**Three into One *Can* Go? Creolizing Narrations of ‘East Indian Trinidadian West Indians’ in Selvon, Lovelace and Mootoo**

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By the time I was in my teens I was a product of my environment, as Trinidadian as anyone could claim to be, quite at ease with a cosmopolitan attitude, and I had no desire to isolate myself from the mixture of races that comprised the community. (Selvon 1986 9)

Sam Selvon’s first novel, *A Brighter Sun* has received relatively little critical attention by comparison to his third, *The Lonely Londoners*, which effectively secured his reputation as maestro of a stylized Trinidadian literary voice, as Kenneth Ramchand argues in Chapter X here. As well as its calypso-style narration, many critics draw attention to the way ‘the boys’ gather in a loose, convivial community to protect themselves from the racism of London. They may live in diminished circumstances but liming together, they adopt an irreverent black urban style that exudes style and confidence and their redeployment of the ‘jungle’ stereotype is wryly alert to its performative power, “they want you to live up to the films and stories they hear about black people living primitive in the jungles of the world” (92). Selvon’s lonely Londoners have come to embody a stylishly subversive Black metropolitan identity. In his discussion of the text, Stefano Harney argues that the “muscle”(107) of Caribbean style is not produced exclusively via the encounter with Britain but is a cultural force, powered by “centuries of Caribbean popular culture” (105) that Moses et al bring *with* them. The “predatory creolization” that the boys enact as they transform the city in their wanderings is “powered by the inevitable creolization of Trinidad” and informed by Selvon’s “base in the street culture of Port of Spain” (114-5). Harney concludes, “This idea of a predatory creolization as national culture is Sam Selvon’s contribution to the national community of Trinidad.” (115) The *inevitable* creolization in Trinidad is contrasted to an actively “predatory” creolization in London; where one ‘naturally’ unfolds, the other involves a more self-conscious and rebellious agency. Harney’s use of ‘predatory’ is strongly affirmative, aligning creolization with an agentive resistance that to my mind too neatly consolidates black Caribbean men as archetypally subversive figures. This view of creolization as an irreverently performative coheres around the figure of the ‘rude bwaii’ and its enduring appeal is driven by the demands of cultural nationalism.

Re-reading *A Brighter Sun* now, it is easy to see why its uneven, anxious treatment of creolization might seem less subversive and tame by contrast to *The Lonely Londoners*. Certainly, Tiger is no rude bwaii: he does not exude the stylish cool of a figure like Moses, the linguistic verve of Cap or the bravado of Galahad. I argue here, however, that *A Brighter Sun* offers a more complicated and contradictory idea of creolization, one less easily reconciled with creolization-as-resistance. Indeed, it invites us to question how ‘resistance’ might be figured textually and whether it is, in any case, what we should continually read *for*. If creolization as it unfolds in *A Brighter Sun*, is anxious, incomplete and altogether less boldly ‘predatory’ than it appears in *The Lonely Londoners*, its *inevitability* in Trinidad is also more troubled than Harney implies. Where in London, the logic of white racism casts all the boys as ‘black’ (refusing recognition of the difference that ‘*Indian* West Indian’ might signify), in the Trinidad of *A Brighter Sun*, everyone is hailed by precise racial epithets. Attending to Selvon’s first novel foregrounds the place of Indo-Trinidadians in creolization that the later novel elides. It also disturbs the easy alignment between ‘Trinidadian’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ that many associate with *The Lonely Londoners* and that Selvon implies in the epigraph above.

Following discussion of *A Brighter Sun*, I offer readings of two more recently published novels by Trinidadian authors: Shani Mootoo’s, *He Drown She in the Sea* (2005) and Earl Lovelace’s *Is Just a Movie* (2011) which share some of the concerns identified in Selvon’s novel. In focusing on the way these three texts stage Indo-Trinidadian involvement in Creole culture, my readings are less oriented towards identifying the specificity of *Indian* contributions to the national or regional ‘callaloo’ than in mobilizing a creoliz*ing* reading practice that responds more openly to the contradictions and possibilities that the texts suggest. There are intriguing continuities and discontinuities in the texts which when read together, invite a more fluid calibration of the creolization model. Rather than thinking of creolization as a process that can be completed or a destination that can be arrived at, I place the emphasis on a *creolizing* reading practice; one that embraces the piecemeal, partial and contingent.

**From Creolization to Creolizing**

Creolization as a concept has a vexed history across several disciplines and contexts. When deployed *within* Caribbean studies, it is critiqued for its exclusive anchorage in the binary European/African race politics of the plantation; when it travels widely *without* the Caribbean to become a description of a contemporary globalized culture, it often appears glib, devoid of the specific power struggles that generated it in the first place. My readings of Selvon, Mootoo and Lovelace suggest more fluidity than these contestations about *within* and *without* imply. Elsewhere, I argue that the ‘primary binary’ of African/European that Kamau Brathwaite identifies as the constituents of Creole society generates a combative cultural nationalist politics and an exaggeratedly, ‘hyper-hetero’ performance of black male resistance (‘Naming Same-Sex Desire in Caribbean Women’s Texts: Towards a Creolizing Hermeneutics’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 2012, 194-212). Privileging the plantation as origin limits the interpretive parameters of creolization and dooms each group of Caribbean *arrivants* (Indians, Chinese, Portuguese etc) to identify their particular cultural contribution to creolization by establishing their place with reference to numbers and dates of arrival in a cultural politics of adding up and adding on. Not only does the plantation paradigm *structurally* exclude Amerindians and assign post-plantation arrivals to *belatedness* (with its whiff of inauthenticity) but it locks interpretive frameworks into the chronology of recorded History. So Brathwaite’s argument (1974 40) that Tia and Antoinette’s friendship in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is *historically* impossible implies a directly mimetic relationship between life and literature that is at odds with the spirit of many Caribbean literary texts (including those discussed here) that manifestly refuse to be constrained by the strictly realist.

Wilson Harris has contested this very *literal* idea of literacy, persistently pushing against the limits of realism towards an intuitive mode of writing that might release more creatively creolizing human potentialities. Although recognizing that classic realist writers (Dickens, Austen, Hardy) were “excellent in their way” he points to the limits of this mode for the Caribbean writer:

Literacy then functioned to achieve an order that offered little chance for sensitive persons to weigh the dangers and the cross-cultural possibilities in a community of different ethnicities: Indian, African Chinese, Portuguese and others. […](Harris interviewed by deCaires Narain 2001 np)

This resonates clearly with Edouard Glissant’s ideas of cultural entanglement and “the complicity of relation” (147) that he sees as a crucial feature of creolization’s transformative potential:

We are not prompted solely by the defining of our identities but by their relation to everything possible as well – the mutual mutations generated by this interplay of relations. Creolizations bring into Relation but not to universalize; (89)

More recently, Michaeline Crichlow asks if creolization “is a prisoner of the Middle Passage?” (xi) She argues for creolization to be loosened from its moorings in the plantation, as a “one-time event” so that it can function more fluidly “as a *creative cultural evolutionary process*” (21) that mutates according to the contingencies of the particular instances in which it is produced. For Crichlow, widening the conceptual parameters of creolization does not imply a glib idea of global hybridity (“the world in creolization”) but is an argument for recognizing “creolization-*in*-the-world” (21) that involves:

grappling with several more *présences* than those offered either by the specifically island-Caribbean context or, I should add, also by the binds of ethnic originaries. It requires, too, that we flee the historical and intellectual constraints of the plantation’s centrality to *creolization*’s processes (219)

A more imaginative and promiscuously creoliz*ing* concept of creolization recognizes the local and global (and the particular and universal) as *always already entangled* in the shifting, historically contingent contexts and spaces in which creolized cultural practices emerge.

Harris, Glissant and Crichlow prompt us to engage with creolization without succumbing to a narrative of belatedness or inclusion. This is tricky given a context where, as David Dabydeen argues, “Scholarly research has been focused overwhelmingly on the African dimension, and in the resulting Afro-centric view of the Caribbean, the Indo-Caribbean is relegated to a footnote (1987 10). When Indian cultural practices *are* addressed, as Viranjini Munasinghe argues, they tend to be discussed as evidence of *acculturation* to the dominant Afro-Creole paradigm, rather than as dynamic *agentive* processes within the creolization matrix:

From this perspective, the choice open to East Indians in the New World is either as retainers of traditional “pure” culture or as imitators of “im-pure” Afro-Caribbean culture because “creole” remains the dominant analytic for interpreting cultural change in the Caribbean. (557)

To return to Selvon, it is worth noting that in 1958, six years after *A Brighter Sun* was published, Eric Williams famously referred to Indians as “a hostile and recalcitrant minority”, a clumsy and politically costly error of judgment.[[1]](#endnote-2) In this context, it is tempting to read Selvon’s embrace of a more widely creolized cultural landscape as evidence of his willingness to ‘throw in his lot’ with the nationalist creolization project (unlike, say, V.S. Naipaul). But this reading, I will argue, elides some productive tensions and entanglements and perhaps is not attentive enough to Selvon’s probing of the unevenness of creolization and of its relationship to an idea of the cosmopolitan.

**“I do not know if I am East Indian, Trinidadian, or West Indian.”**

(1986 11)

In ‘Three into one can’t go’, Selvon reflects wryly on the impossible equation of his identity as an *East Indian Trinidadian West Indian* (100). Although his father was “pure Madrassi” and his mother of mixed Scottish and Indian parentage, he insists:

I was never Indianized. As a child I grew up *completely Creolized*, which is a term we use in Trinidad, meaning that *you live among the people*, whatever races they are, and you are a real born Trinidadian, *you can't get away from it*. And, of course, with a great deal of western influence - I grew up on American films and music. (Nazareth 426, my emphasis)

A life lived “among the people” makes creolization and West Indianness *inescapable* and though a rigid racial hierarchy was firmly in place, it was constantly eroded by the daily rough-and-tumble of living side-by-side that characterized his boyhood. Selvon argues that the modernizing dynamic that energized creolization for his generation produced unease about both “a Hindu wedding” and “a Shango ceremony”:

one even felt a certain embarrassment and uneasiness on visiting a friend in whose household Indian habits and customs were maintained, as if it were a social stigma not to be westernised.The roti and goat-curry was welcome, but why did they have to play Indian music instead of putting on a calypso or one of the American tunes from the hit parade? (9)

Creolization here involves discrimination about ‘traditional’ culture (roti and goat curry but not Indian music) while the embrace of modern forms seems unequivocal (calypso and American pop, both arguably *already* creolized forms via Africa and African-America cultures). The matrix that constitutes creolization then, involves a complicated set of negotiations between the cosmopolitan and creole, that perhaps belies the ease of Selvon’s assertion that he was “completely Creolized”. *A Brighter Sun* also implies a much less complete idea of creolization.

Writing in 2008, Shani Mootoo reflects on the co-ordinates that comprise her identity as someone born in Ireland to Indo-Trinidadian parents, raised in Trinidad and living in Canada. Her experience was of being *prohibited*, as “a good Indian girl” from involvement in creolization:

A town-Indian girl, burning with the town’s current fever of Trinidad nationalism, wanted to assert her Trinidadianness, to take up space on a stage and gyrate her hips like the young black girls in the new national dance troupes. She wanted to dress in a costume and jump in the streets to the rhythm of calypso music on carnival Tuesday. She wanted to play, not the piano, but pan. (87)

Debarred from Afro-Trinidadian culture and uneasy with prescribed Indian femininity, Mootoo’s ‘On becoming an Indian Starboy’ offers a wry account of the way she models her young self on the starboys of Bollywood movies and then later, on the less macho but flamboyant style of rickshaw drivers in Delhi. In her novel, *He Drown She in the Sea*, Mootoo extends *and* creolizes her interest in the Indian starboy in the figure of Harry who I argue is both spectacularly and quietly creolized.

Earl Lovelace, unlike Mootoo and Selvon has never migrated and has not, as far as I know, been prompted to reflect similarly self-consciously on his West Indianness. Most of his novels and short stories are firmly located in a recognizably Trinidadian landscape to the extent that Jennifer Rahim is prompted to urge that this commitment to the local not be read as retrogressive nationalism but as exemplifying Lovelace’s argument that, “Nobody is born into the world. Every one of us is born into a place in the world, in a culture, and it is from that standpoint of the culture that we contribute to the world.” (cited in Rahim 2006 152) If Lovelace’s work contributes from its firm grounding in the creolized word of Trinidad, I argue that he does not take the terms of that creolization for granted but persistently expands the matrix of its co-ordinates. This is amply demonstrated in *Is Just a Movie* where one strand in that narrative offers nuanced reflections on the concerns that Mootoo and Selvon explore about their own position as East Indian West Indians.

**“It was a big thing if you were one of the boys, creolized.”**

**But “what sort of man was that?” [[2]](#endnote-3)**

*A Brighter Sun* is often heralded as a text that stages Indo-Caribbean involvement in creolization in exemplary ways. Sandra Pouchet-Paquet argues that, “The novel concerns itself with Tiger’s quest for manhood and with the process of creolization which Tiger and his young bride, Urmilla, undergo in multi-racial Barataria away from the influence of their parents.” (vii) In choosing to propel the couple *abruptly* out of their childhood in an Indian village and into the racially and culturally diverse village of Barataria, Selvon heightens this sense that the couple *undergo* creolization, rather than already being *in* *it*, in some form, in their home-village. They are given a cow, two hundred dollars and a hut and dispatched into the equally foreign terrain of adulthood and a creolized habitat. We are told at the outset “The village was almost as cosmopolitan as the city. Indians and Negroes were in the majority” (9), a sentence that establishes a very cagey sense of ‘the cosmopolitan’ in that it is configured in terms of *percentage*, rather than in terms of an easy accommodation of cultures. The precarity of Barataria’s cosmopolitanism is consolidated by the description of a racially spatialized demographic, “In the back streets the Indians lived simply, observing their customs and tending their fields” while the “Negroes were never farmers, and most of them did odd jobs in the city.” (9-10). Selvon’s use of the term ‘cosmopolitan’ rather than ‘creolized’ adds to the sense that Urmilla and Tiger are entering a much ‘wider world’ than the one they have left. The cosmopolitan appears to frame creolization here. This framing is most obvious in the prefaces to many chapters which list apparently random events, including developments in the build-up to WW11, economic activity in Trinidad and ordinary and out-of-the ordinary local happenings (a mad East Indian dips a key in the sea; a burly Negro called Mussolini chases a small boy). The impact of these conjunctions is to suggest the imbrication of the global, local, political and personal in the unfolding of everyday life in Trinidad that the narrative is unable to deal with fully in all its complexity. This ‘worldly’ framing of Tiger’s life adds piquancy to his own erratic, jumbled apprehension of ‘the wider world’, as something he yearns vaguely to have access to.

Tiger and Urmilla are welcomed into Barataria by their neighbours who unhesitatingly offer support and friendship. Joe and Rita are Afro-Trinidadian and fully grounded in Trinidadian life, positioned in the text as supremely well qualified to guide Urmilla and Tiger into a more creolized, modern way of life. Joe is pivotal to Tiger’s creolization and functions as the archetypal Creole: he plays pan, limes in Port-of-Spain, drinks rum, loves women, quarrels noisily with Rita, and lives his life fully in the present tense as is conveyed in his wry comment to Tiger, “Wat is to is, must is” (38). When pressed by Tiger into conversations about the future and the wider world, he is dismissive, “I cud live without writing” (42) and “Is experience dat go teach yuh, not books” (110). Despite regular beatings from his grandmother, Joe recounts a boyhood of truanting and play and declares his philosophical contentment with his present life as follows, ”“Ah don’t want to be no millionaire, Ah have enough money. But *Ah still living good*, and Ah does have some happy times wid me friends. So wat happen now?””(111, my emphasis). Tiger respects Joe’s greater experience of the city and of creolized Trinidadian culture, but finds his satisfaction with the status quo and his lack of curiosity about the world baffling. Reflecting on Joe’s values, Tiger muses:

It didn’t prove you were a man. Nor drinking rum, nor swearing, nor screwing a woman. The way Joe talked, you would think these things counted. But look at Joe, man! He still young and yet he have no ambition! *What sort of man is that?* (113 my emphasis)

Tiger, then, is emphatically not persuaded by the rough-and-tumble liming culture that Joe represents and inducts him into; the conviviality of creole liming culture is not enough here.

**Soul and Soil**

Two other (Indian) men, Sookdeo and Boysie, also function as crucial reference points for Tiger as he strains towards manhood and a more secure place within a Trinidad that is itself straining towards independence from colonial rule. Sookdeo is a prolific drinker but also a productive gardener and one of the few literate villagers. He offers Tiger fatherly advice and teaches him to read and write. Sookdeo, who “lived on rum and memories” (65) represents the Indian rooted in the land and still tied by fragile bonds to Indian customs. As such, he represents a rootedness in the land that both contrasts with Joe’s easy mobility and resonates with Tiger’s desire to anchor himself in Barataria. Although Tiger is resolute about never again working in the cane field, he labours in his garden with care and tenderness. The garden provides material sustenance but is also a space in which he reflects on his place in the world at several key moments in his life. Selvon’s original title for the novel, *Soul and Soil,* indicates clearly the centrality of land to an idea of cultural belonging and in *A Brighter Sun*, the land *is* presented as the least complicated foundation of Indian Trinidadian belonging. It is a space of creolization in that on it, in it and through it Indians adapt to and anchor themselves in Trinidad. Sookdeo dies shortly after his desperate scrabble to retrieve the buried money as the Americans hover with their bulldozers, ready to clear his garden to make way for the road. Tiger is deeply moved by his death and the loss of the remnants of an Indian way of life that he is associated with. Although he recognizes that this old way of life is no longer tenable in modern Trinidad, Tiger senses the vacuum its absence signifies. If Joe signifies the oral culture of the current moment (calypso and pan), Sookdeo is tenuously associated with the vestiges of an older, scribal culture.

Tiger’s shifting attitudes to the land in *A Brighter Sun* suggest a trajectory that rejects the grim labour regime of the cane plantation but does not give up on the land as source of sustenance – and pleasure. There are parallels here in the way the market garden provided the enslaved with alternative possibilities for rooting in the land as well as a space of sustenance, creativity and economic independence. This may not signify a far-enough flight from the plantation (in Crichlow’s terms) but it does suggest how in fleeing the plantation, we might take more note of indentureship as a process in which bodies *and* land are marked by Indian labour. One strand of my argument then, is to suggest that Tiger’s relationship to the land represents an Indo-Creole investment in it that can be read as a creolizing force.

**“why everybody can’t live good together?”**

Like Sookdeo, Boysie also works hard on his garden, but he spends his evenings drinking and liming in town and has a Creole girlfriend. Young and and handsome, his cavalier lifestyle echoes Joe’s as does his ‘live-in-the-moment’ attitude:

He used to say that all this business about colour and nationality was balls, that as long as a man was happy that was all that mattered. He got a delight out of seeing the stares of deep-rooted Indians when he walked around the Queen’s Park savannah with Stella holding on to his arm. “Look at dem,” he used to say, “dey so stupid, is as if Ah committing ah crime. Girl, yuh happy?” and when Stella nodded – “Well, I happy too. Is why everybody can’t live good together?” (79)

Boysie introduces Tiger to the excitements of Port-of-Spain and provides him with tantalizing glimpses of the world of politics with his account of the Governor’s arrival at Red House (“Dat is house fadder, boy!” (80)) and the excitements of Woodford Square. Boysie’s plans to migrate to America suggest a world beyond Trinidad that fuels Tiger’s frustrations with Barataria, though the men do not share a similar kind of curiosity about the wider world, as is evident in this exchange:

“So tell me something, Boysie, when I used to work in the canefield, and help make sugar, it went to England too?”

“Yes, man.”

“You think the people who eating sugar over there does think about we who making it here?”

“You does tink bout who make de shoes yuh wearing?” (88)

Tiger replies that he *does* think in detail about the process and labour involved in the production of a commodity like shoes, signaling an awareness of the way labour operates as a *worlding* configuration. Boysie is baffled, “I for one don’t want to know which part it come from, as long as Ah cud get it” and concludes that, “Yuh shoulda been ah scholar instead of planting tomatoes!” (88). As with Joe, Tiger is attracted to Boysie’s creolized lifestyle and the cultural vitality associated with it, but the very vitality of its living-for-the-moment ethos implies a suspension in the present tense and an eschewal of reflection that Tiger finds inadequate. In short, creolization here appears not worldly enough for Tiger’s ‘cosmopolitan’ ambitions.

Joe is presented as unquestionably ‘Creole’ and Boysie as fully committed to a creolized cultural world. But neither they nor the other men who lime, smoke, drink and talk the nights away at Tall Boy’s rumshop provide adequate role models for the kind of man Tiger aspires to be. Midway through *A Brighter Sun*, Tiger muses, “Now he was – what? A man? Maybe, but not a man like Joe Martin or Boysie or any of the others. *They were content, he was not*.” (113, my emphasis). Tiger’s inability to find intellectual companionship in the village presents an impasse to creolization; a life of liming risks seguing into unreflective complacency. So while Tiger is buoyed up by the camaraderie of ‘the boys’, the novel does not suggest that he embraces the lifestyle they embody. Instead he remains poised between several possibilities: the rum shop and liming culture, migration (like Boysie); the garden (as indicated in the novel’s final sentence, “”Now is a good time to plant corn” (214-5)) and writing (having submitted a short piece to the*Trinidad Guardian*).As I read it, in constructing Tiger as a man yearning for a sense of *intellectual* as well as cultural and social community, Selvon aims to critique *and* extend the possibilities signified by creolized figures such as Joe and Boysie.

Curdella Forbes, in a perceptive discussion, argues that Tiger’s concentrated self-making, “is fuelled also by the repeated frustration of his efforts to find a community of mind – what may be termed an intimacy of thought – among other men.” (Chapter 3, Section: ‘Wear Man Mask’ np kindle version). The ‘community of mind’ that Tiger yearns for is missing in the liming and ‘living good’ that characterizes his friendship with Joe and Boysie. Forbes argues that Tiger is failed by all the models of manhood he encounters because they rely on Caribbean gender norms that limit selfhood for both men and women. I agree and would add that Selvon targets a particular aspect of *creolized* manhood in particular. Further, if we look at Selvon’s representation of intimate friendships between *women*, we may find an alternative vocabulary of intimacy and camaraderie and of ‘living good together’ that might usefully be calibrated against that between men. Away from the picong and laughter of the rum shop, quieter registers of creolizing intimacy *are* possible, even if the text does not place them centrally.

**“But when women get together, is a different story altogether.”[[3]](#endnote-4) (133-4)**

Urmilla and Rita’s relationship develops from shy exchanges over the fence into an intimate friendship. The closeness they establish, despite cultural differences, is presented as unfolding easily, in contrast to the deliberated workings of Tiger’s creolization. Rita is the archetypal strong Afro-Caribbean woman: feisty, independent and outspoken; Urmilla is the archetypal submissive, hard-working and wily Indo- woman. What (just about) redeems these (and other) cultural short-cuts is that they are often addressed directly in the novel as when Rita is complaining about Joe’s temper and asks, ”Why Creole can’t live quiet like Indian?” (31). Some of these articulations are clumsy, the working-out of the cultural and historical background to the arguments too deliberated. Nonetheless there are several of moments where Selvon is suggestive in his depiction of these intimately creolizing cultural encounters.

When Urmilla is pregnant with her first child, it is Rita who guides her in what to expect and eventually delivers the child. Such is her concern about Urmilla’s comfort, that she insists on lending them her own bed which she painstakingly takes apart, carries over piece by piece, and assembles in their hut. Later in the novel when Tiger, emboldened by finding favour with the Americans, invites them to his home for an Indian meal, Rita lends cutlery, linen and glasses and trails the electricity cord from her own into her neighbours’ house so that they don’t have to rely on lamps. These transfers of household items are partly comedically relayed, as might be expected, given Selvon’s keen eye for the way tussles over everyday objects, especially for those who own little, can generate humour. But to my mind, the intimate nature of these transfers are profoundly significant to the novel’s focus on cultural encounter: Tiger and Urmilla’s baby is delivered on Joe and Rita’s bed; the electric light strung like an umbilical cord between the two houses allows the current to be shared. Interestingly, Joe and Rita do not have children but raise Henry, a relative’s child, as their own. This underscores the symbolic significance of Selvon’s representation of an Indian child delivered by and into a Creole space. The intimacies that animate the everyday domestic arrangements of ‘living close’ strike me as crucial dimensions of the creolization process. The sheer labour (of love) that Rita’s offering of the bed entails, is significant and Urmilla, too, shares the fruits of *her* labours by giving Rita tomatoes she grows and milk from her cow. It may be that Selvon relies too readily on a lazy assumption that all women are bound by a shared experience of domesticity, but, nonetheless, the quiet, steady consolidation of Rita and Urmilla’s friendship can be calibrated in the novel against the declamatory swagger of Tiger’s relationships with men. Selvon understands that gendered constructions of masculinity are limited, as Forbes argues, even if the argument about the need for the transformation of female roles remains latent. So even if Selvon doesn’t tell the “different story” that emerges when “women get together”, he does provide glimpses of alternative spaces in which more intimate creolizing possibilities flourish.

By way of concluding this discussion I want to turn to a moment when ‘the wider world’ intrudes forcefully into the domestic space. The establishment of an American military base at Chaguaramus (historically, 1941-1998) allows Tiger to get involved in building the road, first clearing the land by hand and then operating a bulldozer. After his promotion, Tiger invites the Americans to have an Indian meal in his home, a move that might be read as an attempt at extending convivial creolization across *very* rigid boundaries of race and class. The Americans declare their desire to ‘go native’, “We’d like everything to be as it always is” (167) by which they mean squatting on the floor, eating with their hands and so on. But they also insist that Urmilla leave the kitchen and join them, despite Tiger’s protestations that this is not part of Indian custom. Larry waves a knife in Tiger’s face, admonishing him to make *choices* and not simply obey custom, “You mustn’t let things rule you, John, you must rule things.” (172). Selvon presents the Americans as boorish and cavalier; not only do they persist in hailing Tiger by the generic ‘John’ but they behave as if their power can be temporarily disavowed to facilitate a temporary, convenient conviviality. They can allow things not to rule them because they rule things in Trinidad in a way that Tiger doesn’t. The force of their bullish intrusion into his home is exacerbated by the fact that his wife and his hut have been beautified with Rita’s help. Urmilla is wearing make-up and the table is set with unfamiliar dishes that gleam in the borrowed light. Tiger is unmoored by these changes and after the Americans leave, beats Urmilla so severely that he causes her to miscarry their second child.

This scene brings together several strands in Selvon’s treatment of creolization; it is an obvious critique of American complacency but it also foregrounds the gendered limitations of Tiger’s stumbling engagement with creolization. If the Americans represent a wider, cosmopolitan world and Rita, a creolized culture, then Tiger perceives *both* their interventions as particularly threatening - or, indeed, *unmanning* - when they are focused on *his* wife within the walls of *his* home. Selvon implies that Tiger’s ‘creolizability’ is confused and precarious: he admires the worldliness of the Americans (their technological skills, their knowledge, their music) and the Martin’s generosity and ability to embrace modernity (their embrace of fusion-cultures such as calypso and pan, and their modern domestic arrangements). But when these intrude into his domestic space, they are perceived as emasculating. In a sense then, the cosmopolitan and the creolized collide here to create another impasse in Tiger’s thinking – *and* in the narrative. Writing in 1952, Selvon must navigate the choppy waters of creolization with little by way of relevant textual examples to guide him. Writing after Selvon (and self-consciously so), Lovelace and Mootoo share a similar interest in and anxiety about “creolization-as-national culture” but their texts seem less burdened by uncertainty about *how* that might be represented.

**We had gone forward to right back where we had begun.**

(Lovelace 2011, 183)

Like *A Brighter Sun*, *Is Just a Movie* is finely attuned to the contingencies of quotidian life in all its messy complexity, though the latter is more encyclopedic in reach and considerably longer, with several stories and lives densely entangled. The framing narrative is a lament for the failure of the Black Power Movement in 1970s Trinidad and the subsequent cultural fall-out and drift towards identity-based politics in which “everybody was finding his own ethnic harbour” (186). Lovelace’s retrospective view assesses the cultural, political and literary ambitions that were part of this cultural moment, including by implication his own exploration of carnival as resistance in *The Dragon Can’t Dance* (1979). Lovelace continues probing creolization-as-resistance and the possibilities for expressing a righteous refusal of injustice, that in *Is Just a Movie* is voiced as “ I not fucking taking that”(54). In ‘Reclaiming Rebellion’, Lovelace argues that we refuse the historical association of rebellion with “delinquency” and instead recognize the persistence of rebellion as a crucial “starting point […] to a vision of another world” (69). His novelattempts to guide the reader towards seeing the human potential that rebellion - even unsuccessful or ‘accidental’ ones - can release. Sonnyboy, a central character in the novel, drifts into his status as a Black Power radical because, although not involved in the group’s activities, he is imprisoned with them because, on a whim, he raises his fist in a Black power salute. There are many other such ‘accidental acts of agency’ when performance becomes performative but here I want to turn to a figure, whose journey into creolization most directly relates to that of Tiger.

In Lovelace’s novels, Indo-Trinidadians are invariably part of the creole fabric. Manick, though not central in the same way as Sonnyboy, performs a significant role in *Is Just a Movie*. His father, a reclusive Indian, arrives on a steamroller at the Settlement and stays “doing nothing to change his status of stranger beyond his mumbled good evening” (151). His gradual engagement with the community is facilitated when he, like everyone else, is enthralled by watching Franklyn bat on the savannah. Franklyn’s style of batting is a spectacle of skill and beauty that conjures obvious parallels with Brian Lara. Manick’s father (as he is always known) recognizes the talent, application and discipline of Franklyn’s batting and that, “to accept Franklyn was to remove any impediment to accepting the community that Franklyn represented and from which he (Manick father) had held himself aloof.” (155). Lovelace extends this silent moment of recognition by suggesting that once Franklyn’s innings is over, Manick’s father’s own energies are infused by the batsman’s style and purpose so that he goes about his farming duties with renewed vitality. It is a wonderfully resonant image of cultural transfer, akin perhaps to the transfer of the bed in the Selvon text, but where the signifying potential is latent in that text, Lovelace is self-consciously attuned to its significance, as can be seen in the way he pursues this idea of cross-cultural transfer across generations in Manick.

After small forays fielding the ball while minding cows, Manick becomes “one of the boys” who play cricket on the savannah, eventually becoming a respected batsman himself, though with a patient style more akin to that of Shivnarine Chanderpaul than Lara. With the arrival of Black Power in the village, the boys meet to organize their participation in a demonstration. While the other two Indians in the group, Soogrim and Romesh opt out, Manick stays and, unsatisfied when given the ‘Africans and Indians Unite’ placard for the tokenism it might imply, asks to carry the red flag. The green flag is for peace, the black for the land and the red for the blood shed as part of the Black struggle. No one speaks but the atmosphere is tense with suspicion *and* possibility, and the narrator silently reflects:

he is the only Indian here, how could we allow him to carry the red flag, the principal symbol of the Black struggle. And how could he, knowing the situation, *want* to carry the red flag? (161-2).

The affective turbulence is left unresolved and Manick leaves.

**“Show them the man you is”**

(Lovelace 2011 149)

Manick’s perceived “neutrality” allows him to continue to ”straddle two worlds” (321) until in the carnival with which the novel ends, he appears wearing, “with an exultant sobriety” (343) the glittering costume his father has been quietly making over several years. When pressed about why he hasn’t shown the costume before, Manick’s father explains that he “couldn’t go with a half piece of a thing” (320) prompting the narrator to ponder, “if what kept us from moving out of our different ethnic harbours was that we were perfecting our offering to the world we had to enter.” (322) This implies a much greater degree of volition and self-conscious reflection for a significantly creolizing involvement in culture to be effected; not the ponderous “big thoughts” of Tiger but a more everyday, organic reflexivity. The care with which Manick displays his costume, rather like his batting, endorses another, more laboured register of style than the flamboyance of Sonnyboy’s refusal to “die quickly” when he is an extra in an American movie. But it is *style* nonetheless. As well as Manick’s direct involvement in carnival, Lovelace also stitches this performance tightly into the fabric of Caribbean writing via resonances with Aldrick’s dragon and in the echoes we hear of Walcott’s ‘Mass Man’: “Hector Mannix, water works clerk, San Juan, has entered a lion.” Lovelace’s Manick is also a Public Works clerk (159). *Is Just a Movie* is thickly punctuated by literary allusion and references to writers and writing, so the enfolding of Manick’s performance into this creolized matrix is important. Lovelace does not present Manick as a figure who has acculturated or *undergone* creolization successfully. Rather, he invites the reader to see Manick in the fullness of his creoliz*ability* *and* creoliz*ing* potential.

It is not just Indo-Trinidadians whose creolizable/creolizing potential is revisited in the novel. Lovelace also revisits and revises the figure of the ‘bad john’, a crucial figure in Lovelace’s configuration of creolization-as-resistance. In *Is Just a Movie*, we see Afro-Trinidadian men, like KingKala and Sonnyboy, negotiating ideas of selfhood in a wider range of contexts and registers of intimacy than in *The Dragon Ccan’t Dance* so that distinctions between private/domestic and public/political are more fluidly ‘raced’ and gendered. Lovelace’s approach here implies a creolization that is always ongoing and in flux as he attends to a greater range of components and registers of a creolizing potential. Manick’s appearance as mas man at the end of the novel, “with his red flag waving” (342) does not signify that he has arrived *at* creolization – finally able to carry the flag signifying “the principal symbol of the Black struggle” (162); rather, it contributes to the wider recognition of a more complex and shifting creolizing potential.

**Everybody same-same. Ent so?** (Mootoo 2005 147)

Mootoo’s *He Drown She in the Sea*, like *A Brighter Sun*, is set during World War 11 in the fictional island of Guanagaspar, a loosely disguised Trinidad. Focused around a love story between a servant’s son, Harry St George and her employee’s daughter, Rose Bihar, the novel ends with the couple’s elopement in a boat. The success of this is left uncertain as it is immediately followed by a lyrical description of a tsunami that they miraculously appear to survive. The key players in this novel are all “Indians and Indians alike” (123) but class disrupts any easy assumption of a shared ‘Indianness’. This is most forcefully demonstrated when Mr Sangha (“Boss”) returns late one night to find Rose and Harry, then very young children, in bed together asleep. Harry is violently expelled and thereafter the two children are kept apart and Dolly (Harry’s mother) eventually leaves the Sangha’s employ. Mootoo’s first novel, *Cereus Blooms At Night*, boldly flouted conventional gendered identities as well as exploring same-sex desire. A good deal of that narrative focused on Ramchandin’s abortive attempts to mimic white masculinity in his quest to marry the white missionary’s daughter. When that fails, he implodes violently, exerting control over his daughter in a series of brutal rapes. Incest is presented as the violent but violently logical outcome of a colonial regime that is vicious in its enforcement of white cultural authority and the abjection of all else. If *Cereus Blooms at Night* refuses cultural endogamy via bold representations of hybrid, creolized and queer subjects, *He Drown She in the Sea* offers a more tangential approach to such concerns.

Harry is an Indian who has a powerful Afro-Creole ‘back-story’: his father Seudath was abandoned as a boy in the seaside village of Raleigh and taken in there to be looked after by an old African couple, Uncle Mako and Tantie Eugenie, “They say leave the child with them, that is God who send this little boy for them to keep as their own. A Indian child they bring up, like if he is one of we. And you know, in time he come true-true like one of we!” (106) Dolly falls in love with Seudath whose physique and style she admires as he cycles round selling fish, “He could not have been more unlike the Indian men of Central”. (91) Dolly tells Harry with delight that his father “didn’t possess the pious calm of her father. He was brazen more like black people […] he was brazen, for so” (90). After Seudath is lost at sea, Dolly feels a pull to live near “Indians, like herself”, but Harry always remains in touch with his father’s adoptive parents.

Although Harry’s connection to African culture is not placed centre-stage, it is symbolically important and is pivotal to the narrative’s denouement. Mootoo boldly transplants an Indo-Trinidadian boy into an Afro-Creole household to explore possibilities for other creolizing routes. The intimacy of ‘living close’ generates affective ties across the generations so that Seudath’s son is permanently shaped by them, even if his wife chooses otherwise. Uncle Mako, in turn, is also affiliatively bound to the boy he raises and to his son. He makes the ultimate sacrifice at the end of the novel by offering Harry and Rose the boat he has been carefully preparing for his longed-for trip back to Africa. Rose, a strong swimmer, has timed her disappearance in the sea (the only way she can conceive to escape her marriage) so that the currents will take her safely to Uncle Mako. Lovelace’s “ethnic harbours” (2011 186) resonate here as a more malleably comforting concept perhaps. The ‘back-to-Africa’ strand in Caribbean culture might be considered sacrosanct but Mootoo hi-jacks it audaciously in instructive ways. *He Drown She in the Sea* is narrated in a largely realist mode but I would read the extravagant conceit of Harry and Rose’s elopement in Uncle Mako’ back-to-Africa-boat as a willingness to deploy the realist mode in ways that defy realistic expectations. This resonates with Harris’s call for a less literal literacy, and Lovelace’s insistence that Manick *can* play mas. Mootoo, too, insists on the necessity of bold cultural transfers and on the narrative conceits and transgressions that facilitate them.

It is notable too that Harry’s embrace of his Afro-Creole heritage does not include him modeling himself in the brazen and bold (rude bwaii) manner of his father. Instead, he grows up to be a cautious and thoughtful man. On migrating to Canada, he works as a taxi driver before patiently working his way up to running his own landscaping business. With his taxi-driver friends, he enjoys wine-tasting events and is generally at ease in Canada. Mootoo contructs Harry as a gentle man, not to be confused with Ramchandin’s aspirations to be a ‘gentleman’. And unlike Tiger who is unable to really *hear* Urmilla, Harry listens to Rose and takes women seriously as equals, as do KingKala and Sonnyboy. The careful inscription of Harry and his friends as connoisseurs of fine wine might also be read as Mootoo’s playful and self-conscious commentary on the rum-drinking ‘boys dem’ that populate Selvon’s texts. In relation to Mootoo’s concerns in her first novel, it is tempting to read Harry as a playful queering of the heteronormative. But, in the context of my discussion here, I want to emphasize instead the *creolizing* possibilities he represents and suggest that Harry, rather like Manick, figures the kind of reflexivity, cultural hybridity and patience that a figure such as Tiger appears to struggle for. These three novels shift the emphasis in Caribbean culture away from the muscular ‘jungle’ style of the rude bwaii and towards a self-consciously reflexive idea of (male) self-making in which *creolizing* impulses animate narrative trajectories in less certain but more varied ways than *creolization* has thus far suggested.

Writing after Selvon and into a fuller and more complex web of representations of Caribbean life, Mootoo and Lovelace are able to forge (or, indeed *force*) more intimately imbricated narrative possibilities than were perhaps available to him. Nonetheless, read together, these three texts suggest fruitfully creolizing narrative possibilities that provisionally ‘solve’ Selvon’s conundrum; as the readings above have aimed to show: Three into one *can* go.

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1. See Colin A. Palmer, *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean*, Chapter 8, ‘The Economics and Politics of Race’ (255-303) for a full discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Birbalsingh,1986 p.151; *ABS*, 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Cited in Alison Donnell in Chapter X in this collection. I am indebted to her for highlighting this quote and note that her astute discussion of conviviality resonates productively with aspects of my discussion here which space does not allow me to pursue. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)