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A Postmodern-Caribbean ménage à trois: Intercourses with Art, History, and Sexuality in *The Island Quintet*

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Abstract:

In the Caribbean, the postmodern turn was not so much a diachronic progression but rather one marked by a synchronic movement coinciding with the development of postcolonial theory. The issues raised in this study establish Caribbean postmodernism as drawing on the postcolonial continuum while also extending it. This is the thrust of the postmodern reading enacted in this paper which explores the thematic and stylistic elements of Ramcharitar as appropriating postcolonial spaces in order to produce different sites of agency, transition and resignification. I emphasize Ramcharitar's ability to integrate issues and narratives into the discourse of postcolonial literary criticism and thereby evolve the way we conceive of the Caribbean condition in a contemporary, globalized setting.

Keywords: Caribbean, postmodern, Art, History, Sexuality.

In *The Island Quintet* there is a satirical return to past stereotypes of Caribbean postcoloniality as the author, Raymond Ramcharitar, projects his view of a region unable to sever ties with its past. This, I argue, constitutes part of the orientation of Caribbean postmodernism.¹ As Rhonda Cobham points to the cyclic and co-existing phenomena in West Indian literary developments (29), I argue that postmodernism constitutes part of this milieu of coinciding discursive contexts. Ramcharitar crafts his aesthetic around a proclivity for dystopia which incorporates the mixing and contradicting of postcolonial concerns; nationalism, historicity, oppression, and migration. His treatment of these concerns subverts prevailing conceptions about the Caribbean. Searching for new representations to deny dominant discourses forms the basis of postcolonial literatures, as much as it does the postmodern. For Ramcharitar there is the re-cognition of assumptions regarding concepts of home, migration, and otherness in the post/colonial setting. Inserted within a milieu of decentered subjectivities and decontextualized identities, *The Island Quintet* plays a generative role in reconstructing and reconfiguring what it means to be Caribbean. In the

analysis that follows, there is the reclamation of an unbounded Caribbean consciousness attuned to its postcolonial past.

Ramcharitar uses postmodern themes and stylistics to relate the Caribbean region and subjectivity in new ways. It corresponds in many ways to a sentiment shared in the first story where the Artist's underlying craft is described as providing "many alternative truths" ('The Artist Dies' 11) through which different dimensions of Caribbean subjectivity are exhumed. They coalesce to reveal submerged frailties and insecurities plaguing the islands. The postmodernity of *The Island Quintet* is based on the manner of representations and contexts that Ramcharitar chooses; self-reflexivity, fragmentation, meta-fiction, maximalism, and pastiche in a late capitalist global order. Through these ostensibly postmodern devices there is the formation of a creative aesthetic which portrays a self and society that have broken down, become fragmented, and misled by the push and pull of globalisation. Encapsulating the postmodern paradox of parodic play Ramcharitar holds up a mirror to conceptions of Caribbean subjectivity which from his perspective is mired in conflict and insufferable crisis. The paradox comes about in the reliance of stereotypes to provide a diagnosis of a contemporary Caribbean society stuck in a rut, and rotting. In the radical determination of historical circumstances that pervade the present lives of the characters, Ramcharitar's prescription is to face the harsh realities of Caribbean existence.

The stories 'The Artist Dies', 'The Blonde in the Garbo Dress'², and 'Froude's Arrow' have been selected for their interplay along a spectrum of post/colonial and postmodern themes that has reduced existence to a "pleasurable stasis" (8). In what follows I first explore the ideological transition in 'The Artist Dies' from purposeful art to one that exists for the sole purpose of profit-making. This has implications for the following story, 'The Blonde', where I apply consumerism and commodification to sexual tourism marketing of the Caribbean. Next, 'Froude's Arrow' will be analysed for its parodic reinterpretation of Caribbean history. In each story I frame the distinctive issues around the construction of the postmodern Caribbean self and society encoded in the narrative technique of the "three-way thyrst" (34) of art, history, and sexuality. Ultimately, I conceive of the collection as illustrating a turn away from an emphasis on knowing and towards a problem of being, as the postmodern condition has emphasized.³

In 'The Artist Dies' the struggle against commodification of creative potential is inextricably articulated through the philistine deferral of art for art's sake. The role of art remains ambiguous throughout the story and indeed the entire collection as the postmodernity of Ramcharitar's text relies on his artistic craft to self-reflexively explore artistic production

within a globalised setting. Positive and negative reinforcement of the Artist's craft serve to reflect art as either a medium of communication and connection or to express alienation and disavowal of meaningful art. Where the Artist represents a functional, figurative purpose for art, his murder denotes an overturning of such a belief system, favouring instead that which is represented by Bouvier and Bain; younger, mimetic, artists who espouse the marketability of artistic creation. The death of the revered Artist, who remains unnamed throughout the story, signals a shift from appreciation of sordid but true beauty to a commodification of not just art but also lived experience:⁴

We needed art only to anaesthetize us from the pain of experience, and that was only when we realised that pain and ugliness were not our natural state, he said to me earnestly in the darkened cabin. We could not appreciate his vision; the ugliness of the world was its beauty; the clean Romantic ideas of beauty were merely bourgeois devices to cover our own inadequacies and hypocrisy (13-14).

Where modernism signaled a congruence of art and the modern experience of life, *The Island Quintet*, in being postmodern, transcends the co-relation of art to life. Just as the Artist shaped the lives of the characters around him,⁵ much in the same way he shapes his lifeless sculptures, so too does Bouvier hold particular influence over the now decadent lives of the characters. Ramcharitar shows not only how art imitates life but life itself imitates artistic representation.

The shift in focalisation to Bouvier following the Artist's death represents a new direction for the role of art which thenceforth becomes convoluted with, as Bouvier notes, "great fickleness hinged on great wealth" (34). He upends the essentialism of modernist artistic representation embodied by the Artist because lacking the Artist's "instinctual awareness" he is more interested in its 'commodifiability' and a new "art establishment" (32) based on anti-aesthetic. The recurrent theme of tradition and change is set against the backdrop of external conflicts between the Artist and Bouvier who become representative of polarized aesthetic, cultural, and ideological world-views. The Artist, symbolizing the renewal and renovation of an amoral Caribbean space, is indicative of modernism with its emphasis on recapitulating the past through abstract expressionism: "He had tried to drag them into the 20th century, but for the island, modernity was still an unfinished idea" (13). By way of contrast, Bouvier is the antithesis to the traditional aesthetic philosophy defended by the Artist. Where the Artist's work attempted to provoke nationalist

affect,⁶ Bouvier had a new vision; “A new art establishment in the island: bigger, better, and more cosmopolitan than anything the island had seen to date” (34). Similarly, Bain’s work contained “endless inversions of postmodernism” (29). Bouvier and Bain work toward a generational shift founded upon a new establishment. Art, once a potential space for the discovery of deeper meaning, becomes inverted in the succession of the Artist by Bain and Bouvier. Using art as both medium and the message, Ramcharitar, the literary artist, interrogates the concurrence of cultural change together with global force and its implications for cultivating postmodern inversions.⁷ As meta-artist,⁸ Ramcharitar exemplifies the postmodern technique of drawing attention to the story, and by extension the text, as a work of art while critiquing artistic production in the twenty-first century.⁹ One of the manifestations of this inversion is highlighted in the complexity arising out of a Caribbean people yet to face their unspeakable personal and national histories. As an aestheticization of experience, postmodern art exposes the superficiality of life and its resultant inability to transcend the demands of consumerism and consumption. In the futility of existence, visual representations of a society stuck in a rut (and rotting) recreate the Caribbean as a space of uncertainty. This is encoded in the final two pieces the Artist creates: ‘Muse Inspires the Island Artist’ and ‘The Ascent of Man’.¹⁰ The latter, with its emphasis on technological change is intended to illustrate the inversion of development, as it is called in the second story, “the progressions, the rapid progress downhill” (59). The Artist’s last chance at a search for anything substantial through art is ultimately subdued as part of the postmodern implication of ‘unrepresentability’ and the limits of representation.

The transition from the Artist to Bouvier during the story indicates a waning of past affinities in favour of a contemporary, maverick view of artistic responsibility. But at the end of the story it is the Artist who had transformed the lives of those around him. As the narrator says: “His presence among us was a joke, and he was the only one who got in in the end” (50). In this story of contradictions and irreconcilable actions, the paradox of the Artist characterises the postmodern response of the characters to his death. At the end of the narrative the process of transformation coils back on itself as the characters must confront the dark void in which they find themselves post-Artist. The story begins and ends with a vignette of the peripheral characters in a crisis of what to do next. In this way the circular narrative mirrors the ebb and flow of multiple ranges of perception open to the characters. It is as the Artist says, “the future isn’t a straight line from the past” (40). Self-reflexively drawing attention to the story told in retrospect, the narrator unfolds the montage of events leading up to the present picture of “disembodied faces” (7).

Assuming the role of curator in bringing together various perspectives; the Artist, Bouvier, Babs, and Emily, the narrator is also an “outsider bringing us glimpses of things just outside our narrow sight” (52).¹¹ Like Balthazar, another contemporary artist, who has “restless eyes constantly moving in search of the perspective that eludes the rest of us” (ibid.), the story reflects much of the collection as a whole as Ramcharitar constructs fluid worlds and selves while destabilising societies and subjectivities. It occurs in the merging and separating of characters: for example, the Artist and Bouvier. The characters are mired in a shared state of “muted decadence” (21) manifested in the dissolution between self and other. In fact, as a feature of the collection as a whole, the constant shifting between selves reveal a multiplicity of perception and various different ways of being. As the narrator says, “I was no longer sure who I was; I was somewhere between myself, the self I knew and owned, and the self the Artist had created” (50). The blurring of boundaries is reflected most notably in the Artist who assumes different masks and poses (52). In this way he mirrors the mosaic of the other characters who also assume facades throughout the story. And as the narrator’s stream of consciousness pans across the motley group attending the Artist’s funeral, he notes that the Artist moved “through them, above them” and “floating around” (ibid.). At the end of the story the Artist and other characters dissolve into each other expanding the fragmentation of selves, constructing instead multiple, fluid self-definitions.

In the destabilising of boundaries between self and other, ‘The Blonde in the Garbo Dress’ applies the postmodern fragmentation in ‘The Artist Dies’ to the Caribbean society at large. ‘The Blonde’ laces sex tourism with a psycho-social grip of racial interactions as a way of illustrating the degeneration and devolution of being subaltern which extends the loss of market value to disintegrated communities. The stasis which occurs is projected onto the landscape in a perpetual cycle of generational loss:

The people had been forgotten, but remained quietly in the villages, breeding, merging into the land and tangled, disordered vegetation (12).

This world, characterized by global capitalism and a converse ‘waning of affect’¹², is symptomatic of the postmodern wasteland whereby the immutable landscape ‘breeds’ and foregoes the discontent among its inhabitants. Ramcharitar establishes the pastoral setting of the Caribbean as a purveyor of retardation and an enabler of sexual deviation. The tropes of sex and sexuality function as evidence of savagery and inhumanity. The representation by Ramcharitar characterizes an aspect of Caribbean-ness as corrupted by external forces which alienate the people as sexually inhumane. The eco-erotic dissolution of boundaries separating

human and environment reflect the queer ecological study conducted by Arvas in which “the discourses of sexuality are informed by the discourses of nature, and those discourses are in turn fashioned by discourses of sexuality” (148). The intersubjective crisis of the characters is exemplified by their sexual frustrations which arise out of being subsumed in the savage “emptiness of the island” (*The Island Quintet* 80). In some cases, it suppresses the very recognition of temporal sequences as the narrator of ‘The Blonde’ is careful to note; “Time runs differently down here; you can lose track if you not careful” (53). In writing *The Island Quintet*, Ramcharitar depicts the Caribbean psyche as borne out of a corrupt postcolonial complex which binds the individual in a revolving swirl of negated belonging. But not just village life is implicated in this cycle. Ramcharitar’s creative aesthetic imagines a contextual present dictated by dysfunction and amorality in which individuals become bound by instinctive routine and a general lack of interest in changing the status quo. When the protagonist feels himself ‘changing’ it is as a result of being immersed into the island, where the people were “sinking into the landscape” (59) breeding the emotionally disembodied. The symptomatic loss of the affective impulse that Ramcharitar describes has been replaced by an impulse that is motivated by carnal instincts:

I could attach no faces, no substantial persons to the thought. These were not men, just bodies - unfeeling, uncaring; just performing. They were mere props... (81)

The postmodern conceptualisation of sex mediates identification of the subject through markers that coincide with not only a waning, but a total disappearance of affect altogether. Sexual desire is predicated on consumption and commodification acting as an avenue for expression for those who can only express themselves through sex. Where ‘The Artist Dies’ relies on art to communicate the transition from a search of beauty to the futile acceptance that such a thing does not exist, ‘The Blonde’ uses hypersexuality to frame issues of exploitation and self-destruction within a glocal setting.¹³ The sexual exploits of the characters is the subtextual frame which encapsulates issues related to culture, ideology, and history of the islands. Just as the inversion of postmodernity converted artistic refinement into baneful consumption, so too is sex inverted as part of the irreverence for the body and relationships.

References to sex operate as an enabler for a postmodern cultural exposition of excess which extends Ramcharitar’s role as literary artist to an application of sex tourism and its role in fragmenting an already fragmented Caribbean space. The maximalist effect highlights the

extent of excess which in 'The Blonde' arises out of the perverse stupor blanketing the lives of the characters. Both human and landscape are implicated in the stasis:

The moon was at its lowest point; a small, curved blade scything the blue-blackness of the sky. Without the moon, I foresaw a blackness not even the stars could allay would settle [sic] would over the island, a darkness I could not find my way through (80).

The insidious darkness that envelopes the characters lends itself to Ramcharitar's collection as a maximalist composite. The extent of excess is such that the characters ultimately find themselves in the consuming, as well as consumption of, darkness. This postmodern awareness is constitutive of fragmentation and affective death. In the sexualisation of Caribbean intersubjectivity, socio-cultural and historical tradition, together with economic production, is absorbed. As such, 'The Blonde' is not just a first person account of island-life but rather an accumulation of different perspectives projected both internally and externally on the Caribbean and covering a range of issues related to identity (crises), eco-eroticism, and migration. The story's re-appropriation of tourism dependency makes for a derisive summation of the effects of globalization. It results in a mystical allure to visitors who come for the sun, sea, sand, and sex, as well as imposes a self-fulfilling prophecy concerning the roles that locals are expected to play. Marketing an identity to sell, both individually and nationally, corresponds to the late capitalist motivations of consumer culture which in the collection takes the form of the characters 'losing themselves'. For Ramcharitar, both settler and visitor alike undergo this loss of self that comes about from the inability to negotiate meaning from the pervasive disorder. The hedonism projected onto the Caribbean region follows not only the whims of tourists but has become entangled with tourism practices to such an extent that the Caribbean's sense of its own uniqueness can be said to derive from the images of tourist brochures. "*Discover a different you in a different world*" (59; emphasis not mine) is the rhetoric touting the islands as the place to satisfy appetites. Here, sex and sexuality take the form of a commodity where the body as a site of objectification parallels the commodification of Caribbean-ness itself. Because the 'discovery' only takes place through debauchery, there is nothing that sustains after the appeasement of their base urges. Thus, the Caribbean mimics the "people you see in the background of tourist brochures. Disposable, forgettable" (62-63). I regard Ramcharitar as invoking the 'porno-chic' model offered by McNair to expand the limits of the existential crisis facing the islands.¹⁴ 'The Blonde' represents this through a reduction of the characters, native and foreign, to prisoners of their own carnal instincts. Just as Ki "deserted her humanity" through sex (77) so too do the other characters relinquish what makes them human

in favour of an animalistic, sexual insatiability. Postmodern futility here dramatizes a defeatist indulgence in pleasure. Tourism in a globalised, late capitalist setting contextualizes the movement of strangers to the Caribbean space to satisfy their primordial sexual urges. This frames a deeper probing of the Caribbean psyche which Ramcharitar illustrates as a contentious embodiment of fragmented experiences. 'Far from paradise' is the underlying tone of this story as the Caribbean people are not the only ones struggling with issues of identity. So too are the tourists who visit for their casual consumption. References to 'apeishness' are intended to portray the devolution of human subjectivity on both sides reflecting a certain degree of semblance between native and the tourist as 'othered' alter/native:

Now the apes have organised themselves into a middle class. An ape middle class. Ape class. Coming here in shorts and sandals. Talking on cellular phones. About how picturesque the village is. On vacation from the mainland. Vacationing apes (53).

In this shared state of retardation sex becomes a neutralizer of hierarchy. Within the representations of sexualisation there is the structure of unresponsiveness and the knowledge that existence constitutes nothing save for the affairs of the flesh.¹⁵ As the tragically honest narrator admits, "Allowances were easy to make because nothing was real" (63). In this particular way of life, the individuals can only relate to each other and to themselves via sex. Like Ki, they have "lost the power of articulation" (77). Where the post-card Caribbean is viewed as a liminal space for the fulfilment of self-serving desires, it rather becomes the site for an interplay of postmodern mis-consumption and negated belonging. The overwhelming tourism industry has created mass commercialization of the Caribbean, establishing Caribbean culture as a commodity. Additionally, it has led to a dependency on multinational corporations to 'brand' the islands. Colonialism has come full circle for the islands, played out in 'The Blonde' as exploitation of the landscape and its people.¹⁶ The men and women who operate as sexual objects become commodified in addition to commodifying themselves. By contextualizing this historical cycle of exploitive domination within the contemporary global scene of tourism, Ramcharitar substantiates the reference to Thomas Pynchon made in the epigraph to the collection.¹⁷ As a story of failed cultural fusion, Ramcharitar is primarily interested in the ways in which the society and relationships devolve as a manifestation of the chaos that ensues. Speaking to the commodity of sex tourism and subsequent marketing of the islands' 'stock', the story fixes its gaze on the localized island narrative of cyclic exploitation and how it is impeded by globalized force.¹⁸

Through the dependence on revenue through sex tourism, the relationship takes on a

sadomasochistic objectification of the body and a ‘pimping’ of the islands. Acting as a microcosm of the wider society the implication is of a cultural environment that privileges pornographic consumption:

It’s just a business. I tried to think of the men who had participated in it, but I could attach no faces, no substantial persons to the thought. These were not men, just bodies – unfeeling, uncaring; just performing. They were mere props, though perhaps part of the payment they exacted was the pain they caused me; perhaps they took pleasure in that (81; emphasis not mine).

Ramcharitar’s vision of the Caribbean mediates above all a dystopic consumer society, much like the one Featherstone attributes to postmodern consumerism which is marked by “a shift from considering consumption as a mere reflex of production, to conceiving consumption as central to social reproduction” (75). The business of sex tourism depends on this socio-cultural reproduction of the Caribbean where sex is the consumer good to be exchanged. In the dissolution of sexual norms through the expansion of pornographic culture there is a resultant receptiveness to instability and fragmentation in the Caribbean. The alteration is reflected in the narrative to the end of the story as quotation marks demarcating direct speech disappear. In the same way that the narrator feels himself changing into “one of them” (72) so too do the markers of direct speech become ‘lost’ in the narrative. Further to this is the internal voice of the narrator which, represented in italics, appears sporadically throughout the story and the entire collection. It increases in frequency by the end of the story, drawing attention to the extent of the narrator’s saturation into the shared tragedy of the Caribbean.¹⁹ In the realization of his human nature there is the admission of the pornographic in constructing the hyperreality of existence:

You were just being human, Ki. We’re fragile, dissatisfied creatures, and sometimes our desire drives us into unknown places where we lose sight of what we desire and we desire illusions that cannot exist anywhere but in our minds (84).

As with the ending of ‘The Artist Dies’ ‘The Blonde’ ends with its main narrator achieving some extent of epiphany. But in both stories this ultimately resigns itself to the underlying though no less pervasive simulacra which is driven by bodily consumption and commodification.²⁰

What Baudrillard calls the ‘culturalization’ of commodity in the context of consumerism, appears in ‘The Blonde’ as a way of representing the functions of sex on the individual mind and collective community. Thus, sex in the story becomes also “culturalized, since it is transformed into a distinctive and idle substance, a luxury, and an item, among

others, in the general display of consumables” (*Selected Writings* 32). In the ‘culturalization’ of sex the postmodern proliferations of the extent of consumerism exacerbate the metamorphoses of a fragmented psyche which takes refuge in sexualised simulacra to escape the “island drawl” (*The Island Quintet* 73). The monotony of existence is compounded by the mindless consumption and reproduction of casual ‘sexcapades’. The “ever present camera round the neck” (68) of the tourists symbolises the simulacra which forms the touristic view of the environment as well as the super-imposition of actuality with superficial, perspectival images. The camera-eye which pans over the lives of the characters takes form in the objectifying gaze, the “leering eyes” (84) which the narrator encounters. It culminates in a “dirty frame” (53, 84) which, appearing as a refrain marking the start and end of the story, transfixes the lives of the characters. What John Urry theorises as the ‘tourist gaze’ becomes inverted in ‘The Blonde’ creating a permanent unease as the “ape-watching” (54) returns the stare back to the tourists. Where Urry discusses the gaze as being “constructed through signs” (3), Ramcharitar portrays a native gaze which deconstructs tourism practices and perceived hierarchies:

I cursed them the more, spat on them more, but the more I did that, the more their admiration, the knowing smiles, seemed to shine, lit by the knowledge beneath. *He is one 'a we now. A man just like we.* (75)

The narrator denies the privilege of the tourist by noting that “We were as unreal to them as they to us” (63). Directed toward the people as much as the environment, the gaze objectifies and simplifies without discrimination. In the application of the gaze to the surroundings Urry finds that “The tourist gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience” (3). ‘The Blonde’ continuously draws attention to the divergence between actual and perceived tourist experiences specifically in cases where the sites and attractions are juxtaposed by the intolerable conflict of the people:

More noticeable than any of this, though, was the air of sadness that permeated the place. Nothing was new, but the oldness was not graceful, not acknowledging the passage of time as much as trying to forget that time moved at all (77).

The insatiability which Urry finds “at the heart of contemporary consumerism” (13) configures the hyperreal configuration of the objectifying gaze. This is one of the implications of simulated experience, resulting in blurred boundaries that separate local and tourist, man and woman, adult and child, body and soul, person and object. Sexual indulgence enables the transgression of boundaries which to its detriment intensifies the

mutual estrangement and fragmentation of the characters.

This is the ‘depth’ of self-awareness afforded to the postmodern tourist.²¹ As Kenneth Gergen argues, postmodern culture enacts a “Social saturation [which] furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self” (6). In the context of ‘The Blonde’ the social saturation takes the form of touristy consumerism. It creates a conflict between the public and private selves highlighted in the need to play certain roles:

In those houses, the personalities put on in the day to earn their livings, to sell their bodies, were banished. In those houses they could be as they truly were; they could laugh real laughter, not the plastic grins and hollow smiles they showed outsiders. (81)

In the advertising of a stereotypical Caribbean ethos to the rest of the world what occurs is a consequent fracturing of the self.²² Postmodern awareness then can only involve the assemblage of fragments because pieces of reality are what constitute the experience of the tourists, and by extension all the characters.

‘Froude’s Arrow’ extends the themes of futility, fragmentation, affective waning and simulacra, already seen in ‘The Artist Dies’ and ‘The Blonde’, to relying on a postmodern sensibility in the problematizing of history. In this novella, the last story of the collection, Ramcharitar reiterates in his creative aesthetic one of - if not the most - ubiquitous themes in postcolonial criticism, the problem of History. His method of exploring the problem however, culminates in a postmodern scepticism of historical discourse. This is done through the presentation of a counter-history to challenge historical claims produced by the West as well as the Caribbean. As a work of postmodern historical fiction the reconfiguration of history functions to subvert and undermine historical evidence and textuality. Invoking the historical figure whose reputation hinged on being polemical, Ramcharitar is centrally concerned with bringing to light his perspective of the controversial Froude and one of his most outspoken critics from the Caribbean, J. J. Thomas. Against this context of competing historical narratives is the exploration of the psycho-social grip of the colonial past interwoven with a postmodernist representation of an alternate history. In the separation and convergence of the two lives, J.A. Froude and J. J. Thomas, the postmodern split-subject becomes polarised between two opposing historical narratives. Focusing on Froude is imperative to the therapeutic process of criticism enacted within the story, and indeed the collection. As part of satirising Froude’s apparent genius, Ramcharitar presents Froude’s status in absurdist fashion. It works similar to V.S. Naipaul’s use of Froude in *The Middle Passage* which, as Bruce King shows, is used for the purpose of “criticizing British colonialism and the effect it has had on its colonies” (200). Therefore, the focus on Froude

operates as a way of directing attention to his arrogance and by extension his subscription to imperialism. In the process of fictionalizing both, Ramcharitar foregrounds the complexity in establishing relationships between history, power, and representation. Because of this, the story remains an enigma, reinforcing the Caribbean writer's 'quarrel with History'.²³

The novella's epigraph is taken from Froude's most notable work *The English in the West Indies*.²⁴ The choice of extract is an immediate reference to Froude's initial uncertainty surrounding British involvement in West Indies, a perspective opted for by Ramcharitar, and one which sustains throughout the narrative of historical re-visioning. Into this contentious plot is thrown socio-political disorder with the Black Power movement on the one hand and the rise of the Asiatic party to governance on the other, further layered by the oppressive "days of the IMF, globalizing commerce and multiculturalism" (145). Just as Bouvier and Bain become consumed by the profitability of art, and the tourists consume each other's sex, so too is the entire West Indian region consumed with the pomp of nationalism within a global setting. Recalling the image of the figure "on all fours wearing a bondage mask of the island's flag" (42) in 'The Artist Dies', the likewise "flawed image of the spectacle of the independence" (140) in 'Froude's Arrow' reinforces the historical conception of nationalism as untenable. Misplaced national pride shrouds the better judgment of the Caribbean people and leaders who in being ignorant of their own history become easily agitated by provocative claims made by those such as Froude. As the narrator reasons:

You had to know a bit about the history of this place to understand Froude's position on it. To appreciate his ideas, mainly his ideas about himself, you really had to understand the brutal comedy of our lot. (142)

In the decentring of historical totality, Ramcharitar does not only work toward parodying Froude but also to ultimately present the Caribbean's sense of their history as misconceived. As already mentioned, Ramcharitar's enigmatic ethos, his extremist satire, is not just in-keeping with the postmodern condition but an experimental prognosis for Caribbean subjectivity. The line "Civilization had failed to take root here" (ibid.) echoes throughout each of the previous stories examined specifically in this chapter as the inversion of values and debauchery.

By making claims of the contingencies surrounding nationalist fervor in a late globalized, postmodern era. Ramcharitar is as much concerned with the fictionality of origins and cycles of suppression as he is the decadence and (self)-parody on which it is built:

But living in the capital, and seeing versions of the first pantomime...this change in atmosphere took on a more insidious aspect and, I confess, I was stunned, paralysed –

not out of fear, particularly, but by my own moral inanition, my fundamental apathy toward the island, and my desire simply not to be there. I had lived for four years in a place where all these questions had been settled, and people were free to live in ways motivated by desires other than primal, gut-driven instincts born of living in one or other ethnic corral. I realized that I, and many people, had unconsciously hidden from this ugliness all our lives, and this hiding had allowed the national party to spread itself like a weed, which was in time mistaken for a flower (194).

Within the swirl of existential crises that the narrator develops, individual and national failures overshadow the attempts at progress. It is fitting that the collection circles back to an overarching tenet of the postmodern condition – the problem of origins and its impact on dispersing subjectivity. This is implicated in the fictionality of history, invoked through the mythical Froude but extended by the equal myth of nationalist rhetoric. Extending the simulacra of sex tourism, explored in ‘The Blonde’, ‘Froude’s Arrow’ presents nationalism as constituting a hyperreality in and of itself. Both history and nationalism are presented as ideological contestations with the story exploring instances of nationalist simulation and commodification of historical exigencies. Here, the university, a microcosm of the society and a pillar of national pride, becomes instead a “huge, Kafkaesque bureaucracy, designed by British colonial administrators intent on creating Xanadu in the tropical reaches of the empire” (201). Perpetuating the cyclic production of unqualified personnel, we are told “in short, the university was a simulacrum of the society” (202). The university is a symbol of assimilation, reinforcing a national history of blame and victimization. And where the university’s ultimate intellectual product takes form in J. J. Thomas, he is taken to represent the island’s sense of its autonomy and perceived significance, in the process becoming the antagonist to Froude.

Resembling what Hutcheon describes of the postmodern double-voiced paradox as both complicit and critical,²⁵ ‘Froude’s Arrow’ is grounded on a scepticism of historiographed fictions. This is similarly seen in ‘The Artist’s Dies’ where the Artist must rely on art to criticise the method of artistic production in contemporary culture. Ramcharitar turns to the spectre of History in the novella, adopting a radically different position which generates new questions to be posed. Encapsulating epistemological as well as ontological issues of the problem of origins the questions are as much about how we know the past as they are how the past shapes out being given the knowledge that we possess. As the narrator traverses the island there is a gradual awakening to the socio-historical frailties that constitute belonging to the island:

There was a sense that the air breathes by the slaves of nearly two centuries ago still lingered somewhere deep in the lungs of the dark bodies that moved restlessly through its decrepit landscapes. It was there in the Levis, the basketball sneakers, the baseball caps, the bouncy yet uncertain way the people walked, the pastiche, plagiarized style of the billboards advertising local products, the frantic music (171).

National identity in 'Froude's Arrow', as with the stories examined in this chapter, plays a central role together with the representation of history. As the political climate descends into chaos and instability the focus on Froude's apparent tragic innocence serves to create a greater historical uncertainty as well as magnify the enigma of history. 'Froude's Arrow' produces the "parodic reworking of the textual past" that Hutcheon discusses as an underlying feature of postmodern historiographic metafiction.²⁶ Nowhere is this clearer than in the relationships and interactions centred on Froude who becomes both the protagonist and antagonist of the story. To this effect, the focalized narrative of Froude's personal life gives the reader access to a hitherto imperceptible and ill-conceived consciousness while at the same time drawing attention to the misguided energies of an ultimately failing nationalist project. In 'Froude's Arrow' this manifests itself as a sweeping ideological change motivated by socio-cultural anxieties of ethno-politics.

As the 'Asiatic' party assumes governance, ousting their 'African' counterpart, the narrator suggests a pantomime of the ruling party enacted by raunchy music and ethnic garb previously unseen. This desire for pomp is inseparable from the assertion of political power on the island which is pinned against racial conflict and the desire for power is overlaid by a satirical reversion to a colonial psychological complex where the Caribbean politicians replicate structures of historical disenfranchisement and entitlement. The lecture that the narrator attends, titled 'Nationalism and Art: A Formula for Salvation', recalls the subtextual death of artistic responsibility explored in the first story and the shifting emphasis toward inversions of any means of national salvation. Cojo and Leigh are the quintessential mimic men who symbolise the misguided consensus of the political establishment: "Cojo was that deliverer, his copied images, puerile ideas and utterances of ethnocentric nonsense were the body, organs and mind of the state" (197). Ramcharitar explores how the encoding of nationalistic (false-)pride engenders contradictions and inconsistencies between what the leaders orate and the ways in which they ultimately become victims to a past-in-the-present historical determinacy. Cojo's philosophy is regarded as "childish ideas about the destiny of his people" which together with notions of "ancestral entitlement, had the virtue of being simplistic enough to become dogma, which the displaced began to swallow" (191). The

widespread popularity of one man's ideology suggests how desperate the people are to the point of charting their own descent into chaos and disorder.

Ramcharitar's attempt to cure the self-alienation of the Caribbean mind-set is founded upon discovering a neutral space to enable the interplay of history and fiction thereby resolving the disparity created by each.²⁷ By connecting past events to contemporary occurrences, Ramcharitar portrays a sense of historical continuity which in most cases highlight a repetition of past transgressions. Additionally, in the multiple and diverse interpretations concerning Froude and Thomas as well as in the blurring of boundaries Ramcharitar undercuts the totality and authority of history.²⁸ Both alternative ways of conceiving the history of the West Indies shift continuously as the reader must rely on the narrator's own developing awareness in resolving the controversy of Froude. There is a correspondence then with understanding Froude and interpreting historical narratives of the West Indies. The narrator notes that in the "pleasant, slippery decadence" his "connection with Froude was cemented; here, in this suspended space, neither in the island nor outside it, was where my crucial knowledge of Froude would emerge" (147). This sense of being paradoxically within and without corresponds to Froude's peculiar place in the literary historiography of the region. As the narrator's omniscience moves from initial impressions of Froude as privileged Englishman²⁹ to more familiar ones of Froude's insightfulness³⁰ so too is the concomitant exploration of the region's contested history presented as a journey from one of misperception to a realisation of hitherto ignored flaws.

Where the narrator uncovers the insecurity masked as acuteness in J. J. Thomas, there is the implicit condemnation of a Caribbean society that ultimately self-destructs when it fails to account for its own insecurities. This is the basis on which Ramcharitar re-presents Froude as a tragically flawed character and even a victim of his own awareness of the world. It is echoed most notably by debunking J. J. Thomas's criticism of *Froudacity*, described as "a sedulous refutation of inconsequential fact" which "in refuting Froude, Thomas had almost vindicated him" (185-186). In the description of Froude's paradoxical prominence, the West Indian writer's 'quarrel' with History is reinforced, particularly what Baugh describes as "Our rather desperate need to disprove Froude" which by the fact itself "might well betray a deep-seated fear that he may be right."³¹ *The Island Quintet* is framed by this re-cognition of historical consciousness, much in the same way that J. Edward Chamberlain conceives of Froude's reception in the Caribbean; "his [Froude's] remarks made a deep impression on the West Indies, a measure of how vulnerable people are to the condescension of others,

especially when the others come from elsewhere” (38; emphasis added). The *Island Quintet* as a whole bears testament to such vulnerabilities which Chamberlain describes as having “ironic relevance” to an age that “celebrates its postcolonial superiority” (40). What occurs throughout the collection are characters struggling to come to terms with the futility of their own inferiority and the frustrations that experience as a result of this.

This final idea which Ramcharitar leaves us, of an unresolved historical consciousness,³² is a fitting conclusion to the collection which, in its entirety, frames the Caribbean space and people as generative but regressive, full of emotion yet inarticulate and susceptible, rendered static by tempestuous desire. Establishing a paradigm of destructive historical continuity, Ramcharitar suggests that a late globalized diminishment of cultural significance has reconfigured notions of Caribbean-ness to an extent where the people have fallen through the metaphorical looking glass and therefore, can only come to terms with their own subjectivity developed from the (im-)perception of those around them. The elements that configure this looking glass effect are the tripartite operation of art, history, and sexuality; concurrent themes which re-construct postcolonial pre-conceptions through a postmodern re-visioning of place and perception in *The Island Quintet*.

Notes:

¹ According to Habermas, “works which count as modern is ‘the new’ which will be overcome and made absolute through the novelty of the next style” (4). Where I believe that postmodernism did not break away from modernism completely but rather absorbed it, the ‘next style’ to which Habermas refers is taken here to connote the postmodern emphasis on new artistic forms that reflect changes in contemporary life. Considered as such, the earliest formations of Caribbean postmodernity convey an emphasis on stylistic modalities that attempt to break with tradition.

² Henceforth referred to as ‘The Blonde’.

³ The postmodernity arises out of a wilful break with Enlightenment notions of the human subject which maintained an interaction between mind and body - read here as rationality and existence - espoused for example by Cartesian thought. *The Island Quintet* portrays characters who act on their inferiorities and insecurities without thinking. Their being arises out of a dissociation between rationality and emotional reactions. As I read the Artist and Bouvier as representative of modernism and postmodernism respectively, the point raised by Foucault of whether “modernity constitutes the sequel to Enlightenment (“What is Enlightenment” 39) is applied to what the fictional characters embody which is a traditional, realistic purpose for art on the one hand, and a waning of convention with emphasis on its replicability on the other.

⁴ His death echoes a moment in ‘Froude’s Arrow’ where one of the characters declares that nations “are formed from ideas” and “those ideas emerge in creativity, in art, in music” (197). The Artist, who symbolized a particular idea for the Caribbean, exemplifies the Caribbean’s turn away from artistic appreciation by his death.

⁵ As the narrator admits, “I know I, and everyone here, is different from what we would otherwise have been, but for the Artist” (51).

⁶ Exemplified by his piece, ‘Muse Inspires the Island Artist’ there is the degeneration of nationalist sentiments through art, history, and sexuality, represented in the striking image of the sculpture “on all fours wearing a bondage mask made of the island’s flag” (42).

⁷ As Kellner notes in “Globalization and the Postmodern Turn” culture is redefined during the global flow of people, ideas, and technologies, “providing contradictory forces of colonization and resistance, global homogenization and new local hybrid forms and identities” <http://www.irfanerdogan.com/globalization/globpm.html>. I read the transition from the Artist to Bouvier in a

similar way with one of the implications being a new perception and engagement as it regards the swirl of global culture.

⁸ Ramcharitar's role as meta-artist follows what Patricia Waugh discusses of meta-fiction, which is "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2).

⁹ It amplifies the postmodernity of the text through the multiple instances of encoded self-reflexive narration which ultimately coalesce to establish the author's double-coded voice.

¹⁰ With its series of pillars "arranged processional...The last was made of fibre optic cables in a transparent container. On top of each was a fist-sized portion of human excrement" (42). The intertextual reference to Jacob Brownowski's *The Ascent of Man*, itself an allusion to Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, is satirically referenced in Ramcharitar's story, meant to draw attention of the moral and existential retardation of the Caribbean psyche.

¹¹ In the story this reference is made to the Artist. It can be applied to the narrator who is also an outsider looking in at the diverse, and yet strikingly similar batch of characters.

¹² Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism* 19. The Jamesonian terminology is used here to include the inversion of morality, values, and responsibility that characterizes Ramcharitar's collection.

¹³ Fassenfast outlines a crisis of 'glocalization' which is taken to mean the cultural challenge of local communities that are susceptible to absorption by "global standardization" (363).

¹⁴ The porno-chic is, according to McNair, "the postmodern transformation of porn into mainstream cultural artefact for a variety of purposes including, as we shall see, advertising, art, comedy and education" (*Striptease* 61).

¹⁵ Echoing the Artist's sentiment, the narrator concludes in 'The Artist Dies', "This life is nothing but a sport and a pastime; when we wake, we remember nothing" (52). It points to the futile acceptance of existence and the pervasive disorder in which the characters find themselves.

¹⁶ The emphasis on commodification of cultural fetishes calls to mind Jean Baudrillard's "fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species" which makes fashionable the concepts of environment and ambiance (29). The exploitation of the Caribbean landscape is justified in the belief that the Caribbean is a place for the wanton satisfaction of primitive desires.

¹⁷ Quoting Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, part of the extract reads "Colonies are the outhouse of the European soul...Out and down in the colonies, life can be indulged, life and sensuality in all its forms, with no harm done to the Metropolis...The silences down here are vast enough to absorb all behaviour, no matter how dirty, how animal it gets."

¹⁸ This is also found in 'New York Story' which places the Caribbean migrant in the equally chaotic and morally sterile cosmopolitan American state.

¹⁹ These intrusions appear six times in the first twenty-nine pages of the story, compared to a total of seven times in the final section (three pages) of the story.

²⁰ The simulacra are constituted by the projections of sex unto the landscape and the people. It is motivated by the racist assumptions and sexualisation of Blackness.

²¹ See Maxine Feifer *Going Places* for the usage of the term 'post-tourist' to mean travellers who can perform different roles and simulate the authenticity of experience (271). Where John Urry in *The Tourist Gaze* connects the post-tourist to cultural contexts of postmodernism (12) there is in *The Island Quintet* a self-awareness that can only come to terms with the fragmentation and fragility of existence.

²² Baudrillard in his study of the simulated advertisement finds that the "unconscious is conflictual and, in so far as advertising mobilizes it, it is mobilized as conflict. Advertising does not liberate drives. Hence, the ambiguity of the object, in which individuals never have the opportunity to surpass themselves, but can only re-collect themselves in contradiction" (18).

²³ Edward Baugh argues that "inasmuch as all narrative is fiction, all history is fiction, a structured, already imaginatively interpreted representation of the past, working through plots and tropes" (Reflections on "The Quarrel with History" 114). Ramcharitar's postmodern representations of history fictionalizes and re-presents an already imaginatively structured perspective of the past. His text operates counterintuitively however, by relying on these tropes to critique them and reveal their inherent flaws.

²⁴ As compared with the epigraph to the previous story 'The Abduction of Sita', Ramcharitar omits the source in 'Froude's Arrow'. I regard this deliberate omission as an early attempt to mask his intention of vindicating Froude.

²⁵ "While much art uses irony and parody to inscribe and yet critique the discourses of its past, of the "already-said," postmodernism is almost always double-voiced in its attempts to historicize and contextualize the enunciative situation of its art" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 44).

²⁶ Hutcheon *The Poetics of Postmodernism* 125.

²⁷ I liken Ramcharitar's method to that discussed by Baugh of writers such Brathwaite, Harris, Lamming, Naipaul, and Walcott. That their 'quarrel' act as "foundational factors of West Indian history and as potentially positive features of a literary imagination that would free the West Indian from the bondage of that history" (116).

²⁸ 'Froude's Arrow' exemplifies the central tenet of historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon sees it, in the way it "works *within* conventions in order to subvert them" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 5).

²⁹ One of the earliest impressions the narrator has is that "Froude and his people remained hovering above us" (144).

³⁰ As the narrator realises, "It was a Froude I'd never seen or heard: the armour was off, and beneath it was no sarcasm, no irony. The grey eyes were clear and the brow slightly furrowed" (178), and later "his [Froude's] unique position to see into both sides of the equation, his divided sympathies allowed him to make arguments no one else was capable of making" (216).

³¹ "The West Indian Writer and the Quarrel with History" (63).

³² As the novel closes, Froude's absurdist perspective is brought to a climax in his unashamed historicizing of the Caribbean: "I do know, from what I have seen, now is the time for people like Cojo and Leigh, and I suppose all we can do is either let history work or work against it and be crushed by it" (217).

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