor in any understanding of Barbados. And that social stratification is not just between white and black. It is very strong within; there is no monolithic white world in Barbados. There was a very strong social stratification in that world. So you had what would have been an old planter white world, whose houses would have been totally inac-

¹¹. See Baugh, “Frank Collymore,” 143–44.
cessible to the merchant shop-keeping white Barbadians, and so were their clubs. They would have had very separate clubs. Now you had a club called the YMPC.

DS: The Young Men’s Progressive Club.

GL: Right. And it is in that club that you would have found a lower-middle layer of white, a white that could not go to, say, the yacht club. And they had a cricket team as well. And I think that Collymore might have also been part of it. He was a great footballer and played cricket and so on. And he was in the YMPC. I doubt he would have been a regular, because he was not that kind of gregarious person. He was a man of books; and remember that he’s living in a country where a very small fraction of even the school population are people of books. The book is no part of the life of the planter class. It’s no part of the life of the merchant class. And it’s going to be a part of the life of a certain educated, colored intelligentsia. And, of course, people like Collymore.

DS: He was apparently very close to a man by the name of W. Therold Barnes.

GL: That’s right. Barnes was a white Barbadian who painted.¹² And I think, as I recall conversations with him, I have a feeling that Barnes may have fertilized Bim in one way or another. There was an aspect of Collymore that was curious. He had a strange modesty. He always appeared to be a little alarmed by the reputation which had been imposed on him as this great maker of writers. He never saw himself in that role at all. When Cozier asked him to take Bim over, and he took it, I think it was almost in the nature of a hobby. He loved literature and therefore this would be his hobby. He would make this something that it wouldn’t have been in the YMPC. It would have been a club thing. And it wasn’t until Collymore that it steps out; if you follow it, the early contributions are club business and so on. As Collymore takes it on, then a Barbados that is not part of YMPC enters it. Some of the finest short stories of the early days were written by a man called Carl Sealy who came from that same Carrington Village—beautiful short stories. But as the thing got opened, the pages got opened. It is also then that I enter it first with “Burst,” not yet perhaps having left school.¹³

¹² W. Therold Barnes also published poems and short stories in Bim.
DS: I want to come to that. I think you’ve said this yourself. The emergence of Bim, or what Bim becomes with Collymore, is part of the quickening of the tempo of colonial life in the 1940s, as in one sense Focus was in Jamaica with Edna Manley, and Kyk-Over-Al with A. J. Seymour in Guyana.

GL: Yes. The thing that is interesting there is the difference, the profound difference, in both the temperament and intentions of the editors [of these magazines]. For example, when you are dealing with Focus, you are dealing with a very conscious expression of nationalist affirmation. And when you’re dealing with Seymour and Kyk-Over-Al there is in a Guyanese kind of way (but a Guyanese extending into the Caribbean) that consciousness of creating something out of this colonial world.

DS: Not so in Bim?

GL: No, there is none of that in Collymore’s relation to Bim. This is why there is something rather miraculous about Bim. Collymore’s relation to Bim is, “let us encourage and collect what is the finest literary talent here.” It is not, as I recall, it is not connected to a Barbadian nationalism, or a Caribbean nationalism, or any of that. It is going in fact to become that, in spite of him. Because by the time you get the Trinidad contribution coming, by the time Jamaica comes, by the time it’s being fed also by Caribbean Voices, the things that are coming to it and so on, Collymore finds, really, that he has spawned a regional project, which was not part of his original agenda. Nor was that off his agenda; it was simply an aesthetic relation to literature. And in this sense, unlike Manley, and to some extent, perhaps less so of Seymour, he was a man who was completely apolitical.

DS: I was going to ask you that. Meaning he was antipathetic or politics just didn’t arise?

GL: He wasn’t antipathetic to [politics]. For example, he would have been sympathetic to the changes brought about by Adams. And he was friendly with Adams, but he would not be a man to be identified with a movement of that kind. In fact, I think much later, I know he was a little worried and disturbed about my own overt political identification.

DS: As you think about it and think back on it, do you think that that concern with a principally aesthetic endeavor was useful and important insofar as it put no pressure on young writers to think of themselves as political?
GL: Yes, it was. And that is why, in fact, I would say that it is that blank open space that in some way explains the longevity of Bim, whereas Focus has a few years and then it closes off. And life goes on in a fitful kind of way, but you didn’t have to feel with Bim that you were meeting an agenda of any kind. Except the agenda of whether he considered it good or bad writing.

DS: If not Collymore in that regard then, who is it or what is it, do you think, and when is it, that you begin to think of literature as part of or connected to the question of politics?

GL: I think—one never knows where the seeds of that begin—but I think that the decisive moment in making directions and choices is Trinidad. The role Trinidad is going to play in the reshaping and redirecting of me . . . In fact, my Caribbeanness begins in Trinidad, not in Barbados.

Trinidad

DS: What prompts your departure for Trinidad in 1946?

GL: A man came to Barbados who had started a private boarding school in Trinidad called Colegio de Venezuela, a Venezuelan college, and it was meant for Venezuelan students. Nestor Negron was his name. They were looking for someone to teach English; they wanted an English-speaking person to deal with that. And they went to the various schools. And Cozier had met Negron, was the first to meet Negron. And Cozier told Collymore, and Collymore said he’d like to meet him. And Collymore just came straight back—it was the first time that Collymore had ever come anywhere near to where I lived; he drove there—and told me, “Tomorrow at three o’clock will you go to the Hotel Royal (which I had never been anywhere near there) and ask for Mr. Negron, he would be waiting for you.” That part of Barbados then was almost a kind of Caribbean apartheid area.

That is the moment, going in the role of schoolteacher to this Venezuelan college. It was a very interesting kind of blessing because it then puts me in touch with the Americas in a way that now became part of my agenda. I was not dealing with any Trinidad students at all. All the people I’m dealing with are from Venezuela, very wealthy; and what is happening at that time is that Venezuelan oil is beginning to assert itself in the economy of the place, and what they’re doing is they’re sending their children to make
sure that they get a mastery of English, because of the American presence there. That language is going to be decisive in how they move up and so on in the oil. It was a boarding school from about ages eight to eighteen. And I’m really just about the age of some of them. It was arranged in such a way that they had to follow the curriculum of the education department of the Ministry of Education in Caracas.

And it is there then that I also became aware of the political figure as monument in a people’s consciousness. Because the way those Venezuelans spoke of [Simon] Bolivar! I had never heard anyone spoken of in the world of politics and struggle and war in the way they spoke of Bolivar. And if you’d made a mistake and uttered the slightest irreverence about Bolivar, you were only playing with your life. That kind of figure in the national consciousness was something completely new to me. And here, by the way, is going to be my first connection with the name Nicolas Guillen. Because Guillen is on the syllabus; once we’re in the Spanish literature class the name Guillen is coming up. The other name that remained with me very much was Andrés Bello. He was the scholarly equivalent of Bolivar. Bolivar was dealing with [politics]; but the brain, the scholar, was Andrés Bello.¹⁴

DS: It has always struck me—I’m curious, and again, I’ve often wondered whether this is generational—that unlike the situation in Latin America, and certainly unlike the situation in India, in the Caribbean, the heroes of our anticolonial political struggle don’t live on in the lives of the postcolony in the same way. Is there a figure in the anticolonial movement of the Anglo-Creole Caribbean who lives in such a tangible way in the present as Bolivar does? Or in the way that Gandhi does?

GL: No, but I would say the nearest we would have come to that in the consciousness of Caribbean people, before that got erased, was [Captain A. A.] Cipriani.¹⁵ And that really had to do with his role in the First World War when they met in Palestine. But wherever you went, and long after Cipriani was dead, there was a whole generation that [venerated] Cipriani whether you were talking to the Marryshaws or Wickhams or whoever. But we don’t have it in the way they did, and I think we don’t have it in the way they did because there is a sense in which the thrust of 1937—later ’38 in Jamaica—was

¹⁴. Andrés Bello (1781–1865) was one of the most influential political and intellectual figures in nineteenth-century Latin America. He was a tutor and friend of Simon Bolivar.

aborted; it was not really completed. It was aborted by the coming of the Second World War, and therefore any kind of political activity was sedition or thought to be. So the forces that were aligned and worked there became diverted, detoured into the defense of something else, in fact, the defense of what they were about to dismantle in 1937, 1938. That lull—and it’s a very long lull—from 1938 adult suffrage is going to come about [only] in 1950 in Barbados. It’s a long, long lull. And in the Bolivar struggle—it’s going to be a serious kind of struggle—there’s a continuity of war and fighting and so on in the nineteenth century, and all through the 1820s. The marks of that are there. In the Caribbean community, in the case of Cuba, Martí is the name of a gospel across three or four generations. And it doesn’t look as though that would ever stop. And that has again to do with the history of the Ten Years’ War in the 1870s, extending into the revolution of 1895 to 1898. Our moments are almost in the nature of social imperial settlements.

DS: And indeed the Moyne Commission is a part of the attempt to produce that settlement.

GL: Right, to diffuse that.

DS: You arrive in Trinidad in 1946, and you are teaching at this boarding school, and you are also as you’ve described yourself elsewhere, a “missionary” for Bim. And you meet a number of writers in that context. Can you tell me about them? Who do you meet and what is your relationship with them? You meet Cecil Herbert, Clifford Sealy. Do you meet Edgar Mittelholtzer at that time? Sam Selvon?

GL: Yes, yes. And there was something about Trinidad that I have no experience of in Barbados. There was not the rigidity of class in Trinidad. I entered the world of Trinidad via a group called the Readers and Writers Guild. This was a group of people who met either once a month or whatever it was, who were going to be writers or were writers and so on. And that became a kind of institution. So it’s within that orbit. The importance about that is that that would have been a catalyst that fused people of very different classes.

DS: Who was participating in it?

GL: At the time, a very fine short-story writer and intellectual, Clifford Sealy, who died not long ago. The most outstanding gift at that time was a man called Cecil Herbert, a
poet, and that is an unfortunate story. But of the poets there was A. M. Clark. Edgar
Mittelholzer also attended. There was also an English judge (whose name I have forgotten) who also participated.

DS: Was E. M. Roach there?

GL: Roach was not, because Roach was based in Tobago. I met Roach later. And then there were others, the names will come back to me sometime. And there were people, not writers but readers if you like, who came to read the work of others or to listen and share. There was a very well known family called the Walkes, Ivy Walkes and two sisters—they would be there. And there was of course, this noisy, very powerful figure, Albert Gomes, who I should have mentioned much earlier. Albert Gomes was quite a regular visitor at that time. By ‘46, he is quite a visible political figure.

DS: You mention Gomes. I have wanted to ask whether in the Trinidad of the Readers and Writers Club that you are participating in, whether there isn’t a self-consciousness of that earlier moment around the magazines Trinidad and the Beacon.

GL: Yes, there is. I’m not too sure whether it’s a carryover. If you like, there’s a continuity, because in the Readers and Writers at that time the discussions would be very much influenced by “is there a West Indian culture, is what we’re reading illustrative of it,” and so on. A lot of arguments at that time are about the question of the provincial versus the universal, and the notion of creating a local something called Caribbean culture.

DS: But you wouldn’t have been aware or wouldn’t have read the writing in the Beacon or Trinidad, which was Alfred Mendes and C. L. R. James’s thing of the late 1920s?

GL: Well, we were aware of them, I don’t remember Mendes, he may have come from time to time, but I am meeting Mendes quite often in Trinidad. Oh yes, at the time. And Mendes is telling me all kinds of stories. As a matter of fact, James is going to become for me, before I met him, a name.

DS: James is a name for you in the 1940s?

GL: From Mendes, oh yes, with all kinds of anecdotes. But Mendes, who is a most fascinating character, and one of the greatest raconteurs, with a tremendous class confidence, that is, to the point where it did not exist. Mendes mixed with everyone. Unlike Gomes, Mendes had come from a very privileged Portuguese background; Gomes came from a very anonymous and underprivileged Portuguese background. Not Mendes. Mendes came from the top layers. Mendes’s people would have known the governor and been able to call on him and that kind of thing. And Mendes had been in World War I; he had spent some time in Europe. And he was a socialist; he was a man of the Left. A very free spirit, as it were. I don’t remember Alfie coming so much to the meetings, but his house was very open to the kind of people who went to the Readers and Writers Guild.

DS: Do you meet Sam Selvon in the forties?

GL: I met Sam Selvon in the forties. Selvon may have come once or twice. But the very interesting thing is, that idea of meeting to discuss literature, Selvon was never too keen on that. But Selvon played a very important role in that in the forties the Trinidad Guardian, where he worked, had a special Sunday supplement that was an arts and literary supplement. And Selvon edited the literary section. In fact, a lot of the Trinidad prose writers, Naipaul’s father, for example, would have come through that supplement of the Trinidad Guardian. And a lot of the early Selvon fiction would have appeared in that. But Selvon was and retained—I’m not sure how to describe it—a certain reluctance to engage in talk about literature.

DS: Was this so for as long as you knew him?

GL: For as long as I knew him, yes. And in fact we would sometimes meet for readings in places in England—Sam and I became very close friends in England, because we traveled on the same boat—and then later in the Caribbean. But when it came to question time and questions were asked, he would enter the role of unlettered person and say: “That is Lamming’s business, not mine, ask Lamming that.” There was a certain timidity, I think. He was a fantastic reader of his work, quite out of this world. But then at question time he was always very nervous, and sometimes very aggressive. I remember once here in Barbados, at the St. Michael School, somebody was asking something about Eliot and he said, “I don’t know who de ass Eliot is.” That kind of putdown. But there
was some kind of, let us say, caution, about that. And that remained for as long as I knew him, to the very end. If he had to speak and reminisce among friends, that was fine, but the moment it entered into an area that might be described as intellectual, there was a tendency to avoid that.

**DS:** So Trinidad for you was a much more vibrant cultural and political space than Barbados of the 1940s. What kinds of literature and what kinds of politics are influencing you?

**GL:** Well first of all, it is also there that I'm becoming aware of what much later I begin to describe as a political culture that is at work. Because the Trinidad I arrive in is also the Trinidad that is going to see the birth almost of the Beryl McBurnie Dance Group.¹⁷ That is a very, very significant moment in Trinidad, in which McBurnie coming back from the States as this trained dancer begins to look for the folk roots of dance. And McBurnie is really going to have an influence on the whole development of the Jamaica National Dance Theatre Company when she goes to Jamaica. Nettleford will speak at length about the importance of McBurnie's visit to Jamaica and what it did for what became the National Dance Theatre.¹⁸

And what is interesting there, is the middle class—remember the 1940s is also the birth of the steel pan, the pan is not much older than that, and the pan is not yet an accepted instrument by the defining authorities of culture—and that middle class is actually looking for folk roots. So shango is coming into its own, replacing ballet in the classical sense. And all kinds of improvised dances are coming from whatever African residuals that they can find. We are very lucky, because it is also in the 1940s that Trinidad is going to get the first extra-mural tutor of the West Indies, and I don't think you've ever had anything to touch him since, a man called Andrew Pearse who combined literary scholarship with music.¹⁹ He was a musical scholar at Cambridge but he came and rooted himself very much in Trinidad, became a very important research worker into Carnival, and some of the major pieces on Carnival of the nineteenth century were by him. And then he was very close to the Carib Theatre. So actually there is this sense of a very indigenous creation at work for which I knew no parallel in Barbados of that time.

¹⁹. Andrew C. Pearse was in 1948 tutor of Extra Mural at University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. In 1949 he became literary editor of the newly formed *Caribbean Quarterly*. 
And then if you ask what was the most memorable experience of that time—I think it’s about 1948 or so—it’s the arrival of Paul Robeson. Robeson arrives in Trinidad to give a concert. And two things happened. I don’t remember how much [they were], but the tickets were completely beyond the range of people who wanted to hear Robeson. Anyway, Robeson comes. . . . The Carib Theatre, by the way, is just a yard behind her house, and Beryl McBurnie has put up a whole big tent defying all the laws of town planning and all that kind of business. And what’s going to be very interesting here is that Gomes, who is very important in the Port of Spain Council, is very close to Beryl, and very much identified with calypso and the pan, and these indigenous forms of expression, and is going to be very protective. Without Gomes, they would have closed the Carib. She had no right carrying on that kind of activity in that area, a very middle-class, respectable kind of area. And it was a fantastic moment! Robeson takes that evening off from his assignment and he comes to the Carib. He actually comes to lay the foundation stone of the Carib. (Beryl claims it was the first time, I wasn’t so sure of that. I have a feeling that the foundation stone was laid more than once. But this was certainly the mother of all layings, really, of the foundation stone.) I always lament that.
we never had tapes or anything like that. That was a fabulous evening! The first time I’ve ever seen this man. He sat most of the time. He’s a fantastic performer, but he didn’t just sing. When he sang, it was more illustrative, why he sang was because he was talking to us about his childhood. Talked about his grandfather’s slave life, about where they grew up. It is then that I understood that our Left never knew how to communicate politics, when I remember Robeson. Because Robeson was engaged in a political message of the most radical and profound kind without any, any political talk taking place. He talked about his background, he talked about how the singing came to him through the church, stage by stage, and then he would stop and this voice would come up. He would then sing. So that the song almost became part of the conversation—he would then sing for about ten, fifteen minutes, and then he would go back to talking, and then later he took you to Rutgers, and so on. And then that would be broken by some song. So that the whole evening was like a conversation, although two-thirds of the evening was song. I remember him ending with—I’ve never forgotten this—Langston Hughes’s poem, “I’ve Known Rivers.”

That was an extraordinary moment! It was one of those holy moments. The other thing that happened then is that he became aware of the number of people who had been deprived of hearing him, because even the Carib could only take about 150 or something people. He then offered to do a concert in public at the same Woodford Square where Eric Williams became known. It was a big open square. They organized a concert with microphones set up so he would be heard for miles around. And he sang in Woodford Square for about two or three hours. So in a way I have left a Barbados rigorous, placid, semifeudal, and I am into a Trinidad that has come alive in a very interesting kind of way. I also am experiencing access to a variety of worlds that would have been closed off to me in Barbados. Trinidad is in a peculiar way one of my freedom moments if not the first of them.

DS: But it is a freedom moment that has been prepared by the relationship with books that you had in Barbados.

GL: Oh yes, of course, yes. It’s not the beginning of it, but it’s going to take that to another level. And what is going to take it to another level too is my sense of the Caribbean as in fact existing. Because I lived in a place called Belmont. Belmont is a very, very interesting part of Trinidad. It represented on the whole a working class but mixed also with a lower middle class but marked by education. Belmont was also the area of the
intellectual classes. For example, the Braithwaites, Lloyd Braithwaite, lived in Belmont. That was an intellectual house. Lloyd was the one well known,²⁰ but there was not a Braithwaite who was not well read, and perhaps the best read was the father, who was a Grenadian and who wrote tremendous stories. I used to visit first the old man, and he used to write a kind of story that we’ve now got around to, that kind of story built on the folktale—you know that the grandmother would tell and he put it down on paper. He was very friendly with a man called Ernest Carr, a fine short-story writer; they worked together. Old man Braithwaite, his occupation was something to do with import-export, but I could not see, I had no idea what it was he imported or exported. There was just a lot of paper around the place. But an intellectual in the sense of a man concerned with ideas and the pursuit of ideas. And you could see where that is going to rub off on all members of that family. He employed Clifford Sealy to check the documents.

And not far was Max Ifill, the economist, who is then a schoolteacher; Clifford Sealy lived there, a very fine writer; [and] Willy Richardson, who became the officer with the federal government and who was a BBC producer. I mean a whole concentration. And they met on Sunday mornings, from house to house. One morning they would be at the Ifills, on the verandah of the Ifills, anytime from eight, nine, to when the wife or somebody sent to call them because it was lunch. And the next Sunday if they weren’t by the Ifills they were up by the Richardsons, or they were down by the Braithwaites. Tremendous concentration of exchange, everything is discussed there! There’s no single agenda: the validity of a national culture, what are its contents, what is literature, philosophy—that kind of thing.

**DS:** Besides Beryl McBurnie, are there any women involved in these discussions?

**GL:** Yes, there is. There would be at a different level. Not in literature, but in politics at that period there’s going to be a remarkable figure, Audery Jefferies, who played that role from the women’s point of view, that kind of welfare role, who was I think in the council, engaged in active politics. There would have been a number of women perhaps not heard, but in the dance. Beryl’s is going to be the main theater personality, but the very serious rival to her is Bosco Holder. There are two dance troupes at the time, with

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²⁰ Lloyd Braithwaite was a distinguished sociologist. He joined the University of the West Indies in 1950 as a junior fellow at the (then) Institute of Social and Economic Research, Mona. He was an important contributor to the debate about the character of Caribbean social structure in the 1950s and 1960s.
Bosco Holder leading. He is the brother of the famous Geoffrey Holder, and Geoffrey Holder is in that at the time.

DS: And Bosco has not yet left for [England]?

GL: No he left on the same ship with me in 1950. Holder came to England for the first time in 1950 with his wife, who was also a dancer. And he was on the same ship with Selvon and me. Now there is a possibility that he may have gone to the States, because he was an extraordinarily gifted man. He played the piano at Chaguaramas at the American base. So he may have. But the England visit is ’50.²¹

DS: Well, that’s actually very interesting because Sylvia Wynter danced with him.

GL: Yes, very likely.

DS: Clifford Sealy is someone for whom you have expressed a great deal of affection and regard.

GL: And respect, yes. Clifford Sealy was working class, very, primary school, nothing more; self-educated, but a very sharp mind. And he was in a way adopted by a man called Jack Kelshall. Jack Kelshall had come from a very well-to-do family, and Jack Kelshall was a Marxist. The Kelshalls would have been in a way a larger version of Collymore, in terms of library and culture. And Clifford Sealy would have started off like, probably a clerk in a messenger role with Jack Kelshall, then adopted by him. This is the education foundation. Then he comes into Belmont and then I leave him there. He comes to England for a while and wrote a number of interesting short stories. Now he is the man who probably had the first direct influence on me in that political sense because he was, I mean, vehemently political. I think it is in this little basement room of his that I am going to see for the first time, these volumes of Marx. But they’re not in English!

DS: They’re in Russian?

GL: Yes! I used to have a joke about this. I said, “What the hell is going on here? I don’t want to deal with this.” But they would have found the English translation. It was he

²¹. On Bosco Holder, see Geoffrey MacLean, Bosco Holder (Port of Spain: MacLean, 1994).
and a man called Lennox Depaiva, and they used to meet in little groups in the basement room, in Belmont again—very explicitly Marxist, unapologetically, explicitly Marxist, or learning to be a Marxist.

DS: Tell me a little bit more about this group of Marxists who met around Clifford Sealy.

GL: There is not much.

DS: What were you reading around that time?

GL: Oh, they would have been trying with bits and pieces of Das Kapital, as far as I remember, and they would have had the Communist Manifesto.

DS: The Soviet Union would have been a figure of some sort in their imagination.

GL: Oh, enormous. And Stalin! Stalin would have been a very stupendous figure. But before that—and I’m coming just as that is fading out—there was an element of that Marxist influence there in a group called “Why Not,” which was a collection of the middle-class intelligentsia, and of which people like Braithwaite were members. And that went on through a large part of the forties into the fifties. And I think they met once a month or once every two months, meeting for all kinds of discussion, and it is then that you’re going to get the discussions about Caribbeanness, Caribbean nationalism, and so on.

DS: “Why Not” would have thought of itself as a Marxist group?

GL: I don’t think they would have called themselves that, but that influence was very real, and in discussions the vocabulary would have been coming from that kind of literature.

Journey to an Expectation

DS: What is the context of discussion about whether or not to leave Caribbean?

GL: I don’t think for my generation and for people like me at that time there was any discussion about that at all. That was predictable and inevitable, and there is no way in
which—thinking in terms of being a writer—you had much discussion with yourself about whether to leave or not. Except people who had to make a serious decision about whether or not they should leave a job, [for example], if you had been a civil servant. There is the story of one; Clem was his name. Clement packed to leave, and Clem remained packed for about three years. And it was then that it became clear to me that it was more difficult to leave the civil service than to get in. It was not so easy to get in but leaving was a very serious thing because you carried the burden of the security which the civil servants of that time [had], and that was a very powerful thing. Clem never left; he visited [England], but he never left. But people who were like myself, where there was nothing to hold you there in the way of security and a particular job, left.

DS: Your mother had come to Trinidad.

GL: Not yet, no. She came later, somewhat later. But it was very interesting how—if you want the motivations also—it’s very interesting because what had happened was there was some connection too about the ease with which you left; it was something to do with the expectations and so on. We used to listen to Caribbean Voices—it’s very interesting the role that that has played. Every Sunday evening, about three or four of us would meet, because that program came out at seven or eight o’clock on the local radio every Sunday, the BBC Caribbean Voices. And that broadcast brought the region to us. I remember it was in Trinidad with Caribbean Voices in 1948, 1949, that we first heard the name Campbell, George Campbell. That name became a very resonant name for people who never set eyes on Campbell. Campbell was read on the Caribbean Voices quite regularly. They were doing things from First Poems. Walcott would have probably heard them for the first time in St. Lucia because the Caribbean Voices went right around the region. You heard it everywhere. So there was a sense [that] if you were thinking of being a writer you weren’t altogether going in the dark, because this Caribbean Voices was edited by someone who was there, who then knew you.

DS: Had Henry Swanzy visited the Caribbean by then?

GL: No. Not yet. He would come, I don’t know if he comes yet. Philip Nanton has a profile on him, about his movements.²² But he did come to Jamaica and that was not

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very happy. He was quite a character. But I remember that movement. Mittelholzer was the first to leave, in 1948. Then Richardson left, about a year later, 1949. And then it was like one after another. And then we made a straight line for the editor of *Caribbean Voices*. We didn’t know where we were going to live, but we had to find him to find out what would happen. So I think with *Caribbean Voices* there was a location out there that was aware of you which reduced the fear of what would happen. And it was a very peculiar thing when you looked back at it because... We had an illusion about where we were going to. But most of us arrived without knowing where we were going to sleep.

**DS:** I want to come to that arrival, but I want to hang on a bit to this business of the context of discussion of leaving and part of the reason I ask you about it, and part of the reason I asked you a bit earlier about E. M. Roach, the Tobagonian poet, is that he wrote a poem for you, you may remember, that was published in *Bim*.

**GL:** Yes, right, “Letter to Lamming.”

**DS:** Yes, “Letter to Lamming,” which was published in about 1951. And that is an occasion in which Roach is reflecting on, he is in fact *lamenting*, your departure.²³

**GL:** Yes, but I think that would have to be later than that. It can’t be that early, because I haven’t left yet. I left in ’50. I didn’t know that that was so early. I thought it was later than that. I don’t know, sometimes you really don’t know where you exist in the other’s consciousness. But by ’51 I wouldn’t have thought that I was that meaningful to Roach—although I was very active. I came across a thing by Baugh about Collymore and Seymour’s friendship, and my name is coming up there [regarding] letter writing to both, Collymore and Seymour, about starting some kind of journal, and giving talks on Caribbean literature before I left. [But] I would not have thought that by ’51 one’s absence made that difference. But as I say, I don’t know. I was active, very active, in [arguing for] the sense of a regional culture. What I was going to say about the Caribbean shaping of me, in Belmont, which is not only its intellectual center, but among Afro-Trinidadians, every house I went into, whether it was the Braithwaites, or the Ifills, or the Richardsons, the only *Trinidadians* were the children. The parents were not born in Trinidad. In the case of the Braithwaites, the father was from Grenada, the mother

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was from there, but the grandparents were from Barbados, and I then came to realize that each household was a family of islands. There were three or four islands here in one family. And this was not an exceptional thing. This was right across that Belmont spectrum, and it occurred to me that, certainly within the English-speaking Caribbean, we were already federated by blood; we simply didn’t know how to institutionalize that relationship, but that existed there inside the houses. You would not have found that in the Barbados that I left. The Barbados that I left would have had an extraordinary homogeneity; [only] pockets of St. Lucians, largely migrants coming, vendors selling coal and fruit and so on.

DS: Forty-eight, forty-nine, is Derek Walcott visiting Trinidad?

GL: No, not yet.

DS: Not yet. But his 25 Poems has come out.²⁴

GL: Yes, that has come out.

DS: And Collymore is very crucial in that.

GL: Collymore is very crucial. When that comes out, Collymore reads it at some group. I have a feeling that I would have left Barbados when that happened. And I was either in Trinidad or in London. No, I would have still been in Trinidad. But I remember the story of Collymore taking it to some group and reading it. 25 Poems, I think it was. And that is in the forties. And I'm not in Barbados then. And Derek has not left; I don’t think he’s left St. Lucia yet. He hadn’t gone to Jamaica. I don’t think he’s gone out anywhere.

DS: I want to go back momentarily to E. M. Roach and that “Letter to Lamming,” because in Roach one has the sense of someone who was clearly recognized as a poet with a certain talent.

GL: Yes, he had a great talent.

²⁴. Derek Walcott, 25 Poems (Port of Spain: Walcott, 1949). This was Walcott’s first collection. For some details see Bruce King, Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), chapter 4.
DS: But he didn’t leave.

GL: No. And when the question comes up about who left and why, I think that is a question quite often the answer to which doesn’t usually have to do with cultural allegiance. I don’t think so. Quite often there is a personal situation, a domestic situation if you like, which hindered that or precipitated it, as you like. And I’ll give you some examples of that. I remember [Vic] Reid. When I came back to the Caribbean after living in England for five years my first port of call was Jamaica, and I met Reid and got very friendly with him. I came back down to Barbados and one or two places, then, on my return, I stopped in Jamaica [again]. Reid had been expected to leave. Swanzy had met me one evening in London, and he had had a letter that Vic Reid was coming and what could he [Swanzy] do? Swanzy was very good in that way. What it meant was that you could organize a selection of things for him to read that [the BBC] paid for [and] he could be guaranteed some kind of money over the next month or so. And say they were expecting him to come in June or something. June came, July, August, September, and we never heard anything from him. So I’m meeting him for the first time . . . [Actually] There are two things that happened there. One is the sense of community being created without your being aware of it. We went into a bar and he said to me, “You know, Roger [Mais] is the first of us to go.”

DS: To die.

GL: To die. That some community had formed there among that group and generation of people. Not consciously either, but conscious of what each was doing, but not in that collaborative sense of being in a movement. That was the first thing that I remember. And then the second thing was my question to him, “What happened? I mean, we were expecting you.” And then he told me the story: “You know, I was ready and there was no reason for me to stay any longer, but you know, I suddenly got a panic because my last daughter was finishing off at school and I just didn’t know how I would make it with two or three children. And I panicked.” So in a way, it was not any bond to the culture or anything that said, “I can’t leave it.” It was simply that “I wasn’t leaving my family behind, and I just didn’t know how I could support them there”—although he was aware that he had had letters and so on, but he was a little afraid of that. And that raises the issue that in many situations one doesn’t really know to what extent that decision rested on a personal and highly subjective predicament in the life of that particular writer.
DS: Except that there is the larger condition of the unpredictableness of earning a living or a comfortable living while you are—that first generation—in London at that time.

GL: Well, I was married and I left a wife, Nina, behind. The thing was how strongly rooted you were in a kind of marital connection. She came a year later and was very helpful. Sam was married, and the wife, Drusilla, followed. But in each of these cases, I would say that the marital bond didn’t have the weight of preventing you from doing what you were going to do. And in a way I think it had a support insofar as it was required. That was Sam’s first wife, not the later wife. Mittelholtzer was married, as far as I know; I don’t know whether they went together.

DS: When did you get married?

GL: Oh, the same year I left.

DS: 1950?

GL: Yes, yes. I got married and I probably left the next week. There was no interval between.

DS: Vic Reid. Before you leave for London would you have read *New Day*, which was published in 1949?

GL: I had not read *New Day*, but this very important thing happened some time in the forties. There was a man called Robert Herring who edited *Life and Letters*, which was a quite distinguished literary journal. And in fact, that is going to be the first English literary journal that Caribbean writing appears in. Herring visited Jamaica and met Reid. I don’t know how that came about. And then when Herring got back there is a communication between Herring and Swanzy at the *Caribbean Voices*. Because one of the first people I met when I went to London, through Swanzy, was Herring. Swanzy used to give these little soirees for people. The first time I came across Reid was extracts which Herring had used. I’m not sure, it may have been published by then, but it was extracts by Reid, extracts from *New Day* in *Life and Letters* before I got to the book itself.²⁵ But

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we had had Reid by Caribbean Voices, not New Day, but Reid was very beautiful in the vignette, he had a way of capturing that moment in landscape, very rooted in the Jamaican landscape. So the name was known to us. Both Reid and [the poet] George Campbell, particularly Campbell.

DS: So sitting in Trinidad, the way the region comes to you is through Caribbean Voices.

GL: That’s right. Clifford Sealy and myself, we didn’t miss that on a Sunday night at either seven or eight o’clock. We decided whose radio we were going to use and we met to hear, quite often to find out, whether they had chosen anything of yours, because you didn’t know beforehand.

DS: Oh, you didn’t know?

GL: No. There was a method, which we didn’t like at all. They went first through Jamaica, because there was a man called Lindo, who vetted, Cedric Lindo.²⁶ I suppose in order not to overwhelm Swanzy. Stuff was sent to Lindo, [who] made a selection of what should go on to Swanzy. So I don’t think Lindo was very popular with a lot of people. And then Swanzy made the final selection.

Swanzy was a kind of maverick really, very brilliant. He was an Oxford historian, Irish, who had worked in the African services, radio as well, before coming to the Caribbean. He had a great passion for literature and a very great passion for the region, and encouraged what in inverted commas would then be called “local color.” He really wanted the region presented in some way and therefore he became very controversial, because material was used on the radio which elements both in Jamaica and Barbados thought were unsuitable and should not really be used. And we were at that stage then—I think we’ve passed it now—where this business of something called dialects and all of that had no place really on something called the radio in the context of literature. And he got into some difficulty there when he met elements in Jamaica who weren’t too pleased with some of the things that had happened there. The Jamaica visit wasn’t altogether happy.

DS: And that was his only Caribbean visit?

GL: Yes.

GL: As far as I know, I don’t think he went back. I don’t remember him coming to Barbados. But he would have maintained a tremendous correspondence with Collymore; they would have been very, very close.

DS: Okay, 1950. You arrive in London with Selvon. Where do you stay? What contacts do you have? What preparations have you made? What do you do?

GL: We made no preparations at all in terms of where you would live or what would happen. It was, as I said in another place, it was just a journey to an expectation. We arrived, I think it was Waterloo or Victoria, I’ve forgotten what station it was, and in those days there were always English crusaders of one kind or another looking for such people. They may have come for the British Council, or in the Conservative Party, who came to find out if there was anybody who needed help. Sam had a friend called Chungsingh, who later became an editor of the Trinidad Guardian. They were friends. He had come to meet Sam. And it ended up with somebody who had some connections at the British Council taking us to what was a students hostel called the Balmoral. And there you had a very interesting concentration of the colonial world, really. It was a hostel run, I think, by the British Council. And it put up students for a while, that is, until they found places [to live]. And we stayed there probably for about two months. You would have had West Indians there, Africans, the Nigerian in Sam’s Lonely Londoners shared a room with the two of us; we were in one big room.²⁷ I remember that. We were two to a room. But Mate, who was without board, had once asked whether he could stay the night and we made the mistake of saying yes and making space for him but he never left. He stayed put. They came from all parts, Indians, and so on. They were kind of in transit. But the importance of it was that you got a meal that was very heavily subsidized. I don’t know, it could have been about a shilling or something, I’m talking about a large meal with sweet and coffee. I don’t remember what money we had; we really didn’t have any money.

That’s where we stayed as far as shelter was concerned. Now the next thing was contacts. And of course the first thing was to contact Swanzy, to let him know that we were here. And that established some sort of connection. And very quickly he had me doing readings. As a matter of fact, for the next year or two I read regularly on the Caribbean Voices, not necessarily my own work, but the work of other people, mainly poetry.

²⁷. Lonely Londoners (London: Alan Wingate, 1956) was Samuel Selvon’s great novel about West Indians in London in the 1950s.
I then met a man who is not much mentioned now, but was at the time a very big name, Edric Connor. He was a singer; a very beautiful singer. And was at that time, perhaps, one of the highest paid BBC performers; he was a regular. He was Trinidadian. He was the man who when the steel band came to England—by another name, by the way, in 1950—and appeared on British television, he was the person who did the introductions. He was a fabulous singer—very much a darling of the English public—and an actor. He appears in *Moby Dick*, in one or two films, but he’s in *Moby Dick*, one of the whaling people. He was very helpful. He used to do a show out of Vaudeville Club, a thing called the Players Theatre, or something like that. And he took me (I had been there just about a month or two) to see the show. And at the end of the show, he introduced me to this audience; he’d brought a poem I had written and told me to read it. I nearly collapsed, really; then I read it. The applause was more welcoming, flattering, than anything else. But one of the things about him was this sense of coming to the assistance of a new, young arrival. I thought it was great generosity on his part. And that was extended to others. I think when Kitchener arrived in London he would have looked after him in much the same kind of way until he found his feet.²⁸ He died some time, I think, in the sixties or seventies.

I then started to put together the beginnings of *In the Castle of My Skin*. There is not going to be too much of an interval. I then went out and apart from the readings, had like two-week spells in factories and so on. One was a tire factory at night, just a night shift. Wheeling Firestone tires, things like that. Nearly broke a man’s leg one night, because the thing got away from me. Some men knew how to wheel two and three of these things at a time; I could handle one. But I tried two and the next thing I knew, they were going in different directions. But nothing ever lasted more than a few weeks at a time—until I got settled in, more or less, to that regular BBC reading and writing, and then reviewing. And that was my main source of income. My wife then arrived about a year later and went to work, and somehow we managed on her salary. She worked at the Indian High Commission. Sam had [also] worked there for a while. Oh yes. He did more casual labor than I did. He always got around. He had some very odd kinds of jobs too. It was a little rough until the first publications. After *Castle* that was a different story. Things moved very, very fast after that.

DS: When you arrive in London you still think of yourself, primarily, or entirely, as a poet, and you’ve said that when you complete *In the Castle of My Skin* in 1951 you never

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²⁸ Lord Kitchener (Aldwyn Roberts) died on 11 February 2000.
return to poetry. So that the “Birthday Poem,” for Clifford Sealy, which was published in *Bim* in 1951, would have been one of the last poems.²⁹

GL: One of the last. I’m not too sure which was the last. It’s between that and a thing that I did called the “Illumined Graves,” which was a recollection of All Souls’ Day or the night before, when all the candles are lit on the graves. And I had remembered that from my Trinidad experience. Somebody once put together a list of the poems (I don’t like remembering my poems, really) and put dates on them, so I could get a date. I don’t remember whether “Illumined Graves” [was the last one]. Or the one that really brought me to attention (now the “Illumined Graves” was read at the ICA, the Institute of Contemporary Arts) was a thing called “The Swans” which was a depiction—I’m in Hyde Park—of watching these birds on the water. So it’s about two or three of those that are going to be written there. But then that’s the end of that.³⁰

But I want to get clear about leaving the poetry. What I did not return to was writing in verse. But what I never really left was what I would regard as the components of the poetry, that is that my prose retained a very strong visual and a very strong aural [dimension]—that is, the devices, what you would call the poetic devices, never left the prose, remained in the prose. And sometimes to the displeasure of certain critics who think that it makes for a density that was unnecessary. I don’t often speak to this, but on the occasions when I do, I try to explain that I quite often see the novels as dramatic poems rather than novels in the conventional sense. None of them are novels in the conventional sense of the novel. All of that is about the leaving of the verse. I have never tried to reflect on why, I have never (since whenever the last poem was) made any attempt to write anything in verse.

DS: But can one say that there is a sense in which you felt that there was a limitation to verse, that the novel form had a potential that was enabling in a way that verse was not?

GL: Before I actually got to the writing of *Castle*, and away from the verse, before that, my ambition really was not so much the novel, because I always thought prose was a very

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³⁰. Lamming’s “Illumined Graves” and “Swans” were published together with “The Boy and the Sea” as “Three Poems” in *Bim* 4, no. 15 (1951): 163–66.
low form of expression. I didn’t go for that and particularly the prose of the ordinary novel. But I had a great interest—which I’ve returned to recently—of the use of verse in theater, and if I were going back to verse it would be in the form of poetic drama. In other words, I was trying to get at a narrative form which you would not do in the lyrical poem, but a narrative form which carried all the devices and the evocative mechanisms of verse. But I didn’t get around to writing for the theater. Actually, I was thinking of writing for the theater. And that may also have been encouraged by the fact that I am in England at a time too when this is becoming very popular. Christopher Frye, the English theater, the poetic drama, T. S. Eliot’s *Family Reunion*, the poets are coming into the theater in a very serious way in the fifties. So I think that that may also have encouraged the notion that your using verse in a narrative form was acceptable. But I didn’t; instead, all that got taken into *Castle*.

The Colonizer and the Colonized

**DS:** When and how does the idea for *In the Castle of My Skin* emerge?

**GL:** I have difficulty with that. I think it’s one of those examples of something buried there that had been germinating and germinating, and then that moment came. I think one of the early germs too, very, very early, is a poem that I have called “The Rock,” in which, before I’ve left for England, I’ve come back to Barbados for the first time and I’m seeing this rock almost as a whole island. And that may have been one germ of it. But I think it was a case of a silent, subconscious accumulated experience including what I said earlier about 1937, 1938, the Moyne Commission, the village as the bad village, all of these things are in some way secreted and at some moment comes out.

The history of the writing is very interesting because I had written what seems a chapter that appears somewhere. There is always a question of whether this was done in England or not. I think everything was done in England. This is a thing called “David’s Walk,” which is almost like the opening of *Castle*.³¹ But I had that opening and about another two chapters, I think the school scene was one. And I had no money—this is a very extraordinary story—and there was a man who was used as a critic on the *Caribbean Voices* called Arthur Calder-Marshall. Arthur Calder-Marshall was a very prominent English novelist of his day, an exact contemporary of Christopher Isherwood and

³¹. I think Lamming is misremembering here. A short story called “Birthday Weather” which opens almost exactly like *Castle* was published in *Bim* 4, no. 15 (1951): 183–87.
Graham Greene, and belonged to the same background and circle: all Oxford people.³² And Swanzy had got hold of him to do critiques of the Caribbean Voices fiction. There were two English authors involved in that. One was a man called Roy Fuller; he would do a review of the verse broadcast over the last six or seven programs. Calder-Marshall did the prose. Calder-Marshall had some knowledge of the Caribbean because he’d visited Trinidad [in 1938] and wrote a very interesting book called Glory Dead, which caused a lot of resentment in Trinidad. I met him in the BBC canteen and we were talking and I told him that I had a couple of chapters of this novel and I wanted to submit them, and I wanted to find out where I should send them. And he said that first of all, he didn’t think that it was a good idea [to send the chapters] because you never really know who the reader is going to be, and on the basis of that, they might just say “no, not to bother with it.” Whereas if there is something larger, more substantial . . . But, he said, “If you feel hard up and confident, then . . .” And he named three publishers and he said that these would be [good], but this one, and he marked out Michael Joseph, [was best]. And he marked out Michael Joseph because he was looking for publishers who had readers who were specially retained for [their] quality—the publishers at the time had retained readers. They had different readers, but they would have a reader who was also a leading critic. And at that time, Walter Allen was the leading critic of The New Statesman, with V. S. Pritchett. And he was the reader for Michael Joseph. So he said, “Of the three, I think Michael Joseph might be the wiser choice but I would wait.”

But I don’t know, in my impatience I didn’t wait. I went, I got this thing typed, it may have been three, not more, about three chapters, and to my astonishment, I think it was about ten days or two weeks later, I got a letter from a man called Robert Lusty, who was the head at Michael Joseph, asking whether I would like to come and discuss this manuscript. And I went and he said he had a report from Allen on what I had submitted. And Allen advised them they should not let it get away. And he said, “We will draw up a contract, but I don’t advise you to sign it, go and have a look at it.” And I said, “No, go and bring it.” And I signed it there, and the whole contract was, it was no big settlement, I think it was two hundred and something pounds, but half up front. And I’m telling you, we are talking about an England where five pounds a week was now more or less the average wage of a worker. So fifty to a hundred pounds was very serious money. And he kept telling me to go think it over, and I said I didn’t need to. I think everything was all right there. And I asked him if I could have the check. Because I’d never seen this kind

of opportunity staring me in the face. And then he rang a bell and the secretary came and gave it to me and I took off.

It was a very strange thing, it [the check] was of no use to me, because I hardly had tube [subway] fare, and this thing was useless! So what I did—I always remember that, a very peculiar situation, I don’t think at that time I had a bank account. But there was a famous bookstore called Zwemmers on Charing Cross Road, and I used to spend a lot of time at Zwemmers. So I went into Zwemmers and I bought about twenty pounds worth of books, which was a lot [to spend]. And then this man who had seen me in there came and said fine, and I signed this check. He took a long time. He went in the back, because apparently this thing looked so dicey. I think he went and called Joseph or somebody about this check. And that’s how I got it changed. And I came out with the rest. But that was a most unusual event. That in a way had a great influence on me, because then I went back and started working furiously in a routine kind of way for about the next year. *Castle* took, I think, about eighteen months or something like that, to work on the whole thing, with the view that there were other things coming. And the rest was history.³³

**DS:** That seems very fast.

**GL:** It was about eighteen months. But that would be a daily routine, I worked then daily, every day, at it. And it was about eighteen, a year and a half, maybe a little more. It was quite a long book. And then it was sent to Allen and Allen sent it back with a full report. I mean his predictions were really quite extraordinary because then it came out to a very remarkable press. It went to about three impressions within the first month. The thing was to get reviewed in the *Observer*, the *Times*, and if you’re in one, you’re going to be in the other—I don’t know how they worked that out. And also the *Statesman*. The story at the *Statesman*—Allen told me this later that it was a lucky kind of thing—was that they’d sent it to some guy to review and the review came in, and it was a favorable review, but it wasn’t, they thought, very well written and they sent it back to him. In the meantime, Pritchett had read it, and Pritchett sent to say that he wanted to review it, and he did a full page in the *Statesman*, and that is the one that they quote about being back again in the pages of *Huckleberry Finn*. Pritchett was and remained until his death a very powerful name in that world. A review by Pritchett carried weight.³⁴

³³ The first printing of *In the Castle of My Skin* appeared in March 1953.

³⁴ V. S. Pritchett, “A Barbados Village,” *New Statesman and Nation*, 18 April 1953. The review was warm and appreciative. Pritchett said in part: “Mr. Lamming is a poet and an artist. He is not an urgent journalist with opinions, nor a politician with indignations, interests and causes. Yet, we shall learn more from Mr. Lamming about
But there’s something I wanted to add to that. The man who took the greatest pleasure in that was Lusty. It was Lusty who made the decisions. I don’t think Lusty had much to do with reading books. He just had this hunch. He and Joseph ran Michael Joseph. And that really was the best, most prestigious of what they would call of the small firms at the time. That’s the firm that’s going to do Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* and all the early Lessing; it was the firm of Joyce Carey. It had a very substantial list. So many years later, after he’d retired, I had this card from Lusty saying how he’d seen me on a television program somewhere and it took him right back to this period.

But there is a story behind that that you would be interested in, that has to do with [C. L. R.] James and Lusty and me, which is not generally known. James one morning phoned me and asked me to come and see him because he just had back the manuscript of *Beyond a Boundary*. James had sent it to John Arlott, the cricket commentator, and it had gone around and around and around. And according to Arlott’s letter, he couldn’t persuade them [to publish], and James called me to ask me what to do. I had read a section or so, so I said I would read the whole of it. And I said I tell you what, the only thing I could do is to play on a connection. Lusty had moved from Michael Joseph, and had gone to be the head, the boss, of Hutchinsons. So I wrote Lusty and asked to see him. And I told him why and I carried a kind of letter-report on the manuscript and gave it to him. And that is how *Beyond the Boundary* got published. If you look at the first [edition] you will see that it comes out first from Hutchinsons. Now there is something I can’t get explained, I don’t know if we can find the original, but *Beyond a Boundary* was not the title. The title was *Beyond the Boundary* not *Beyond a Boundary*. The original title had the Boundary. And that was my choice. The title was my choice. But it was with a definite article not the indefinite. And I don’t know at what point someone changed it. But it was incorrect because it should have been “the.” Because if you said “a,” you’d deconcretize what we’re talking about. But if you say “the” and “beyond,” you have both the concrete and the movement beyond the concrete. And the thing got changed to “a.” I don’t know where along [the way it got changed]. But I am wondering if there aren’t early copies with “the” in the title. But I remember it as *Beyond the Boundary*.

Anyway that was the story of the Lusty connection with *Beyond the Boundary*. Now what to me was quite astonishing—I didn’t go into it with him—I found it very difficult to understand how a man in Arlott’s position within the context of that world (I mean he was the leading cricket commentator and also in the public), how he had difficulty in persuading a publisher to take it. I have some problems with that.

politics and social change in the life of a small feudal estate in the last twenty years than we are likely to get from a business-like interrogation” (460).
DS: As everybody knows, *In the Castle of My Skin* is partly autobiographical. But what prompts you to locate the story as you do in relation to the riots of 1937? What I mean is, *In the Castle of My Skin* is simultaneously the coming of age of G and the coming of age of a social consciousness. And one is mapped on to the other. And my question is, in 1950 do you already recognize that 1937, 1938, 1939 is a break-point in Caribbean political history?

GL: When I get to England in 1950, remember, I am coming out of a Trinidad where the sense of belonging to somewhere is established through the activities in Trinidad, the Little Carib Theatre and so on—a lot of discussion about culture, Caribbean culture. There are also the echoes of the ’47 Federation debates, preparations in Jamaica—there is all of that.³⁵ But very quickly then, that is going to be fertilized by a very rapid politicization of my sensibility. Remember I am in a place now where very quickly I am discovering the illusion that was imposed upon me via that school and education and coming to this kind of place. And I am meeting Mate, the Nigerian, and I am interested in the concrete realities of Africa, not in the cultural sense of a [Kamau] Brathwaite, but in the political sense because I am in England in 1950 where I am hearing all the time of the anticolonial struggle in the Gold Coast, which is going to be Ghana. Nkrumah was around there in 1948 and is coming back. And I remember going to a meeting at which Nkrumah is in fact speaking to people in London. Every Sunday I used to go over to a place called WASU in Chelsea—it was the West African Student Union—to listen to the same discussions that went on there as went on in the WISU, the West Indian Student Union. I got this very great interest in hearing and feeling Africa, the political Africa, the anticolonial Africa.

And I think that in a curious way that is feeding into *Castle*, into what may then be seen as the political side of *Castle*. London was a very important political capital at the time; that aspect of it had not yet disappeared. And I’m very conscious, I think, of writing a book that is now not really just about Barbados, but is about a historical moment of transformation in the world with that anticolonial movement in Africa [in] ’50, ’51, ’52. By ’52 *Castle* is finished. And I’m just about twenty-three or twenty-four when all of it [happens]. So I think there is a way in which the Barbados experience is now being filtered through another kind of experience—another kind of intellectual experience takes that and processes it in a certain way. I’m also reading voraciously. But I’m not

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³⁵ In Montego Bay, Jamaica, in September 1947, the secretary of state for the colonies, Arthur Creech-Jones convened a meeting of West Indian governments to discuss the establishment of a West Indian Federation.
reading English writers. They don’t interest me very much. I am reading the French. I am interested in Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and André Malraux. And I begin to make no separation between the man of culture and the man of public affairs, the man of letters and the man of action. I am absorbing this now from my reading of the French writers. I would not have got that if I were concentrating on Waugh or Green. But I’m reading everything by Sartre, everything by Camus, everything by de Beauvoir, all of the debates going on [among] the French and that is having an influence on me at this time. I think that some of that in some way comes through when the boys on the beach are doing these philosophical speculations about time, but quite consistent with how people of that age would talk about the mysteries of things. There is an element of a philosophical exchange that’s going on in that beach scene that I think comes also from the way I am incorporating certain kinds of discourse taking place. I’m also aware, in a certain way, that for us our politics is central to our aesthetics.

DS: It seems to me that it’s not only that it is a philosophical discourse but it’s a very particular kind of phenomenological-existential philosophical preoccupation that one can see, I think, very explicitly in some of the later essays, such as “The Negro Writer and His World,” which I want to come to in a minute. But before I get there, In the Castle of My Skin is thinking through a moment of transformation that is going to feed into, or be the source-bed of, the anticolonial movement in the Caribbean. And it’s the story of the dismantling of one kind of world and the emerging social consciousness of another kind of world. But it is at the same time a deep worry about the new kind of world that is emerging, so that Mr. Slime and the head teacher are in some way part of a worry about the kinds of sensitivities and the kinds of outlook that are going to prey on or take over the emerging social order.

GL: I think there is planted in the change, and what seemed the inevitability of the change, also the question of great doubt about where this will go. In some way I am already very skeptical of the authenticity of what would be the new leadership in the form of Slime, and if you can take the scenes in which Slime goes to, in a way, make his peace with the old man, he realizes that something has gone wrong here. And also, his intervention to rescue the landlord—in that moment I am in some way conscious of the kinds of compromise in which this leadership will be involved. And I don’t know if it’s prophetic because I’m not having these discussions about that at that time. But I’m going to see that happen then in a very overt kind of way. I am going to see ’37 and ’38 in fact kidnapped, so to speak, by a leadership that had little or nothing to do with
the makings of it. And by leaders that are very decent but saw themselves as the natural heirs to the departing imperial power. Not necessarily the natural leaders of the people who become their constituency. I mean they chose themselves as the leaders, by virtue of education, by virtue also of the mythology which the school has played in shaping our social relations.

**DS:** This is also connected to the view which you have already expressed above (and elsewhere) that the pity of ‘37/’38 is the war³⁶ If it had not been for the war’s ability to deflect the unfolding process, we don’t know what momentum would have developed on the streets in the Caribbean.

**GL:** We don’t know. I think we can only guess about that but I saw ’38 being picked up in the sixties. And as a matter of fact, if that had had a movement, a flow of movement, the confrontations with power that were to take place in some ways in the sixties, and may have taken place, not necessarily with the same vocabulary, but there is an impetus at a regional level that would I think have given a confidence to a leadership from within that movement that made the riots. I have question marks on that because I am conscious that one may in fact be investing what one would call the “working class” with a potential for its leadership that may not have been there. I believe sometimes when I talk and check out who were the individuals there that were capable of leadership I am convinced that they were. And that they were very effectively got rid of by that middle-class leadership in one way or another—marginalized, erased, forced into migration, because they posed threats. We have one or two examples of that. Stories are told in the case of certain figures with very tremendous organizational capacities, absolute working class, and who Adams made absolutely sure would be erased in some way. And I think you would have similar things in Jamaica where I think that middle-class leadership would have spotted [such individuals]. I am very interested when I read about [Hugh] Buchanan. You can multiply him a number of times that class had a leadership, and an intellectual leadership, [though] not in the conventional sense of intellectual, of the highly schooled.

**DS:** Buchanan is actually a very interesting, and it seems to me, much under-reflected-upon figure, because he was both a Garveyite and a Marxist. And I remember asking

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Richard Hart why it was that Buchanan never joined the People’s National Party (PNP). And Richard didn’t give a long explanation, but clearly the PNP and the Left in the PNP was not sufficient to draw Buchanan into that movement.

GL: What is interesting here is the force of Garvey. Many of the working-class figures in the vanguard of the riots in Barbados were Garveyites. [Israel] Lovell, a number of them were Garveyites. And in fact, then, at another level, people who did not define themselves [as Garveyites were sympathetic]. Garvey paid a visit to Barbados and you only have to look to see who hosted him.³⁷ He was hosted by a very famous merchant called Tudor, the father of Sir James Tudor who was the minister and advisor to Barrow, a fascinating man. James Tudor, and there was another man, I think it was John Martineau, small businesspeople, strong Garveyites. And when Garvey came to Barbados they were his hosts. They organized the meetings for him. So that you had that kind of leadership, that kind of foresight, that recognition of what had to happen in terms of confronting the established party.

DS: Do you know that the theme of The Emigrants would follow before you finished In the Castle of My Skin?³⁸

GL: I knew that, yes, I knew the moment I finished. As a matter of fact I have some regrets about Emigrants because I thought I should not have gone so fast. As a matter of fact, Castle is finished in about ’52, but it is not published until ’53. And if I’m not mistaken, about half of The Emigrants is ready before [Castle is published]. Because Emigrants comes out in ’54, almost the next year. And sometimes I think back that that movement was too fast. But I realize that this was a book almost writing itself, because by the time I get there . . . From there on, by the way, Barbados never appears again as a single geographical or cultural entity in any of the books. It is in there somewhere as Trinidad is in there or Haiti is in there, but from there on it’s a composite, as the ship is. And what I was very conscious of, in a way, is that that exchange that takes place

³⁷. Marcus Garvey arrived in Barbados on 18 October 1937 on the SS Lady Nelson from St. Lucia as part of a larger Caribbean tour. John A. Martineau (1882–1969) hosted him. He addressed a gathering at Queen’s Park and left that evening. I am grateful to Robert Hill for this information.
³⁸. George Lamming, The Emigrants (London: Michael Joseph, 1954). An extract from Emigrants appeared as “Extract from Second Book,” Bim 5, no. 18 (June 1953): 120–27. This was accompanied by a series of line drawings by the Jamaican artist Gloria Escoffery as a tribute to Lamming’s just published first novel, In the Castle of My Skin. This issue of Bim carried, as a frontispiece, a photograph of Lamming; and in their “Notebook,” the editors, Barnes and Collymore, offered their congratulations to the author.
between the men on the ship is the extension of the boys on the beach in *Castle*. The boys from *Castle*, coming now not just from Barbados but from every point, and if you like, their philosophizing has a concreteness about place and belonging to a West Indian [nation] and having to know this if you’re going to be anybody—that becomes very conscious. That is a period also where by ’54, the possibility of Federation and what that would mean is very, very strong among anyone who is in England at that time. We are almost coming to the stage where I think (I don’t know whether they set it up) we are having a high commission that is regional, we’re having a high commission that is not a Barbados thing but there is a West Indian High Commission getting ready. So there is that consciousness there.

**DS:** One has a sense in *The Emigrants* that you are asking *yourself* a question having arrived in London: *What now?*

**GL:** Yes, and in a way certain revelations are happening there. There are the images that the Caribbean has especially of Africa, and vice versa, because they’re meeting for the first time in any real kind of way. The Caribbean consciousness is still not sure of the relation of this Africa to the Caribbean notion of civilization. They don’t mind that the African is a lawyer in England but he may be into any kind of black magic at the same time. I mean the West Indian women talking about the African men. And then the scene with Collis and the English family. That is actually literal, just to fictionalize the organization of an actual experience. And I think that perhaps one was attempting too many things in the one book. There is the meaning of the journey, the voyage, which is part one, and then there is in that living room with the two of them, one is creating the enormous sense of distance that neither quite understands where he stands in relation to the other. Although they’re brought together by a relation, that was very rare, of going to see a man who was the brother, or going to see the sister or something like that of a man who was the British councilor—the representative in Trinidad had asked me to make that journey. I think that it was an ordeal for them. My suspicion is that they had never before met or dealt with a black person and there was some confusion about what was to happen there, hence the peculiar silences, long silences, wondering how soon he would get out of here.

And the irony may not be completely clear, as I look back on it now, of the Englishman not being aware of the extent to which Collis and his world had actually shaped their own consciousness. And Collis’s total misdirection, because Collis is thinking that he’s coming to something which by sharing the same language and all of that,
and knowing the brother and all of that, that that should be a pretty straightforward encounter. And he is shaped by an illusion too. But also the other thing that is much more important is the man not being conscious of the way the existence of Collis without meeting him is already a shaping factor in how he sees his world of England and the world outside of England.

**DS:** Right. But it is the complacency with the illusion of self-containment on the part of the Englishman that Collis is not able to breach.

**GL:** Yes, he can't get through there, yes.

**DS:** *The Emigrants* inaugurates a theme that then preoccupies you, namely the theme of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, that co-constitutive relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In many ways, one can see the way in which the existentialist writing is producing a space in which the sense of the phenomenological co-constitution of selves is part of the world of your thought.

**GL:** Yes. It may have been taken a little too far because there is then the curious scene where the African and the English guy who had worked in the colonies with the woman who had recognized him. But I'm not finished with that. I don't know who's interested in it, but I once wrote out a draft of a script of that for the stage, of *The Emigrants*, because I think that has a very visual presentation and very dramatic possibilities.

**DS:** I think so too. I think on the one hand there is the co-constitution of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, but there's also, framing that, the idea that propels these characters to emigrate—the *idea* of England, in some sense the journey to this expectation. And in some way also, it is a journey to an expectation, you seem to be suggesting by the failure of these characters, that is unfulfillable.

**GL:** But they also recognize that, I mean, its not too long before there is a sense that something is wrong here, that there has been a misplaced affection. And there’s going to be trouble. There's going to be trouble. This is not going to be a peaceful solution. Remember this is coming before '58.³⁹ There's going to be trouble here and what was once the greatest love affair is going to turn into its opposite.

³⁹. The allusion here is to the Notting Hill riots of late August/early September 1958, an event that profoundly altered the perception many West Indians had of England as a kind of home.
The Vocation of Writing

DS: One of the writers around this time who obviously had a very deep impact on you in your early years in London was Roger Mais. I remember your tribute to him in *Bim*, and what is striking about that tribute is that clearly what impresses you about Mais is less his books than his style.⁴⁰ And this is an idea that I’ll come back to, but Mais was a poet, you say, whose poetry was not merely a formal arrangement of words, but a way of living. There is something about the way in which Roger Mais inhabited his vocation as a writer that has a very deep impact on you.

GL: There were two writers who, for different reasons, I had a respect for [Roger Mais and Edgar Mittelholzer]. The big difference really is that in addition to my respect for Mais I also had an enormous affection, a personal affection [for him]. I had no experience of affection for Mittelholzer. I respected the integrity of his commitment to what he was doing, and that was really formidable—even from the Trinidad period. He was the first West Indian I know of who declared himself a writer: sent the wife off to work, and he stayed at home and did the housework. That used to be a big joke in Trinidad. But he seemed to be very clear about vocation. Outside of that, I had difficulties connecting with him in many other kinds of ways. There were lots of complexities in his makeup. But Mais . . . I met Mais in London, and later when he was dying in Jamaica. But when I met Mais in London, I met a man with passion. You got the feeling of a man who would almost burst at any moment, as though there was some vision inside to be released that was not getting released—but with a passion at all times. And with the passion went also a great intolerance, that is, if Mais didn’t like you or anyone, it had something to do with your philistinism, not your class; or it had to do with class in the sense that you might have come from a class—meaning his own—which he despised. He didn’t censor [himself].

The story I have of him is about a Christmastime. There was a Jamaican called A. E. T. Henry, who was a journalist and had also written some humorous fiction. If you look back in some of the old [issues of] *Focus* you will see some [references]; he was a kind of funny man. And Henry had come out to England from the *Gleaner* as a journalist, and he worked on the BBC programs. [He] was very popular. He had invited us one night to his house, a little apartment. And I went, and Roger came. It was a rather sad

⁴⁰ George Lamming, “Tribute to a Tragic Jamaican,” *Conversations*, 154. Mais was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in August 1905. He died there in June 1955. There is yet to be a full-length treatment of his remarkable life and work.
evening because Roger got high and A. E. T. had some English friends there and one of them may have made the mistake of expressing ignorance about some kind of literature or that kind of thing, and that set Roger off. And he was a man given to very sharp, unacceptable language, anywhere, at any time. And I thought it was an occasion where one might have called Roger aside and [had a word with him], but A. E. T., I think, coming to the defense of his English guests, ordered him out of the house. And he said, “I’m serious.” And Roger got up and left. And I left with him; I didn’t leave the party, but I left and went out with him and walked for a while with him. He disappeared and I went back. And A. E. T. was ashamed [because] all of that was never intended.

Sometime later, and not too much later, Roger went off to Paris. And I was going to Paris. I told A. E. T., “I’m going to Paris,” and he said, “Okay, if you see Mais tell him to send the money he owes me.” Mais had owed him ten pounds or twenty pounds. Mais never had money. So I saw Roger, we went and we had dinner one evening, and we talked. Mais was very warm, and that passion, that passion was there. You had the feeling of a man who was in a hurry, as though he felt that he was near the end of something and you had to be in a hurry, you couldn’t relax with what you were doing, whether you were talking or working. So I had some money, from royalties, so I told him I would do this [pay the bill]. And it’s very funny. He ordered some wine, which he paid for; he ordered a bottle of wine, he paid for it. This was a very, very curious thing. Then I said to him, “A. E. T. asked me to say hello, to give you his greetings.” And he said, “Yes, you know George, I owe him some money.” He said, “You know what hurts me? It’s not that I can’t pay him but that I would like to. It really hurts me that I would like to pay him.” Almost in the same breath he then turned to me and said, “Oh by the way, the bottle of wine I just bought cost ten francs”—that extraordinarily lovable character.

Then the grief was, I’d left him in Paris . . . He was being looked after by the Wrights at one stage, Richard Wright and his wife, [Ellen]. And there was an exhibition—I don’t know what became of Roger’s paintings—but there was an exhibition of his paintings in Paris when I was there. And in some way, Wright’s wife and Wright had something to do with him. We used to meet in a very interesting bookshop run by an American, everybody met there, just opposite the big cathedral, Notre Dame. I left him there. And as soon as I got to Jamaica (on my first visit back to the Caribbean) I asked and they told me he was very ill. He was staying with his sister [Jessie] who looked after him and apparently was the only member of his family who would have any connections with him. And I went to see him (I think I mentioned this in the tribute). By then the cancer was very advanced. And the famous phrase: he told me, “Boy, this cancer is a fascist disease.” And then he was saying, “The ideas, the ideas, but I can’t . . . my hands.”
But he sat up and I spent about a half and hour, and he was talking about what he would like to do. And I left him. And he died shortly after. The tribute was given on my way back to England via Jamaica.

What I have never quite worked out with him was the *exceptionalism* of him, coming out of that background. At what point did he make that kind of break away from the world [he came from] and make the very genuine identification with that other world? Because I remember—this is very curious—I asked Douglas Manley to drive me to West Kingston because I wanted to see some Rastas. So he took me to as far as he thought it sensible for him to go. And I went and there was a man who was like a guard, and he asked me what I wanted, and I forget who it was I told him I had come to see, but I said that Roger Mais had asked me to come. He said come. The name “Roger Mais” was enough. It was a very interesting thing, because I spent about two hours there talking, very heavy sort of talk, and then I came out and they said they would take me back to the [university] campus. And I’m a stranger to the place, and when you’re a stranger you’re innocent, so I said sure. But they took absolute care [of me], and we talked, and we talked, and they drove me right back up to the campus. I went on to see them a couple of times after that.

DS: But Mais represents for you a compelling image of what it means to be a writer.

GL: In that *vocational* sense, yes.

DS: But a writer whose work is deeply rooted in . . .

GL: . . . in the world down below. And in a way, when I look back at it, I used to see it through a strictly political filter. But then I realized actually that his reconstruction of that world down below is something *more* than a political reconstruction. It is not the reconstruction of a documentary social realist, it is not *that* reconstruction at all. It is rooted in a deep sense of the humanity of these people, the assault on this humanity. It is not an ideological reconstruction in Mais, although the centrality of what you would call the politics is there. And you find it also right through [although] the output is small. What is very curious in that fable of *Brotherman* [is that] Mais has, in a way that many of what I would call the Africanist enthusiasts don’t, some spiritual connection to that world which I find missing in the rhetoric of people who are talking about Africa. He didn’t use Africa, but that humanity that he’s always exploring, the humanity which he feels is violated, is assaulted, has to be redeemed, has to be restored.
DS: Let me come back here to the matter of style and remind you of what you say that you admire, what you say explicitly that you admire, in Mittelholzer. You say you never liked him, but in him you see “a confirmation of my duty as a writer.”

GL: I meant that—a confirmation of my duty—almost in a vocational sense in which Mittelholzer very consciously decided that this activity was the raison d’être of his existence. And that he would not be deterred from that. I mean the kind of ridicule that he would be subject to at the time that Mittelholzer is calling himself a writer—it was a big joke in Trinidad. The rejection of manuscripts—because it seems nearly everything that Mittelholzer wrote at some time was sent back to him. This could not in any way deter whatever was this peculiar kind of determination to continue. And that is what I meant by style. It is not a question about literary style; it was about a style of living, a particular way in which life would be conducted. And I would say that what he did was to give that activity of writing a preeminence that could not be surpassed by any other calling, whether it was the calling of family, or whether it was the calling of society, whatever it was, that was utterly vocational. What I can’t do as I could do in the case of Mais, is that [although] there are one or two exceptions, in his work as a body of work I had difficulty finding that the energy was altogether justified in the extent of the output. I think that there are a handful of very good things; I think that Morning at the Office is a very important book of what happened at that time. And there are critics who tell me that the trilogy is certainly worth reading, but I have had difficulty with that. I think his Swarthy Boy has to be studied. But there were to me severe limitations in what he imagined to be his vision of the world and certainly his vision of the region. And I’m not sure what role the Caribbean played for him. I don’t think he had any of the passion for region that some of us would have had, or would argue on behalf of it in the way that some of us would; or believed in it like some of us would.

DS: Let me remind you of the way you characterized style in that tribute to Mittelholzer, “But Alas Edgar.” You say; “Nothing matters more than a man’s discovery of his style,
a discovery which is also part of his own creation. And style, not a style, but style as the aura and essence, the recognized example of being in which and out of which a man’s life assumes its shape.” I have read this remark over and over again partly because it reminds me of something else and draws for me a connection between you and another writer of the same period: Frantz Fanon. There is a letter that Fanon wrote to his brother Felix from Paris in which he says, “the greatness of a man is not to be found in his acts, but in his style.”

GL: Yes, I wasn’t aware of that. But I think the description there—I couldn’t explain or simplify—that is perfect about what I saw in Mittelholzer.

DS: What I’m pushing towards is that your admiration for these two figures [Mais and Mittelholzer] has to do with the will to embody in their *style*, as Fanon says, not in their acts, to embody in themselves, in their way of being, as you put it, the aura and essence of the *vocational* writer. So it’s not simply that these are people who take writing seriously but that they inhabit and recognize themselves in a very profound way in that practice of expression.

GL: Yes.

The Dialectic of Recognition

DS: There is the connection to Frantz Fanon that I have always wanted to ask you about because I find it all over the work of the 1950s; less so in the novels of the 1970s but all over the work—the essays, etcetera—of the 1950s. And where it comes to me most explicitly is in the talk that you gave at the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956. What interests me is the very phenomenological conception of the place of recognition, the dialectic of recognition, in that essay, and the place in the problematic of recognition of language. Now, these are themes which are also there in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which was published in 1951 or 1952. And what is fascinating to me is the sense in that essay, “The Negro Writer and His World,” of your

45. This is actually part of the inscription dedicating a copy of his thesis to Felix Fanon. See David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 139.

trying to work out and work through the Negro’s sense of himself as reflected through the image of him established by the white and the white racist world. You say somewhere that one’s conception of oneself depends heavily on the attention of the Other, so that you’re very interested in how one’s sense of oneself is reflected in the regard of the Other, which reminds very much of the way in which Frantz Fanon is talking about the gaze, and the importance of the gaze. Can you speak to that?⁴⁷

GL: Yes, how should I go about that? First of all, there is a part of that in which, speaking from the perspective of the Caribbean, I am warning that I have no intention of being diluted into a general thing called “African.” Therefore, I think I began by identifying three writers or so, and that while I’m aware of the continuities of a certain kind of experience—and I’m talking about political continuities of struggle—I am speaking from a particular space which is distinct, which may overlap, have its connections whether it is with Camara Laye or Achebe or who ever it is. I’m speaking from a space that is distinct, and I resist the dilution of that space either into a real or manufactured category that you would call Africa or African personality. I am trying to get that straight because at that time there is a great pressure to be incorporated into something about African personality. This is also coming really from the imperatives of Negritude at the time, and I’m saying, okay, I am completely for the device, the instrument of Negritude as a necessary strategy, but I am not dealing with Negritude as an essence.

And on the other hand, what I cannot avoid is the fact that my own existence is not conceivable without an awareness of the Other. That goes for the Other as well. And therefore what one is battling with all the time is how to colonize that awareness, to make the awareness of the Other not only real, but to bring it within the authority of your own possession as you reconstitute who you think you are. So that although I am not free, totally free from the influence of what that gaze or that glance means, I can in fact place a meaning on it that allows me to remain sovereign within a particular self that I am seeking to articulate. While I cannot erase or deny the Other, what I can do is express a sovereignty of self which places the Other in a perspective that I want it to be placed in at an individual level. That then takes us—and later we may get to this—to how you are going to deal with sovereignty when we use it in a much wider sense.

Now it is quite clear that one may not be in a position to establish an absolute freedom from the influence of an external power. That I understand. So that there is a sense

⁴⁷. See, interestingly, Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 165, 167, for some recognition of the similarity between Lamming’s address and Fanon’s ideas about identity.
in which one has to accept the reality of a limited sovereignty in one area of perceiving the world. That is when you come to public affairs, about how decisions are going to be made, according to the constraints of resources, constraints of resources which are in conflict with unlimited expectations or the expressions of a limited expectation brought about by the uncritical and sometimes irresponsible promises made by people who are shaping the society, you realize that there is a limited sovereignty there, but a limited sovereignty acknowledged in the public domain does not necessarily demand a limited sovereignty in the power of the self to perceive why you have to limit that sovereignty. In other words, there is a sovereignty that remains intact in spite of the limitations which you must concede about another kind of sovereignty in the public domain. This is an unending process of thinking of how one has always to rework the ways in which one claims and exercises the power and the authority of an individual and subjective perspective. And I am in a way arguing that there remains an area for choice, for independent free choice, about the meanings you place on events. And that area has not got to be abandoned, whatever the superiority of forces around you that call for its abandonment.

DS: And indeed this conception of freedom begins to inform Of Age and Innocence.

GL: That’s it; that’s the foundation of everything that one is doing.

DS: I want to come to that matter of freedom, that area of freedom that can remain part of one’s possession, part of one’s instinctive possession. But I want to go back to “The Negro Writer and His World,” and while acknowledging the strategic move that you are making to insist on the distinctiveness of the experience through which you speak or the unabsorbability of that experience into an essentializing African personality, I am at the same time very interested in your understanding of the constitution of the sense of self of the black or the colonized. In some sense the dialectic of recognition is worked out in your conception of Prospero and Caliban, so that the Shakespearean dialogue between Prospero and Caliban is mapped on to what I think of in your work as a Hegelian conception of the co-constitution of Self and Other. It’s in some ways a Master-Slave dialectic that I see being worked out in that conception of recognition in “The Negro Writer and His World.” And what of course is very interesting about this is the sense that the self-concept of the colonized is not understandable outside of the hierarchy of language in relation to which that sense of Negroness is constituted. So you talk in that essay about language being an infinite source of control, and you talk about the way in which the hegemonic conceptual grid, so to speak, is established.
GL: This is a problem which I find myself reconsidering. Language is a source of control. But language is also a source of invention. And the controlling power of language of course depends very much on who has the power to define. One of the problems that I’m having when I read, say, people in your own discipline [anthropology], is that I have always felt that the extraordinary composition of this region that we call the Caribbean, the very early, in a way, if you like, premature global character of its formation, almost in a way one of the earliest chapters in this experiment that is now called globalization, is that we were in a sense presented with the distinct possibility of making the abstract global, a global community of what [Martin] Carter would call, “valid persons.” Instead of a globalization of things and structures or space, the proximity that we have to each other, and the communality of historical cargo of burden, and survival from burden, that we carry, allowed us the possibility if we willed it, of giving to the concept of global a meaning that is not on the agenda of globalization. I am finding it very difficult to see how we are going to deal with that when definitions of our predicament by the chosen definers—and I mean by the people who are economists, the people who are sociologists, the people who are in a variety of disciplines, and so on—the definers are mired in the language of their tutelage from which they have not been able to escape. And I don’t know how you do it, but this question of finding the language [is important]; and I earlier would have argued that one of the failures of the Left was not only the failure but almost the lack of the awareness that there needed to be found a language other than the inherited language that you’ve taken over from the texts. We have to find a language, a defining language that bears some organic relation to what I see as the uniqueness of our particular evolution as a people over the last five hundred years.

I came across a phrase by Carter in his early political days when he is grieving about the breakup of Guyana, a marvelous phrase about a “free community of valid persons.”⁴⁸ [This] is what you were aiming for, and what we would be aiming to create within the context of what we call global. The difficulty of arriving at that is that the issues that engage our leadership at all levels, the leadership at the political level, the leadership at the judicial level, the leadership at the business level, is a leadership which quite often is marked by high levels of competence within its particular areas, but it seems to me in nearly all areas it is a leadership that is almost totally devoid of a philosophic turn of

mind. That is, it thinks statistically in terms of systems and in terms of structures. But it doesn’t think *philosophically* in terms of the evolution of person and the community of valid persons.

DS: Your affection for Martin Carter and your uses of his work especially in the seventies and early eighties to help you to provoke us to think about kinds of commitment—I want to come back to this. But I want to press you a little on “The Negro Writer and His World” partly because I want to ask you later on whether you have traveled a certain distance from that conception. That essay is concerned to think about exactly what the title tells you it is concerned with; in fact, you spend some time saying why you have altered the title to “The Negro Writer and His World.” And one of the things that you say in that essay is that the Negro writer is concerned with a *universal* predicament. It is not that the Negro writer is some kind of exotic peculiarity, but that the Negro writer finds him or herself faced with the problematic of identity in a very sharply focused way, given the nature of the history of domination in which black people have found themselves. The particularity of the Negro writer has precisely to do with the Negro writer’s preoccupation with a universal problem of identity.

GL: Yes. I think somewhere I speak of more than one world. There are about three worlds that we are speaking of: there is that public world that produces and that shapes; there is the world he addresses; but of course the most important of all towards the end [is] the private world. I am saying that he [the Negro writer] joins hands, therefore, not so much even with the Negro audience as with every other writer whose work is a form of self-inquiry, clarification of his relations with other men, and report on his own very highly subjective conception of the possible meaning of man’s life. In a way, his predicament is only an extreme form of a general human predicament, the explanation and the self-inquiry about the meaning, really, of existence. What one fears—I don’t know if it comes up there—is that there is always the possibility of the writer coming within that category of “Negro writer,” and accepting the limitation imposed upon him by the mythologies that go with the word “Negro,” that in fact there was a special battle that he had to fight, that was not the battle fought by other people. There is a sense in which he has a special kind of war to conduct in relation to many another, a special war which he has to conduct quite often in relation to those within his own tribe. But when we are speaking, then, of the writer at a very fundamental level, he has to avoid the demand which may be placed upon him to be thinking exclusively in terms of the predicament of the mythological Negro. And what I would have added to that at some other stage is that
it was an imposition that worked unfortunately on a very large body of what otherwise would have been a very important Afro-American literature, that got mired into the daily combat of double consciousness: the double consciousness is there, but the double consciousness must be seen as a strategy, and not as a prison. The double consciousness you work because that worked both ways: he's in my consciousness as I am in his. And I have the power to place meanings on him that is no less than his placing meanings on me.

DS: What are you reading in the fifties that is enabling you or helping you to formulate these ideas in the ways you do?

GL: In the fifties I am reading everything. There is also the influence of an intellectual environment. I am gregarious, culturally gregarious. I am a West Indian; I am meeting West Indians—West Indians, and not many Barbadians. My closest friends are going to be Jamaicans, Guyanese, people I have not seen before. Theirs is going to be the world I am seeing most. Then I am meeting African friends in which discussions are very specifically political—questions of where does X stand in terms of the leadership of the time, whether you're talking of Tom Mboya or Kenyatta, or where do they stand in relation to the struggle, which in general is this liberation, anticolonial struggle. I am meeting them. And all this is happening like within the same week—on a Monday, or on a Sunday, because I'm moving about a lot.

I'm then moving in a world of an English middle-class sophisticated intelligentsia—met through BBC, and also met then through the curiosity that comes of the invitation to meet this *In the Castle of My Skin* person. And very lucky, really, because I'm meeting some very interesting people and I'm meeting a world where the conversation forces me to check on the references coming into those conversations. It's a world in which in some rooms there is very violent argument between people who are Freudians and people who are Jungians. So it leads me to all the early books I buy. I have nearly everything of Freud and of Jung. And I have a very, very strong fascination with Freud. I am reading Wilhelm Reich at that stage. I'm reading Martin Heidegger. There is a segment of my world that is strongly philosophical, [though] they wouldn't call themselves that. And there are the Marxists, very clear, [who claim that] all of what you're saying, Freud and all of that, we have a paradigm through which all of that can be seen.

I am a learner. I am listening and I am then going back and checking this thing out for myself. I am not and have never been a joiner; I am not joining. I support, I identify with, but I'm very reluctant to join. I don't have a history of joining—but always supporting. I then learn the complexities and the overlapping, because when you begin
with something like The Communist Manifesto, which is to me a work of extraordinary brilliance, what is clear to me is the capacity for simplifying the most complex ideas is reduced to a statement. I understand that the statement that is to cover a tremendous terrain of many disciplines, that it occurs to me that, look, if this thing is really going to make true sense, you may then have to go and read A, you may have to go and read B. What I have found with most of the “Marxists” from my territory [was] that their reading was very limited. It was limited to three things: the Manifesto, Lenin’s What’s to Be Done, and The Eighteenth Brumaire.

I was very interested in philosophy, and then that brings the whole French existentialist movement into mind, [for example] the arguments that will go on between a man like [Gabriel] Marcel (one of those coming from the Catholic position) and Sartre.⁴⁹ There’s a very interesting work called Existentialism Is a Humanism—I don’t know whether you’ve ever come across it.⁵⁰ All of that in the fifties is my main reading. It’s more Continental, especially more French, than it would be English. It’s later, then, in stages, [around] ’55, on the Guggenheim [that I] went to the [United] States and realized that there was this whole omission, because American literature didn’t come into my reading very much. I had some Mark Twain and fragments of Whitman, and so on. But when I got to the States and spent some time there, I started to realize the immense importance of that nineteenth-century literature.

DS: I’m reminded as you speak that, of course, the epigraph to In the Castle of My Skin is from Whitman.

GL: Yes, yes. “Something startles where I thought I was safest.” I must tell you—I must admit to you—that I have been trying for the longest time to tell people where to find this.

DS: How did you come to be invited to that congress on Black Writers and Artists?

GL: Castle. In the fifties—and it’s curious how that has multiplied—but if anything was happening and you had to have a name of some distinction from the English-speaking Caribbean, that first name would be Lamming—from somewhere between 1953 right

⁴⁹. Gabriel Marcel, a Catholic existentialist, was the author of many books, including The Philosophy of Existence (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949) and Men against Humanity (London: Harvill, 1952).
⁵⁰. Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism (London: Methuen, 1948 [1946]).
down to 1960. Now, what would have happened there was that *Castle* was bought by Sartre for *Les Temp Modernes*, so actually *Castle* was appearing in installments in *Les Temps Modernes*.⁵¹ So the French Africans and the French Caribbeans were very aware of *Castle*. And I think that the person at the center of *Présence Africaine* who would have raised that would have been Richard Wright, because Wright had written the introduction to the American edition.⁵²

**DS:** Did you meet Frantz Fanon?

**GL:** Maybe very fleetingly. I don’t have a clear recollection of that. I remember him being there, and (I think I may have mentioned it before) I remember him as expressing a certain frustration and perhaps anger. Remember, Fanon is coming in from Algeria to the conference, and he is having difficulty getting a number of what he thought of as his colleagues to understand the urgency for support and identification with the FLN [Front for National Liberation], something that he is in the middle of.⁵³ And I think people are saying, “Yes, we understand, but . . .” Each territory or constituency gave priority to its concerns. So that if you came from point A, the Senegalese had certain concerns which were more important than anybody else’s. That’s the thing of bringing this collection of people together, each having distinct agendas. The one thing that would stabilize the differences was the personality that would be called African or the Negritude essence that had brought us here.

**DS:** You don’t attend the second congress in Rome in 1959?⁵⁴

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⁵¹. *Les Temps Modernes*, founded by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1945, was one of several critical magazines to emerge in Paris in the aftermath of the Resistance and the Liberation (others include Emmanuel Mounier’s *Esprit* and Georges Bataille’s *Critique*). From 1956 onward it was very sympathetic to the anticolonial movement.

⁵². See Richard Wright, “Introduction,” *In the Castle of My Skin* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953). Wright wrote in praise, finding in Lamming’s prose a kindred spirit, “the echo of another voice declaiming in alien accents a description of [the] same reality” with which he was concerned, namely, “the story of millions of simple folk who, sprawled over half of the world’s surface . . . are today being catapulted out of their peaceful, indigenously earthly lives and into the turbulence and anxiety of the twentieth century” (x). There is an intriguing story told by one of Wright’s biographers about Wright’s “jealousy” of Lamming. See Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 478–79.

⁵³. In fact this is a period of considerable intensification of the Algerian anticolonial struggle. Fanon, who spoke on the morning of the second day of the meetings, Thursday, 20 September, delivered an address entitled “Racism and Culture.” Within months of his return he would be obliged to leave Algeria. On Fanon at the Congress, see Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 278–291.

⁵⁴. The Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists was held in Rome from 26 March to 1 April 1959.
GL: No, I don’t. I don’t know why. But I saw a peculiar thing in that my name was down there as a vice president of the second congress, and I’m not there. I didn’t go to the second congress, but I will tell you that there was great argument about the location of the second congress. Rome did not seem an appropriate place for a conference of that kind. I remember there was very sharp discussion and dissent about this. *Présence Africaine* was a great power for the French.⁵⁵ In fact, the conference is really dominated by that French presence, and I would think that the Vatican would have had direct connections with [Alioune] Diop. What people were very interested in finding out was how [Aimé] Césaire was going to deal with the pope. How would he meet with him? Would he bow, would he kiss the ring, or what? But he went, and I don’t know how [it turned out].⁵⁶ But what is interesting—and I’m sorry I didn’t have the names—is there was a photograph taken, and from memory I can only spot here or there, one or two. But what is quite extraordinary is that in the overwhelming majority of cases in that photograph, nearly all these men were or would become major political figures in the territories they came from. [Jacques] Rabemananjara is there, who is the leader of the movement in Madagascar—a whole range of them. And it showed in a way an interesting contrast in the legacies of the colonial experience, that the French and to some extent the Hispanic world, although there wasn’t a great Hispanic presence there if I remember, not really. Nicholas Guillen came, not as a guest but in an almost kind of hidden way, unknown.

DS: Was he living in Paris at the time?

GL: He was living in Paris. He was also on a list. Batista was asking the French government to get him back. I remember he wanted to meet me, and he got a message to meet at a certain café and I went and had to look all around and he was pointed out. And he was way back at the door, and it was pretty cool, and I wanted to change seats, and he said no, in case he had to move, the nearest exit was the wisest place to be. And in those days, you had to be very careful because kidnapping was on their minds. You see, if they got you on the premises of the embassy that was all that was needed. If French police picked you up and drove you straight into the Cuban embassy, you were on Cuban territory and nothing more was required. And therefore there were a number of people

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⁵⁶. Indeed all the delegates were granted an audience with Pope John XXIII. See Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, 373.
who lived in this, not quite underworld way, but always with very, very great caution. If I’m not mistaken I think Augustino Neto was there, Leon Damas certainly, Césaire of course. But I was very struck by that difference. There was no English-speaking delegate who was a man in political office, or on the way to political office, in the way that a substantial number of the delegates from Senegal or Angola were.

DS: Besides you, was there any other writer from the English-speaking Caribbean?

GL: There was a man called Peter Blackman, who should really be better known. Peter Blackman was from Barbados, he was a member of the British Communist Party, and was a priest who had been sent out to Gambia. You remember there was something called the Mission to Gambia and Rio Pongas? He is dead now. He was very funny about this. [After] the experience of the Gambia and what happened there, he decided that he could no longer belong to the Anglican Church. He was an Anglican missionary. And he came back to London and after a period of time he joined the Communist Party. His importance is that he was one, in my experience, of the very early pioneers in African history, and the story is really that it was Basil Davidson’s association with Peter that led him [Davidson] to do the books that he was doing. That was one story.

Peter was a very scholarly man; he had lots of notes and papers, but he was one of these men who didn’t let you read anything until he thought it was finished. And he was the kind of man for whom nothing was finished. You know, there was something, he didn’t know what it was, but there was something missing that had to be there. So there is a pile of papers left, he has a niece who comes into Barbados now and again. I don’t know what would have happened to his papers. The one thing that you can find of his is a long remarkable poem called “My Song Is for All Men.” It was set to music in the fifties by a very famous composer called Allan Bush. Someone sent me the score, which I gave to the Barbados Archives.

Then there was a very strange, fascinating man, who was an architect, a Jamaican, John Holness. John Holness was a man of the Left and was very keen on organizing groups, and he went eventually—I think through a connection with Neto—to Angola for a very long time, in some advisory capacity, and moved between Angola and Tanza-

57. In the mid-nineteenth century the Reverend Hamble James Leacock and H. A. Duport left Barbados as representatives of the West India Church Association to start the first Christian Mission in Gambia and the Rio Pongas.

58. Peter Blackman, My Song Is for All Men (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1952).
nia. [He] gradually faded out of that scene. Then there was another, Marcus James, who was also a priest, an Anglican priest. There was also an Anglo-Indian, Cedric Dover, a very, very important figure in the movement of the Left in England at that time. And I think Dover had a close connection with Du Bois, because Du Bois on one of his very last grand tours came through London on his way from China, before taking up residence in Ghana. And I remember being called because Présence Africaine had started a series of what they called Societies of African Culture in different places; one was in London, Paris was the headquarters, and I was the secretary of the London branch at the time.⁵⁹ So I was called and told that we were arranging a small gathering for Du Bois, who was arriving sometime. It was in an apartment. And there were about fifteen or twenty people, very carefully selected, it was quite an experience. And he came; he had just come back from China. And he was on his way then, I think, back to the States [and] then on to Ghana. I was discussing this, not long ago, with his biographer—he’s written a remarkable biography of Du Bois—David Levering Lewis.⁶⁰ It’s fascinating. And I was telling him about this, and I was saying I didn’t know exactly who had fixed up the meeting, because it was done [quietly]. It was done between one of two people really. Either Dover who had that very close connection to the party or a most extraordinary woman called Claudia Jones. She was in London, and she was very active in the party. But it was an evening . . . it’s a pity we had no tape recorders. Du Bois sat and he spoke for about an hour and a half, just conversation. But what he was trying to get us to do was to imagine the world in which he was born, the 1860s. And then he spoke about his first visit to Europe, and about being in Berlin. And in those days the authority of an English pound note! No one would even check your credentials if you showed an English pound note.

And then—which was a very touchy moment—he was asked about Garvey. And Mrs. Garvey was there. [She was] very quiet. Du Bois spoke of Garvey with great respect and said that he must not be misunderstood. [He had made] criticisms, but he was aware of Garvey’s enormous contribution. He simply maintained that on the practical side that he [Garvey] had entered a world whose mechanics he did not [understand]—he meant the world of business and shipping. But there was no question about the power of his influence. He said nothing negative, and it was left [there]. But Du Bois was a man, I

⁵⁹. The Société Africaine de Culture (SAC) was launched in 1956 by Alioune Diop as part of the expansion of the project of Présence Africaine. See Jules-Rosette, Black Paris.

could see, that would make life very difficult for a rival. Full of that kind of authority that could easily be arrogance. And I remember him insisting that he still made the best cup of coffee of anyone he’d ever met. And of course his wife was there, very charming, Shirley Graham.

Dover is really worth following up. I got to know him fairly well; he moved with the ease of people who had that tendency to be of the Left, not necessarily to be in the party. And I think that was the lot. The really fascinating one to me was the old man from Haiti who was the chair and in whose honor [the Congress was held], Jean Price-Mars. Yes, he chaired. In fact, the congress was intended to be in his honor. Now there was an embarrassing moment there, because Du Bois couldn’t come, Du Bois wasn’t allowed to come. Alioune Diop opened and there was a long cable from Du Bois to the conference regretting [that he can’t come]. [Diop] had to read it. People thought perhaps it would have been better if he hadn’t. They’ve seized Du Bois’s passport; he can’t travel. And he reminds the conference of its duty and of its importance at this point in history. And then he says, “I think it is my duty to warn you to be very careful in your dealings with the American delegation.” There were five Afro-Americans present. And, I don’t know, I thought that it was a little unfair to them. But I don’t think he could have received Du Bois’s cable and not read it, and I don’t think Diop would have dared editing it. So he read it. Later the Americans had something to say about it.⁶¹ But it put a shadow on their authority.

DS: Let’s back up a bit, George, to 1953. In the Castle of My Skin is published, but there is a major crisis in what is then British Guiana. What is the response of Caribbean writers and intellectuals in Britain at the time?

GL: I can’t speak on behalf of all the writers, but I know that among students at all levels, postgraduate students and so on, and West Indians who had an interest in what was happening in the region, there was just outrage. There was a kind of alarm, also, which the colonial of British tutelage had that this was not the kind of thing you expected Britain to do. You had a government that was freely elected and you then intervened and you suspended its constitution. Churchill was the prime minister then. He was the one who opened a speech, I remember, by reporting that things were now stable in Guyana. What later we discovered to our amazement was that the Colonial Office had in fact consulted with two of the leading Caribbean leaders of the period—Norman Manley in Jamaica

⁶¹ See Rowley, Richard Wright, 478.
and Grantley Adams in Barbados—to find out what their reaction would be to such a
decision. And it is there on record that they both gave their approval to the suspension
of the Guyana constitution. It would have been [their] view that Jagan defined himself
as Marxist and therefore communist, and Manley and Adams in their different ways
[made] it clear which side of the curtain they were on.

DS: Well, of course, for N. W. this was in the wake of the expulsion of the Marxist Left
from the PNP in ’52.

GL: Yes. We had reason to believe—again, this is reflecting [back] on this—that the
urgency for that did not really emanate with the British, but that in fact the British were
responding to an American demand. Because remember that after the Second World
War what you have really is a kind of understanding that the Americas—Latin America
and the Caribbean—come within the sphere of the authority and decision making of
the United States. The Cold War is very much on in 1953, and the United States was not
prepared to accommodate what they would call a communist-led, Marxist-led govern-
ment. And remember the Guyanese constitution is at that time only one step or so away
from full independence. That in fact created a great breach in relations between Guyana
and the rest of the region because they [the Guyanese] found themselves really isolated.
There wasn’t that support. If I remember correctly, even when they tried to travel, they
had problems being in transit in Trinidad, [when] they would try to get out to Europe
for support. It is very important to remember here that in 1953 Jagan and Burnham are
together as colleagues—one as chairman of the party and [the other as] leader of the
party, and they are going to make this tour. They come to Britain and then they go to
India where there is great support for their stand.

But in a way, I think that the reactions of the Caribbean to the suspension of the
constitution may also have affected Jagan’s relation to the question of Federation. In the
sense that if men of the caliber of Manley and Adams could collaborate in the negation
of the democratic process where Guyana was concerned, it was asking a lot for him to
trust a partnership with such men. I think this was one of the arguments that he would
have had. He was stepping into territory where he had had enough evidence of lack of
any democratic solidarity for the liberation of the region. And that would lead later, after
’53, when the constitution is suspended, to something called an interim government.
That is a very extraordinary period.

I am traveling a great deal now, after Castle. I get the Guggenheim [in 1954] and I
go to the [United] States around 1955. [And] I take my first trip back to the Caribbean
from the United States. I had an assignment with a magazine called _Holiday_ to write something on the region. I took that one slowly. I came right through: I went to Haiti, stopped in Puerto Rico. I wasn’t allowed in at Cuba for some reason. They said they did not accept my passport or something like that. Then I came right down to Barbados and to Guyana. So I’m going to be in Guyana during the period of the interim government, and I meet Jagan and I meet Burnham at some time during that period. It was very interesting at the time that the Guyanese population are still in some doubt about what will be the future of the PPP [People’s Progressive Party]. Have they broken? Have they split? Because there are rumors now that there may be a split in the party and they are waiting for a new constitution. Observers of that situation believe that it is in that period that preparations are being made for Burnham to become leader of an independent Guyana, as perhaps the more acceptable, not necessarily the more reliable, but the more acceptable of the two. It is going to be the visit to Guyana at that time that makes me very aware of the tensions that are going to arise where a political struggle deteriorates into racial conflict. And I would say that the Guyana visit was the seed of _Of Age and Innocence_. The centrality of that political drama in the novel was really influenced by the Guyana visit.

C. L. R. James

**DS:** We will come back to that. You meet C. L. R. James around 1954 on the Charing Cross Road, you’ve said, and _he_ recognized you, not you him? And he seemed, as you put it in the eulogy at James’s funeral, “a vagrant.”⁶² Tell me what you mean by that.

**GL:** It’s very odd. First of all, James at that time was not in very good physical condition. When he said “Lamming” and I said, “Yes,” I was very excited and a little shocked when he told me who he was. I would not have known who he was just by seeing him, and I said, “Let us go and have some coffee.” We went in to this coffee shop and what I noticed was the shaking of his hands. I mean he couldn’t hold the cup of coffee with one hand. He had to take his head down to the cup. He suffered some disorder, which at the time was thought to be Parkinson’s [disease], but they said later it was not. But that remained with him for a very long time. I don’t know what he was doing on Charing Cross Road. I didn’t pursue that then, but later what I discovered was that Charing Cross Road had these pinball games where you go and pull whatever it is. But apparently he was very

⁶² See Lamming, “C. L. R. James, Evangelist,” _Conversations_, 195–200. This was the eulogy Lamming delivered at James’s funeral on 12 June 1989.
fascinated with this and would quite often visit these pinball machine places where he played and betted. I think he was also there book-hunting. I think that that meeting led to calls to visit and discussions.

DS: What did you talk about in that coffee shop? Do you remember?

GL: I don’t remember the details of what we talked about, but we would certainly have been talking about something to do with the literature of the region, and books which had come out.

DS: When you meet James then had you read *Minty Alley*? Do you know about *Minty Alley*?63

GL: I’m not sure whether I had. I may have, but I’m not sure, because remember in 1954 James’s books are not available. *The Black Jacobins* was hardly available.

DS: What do you know about James when you meet him?

GL: We know James as a tremendous figure in Trinidad. I’m not even aware of the importance of James’s political work in the United States. When I was in Trinidad I just knew James by hearsay as this very articulate, highly intellectual person, who was always engaged in public discourse in the press in Trinidad, and who was connected to the *Beacon* magazine, and who had written. But I never saw *Black Jacobins* until I got to England. I don’t recall seeing a copy of *Black Jacobins* in Trinidad. Remember, *Black Jacobins* was published in 1938, and with the war God knows what would have happened to it. I don’t know how many copies were circulated, and *Black Jacobins* did not come back into print until the sixties, and then first in the United States, and then in England. There would have been copies; the university library may have had it in the reference section. But he was a name and an intellectual personality without our actually knowing what was the content of that.

DS: When you meet him how does he seem to you? Does he seem to you to be a man with regrets? Does he himself talk about the United States period?

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63. *Minty Alley* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1936) is James’s only published novel. It was written, as he says, one summer before he left Trinidad.
GL: No, not at that time. He does not. When I meet him in the early stages he is talking about the Caribbean. It is a little later, I think, than ’54 [that I meet him], because about a year or two later, I remember taking him to Lord’s. I lived around Swiss Cottage, and the Lord’s ground was just a short bus ride away. The West Indies had come up in 1957 and they are practicing at Lord’s. This was the first time that he is going to see the West Indies play cricket since he left England, since [Learie] Constantine’s days. But he has followed the team; [though of course] he misses the 1950 tour. We would watch them in the nets, and then he specially wants to meet [Frank] Worrell. Worrell and I had been at school together. And I went to say hello to Worrell and took him. And he always makes a joke about this much later, saying, “When I saw Worrell and you together, he looked like the writer and you looked like the cricketer.” So I think a lot of our talk at the time would have been Caribbean-related, either through cricket or through the literature.

DS: Is there a sense that he is now looking toward the Caribbean?

GL: He is now looking towards the Caribbean because I think what one has to face, first of all, [is that] there would have been a great lament and grief about leaving the United States. James clearly did not want to leave the United States and that was a great blow. He had returned to an England, of course, which was different from the England that he had left, and he had returned to an England where whoever were his colleagues at that time had dispersed, were dead, or whatever. So in a way it was a search for some new constituency and [his] is not a name that was that well known in England. But our talk was also about the Americans because he was still corresponding and he is still the leader of the group of Facing Reality, and these letters and these exchanges are going on between him and Martin Glaberman.

DS: He is, of course, much taken with Hungary in 1956.

GL: Oh yes, that international situation in Hungary. And it was very prophetic that he was always quite sure that the Soviet empire would collapse. He was very strong on that. He didn’t know when, but it was bound to come.

But I don’t think it has been emphasized sufficiently that in that period in England, just out of the States and before he knew what was going to happen next, he was more or less a lost person. I think he was unclear about what would happen; and the material base of his life was very fragile. He was never a man who paid much attention to making money or keeping it, and he was greatly supported by his then wife, [Selma], who did
a lot of typing for the BBC producers. Gradually, people became aware of him and he would be asked to give a talk here and there. But I think he really came back to life in a way with the invitation to come home, that is, to come back to Trinidad. He went back to Trinidad first in 1958. This is going to be twenty-five years since he left; he never set foot on it before [then]. And it’s in connection with the opening of the Federal Parliament. That is going to be the visit of ’58, and then they argue over this. Williams would sometimes try to deny that he’d asked him to stay. But James remains and becomes, first of all, secretary of the Federal Labour Party, then editor of the Nation, which is the party paper of Dr. Williams’s People’s National Movement [PNM]. It is in that period that James is going to be brought to the attention of one or two generations in the Caribbean for the first time. Because when James gets back to Trinidad in 1958, he is almost totally unknown. There’s an enclave of his contemporaries—Mendes, Gomes, a small handful—who remember him from the thirties.

DS: But they would not necessarily have followed his career since then.

GL: I think that Gomes might have followed his career because of his own political interest, and Mendes probably [though] not closely. The life in the United States, as far as I recall, was a blank to most West Indians at home and abroad.

DS: And indeed he was underground for the most part.

GL: He was underground with all kinds of pseudonyms. But I think one of the ironies in this is the way in which the person responsible for his restoration to the region would also soon become the major agent in alienating him from it. I mean, there is no way that James on his own could have established his name and reputation, had it not been Eric Williams, and the way Williams located him in the movement—he couldn’t have done it if he had gone on his own, just returning—and a political movement that had the authority of its party in power.⁶⁴ When he spoke, he spoke in a way with the support of an entire movement behind him. Then what really made him a Caribbean crusader was when he launched into the crusade for Worrell as captain. That was a tremendous crusade. If you go back and you read issues of the Nation, week after week, [that] was going to be the promoter of Worrell, who should have been captain of the West Indies.

⁶⁴. In Beyond a Boundary (London: Hutchinson, 1963), James writes: “Once in a blue moon, i.e. that is once in a lifetime, a writer is handed on a plate a gift from heaven. I was handed mine in 1958” (217).
long before then. So that, as you can see, became not a Trinidad matter [but] a matter that concerned the entire Caribbean.

In that role as the Nation editor, and also linked to the Federal Labour Party, he is going to travel. He is going to speak in Guyana; he is going to speak in Jamaica. James had a remarkable gift of oratory. He was really a superb speaker, and I think to the fascination of many people at the time he would speak for an hour or hour and a half without a single note, on whatever subject it was. People were quite mesmerized by him. This force of personality may also have been a component in the undoing of the relationship between himself and Williams. Because remember, Williams is about the only person, with the exception of Constantine, in that party now, who really knows who James is and what his value is. James had a long association with Constantine and in fact collaborated in the writing of Cricket and I. But the others don’t really know James and what they are very concerned about is this closeness between himself and Williams, and they are convinced that he knows a great deal more about what is happening than Williams tells them. So you are going to get, in a way, this proximity to the leader. It is quite clear too that they are sensing that Williams depends somewhat on his [James’s] advice, and the rumor begins that if you are not careful he will take this party over. In a way this [rumor of] proximity then builds up among [the] general mass of party people. But there is a hard core in the party, younger people, who are drawn to him by this intellectual energy, by this enthusiasm, by this extraordinary optimism about what you have here and what could be made of it. So he gets a group, particularly the group around putting out the Nation, around him. This also increases the suspicions of others. That story does not unfold very nicely.

DS: Do you think James himself had a political ambition in Trinidad, and in relation to Trinidad?

GL: James’s political behavior in Trinidad was in a way a profound contradiction of James’s political style, as those of us who knew him in England would have recalled. In Trinidad, I think that one of the errors that James made was to have either ignored completely or underestimated the importance of that long absence. He goes back into Trinidad as though he had left it the week before, and Trinidad knew who was here; and “I know you even if you don’t know me,” and that was a very serious mistake to make. That absence does require patience and observation and listening before you start to

affirm self. I think that that affirmation of self created a very high profile and the profile that was therefore seen as a major threat to all the people who were now seeing in politics the possibility of their social mobility and their careers. They did not know what would happen with this kind of high-profile man, with this immense influence on the political leader, and I think that relationship might have [been] handled with greater subtlety if he had found a way of negotiating a lower and less-explosive profile while doing what he was doing.

The other thing that was quite shocking to me was after the break, which in a way some of us anticipated, we really did not see how the James we knew ideologically was going to fit with Williams's concept of party organization, and the role of the movement and party. We didn’t see how that would fit because these were not really on Williams’s agenda and may indeed have been in conflict with his agenda. So that there were people who questioned the motivation behind the linking up with Williams; some of his closest colleagues questioned that. My recollection leads also to the interpretation that some time—I think it was about the year or so before he left—in 1956 I think it was, Padmore was leaving for Ghana permanently. Padmore lived in London and he was going away. And Dr. David Pitt, who had played a very important part in Trinidad politics in a party called the WIN Party, the West Indian National Party, in the 1940s and who would have been defeated and financially ruined in a way through that campaign, migrated to England. A very fine man who became later a member of the House of Lords. David Pitt gave a farewell party for Padmore. And I remember a tremendous gathering of West Indians, and James spoke. James spoke to a [younger] generation there, and he was trying to tell that generation who knew Padmore only by name who Padmore really was, and the importance of him. And then I got to realize what the relation of Padmore to Nkrumah was. Padmore was, in a way, the architect of that whole anticolonial movement, and the architect, to some extent, of the war which Nkrumah waged there with the party that he founded.

I reflect on that farewell party and James’s speech and then the return . . . And before I forget, I am present, shortly after ’56 and the PNM winning the election. Williams visits London and an evening is spent at James’s discussing the PNM and programs and what’s to be done. So there is this connection. I see James going to Trinidad, first of all, playing more or less exactly, in relation to Williams, the role that Padmore had played in relation to Nkrumah—the organizing tactician, the party brain behind the scene. And it’s around that kind of issue on the surface that they break. Because they break when it comes to the question of the role of the paper and the relation of the party to the movement as such. James was a man who believed in the movement more than the party, the
organization of the movement and mobilization of people. And very soon after Williams comes into power, the energy is concentrated on government and the administration, and the party and the movement is left to underlings. James’s view of this thing is the reverse. The record is there now, in *Party Politics* as James tells his side of the story.⁶⁶ But that lasted two years. It was very brief. He goes in 1958. By 1960 it’s over, and he lingers for a while and returns to England.

Then we have the extraordinary drama. He then goes back a few years later and he is put under house arrest. People are terrified of this James debacle; they are terrified! He is going to cover cricket and he is put under house arrest. There is some protesting and very soon he is released. And then what is quite astonishing to me—and by that I mean, the contradiction—something that is totally, totally against everything you recall James telling younger people who are going into politics, James plunges overnight almost into the formation of a party to fight an election, and announces then that he will contest a seat wherever Williams is running. In other words, a serious national issue becomes almost a personal, gladiatorial contest. You cannot imagine anything remoter from the serious James dealing seriously with politics than that kind of exercise. A party that has no base, a party that is not the product of any long mobilization of people, a party that is just a vehicle for a challenge to Williams. “I will show Trinidad that I can deal with him.” Pathetic the results. All of them lost their deposits in that election.⁶⁷

**DS:** What is James’s account of this to you?

**GL:** I don’t remember him giving an account of it to anybody. I think what he would have said to that [is that you have to] look at the manifesto of the party, that is what James would always say. James had a way of treating defeats: any defeat was an occasion to look closely to see where there was the seed of a victory. He would say that at least what they were left with was the kind of manifesto they had never seen before of aims, goals and probably methods whereby you would attain that. But I think he then left; he was very shaken by that.

**DS:** James was embittered by the break with Williams.

⁶⁷. In a letter dated 20 August 1965 and sent to two people, Marty Glaberman and George Lamming, Selma James (James’s third wife) expressed her misgivings about the enterprise James is embarking upon. “People here believe,” she says in part, “that if anyone can defeat [Eric] Williams, James can, and have no confidence [that] anyone else can. This, on the surface, is James’s problem.” I am grateful to George Lamming for sharing this document with me.
G.L.: He was embittered by the break, yes, because he didn’t mind having the lower levels of the party [the PNM] attack him in their ambitions for office, but I think he never believed that Williams would fail to come to his defense and his support—because the party then started to go for him in a very ugly kind of way. An investigation was called for the running of the paper, and [there was an accusation of] the mismanagement of money with the suggestion that money might have been fraudulently used.

DS: Do you think the fear was Williams’s, or other members of the party who impressed upon Williams that James was a danger?

GL: Oh, I think that it had reached a point where Williams was not at all very happy about what would be the direction of the party if James remained around. If you then look at what happens to that party after the first four to five years, if you look after the sixties and past the seventies, you can see why he was afraid. Williams either did not feel he had the capacity or never really had the intention of making the party the kind of instrument of transformation that James would have had in mind.

DS: So when James returns in ’58 he imagines himself to be going home for good.

GL: Oh, yes. Oh yes, if that were made possible, yes. If, for example, as he said earlier, that what should have happened was that the editor of the party should be a member of the executive committee of the party. He saw himself as a permanent part of that movement and with the party in power, he would also—with his teaching gifts—have had access to the university and the students. Yes, he saw that as going home for good and that as being a new phase; the American phase was closed [and] this was in a way a new phase in the opening of whatever was left to him as political activity.

DS: By this time, James has completed the manuscript of what we know as Beyond a Boundary.

GL: He was working on it and I am not too sure that it was completed because that comes back then to the sixties when he comes back home. But he is certainly working on it then.

DS: Beyond a Boundary is first published in 1963. So he has finished it by the time he returns after the break with Williams.
After the break, yes. But I am not too sure. I would have to check that. Because when James calls me about *Beyond a Boundary*, he would have been working on it when he was there. He says somewhere that he had a plan for books even from the American stage and this was a part of it. I don’t know the details of that offhand, but I would think when you look at the detailed descriptions of the players, of the Caribbean players, of a certain period, I think that that may have been generated by his return to the landscape. I don’t see him doing that from outside that easily. I think that most of that may have been done in Trinidad, but not completed, necessarily, in Trinidad.

What he’s also doing in Trinidad with the *Nation* too—if you look at back copies—is also preparing for some long work on the life of Padmore. There are a lot of articles in the *Nation* which are giving Trinidadians a background history of the evolution of this extraordinary figure, whom he sees almost as the father of the African independence movement. And as I have mentioned before, I knew that when I spoke with him in the seventies in Washington he was then engaged or about to be engaged in what he thought would be a biography of Padmore. He never thought that there was an adequate biography of Padmore.

**DS:** Well, that’s absolutely true. But why did he not pursue it systematically?

**GL:** In the seventies when I saw him I suggested to him that I thought that an autobiography of his was in order and perhaps more urgent—I mean, he didn’t have to abandon the Padmore thing—he went for that and he started that autobiography and did some substantial portion of it. Now, I do not know whether his going to the autobiography distracted from the Padmore book, I don’t know. But he did start work in the seventies on the autobiography, which of course never got finished. And I don’t know whether among his papers, what unpublished work there is, there would be a continuation of the *Nation* projects on Padmore.

**DS:** Do you think that by this period, the early 1970s, that James has lost or is losing the capacity to construct a coherent image of the purpose and project of his life?

**GL:** No. I think a very curious thing is going to happen. James comes alive for another generation as a result of the break with Williams. There is a generation that is now

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68. George Padmore is a profoundly under-studied figure. The standard work on his life and work is still James R. Hooker, *Black Revolutionary: George Padmore’s Path from Communism to Pan-Africanism* (New York: Praeger, 1967).
reading *Party Politics*, his analysis of Caribbean society, and when he gets back in the sixties, there is going to be a very interesting formation: there is this once a week, or once a fortnight [gathering] of graduates students of UWI [the University of the West Indies]—[Norman] Girvan, [Richard] Small doing law, [Walter] Rodney, all of these are becoming a new constituency for James. And they’re meeting now regularly, carrying out the same kinds of discussions that James would have been doing in the United States with the Facing Reality group. And what happens now [is that] there is an image of James as icon, as advisor to that whole generation. Rodney will speak at length about the importance of the encounter with James. So would Girvan. In other words, it’s as though he had created or found, discovered, a completely new constituency. Something is also happening in that when you look at [Selwyn] Ryan’s collection of pieces on the February rebellion in 1970, there is a view that the influence of James is at work in the [Trinidad] insurrection of 1970.⁶⁹ There is in Trinidad, around the Oilfield Workers Union and the *Vanguard* paper, a core, a very hard core of Jamesian disciples who were left there and who in fact are even more significant players in what is happening than the NJAC and the Black Power people. The NJAC [National Joint Action Committee] and the Black Power people were at the mass level but the organizing ideological people are in that. And this is seen in a way as one of the legacies of James, the legacies of the break of the sixties, the legacies of the formation of the Workers and Farmers Party, and so on. Incidentally, the present prime minister, [Basdeo] Panday, was a member of the Workers and Farmers Party, and fought an election with James. In a way, something very curious happens to him; there is almost a rebirth of James after the defeat with Williams, if you want to put it like that.

**DS:** James, you’re saying, becomes a source and a fount almost for a younger generation.

**GL:** And a teacher.

**DS:** And a teacher. But does that enable James to reinvent *himself* from the 1970s onwards, is partly the question that I’m asking you. And I’m asking this partly in relation to the seeming inability to write and prepare either the autobiography or the biography of Padmore, or any single work in that period.

GL: I think that one may have to consider that as you get into the seventies there is a certain frailness; remember he had had the accident in Jamaica, and that would have affected him in some way, although he always claimed that it didn’t. There is not sustained writing after that, but there are the things you will see collected by Allison and Busby. He is giving a lot of talks. The writing has turned into that talk, into James the teacher, James taking back, reconstructing what happened in Ghana, reconstructing here, reconstructing there. And my guess is he sees now—and probably is quite happy with that—the work and the meaning of his life being carried forward in the lives of people of Rodney’s generation. And he is aware of the immense respect, affection, and honor in which they hold him, whether they agree with him or not. He is very conscious of this, and I think he’s very pleased with that.

DS: Yes. There is mention somewhere that in the mid-1950s you apply for membership of the British Communist Party.


DS: What prompted you?

GL: Let’s say there may be two things at work there. Remember that in Trinidad, with my association with Clifford Sealy, although I’m mainly a writer and a poet I am mixed up with people who are very engrossed in reading Marx and discussing Marx and Marxism. So there is an echo of that and an influence of that in me, I think. And then shortly after I’m there [in England], there is a feeling of lostness and I’m not, in a way, touching the society or being touched by it in any meaningful way. I am spending time also with people who discuss Marx and I thought it would be a good idea to join the Communist Party. At the time I’m thinking of the communist party really as a kind of school in which I could come to understand better the meaning of Marx—even more than a religion or a church, as it was for a number of people. But I was very innocent, I didn’t realize that you don’t go down and say you want to join the Communist Party. At the time I’m thinking of the communist party really as a kind of school in which I could come to understand better the meaning of Marx—even more than a religion or a church, as it was for a number of people. But I was very innocent, I didn’t realize that you don’t go down and say you want to join the Communist Party. And I went down to King Street—I had asked where the Communist Party headquarters was and they told me King Street—and I went in there quite innocently and saw some lady and I told her who I was. I wasn’t known as a writer or anything then.

DS: In the Castle of My Skin has not yet been published?
GL: No, no. And they asked me what I wanted, and I said what I have really come for [is to] join the party. Well, she took my name and my address and so on. I never heard from them. Now I don’t know—I believe they did in those days—they must then have checked with other people: Do you know him? Who is he? What is he? But in a very fascinating way, I never ever heard from them again.

DS: And then you dropped the idea?

GL: Yes, I did not pursue that. I was surprised that I didn’t hear from them, but I wasn’t going back. I think my relation to it was the need for being in a school; I saw it as a serious collection of people who would be exploring [Marx].

The Poetics of Decolonization

DS: This brings me to *Of Age and Innocence*. *Of Age and Innocence* is published in 1958 and it is, among other things, of course, a book of return. The principal characters are on their way back to the Caribbean to be engaged in political activities in the anticolonial movement. And I want to ask you a little bit about the character Mark Kennedy. Because there is something very curious, but something very recognizable about his aloof and almost exhausted sensibility. And at the same time, you put in his mouth in the famous Sabina Square speech scene, conceptions which are very important to you, especially the conception of freedom that he articulates in that speech. In that speech he says at one point that freedom is an instinct, freedom is a nerve. There is something else that I think that he says in that speech which has always fascinated me. He says something like, “Life is an occasion one of whose aspects is man,” which I have always remembered and thought very fascinating and at the same time very obscure. Can you tell me a little bit about this character, Mark Kennedy, and what it is you are trying to do with him, and in particular in relation to this conception of freedom and of man?

GL: I think in Mark Kennedy what I am looking at there is the great ambiguity which has to be struggled with in the creative mind which at the same time feels the need, the moral imperative, for engagement in public affairs. The creative act cannot be an exclusively private and subjective matter.

DS: You’re struggling with yourself.

GL: Yes, and the engagement in public affairs means for me at that time the engagement in the politics of the life of where I am. That is the Caribbean wherever it may be. And if Kennedy is concerned with that society he cannot be concerned with it purely at the level of private reflection. There is the need—he feels the impulse—to intervene. But when he intervenes, he becomes acquainted with the men who are now professional or vocational politicians, their life and their business is politics, which he recognizes means for them office, exercise of power, none of which he really has a great interest in. The holding of office and the exercise of power is not his concern. His intervention in public life is [about] how he can plant a vision inside that activity. How can he bring a base to that activity that was other than what they [the political leaders] are concerned about.

DS: A philosophical base.

GL: Yes. Because what he’s aware of too is that the men who are engaged in what you call politics are also men for whom the private, subjective reflective self-consciousness does not exist. Or if it exists, it is in a way adjourned, it is postponed, it cannot be dealt with. What has to be dealt with is how you win this battle that is on hand. I don’t think they are understanding him very well when he speaks of this freedom; he is really saying, “You know, you are really dealing with something that is already there. But you don’t know it is there, or how to exercise it. You call it independence or self-government or something, but that is only one aspect of it. But it is there as an essence in you.” That is going to come up again with Powell in Season of Adventure. Freedom is where you are and where you start.

DS: Nobody can give it to you.

GL: No. That is there. That is your original spiritual oxygen. That is there. And the struggle is to discover it and to discover its potential and to discover the ways in which that potential can be made to exercise itself in a variety of ways, of which that political struggle is only one way. And he’s trying to get across to the audience also that—I think there’s a speech he makes that I quote sometimes, where he’s giving a view about this nationalism—when you are speaking of nation, what you are speaking about is the creation. You are given a space but then you create a space where you know the language
of its winds, you know the smell of its air, you know . . . And this is really home. This is what men mean by home. And this home—it’s implied—is also where you work.

DS: George, isn’t there a connection between this conception and your conception of style?

GL: Yes, yes. Indirect. Style would really be the metaphor that covers all of that, and that style would apply not just to the writer, that may also be to the carpenter or the fisherman who finds in what he does a discovery of who he is.

DS: To discover, create—because these, discovery and creation, are part of the meaning and making of style—is at the same time to discover or create one’s own sovereignty in relation to one’s activity?

GL: Yes. The question of sovereignty, then, particularly in the light of the definition of nation as being a particular space defined in terms of politics and laws, that sovereignty is limited. The sovereignty which literally means your freedom from external influence, external interference in your domestic affairs, that is limited in the sense that you may not always have control to shield or protect yourself from interventions. But what I’m claiming that is not limited is another kind of sovereignty, and that is the capacity you have for choosing and making and remaking that self which you discover is you, is distinctly you. And which in a way is always unfinished, but it has a very special essence that is you, and its power is that it allows you to create the meanings that are to be given to what happens to you.

DS: It is of course interesting that you place that conception both in the mind and mouth of Mark, a middle-class kind of character in Of Age and Innocence, on one hand, and in a man of the people, Powell in Season of Adventure, on the other hand. And therefore the claim is that this conception, the recognition of this freedom, is not the sole possession of the intellectual classes.

GL: No, not at all. And as a matter of fact, it may sometimes be stronger in a man like Powell than it is in the intellectual classes, which, according to the nature of the tutelage, according to their relation to the institutions of learning, may have had that sense of freedom put in doubt by the kinds of questions that are raised through their particular tools of analysis.
DS: I am very interested in this character Mark and in this idea of inserting into the project of anticolonialism a reflective moment, a moment in which the anticolonial movement is urged to reflect on its conceptions of itself, its conceptions of politics, et cetera. Are you worried in the late 1950s that the anticolonial movements are not sufficiently philosophical in their reflections on what the meaning of the coming sovereignty is to be?

GL: I am, yes, because by ’55 I have come back, and I have gone around and I have met a number of people. And let me say that I think that insofar as writers are in any position to be reliable about these things, there is a lot of a kind of autobiographical experience in the making of Mark Kennedy. What is happening to Mark Kennedy is in a way some reflection of what I’m going to experience on the inside in dealing with organizations that I had had some connection with, and with the leaders of organizations. What I’m aware of is that they really don’t understand what I do. They recognize that it may have an importance and a utilitarian value for this moment with that crowd, but what it’s really about is not on their agenda and I know that. But I still have this notion that in spite of that I have a moral commitment to intervene in that public area. I think I will lose that.

DS: Lose what, the moral commitment?

GL: No, I won’t lose the moral commitment; I will lose the battle that I’m engaged in with them [the political leaders]. I can’t win that.

DS: You can’t persuade them to understand you.

GL: No, I can’t. At one stage, there is an innocence, if you like, that makes you feel that you could. Because they listen to you sometimes with what appears to be a great air of care and respect. But you realize that they’re engaged in another kind of battle; they’re engaged in a battle of winning and losing, they’re engaged in a battle of power, they’re engaged in that kind of exercise. And it doesn’t really give them time for reflection; reflection is not there, they cannot afford reflection. They want opinions, and they want opinions that can be applied in a social practice whose results are visible and there. And if that is not happening, it’s alright, you’re fine and so on, but you’re not really what they [want]. I always saw the complexity of my relation to organizations, to all of them. At one stage, in the fifties and later in the sixties, coming back, I had a very
George Lamming by Carl Van Vechten, New York, 1955
close relationship with the Barbados Workers Union. I had brought about a kind of temporary marriage between them and a theater group in Barbados. There was a theater group out of which some very fine actors came, and Frank Walcott\textsuperscript{71} had asked me to open some occasion—I was always asked to prepare a program for certain occasions of the union, and on the twenty-fifth anniversary or something like that, I hit upon the idea, “You know what we’ll do, we’ll do a reconstruction of the riots of 1937”—with the full authority of the union. So I got [Earl] Warner, who is now dead, he was one of the leading people in that workshop, to assist me. This was the union’s production. Now, the union never dealt with any theater before; I had to meet the executive to explain that you will see it, and when you see it [you will see that] it concerns you. And it was put on in the union headquarters.

But it was a very interesting experiment because what I did was that each member of what was going to be the cast was asked, “How will you research this? I want you to check with the parent or the grandparent, and the further back you go the better, at home or wherever they are and it doesn’t matter who, ask them what they were doing on the morning the riots broke out. Do they remember the morning the riots broke out? What were they doing, what happened where they lived?” And each came back then and they themselves were quite astonished, because they had heard no talk about any riots before. And they came back with these extraordinary stories about what the old woman said and what this man said and what the other one said, and so on. And we made those stories the script, as the exchange that went on among people on that morning. And then of course we reconstructed the leaders. We did an interesting thing with the leaders. Rather than bring in the leaders, we introduced—just as in \textit{Natives of My Person} with the wives—we invented a scene in which the wives of the leaders are talking about the kind of distress their men had put them in. So we meet the leaders via the wives; that one was written out by me. I went to the archives and I photocopied pages and pages of things like the Moyne Report, the investigation and so on about the riots. That was an \textit{extraordinary} performance.

\textbf{DS: When was it staged?}

\textbf{GL:} It would have to be, I think, in the sixties. There is a record of that. The fighting scenes were then—Warner did that directing, fascinating—we did a mime of the fighting, the police confrontations were done in mime. We then put it on a second time,

\textsuperscript{71} Sir Frank Leslie Walcott (1916–1999) was a distinguished trade unionist. He joined the Barbados Workers’ Union in 1946 and spent the next forty-five years working in it. I am grateful to Glyne Griffith for this information.
down in the port; the union had a club, and it’s actually very fascinating because there were port workers who were around in the riots, and we had a very Shakespearean kind of scene because in the middle of this thing men were getting up and saying, “Oh no, no, it didn’t happen that way at all. No.” And we had to then say, you know, “Quiet, quiet. . .!” What I wanted to do was to forward that because as a result of that audience involvement in a matter which they had borne witness to, we had tried to set up a meeting in which the actors were going to come down to the port club to have a discussion with the workers who were involved in the riots, about how they saw the play in relation to what actually happened. And it was that kind of bridge that I was trying to build. What I was trying to do at the time was to establish for the union that what you call culture was the very foundation of your labor and therefore whenever a government is speaking about cultural policy, the union should be able to say, “Here is how we understand culture and a policy for culture.” That the union should have a view of what a cultural policy should be. That the union, for example, had the resources to produce plays, that they could call Warner and whoever and say, “We want you to put on this or that.” And they were the producers. That theater in a way became not a thing that those people did in that place or that place, but it was an organic part of what you were doing every day, of returning society to itself through this activity. And I was trying to plant that notion of the absolute importance of the cultural base of your struggles. It was listened to, but I realized that [it was unlikely to succeed]; you keep your fingers crossed that seeds may drop here and there, but it would not.

DS: And this is what you’re experimenting with in Mark Kennedy’s discourse.

GL: Yes, that’s right. Kennedy is trying to plant these seeds all the time. But I think that at that stage, it’s probably different now; at that stage also there is a great weight of doubt in Kennedy, not only about the possibility of it but about the very purpose, really, of that kind of exercise.

DS: There’s clearly in all of your work an attempt to insert a kind of deliberate self-consciousness which reflects on activities which themselves are acted out with more or less self-consciousness. There is clearly this preoccupation in all of your work. I want to come to another aspect of Of Age and Innocence, which has been of great interest to me. And that is the relationship between generations in that novel. And here I’m thinking of the relationship between Ma Shepherd and the three boys, Bob, Lee, and Singh. There is a very close relationship between Ma Shepherd and the boys, and in many ways, an enabling relationship for a good deal of the novel. Ma Shepherd is their link to a certain
kind of history. But the boys occupy a place in the unfolding history in which they are looking forward to a new dispensation and a new set of possibilities, which Ma Shepherd is deeply worried about. And in the end, she betrays them and their hope. I am very interested in that conflict of generations that you implant there. What are you trying to do?

GL: I was thinking for a moment that the conflict is there but it is sometimes to be seen within the same generation. I was thinking of Ma Shepherd and Ma in Castle, the conflict between Ma and Pa over Slime. Pa is very much on the side of Slime as an agent of change, and Ma is speaking from a kind of faith that says, look, you don’t interfere in God’s work. There is a transcendence there, she wouldn’t use those terms, but God knows best, and I don’t like this idea of your seeing Slime as Moses. One of the reasons I think for that difference there is that Pa has traveled; Pa has the Panama experience behind him. He has worlds to compare, which would not particularly impress Ma, but she is not challenged by that difference in worlds which he has. Now my point too about generation [is that it] may sometimes not just be a chronological thing; [they may be] the same chronology but with very different ideas generating Ma and Pa over the issue of Slime.

When we come to Of Age and Innocence, I’m glad you mentioned it because I find that in critiques of Of Age and Innocence, very rarely, if ever, is much importance paid to that subplot of the secret society, which to me is very critical in the whole theme of the novel. It first of all is the re-creation or the reconstruction of a historicity that gives meaning to the secret society. The secret society is not just a game or a joke; the secret society has tradition and the secret society has a history of struggle—the Tribe Boys and Bandit Kings. But also the way in which the secret society is already in advance of their fathers; that their fathers are talking about something, [but] what they’re saying we’re doing. We are in fact doing what they are talking about. We are together in the way they’re asking people to come together. So I think what, if you want to put it that way, Ma Shepherd represents is a very archetypal figure that in a way contains the history of the tribe in her life, in her head. The political people are a transition between her and a world that would be made real by the boys if the purpose of the secret society could at a later stage be realized.

DS: George, I want to press you a little bit, because in some way Ma Shepherd is a condition of possibility for those boys and their insertion into that conception of history. Without Ma Shepherd, their understanding of that history would not exist. So she is
enabling in one moment for them. But there is a limit, you're suggesting, to what she can enable. And that limit has to do with the experience of her own life as a colonized subject.

GL: Yes, I think that is true.

DS: So there is a suggestion here, when you say “transitional,” I see that, but there is a suggestion that her betrayal of them is a statement about a limit. It is not a statement that should encourage us to be morally critical of her.

GL: Could you identify what you are calling the betrayal of them?

DS: I mean that she, first of all, does not support their vision of where they want to go.

GL: No, she does not.

DS: Do you see what I'm saying?

GL: I see that. I do not know that I would use “betrayal” though; I think there is, as in the case, really, of Ma in Castle, a kind of faith that there is an order that is created for you and she is within that order. That you don’t go beyond what you can see.

DS: Exactly. George, I guess that what I’m trying to get at here is something I also read in Castle. But to me, more generatively for thinking about the connections within and across generations in the anticolonial and postcolonial moments, is the continuity and discontinuity within and across generations: the way in which a generation prepares the possibility for the vision of a succeeding generation even if it cannot entirely support that vision. That vision does not exist without the prior conditioning of the older generation.

GL: I think I would agree with that, but I have to look at the text again. There is always within any given [moment], whether it’s a generation or the couple, the narrative is always somehow battling with a complexity, that in every act there is going to be a seed of its negation. And that battle is going on all the time.

DS: Which again reminds me of how deeply Hegelian this is.
GL: The seed of negation is there. And I think that is to be found right through to Natives. The great thrust of the women is going to be negated in some way.

DS: I think that that’s true, and I do want to come back to Natives because there’s also a contrast in the subject matter and preoccupation of Natives. In 1958 you go to Ghana. What draws you there? Who do you meet? What do you do there?

GL: Ghana came about as a result of winning of the Somerset Maugham Award. That was the material possibility of it. The Somerset Maugham Award at the time was very prestigious, almost like the Booker of today. I don’t remember how much money it was but it was quite substantial for me. And one of the conditions of the Somerset Maugham Award was that it had to be spent outside of England. Maugham had a belief about the importance of travel in a writer’s life, I had been very close to Neville Dawes. Neville Dawes was really like a brother. And [there were] of course my encounters with Africans in London, who were in a way influencing me. Neville Dawes was living in Kumasi and that’s why Season is dedicated to the people in Kumasi. And Neville is there and we’re in correspondence and he really is saying, “Well, this is the obvious place to come.” So in a way I’m going partly out of my curiosity that derives from the London encounter, but on the advice and persuasion of Neville Dawes. And I’m going to stay with him and his family.

And I go; I had no specific duties, I simply make notes. He was teaching at the School of Science and Technology in Kumasi. And then remember that this is ’58, so we’re really in the springtime of the whole African liberation movement. Ghana is the first to become independent. And one feels that, one feels that in a way that I’ve never really felt elation about an independence. You got a feeling of some real break there. But what I’m going to feel also is the complexity of my relation to this place that is Africa. I tell the story of coming off [the plane] and seeing African kids meeting this Englishman who has something to do with the Boy Scout movement, and when I see them I really see myself in my Barbados village performing in the same kind of way. Until after their little parade is over and they start arguing and I become conscious of the distance, because I don’t understand a word of what they’re saying. And then I come to realize the importance of this language loss, if you like, that took place between Africa and the African diaspora. They go off into Fante, Ga, and Twi and whatever. I’m very conscious of that.

But something happened when I was there that was quite overwhelming, where Nkrumah was concerned. I don’t know [if it’s] generally known that Ghana was on the brink of civil war before the independence because the Ashantis were very hostile to the idea of any rule from the coast. And there were delegations and so on. I remember meeting a man, Dr. Kofi Busia, who had come to England to ask them to postpone the independence. The leaders of the old party had come to say that they thought there would be trouble if they allowed the independence to go through. So there was a lot of tension. And Nkrumah was nervous about Ashanti and had not gone to Ashanti. They had had self-government for some time, but for years he was a little worried about going to Ashanti. And then on this occasion, I think it was ’58, he decided to take the bull by the horns. And he not only went, but the Convention People’s Party was going to have a conference, and he decided that the conference would be held in Ashanti, in Kumasi, the capital. He had one man in his cabinet, a man called Krobo Edusi, who was Ashanti and his watchman, so to speak.

And I went to that meeting; Padmore was there. That kind of big public open-air meeting that we would have in the Caribbean, people in trees and so on. And there are rumors of possible assassination when that was going on: this is why there was a certain boldness about going into the lion’s den. And I was struck by the problem that he was confronted with there. Nkrumah gets up to speak, and in Kumasi I would say 90–something percent of that population speak Twi, nothing else, no English. And Nkrumah does not know any Twi. So Nkrumah has to speak in the only language fit for that occasion, and he speaks in English, but he has Krobo Edusi to translate into Twi. Now I was with a man called Ado Kufour who was from Kumasi; we went to this meeting together. And I was very puzzled; I found that the Twi translation lasted so much longer than the English sentence. Nkrumah would say, “And therefore I want you to understand,” and in Twi, that went on for about a minute and a half. So I asked Kufour, “What happens there? Is there a big a difference?” He said, “No, what’s happening is that Krobo Edusi has to put some seasoning in it, so that’s why it’s lasting a little longer.” It occurred to me, what a vulnerable position to be in from Nkrumah’s point of view, because Nkrumah doesn’t know what . . .

DS: . . . what the seasoning is.

GL: Not only doesn’t he know what Krobo is saying, seasoning or not, he just goes on that. And I started to compare that with the manageability of our own situation, from Barbados to Jamaica. Manley would have no problems with who he’s speaking to at
any level, nor Adams. And I realized the complexities of managing in a coherent way that kind of society that is really segmented, beginning with language but by a variety of other things [as well]. How do you hold that together without arousing the rivalries and the jealousies of one group over another? I realized, too, in Ghana at the time [that] we speak of African and sometimes forget really that it’s a very recent way of naming the people. If you take the writers, for example, somebody like Achebe (who is now seventy), as a boy he would not have thought of himself as anything called an African. He wouldn’t have thought of anything called a Nigerian. Achebe would have known himself only as an Ibo. The question one always puts to oneself about Chinua is, “When did you first think of yourself as an African?” I’ve heard that question put to him and he’s puzzled about what or when [it] was, because there’s going to be a considerable period in his life when it is not so. So we speak of Africa and Africans without realizing that quite often that is a very recent naming of a people who have other names for themselves. And that was one of the things I came away with—the complexity of the task of cohering that kind of group together.

The Adventure of Sovereignty

DS: I have always been struck by the character Fola in Season of Adventure. Tell me about her.

GL: There are many stages of a journey that Fola makes to becoming at the end the Fola that she wants to be; and then of course this seed of negation all the time because the public thing becomes a private thing with Chiki and there is the implied discovery really that a love affair is not on because they may in fact be family, so that gets broken. In a way, what that does too is to break the possibility of any sentimentality clinching the relationship. I’ve always been struck by the [fact] that Fola has exercised a very extraordinary influence on a certain generation of some West Indian women of that background who went into proletarian movements.

DS: I know several. And not just women who went into proletarian movements but many women with whom I have been acquainted as a teenager in Jamaica of the seventies who were connected to Rastafarianism and for whom that was a very central part of taking a “backward glance,” and of remaking their identities. So in that sense Fola is very, very familiar. But let me ask you a slightly different question which has to do with the gendered character of the representation of the middle class or the representation of a
particular strand of the Caribbean middle class, whose sense of itself is fragile—because clearly Fola’s ability to make the transformation she makes has very much to do with the fragility, to begin with, of her own identity formation. I imagine that to have made that character male rather than female would have produced a different order of activity and a different order of self-consciousness.

**GL:** I have to give that second thoughts. Fola as female just came to me as perfectly natural. She has to be female because, in a way, *Season* is a book of extremes and the journey that the woman has to make in class terms is a considerably more difficult one than the male would have to make. When a woman crosses those bridges, much, much more is involved. There is likely to be much greater punishment and much greater scales of rejection. And I think that by the time one is doing *Season* I really am not in the mood for creating any redeeming moments at all in the middle class. The figure in there that represents everything really is the doctor. The middle class comes out there as an example of an extreme form of sterility; but this sterility has a kind of authority in spite of itself, which the creative energies and power of Gort are up against; and indeed one of the implications there is that the only way they could perhaps deal with them is the way in which Powell decides to deal with the head of the republic.

**DS:** It has been said, and I think you have said this yourself, that *Season* has turned out to be a prophetic novel. There is the collapse of the first republics and by the late 1960s, early 1970s, there is a set of transformations that usher in the possibility of a new kind of Caribbean independence. In the novel that possibility is represented in the figure of Dr. Kofi James-Williams Baako whom you don’t actually flesh out, and you don’t actually flesh out the course of the activities in which he is engaged, but I am puzzled by this character and, in particular, curious about your elevating him as you do.

**GL:** The names are not fleshed out, but the names are code names, and Baako *couldn’t* at that stage be fleshed out. What one is doing there is sending out signals of possibility; no more than signals of possibility. One is that it looked, some time between 1956 and about 1959, that Williams represented the signal of a possibility of some kind of restoration. In the first three or four years of Williams’s [leadership of the PNM], with that experience of the University of Woodford Square, [it seemed that] something quite electrifying had happened in Trinidad among the rank and file of people. There is no question about that, and a collective experience of possibility that I don’t recall any other territory feeling and having in that moment in quite that kind of way. That novel was
written very fast, faster than the other novels, and James is probably there [in Trinidad] and that connection, that possibility if that were to work . . . These are just signals of possibility, one doesn’t go into them.

Baako was really a tribute to the Ghana side of it. Kofi Baako was the youngest member of the Nkrumah cabinet, and the cleanest, and the one who represented the idealism of the anticolonial struggle. As a matter of fact, there was so much antagonism between the top senior ministers that when Nkrumah was going to be absent, instead of leaving conflict behind, in terms of those two seniors, he left Kofi Baako in charge of the government, not his seniors. As a matter of fact, later, Kofi Baako’s end is not very good; I think he collapsed under the pressure of the corruption of the seniors. But he was at that moment that spark that showed possibilities. I don’t know technically how workable it is because they are no more than sparks that suggest possibilities and, as it turns out, they’re not sparks that are going to last all that long; and in a way, the passage you quote [suggests] that [you have] to keep it open-ended, it doesn’t end on a total night. We have the little girl . . .

DS: . . . sitting on Gort’s knee. “As a child treads softly in new school shoes. . . .”⁷³ This is my favorite passage in Season of Adventure.

GL: This thing is still alive; it’s not dead. And it’s in that open-ended kind of way that what would happen [happens]. But again, among the Caribbean critics I have never seen that dealt with. I think Season and Age, they belong together as almost stages one and two of the same [process]: the colonial regime in its last dying stages.

DS: For my generation, George, I read Season of Adventure in the mid-1970s when I am a schoolboy at Jamaica College. So I am reading Season of Adventure in the middle of what is taken to be, in some sense the making of that Second Republic. And so I am listening to you produce this critique of the first independence regimes, which are recognizable to us all now, and your suggestion of what the Second Republic has to recognize which the first didn’t. Part of that is that it has to recognize the organic generative energies that come from the drums, Forest Reserve, of the people down below, which is of course part of the rhetoric of the Michael Manley regime of the middle-1970s when I am reading this. So there is very much a sense when I am reading this book that Season

of Adventure is speaking directly to a set of transformations that are going on in the Jamaica of that day.

GL: I think at the end there with Baako giving the address, we come back to this question of language, of finding a language that would enable the people who are being led to realize the identification that exists between them and those who are leaders. In statements later, I find that I am very much preoccupied with that: what we really have never been able to deal with (because I don’t think we even thought that it had to be dealt with) was this separation of what I call the head from the belly. There is a strange amputation that takes place in Caribbean society in which you have a head that carries a certain “knowledge” of the total body, and it contains certain skills provided by that knowledge; but it has somehow got disengaged from that body without which it can’t survive. So you have, if you like, an intelligentsia, a school layer made up of technocrats and so on that floats somewhere, and the belly of the society is moving about somewhere else, and we have not found a way, a language, that links these two into one whole. And the closing statement of Williams Baako is [about] finding that new language—as he puts it, on the one hand, the other language of the drums, [on the other] the language of science. How do we find the language that brings this head that you call “knowledge” into an organic relation to the body, which is that area of feeling, that reservoir of feeling, that feeds that head—and in fact that head is limited because it is deprived of the fueling functions of that body. And that body sometimes is very wasteful of its resources because it is deprived of the direction of the head.

DS: Let me ask you a question about that authorial intervention about which you have no doubt been asked many, many questions. But let me ask a question about the impulse on the author’s part to make something clearer to the reader that might not otherwise have been clear, which has to do with this relationship between the head and the body, or, in another way, between Powell’s instinctive reaction to domination, and the direction in which that instinct takes him, and the proximity of someone who begins where Powell begins but who has migrated towards that area of the head or the area of knowledge. What impels you to state that explicitly rather than to allow the reader to say, “But ha, there are connections between intellectual considerations and forms of, as it were, instinctive aggressions or responses to domination that are part of the weave of the novel.” One has the sense that you suddenly feel a doubt as to whether the political point of the novel is going to be clear.
GL: No, the one part of the novel that I feel absolutely confident about, as being absolutely right, is the authorial note. And only very recently I am reading a critique by Rhonda Cobham of a novel and then she relates it to *Seasons* and then speaks of the inexplicable intervention—I don’t know what’s inexplicable about it.⁷⁴ But my answer to that is that it came naturally as part of the logic of the narrative which you are following, and I felt now that I wanted to *personalize* that total statement, to say that it is *me* also that I am talking about, not me as any author but me as a man called “Lamming” who is caught up in that ambivalence about directions, and who has daily to question himself about the nature of his relationships, to question himself about the kind of commitments he has made here and there about this and that, and that as a matter of fact I have not really gone as far as my instinct of rebellion is ordering me to go. So I wanted that to be known that I am talking about *me* here and not just describing.

DS: So Lamming is unable to do what Chiki has done, because Chiki in some sense bears part of that burden. Chiki also comes from where Powell comes and Chiki has been unable to make a migration; but Chiki gives up what that migration has wanted to bestow on him, to return to a life of aesthetic work *within* the space of Powell’s community.

GL: I think you may see it in that way, that in fact Chiki has made a more courageous stride than Lamming in life has done, and yes, it could in fact be seen in that way. I mean, where would I have gone and what would I have otherwise done? Already in many respects within the context of how I live in this peculiar little island, [I am] *persona non grata* for large sections of this community—[I’m called] communist, antiwhite, all kinds of peculiar labels, and I am not too sure [what the reception will be]. I don’t really know what it will be on any given occasion but that doesn’t disturb me. I expect that it could be anything; it’s unpredictable, and sometimes it is extreme in the case of Barbados. Sometimes it is one of almost idolatrous admiration, and it is sometimes an almost pathological resentment. The name alone can create all kinds of resonances. I mean, that graduation address in 1980 was the topic of conversation in black and white middle-class houses for months.⁷⁵ Willie Demas told me; you know, I was away, out of

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⁷⁵ George Lamming, “Politics and Culture,” *Conversations,* 77–83. This was Lamming’s address to the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, in 1980, when he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters.
Barbados for six months and I then came back, and they’re still talking about that. The white people were [going on] about that charge about white demons.

**DS:** This problem allows me to enter into _The Pleasures of Exile_, which was published at the same time. One of the things that always struck me about _The Pleasures of Exile_ was the worrying over this question of the place of the artist or the intellectual in the making of postcolonial society; and you say at some point in _Pleasures_, or you ask yourself, what would I have to offer. Then that is followed by this wonderful, wonderful passage in which you say: “there is always an acre of ground in the new world which keeps growing echoes in my head.”⁷⁶ And I always thought (obviously thinking in part about myself), on the one hand you invoke this hope and on the other hand end on this note of seeming despair.

**GL:** I see that complexity; that seed of negation is always there. But let us put it this way about these journeys of expectation, there is a period when (I see it now as almost an innocence in a way) I believed—and I think this was shared by certain people of my generation—that the writers, the artists, were actually creating something new. The creation of that something new, the exercise involved in creating that, could not but have impact. I think that although we are very different, that sense of the importance of something you are doing is to be found in [Derek] Walcott.

**DS:** I had thought you were going to mention Walcott.

**GL:** Although we’re very different. But that something was being made here afresh, so that whatever were the weights, the burdens, there was the blessing of being offered the opportunity of making something new. And the innocence was that this would have impact. You’re going to come to a stage where you realize that to the political men who were really having an impact, and even those who identify you as being worthwhile, you are a pure ornament; you’re an ornament because their whole conception of culture is ornament. In one of the speeches I make in Grenada, and I am speaking very directly to Bishop, [I say] you see that you have a conception of culture as something you get

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76. “The pleasure and the paradox of my own exile is that I belong wherever I am. My role, it seems, has rather to do with time and change, than with geography of circumstances; and yet, there is always an acre of ground in the New World which keeps growing echoes in my head. I can only hope that these echoes do not die before my work comes to an end.” George Lamming, _The Pleasures of Exile_ (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), 50.
around to after you have fixed the major problems in the society. If you got the political economy right and you got other systems right, then you bring on the dancers. You don’t actually see culture as the very cake you are making, it is the icing you put on the cake. When one comes to realize that that is a shared view of culture—as the icing on the cake—maybe there is no place, that as far as the people who decide locations are concerned you may have no place. But—and this now brings us back to my other sense of sovereignty—whatever location you have, the one thing I want to hold on to, is that acre of ground because you don’t decide that. That acre of ground is that Caribbean wherever I encounter it; it does not matter now whether I find myself in Asia, in Africa, or wherever, it is the window through which I am looking at wherever I am. It is that ground which will never be completed in my excavating of it. One holds that irrespective of wherever you want to locate me—that is your business, that is not mine. It is inexhaustible, and the one thing that one could not bear to lose and go on breathing would be that acre—that is to be held on to. And that is what I mean, too, when I say that no limitation of sovereignty in the political sense can alter that, because that acre is also itself a component of the imagination.

DS: The Pleasures of Exile is also in part a meditation on C. L. R. James.
GL: To a large extent, yes.

DS: And it is James’s account of Toussaint Louverture in *The Black Jacobins* that you are employing as the device through which to think about Caliban’s encounter with Prospero.

GL: Yes, but two things are happening there. One is that I am beginning to feel at a certain time a certain responsibility that one in a way owes it to him. Because until *Pleasures*, an overwhelming majority of a school population of teachers has never seen or read *Black Jacobins*, and this is why it is almost going to be a repeat of the story. I am not even getting into any interpretations. I am just passing *Black Jacobins* over to you in this chapter, because I know you don’t know it. And I know that you don’t believe that these things happened. In a way, I was concentrating on doing really, if you like, for James here on the page, in the work, what Williams did for him in bringing him [to Trinidad] and making him editor of the *Nation*—if I may put it that way. [He is] unknown until he comes back in that role and [makes those] addresses and so on. I am going to do that, here and there giving the occasional interpretation.

But I am also influenced in a peculiar way by something that happened when I went to Haiti. Before I went to Haiti I had asked for some addresses. There was a very well known woman who was a dancer: Maya Deren. She wrote an interesting book called *Divine Horsemen*.

I knew Maya Deren; I had stayed in her apartment. Maya gave me about four or five addresses. One in fact carries the name of a character in *Season*: Charlot. Charlot Pressoir was a very well known Haitian poet. All of them later fled to the United States as victims of Duvalier. So I arrived in Haiti with the names and phone numbers. I look around and the first shock I have was that I asked a porter whether he knew Monsieur Charlot Pressoir, and he said, “Le poete?” And I said yes. He said, “Oui.” The shock I had about that was I could not imagine his equivalent in Jamaica or anywhere [in the Anglo-Creole Caribbean] identifying anybody by that category “poet.” It had to be a French legacy. You would have said, “Is he the carpenter?”

This story brings us to James. Pressoir was there. We went to a café. Two or three of them came—very extraordinary how these influences happen. I asked whether they had read *Black Jacobins*. [And they said], “Of course. That’s our bible.” I said, “You know, James would be very pleased to hear that; I will tell him.” “You know him?” I said, “Yes, I know him.” Pressoir says, “You tell him thanks and how much we admire him because

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we always wondered how a white man could have got inside the mind of those people.”
I said, “Hold it, James is not a white man.” And then there was a little embarrassment.
“No. He’s just from across the water.” The French had no hardbacks and no pictures.
There was no biographical [data]. But there was the assumption that this was some
remarkable English historian who had come here and got into the minds of people. So I
always tell this story of what in fact that European exercise has done to us, that the ease
with which you could actually appropriate the minds of men who were very, very sharp,
to whom it never occurred until that moment that James may be one of us, that James
may have come from [the region]. That is 1956, ’57, that this is happening, and these are
established people, the best educated.

In a way, those experiences are feeding into what I felt had to be done about James
and that is why in the ordering of the chapters that also comes immediately after the
Tempest, it is Toussaint in the role of Caliban who is now ordering history. So in a way,
what I was doing there in that re-presentation of Jacobins [was] bringing to a generation
the substance of a creation that was not at all generally known—known to a few people
but not generally known. That was one of the things I was getting at. But I also was
paying a tribute to him. I think that I was feeling about him, at a different level now,
something I felt about Mais and Mittelholzer, and about that style; that I was always in
the presence of a man, whatever his faults and limitations, who had chosen a life of the
mind. That was James; James’s was a life of the mind. He brought that to every thing. I
mean, he is talking to a five-year-old, [and] the mind is at work in asking your name and
asking what games [you played]. You had to hear him talking, even to people with no
claims to knowledge, and it was an interrogation that was serious, as if he was in a semi-
inar. There was a style; he had created there a style, an essence, from which there was no
breaking away. A lot of flaws, in the judgment and so on. But [he] had devoted his entire
life to the creation of a style that was the life of the mind, and I wanted to get that across
about him—although we had the sharpest of disagreements on a number of things.

When I speak about touching, he had a remarkable influence; in a way, influence is
a very curious term to use because you never know where this begins. But [to me] he was
an extension, on another level, of Collymore. Just as Collymore had introduced me to
the unlimited possibilities of the book and reading, what James reinforced in me—that
would have been there but reinforced in a way I have not had with others—was the
interconnectedness of all enquiry. That there were no compartments to something called
history and literature and philosophy and science. That these were areas of the same
pursuit, and any comprehensive grasp of one required at least an acquaintance with the
neighboring areas. So that if, for example, you were concerned with developments that
were taking place in the literature of a civilization, something comparable would have been happening in its sciences, and its philosophy, and you only had to look to find out who were the chemists, who were the painters—there was this organic interconnectedness. He had this capacity for making connections between what might appear on the surface to be totally irreconcilable, for making connections between things that may have seemed totally remote, totally foreign. And it is in this sense that I think of him as the supreme example of an intellectual, a man whose life is the life of the mind, whose oxygen was ideas. And he was intellectual in the sense that Eric Williams was not.

DS: Is this the sense of James that you get primarily from his written work, or from engaging with him personally?

GL: Oh, both. It was something fascinating that when you were talking with James, if there was a transcript it would come out like reading. He had a capacity in talk for that moving about, but also with an ease. Not just a facility but with an ease, as though he was simply recording things that were there, that had been stored there.

DS: At what point do you recognize this influence of James on you, because you meet James around '54.

GL: It's late, I think the meeting may have been a little later than '54; I don't think it was '54, [maybe] '55, but middle sort of fifties.

DS: But at what point do you recognize the influence?

GL: I'm not recognizing it. It's something that's going to happen. I don't consciously recognize influence. If it comes up that someone asks about him, I might, as I do now, try to say why something happened in the way that it happened. But I am not, never, conscious of being under his influence.

DS: No, no, I don't mean it that way at all. I mean that Pleasures, as you say, is in part a tribute to James, and a tribute to the mind of a remarkable Caribbean thinker. And you want in part to share with a public what it is this mind has enabled, and in part what this mind has enabled in you. So my question is, at what point do you feel Ha! Here is someone who has gone without the necessary recognition, as you say in Pleasures, here is a book that every schoolchild should read. Is this a recognizable moment? It may not be.
GL: I don’t know that it is. I don’t know that I could pinpoint a moment. I know in the early stages, I listened to him in a very ordinary kind of way—there is something cumulative as one goes on. What is happening also that I’m very conscious of is the immense admiration that he has for *In the Castle of My Skin*. In a way, we meet as equals. This is what I meant by authors of the same generation. And he is very curious about how this [novel] happens. It’s a rhetorical question. “But how did he do that?” But he has the answer to it. “That’s the Caribbean, the Caribbean writer.” James had also this tremendous thing that the Caribbean was capable of doing those kinds of things. Now, the thing that I am fascinated by then, that holds me when I reread him now—more than when I [read him before]; in fact I find James talking to me more intimately now when I reread him now knowing him, and knowing him both in the positives and negatives—is when I look at the *connections* in the work.

When I look at how he deals with Philomene in *Minty Alley*, the Indian girl, the extraordinary, unforgettable impact of Matthew Bondman from that window. And Matthew Bondman is really Toussaint, and Dessalines, particularly Dessalines, more Dessalines. That he is always convinced of a fertility that is there and will burst out. And this is going to be a consistent tendency through him. That can then be taken to a point of, in a way, romanticizing the collective, because sometimes James can speak about the Caribbean people in a way that is not recognizable in many aspects of their lives when you think about it.

Occasions of Return

DS: What are the occasions of your return to the Caribbean in the 1960s, in the aftermath of the independence of Jamaica and Trinidad? And what kinds of participation do you have in intellectual and political trends in the Caribbean region?

GL: When I come back to Barbados in the sixties, at some stages I had developed a very interesting relationship with the general secretary of the Barbados Workers Union. And I remember I gave a number of lectures in Barbados. And there was a time, for a long time, when I never spoke on any other platform but the platform of the Barbados Workers Union. And one of the reasons for that was that the Barbados Workers Union in a way insulated me from party allegiance. The Barbados Workers Union cut across all political parties, so you were listened to from the platform of the Barbados Workers Union in a way you would not have been if it was a party platform. So the Barbados Workers Union was my platform. I don’t remember the date, but I remember speaking to an audience—I’d never seen such a crowd before, with the exception perhaps of Trini-
dad in the union headquarters—and I'd never seen white people before in Barbados in
the headquarters of the union for a public lecture. I don't have any texts of that! And they
came because of the title, not only because of the fascination with [Lamming]. But it
was a lecture called "The Black Man in the Modern World." And at that time the phrase
"black man" in Barbados was a very explosive phrase—in whatever connection. But this
big headline in the papers about this “The Black Man in the Modern World”—what is
going to happen? And I gave a lecture that really had to do with looking at the changes
in the world, with the role of Africa in the anticolonial movement, and in a sense of how,
in those terms, the man seen as object had become the subject and author of his own his-
tory. We then moved, I remember that, ending up with South Africa on the note that it
was very difficult to see how that could be resolved in peace. It was a very long lecture; I
think that was one of the first. I don't think there are tapes of that. And then there were
other occasions, major conferences, and on two occasions I was the guest speaker at the
annual conference.

But then I had a break, a distancing. I opened the Labour College; that was fantas-
tic. And I almost did—I did, really—at the Labour College what later I would do for
Bishop. I drew up a list of the panels to which the public and schools should be asked
to attend. And we had a panel, “Labour in History,” “Labour under Law,” “Economists
and Labour,” and so on. It was remarkable. The economy panel was William Demas,
George Beckford, and the Trinidadian Trevor Farrell, the Jamaican George Eaton. The
law panel was Telford Georges and Miles Fitzpatrick. But I sent all these invitations, and
the thing when you're with such an organization is that Frank Walcott signed the invita-
tions. These invitations came from the general secretary of the Barbados Workers Union.
You don't turn down [that kind of invitation]. The only mention of [me] there was of the
"coordinator." The history panel was a beauty: Walter Rodney couldn't come because he
was battling with Burnham, but he taped his contribution and that was wonderful.

But something happened there that was the beginnings of a distancing. On the
night of the opening, I had to open but I asked to change seats because I didn't want
to sit next to a man—the man who was the head director of the AIFLD. I had definite
views about the American Institute of the Federation of Free Labor. It was a front orga-
nization. Then it became clear that a lot of the funding towards the establishment of
the college was really connected to the AFL-CIO. And I believe they must have told
Walcott that they weren't too happy about the kind of relationship [with me]—because
I had given lectures about the AIFLD and the Peace Corps in various places. There's a
long one in Conversations in which I read at length the briefing that is sent out to the
Peace Corps volunteers. So I think this is another example that brings up your ambigu-
ity and your conflicts, and I realized, okay, Walcott has an organization to run, it has
to run somehow, and there are associations there which I must keep a distance from. I don’t want to be anywhere close to that. In fact we had a talk about that once and I told him I didn’t like the connection. He told me a very interesting thing, he said, “Wait a moment. Do you believe that the union has done good work here?” And I said, “Yes, of course.” “Good, I’m glad to hear that. I take the view that if you’re talking about money and all that, if the devil brings it, it’s the Lord who sent it.”

DS: That’s very good. When does your relationship with New World and Lloyd Best begin?

GL: To the best of my memory, that has to do with the editing [of New World Quarterly]. Robert Hill’s account is very accurate. I don’t remember having any connection with New World before being invited to edit the [Guyana and Barbados] independence issues. I’m aware of them, and I don’t know, New World would have started in the sixties, really. I am not too sure. I had met G-Beck [George Beckford] when he first came back [to the Caribbean]. G-Beck spent a short time at [UWI] St. Augustine on his way [back to Jamaica], and I met him there. I liked him immediately; we had a long talk. And then I had met [Norman] Girvan on visits to [UWI] Mona. But I don’t remember meeting them formally in the context of New World.

So I would say that my relation to it really has to do with the independence issues. On one or two occasions I have submitted things, not very much. But I was regarded then as part of the fraternity, and I would be written to and invited to things. But I’m not here; I’m either in London or the States. And my real relation to New World has to do with the regional character of what it was trying to create. New World at the beginning was in a way trying to indigenize thinking. It wanted to create a tradition that would be an indigenous intellectual tradition, and I felt a great attraction to that. But then my tendency is always to respond to any project of a regional character that reinforces the unifying, the integrating, of the region, and that really is the fundamental base of our connection. It has no ideological rapport with Best. Best and I do not see the world, I think, in the same way at all. In fact I think there are probably very clear differences there in emphasis and perception. I think we have a common view, of course, about the necessity of the creation of a region that is in some sense one region. What shape and direction that region may take may be a different matter altogether.

DS: What is your association with the Caribbean Artists Movement [CAM]?

GL: I am vague about that, because after 1955, 1956, I’m traveling a lot. I’m in the States, I’m back in the Caribbean for a period, I’m in London, I’m moving about a lot. In ’58, I’m in Spain, writing away—Of Age and Innocence is written in Spain. And then I was out for some time and when I got back, I think, it was the sixties or something like that, I remember being invited to a conference at Kent.⁷⁹ And that, to the best of my knowledge, is my only participation.

DS: Oh, you went then?

GL: I went, yes. I went and I read. I think I gave a reading from Of Age and Innocence. And I remember that occasion very well because Elsa Goveia gave a keynote address, and we had some exchanges with her on the role of the media. I used to be very interested in the media and the role of the media as an instrument of regionalizing thought in the Caribbean. And then I remember going one evening to what was an extremely cantankerous exchange. I think John Hearne was giving a talk.

DS: Who was giving the talk? Was it Orlando Patterson giving the talk?

GL: It may have been in the form of a panel. But anyway, what Hearne was saying really was that Patterson should leave the writing of fiction to certain people and not mix it up with his sociology. It was that kind of [talk]. And if you know Hearne, Hearne had a waspish kind of way, and I don’t remember how that ended. But that was held in the West Indian Students Union.⁸⁰ I don’t know how it [CAM] gets established; I’m hearing of it more than being part of it.

DS: But you have a closer relationship with Andrew Salkey.⁸¹

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⁸⁰. This was a very famous moment in the early debates within CAM. The occasion was a colloquium in May 1967 on Patterson’s novels, The Children of Sisyphus (1964) and An Absence of Ruins (1967). See Walmsley, The Caribbean Artists Movement, 76–79.
⁸¹. Andrew Salkey (1928–1995) was one of the most distinguished writers of his generation. Novelist, poet, journalist, travel writer, he was one of the founders of CAM.
GL: Very close, yes. That was very close; very, very close. I don’t remember when that started. I’m not alone in that. There is hardly any of my contemporaries who did not have that kind of relationship. As I have mentioned, Andrew was like our bureau. Andrew was the man who kept, as it were, a tag on all of us in a protective kind of way. Those of us who had to change addresses, Andrew would know where you were living, he would know the phone number, if you were out of the country, Andrew would know where you had gone. Andrew’s apartment was the apartment where people who normally didn’t speak to each other met for drinks or dinner. And over a period of years you got the feel that Salkey had almost made that a part of his collective responsibility towards particularly writers. And in very basic ways. I remember, I was out for about two years or something and I had given up my apartment, so when I got back, I wrote him, and he just came and met me and said, “Take it easy.” So I lived there [with Salkey] for about a month while we looked for an apartment; there was no hurry. “We’ll go every other day until we find something.” He had a sense of the Caribbean writers as belonging to a very special family: that generation. And he was, in a way, the one who saw to it that that family was held together.

And I remember a most touching occasion, there are two instances, one very sad. He phoned me, phoned me late one night and said, “I couldn’t get you before, but Mittelholzer is dead. You may have read something. But they’re burying him tomorrow morning and you know he lives somewhere [out far]. And I think we ought to go; we have to go.” And I said, “Yes, I think so, how we go get there?” He said, “Okay, there’s a journalist chap I spoke to, and he’s going to drive us out. An English chap.” And I don’t know, this must have been about a two-hour drive, a long, long, long drive. And he was being buried at nine or something in the morning. This was also very characteristic. Mittelholzer had moved out of London and lived way out in Dippenhall, in Surrey. I think I’ve got that in the tribute to him. And it was a very sad thing because we got there, we couldn’t find this church, driving here and there. And then we found the church, and it was about five past nine. We didn’t see anybody at all in this churchyard; we looked around. And a man said, “There’s a man over there.” And we went over, a long walk, and we told the man, “We’ve come to a funeral.” And the gravedigger said, “Oh, I’m covering it up.” We said, “But they said it was nine.” He said, “Yes, it was nine, and we just finished.”

DS: And no one had come?

GL: Well, they had come and gone. There were just the three of us, myself, Andrew, and this English guy whose name I could get. I don’t remember it offhand. And then we
asked the gravedigger, did he know where the family lived. He said, “Oh yes, if you go out and ask.” They lived about ten minutes away. And we went back to this cottage, this little cottage where there was Mittelholzer’s wife, now his widow, very young English woman, and his brother. And that was it. We had some tea.

**DS:** Where did he burn himself up? At home?

**GL:** No, he went for a walk. It was normal. Mittelholzer’s was a life regulated by routine. He did everything [according to a schedule]. Like if he was going to start work in the morning, it was like 7:35. It would not be half-past seven. And he would stop at 11:40. It would not be 11:30, or 11:45. Very strange. And he did this in Trinidad too. If you wanted to meet Mittelholzer, about five o’clock around the Savannah—he used to take a walk—he would sit right opposite the castle of the Roman Catholic archbishop. He was an atheist; I don’t know why he chose that seat. He would sit there, he would sit there for five or ten minutes, and then he walked around the Savannah. And that would be at a particular time.

The wife said that always around about five he took a walk but that would be about half an hour. Within half an hour he would be back. If he left at five, by five-thirty he’d be back. You could set a clock. And she didn’t remember seeing him leave, but she knew he’d left at five. After five-thirty, six, she got very worried. Because that was exceptional. And then she started to make enquiries. She made enquiries, and they found him, they just found this burnt [body]. Apparently he had taken the stuff that he was going to use before, the kerosene or whatever it is he burnt himself with. And the body was just found, dead. But that was a very peculiar end and I was in a way glad [that I’d gone], but there was no way I would have gone to Mittelholzer’s funeral without Salkey. **That** was Salkey. In a way, it is a perfect example of Salkey looking for a member of the family. “I cannot go to that alone; there must be another member of the family.” And the nearest and most obvious one he would call [was me], although he knew that Mittelholzer and I didn’t set horses. But he also knew that Mittelholzer, as a West Indian writer, was of importance to me in the context of how I also saw that community of activity among a certain set of men.

Andrew played that role, fulfilled that obligation always within this family. And in a way he took this mission with him even when he went to the States; that was not broken. He still, in a long-distance kind of way, from up in Massachusetts, knew where to find [us], as if he had taken all his files on all of us with him. He still knew where to find you.
DS: Are you inspired by the radicalization of Caribbean politics at the end of the 1960s, early 1970s? Trinidad 1970?

GL: Trinidad 1970, yes, that is, there’s going to be a moment of a certain kind of excitement and of distress, because I arrived in Trinidad, I think just after, not too long after, just after what was known as the February Rebellion. This is when, beginning with the students, you know, the incident with the Canadian governor-general, whom they had not allowed to come on to the campus, and then that opened up into a big sort of march and demonstration that went on then for about six or seven weeks. All kinds of forces were at work there. And also what eventually became a mutiny trial in the army. And I’d gone—I don’t remember at what time the invitation came—to a conference. The Oilfield Workers Trade Union had invited me to be the guest speaker. And I go down to San Fernando, this is the part that is distressing, and there are a lot of police there, checking you. But George Weekes, the general secretary, is in prison. He is detained. He was one of the many people detained. And I spoke, but I spoke with a very heavy heart, because Weekes occupied a position of such enormous stature within that Oilfield Workers Trade Union that I didn’t understand how the general secretary could be in prison and there weren’t massive demonstrations. And there weren’t. The members were there; they were very sorry. So that was very wounding.

Then I went back up to Port of Spain to discover something which I’d never thought possible. All the gates to Woodford Square, which was once the University of Woodford Square, were locked. You could not go into Woodford Square. If you knew the role and history of Woodford Square, particularly in relation to the PNM and Dr. Williams, the idea that you could pass a Woodford Square where you couldn’t go in was unimaginable; [but] the gates were closed. So that was a very weighty period. And then I tried to find out what had really happened, what had really happened there. And then of course—[and] very much linked up—Jamaica is going to be entering its phase of a very heavy ideological politics, as I recall. But in a way, I think one of the “contributions” of Michael [Manley] was the way that the ideological emphasis became more explicit—as he took over the party—than it would have been in the time of Norman [Manley]. And then the excitement around the ’72 elections. And I go to Jamaica at some time; [UWI] Mona was always a spot that I was always being invited to for some reason. The seventies is a period in which you’re always on the verge of something about to happen, you don’t quite know, [but] something is about to happen. The formation of groups, there are a number of groups going on. But the important thing then is the emergence of the WPA
[Working People’s Alliance] and the return of Rodney [to Guyana]. And then I am going into Guyana on occasion to speak.

DS: This is much later, though.

GL: Much later, this is getting to late seventies now. But from about ’71, right after the ’70 rebellion, there is a sense of expectancy that something is going to happen in this region. But from the late sixties right through, the Caribbean territory that is my major preoccupation, with visits and participation in one way or another, is Cuba. I’m going to Havana frequently.

DS: When do you begin going to Cuba, and what are the occasions?

GL: Very early. I am always going in connection with conferences sponsored by CASA [Casa de las Americas]. And then I become, at some stage, what you call asesor. I am an advisor on a committee that has to do with the English-speaking Caribbean, and in fact the same Annales I told you about. And then in the seventies, the CASA prize, which used to be exclusively Spanish (Cuba and Latin America) is extended, and I become the first of the judges when it’s opened up to the English- and French-speaking Caribbean. The two judges of the English material were Dennis Scott and myself. He was doing the poetry and I was doing the prose. But a lot of the sixties and the seventies and on, my Caribbean connection is to a large extent following the Cuban Revolution—until ’78, ’79, when I find myself drawn in a way into [Grenada]. It begins by their asking for ideas for the minister of culture in the Bishop regime. That is how I came then to play this role of organizing the intellectual conferences.

DS: I want to come to your relationship to the Grenada Revolution and also your relationship with Walter Rodney. But before we get there, I want to talk very briefly about Water with Berries and Natives of My Person, both of which are published, I believe, around 1971. A little more than a decade separates Season of Adventure from the novels that follow it—Water with Berries and Natives of My Person. And in these novels, rather

than pursue the trajectory that appears to be outlined in the connection between *Of Age and Innocence* and *Season of Adventure*, you seem to return to a set of themes that had been an earlier preoccupation—the themes that run through a problematization of *The Tempest*, the reversal of the relationship between Prospero and Caliban, and the exploration of the psyche of the colonizer. Why is this?

GL: I think that I regard each novel as a kind of installment or chapter in the same book, just as, for example, I may have mentioned how the men on the deck in *Emigrants* are really the extension of the boys on the beach in *Castle*. We are dealing there with the pure early colonial world. *Of Age and Innocence* is the dying stages of that world. *Season of Adventure* is the next stage, which is the emergence of that world in the independence experience. And from there on I think I saw *Natives of My Person* as really the completion of a cycle, that I was now going back to show the etiology of all of that, using the original voyages as the allegory into which everything else was going to fit. So that there is a sense in which the end was in the beginning so to speak—that *Natives*, which seemed to come at the end of the cycle, was really showing us where *Castle* had come from.

DS: I suppose my question is, why complete the cycle then? Why not press on, particularly in light of the kinds of transformations in the Caribbean that are taking place in the late 1960s, early 1970s that connect in many ways to the prophetic vision of *Season of Adventure*?

GL: I have to guess here. I possibly couldn’t press on because thematically there was no further to go with that. I mean, in spite of the issues that were taking place in the seventies I had come to a completion of that theme and was, as I say, just rounding it off in *Natives of My Person*. In *Water with Berries*, what is happening [is] I am in a way completing or adding a new dimension to what was there [in] *The Emigrants*. There is a close link between *The Emigrants* and *Water with Berries*—that further exploration of the discovery of the illusion that had been created around this legacy called England. And I didn’t see where I could go along with that theme. I would have had no difficulty of turning out some kind of fiction that was reflections of what was happening in the sixties or seventies, but I considered that I had done that already. If one identifies the kinds of novels that take up my themes, I would say, although I respect it and enjoyed it very much, that Lovelace’s *Dragon* is already inside my cycle.⁸⁴ I wasn’t going to do that.

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over again. You know, Lovelace’s *Dragon* is really what *Season* is saying in a kind of way. So that if you look at any of the things that are going to be reflections of the sixties and seventies, I felt no inclination to return to that.

I was working in notes on a script during that period, and I am traveling a lot too; this is one of the problems of my situation as a writer who decided that that was what I was going to do and was having to earn by running about doing this lecture, this semestering, and so on. So there is a sense in which there was a kind of distraction from my main occupation, although, by the way, I do enjoy that kind of exercise. But I started in two ways: one, a kind of film script, and [the other] as almost a chapter of a novel that I was doing. This was very interesting. I was working on a novel in which I had the image of Fanon in mind, and I wanted to explore the idea that the Fanon we meet in the context of the Algerian Independence War and the Fanon whose rages are going to be expressed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that Fanon was shaped very early. And what you would call the defining moment for me with him, I think, is with the fall of France, when the French government has fallen, and then the French navy was immobilized. Nobody was quite sure what to do with it. And the Vichy government came in and took a kind of fascist possession of Martinique, and Martinique had never experienced that kind of naked racist aggression until the collapse of France.⁸⁵

And I felt that the wounds which Fanon is expressing in the later work were first dealt with then and he is young, probably in his teens. There is a fantastic story of the invasion of the French fleet; all the soldiers come over and Martinique is overwhelmed and it becomes a kind of fascist experience for the Martinicans. I was building something around the idea of how he was shaped by that and how that was working itself out then in his encounter with them. And there are some pages of that there; there are quite a few pages of that that were turned into a kind of draft for a film. I still have that kind of urge to express vision in the form of theater.

**DS:** Will that project be completed?

**GL:** Well, I don’t know if it will be because the pure narrative side of it I left alone, but the script thing which reads in a way like a short story, that will have to be taken up by people who are interested in films.

**DS:** I want to come back in a moment to the question of aesthetic form and your relationship to film and to other forms, but I want to turn now to the question of your

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⁸⁵. See Macey, *Fanon*, 78–87.
relationship to the Left of the 1970s and the early 1980s. You have, as everyone knows, a very pronounced relationship to the Left, but also have had a not uncritical relationship to the Left. And I remember very vividly an occasion in Jamaica in what was for us a very dread year (1980), very close upon the elections of that year, you visited and gave a talk at the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica. I remember well that it was the year after Allison and Busby had brought out their edition of *Season of Adventure*, and after your talk there were questions and there was one question to which you replied in the following way. You said, “The problem with the Left in the Caribbean is that they never left school.” Can you tell me what you meant by that?

GL: I think what I would have been suggesting or stating there is that wherever you went, from one territory to another, meeting the Left (by which one would mean the leaders or potential leaders of different organizations), is that they were invariably drawn from a middle class which had the advantages of school of which the constituency which they were trained to speak on behalf of, had not. And I always saw, even in the better types, with one particular exception, perhaps, I always saw them in the role of people who had the text, who had the book, and on whom had been conferred the privilege to interpret and explain this text for the others, but who really had no organic connection or direct identification with the daily lives of that other—though they imagined those lives, but they were not directly connected with them, and having the sense of “not left school.” A lot of the behavior was almost the living of a text. They had read the literature of the Left; they had read Marx. But it was not really the translation of the essence and spirit of meaning of that text into a wider collective experience. I saw that very much in the case of Guyana. Some of the leaders of the PPP who were Marxist would engage an audience of working-class and peasant people in great expositions of developments that were taking place in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia and a whole set of places about which I am quite sure the overwhelming majority had absolutely no interest whatsoever. This is really like a schoolmaster bringing some kind of gospel to you for the first time and asking you also to accept that gospel as your own.

I saw it again in Grenada. I tried to speak to that once because I went to a kind of rally, which Bishop had called. It started off with a skit on Chile and the assassination of Allende. This was to a large number of young people, schoolchildren. Then when they got up to speak this was again the teacher in the classroom explaining the meanings of Allende and Chile and so on. I had to speak—they’d asked me to speak—and what I did was to ask particularly the young people to try and remember that there has been a tradition of political struggle here before the New Jewel Movement, and whatever may
have been its limitations, Comrade Bishop could not have been unaffected by the kind
of work which the late T. Albert Maryshaw had done. In other words, what I was very
conscious of was a leadership Left at the time and most of them never tried to return
people to the fundamental bases of their own experience. They were always, in a way,
imposing upon them the experience of another. And I think that this is really what is
implied by school. That took me to the view that I held that the colonial experience was
so deep, because in a way that is going to run through everything; everything that I am
writing is tied up with the psychological dimensions of the colonized. The colonial expe-
rience was something infinitely deeper than simply the appropriation of other people’s
material resources—much, much deeper than that. It was actually the effective appro-
priation of the others’ minds, and the resistance struggle was a struggle above all about
how to recover that faculty, how to bring it back into your own possession before it could
really work effectively on your behalf.

So I saw that there was in fact a Left, if you like, that suffered, in a way, the same
kind of casualties as those who would have been regarded as petit-bourgeois and Right;
that is, there was a colonized Left, a Left that was as deeply colonized as the Right was.
There was a Right—a traditional sort of petit-bourgeois Right—who had the notion
that the organization of society depended on some model called Westminster that
they had picked up in book form and whose forms they had been asked to follow and
embrace uncritically; and there was a colonized Left who had also found models and
texts which they had also embraced uncritically, and of which they became the evange-
lists. But in each case the attempt to return people to the realities of their own concrete
experiences and in their own concrete contexts was secondary. It was not the primary
concern. And you get it again, a matter that will preoccupy me was this question of
language: neither the Left nor the Right ever sought for or tried to find a language that
would be appropriate for the description and analysis of the needs of the people that they
were addressing and whom they assumed that they were the natural leaders of. I think
there are probably many more things to say about that. And I retain it still that we have
never really quite exorcised the demons that were left by that colonial experience and I
use the term colonial there in a much, much deeper sense than simply people who came
and exploited your material resources. The mind was entered and the mind was shaped
or reshaped by that experience in that profound way, and that exorcism to this day is not
really complete.

DS: I am reminded of the title of Ngugi’s famous work, Decolonizing the Mind. Indeed,
the Left has not sufficiently attended to the decolonization of the mind. Let me ask you
two questions about your relationship to Marxism and your reading of Marxism. You’ve said somewhere that when a man tells you that he is a Marxist, that is all well and good, but the question that interests you is how he got there. So my first question is, how did you get there?

GL: My answer to that is that without knowing it I probably started there in the sense that when I came to read Marx and when I came to understand what I thought he was proposing as a fundamental component in the shaping of relations, that is class, I say to myself, “But this is what I lived.” So it is as though he was in some way reporting on an experience that was mine, doing it in a language that I could not have done it in. But I had lived a life in Barbados where it was perfectly clear to me that the location of power was exclusively with a clique of people who actually owned and organized the material base of my daily life in the form of the sugar plantation. And what was clear to me was that every major institution of the civil society that mediated my daily life, got its authority and its approval from that planter ruling elite. That is, in Barbados in my growing up no member of the Anglican Church, vicar or whoever, could have been appointed without the vetting and the approval of the planter in that area. That would also have applied to the school, and I am quite sure that that would have applied also to appointments in the judiciary. In other words, what I had lived but would not have been able to see arise then as I saw it later was that, in fact, those who actually owned and controlled the material base of my life also controlled the institutions that would shape my notion of how I was related to the Other and how I was related to them. Or to put it in the words which one would later use, that ownership, that possession, that organization of the material production fell within the same orbit of control as the mental production; that these two things were very closely connected. I lived that. I lived that also in seeing the way the school was organized to create important divisions of labor among a population. If you went to a certain school, it meant that you were removed from certain forms of labor. If you went to another kind of school, it meant that you were trained to be located there permanently in that form of labor. So that the school for me—this comes up in the work also of many West Indian writers—was also an agent in the organizing of social distance and it was a fundamental agent of social control.

DS: You’ve argued that what Marx enables you to do is not so much focus your attention on class, which, as you say, has been part of the context of your life experience, but to focus attention and to clarify the conceptualization of labor and the centrality of labor in any understanding of culture. And in many of the lectures that you have given when
you talk about cultural production and cultural work there is inside there centrally an attempt to think through the relationship between labor and culture.

**GL:** I begin that first of all by offering sort of a definition of culture. One of the earliest uses of that word, culture, would have to do with the rearing of animals and the tending of plants. That is its earliest use.⁸⁶ And therefore what I am hearing there is that the earliest responsibility, the earliest necessity, the earliest imperative is the acquiring of food—how do you go about getting food, because if there is no food, there is going to be no book, because there is going to be no life. So in other words, all the edifices that one constructs can only really be constructed after the fundamental engagement with creating that material base has been completed, and in a way, all the edifices that one constructs will in some way be influenced by the nature and the character of that material base. But I start with that—with food—how the species we call Man (meaning men and women), how do they go about first of all making this existence possible. And the second stage of that is, having made existence possible through food, they are also condemned to an instinct which forces them to question the meaning of this existence. Why do I

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⁸⁶. See, famously, the entry for “culture” in Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 87–95.
make this effort to reproduce myself? And this question is then going to be answered in a variety of what you call disciplines—this question will be answered by reflections called religion, it will be answered by reflections called philosophy, and so on. But all of these areas of enquiry really derive from that early question, the recognition that I am here, I exist, I have reproduced myself. What is the meaning of this existence?

**DS:** Isn’t labor for you—following from that—a metaphor for any kind of fundamental engagement or fundamental activity, whether with the mind or with the hand, that is involved in the *transformation* of the life that we have.

**GL:** Yes. So that the farmer and the fisherman are cultural workers who in a serious way (because they’re concerned with making possible the material base of life) are engaged in the *exercise* of the *mind*. They are people who by observation and experiment and trial know how the currents work, know what happens to soil in certain situations, and sometimes have a much deeper and more intimate grasp of these processes than people who come to them as students of the process itself. But the point you are raising is that I use labor almost as a metaphor for all activities that you would call work, all activity that gives meaning to that existence and helps to explain that existence. And an activity that also at a certain stage involves the worker in the *re-creation* of himself, in the *remaking* of himself, because that is unending. There is a passage from Marx, I don’t know if I remember it, which I quite often use in that connection; a beautiful passage from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* where Marx says, let us assume man to be man—meaning he is not yet that. Let us assume man to be man, and the world he lives in is a *human* place, which clearly it is not. Then love can only be exchanged for love, trust for trust, and it goes on.⁸⁷ When on occasions I read that, particularly to audiences of the Left, I don’t say who wrote it. And it sounds as though it comes from the Bible. And I remember somebody whispering, “Why is he starting with this? Is it St. Paul or somebody like that? What is this thing about love for love, trust for trust?” Then you have to go on to explain that really what he is getting at there is the communal nature of man as a social animal and that the two most vital needs for the solidarity of that community, the two most vital needs, that need of love and that need of trust, these are the two that are not negotiable in the marketplace. Each can only be exchanged for

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⁸⁷. “If we assume man to be man, and his relation to the world to be a human one, then love can be exchanged only for love, trust for trust, and so on.” Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 379.
itself. You may do bribery here but you cannot be assured of love except by the exchange of love, and you cannot be sure of trust except by the exchange of trust. But there is in that—“let us assume man to be man and the world he lives in a human place”—always that sense of an ongoing struggle to transform the primitive nature of relations into what Carter would call a community of valid persons.

DS: So that if the fisherman is to be understood as a cultural worker insofar as he is involved in the transformation of meaningful life, the poet is to be understood as a kind of laborer involved in the transformation of meaningful language.

GL: I do not make a great distinction—unlike some of my colleagues—about the worker in that sense. I regard the writer as a worker always, that is the beginning, and that activity in which he is engaged comes within the category of work. You may call him an intellectual worker or what have you, but the writer is also a worker and he is also producing a commodity that is going to be subject to all the processes of distribution like any other commodity. I have difficulty isolating the writer from what seems to me the common responsibility of all citizens. When people question, for example, your involvement in or your attachment to politics, I always find that puzzling because it seems to me that it is inconceivable that the work which a writer is doing (which is so directly connected with trying to explore and even find his location within the social collectivity) could be done without being directly involved in processes which I would call political. I have found the Greek use of the word idiote very interesting. The Greeks had a word idiote, which in an English translation would literally mean “idiot” or “stupid,” but they didn’t mean that. When the Greeks use idiote they used it to define an unacceptable lack of responsibility in any citizen who did not engage in public affairs. That every citizen of whatever level was expected to be concerned with and to be engaged in public affairs and if he did not, he was an idiote, not an idiot; it was a suspension of his responsibility to the polity in which he lived.

Grenada

DS: When does your association with the Grenada Revolution begin?

GL: I don’t remember the actual year or date, but I remember a formal kind of association was at a conference. Some conference was called shortly after the Grenada Revolution and I was invited, I was asked to come to that. And that was the very first occasion.
I think it was an attempt to bring the different factions of the Left together, because I remember that Jagan was a guest there.

I was not invited as a speaker; I was just invited. And before it ended, I think it was Tim Hector, said to the chairman (who I think is one of the guys in prison now, Selwyn Strachan), “You know, George Lamming is present here and I think we ought to ask him to say a word.” And I think this was the first time that, in a way an association was being materialized, because I was just invited, I think, as a name. But I was not even on their list as a speaker. And then what I recall distinctly doing was, I first of all thanked them for the invitation and for the opportunity to say a few words, and the first word I wanted to say was how pleased I was about the presence of Dr. Jagan here. Because I was very conscious of a whole set of tensions going on between these factions and I always wanted to establish, whatever the limitations, whatever the contradictions, that he had a very special role in resistance struggle. Because long before we knew him, Jagan had been in the parliament for ten years alone, all through the forties, before we get to 1953—that lone voice. And I wanted to call attention to the fact that we had a figure that represented a tradition of struggle. Saying in as politely a way as possible that one had to be very careful about thinking that you were the beginning of something, rather than just the continuation of other things going on.

And I think it was as a result of that that I was then approached to help or give advice to the minister of culture about what kinds of programs they should undertake that would help the revolution. Everything you did was supposed to help the revolution. So that was the beginning, and that deepened and deepened because then I dealt almost exclusively, in a way, not so much with Bishop and not at all with Coard, but I dealt with Jacqueline Creft who was the minister of culture—giving ideas. And it was out of that that I made the suggestion for the conferences.

DS: When was the first conference?

GL: That first conference is going to be about 1982. It was a tremendous conference. And what I was trying to do with that conference if you look down—we brought out a lot of monographs and so on of the papers—was trying to pull together that intellectual community within the Caribbean irrespective of its ideological directions. An intellectual community which [had] one thing in common, [namely] a struggle for the

88. Jacqueline Creft was one of the nineteen (including the prime minister, Maurice Bishop) murdered at Fort Rupert, St. Georges, Grenada, on 19 October 1983.
89. The first conference of culture and sovereignty took place in November 1982, in St. Georges, Grenada.
integration of the region, and for the movement of the region in some progressive direction. And the other thing would be that they were very distinguished in their own fields; that was very important. They didn’t come as members of organizations. And I did that deliberately, because I think quite often if you come in that independent role, you speak with a greater authority and you are heard with a greater sense of credibility than if you come as the voice of organization A or the voice of organization B. That was really an outstanding conference. And that ended with our forming a committee that would be a permanent committee for the running of the conference.

DS: Who were on the committee?

GL: I have the list; I will get the list for you. But I remember we had some serious problems with the selection of that committee. The conference was to finish, say, at seven o’clock, because the comrade leader [Bishop] and the cabinet were coming as the grand

90. The Regional Committee for Cultural Sovereignty issued an undated Manifesto. The members listed were: George Lamming (coordinator), Kathleen Drayton, Neville Duncan, Rickey Singh (Barbados); Martin Carter and C. Y. Thomas (Guyana); George Beckford, Barry Chevannes, and Peter Phillips (Jamaica); Siegmien Stephanor (Suriname); David Abdullah, P. I. Gomes, Merle Hodge, Earl Lovelace, Syl Lowhar, and Pearl Springer (Trinidad and Tobago).
finale of the conference; so the conference ran over. And at about half past seven, I was there as the coordinator in serious battle with an element of the Left about who was omitted and who was not going on this committee, and so on. I had put down a list of names and checked earlier in the day with responsible people about how the list looked. But I think there was a wing of the ultra-Left which wanted a more dominant presence in terms of their names. They probably only had one or two. And that got prolonged. And I got a little offended by the notion that I was charged with not following a truly democratic process here. So I said, “Look, I will not be spoken to by men who do not observe any democratic process when they are choosing anything.” And we tied it up and called for a vote, and I didn’t even wait to see the hands and I said, “Well that is the conference committee; the comrade leader is here.” And that was the end of that. It was a very draconian kind of way. That was it. He [Bishop] added one or two [names] later. But they [the ultra-Left] got to Bishop then, because he then had a talk with me and he told me, “I heard you bulldozed the thing with the names”—in a jocular kind of way. But I said, “I didn’t bulldoze anything; I think we have the right kind of committee.”

But there was an aspect of that conference, too, which I found very disturbing. The Jamaica delegation, which was made up of two or three people who would later be members of the WPJ [Workers Party of Jamaica], were there. And at an open session in Carriacou, we had a debate and that’s where the Carriacou address was given—at that open session. And then Lovelace spoke. And they had a kind of debate. And Barry Chevannes and one or two others whose names I have forgotten entered into very fierce debate about the emphasis of the directions. But the weight of opinion was going against them all the time. And a curious thing happened, that when that session broke, they left frustrated that somehow they didn’t get project suggestions or whatever it was accepted and carried. And that was the early session; we were to meet again in the afternoon after lunch.

DS: Do you remember what the substance of that debate was about or what was at stake, or the line taken by different elements within the conference?

GL: I think it was a doctrinal issue, a demand to declare ideological clarity. And it was that that had led me to that business of saying whether you’re Marxist or not is not my concern. I’ve never heard of a Marxist baby. But what has interested me most is the
journey to that. But I think they wanted the conference to end on a greater clarity of ideological commitment and ideological direction and that sort of thing. And Lovelace, who is not ideological in any way, Lovelace was taking the view of his warrior expression and was not going to be caged. That’s the kind of exchange that went on. But the thing that really shook me, and at the same time opened my eyes to a certain form of behavior coming from that dimension, was that in the second half (we were meeting to complete [the debate]), the Jamaica delegation did not show up. There was a morning session and an afternoon session, and in the afternoon session we were going to be joined then by the Carriacou drummers. That was going to be a big thing; they were coming to welcome us. I was very upset because the Jamaica delegation did not show up at all, either for the continuation of the debate or for the drumming. And I was truly puzzled by this. And then I asked someone who was from Jamaica but who was not a part of that group, I said, “I’m very surprised, what’s happened?” And he told me, “Oh no, I’m not surprised. They have gone to work out a strategy about what should happen tomorrow as a result of what happened today.” And I said, “I don’t mind their not coming back for the rest of the debate, but it was really an insult to the Carriacou drummers who had rehearsed and prepared specially.” “That wouldn’t bother them. They have gone to work out what is to happen tomorrow in the light of what happened today.”

DS: And your relationship with the Grenada Revolution largely continued . . .

GL: Right through. I went there then quite often. I had a lot of problems from here because during that time I’m in Barbados and I am subject to all kinds of petty harassments. All my mail is opened. Somehow or other the telephones I use are tapped. So sometimes I would call Grenada and I would say directly, “Would you put me on to the comrade leader?” and I always spoke in a way that allowed the listener, wherever the listener was, to know that I have nothing to say that should be concealed, that I did not believe in any underground, hidden behavior. My support of, identification with that effort of transformation was made absolutely clear and above board. Nothing clandestine about it. But there was a kind of hysteria in Barbados about the Grenada Revolution and [there were] very unpleasant attacks, to put it mildly, both public and private, on the one or two people who articulated their support for them, especially Rickey Singh, whose defense I often had to come to.⁹² But I must say that my relation is a curious one, because in all of this, whether you were speaking of Grenada or wherever it was, I was

⁹². Rickey Singh is one of the most distinguished independent journalists in the Caribbean region.
never at any time any formal member of party or organization. I was always located in a very independent kind of space, as though I was my own organization or my own institution, and I went always in that role, not so much as working for you, but making a contribution to what you were doing, and therefore demanding the freedom to be critical of whatever I saw and that I was in conflict with.

DS: And you were.

GL: Oh yes! And this is where the term would come up that I was accepted, not really into the inner circles—I had access to people like Bishop at any time—and in fact the only one I really dealt with directly [was Creft]. I had no dealings with Coard, except the visit of welcome. When I first arrived, the first man who came to see me was Coard. I met Coard before I met Bishop.

DS: This was not a matter of welcome.

GL: No, he had come, I discovered, to put me in a kind of role. He came and he didn’t discuss Grenada or anything like that. He discussed Guyana. And I had been recently in Guyana, and he had come to, in a way, tell or explain to me why it was very important for the WPA to come to some kind of accommodation with Jagan and the PPP. And I was very struck by that; I couldn’t understand why he kept on with that. And then I realized what had happened and the way things were. He knew that I had a close association with members of the WPA, and he assumed that that also carried the possibility of influence.

DS: Were there other writers who were as close as you were to the Grenada Revolution?

GL: Yes . . . well, in the sense of attending, of responding, [there is], for example, Earl Lovelace. Anything that had to do with transformation, Lovelace would come. And Lovelace did on both occasions—because we had our second conference there in Trinidad—come. But I think that Lovelace would not have thought it . . . let us put it this way, somehow by temperament he was not one to speak directly on behalf of [the revolution], if you see what I mean. So probably people would not identify Lovelace with the Grenada Revolution in the way they identified Lamming with it. Although Lovelace was consistently supportive of whatever was happening in Grenada. There were also Martin Carter, Syl Lowhar, Pearl Springer.
DS: What about Merle Hodge?⁹³

GL: Well, Merle Hodge worked there [in Grenada] in that capacity and she then worked for that movement. And therefore you may say yes. But as I say, the difference there is that Merle Hodge was an employed functionary inside their bureaucracy, definitely working for the government. I never worked for them. I’ve never received any monies of any kind for anything that I did. The only thing that one expected was that transportation would have to be provided. There was never any kind of material reward. But Hodge was deeply committed to the Grenada Revolution.

DS: In your work in relation to the Grenada Revolution are you thinking about the kinds of issues that are turning in your character Mark Kennedy’s mind? The problem, as we discussed earlier, of how to insert into a revolutionary process that moment of self-reflection.

GL: Exactly, yes, and to bring a dimension to that revolution that is not there. I’m going to be very conscious of the fact that Bishop doesn’t really understand the organic meaning of culture that I’m engaged in. I’m understanding that. He recognizes and sees it as a very important tool in mobilizing a force behind the revolution, but he does not see it as an inescapable component or even base of the revolution itself. He’s not too far removed from [the idea that] the cake is getting the structures right, and the icing we can put on later. He wasn’t really too far removed from that. And I think he would have been the more advanced of them in that respect. I have a feeling that on the Coard side, they were very skeptical about that committee and whether that committee would not in fact become a serious impediment to whatever it is that they had planned. Because the committee was bringing a humanizing dimension to the project. First of all by its eclectic nature. It wasn’t calling exclusively on anybody who happened to be Marxist-Leninist; that was not it. It was calling on anyone of noted, verifiable skills and capacities who also supported what was happening: they have all kind of differences but they’re supporting what was happening. And it was brought to my attention later by someone that Bishop may have been depending on that committee to give the revolution intellectual respectability at a regional level—because that committee was regional. And in doing so, to bring what would appear to be a liberalizing content in what would be the otherwise rigorous and doctrinal character of the organization.

DS: There is a second conference, as you say, which took place.

GL: After the assassination. Yes, this is very extraordinary. Conference two is planned. Bishop has announced conference two. Bishop announces that his information is that Lamming would be here next week. We’re getting ready for conference two, the delegates and the various people are informed. And then it’s about a week or so after, before I could arrive there, that this thing bursts on us. Now what is so strange to me about the timing of the assassinations is that I had been there a few months before, discussing and laying the foundations of conference two with Creft. There was a Jamaican who was helping in radio there, a woman who worked for the movement—there were a lot of voluntary people working [for the revolution]. That was one of the interesting things about the Grenada Revolution. It was called the “Grenada Revolution,” but the whole region was involved in one way or another—skilled people—in a whole set of activities, people who were not Grenadians: they were either Jamaicans or Guyanese, in my case Barbadian, [and so on]. The region was in a moment of resistance in Grenada. That was really how I liked to see it.

During that period I am there they are getting ready for the opening of the airport. This is something I am not clear about. We are only a few months away from the opening of the airport. And there are appeals to people saying could they open their homes because they are not going to have enough hotel accommodation. Tremendous, hundreds of people are writing from the States, a whole set of Afro-Americans who are now seeing this thing as [one of] blacks taking over something here. And the airport is in a way going to be the most spectacular material and symbolic triumph of the revolution—the opening of the airport. Now it has always puzzled me—they know that, they are all preparing for the airport—that [they] should have allowed a crisis of that kind to take place on the eve of what is going to be your major triumph. I have never quite understood that. Except there are speculations about it; there are speculations about who should be the visible leader at the opening of the airport.

DS: How could there be speculations about that? Surely Bishop.

GL: Well, the battle is going on inside, the battle for leadership. This is where Bishop then comes and falls into the trap about the “dual leadership.” There are going to be terrible inside meetings in which Bishop is by the executive being demoted. And the dual leadership would take the form that Coard would be responsible for strategy and planning, and Bishop’s role was almost like how the governor-general would be. That Bishop
would be the voice that goes out and speaks, but the hardcore decisions would be taken by [Coard]. In fact the crisis would grow around that question of the dual leadership. But it has always remained to me very strange, the timing. That even if you had a crisis you would have thought that nothing should be allowed to be an obstacle to the opening of the airport. Literally nothing. That all forces would have combined around making absolutely sure that the airport was opened. Anything else could come after that. What did come really was the story that you know, this awful story.

DS: Where are you when this takes place?

GL: It’s very extraordinary. I am in Barbados and I am at the airport. I am going to Havana. I had not heard anything about this story. I left home and I’m going [to] a meeting in Havana. Bill Riviere is with me.⁹⁴ And there was a man at the airport who works with BeeWee [BWIA], and before I check in he comes over to me and he says, “Mr. Lamming, there was just a news bulletin that the comrade leader [he was a Grenadian], the comrade leader has been put under house arrest.” I said, “What nonsense are you on about?” He says, “Yes, I am telling you, it was just a news flash, that the comrade leader is under house arrest.” So I went and I checked in and then the same man came back to me and says, “I’ve just been asked to tell you that the foreign minister [Unison Whiteman] is upstairs and he would like to see you.” He was in New York attending some United Nations meeting and he was in transit on his way home. And I said, “Yes, tell him [okay],” and they put us in a VIP room and we talk. The radio is going blow by blow, and next we hear [while] sitting down that Coard has resigned. The very interesting thing is, when Bishop is murdered Coard holds no official post. He’s not on the executive, he’s not in the central committee, he’s not a minister. Coard is an ordinary citizen when it happens. He had resigned all offices before that happened. There was a story about Tom Adams calling Whiteman at the airport, I don’t know how or when that took place, because I saw him on to the plane. But there were two reasons Whiteman wanted to speak to me. He said, “I heard you were going to Havana.” I said yes. “What I would like you to do is to say that you think everything is under control.” He didn’t know exactly what was happening [but] he didn’t want them [the Cubans] to come to any conclusions. So I ask him [what was happening]. He doesn’t answer me, he just says, I always remember, he says, “You know, this power is a destructive tool.” That’s all. And

⁹⁴. Bill Riviere is now a lawyer practicing in Dominica. In the 1970s he was a leading figure in the Dominican—and Caribbean—Left.
he was certainly referring to Coard. He says power is a destructive thing. Then the next bulletin is that Selwyn Strachan has gone down to the market square in St. Georges—he was Minister Strachan; he is in prison as well—to make announcements about changes and that everything is under control. And they chase him out of the square. I phone Rickey Singh to ask him what he knows and he says he is trying to find out. Singh is in Barbados. He is our one regional journalist and is also very supportive of the Grenada Revolution. The story is that the prime minister of Barbados, Adams, who was aware, it is thought, about what was going to happen, had offered the foreign minister White-man asylum. He had advised him not to leave and that he would be quite comfortable here, but not to leave, and he refused it, said he couldn’t do that. He had to go back. So the plane is called, and Bill Riviere and I are discussing—Bill and I are very good friends, remained very good friends—and I remember saying, “Bill, if by the time we arrive in Cuba [this is about three hours or so from now] Bishop is not out of that house addressing the nation, the Grenada Revolution is over. I’m sure of it.” Because given the symbolic role of Bishop in that—Coard was bright and all that—but the revolution in the consciousness of Grenada was Bishop.

DS: “No Bish, no Revo.”

GL: That’s right. And I was saying if you put Bishop under house arrest, you have put the revolution under house arrest. And Bill was telling me, “Coard is not the man to be involved in that, not the Coard I know.” I said, “I don’t know, but I’m telling you if he’s not out of there and we get there [to Cuba] . . .”

DS: What do you tell the Cubans?

GL: Well, the Cubans of course are following this, because the Cuban ambassador got dismissed very soon, because they thought he was very, very backward in not getting [them] what they regarded as sufficient information. I go straight to CASA. I remember the man who was director saying to me, “It sounds as though Coard is the lion.” But I then get a hold of a man I knew who is the Guyanese ambassador to Cuba to tell him that I was here and I wanted to see him to ask him did he have any information. I call the wife of the Grenada ambassador, the Grenada ambassador to Cuba, I call, I’m calling thinking he’s there to ask if I can come and see him and find out what is happening. But the wife takes the phone [and says] he’s not there, he’s in Grenada. And I said, “I won-
dered whether there is any news.” And she says, “Yes, everything is under control.” And I said okay, thanks very much, and then I call (it was in that order), I call the Guyanese, whom I knew. And about the next day we met and had lunch, very discreet, and he said, “I don’t know, but the Grenada ambassador to Cuba has been in Grenada for about the last two weeks, and actually I was expecting him back here a week or so ago, so I’m not clear.” The foreign minister [Whiteman], I think, was not aware that his ambassador to Cuba was back in Grenada.

But what has turned up later, as we saw, is that the Grenada ambassador to Cuba, Cornwall, was part of the Coard cadre, and had gone down in the absence of the foreign minister to be part of plotting whatever they were plotting. He’s also among the imprisoned. And that had such a traumatic effect. We had the second conference; I wrote everybody. But there was such a weight of gloom that there were people who thought we couldn’t; I thought no, that even on behalf of Bishop we should go through with it. And we had it and that was quite a remarkable conference. The Guyana delegation came: Eusi Kwayana and Andaiye of the WPA.

DS: Was there a Jamaica delegation?

GL: There were Jamaicans, yes.

DS: The same delegation as before?

GL: No. Peter Phillips and Neville Duncan. But we also had one of the ministers of the Grenada government who had survived. Kendrick Radix came and he gave a long background to Coard in England from before they got home. Hodge, I think, came—a very interesting presence. Kenny Anthony, the present St. Lucian prime minister [came]. He had been in labor politics in St. Lucia before he joined the law faculty and he was there. He spoke to the question of education and problems with the Catholic Church in St Lucia. Syl Lowhar, there was a good Trinidad delegation. But the conference just went on with the program we discussed of carrying on the kinds of work that we hoped would continue in spite of the [catastrophe]. But among the people I think of, I have a feeling that there was never really a complete recovery from that—among the people who were directly [involved]. That dealt a blow to the whole Left in the region. It in a way almost crippled whatever was the Left in the region. It made it almost impossible now to speak in terms of socialism. Those words had become dirty words to ordinary people.
Let's now turn to your association with Walter Rodney and the WPA in Guyana. When did you first meet Rodney?

I met Rodney first in England at some time. I didn’t know him so well; I got to know him better a little later. But my association really, before Walter, was with Andaiye, who I had known before Grenada, and then later in New York, and who was then to become a very critical member of the WPA. C. Y. Thomas I had met at [UWI] Mona at some time. But the association with Walter begins in discussing with him preparations for the *New World* independence issue. He’s in London. I go to see him. I remember, he’s living in London, because I want a contribution from him. And he says yes, he would prepare it. And he gave a very fine contribution—it’s in the *New World* issue. We discussed it and he said, “Use it as you want, edit it as you want.” And I think that piece is also going to be part of what later would be *The History of the Guyanese Working People*. So that was the first meeting. And then later I think I met him once or twice. And then there is the correspondence—this is very interesting. He writes to ask me would I write the introduction [to *The History of the Guyanese Working People*].

This is many years later.

Yes, this is many years later. So there’s some kind of exchange going on between us. I’m moving in and out of Barbados, but once I’m there anytime the WPA is having anything that looks like conference, one is sent for as being a part of this. So in a way, I get sort of identified as being of, related to, in some way, the WPA.

But does your association with the WPA begin with *its* emergence, or is it much later that you become associated with it?

Well, with *individuals* in its emergence, because remember the WPA is going to be a formation coming out a number of groups at work, and they merge into this WPA. And between the formal founding of the WPA and the death of Walter, that’s about four years or so, it’s not [very long]. The WPA, I think, becomes a party in about ’78. There is a loose working together with groups, three or four groups. And Walter is killed in ’80
or '81. And then it went on in the name of Walter. But what is quite extraordinary is its impact—the impact of the WPA on a new generation in Guyana in that short period of time was quite astonishing. I think it even astonished them. It may also have tricked them into a notion of having a greater power and authority and control than they actually did.

**DS:** What is the source of that impact, do you think?

**GL:** I think if you were going to reduce it to one single factor, it was the extraordinary powers of communication of Rodney. There was something about Rodney that symbolized and expressed what layers and layers of people, and particularly a younger generation, were feeling. And Rodney, as he had done in Jamaica and elsewhere, had this gift of *grounding* with people. He was not only the scholar but he was a man in the shop there; he married that head to the belly of the society in a very extraordinary kind of way. And Rodney—I mentioned earlier when we are talking about the Left and leadership he was the one exception—always moved and behaved as a man who had come from the class of the majority. In the way you could spot others as being what you might call middle class—he was not.

**DS:** Rodney was a kind of Chiki.

**GL:** Yes, if you like. And he retained that. And he had come from a kind of working artisan tailor father and that kind of background, and he held on very much to that.

**DS:** Did Walter for you embody what you think of, more in relation to the writers you have admired, as a kind of *style*?

**GL:** Oh yes, in politics, yes. In that there was no division. It seemed to me Rodney achieved in a remarkable way that fusion of the scholar, activist, ordinary man of the people without making any great effort at it. And he saw this again as his *way of life*. This is what he was put here for. There is something, though, about all of that and the speed of that period that I ponder on now.

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DS: What do you mean by that?

GL: I am thinking of this question of influence, and influences. And I thought that, from the accounts I would get of Walter’s activities, in that ease and what seems fearlessness with which Walter moved about, in the style of fusing the life of the scholar and activist, I sometimes get the feeling of the element of adventure. I am attending a conference there [in Guyana] and Walter is in Guyana, he’s supposed to be in Guyana. And I’m very conscious that Andaiye, [who] is responsible for some organizing, is every now and again absent, is not in the room. Something has happened. Walter is not there. It’s only a day or two later that I discover what was going on. What was going on is that Walter was being smuggled out over to Suriname to get a flight to Zimbabwe where there is a heads of government meeting. Walter is under surveillance. And who is going to be most astonished is Burnham arriving in Zimbabwe to find out that Walter is ahead of him. Now, this is what I mean that there is an element of the adventuresome in that. Because actually, he could have been shot in that attempt to move out in that way. And I always wondered to what extent the role of Guevara played in influencing a certain type of intellectual and activist in our kind of circumstances.

I see a Guevara come alive in Walter, in our own terms, and therefore taking those risks. Because the Burnham that is organizing Guyana at the time is not a Burnham that you should misread. And I suspect that Walter misread him. Whatever the extent of his monstrosities and so on, I have a curious feeling that Walter had a notion that Burnham wasn’t going to touch him. And that was a serious, very serious misreading of Burnham.

DS: Is the problem that you are negotiating in relation to the unfolding Grenada Revolution—the problem that I think of as the Mark Kennedy problem—an issue for you in relation to the WPA and the Guyanese struggle? Is there the same kind of issue of inserting into the unfolding discussions in Guyana that moment of self-reflection? Do you see that in part as your own task as a writer, indeed as a philosophical writer, engaged in discussions with the WPA?

GL: Yes, with elements within the WPA, rather than the whole WPA. But this is, if you like, the project or vision of seeing that cultural base in political struggle, the WPA or the members of the WPA I knew, were much more receptive and open to that. Much more fertile ground existed in the WPA for that kind of activity than I would say in any of the other institutions that I have mentioned. And when you check out the names of
the WPA members, there are a number of people very close to the arts in some kind of way. I mean, Carter is going to be, not a member, but he is going to be in a remarkable way very identified with what the WPA is about and what Walter is trying to do. And he is going to see in the WPA a civilizing quality, or the possibility of a civilizing quality, that does not exist in either of the other two parties. The other thing that was very fascinating to me is that Walter was a historian. I was very struck—and later was asking people who knew him—why he would have wanted me to write the introduction to The History of the Guyanese Working People. And I remember somebody saying once he had read Of Age and Innocence, he said he was trying to do what I’m also doing [though] we’re doing it in different forms. So he did not want a historian, he did not want a historian in the [disciplinary] sense of a West Indian historian. He wanted someone who had a sense of history, who was writing a history of his own kind, and about that world in which he was engaged. That was the sort of person he wanted, and that was the kind of introduction he wanted.

The Politics of Form

DS: I’m always reminded of moment in the preface to The Black Jacobins when James says, “It was not the Toussaint who made the revolution, it was the revolution who made Toussaint. And even that is not the whole story.” But I want now to come back through that to the business of writing and the politico-aesthetic question of form, narrative, and its relation to the political world and the social world in which the writer lives, or about which the writer is concerned. And you make, I suppose, a set of decisions and a set of calculations, about form and political work. And there comes a time when a lot of your writing is what you call the writing of “statements” as opposed to the fictional form of the novel. Is this a very conscious move on your part to permanently or temporarily suspend the engagement with the writing of the novel?

GL: Let me deal with the statement/fiction contrast. That comes up in one of the lectures in Conversations in which I am explaining that.⁹⁶ Broadly speaking you could speak of literature taking new forms, whether it’s the form of statement or the form of fiction. Statement is that kind of argument, verifiable argument, that the historian, the essayist and [so on uses]. Fiction is the series of devices which allow you to create a very autonomous world out of the raw material of experience. Now what I’m saying there

is that when I’m writing novels I am directly concerned with the fictional devices that construct some particular world of my imagination. When I am called to address the workers’ union or the students or a conference or whatever, what I am doing is using the language of statement as distinct from the language of fiction. And that is why the novels would have a certain density that the lectures would not have. But if you look at the lectures carefully, they are also very structured, and what I’m doing is bringing a kind of fictional device of structure to the lecture, but the lecture is really a statement. And the way I put it in one of the lectures is that the lecture is aimed at the mind, directly at the mind. But the device, the structure is of such that it is trying to make the mind feel what it is hearing. And the fiction on the other hand is devised in such a way [as to] aim not at the mind [but] directly at the area of feeling, but with the device of making the feeling think.

On the question of form and narrative, from very early on, problems were raised about the categorizing of Lamming—from *Castle*. From the very beginning the orthodox critics [are raising this as a problem of categorizing]: autobiography, this that, what? Because it is not really in any way following the norms and established conventions of the novel. And this is deliberate. When you look at *Castle*, nearly all the forms, all the genres, are involved. There is straight narrative; *Castle* then will move into dramatic dialogue, as between Ma and Pa and so on. And quite often a lot of the school scenes could be taken from there onto the stage. So you get the play at work in *Castle*. You get what would normally be the novel, that prose narrative at work. But you also get, and this is going to come up in nearly all the other books also, you’re going to get a diary, some poems. There is a diary that is supposed to be part of whatever form it is that he is seeking, if you like. It is a form that is going to include the variety of all these forms, each of which could be examined on its own. So you could have diaries, you could have plays, you could have straight narrative. You could have that interior monologue. And already they are all there in *Castle*. They are going to appear again—the theater form in *The Emigrants*. It’s almost a stage thing with the men on the ship, in the exchange there’s almost a staged version. *Natives* or *Season*, with the letter form, the diary form. And what I had forgotten to say, really when we were discussing *Season*, is that the authorial note, which seems a strange intervention, could also be seen as the author’s diary. It was the diary item inserted into the narrative at that moment.

**DS:** I see the distinction that you make between statement and fiction. But I’m interested also in the relationship between that distinction and what you think of as the public task of the writer. And about what you think of as perhaps the changing public task of George Lamming the writer.
GL: Well, let me say to the first question, I would not presume to say what should be the public task of the writer, because there’s a sense in which when one says the writer, you’re really speaking of a tremendous diversity of personality, and a great variety of temperament. And therefore there may be, not may be, there certainly would be writers who do not in any way feel the compulsions or feel the obligations that Lamming may feel in his relation to what he does with writing. And they are free too; they’re absolutely free to choose how that work is to be used [and] in what service. So I wouldn’t have a manifesto about the writer, “I should do this, I should do that.” In my particular case, I would say that that is almost a compulsion, that is a feeling of being engaged in what I call public affairs.

Now as to statement/fiction/lecture/novel, what quite often I am doing—and if you look through Conversations, the extracts from the novels are used quite a bit—is spelling out in the lectures the themes raised in the fiction. So that in fact, I do not expect most of you there whom I’m talking to, particularly if it’s the union people, I do not expect that they’re going to be reading any Of Age and Innocence, that they’re going to be reading any Season of Adventure. But when I give a lecture about the honorable member, and trace the history of this parliamentarian, from the great-grandfather in the canefield, right through to the schoolmaster whose son is now a lawyer, that is very clear. They’re hearing that very clear. But I am telling them what Season and Of Age and Innocence is about. In other words, the lectures are used really as statements that illustrate the theme and content of the novels.

DS: Let me put the question this way. Do you think that your conception of your own public task as a writer has altered significantly between the Paris Congress of Black Writers in 1956 when you gave that lecture on “The Negro Writer and His World” and the present moment?

GL: No, I don’t think there’s been any change in that. In the sense of how I see what I do and the compulsions I feel about how I see intervention in public affairs—that has not changed very much.

DS: Though the representational form in which you carry out your task as a writer has somewhat shifted from the novel form to the form of the statement.

GL: Yes, but that is because I have not had fiction published for a very long time. There is unpublished fiction there, but it’s not been [published]. Most of the recent published work has been in the form, yes, of statement. And in a way, yes, if I am going to deal
directly with your question, at some stage I had come to feel that if I had anything of relevance and value to say that could be immediately effective in however minimal a way, it would be more effectively done by that statement, by that lecture-form, than by the novel-form. So [consequently] *Coming Home, Conversations*, and so on—and I would like two or three more publications of that kind. And whenever I am asked to give a public address on some major occasion, I am also doing it with a view that it would play the role that the fiction would have played if they were able to read the fiction, or if the fiction was made available to them. It may not have been a very good thing for me from the point of view of critics, but I haven’t changed very much in that sense of almost seeing what I do and myself as a kind of evangelist. I’m a preacher of some kind; I am a man bringing a message of some kind. That would have been there in 1956. I am bringing my message; I don’t know what you would make of it. And that is there right down to the later Carifesta addresses.

**DS:** Let me ask the question this way. Do you think that the novel form is still adequate to the task of what you call the education of feeling?²⁹⁷

**GL:** Yes, I think so, but again, it depends on who is using it, and how you want it to work. I don’t think as a form that that is necessarily exhausted at all. As far as I personally am concerned, I don’t feel a great urgency to return to it—that is, to return to a narrative that is known and recognized as the novel. What I have been, for some years now, working on is, if you like, a rewriting of the Columbus experience, a rewriting, as it were, of the voyages. And that is there in bulk, in enormous bulk. And again, I am back to where I said I started with *Castle*, because how I have that visualized is that all of the established forms are involved. That appears at times as though it were a film script with directions and so on. Then it would have a narrative that would take the form almost of authorial comment on the script. Then it has—a lot of it—a play form. I’ll give you an example of what I’m doing. It’s all within the frame of the Ceremony of Souls—I’m back to the Ceremony of Souls. That comes up in each. And what I’m doing is I have the *tonelle* as the region. So one night they might be in Haiti, and one night they might be in St. Lucia, and one night they might be in Barbados.

The one who is in charge of that now is not the *houngan* of the earlier *Season*; it is the *mambo*. And what she’s doing here is summoning from this water the major figures

of that journey. And she is interrogating them. Now that takes a form that sometimes that someone, say in the case of Columbus, some of his answers will come directly from his voyages, that could be identified in the voyages. And that may break sometimes and then (which is pure invention) he speaks the words I give him to speak as I interpret his position. Then you would have a section in which she summons Sepulveda and Las Casas to go through the famous debate that they have. And in all of this the contemporary Caribbean is listening to them on this debate. And then the narrative would be descriptive of the ritual that is taking place around that. And that is then carried right through the centuries—the mambo is part of that myth and cosmology; she is someone who is alive in this moment, but she was also alive in 1493. She has borne witness to every occasion that she is investigating. So in a way, her questions are sometimes rhetorical. If she asks Columbus, “Were you at such and such a place?”

DS: She already knows.

GL: She knows. What she sometimes doesn’t know, what she’s not going to be sure of, is how he interprets his actions. And then that is my interpretation, how I’m locating him. And that comes right through scenes in which one of the houngans speaks to a tourist. We may now be down in 1960—something, about this cannon here, this cannon that the tourist is photographing, and the houngan is reminding him of the meaning of the cannon that he’s photographing. The cannon is now a dead cannon, but the cannon was very much alive, and he brings the whole thing [into the present]. And right down—with a lot of this in almost a kind of play form, with lots of narrative—into the confrontation of Africa and India in Trinidad. And the whole argument around whether there was any objective need to bring Asians here as a labor force and battle over that. So it comes through, and all this is taking place within the context of the ceremony, as though I select major moments, major sectors in the history of this region, which is then fictionalized in that way. So when that is finished, then, and I would expect to see it in book form, it would be again beyond any singular orthodox categorization of novel or play. It would have included all of those forms.

One of the themes I’m developing there, I’m making a break away from the stereotype presentation of Columbus. I present Columbus very sympathetically. I don’t see him as the monster. I have a section in which I see him as a man of very little formal education and he’s out at sea at fourteen, he has no money; he’s not a man of wealth. And I try to imagine this man in Salamanca before this council of scholars, justifying this voyage. As I say, he’s not a man of means then. But some of the men who are going to
be a part of his voyage are men with investments in the ships. And then I look at these, what you would see in normal life as serious disadvantages. “I’m put in charge of a man who could buy me in terms of his wealth; I’m asked to convince a council that is made up of men who look at me as a crank, and a barely literate crank; and worst of all, I’m a foreigner. This vessel is a vessel under the Spanish flag and I’m an Italian.” And I’m trying to explain the harshness of his behavior long before he gets anywhere near the tribes. A very harsh behavior in punishment with the crew; and I see that as the one way in which a man of deep and great insecurities affirmed his authority. It cannot be taken for granted, nor can he allow anyone to be in doubt about it. And the only means he has is to give orders for $X$ number of lashes. [He was] extremely brutal in punishment long before you get to any business about how you deal with Indians.

And something that we tend to forget is that he comes out of a world that was behaving like that. There was nothing extraordinary about that. He behaved like that. When you read that extraordinary [book] The Waning of the Middle Ages, it’s an extraordinary thing.⁹⁸ When there was to be a hanging and so on, crowds are turning up as they would turn up for a picnic! And appealing, “Don’t let him die too soon!” So the mambo is pressing him about why he chose that part of the world. I have to get that passage. But the exile theme is coming up in him: he’s claiming always that he was a man without any anchor. From the first time he could recall himself, he had no anchor and was always looking, feeling for an anchor. And this is going to be his anchor: the discovery.

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⁹⁸. The reference is to Johan Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries (London: Folio Society, 1998 [1924]).