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Migrant Literature and/as Cultural Change: The Case of "London Is the Place for Me"

Arrivals: The *Empire Windrush* and the Making of Postcolonial London

On June 24th, 1948, British Pathé issued a newsreel consisting of two starkly contrasting arrival scenes.¹ The first is set at Heathrow airport and features actress Ingrid Bergman and director Alfred Hitchcock on the way to shooting their third and last film together. Greeted by a throng of journalists, the two celebrities stop for a short interview at the foot of the gangway, with "Hitch" taking on the role of reporter and bantering with Bergman about "the diet in England" and its effects on body weight.² The sequence ends with a close-up of Bergman's smiling face. From here, the newsreel cuts abruptly to a long shot of the *MS Empire Windrush* docking at Tilbury near London. On board the former troopship are 492 male passengers from the West Indies who have come to Britain to rejoin the Royal Air Force or to find other kinds of work. The arrival scene that follows lacks the glamour of the previous one, and its protagonists are far less confident in front of the camera than movie star Ingrid Bergman, yet it is this second scene that would leave a lasting imprint on historical memory.

Although the *Windrush* was not the first ship to carry larger numbers of West Indians to Britain,³ and although the influx of Caribbean migrants would increase vastly in the subsequent two decades, the much-publicized arrival of the *Windrush* in June 1948 is generally considered a watershed moment in the post-war history of the British nation. The *Windrush* has given its name to a whole generation of migrants, and its docking in Tilbury now serves as a shorthand for both the beginning of "mass migration" from the colonies to Britain and for the cultural transformation of British society that this demographic process entailed. In their 1998 book *Windrush*, a compila-

¹ British Pathé, "Pathé Reporter Meets —," June 24, 1948, accessed September 9, 2016, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/pathe-reporter-meets>. The newsreel can also be watched on British Pathé's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDH4lBeZF-M>.

² Ibid.

³ See Ian R.G. Spencer, *British Immigration Policy since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 51-52.

tion of oral memories that accompanied the BBC television documentary series of the same title, Mike and Trevor Phillips celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the *Windrush* by stating that:

By the time the *Windrush* arrived there were already black communities [in Britain] who could trace their ancestry back a couple of centuries. But on 22 June 1948 the *Windrush* sailed through a gateway in history, on the other side of which was the end of Empire and a wholesale reassessment of what it meant to be British.⁴

As the subtitle of their book indicates – *The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* – Mike and Trevor Phillips tell an optimistic story. It is a story of change against all odds, in the course of which people and customs with roots in former colonies have become integral parts of a reconstituted, post-colonial British society, a society in which compounds like “Caribbean British” or “Black British” are no longer considered oxymoronic. The *Empire Windrush*, Mike and Trevor Phillips suggest, is an apt symbol to mark the beginning of this gradual and ultimately unstoppable process of ethnic and cultural pluralization.

The Pathé newsreel of June 24th, 1948, frames the arrival of the *Windrush* in a markedly different fashion. Reassuring the audience about the “good intent” of the West Indians on board, the announcer explains that many of the passengers are “ex-servicemen who know England.”⁵ By adding that they “served this country well,”⁶ the voice-over implies that the migrants have proved their commitment to England during World War II and that they therefore deserve a favour in return. This is their “mother country,” after all, and as such, it has a quasi-parental responsibility for its colonial subjects, who are explicitly identified as “citizens of the British Empire.”⁷ In this way, the newsreel presents the arrival of the *Windrush* not as a moment of rupture (or the beginning of something new), but simply as the next chapter in the ongoing history of cooperation and exchange between imperial centre and periphery. The passengers are still standing on deck when a reporter sporting a mackintosh boards the ship. His style of interrogation can only be characterized as patronizing and invasive: “I’d like to ask you, please, are you a single man?”⁸ Underlying such questions is the concern that some of the West Indians might wish to settle permanently in Britain. What the reporter is really asking is: Will your wife join you, and are you planning to stay here for good? The man’s answer – yes, he is unmarried and only his mother is dependent on him – is supposed to illustrate the voice-over’s preceding claim

⁴ Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 6.

⁵ British Pathé, “Pathé Reporter Meets —.”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

that many of the Jamaicans plan to return to their economically ailing home country as soon as “conditions improve” there⁹ (the possibility that the interviewed Jamaican might fall in love in Britain, perhaps with a white person, is apparently not considered).

The announcer goes on to identify another passenger as the “spokesman” of the West Indians – an absurd notion which implies that the randomly assorted group of travellers formed a coherent and organized community speaking with one voice. “I am told that you are really the king of Calypso singers. Is that right?”¹⁰ Visibly taken by surprise at this opening question, the man duly replies: “Yes, that is true,”¹¹ a confirmation that is more polite than immodest. Born Robert Aldwyn in Arima, he was indeed a popular performer in both his native Trinidad and in Jamaica; after landing a first hit in the early 1940s, he had changed his sobriquet from Champion of Arima (where he had won four calypso contests) to the more grandiose Lord Kitchener.¹² In the Pathé newsreel, the reporter continues his brash interviewing by asking him to sing one of his tunes. “Right now?” Lord Kitchener asks before delivering an impromptu a cappella rendition of a brand-new composition of his, imitating the instrumental passages with his voice.¹³ The song’s chorus – “London is the place for me” – forms the conclusion of the Pathé newsreel, thus giving Kitchener’s calypso the last word.

What the newsreel does not mention is that at the moment of performance, Lord Kitchener had never set foot on British soil – a fact that clearly distinguishes him from the ebullient speaker of the song:

London is the place for me,
 London this lovely city
 You can go to France or America,
 India, Asia or Australia
 But you must come back to London city

 Well believe me, I am speaking broad-mindedly
 I am glad to know my mother country
 I’ve been travelling to countries years ago
 But this is the place I wanted to know
 Darling, London, that’s the place for me¹⁴

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Philip Carter, “Roberts, Aldwyn (1922–2000),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., September 2012, accessed September 9, 2016, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/73811>.

¹³ British Pathé, “Pathé Reporter Meets —.”

¹⁴ Ibid. (my transcription).

Even upon first viewing the newsreel, we intuitively feel that contrary to what the voice-over would have us believe, Lord Kitchener's song does more than express "his thanks to Britain."¹⁵ While it is certainly right to state that the calypso evokes a general mood of joy and hopefulness, it would be crudely reductive to read it merely as a sign of gratitude. In her contextual discussion of "London Is the Place for Me," historian Kennetta Hammond Perry argues that the song undercuts the newsreel's narrative about "crowds of West Indian men looking to Britain with gratitude in search of acceptance."¹⁶ Perry stresses the importance of the song's musical genre, the calypso, which traditionally serves as a "medium of political expression."¹⁷ Accordingly, she suggests that the song makes both a cultural and a political point: it employs a Trinidadian form of creative expression (which is being showcased as a part of the "cultural baggage" that the Caribbean migrants have brought with them to Britain) in order to publicly express a "sense of belonging."¹⁸ For Perry, Lord Kitchener's statement "that London was a place where he belonged," "a place [...] to which he could lay claim" is the core message of the song.¹⁹ She does not look beyond the song's refrain, however.

Upon closer examination, "London Is the Place for Me" turns out to be more complicated and ambiguous than its simple melody and catchy chorus seem to suggest. What is striking, first of all, is that the song chooses not to reflect Kitchener's own perspective as a newcomer to London. Rather than articulating the excitement of first arrival, it celebrates the desire for *return*, thus giving its hyperbolic identification with London an "exclusively imaginary" character, as Bill Schwarz rightly points out.²⁰ Concurrently, and perhaps even more significantly, the song describes London not as a "white, white city" (as the Jamaican poet Una Marson had done in the 1930s²¹), but as

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London Is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁸ Ibid., 2, 3. Perry writes: "At the very moment when Lord Kitchener confidently sang the refrain 'London is the place for me' in a locally recognized standard English that suggests that he was very aware of his audience, not only did he express a sense of belonging for himself and his fellow passengers within the physical confines of the British Isles, but he also performed within the conventions of calypso, a musical genre born and bred in the crucible of Trinidad's inter-imperial histories of colonization, enslavement, occupation, and migration" (ibid., 3).

¹⁹ Ibid., 2, 8.

²⁰ Bill Schwarz, "Unspeakable Histories: Diasporic Lives in Old England," *Philosophies of Race and Ethnicity*, eds. Peter Osborne and Stella Sandford (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 92.

²¹ Una Marson, "Little Brown Girl," *The Moth and the Star* (Kingston, Jamaica: Published by the author, 1937), 11. The poem has since been reprinted in Una Marson, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alison Donnell (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2011), 92-95, here 92.

a post-*Windrush* London before the fact. This London is the home – rather than the destination – of the West Indian speaker, and it is marked by both his presence and his activities. As the song's subsequent verses make clear, he has made room for himself in London by means of his everyday practices (on which more later).

In this essay, "London Is the Place for Me" will serve as an exemplary case study for an investigation into how migrant literature (in this case, a song lyric) relates to cultural change. My hypothesis is that London texts by authors from British colonies or former colonies allow us to approach the cultural consequences of immigration not as an accomplished fact (as the BBC documentary celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* does), but as an ongoing process. They give us a glimpse of cultural change in the making, of the making of what we may term "post-colonial London." I borrow this term from John McLeod's eponymous monograph, which presents itself as "a book about change."²² McLeod begins his study by reminding us how the dismantling of the Empire and the continuing legacies of imperialism have left their mark on the space of London, most notably in the form of immigration from Britain's former colonies. As a literary scholar, McLeod is not directly concerned with material transformations of the city, however. Rather, he investigates the London fictions of immigrants or their descendants, arguing that their "novel and divergent ways of regarding and representing [the city]" are themselves manifestations and motors of change.²³ McLeod contends that the "creative endeavours" and "cultural energies" that have gone into postcolonial London writings provide resources helping to "reimagine London, nurturing new ways of regarding and living in the city."²⁴ Underpinning this approach is the understanding that cities like London are not simply "out there," where we have direct and unmediated access to them, but that our perception and experience of cities are always mediated by our images (or imaginations) of them, which are themselves based on previous representations. On that premise, James Donald suggests in his book *Imagining the City* that the dominant conception of a city can impact the material space of that city, since "ways of seeing and understanding the city inevitably inform ways of acting on the space of the city, with consequences which then in turn produce a modified city which is again seen, understood and acted on."²⁵

²² John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4, 7.

²⁵ James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), 27. See also McLeod, *Postcolonial London*, 8.

In what follows, I want to take a closer look at the “novel and divergent ways of regarding [London]” mentioned by McLeod, employing a slightly different theoretical emphasis. “If ‘postcolonial’ is a useful word,” Peter Hulme wrote in 1995, “then it refers to a *process* of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome.”²⁶ Hulme italicized the word “process” in order to emphasize that the “postcolonial” has not been fully achieved. In a similar vein, John Clement Ball says about postcolonial London: “If [...] London is becoming postcolonial, the emphasis must remain, as in all uses of that much-debated theoretical term, on *becoming*: on a process that is always underway and never complete.”²⁷ Migrant literature about London, I want to argue, takes part in this ongoing process. Rather than passively reflecting social conditions, it actively engages in the transformation of culture. At the level of plot, it does so by using its fictional characters and situations to create (and experiment with) forms of cultural change in London; and at the level of form, it does so by performing cultural change by means of language, imagery, narrative strategies. To illustrate this point, I will return to Lord Kitchener’s calypso song, which will serve as a paradigmatic example. My reading of this text will draw on Michel de Certeau’s understanding of “practice” (particularly the practice of “using” cities) as a form of creative “appropriation.” Contrary to most previous applications of Certeau in the field of postcolonial studies, I will apply his concept of “practice” not only to the characters *in* the text, but also to the texts themselves, arguing that both turn the “Concept-city” of London into a “metaphorical city” (to use Certeau’s terms).²⁸

Appropriations: Lord Kitchener’s “London Is the Place for Me”

Three years after his live rendition of “London Is the Place for Me” for British cinema audiences, Lord Kitchener released a full-band studio recording of the song on the London-based Melodisc label. This version is much longer than the one heard in the Pathé newsreel, which is probably incomplete (either because the newsreel only shows an excerpt from Kitchener’s performance or because Kitchener himself shortened the tune for the occasion). It is also quite possible that Kitchener continued working on his calypso between 1948 and 1951. At any rate, the studio version contains several additional verses. It opens with the already familiar introduction of the speaker as a

²⁶ Peter Hulme, “Including America,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26.1 (1995): 120 (emphasis original).

²⁷ John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: U of Toronto P, 2004), 16 (emphasis original).

²⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1984), 93, 94.

widely travelled West Indian who knows from experience that no place in the world can compete with London (see the two stanzas quoted above). The song then goes on to describe his leisure activities in the city, while saying nothing about such prosaic matters as his occupation and source of income:

To live in London you're 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
 So London, that's the place for me

At night when you have nothing to do
 You can take a walk down Shaftesbury Avenue
 Yeah, you will laugh and talk and enjoy the breeze
 And admire the beautiful sceneries
 Of London, that's the place for me

Yes, I cannot complain of the time I have spent
 I mean my life in London is really magnificent
 I have every comfort and every sport
 And my residence is at Hampton Court
 London, that's the place for me²⁹

In light of the precarious situation of Caribbean migrants in post-war Britain, Kitchener's song about the pleasures and amenities of London life can seem "painfully naive," as Ashley Dawson remarks³⁰ – but only if we ignore the satirical and playful nature of calypso music. Musically and lyrically, the roots of calypso have been traced to the performances of West-African *griots*, whose songs established various distinctive features such as the call-and-response pattern and percussive rhythmic beats (both of which are on display in "London Is the Place for Me").³¹ In their traditional capacity as court singers, *griots* sang at official ceremonies and masquerades as well as at other festivities. Their repertoire mainly consisted of panegyric songs (performed in honour of their patrons), but it also included songs of blame and ridicule. Hollis Liverpool contends that during the time of slavery, when West African musical traditions were brought to the Caribbean, songs of praise and deri-

²⁹ Lord Kitchener, "London Is the Place for Me" (1951), in Various Artists, *London Is the Place for Me: Trinidadian Calypso in London, 1950-1956*, Honest Jon's Records, HJRC2, 2002 (my transcription).

³⁰ Ashley Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 2007), 2.

³¹ See Errol Hill, "The Calypso," in *Caribbean Rhythms: The Emerging English Literature of the West Indies*, ed. James T. Livingston (New York: Washington Square Press, 1974), 286-297, here 286-87, 288, as well as the chapter "Sounds of Struggle: From Griot to Calypsonian" in Hollis "Chalkdust" Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion: The Carnival Tradition in Trinidad and Tobago, 1763-1962* (Chicago, IL: Research Associates School Times Publications / Frontline Distribution, 2001), 185-210, here 185.

sion provided a means of “cultural resistance” (for instance, when flattery of the master was used as “resistance in disguise,” or when work songs deriding the master became vehicles of frustration).³² A third type of song from the period of slavery had a more plaintive mood, presenting satirical takes on topical issues in the form of laments.³³

The influence of these various forerunners of *kaiso* or calypso is quite evident in the English recordings of Lord Kitchener. Soon after Kitchener released his ode to London on the Melodisc label, he composed several humorous songs of complaint, bemoaning the nosiness of white landladies (“My Landlady,” 1952) or lamenting the labyrinthine intricacies of the London tube system (“The Underground Train,” 1950). Feelings of homesickness are expressed in songs like “Nora” (1950) or “Sweet Jamaica” (1952), the latter of which can be considered the pessimistic counterpart of “London Is the Place for Me.” It adopts the point of view of a disillusioned Jamaican who is fed up with the shortage of jobs and food in post-war London and who yearns for a return to his native country. The first verse runs: “Thousands of people are asking me / How I spend my time in London city / Well, that is a question I cannot answer / I regret the day I left sweet Jamaica.” In the last verse, the speaker states that the same applies to other West Indian migrants in London:

Many West Indians are sorry now
They left their country and don't know how
Some left their jobs and their family
And determined to come to London city
Well, they are crying, they now regret
No kind of employment that they can get
The city of London they have to roam
And they can't get their passage to go back home.³⁴

In each of his calypso songs of the early 1950s, Lord Kitchener assumes a different role, thus reflecting the ambivalent and multifaceted character of the migrant experience in London, which he captures in a series of fragmentary glimpses.

“London Is the Place for Me” certainly qualifies as a song of praise, yet it is replete with comic exaggeration and irony. Its facetious stance is signalled early on when the speaker declares that he is “speaking broadmindedly,” which indicates that everything that follows has to be taken with a grain of salt. The tongue-in-cheek character of the lyric is also obvious in Lord Kitch-

³² Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, 193, 196.

³³ See *ibid.*, 197.

³⁴ Lord Kitchener, “Sweet Jamaica” (1952), in Various Artists, *London Is the Place for Me: Trinidadian Calypso in London, 1950-1956*, Honest Jon's Records, HJRCD 2, 2002 (my transcription).

ener's seemingly unquestioning endorsement of the "mother country" myth. The imperial myth of the "mother country" encouraged colonized peoples throughout the British Empire to develop an affective bond with the colonizing nation of England by casting the latter as a protective, caring, and nurturing parent. True to this myth, the Londoners in Kitchener's song welcome colonial migrants with open arms. Their exceptional generosity goes so far that they willingly serve as guides, showing West Indians a good time in their city. London may not be the famed El Dorado, where the streets are paved with gold, but at least one can *feel* like a millionaire there because one is being treated accordingly. This portrayal of London as a site of harmonious cross-cultural interactions is self-consciously optimistic and even utopian. By taking the "mother country" myth literally, it confronts listeners with a fantasy rendition of a *potential* London rather than a depiction of the actual London of 1948.

Far from providing an element of realism, Kitchener's occasional references to real locations only reinforce this effect. In the third verse, the speaker talks about his leisurely strolls along Shaftesbury Avenue at night, during which he likes to exchange stories and jokes. This kind of activity – "hanging out" casually in a public place to chat with friends – can best be described with the Trinidadian slang word "liming." It is not the kind of activity that one would usually associate with London's main theatre street. The phrases "enjoy the breeze" and "beautiful sceneries" seem even more incongruous in a West End context, as they both evoke landscapes (in the case of "enjoy the breeze," a landscape close to the sea) rather than a megacity notorious for its smog. It is quite evident here that the song projects features of the composer's native Caribbean onto London. And the same may be said about the assertion that "English people are very much sociable." Jahan Ramazani argues that in this line, Kitchener's song "culturally creolises England by attributing to it a Caribbean hospitality."³⁵ The blending of West Indian and British features at the level of content goes hand in hand with parallel instances of creolization at the level of form. Ramazani mentions linguistic creolization in phrases such as "you really comfortable" ("West Indian ellipsis") as well as musical creolization ("a buoyantly syncopated sound new to London").³⁶ What we see at work here, according to Ramazani, is a technique of "translocation," which he identifies as a distinctive feature of the poetry of African and African-Caribbean writers in Britain:

Though often "located" in London, their poems are "translocal," in that they see the metropolis afresh through the lenses of non-metropolitan history, language

³⁵ Jahan Ramazani, "Black British Poetry and the Translocal," *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge UP, 2007), 200-214, 205.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

and power, and shuttle across and unsettle imperial hierarchies of centre and periphery, motherland and colonial offspring, North and South. In short, they dislocate the local into translocation.³⁷

Ramazani's explanation of "translocation" as involving a moment of "dislocation" is slightly misleading, however, since it implies a separation of features from their original context. As Lord Kitchener's song lyric illustrates, "translocal" imagery is "translocal" only in the sense that it forges a connection between two spatially and culturally separate contexts. While being associated with a new environment, the features in question retain their original associations – the whole point of the technique of "translocation" being the simultaneous evocation, and blending, of two distinct environments.³⁸ Another way of describing this effect would be by means of a photographic and cinematic metaphor: superimposition, that is, the placement of one image (in this case: the image of West Indian landscapes and forms of sociability) over another (London and its white inhabitants).

Lord Kitchener's "creolization" of London by means of "translocation" goes hand in hand with a "carnivalization," which becomes more pronounced as the song progresses. In the final verse, we move from the West End to another tourist destination, this time outside the city, in the affluent borough of Richmond-upon-Thames. It is here that the speaker has his domicile of choice. He lives at Hampton Court, a favourite residence of Tudor king Henry VIII – one of several aspects of Kitchener's representation of London that is quite obviously derived from history classes in the British colony of Trinidad and Tobago. The image of a West Indian migrant literally living like a king in London is the most deliberately fantastic element of the song, and it hints at the close relationship between calypso music and the Trinidadian Carnival. As John Cowley reminds us,

In many respects [calypso] grew from the hierarchical structure of the Carnival bands which, in masquerade, adopted the European nomenclature of Kings,

³⁷ Ibid., 202.

³⁸ John Clement Ball sees a similar technique at play in postcolonial prose literature about London, in which "[t]he metropolitan city [...] becomes newly interlinked with Trinidadian or Nigerian spaces and lived realities to which, as imperial capital, it has long been related, but at an oceanic distance" (Ball, *Imagining London*, 10-11). For Ball, this reduction or elimination of distance gives the resulting representations of London a "transnational" character – an adjective that unnecessarily invokes the political concept of the nation, even though the British Nationality Act of 1948 gave all people born in British colonies the status of "Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies." Ball's concept of the "transnational metropolis" is not so much concerned with the issue of citizenship, however, than it is with "translocation" in Ramazani's sense of the word (with which it is largely synonymous). Like Ramazani, Ball is interested in how "London [...] becomes overlaid with and complexly linked to faraway landscapes and cultures" (ibid., 11).

Queens, Lords, Ladies and other measures of social status. For the black maskers, in a world turned upside down, these served to satirize the symbols of European power as well as to establish an African-American authority over them.³⁹

Among the pseudonyms of well-known calypsonians are such extravagant names as Atilla the Hun, the Mighty Terror, or Black Stalin. Lord Kitchener was not the first "lord" in the scene (having been preceded by the likes of Lord Executor and Lord Pretender), and there were no less than two other lords of calypso on board the *Empire Windrush* when he arrived in England: Lord Beginner and Lord Woodbine (the latter of whom would go on to promote the Beatles in their pre-Hamburg days).⁴⁰ What distinguishes the sobriquet "Kitchener" from these other aliases is its explicit connection to British colonialism. "Lord Kitchener" is the title of military hero Horatio Herbert Kitchener, who became "Lord Kitchener of Khartoum" in 1898 after having commanded the army that re-conquered the Sudan for Britain. Lord Kitchener subsequently served in South Africa, India, and Egypt, before being appointed Secretary of State for War (and immortalized on a now iconic recruitment poster, "Lord Kitchener wants you") in 1914. When Aldwyn Roberts adopted the sobriquet "Lord Kitchener" during World War II – upon the suggestion of his fellow calypsonian Growling Tiger⁴¹ – he assumed the title of one of Britain's imperial icons (leading to a comic scene in the Pathé newsreel when the reporter asks him for his name, and Aldwyn Roberts surprises British viewers by mentioning the epithet of their late former Secretary of War).

A similar reversal of hierarchies is enacted at the end of "London Is the Place for Me" in the carnivalesque image of a Caribbean migrant residing in a well-known English palace. At one level, this over-the-top version of the rags-to-riches formula seems like a wish-fulfillment fantasy inspired by imperial propaganda, as does the song's glorification of the "heart of the empire" more generally. At another level, though, it can be said to challenge precisely such hegemonic representations. For the speaker's joyful announcement that "London is the place for me" does not necessarily imply that he intends to embrace the city exactly as he finds it (that London is perfect the way it is). Rather, the phrase "the place for me" signals a symbolic *appropriation*, a self-confident affirmation of the desire – and the entitlement – to use the city actively, to shape it according to the speaker's own needs and purposes. The whole song is pervaded by a "powerful feeling of agency,"⁴²

³⁹ John Cowley, "London is the Place: Caribbean Music in the Context of Empire 1900-60," *Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro-Asian Contribution to Popular Music*, ed. Paul Oliver (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open UP, 1990), 58-76, 59.

⁴⁰ See Carter, "Roberts, Aldwyn."

⁴¹ See *ibid.*

⁴² Dawson, *Mongrel Nation*, 2.

and the vibrancy of the lyrics is amplified by the band's "buoyant percussive rhythms and clarinet solos."⁴³

Detour: Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City"

A helpful theoretical tool to describe this "appropriation" of London may be found in a study that initially appears to be far removed from the situation of Caribbean migrants in post-war England: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a study that is as difficult to pigeonhole as its discipline-hopping author, Michel de Certeau. Originally published in 1984 as *L'invention du quotidien 1: Arts de faire*, Certeau's best-known book challenges the prevalent understanding of consumption according to which the consumer is forced to submit him- or herself to the prevailing system of production, which controls the act of consumption – a view which places the user in a merely passive position vis-à-vis the products he or she consumes. In Certeau's view, it is shortsighted to consider the relation between consumers and the system of production merely in terms of subjection. While there is no question for Certeau that users are indeed "the dominated element in society," this does not mean that they are necessarily "docile."⁴⁴ Rather, Certeau asserts, users have the possibility to make active and creative use of the products that are part of their everyday culture, to employ them in ways unforeseen by their producers. In doing so, users become producers in their own right – albeit not of primary, but of secondary products; in other words, the act of consumption can become a form of second-order production.

Most relevant in the present context is Certeau's chapter "Walking in the City," in which the author applies his understanding of productive consumption to the "users" of urban space. In this much-anthologized section of his book, Certeau considers the act of walking through the metropolis as an act of "using" the city. From this perspective, the pedestrians who walk through streets, squares, and shops consume the product of urban planners. In the process, they transform what is given – the solid structure of the city imposing "possibilities" and "interdictions" – into something that is at least partially of their own making:

[T]he walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else. And if on the one hand he actualizes only a few of the possibilities fixed by the constructed order (he goes only here and not there), on the other he increases the number of possibilities (for example, by creating shortcuts and detours) and prohibitions (for ex-

⁴³ Ramazani, "Black British Poetry and the Translocal," 205.

⁴⁴ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xi-xii, xii.

ample, he forbids himself to take paths generally considered accessible or even obligatory).⁴⁵

One essential feature of Certeau's approach is its indebtedness to speech act theory. For Certeau, the itinerary of the individual pedestrian along certain idiosyncratic and improvised routes is the equivalent of a speech act. Because the concrete performance of the speech act generates context-specific meanings that lie beyond the reach of linguistic rules, the act cannot be reduced to its dependence on the language system. Certeau describes this as an "appropriation, or re-appropriation" of language through the speaker in the moment of utterance.⁴⁶ In a similar fashion, Certeau writes, each walk through the city can be understood as "a process of *appropriation* of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language)."⁴⁷ This is to say that the relationship between the city (as a given structure) and the act of walking is analogous to the relationship between language (as a given system) and the act of talking. The activity of walking in the city – which Certeau describes as a "pedestrian enunciation" – engenders its own "rhetoric of walking": "a series of turns (*tours*) and detours that can be compared to 'turns of phrase' or stylistic figures."⁴⁸ The exact course of this process cannot be predicted, let alone controlled. The only thing that can be planned systematically is the material shape of the city, as it is represented in maps.

At the beginning of "Walking in the City," Certeau distinguishes between two views on, and manifestations of, the city. The first is the city seen from high above, in bird's-eye perspective. This is the city in its abstract totality, the city devised by urban planners, the city familiar from maps that can be read like a text. Certeau calls it the "Concept-city" and dismisses it as a "theoretical [...] simulacrum" for its failure to acknowledge the "practices" of the "ordinary practitioners of the city [...] 'down below'."⁴⁹ The myriad intersecting movements of the people on the ground compose "a manifold story," albeit one that cannot be read, for it defies cartographic representation and therefore remains illegible from the vantage of the Concept-city.⁵⁰ To adopt

⁴⁵ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁶ Ibid., xiii.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 97-98 (emphasis original).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 99, 100.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 95, 93.

⁵⁰ Maps cannot depict movements in progress, because they have no means of representing temporality. Certeau writes: "It is true that the operations of walking on can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths (here well-trodden, there very faint) and their trajectories (going this way and not that). But these thick or thin curves only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by. Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by. [...] The trace left behind is substituted for the practice. It exhibits the (voracious) property that the geographical system has of be-

the point of view of the spatial practitioners at ground level means to disturb the sense of order that is imposed on urban dwellers by the Concept-city: "A *migrational* or metaphorical city [...] slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city."⁵¹

Certeau's use of the word "migrational" may be one of the reasons why his approach has been so popular with postcolonial critics, who applied it in readings of Sam Selvon's 1956 novel *The Lonely Londoners*⁵² or migrant literature about London more generally:

As ex-colonials come to dwell in London and walk its streets; they appropriate it and reterritorialize it. [...] The London that once imposed its power and self-constructions *on* them can now be reinvented *by* them.⁵³

[R]epresentations of postcolonial London bear witness to modes of authority which attempt to trap London's newcomers and their families in a particular mapping of the city [...], regulating their movements and placing their activities under surveillance. But these texts primarily give expression to the improvisational, creative and resistant tactics of those who make possible new subaltern spaces in the city.⁵⁴

It must be noted, however, that Certeau's theory is designed for the "user" as such, and not for any particular subaltern group. When Certeau speaks of marginality, he refers to the "marginality of the majority" rather than that of "minority groups," even if he concedes that the specific position of the "immigrant worker" – who has "inferior access to information, financial means, and compensations of all kind" – is likely to elicit an "increased deviance."⁵⁵ It is problematic, moreover, to "conflate or equate mobility with political resistance"; for, as Lisa Kabesh notes, "walking and other everyday practices might reify strategies of power" and we "must recognize that these enunciative practices are neither homogenous nor necessarily coherent."⁵⁶ Certeau explicitly states that the relationship between the individual act of walking and the Concept-city is not necessarily oppositional, and that there is a whole spectrum of possibilities: "[w]alking affirms, suspects, tries out,

ing able to transform action into legibility, but in doing so it causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten" (*ibid.*, 97).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵² See, for example, Rebecca Dyer, "Immigration, Postwar London, and the Politics of Everyday Life in Sam Selvon's Fiction." *Cultural Critique* 52 (2002): 108–44; Lisa M. Kabesh, "Mapping Freedom, or Its Limits: The Politics of Movement in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*," *Postcolonial Text* 6.3 (2011), accessed September 9, 2016, <http://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/download/1255/1211>.

⁵³ Ball, *Imagining London*, 9.

⁵⁴ McLeod, *Postcolonial London*, 9–10.

⁵⁵ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xvi–xvii, here xvii.

⁵⁶ Kabesh, "Mapping Freedom, or Its Limits," 4.

transgresses, respects, etc. the trajectories it 'speaks'.⁵⁷ This range of attitudes is clearly reflected in "London Is the Place for Me," where the speaker does indeed "respect" and even "affirm" certain features of imperial discourse (such as the idealization of London, which is ironically distorted and exaggerated but ultimately reinforced, albeit from a different perspective), even as he "transgresses" other stereotypical assumptions and representations.

Bearing these reservations in mind, we can nevertheless apply Certeau's model to migrant literature of the post-war years, as Rebecca Dyer demonstrates in her reading of Sam Selvon's Moses trilogy:

The men and women who migrated from the British West Indies to London following World War II had been – prior to their migration – the "consumers" of an ideal of Englishness that was being exported from Britain to its colonies. [...] As actual London residents, these migrants, though still "the dominated elements of society," as de Certeau puts it, were consumers of existing culture but also its creators, involved in a *poiesis* of their urban surroundings. They became both the chroniclers and practitioners of everyday life in the city.⁵⁸

Dyer, too, transfers Certeau's theory about the individual act of consumption to a whole social group, and we should be careful not to lump the diverse activities of migrants together (as if they were the activities of one collective subject). Yet, Dyer makes a compelling point by referring not only to the *contents* of migrant literature – its representation of everyday practices at the level of plot – but also to the *writing* of this literature by authors who are, in turn, "practitioners" in Certeau's sense of the word. The (re)writing of London is itself a performance which can be considered an agent of cultural change, since it produces new visions and versions of the city.

Conclusion and Outlook

As we have seen, "London Is the Place for Me" depicts the British capital – in an emphatically carnivalesque spirit – as a transformed space. By using the metropolis in an idiosyncratic way according to his own desires, needs, and habits, the speaker leaves his personal signature in the city. This distinguishes the Certeauian understanding of "appropriation" from "mimicry," insofar as appropriation does not involve an attempt to camouflage difference.⁵⁹ It is less about adaptation (trying to look like something else) than

⁵⁷ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 99.

⁵⁸ Dyer, "Immigration, Postwar London, and the Politics of Everyday Life," 109-10.

⁵⁹ I am, of course, referring to Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125-133, a *locus classicus* of postcolonial studies which was later incorporated into Bhabha's only monograph, the influential *The Location of Culture* (1994).

about adoption (making something one's own), less an attempt to disguise one's presence as the "other" (and thus to suppress one's identity) than to make one's presence – and otherness – felt. This idea can be applied to Lord Kitchener's calypso song itself. For in "London Is the Place for Me," the "appropriation" of the city by the speaker corresponds with another kind of "appropriation" by Lord Kitchener, who also lays claim to London (or the right to transform London) in the form of his song. This is indicated by the chimes of Big Ben, which bookend the song – a sound so inextricably linked with London that it can be said to stand *metonymically* for the city as a whole. The idea of citing this famous melody at the beginning and end of "London Is the Place for Me" may have been borrowed from an earlier tune ("A Foggy Day" by George and Ira Gershwin, a jazz standard originally sung by Fred Astaire in the 1937 film *A Damsel in Distress*); yet, it still works effectively as a contrast to the Caribbean rhythm and melody of Kitchener's calypso.

As John McLeod observes, "[t]here is a sense throughout that Lord Kitchener is having fun with London signatures, its proper names and its famous sounds."⁶⁰ By means of these names and sounds, Kitchener invokes iconic London landmarks and simultaneously places them in a new and surprising context. In this way, the song itself performs a transformation of London – or a concept of London – by confronting its listeners with a creolized vision of the British capital. Using the voice and perspective of a West Indian, it presents familiar landmarks in a defamiliarized way. The song's calypso style, its slight deviations from Standard English, and its "translocal" imagery all contribute to this effect. This goes to show that the song is not only a *response* to cultural change (to the extent that it reflects the beginnings of mass migration from the Caribbean to Britain); it also *promotes* change by transcending real-life obstacles to change in a deliberately utopian fashion, creating a new and transcultural representation of London. And the same holds for many later writings by colonial migrants to London and their London-born children, from Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). Their characters similarly "appropriate" parts of the city – and thereby reflect their authors' own creative uses and metaphorizations of London as an ever-changing, emerging postcolonial metropolis.

⁶⁰ McLeod, *Postcolonial London*, 29.

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