

Ideations and Tangibilities of Place: Migration Fiction and Postwar Black

Joseph Edward Mason-Jones

‘London is the place for me [...]’

- Aldwyn Robert (‘Lord Kitchener’) - calypso written aboard the SS Windrush and performed on his arrival at Tilbury Docks, 1948.

‘Memory takes root only half in the folds of the brain: half’s in the concrete streets we have lived along.’¹

Lionel Abrahams, cited in Ivan Vladislavic’s
preface of *Portrait with Keys*, 2011

Place is elusive and multifaceted; it is both a concept engaged with and a phenomenon experienced. To understand and interact with it engages our whole being, body and mind. Its ideation—how we think, imagine and remember place—and our physical experience of its tangibilities, come together to form our relationships with place, as suggested in the quote from

¹ Lionel Abrahams, cited in Ivan Vladislavic, ‘Preface’, in *Portrait with Keys* (Cape Town: Penguin Random House South Africa, 2011).

Abrahams above. Ideation denotes a processual formation of ideas rather than a fixed idea or preconception which is useful to an understanding of how place functions imaginatively. To sense a place with our body ignites in our mind all that we associate with it. Our experience of the tangibility of place, therefore, is underpinned by our ideation of it, as well as the ideations of others which have taken root as socio-political narratives and discourses of place. This is the source of place's elusiveness because ideations are unstable and malleable, constructed from an immeasurable range of ideas, narratives and experiences. The way place is evinced in fiction, therefore, can be very potent and potentially allows us to better understand how we are situated within the world, and particularly how specific contexts alter our experience and understanding of place. Literature has the capacity to consider dissentious ideations of place and narrativise their alternate conceptions and understandings, all the while obliging the reader in a haptic and imagined engagement with the milieu that it conjures.

In focussing on ideations and tangibilities, this essay will therefore explore both how place is experienced, and simultaneously how it is politicised, suffused with competing and unstable socio-political narratives shaped by racial, cultural, national and colonial discourses. The essay will argue that the ideations and tangibilities of place are too often seen as disconnected elements, or dichotomous. Instead, it will make the case for a perspective that sees these elements as simultaneous and always in dynamic relation. In conclusion it will argue that fiction has a considerable mediating power in being able to address this relation. The essay develops this argument within the context of migration, specifically the years following World War Two in which Britain saw a significant increase in its black population, drawing on examples of how authors create a sense of place in what can loosely be termed 'migration fiction', and in particular in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londers*. Migration fiction is a genre which offers a fertile ground for exploring the contours of place and its politicisation,

showcasing different people's incongruous understandings and manifesting them in an experiential narrative fraught with ambiguity, tension and conflict with place at its core.

Theorising place in post-war Black Britain

The journey made from Kingston, Jamaica to Tilbury docks by the *SS Windrush* in 1948, carrying some five-hundred migrants from the Commonwealth, is a point at which ideations and experiences of place came to the fore, marking a crucial point in black British history. Indeed, the arrival of the *Windrush Generation* is often considered the symbolic birth of black Britain. Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004) both situate their narratives within this context and will be the two primary literary texts this essay draws upon. Both texts have a proclivity to explore their characters' situatedness within place, both in a national sense—considering the tensions and contradiction of nationality and national identity—and in a more immediate and proximate sense. Particularly pertinent is how they politicise the sense of place they conjure; how they consider its understandings and ideations and the implications of this tension for migrants. The arrival of the *Windrush Generation* was perhaps one of the most palpable tensions of this kind. The 'birth of black Britain' and the pervasive notion of an ethnically homogeneous nation brought together two polarised understandings of place. Literature, as an imaginative medium, conjures these dissentious ideations and manifests them, makes them tangible, in a character's experience of place. In doing so, authors can effectively capture the simultaneity and inextricability of the physical and metaphysical aspects of place. These ideas are fundamental to a consideration of postwar black Britain and the racial, cultural and political tensions and will for the crux of this essay.

It is first useful to outline the theoretical underpinnings of this discussion. One of the most influential theorists of place is the geographer, Doreen Massey. Her landmark essay, 'A

global sense of place' argues for a progressive incorporation of the global into the local by understanding a place's character or uniqueness as dependent on its social links with places extraneous to it.

In this interpretation, what gives space its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus [...] And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.²

Understanding place by figuring it as relational and extroverted, exceeding its tangible borders through its social and discursive links with the rest of the world, helps to dismantle ideas of authenticity and nationalism. This, therefore, undermines a territorial ideation of an essential 'Britishness', an essence rooted physically within its borders, by dismantling the binary logic which underpins it; namely a divisive logic which creates a spatial dichotomy by defining place in contrast to its territorial exterior. In doing this, Massey posits the inadequacy of a territorial understanding of place and instead foregrounds the more social and metaphysical aspects. This makes a place's character impossible to be defined objectively or as anything fixed spatially or temporally. Instead, the 'specificity' of a place, its character, is perpetually negotiated and renegotiated through these bridges with the global. Understanding a place like this, as extroverted, does not rob it of its uniqueness but rather heralds the production of a space which is a sum of its specific social relations and linkages, creating a unique but processual space of perpetual negotiation. This idea that a place's uniqueness or its character is contingent on the

² Doreen Massey, 'A Global Sense of Place', in *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 146–56 (p. 147). Further references to this chapter are given after quotations in the text.

discursive, and the imagined, also allows us to see how our understanding of place is subjective and personal, not an engagement with its innate qualities.

National identity is an abstract concept. That which is considered quintessentially British is purely symbolic, a set of abstract and arbitrary values and ideas superimposed on to a literal geography. It is important to question, therefore, how these ideas come to be considered innately bound up in the tangibility of place—its physical location and aspects—confined hermetically within its borders, containing the metaphysical in the physical. Suggesting that these facets of ‘Britishness’ emanate from the geography, from the ground up as it were, and not as a ideated superimposition, allows people to lay claim to an essential Britishness. It is by subscribing to this idea of essentialism that people manage the ownership of the abstract, the rooting of culture in land. This conflation of nation and culture—the rooting of culture in the tangibility of place—is the basis of cultural nationalism. Graham MacPhee, drawing on Jed Etsy’s work, also notes that cultural nationalism is a concept borrowed, somewhat ironically, from the decolonised nations. ‘For Etsy, then, decolonisation generates a compensatory retreat to an Anglocentric national culture, but crucially, its particularistic conception of Englishness is not the expression of a self-contained culture as it claims, but is itself derivative and dependent on the colonial history it abjures.’³ MacPhee and Etsy, here, note that English culture is derivative of that which is not English and, while their focus is temporal (focussing on colonial *history*), implicit in their argument is that ‘Englishness’ does not exist in a territorial sense, contained within its borders, but as a construction or ideation, contingent on that from which it often sets itself apart.

It is also worth noting that the material presence of British colonies in Britain in the form of goods and commodities was established before the social co-presence that came about

³ Graham MacPhee, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 16–7. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

through mass migration. In other words, the importation of goods from colonised countries to Britain preceded the immigration of people from those countries. Although, of course, Empire had involved both social and economic relations between coloniser and colonised, the nature of imperialism meant that the social aspects of colonisation—that is to say the widespread meeting of coloniser and colonised—had operated imperceptibly and unobtrusively to most British nationals.

This is important as Britain's character, its cultural uniqueness or 'essence', had already shifted in its processual renegotiation well before a perceived threat to Britain's uniqueness in a nationalist sense. As Stuart Hall eloquently puts, 'symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea.'⁴ This shift was accommodated, however, effectively abjuring the constellation of social relations (to use Massey's terms) upon which it rested. Clearly, a global sense of place in a material sense, that is, Britain's existence as a conglomeration of global material facets, had not apparently warranted the outrage in the British national populace that a global sense of place in a populative sense did with the arrival of the *Windrush Generation*.

Massey's understanding of place seems to place a primacy on the metaphysical, imagined and discursive aspects of place, and mostly disregards the phenomenological and sensuous aspects of place, that is, our embodied and pre-reflective experience of it. She understands place as relational, dependent on that which is not there in a literal sense, and thus the imagination, by linking it to an unmappable constellation of social relations. They weave together at a particular locus, but Massey seems to suggest this locus is almost arbitrary—its physical location, its tangibility, does not contain a place's essence. Essentially, she places a

⁴ Stuart Hall, 'The local and the global: globalization and ethnicity', in *Culture, Globalisation and the Third World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representations of Identity* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1991), pp. 42–68 (pp. 48–9).

primacy on our ideas, constructions and imaginings of place, rather than our experience of its tangibilities.

In contrast to Massey, Sten Pultz Moslund puts forth a different theory of place, drawing on ‘migration fiction’ to argue for a more embodied and sensuous understanding. While he recognises that place sometimes draws on our imaginative faculties to be understood and that metaphysical aspects of culture such as ideology can be encoded into the physical structure of place, he asserts that we disregard our embodied experience of the tangibilities of place. The crux of his argument is that place is sensuous and that we experience it pre-reflectively, positing the potential of an understanding of place that is ‘a challenge of metaphysical regimes of meaning by embodied experiences of being in the world that do not easily translate into meaning or regimes of identity, whether English, Indian, or hybrid’.⁵

Moslund cites canonical texts in migration literature to illustrate what he sees as a problematic prioritisation of discursive space over embodied space. Amongst these is Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) which places an emphasis on the constructedness of place, how it draws on a migrant’s faculties of imagination to be understood:

The homecoming passengers notice none of this [the constructedness of reality], they stride confidently forward through the familiar, the quotidian, but the new arrivals look fearfully at the deliquescent land. They seem to be splashing through what should be solid ground. As his own feet move gingerly forward, he feels small pieces of England solidly beneath them [...] everything must be made real, step by step. This is a mirage, a ghost world, which becomes real only beneath our magic touch, our loving footfall, our kiss. We have to imagine it into being, from the ground up.

(Moslund, p. 208)

⁵ Sten Pultz Moslund, *Literature’s Sensuous Geographies (Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies)* (New York: Springer, 2015), p. 216. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Moslund argues that this passage illustrates Rushdie's prioritisation of an ideation of place rather than a sensuous experience of it. What Moslund does not acknowledge, however, is that the place only exists discursively for the migrant. The ground for the homecomers has a sense of solidity and tangibility; place exists for them, not as a set of ideas, connotations and narratives, but simply as home. There is no aspect of ideation in their arrival as their relation to place is sensuous, pre-reflective and phenomenological. By contrast, the migrants have to imagine the ground into being. Its tangibility is subordinate to its metaphysicality as it simply cannot exist without first being imagined. To imagine a place into being draws on the narratives and connotations it exudes, which are often a product of its portrayal in art (or anything that aims to conjure that place) and popular culture. Msiska's argument is relevant here:

The immigrant's view of London is also mediated by the metropolis's own symbolic self-projection to the world, in addition to anecdotal evidence. In a way, some of the unrealistic expectations that the immigrants have about the city may have to do with the way the city has been represented to them through particular ideological forms of representations as well as through the tall-tales told by returnees – London as re-imagined in the popular imagination of colonial and post-colonial subjects.⁶

Place as a dichotomy between the tangible and the ideated

The Lonely Londoners also explores this ostensible dichotomy between a conception of place as discursive and ideated, and place in a phenomenological sense, as underpinned by our sensuous experience of its tangibilities. Selvon introduces this debate in the opening sentence, calling the reality of London into question and suggesting a disconnect between the characters and the tangible milieu which surrounds them; 'One grim winter evening, when it had a kind

⁶ Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, 'Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and the Structure of Black Metropolitan Life', in *African Diaspora and the Metropolis: Reading the African, African American and Caribbean Experience*, 2 (2009), 5–27 (p. 13).

of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet, Moses Aloetta hop on a number 46 bus.’⁷

We are immediately thrown into a place which resists identification, shrouded both literally and figuratively in ambiguity by the fog. The unreality of Selvon’s London in this opening sentence seems to refute a sensuous understanding of place by literally veiling it from us, rendering our perception of it so incomplete that it could be ‘some strange place on another planet’. There is a dream-like quality, an idea Selvon plays with by having Galahad arrive in London asleep, placing a primacy on its ideation rather than its literalities. Indeed, Galahad’s conception of London as an ideation, a conceptual space purely in the domain of the mind, suppresses any sensuous immediacy to the point where his embodied experience is comically non-existent, stepping off the boat train in

[...] an old grey tropical suit and a pair of watchekong and no overcoat or muffler or gloves or anything for the cold [...] ‘You not feeling cold, old man?’ Moses say, eyeing the specimen with amazement, for he himself have on long wool underwear and a heavy fireman coat that he pick up in Portobello Road. ‘No,’ Henry say, looking surprise. ‘This is the way the weather does be in the winter? It not so bad, man. In fact I feeling a little warm.’

(Selvon, pp. 12–3)

By contrast, Moses’s conception of London rests on a phenomenological and embodied *experience*, engaging sensuously with its tangibilities. While London’s weather seems distinctly separate from Galahad, it penetrates Moses’ body; ‘he take out a white handkerchief

⁷ Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Longman, 1956; repr. London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 1. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

and blow his nose. The handkerchief turn black and Moses watch it and curse the fog' (Selvon, p. 1).

Selvon uses Moses and Galahad to embody the two ostensibly dichotomous conceptions of place that Moslund discusses. By introducing this polarity in their characters against the historical and political backdrop of postcolonial migration, Selvon explores how imperialism and globalisation shape our understanding and experience of place. As Procter argues,

Galahad foregrounds London as a primarily *imagined* geography composed through a range of disparate sign systems [...] his is above all a discursive knowledge of the metropolis, a knowledge that has been acquired through a range of social and institutional apparatuses in colonial Trinidad.⁸

This links back to Msiska's point about the self-projection of the colonial centre and how this seeps into the imagination of colonial subjects, forming a preconceived notion of place that exists potently but discursively. It is useful here to consider the context in which Selvon is writing and why this discursive understanding of place holds, for him, such a resonance. The type of romantic and discursive relationship with Britain that Galahad holds can be found contextually in the lyrics and tone of calypso (a popular West-Indian style of music). Hall argues that calypso

became the first signature music of the whole West Indian community. The calypsos of the 1950s therefore must be 'read' and heard alongside books like [The] Lonely Londoners [...] as offering one of the most telling insights into the early days of the migrant experience.⁹

⁸ James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 52. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁹ Stuart Hall, 'Calypso Kings', *The Guardian*, 28 June 2002, <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/jun/28/nottinghillcarnival2002.nottinghillcarnival>> [accessed on 29 May 2020] (para. 19 or 22).

Perhaps most famously, Aldwyn Roberts' ('Lord Kitchener') song 'London Is the Place for Me', cited at the start of this essay, (written in 1948 aboard the *SS Windrush* with Selvon) encapsulates how Britain, and more specifically London, held a mythic quality and existed affinitively but imaginatively in the mind of colonial subjects:

To live in London you are really comfortable | Because the English people are very much sociable | They take you here and they take you there | And they make you feel like a | millionaire | London that's the place for me.

Of course, as McLeod aptly points out,

Lord Kitchener's calypso is [...] not about London at all but about a certain expectation or ideal of London when seen from afar [...] The calypso's farcical sensibility and the happy artifice, coupled with its brisk beat, jaunty tone and humorous optimism, cheerfully *possesses the city in song* as an accommodating and unproblematic 'place for me' [my emphasis].¹⁰

This idea that the song is not merely about London but actually *is* London—it possesses London—is pertinent, as the same is true of Galahad's conception of ideation of Britain. It is also worth noting Roberts' reference to being treated like a millionaire. It shows how he has absorbed the imperial narrative of the 'Colonial Centre' embodying affluence and plenitude.

Selvon addresses the projection of the colonial centre again by using Galahad and Moses as the embodiments of two separate dispositions and two different relationships with place. They are also set apart by the duration of their residence in London, Galahad being the newcomer and Moses the veteran. For Galahad, the names of places hold a greater significance

¹⁰ John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2004), p. 29. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

than the places themselves. This re-establishes his proclivity to engage with London as an ideation, thus relegating his embodied experience:

‘He had a way, whenever he talking with the boys, he using the names of the places like he they mean big romance, as if to say ‘I was in Oxford Street’ have more prestige than if he just say ‘I was up the road.’ And once he had a date with a frauline, and he make a big point of saying he was meeting she by Charing Cross, because just to say ‘Charing Cross’ have a lot of romance in it, he remember it had a song called ‘Roseann of Charing Cross’.

(Selvon, p. 71)

Just before this passage we are reminded of the disjuncture between Galahad’s phenomenological experience of place and his ideation of it when he says ‘I don’t know why I hot in the winter and cold in the summer’ (Selvon, p. 71). Charing Cross for Galahad, unlike for Moses, exists as a romantic idea that he once heard in a song back in Trinidad. Massey’s extroverted understanding of place is useful here. She recognises ‘the connections [people] make (physically, or by phone, or in *memory and imagination*) between here and the rest of the world’ (Massey, p. 153). Galahad’s memory is what ascribes Charing Cross its romance. Interestingly, much like Rushdie in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Selvon accords this emphasis on the exaggerated disparity between the tangible and the ideated only to the newcomers. There is a suggestion in both that this is short lived, as an ideation of place is unstable and processual. Its discursive aspects seem to diminish (or perhaps just become less noticeable as the ideated and the tangible morph into one) giving way to a more sensuous, embodied experience. Selvon depicts this by having Moses recall his arrival in response to Galahad’s ideation of Charing Cross:

Ah, in you I see myself, how I was when I was new to London. All them places is like nothing to me now. Is like when you back home and you hear fellars talk about Time Square and Fifth Avenue, and Charing Cross and gay Paree. You say to yourself, ‘Lord them places must be sharp. Then you get a chance to see for yourself, and is like nothing.

(Selvon, p. 73)

Moses’s discursive understanding of an imagined London seems to have dwindled as he is forced to face the harsh realities of being a postwar immigrant in London. He could not reconcile his ideation of place from afar with its tangibility upon arrival and so inscribes new meaning onto it. Galahad, on the other hand, has so far maintained his ideation, not yet recognising a disparity between the imperial narratives he has absorbed and the physicality of London. He arrives literally dreaming, iterating Dawson’s argument that ‘some simply sought the affluent and cosmopolitan life represented by the London of their dreams’.¹¹ As Susheila Nasta writes in the introduction to Selvon’s text, ‘*The Lonely Londoners* encapsulates the romance and disenchantment of an imagined city that was both magnet and nightmare for its new colonial citizens, a promised land that despite its lure turns out to be an illusion’.¹² Indeed, this pattern of demythologisation of the colonial centre is well charted. Gilbert’s personification of the ‘Mother Country’ in *Small Island* as the ‘beloved relation’ from afar quickly disintegrates when he finally encounters her, the ‘filthy old hag’.¹³ Highmore offers an analysis of the pervasive feelings of disappointment felt by many postwar Caribbean migrants as the incongruity of London as an idea and London as a reality becomes ever more apparent; ‘The promise of the imperial ‘motherland’, of the symbolic architecture of Empire, was offered but

¹¹ Ashlye Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 3.

¹² Susheila Nasta, “Introduction” to Sam Selvon’, in *The Lonely Londoners* (Penguin Books: London, 2006), p. v.

¹³ Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2004), p. 139. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

not shown to George [Highmore's example] [...] They had lost the ability they once had to symbolise for him a civilising centre for the modern world'.¹⁴

Beyond Dichotomies: Reconnecting Tangibilities and Ideations of Place

While Selvon's text focuses almost exclusively on understandings of place from the perspective of the immigrants, there is a brief but telling passage in the opening pages on how place exists as a malleable ideation for the non-migrant English:

Big headlines in the papers every day, and whatever the newspapers and the radio say in this country, that is the people Bible. Like one time when the newspapers say that the West Indians think that the streets of London paved with gold a Jamaican fellar went to the income tax office to find out something and first thing the clerk tell him is, 'You people think the streets of London are paved with gold?' Newspapers and radio rule this country.

(Selvon, p. 2)

While the expression 'the streets are paved with gold' is clearly not literal, Selvon uses it to manifest the metaphysical (wealth, prosperity and plentitude) in the physical (the street) while also understanding that this idea has been pedalled by the media and has become manifest here in the English people's racialisation of the street. Different and opposing understandings of place, but crucially, here, ideas about other people's ideations, are pedalled purposively to polarise these understandings. This is instrumental and divisive. It effectively renders the newcomers an incursion, identifying their understanding of the place as incongruent with its realities and thus making it seem both easy and desirable to oust them. MacPhee, drawing on Dawson's work, argues that 'part of the retrospective significant of the *Windrush's* arrival in

¹⁴ Ben Highmore, *Cultural Feelings: Mood, Mediation and Cultural Politics* (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), p. 94.

June 1948 lies in its contemporaneous framing by prominent politicians and sections of the media as marking, in the words of Prime Minister Attlee, an ‘incursion’ into the national space’ (MacPhee, p. 43). This idea of a spatial incursion has clearly been absorbed by the tax office clerk in *The Lonely Londoners* and he has allowed this idea to become manifest in his racialisation of the street’s tangibility.

Contextually speaking, we can also trace this idea of a spatial incursion in the images circulated of the new arrivals. Procter analyses these images and argues that, instead of this migration being imagined as a transitory act of *movement*, what is particularly prevalent is the act of *dwelling*. ‘Standing around at London’s major stations, these figures effectively congest, or ‘jam’ the national landscape. To a large extent the anxieties that these images announce are to do with the particularly *stationary* nature of the crowds gathered there. What are they waiting for? Why don’t they move on?’ (Procter, p. 205). Ironically, it is precisely the stationary nature of their migratory journey that was captured and used by the press to depict them as an incursion, a literal and symbolic congestion of British space. Of course, this rhetoric of invasion—a problematic and often aggressive occupation of space—has since been adopted by many as a means of instilling fear and panic, perhaps most notably Enoch Powell in his 1968 so called ‘*Rivers of Blood*’ speech; ‘Of course, [immigrants] will not be evenly distributed from Margate to Aberystwyth and from Penzance to Aberdeen. Whole areas, towns and parts of towns across England will be occupied by sections of the immigrant and immigrant-descended population’.¹⁵

Another aspect of place Moslund’s argument somewhat overlooks, and which is arguably indispensable when discussing postwar migration literature, is the phenomenological, *embodied* experience of a place if your *body* is black in a place that equates black with Other.

¹⁵ Enoch Powell, ‘*Rivers of Blood Speech*’ given April 1968.

How does alterity transform a person's situatedness—in a socio-political sense—within a place? Selvon explores this by interrupting Galahad's romantic ideation of London with an abrupt reminder of his Otherly status when a child says 'Mummy, look at that black man' (Selvon, p. 76). The structure of the text here suggests an inextricability of place and race, as the latter quite literally interrupts the former, snapping Galahad out of his ideation of London. Galahad's ideation of London and his situatedness within that idea is at odds with an understanding of nation that rests on racial homogeneity and the two clash, here, manifesting this tension. Procter, in his discussion of the racialisation of the street, cites an article in the *Times* in 1970; 'A tall, lithe Negro walking elegantly down Ladbroke Grove wearing a vivid Dashiki (African shirt), woolly hat, blue trousers and patterned moccasin is the personification of everything an Englishman isn't'. Here, we see a conflation of race and nation, but also, as Procter argues, 'perambulation and street occupation appear as racially determined acts. The height of the 'Negro', his 'litheness', the 'elegance' of his walk are used to diagnose an essentialised and innate 'negritude' (Procter, p. 69). This is the disposition Galahad encounters as his occupation of the street, his embodied experience of place, equates to some kind of essential 'negritude' which renders him dichotomous with 'Englishness' and thus England and Britain. His existence within place, his embodied engagement with it, is what marks him as distinctly separate from it, a visual anomaly in the eyes of the English.

Coming back to Moslund's argument about the different understandings of place, which he posits to be somewhat dichotomous, it is useful to consider his analysis of Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*. Analysing a passage from Naipaul's text, Moslund argues that

the language [...] does not *tell* us anything and it does not interpret things for us to pass on some inducted meaning of phenomena. It shows, evokes, and brings them forth. It is a description producing images of tangible things immersed in haptic space. Soundlessly, the excess of matter fills up the words and produces a sensuous presence

(Moslund, p. 216)

By arguing that a description of place ‘does not *tell* us anything and it does not interpret things for us to pass on some inducted meaning’ Moslund effectively suggests that it has an essential, objective quality beyond the grasp of interpretation and subjectivity. While this may not seem problematic in and of itself, Moslund’s fixation on sensory experience as inevitably pre-reflective ignores the ideation that informs it; it allows a place’s tangibility to be taken at face value, as though it has no relation to the socio-political and cultural conditions that created it, allowing a disconnect to form between the two.

It is this disconnect that allows the attribution of a specific culture, race, ethnicity and heritage to place; the idea that these categories are beyond interpretation and belong inextricably to the place itself. To understand one’s situatedness within a place, one’s sensuous experience of it as being severed from the ideas that underpin it and the narratives that inform it is dangerous and contains within it the seeds of nationalism and the fruits of Empire. Where does one draw the line between the metaphysical and the physical if the abstract (values, ideas, ‘Englishness’, ‘Britishness’) drifts into the domain of the pre-reflective? Narratives and ideas can all too easily root themselves in a place (especially when these narratives are entrenched purposively through pernicious immigration legislation and nationalist movements) to such a degree where we accept them, perpetuate them, in our unquestioning experience of that place and our severing of this experience from our reflectivity. However, we cannot experience nation pre-reflectively when the concept of a nation is itself an idea. Furthermore, a sensory experience of ‘Britishness’ can never not translate into meaning when an engagement with its infrastructure is an engagement with the history that built it. This echoes Massey’s ideas about how a place is extroverted, contingent on that which is without it, both temporally and geographically speaking. The contemporary performance poet Kae Tempest who writes

evocatively on some of these themes also recognises this in their poem *Let Them Eat Chaos* and their articulation of it is useful here:

All of the blood that was shed for these cities to grow, | all of the bodies that fell | The
 roots that were dug from the earth | so these games could be played - | I see it tonight |
 in the stains | on my | hands. | The buildings are screaming |

[...]

The wrongs of our past have resurfaced | despite all we did to vanquish the traces | my
 very language is tainted | with all that we stole to control and erase and replace | in a
 country still rich with the profits of slavery | As yet, there's been no repatriations. | We
 clothe the corpse of our culture | parade it as *Great Britain*.¹⁶

Historic statues of slave traders are also tangible examples of colonial history that exist in our sensuous experience of place. They are a literal embodiment of imperial ideology and their physical presence perpetuates what they represent, containing tangibly, and exuding ideationally, colonial narratives and white supremacy. This resurfacing of the intangible in the physicality of place can also be traced in the kind of language people often use when a place holds meaning or significance for them; phrases like ‘if these walls could talk’ and ‘blood on my hands’ illustrate the simultaneity of ideation and tangibility.

When Queenie’s mother in *Small Island* drinks an English ‘cuppa’ actually from Ceylon, her ‘pre-reflective’ experience of it contains within it a perpetuation of the narratives of Empire. It is precisely her ignorance of the experience’s meaning - a belief that it has no meaning - that gives it meaning. McLeod, in his analysis of postcolonial London, cites Dan Jacobson’s autobiography which eloquently captures the inextricability, for him, of the tangibilities of England and the ideations that underpin it. He remembers feeling,

¹⁶ Kae Tempest, *Let Them Eat Chaos* (London: Picador, 2016), pp. 17–8.

with gratification, after years of handling only the overseas editions, the thickness of the paper between my fingers; with the same gratification I saw the dateline on the papers to be the actual date, not that of two or three weeks before. So I was in England, truly in England at last.¹⁷

His phenomenological experience, the tangibility of the paper in his fingers, holds a great deal of significance for him. The passage encapsulates how meaning, ideas and narratives are literally embedded into the sensuality of place. His pre-reflective engagement with the literalities of place is ineluctably reflective. Similarly, Hortense and her friend Celia in *Small Island* have a strongly sensuous fixation on their anticipated doorbell in England - the feeling of pressing it, the sound of its ring - comes from a place saturated with ideation and meaning; “Hortense, in England I will have a big house with a bell at the front door and I will ring the bell.” And she made the sound, ding-a-ling, ding-a-ling. “I will ring the bell in this house when I am in England” (Levy, p. 9). The sound of the bell, hypothetical at this point, manifests a dream and contains within it what England represents to Celia. Hortense goes on:

I did not dare to dream that it would one day be I who would sail on a ship as big as the world and feel the sun’s heat on my face gradually change from roasting to caressing. But there was I! Standing at the door of a house in London and ringing the bell. Pushing my finger to hear the ding-a-ling, ding-a-ling.

(Levy, p. 9)

The emphasis Levy puts on the senses here shows her understanding of the inextricability of a place’s ideation and its tangibility. Hortense’s embodied experience of the immediacy of place

¹⁷ Dan Jacobson, *Time and Time Again: Autobiographies* (London: Flamingo, 1986), p 75, cited in McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2004), p. 59.

manifests the attainment of a dream. The touch of the doorbell does not remind her of her dream, it *is* the dream.

Conclusion: The Mediating Power of Fiction

This essay has examined the ostensible dichotomy between literary mediations of place as imagined and place as physically experienced and presented a critique of the disconnect which this dichotomy produces. To conclude, it is important to consider the role of literature as a medium in these processes. What are the purposes or implications of conjuring a sense of place? How does mediating the politicisation of space give way to new narratives and ideations?

Moslund does not examine the irony of arguing for an imaginative medium—reading, an exercise of the imagination—to evoke the pre-reflective experience of place. He discusses the haptic nature of literature. Analysing a passage from Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival*, he argues that

languages in these passages from Naipaul is not a language of words to be interpreted, not a language of concepts, in Deleuze’s terms, or a ‘language of names and voices,’ but a language of spaces and things writing themselves before the speaker [...] The language [...] does not *tell* us anything and it does not interpret things for us to pass on some inducted meaning of phenomena

(Moslund, p. 216)

Moslund, here, is outlining what he sees as the potential of literary mediations of place that haptically engage the body and not the mind and thus escape ideation. It is arguably impossible, however, to conjure a tactile, *pre-reflective* experience of place by engaging solely with the imagination of the reader. Moslund goes on to argue that ‘Naipaul produces a sense of presence through a reconnection with embodied experience of reality that does not translate into discursive meaning’ (Moslund, p. 217). While this might be true of Naipaul’s characters, it’s

problematic to suggest that the reader's experience of place when engaging with the text does not translate into discursive meaning. How, when the mind is the only faculty at the reader's disposal, can we not impose on or draw meaning from the language chosen? Are we to assume that a white reader of *The Lonely Londoners* from England in the present day would draw the same sensuous experience from the text as a black Trinidadian in the 1950s? If, as I have argued, our interaction and interpretation of place is so imbued with ideas, ideologies and narratives as to the nature of that place, then surely our haptic experience of literary place is too, as we cannot but impose our personal ideations. Much like Galahad the newcomer and Moses the veteran, different readers experience a text's sense of place differently because it draws on our imagination to do so.

As the title suggests, this essay has primarily focussed on how 'migration fiction' understands and conjures place but it is also important to consider how the self-same literature actively constructs our engagement with place. Indeed, our understanding and experience of place is often contingent on the literature we have consumed, engaging with its tangibilities through the lens of our adopted ideation (of course, the same is true of film, music, paintings and anything that attempts to conjure a sense of place). In these ways, we can see that literature actively mediates place in potentially powerful ways.

The Lonely Londoners is often hailed as *the* landmark text on West Indian migration, accredited with originary status, as Procter argues on page 46 of *Dwelling Places*. Mark Looker even credits Selvon with 'inventing black London'.¹⁸ The power of fiction lies in its fundamental aspect: ideas. To read about place is to imagine it and to imagine it is to imbue it with meaning. When Mark Looker attributes the invention of black London to *The Lonely Londoners*, he does not mean the literal arrival of black people to London but rather the

¹⁸ Mark Looker, *Atlantic Passages: History, Community and Language in the Fiction of Sam Selvon* (New York: Peter Laing Publishing, 1996), p. 60.

insertion of black bodies into the *idea* of London. Similarly, readers of *Small Island* are engaged in a retrospective ideation of place, revealing the potency of its discursive aspects. This quashes an essentialist understanding of nation by exposing the constructedness and the ideated nature of what such a perspective deems to be pre-reflective, given and essential. Writing in 2004, Levy creates a narrative (in both senses of the word) of the past that informs the present by uprooting ideations of place that have been systematically rooted in its tangibility and physicality to the point where they have drifted into the pre-reflective, the essential. She brings place back into the realm of interpretation.

Both texts recognise the inextricability of what is ideated and what is tangible, mediating the link but posit the link as subjective, unstable and constructed. Each, by virtue of literature's imaginative nature, enter the subjectivity of the reader, adding to our cumulative construction of place. Our newly altered ideation of place (whether in a national or proximate sense) informs our engagement with its tangibilities. Our sensuous experience of it is imbued with the immeasurable ideations we consume and exude.

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