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REVIEW ESSAY

Aftermaths Without End

V. S. Naipaul's Journeys: From Periphery to Center Sanjay Krishnan, Columbia University Press, 2020

Comrade Sister: Caribbean Feminist Revisions of the Grenada Revolution Laurie R. Lambert, University of Virginia Press, 2020

"This poem cannot find words / this poem repeats itself," begins the Trinidad-born Canadian writer Dionne Brand in her poem titled "October 19th, 1983." This self-reflexive opening is underwritten by shock, confusion, and even trauma. The poem goes on to list a series of names in a repetitive refrain that suggests disbelief: "Maurice is dead / Jackie is dead." Laurie Lambert argues in *Comrade Sister: Caribbean Feminist Revisions of the Grenada Revolution* that Brand's stuttering attempt to come to terms, through poetry, with the violence of what transpired in the Caribbean island country of Grenada on October 19, 1983, speaks to how writing functions as a "certain structure of healing" in the aftermath of revolutionary struggle and defeat (Lambert 139). In 1979, the Marxist-Leninist New Jewel movement (NJM) under Maurice Bishop overthrew the government of Grenada. While the anti-imperialist, social democratic vision of the NJM transformed Grenadian infrastructure, agriculture, and education for the better, "a thread of violence" too often ran through the everyday lives of those in whose name revolutionary change was being sought (Lambert 10). This culminated in the fratricidal outcome of which Brand writes—or rather, "cannot find words" to write—wherein a combination of internal party conflicts and external destabilization turned the revolution murderous of its own. The US military invasion that followed, which included aerial bombing and the deliberate erasure of evidence, was retraumatizing and further complicated the revolution's legacy.

Comrade Sister turns to women's perspectives in order to grapple with the conflicting realities of this period of Grenadian history, itself part of a *longue durée* of radical political struggle in the Caribbean that dates back to the genocide of its indigenous peoples and plantation slavery. Lambert's study rests on two productive and urgent (re-)conceptualizations. One is recognizing the "queer temporality" of revolution, wherein "ideas of revolution as a chronological project of achievement" must be disrupted in order to understand, in full, how the Grenadian Revolution is imagined and remembered (127). The second is an expansion of what constitutes everyday resistance, political struggle, and revolutionary history-making—even and especially where those engaged in these everyday struggles feel ambivalent toward the revolutionary state, even if they may broadly share in its political desires. This latter especially shifts the domain of history-making from a hagiography of Caribbean revolution that is filled with narratives of charismatic male leaders—from Toussaint L'Ouverture to Che Guevara—toward Black, poor, and sometimes queer Caribbean women.

Through these two focii, Lambert's book discusses several writers who differ significantly in their perspectives on the twentieth-century Caribbean from V. S. Naipaul. In *V. S. Naipaul's Journeys: From Periphery to Center*, Sanjay Krishnan writes that the Nobel–prize winning Trinidadian writer of Indian descent "was persuaded that people with limited backgrounds were poorly equipped to reflect on how their choices were influenced by the deranging forces of the past" (Krishnan 14). Far from reading the defeats of Caribbean revolutionary uprisings as evidence of continuing struggle, Naipaul's writings often framed the latter through a defeatism tinged with the idea of Europe as the maker of history. The masculinism of Caribbean historiography, Naipaul largely left unquestioned.

However, Krishnan's considered and comprehensive book demonstrates that it would be a disservice to Naipaul's geographically and historically wide-ranging *oeuvre* if we "make it a pretext for confirming pre-existing views about Naipaul's character" (229). *Journeys* productively draws particular attention to two elements of Naipaul's own formation: the disorientation experienced by the ethnic minorities of the decolonizing world, who discovered during the post-independence period that the postcolonial state or majority could sometimes become the agent of mass killing, and the complexities of intra-group relations, as exemplified by the life of Naipaul's father—a writer who fell foul of his tight-knit Indian community in wartime Trinidad. These ideas—the fallout from decolonization and the dilemmas of group belonging—prove rich avenues through which Krishnan successfully reappraises Naipaul's whole corpus.

Yet the proposition that the resignation in the author's works about the future of formerly colonized peoples, and his broad-brush representations of Caribbean anti-colonialisms as mere racial politics, are a part of Naipaul's desire to unflinchingly depict the environments of "disorientation, resentment, and prejudice" (Krishnan 244) he grew up in, sometimes feels too neat an argument. It rests on the intentionality of the author, which Krishnan had precisely warned us away from utilizing for scholarly critique ("Naipaul's character"). That said, in demonstrating the productive contradictions within Naipaul's work—through both newly available archival material and close reading—*Journeys* duly complexifies Naipaul's biography and bibliography. An area Krishnan may have pursued is how this productive, self-interrogative strain quite often comes up against a particular view of history that informs much of Naipaul's work: one that sees British colonialism as "an ultimately regenerative force" because of "the intellectual tools it provided," having "brought the alien idea of equality" even as it damagingly "presupposed racial hierarchy" (Krishnan 203). Even if—granting the argument that Naipaul is providing an authentic snapshot of his own divided self-formation—we were not to understand this view of history as an internalization (in Frantz Fanon's psycho-political meaning) of the colonial lie that concepts like equality remained unthought by non-Europeans, such a view still calls for examination, especially given its surprisingly limited (despite Naipaul's travels) interest in the Caribbean's layered histories of resistance and political struggle.

This insularity grows especially distinct when paired with the writers in Lambert's study, who present quite a different picture of the mid- to late-twentieth- century Caribbean. Inertia, thwarted intentions, mistaken beliefs, small-mindedness, and confusion often color the everyday struggles of Naipaul's characters, while the major historical moves occur in a world of colonial elites, anticolonial elites, political parties, nationalist leaders, Black power figureheads, local religious leaders, newspaper editors, and ministers. Naipaul's holding the latter types as the ones who "make" postcolonial Caribbean history grows all the more evident when contrasted with the writings of his contemporaries, such as Merle Collins and Dionne Brand. Although a chapter devoted to George Lamming, Derek Walcott, Andrew Salkey, and Naipaul in *Comrade Sister* examines how the masculine iconography of revolution, sovereignty, and political independence informed the development of the region's national literatures, Lambert sandwiches this male corpus—where the conversation often stops—between literary responses to the Grenada Revolution from Caribbean women who found joy in the revolution through self-expression and those who recorded the heavier burdens women bore throughout its course and its aftermath.

Lambert considers Merle Collins's *Angel* (1987), for example, in ways that surface how Caribbean women frequently warned of the problems the revolutionary government may face; how they often picked up the pieces after the violence of revolution to (re)build community ties; how they stewarded ancestral knowledge, which often provided an indigenous idiom of resistance that served the Caribbean context better than dogmatic applications of Marxism; and made inter-generational connections among different periods of struggle. The chapter on Dionne Brand, meanwhile, foregrounds the dimension of the Grenada Revolution that looked to forge strategic links across the diaspora (especially with Black radical movements in North America). Brand's work is an example of how these connections could and did aspire to "break" the Black radical tradition in order to strengthen and broaden it, whether geographically (by decentering the US experience), epistemically (by prioritizing Caribbean experiences and knowledges), or socially (by foregrounding women and those who are gender nonconforming).

In demonstrating how Naipaul's work attends to multiple viewpoints and undoes the search for a master narrative about the postcolonial Caribbean, *Journeys* contributes a comprehensive, meticulously researched, and insightful new study of a life and a literary corpus. *Comrade Sister* draws attention to the broader socio-literary excavations that must now be done and, in starting to do it through a Caribbean feminist lens, evidences how this could well change not only our understanding of the modern political experience of the Caribbean, but also the region's canonical literary genealogy, which includes Naipaul. In doing so, Lambert's book gestures toward Caribbean literatures that continue to speak where the masculinist logics of both the revolutionary and the colonial archive (in their different ways) are silencing; recognizes the contributions of women and the complexities of gender in shaping revolutionary spaces and ideas; and builds a more generative view of revolution as cyclical, rooted in locality, and speculative of truly new futures.

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