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Decoding the Ancestral Land: The Poetics of Place, Space and Time in V. S.

Naipaul's India Trilogy

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Like Dan Jacobson's Bloomsbury,¹ Naipaul's oneiric model of India, as described in the India trilogy (comprising *India: An Area of Darkness* [1964],² *India: A Wounded Civilization* [1977]³ and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* [1990]⁴), is cancelled out by the reality of the place(s) he encounters. The India he witnesses in the course of his travels in the subcontinent responds poorly to what he describes as the "resting place of the imagination"—the land of his forebears playing out as his own private heterotopia,⁵ a "counter-site" or a space of otherness, whose physical reality does little to mitigate its essential placelessness. Like Jacobson's "ruinous" and "voided" Tavistock Square,⁶ Naipaul's India turns out to be a "difficult country"—a quintessentially *unheimlich* realm which is as much a counter-site as it is a mythical construct. "Jacobson's revealing memories of arriving in London," writes McLeod, "stage a particular kind of troublesome encounter with England and English culture which [. . .] was by no means uncommon in the 1950s and 1960s" (*Postcolonial London* 60). McLeod further goes on to state that: "Many budding writers from colonised countries who came to London suffered similarly dislocating experiences" (*Postcolonial London* 60).⁷

¹ John McLeod refers to Jacobson's disappointment with what he discovers as the "real" London—a place which is painfully at odds with the London of his imagination—the London found in the books. For a detailed discussion of this, see John McLeod. *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*. Oxford: Routledge, 2004. (60).

² All the references to the text are taken from the following edition: *An Area of Darkness*. 1964. London: Picador, 2002.

³ All the references to the text are taken from the following edition: *India: A Wounded Civilization*. 1977. London: Picador, 2002.

⁴ All the references to the text are taken from the following edition: *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. 1990. London: Picador, 2010.

⁵ For an extensive insight into Foucault's conceptualization of heterotopias, see Michel Foucault. "Of Other Spaces." 1967. *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22-27.

⁶ See *Postcolonial London* 60.

⁷ It is worth noting that in the section entitled "Jack's Garden" in *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), Naipaul recounts his first impression of England (he arrived in England in 1950) which seems to reflect a similar angst: "I saw what I saw very clearly. But I didn't know what I was looking at. I had nothing to fit into. I was still in a kind of limbo" (5).

By the end of the seventeenth century, the essence of place—the very point confirming one’s being in the physical world—was completely absorbed into the all-encompassing notion of space. In *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (1997), Edward Casey appraises this phenomenon when he writes of space as the “infinite extension, [which] has become a cosmic and extracosmic Moloch that consumes every corpuscle of place to be found within its greedy reach” (x). “Space,” however, is a more abstract concept than “place.” This article draws on Yi Fu Tuan’s conceptualization of space as “undifferentiated place”⁸—a somewhat diffused area that is yet to be endowed with meaning. In this context, it is indeed useful to consider Tuan’s insightful differentiation of space and place:

The ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition. From the security and (relative) stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as a domain that allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (Tuan 6)

The ancestral land in Naipaul’s India trilogy evinces the melting of space into place (and vice versa) as apparent in the following passage from *An Area of Darkness*:

And India had in a special way been the background of my childhood. It was the country from which my grandfather came, a country never physically described and therefore never real, a country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad; and from it our journey had been final. It was a country suspended in time; it could not be related to the country, discovered later, which was the subject of the many correct books issued by Mr Gollancz and Messrs Allen and Unwin and was the source of agency dispatches in the *Trinidad Guardian*. (21)

India as the background of the author’s childhood evokes the notion of a “sense of place.” For a “place” to become a “meaningful location,” it is imperative that it be endowed with a “sense of

⁸ See Yi-Fu Tuan. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1977.

place”—a subjective and emotional attachment stemming from one’s familiarity and intimate involvement with such space. In the following lines, Naipaul concedes that the country of his forebears was “never physically described” and for that reason “never real.” Furthermore, the notion of India as “a country suspended in time” challenges geographical imagination, launching the idea of a metaphorical, as opposed to physical, land awaiting habitation and use. On the other hand, the India “discovered later” can be said to be spatially—presumably temporally, as well—grounded; it is closer to the notion of “place” (than *a priori* limitless, undifferentiated “space”)—a location that is a concrete representation of something and the materiality of which can be experientially derived and/or appropriated.

Closely associated with the ideas of space and place is the notion of landscape. However, in Naipaul’s India trilogy, the traditional understanding of landscape as an aesthetic appreciation of the environment is complicated, given the importance of the *gaze* that formulates it. For instance, the recurrent images of filth, squalor and abjectness that punctuate the India trilogy imbue its landscape with a dreariness which is not only characteristic of the actual locale as experienced by the travel writer/narrator but also reflective of the specific position—that of a diasporic individual with ancestral roots in India and a highly complex, problematic and often ambivalent perception with regard to Trinidad (the country where he was born and had spent his early boyhood) and England (the country where he had lived ever since he left Trinidad in 1950 to pursue higher education and a career in writing)—he writes from.

In order to meaningfully comprehend the dialectics of Naipaul’s representation of the ancestral land, it is imperative to obtain a corresponding understanding of his migrant subjectivity. This is particularly relevant given Naipaul’s specific historical circumstance of being born into the Indian diasporic community of Trinidad and his subsequent emigration to

England. Furthermore, these biographical facts—both well-known and frequently alluded to, by all means—have contributed much to the thematic structuring and development of his fictions and nonfictions alike and are, for that very reason, particularly relevant to any critical appraisal of his representation of other cultures and peoples. Landeg White, in his 1975 book *V. S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction*, examines Naipaul’s development as a writer against the cultural ambiguities of his historical positioning and his subsequent career as a “British” writer. White’s study explores and analyses the complex entanglements of identity which not only impress upon the India trilogy and Naipaul’s characteristic formulation of the ancestral land but also, tellingly, on his fictional works. According to White:

There is no home for him [Naipaul] in India; his assumptions are too much of the West. Just as it was in London that he wrote the Trinidad novels, so it is in Kashmir that he writes *Mr. Stone and the Knight’s Companion*, projecting on to his English hero a strong Hindu sense of the world as illusion. Returning to Europe, he is no longer able to believe in the places in which he has lived and worked. *A Brahmin-cum-Englishman in Trinidad, a European in India, an Indian in London*. (7; emphasis added)

While Naipaul has often been chastised for allegedly highlighting the unlovely aspects of his ancestral land—a tendency that critics have often associated with his unabashed affinity for the West together with his contempt for the Orient—his perception, as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes in his essay, “Of Garbage, Modernity and the Citizen’s Gaze,”⁹ cannot be safely attributed to a simple predilection for the West. According to Chakrabarty:

It would be unfair, however, to think of this perception as simply Western. What it speaks is the language of modernity, of civic consciousness and public health, even of certain ideas of beauty related to the management of public space and interests, an order of aesthetics from which the ideals of public health and hygiene cannot be separated. (66)

⁹ This essay was published in Chakrabarty’s *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (2002).

Concomitantly, Naipaul's travels to and through India, notwithstanding the "negative sightseeing,"¹⁰ an idea introduced by Dean MacCannell, that often seeps into the moral fabric of the narrative, challenge the linear narratives of a more straightforward nationalism. MacCannell described negative sightseeing as "a modern alternative to systems of in-group morality built out of binary oppositions: insider vs. outsider, us vs. them" (40). According to MacCannell, the affinity for the unpleasant, an emerging aspect of modern societies that can no longer sustain themselves with traditional notions of differentness, is "a form of moral involvement"—a mode of social inquiry through which one can acquire for himself or herself a moral identity (40).

The use of landscape in Naipaul's India trilogy often generates an acutely dystopic effect further complicating the traditional understanding of the concept. The imbrication of objectified environments and the gaze of the observer echoes Lawrence Buell's conceptualization of landscape as an embodiment of the holistic comprehension of the gaze.¹¹ In *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005), Buell writes:

Landscape typically refers to rural rather than urban contexts and typically implies certain amplitude of vista and degree of arrangement, whether the referent is an artifact or an actual locale. But what is called landscape may be messy or chaotic rather than orderly, foreshortened as well as panoramic, urban as well as exurban. In all cases, landscape implies *the totality of what a gaze can comprehend from its vantage point*. (142-43; emphasis added)

Thus, according to Buell, the conceptualization of environment as landscape entails not only variability but also the gaze of the observer delineating it. In fact, this is also how Naipaul seems to narrativise "place" in his India trilogy—by faithfully recording the varied environments or

¹⁰ For more on this, see Dean MacCannell. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken, 1976.

¹¹ For more on this, see Lawrence Buell. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 142-43.

landscapes through which he traverses, on the one hand, and endowing them (by means of his gaze) with meaning, on the other.

From colonial imaginings of the nation space to the postcolonial formulation of its domain, Naipaul's delineation of architecture and architectural practices in the Indian context problematises representation by emphasizing the essentially complex and often, political nature of its rhetoric. In the section entitled "The End of the Line," Naipaul describes a view from his hotel room in Lucknow—"a view that took one back to the past" (*A Million Mutinies Now* 414). The "view," by his own admission, calls to mind one of Thomas and William Daniell's renditions of the traditional Italian *vedute* in the Indian context.¹² Later, these were published as aquatints in London—depicting the lower channel of the River Gumti. The Daniells often used the Camera Obscura, which provided a tracing of the landscape they wished to paint; the painting was subsequently invested with figures, structures and events. Meaning was imparted through a premeditated and careful construction of the visual field through which the "ideal" (or idealised) relations of power were expressed, emphasised and perpetuated. In this particular instance, it is worthwhile to note that Naipaul's spatial relation with respect to the panorama before him is similar to that of the Daniells, when they conceived the painting in the eighteenth century, so much so that the real scene in all its actuality "gave one the illusion of looking at the original" painting. This "emplaces" Naipaul—at least, provisionally—in a position from which it is possible not only to revisit the provenance of the colonial aesthetic but also to re-inscribe it with his gaze. He mentions the Hindu temples on the left bank of the river and the minarets of old

¹²The Daniells recognised—from fellow-draftsman William Hodges' experiences in the South Seas—the importance of documenting (the Indian) landscape and architecture as emblematic of British power and authority. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines a veduta (Italian: "view;" plural: vedute) as a "detailed, largely factual painting, drawing, or etching depicting a city, town, or other place." See "Vedute." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. Accessed 15 May 2018.

Lucknow some way off; the swimming-club huts; the water buffalos and the small diminutive figures dotting the scenery. While the formulation of this postcolonial sublime—along with its similarities and dissonances with the colonial construction of India—reveals, on the one hand, travel writing’s (and the travel writer’s, by extension) complicity in the symbolic (re)construction of physical space, it foregrounds, on the other, the author’s emotional reaction to the subject of (his) representation.

Buell’s formulation of landscape as “the totality of what a gaze can comprehend from its vantage point” is particularly useful in the analysis of the imagining and structuring of landscape in Naipaul’s travel writing. Or, just to take it one step further, one may consider Kojin Karatani’s (1993) discourse on the (re)discovery of landscape in painting: “For landscape [. . .] is not simply what is outside. A change in our way of perceiving things was necessary in order for landscape to emerge, and this change required a kind of reversal” (24). The “reversal” that Karatani mentions is in essence a mode of perception that “does not take place either inside of us or outside of us, but is an inversion of a semiotic configuration” (27).¹³ He gives the example of Masaoka Shiki—a Japanese poet of the Meiji era—to illustrate his point. Shiki, Karatani tells us, adopted and developed “sketching” (*shasei*,¹⁴ in Japanese) as a technique for writing poetry—his “sketches” were haiku composed in the midst of Nature. Shiki, in his advocacy of the *shasei*, placed the individual/poet/artist at the centre of the subject of his/her observation. He maintained that the “external world,” in order to be described or rendered accurately in writing, must, at first, be discovered. In other words, Shiki’s practice of sketching entailed, first, the discovery of the

¹³ For more on this, see Karatani’s *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*. Ed. Brett de Bary. Durham & London: Duke UP, 1993.

¹⁴ *Shasei*, translated as “sketching” or “copying,” was practised and developed by the poet and verse teacher, Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) who considered it an important compositional technique for those practising the “haiku” or tanka poetic forms.

“external world” by being *in* (rather than *outside of*) it followed by the description of that newly-discovered reality. This form of realism, based on the “defamiliarization of the familiar,”¹⁵ always presupposes the presence of an “inner world” and is shaped by it. This is also to say that Buell’s *gaze*, as well as Naipaul’s, is a function of its latency—the comprehension of the gaze from its vantage point being, at least partially, informed by the workings of this inner world which is reasonably complicit in producing the “reality” as the observer “sees”/experiences it.

The conceptualization of the physical environment as landscape in Naipaul’s India trilogy encapsulates not only the author’s moral involvement with his subject which plays out in complex ways—space and place being the two important elements in the formulation and structuring of the narrator’s social identity—but also the rather problematic reconciliation of the imagined with the real. The ruined landscape; the relentless, brown suburbs; the unyielding fields—all stand in antithesis to the “imagined” ancestral land (i.e., India); they are both scenes of confinement and liberation. Consider the following “landscape” describing the workings of a trench-digger from *A Wounded Civilization*:

The man was small and slightly built. He was troubled by his chest and obviously weary. He managed the pickaxe with difficulty; it didn’t go deep and he often stopped to rest. His wife, in a short green sari, squatted on the stony ground, as though offering encouragement by her presence; from time to time, but not often, she pulled out with a mattock those stones that the man has loosened; and the white-capped boy stood by the woman, doing nothing. Like a painting by Millet of solitary brute labour, but in an emptier and a less fruitful land. (64-65)

Although Naipaul does not specify the exact title of Millet’s painting, it can be reasonably inferred that he was probably referring to Millet’s *Des glaneuses* (1857),¹⁶ also known as *The*

¹⁵ Karatani refers to Victor Shklovsky in contending that this form of realism advocated by the latter “creates” landscape rather than just “describes” it. In so claiming, Karatani suggests that the “relentless defamiliarization of the familiar” (29) enables one to see that which, owing to the deadening force of habit, was hitherto unseen.

¹⁶ Jean-François Millet. *Des glaneuses*. 1857. Oil on Canvas. Musée d’Orsay, Paris. Web. Accessed 5 June 2018. http://www.musee-orsay.fr/index.php?id=851&L=1&tx_commentaire_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=341

Gleaners or *Gleaners*. Millet's painting depicts three women—representative of the rural working class—picking up ears of corn missed by the harvesters. The women—bent and labouring—appear in the foreground, their austerity in stark contrast with the hint of a promising harvest in the background. Millet's painting and the scene Naipaul describes have a number of things in common: both depict scenes of brute labour—thankless, repetitive tasks that seem to alienate the protagonists from their physical environments; both represent three anonymous figures in the foreground—nameless, ordinary people, whom art (painting and writing, respectively) has rendered unforgettable.

Much like the Japanese romantic naturalist Kunikida Doppo's (1871–1908) “unforgettable people” (from the novel of the same name originally published in Japanese as *Wasureenu Hitobito* 1898), Naipaul's trench diggers and Millet's gleaners represent “people-as-landscapes”—ordinary people who are both inseparable from as well as representative of their physical environments.¹⁷ According to Kojin Karatani, the unnamed person that Otsu, the narrator of Doppo's *Unforgettable People*, catches a glimpse of on an island “is not so much a “person” as a “landscape”” (24). Karatani contends that Doppo's *Unforgettable People* “offers convincing evidence that “landscape” was an inversion of consciousness before it became a representational convention” (23).¹⁸

That Doppo afforded conscious thought to his “subject” emerges from his personal reflection: “Once I had become a believer in Wordsworth I could not think of a man as being

¹⁷Karatani's view on this issue is central to my analysis of the emergence and structuring of landscape in Naipaul's India trilogy where I have attempted to demonstrate that Naipaul's conceptualization of the physical environment subsumes the foregrounding of people—often anonymous—as representational landscape.

¹⁸ For a detailed account on this see Karatani (especially, ch1).

separate from nature”.¹⁹ It is this basic correspondence of man with nature (“a man matching his rhythm to that of nature” (*A Wounded Civilization* 111)) that informs Naipaul’s formulation of the subject in the India trilogy, facilitating, at the same time, the conceptualization or discovery of landscape as “a realignment of the relationship between an individual and his/her environment.”²⁰ In fact, the individual—as Naipaul shows us in his characteristic delineation of the ancestral land—often *is* the landscape. In the section entitled “The House of Grain” in *A Wounded Civilization*, he writes:

At Lonavala, where we broke our journey, a buffalo herdsman sang in the rain.
We heard his song before we saw him, on a hill, driving his animals before him.
He was half naked and carried an open black umbrella. When the rain slanted and
he held the umbrella at his side, it was hard to tell him from his buffalos. (77)

The portrayal of this pastoral idyll is inspired by both a latent Darwinian economy of inevitable, primordial struggle as well as what Richard Kerridge plays up as the idea of nature as “a paradise temporarily regained”²¹—the last made possible (in the case of India), despite all odds, through the typical “Indian defences” of renunciation and withdrawal. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), Lawrence Buell writes:

Traditional pastoral, dating from the poetry of Theocritus, is a stylized representation of rusticity in contrast to and often in satire of urbanism, focusing in the first instance on the life of shepherds. In the early modern and romantic eras, as in seventeenth-century English country house poems and in Wordsworthian lyric, pastoral becomes more mimetically particularized, and

¹⁹ See Donald Keene. *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature in the Modern Era*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. 227.

²⁰ See James A. Fujii. *Complicit Fictions: The Subject in the Modern Japanese Prose Narrative*. California: U of California P, 1993. 99.

²¹ In his essay, “Nature in the English Novel,” Kerridge cites the example of Clym Yeobright (of Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*) who, as a furze-cutter on the Egdon heath, comes closer to nature “with a striking literalness.” Clym, as Kerridge maintains, is part of the landscape of the heath (where he works as a furze-cutter) itself; in fact, the realignment of his relationship with the small creatures of the heath makes him indistinguishable from them so much so that “(n)one of them feared him” (qtd. by Kerridge [152]). See Richard Kerridge. “Nature in the English Novel.” *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*. Ed. Patrick D. Murphy, Terry Gifford, and Katsunori Yamazato. London: Routledge, 1998. pp. 151-52.

more given over to representation of country ways that are being displaced by enclosure and/or urbanization [. . .]. Pastoral is originally and predominantly a high-cultural, hegemonic formation[. . .]. (144-45)

One of the many uses to which Naipaul puts the pastoral idyll in his India trilogy is to assert the incongruities inherent in the notion of Indianness that insists upon conjoining the “beauty of simple life” with the “beauty of the poor”—ideas, which according to Naipaul, are representative of two essentially opposed civilizations.

Pitted against this pastoral idyll, is the dystopic imagery of squalor and dispossession which is likely to evoke Dickens’s environmental imagination. Like Dickens’s dreary cityscapes,²² Naipaul’s environmental imagination is characterised by an unmitigated cynicism coupled with an inexorable claustrophobia. Concomitantly, “place,” as far as the India trilogy is concerned, seldom imparts a sense of relief—being, for the most part, a “site” of confinement: either immured in an irretrievable Past or embodying chaos and disorder. The intrusion of what might be called an avowedly disconsolate—almost ruinous—landscape into the narrative concretises the threat of entropy,²³ encouraging the reading of Naipaul’s India trilogy as an alternative thermodynamic narrative. According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the state of entropy in a closed and isolated system will always multiply over time. As Bruce Clarke, in *Energy Forms: Allegory and Science in the Age of Classical Thermodynamics*, argues:

²²For a perceptive appraisal of urban space in Dickens’s work, see Matthew Beaumont. *Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London: Chaucer to Dickens*. London: Verso, 2015, and Jeremy Tambling. *Going Astray: Dickens and London*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2008.

²³ The *Literary Encyclopedia* describes entropy in the following words: “Originated by Rudolf Clausius, the German pioneer of Thermodynamics, in 1850, entropy is a scientific expression of the degree of randomness or disorder in any system, zero entropy being a state of perfect order and high entropy being a high degree of randomness [. . .]. The term entropy moved from science into cultural and literary criticism (notably in the 1970s) to describe states of social and communicational disorder.”

Editors. “Entropy.” *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 01 November 2001 [https://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=341, accessed 05 June 2018].

Thermodynamic entropy became cultural allegory by unveiling a scientifically plausible version of last things. In some circles the second law was interpreted as God's withdrawal from the material universe. Operating in parallel with the theological doctrines of the Fall and the promised end, entropy became *the* cosmic metonymy for a God that has absconded from the physical world. (27; emphasis in original).

In the current context, the reading of Naipaul's India trilogy as an alternative thermodynamic narrative, concomitantly, entails the envisioning of the ancestral land—the original “resting-place of the imagination”—as the embodiment of disorder and decay. While the India of the diasporic²⁴ imagination hints at an internal order—albeit fragile—the India that is encountered in reality—the India of the ruins standing in for a decaying civilization—embodies the threat of disorder and decay, signalling a somewhat retrogressive evolution. If the India trilogy is to be viewed as a “return narrative” in which Naipaul—as a descendant of migrant indentured labourers—*returns* to the “imagined community” of the ancestral “homeland,” guided solely by collective, diasporic memory, his narrative representation of “home” in the context of India is incontestably a political act. This is so because such an act is also an effort to reconfigure the mythical landscape of migrant memory into a “this-worldly” (Markowitz), anti-hegemonic political reality.

“Place,” in the India trilogy—contrary to that in traditional travel writing which celebrated Nature and the “exotic”—is ostensibly unlovely, holding forth memories of violent histories (disorder and chaos) and deeply reminiscent of failed aspirations. Naipaul's attitude towards the pastoral, rather than counterbalancing his more straightforwardly dismissive attitude towards “place” in general, is bafflingly ambivalent. For instance, in *A Wounded Civilization*, the

²⁴For a detailed account on the political nature of migrant homecoming, see *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return* (Markowitz and Stefansson 2004).

temple-town of Vijayanagar impresses itself upon the reader with a striking tentativeness: its melancholic ruins; its moribund scenery; its diminutive peasant lives in abrupt contrast with the teeming pilgrims; the gay souvenir shops and the food stalls amidst the ubiquitous grime and squalor. While the scenery, for Naipaul, becomes an occasion of philosophical rumination—with Vijayanagar, the ruined Hindu city, taking on the colours of a far more recent, turbulent, post-Independence India—for the reader, it is made to function as a form of psychic landscape signalling the intellectual depletion and moral stultification of the Indian civilization.

In his India trilogy, Naipaul begins his journey in and through an “area of darkness”—the realm of the unknown, the uncanny or, paradoxically, the strangely *heimlich* ancestral land. However, irrespective of his narrational position, Naipaul’s analysis of India does not so much foreground a space crowded with things or objects—a concatenation of locales or even sites of arcane significations—as imply the existence of what Henri Lefebvre²⁵ has called a “present space,” a wonderfully inscribed space where the past “leaves its traces” (Lefebvre 37). This obviously points to an approach whereby space is envisioned as a concept or idea that is *produced* historically, socially and politically (also, economically, aesthetically and culturally) and for that reason, symbolises both the *product* as well as the *process* of its production/generation (Lefebvre 37).

Given the nature of Naipaul’s enquiry in relation to India and his narrative representation of the ancestral land, the problem of “time” arises naturally and concretely, as a matter of course. As this essay shows, Naipaul’s use of “time” and temporal devices with regard to his enunciation

²⁵ This study draws upon Henri Lefebvre’s formulation of space in *The Production of Space*. 1974. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991.

of India in *An Area of Darkness* entails what Johannes Fabian has described as “Typological Time” as a way of constructing (the idea of) postcolonial/post-Independence India.

“Typological Time,” as Fabian argues, implies a “quality of states” rather than a vectorial representation of movement.²⁶ This is also to say that Fabian’s description of it interprets time as a theoretical construct qualifying the duration between pairs of discrete but “socioculturally meaningful” events. For instance, in envisioning the various progressive stages of history and in conceptualizing the qualitative difference between two discrete states such as that between preliterate and literate societies or even that between ancient and modern civilizations, one may use Typological Time to articulate man’s progression through history and consequently, through time. Concomitantly, according to Fabian’s definition, the use of Typological Time in any temporalizing discourse implies a specific use of “time” that does away with plain periodizing in favour of envisioning it (time) as an expression of the uneven historical progression of the human civilization.

Instances of temporalizing, as will be shown later in the course of this study, abound in *An Area of Darkness*. In this connection, this essay aims at providing a theoretical framework to Naipaul’s use of “time” as a means of conceptualizing the *Other* as distanced from the author’s “time.” This is also to say that the narrative of *An Area of Darkness* presupposes a notion of time that its author is *conscious of* and *writes about* but does not necessarily *belong to* or *write from*. To begin with, the title of the narrative—*An Area of Darkness*—evokes a separation in terms of both space as well as time. Spatial distancing, as one might note, is established through the early

²⁶ For more on this, see Johannes Fabian. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia UP, 1983. 23.

dissemination of the knowledge that Naipaul, as the author of the text, travels from the “metropole”—with a more or less defined objective of studying/knowning/(re)discovering the land of his forefathers (India)—to the “periphery” of the West as well as his imagination. The spatial indeterminacy of India is further expressed in and accentuated through the following description of the country: “It was the country from which my grandfather came, a country never physically described and therefore never real, *a country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad*[. . .]. It was a country *suspended in time*[. . .].” (*An Area of Darkness* 21; emphases added). Such a description (“out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad”) communicates an aporetic split between the author’s conception of *his* space in time (at the moment of writing) and that of an indeterminable space to which he appears to be genealogically linked.

It is worth mentioning here that Naipaul’s description of India in the current context is purely relational (“beyond the dot of Trinidad”)—as if it were impossible to situate India along a time-space continuum without evoking the diminutive physical reality of Trinidad. Even though it acknowledges the spatiality of Trinidad apart from its existence in routinised, “Physical Time,”²⁷ it extends no such privilege to India. Furthermore, Naipaul describes India as a “country suspended in time”—an expression that robs it of spatial certitude. However, this also brings us face-to-face with more puzzling questions: *Which* time? *Whose* time? The answer is implied. India seems to be suspended in a time that is not the same as the one in and from which the author writes, implying the presence of a now-inaccessible past—glimpses of which can only be partially obtained through collective memory or the flawed, deficient knowledge of the émigré. To make the point, Naipaul recounts the case of grandmother Gold Teeth, a neighbour in

²⁷ For more on “Physical Time,” see Fabian’s *Time and the Other*, especially ch. 1.

Trinidad, whom he describes as a “rustic oddity” declaring that her world appeared to be “receding” and that that world had seemed so “remote” even at the time of his boyhood in Trinidad: “[A]nd as we grew older, living now in the town, Gold Teeth dwindled to a rustic oddity with whom there could be no converse. So remote her world seemed then, so dead; yet how little time separated her from us!” (*An Area of Darkness* 22). This excerpt from the text demonstrates a clever manipulation of time as a mode of both distancing and establishing taxonomies. It not only insinuates a rural-urban divide but also expresses the difference in terms of temporal relations—living in the town, as Naipaul puts it in context, situates one at an elevation on the temporal slope, at least relatively, as those consigned to rustic life similarly seem to slide down the same temporal slope into the deadness of oblivion. Arguing that anthropology as a discipline provided the utmost intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise of the West, Fabian describes the process by which it (anthropology) devised its success in such an endeavour: “It gave to politics and economics a firm belief in ‘natural’ i.e., evolutionary Time. It promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of—some upstream, others downstream.”²⁸ In the India trilogy, particularly in *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul formulates his relation with the *Other* in terms of temporal distance which is, alternatively, made to function as an affirmation of his difference with the “object” of his inquiry.

Through the use of adjectives such as “rustic,” “remote” and “dead,” Naipaul achieves temporal distancing—a method that, as we shall in due course see, is central to his formulation of the object of his study in *An Area of Darkness*. There is at least one more point to be inferred

²⁸ See Fabian’s *Time and Other*, p. 17.

from the excerpt quoted above. Even though Naipaul recognises that he, during his boyhood in Trinidad, “shared” the same time and space with grandmother Gold Teeth—at least in the sense that she was a family friend who, like him, lived in Trinidad at the “time” in question—he also seems to make the point that they were not “coeval” by stating that Gold Teeth’s oddity made communication impossible. In other words, Naipaul’s formulation of grandmother Gold Teeth as a “rustic oddity” denies her coevalness—that is, it situates her at a “different time” than his own.

The manner in which Naipaul extends the idea of “darkness” from space to time is both interesting and provocative: while the title of the narrative pronounces India as an *area* of darkness, Naipaul describes the time “when the transference was made as a *period* of darkness” (*An Area of Darkness* 24; emphasis added). He goes on to write: “And even now, though time has widened, though space has contracted and I have travelled lucidly over the area which was to me the area of darkness, something of darkness remains, in those attitudes, those ways of thinking and seeing, which are no longer mine” (24). In this context, Naipaul’s use of “time” subsumes the positioning of two universes, as it were, the pre-modern and the modern or the interval between the “time of transference” and the subsequent event of writing.

In the section entitled “A Resting-Place for the Imagination” in *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul describes Indians as an “*old* people” belonging to an “*old* world”. Such labels imply temporal distancing and suggest that the object of enquiry in the text at issue is not coeval, i.e., does not share the same “time” with either the author or the readers. Further, this is put forward, rather artfully, as one of the primary justifications for the monologism of the narrative—since the participants involved (the enquirer and the object of his enquiry) are not, strictly speaking, coeval, communication cannot ideally occur. This “denial of coevalness”—which Fabian, in the context of anthropology, describes as “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the

referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (31)—is symptomatic of Naipaul’s response to India and its civilization.

Rather tellingly, Naipaul’s use of “time” in the Indian context occasionally involves the positioning of the author)—the *producer* of the discourse)—in a “time” that is literally remote from the object of his enquiry. Curiously, in the example that follows, he achieves this effect by placing himself *down* the temporal slope rather than *up*: “I had rejected tradition; yet how can I explain my feeling of outrage when I heard that in Bombay they used candles and electric bulbs for the Diwali festival, and not the rustic clay lamps, of immemorial design, which we still used in Trinidad?” (*An Area of Darkness* 31). Not only do these lines betray a somewhat romantic longing for time past (as implied in the expression “immemorial design”) but also seek to formulate the *Other* as a sociocultural category whose very differentness, despite the insinuation of modernity (the people of Bombay “used candles and electric bulbs for the Diwali festival, and *not* the rustic clay lamps” as ordained by tradition), borders on the grotesque. What is particularly noteworthy here is Naipaul’s identification—done almost in the passing—with the “we” in the final sentence (“*we* still used in Trinidad”). This is an idea embodying complex spatial and temporal notions: while in Trinidad, India could be experienced as coeval (clay lamps), in India, it could be ironically remote (candles and electric bulbs).

Naipaul’s formulation of the ancestral land in *An Area of Darkness* arguably involves the use of temporal distancing to the point of denying coevalness to the object of enquiry. For instance, in the section entitled “Degree,” he writes of the poverty he encountered in Indian villages: “I had seen the physique of the people of Andhra, which had suggested the possibility of an evolution downwards, wasted body to wasted body, Nature mocking herself, incapable of remission” (42). Clearly, the suggestion of a developmental sequence indicated by the reference

to “evolution” is violently diluted with the concurrent declaration that *that* evolution is “downwards” (rather than upwards or forward, as would have been natural or expected). This “possibility of an evolution downwards” is clearly a temporal expression and situates the object of enquiry—wasted and diminished—into an indeterminate past, thus denying it coevalness with the author’s “time.”

Similarly, Naipaul’s use of the term “colonial” in the following passage about one Malhotra, an officer in a government department, is allochronic,²⁹ or indicative of a lapse or an aberration: “For Malhotra, too, with his Italian-styled suit and English university tie, the society and its violations were new. East Africa, the English university and the years in Europe had made him just enough of a *colonial* to be out of place in India” (*An Area of Darkness* 49; emphasis added). A colonial in post-Independence (and of course, postcolonial) India is certainly an oddity—as Naipaul goes on to show—Malhotra, owing to his differentness (he is said to have rejected caste and class hierarchies) is an outsider, a “new man” with a “colonial eye” aspiring far above his station. Stuck in a time and place that only provided evidence for his allochronism, Malhotra—as Naipaul suggests—seems to echo the longing of Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men* (1967): “There, in Liege in the traffic jam, on the snow slopes of the Laurentians, was the true, pure world. We here on our island, handling books printed in this world, and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten” (p. 146). Like the island of Isabella with its primitive, decadent ways—far from the “true, pure world”—the India of Malhotra seems to have slid down the

²⁹Fabian distinguishes between the terms “anachronism” and “allochronism.” “Anachronism,” according to him, “signifies a fact, or statement of fact, that is out of tune with a given time frame; it is a mistake, perhaps an accident. I am trying to show that we are facing, not mistakes, but devices (existential, rhetoric, political). To signal that difference I will refer to the denial of coevalness as the allochronism of anthropology” (32).

temporal slope, especially for the Europe-returned “colonial”—the man with ambition, taken up by the spirit of modernism.

On his way to Kashmir, Naipaul encounters villages which he describes as “*fairy-tale villages set in willow groves*” (*An Area of Darkness* 99; emphasis added)—no doubt, a marker of the past, the “fairy-tale villages” sit uncomfortably with the “crowded courtyards of Colaba” or the “choked back-to-back mud houses” he encounters in the course of his journey in India. However, the author writes *in* and *from* none of these temporal or spatial constructs—writing from the *outside*, he is, admittedly, an “intruder” in these spaces and temporal planes which he variously describes as “quaint,” “medieval,” “ancient” and “derelict.” Such praxis of encoding time involves the linguistic expression of temporal relations with the effect of enhancing their topicality within the larger frame of the narrative. Temporalization, in this sense, anticipates the conceptualization of time within the framework of narrative or discourse as a purely connotative element, which is to say that it is often loaded with social, cultural, moral, political and aesthetic contents.

The term “ancient,” for instance, as used in the text at issue, is a case in point. While it is possible—though not absolutely—to accept its neutrality as a technical term connoting a sense of antiquity within the scope of the narrative, it is equally fatuous to disregard its potential for assuming political, aesthetic or moral connotations. The word “ancient” as a term connoting temporal relation suggests antiquity—a period in the remote past or even the diffused origins of a historical event for which no specific temporal marker is available. The same logic also applies to a term such as, “medieval.” While it invokes a sense of the past in its reference to a specific, locatable historical period in time, it can, as naturally, take on political, moral or aesthetic significance. Like the term “ancient” (in the current context), it suggests temporal distancing but

its semantic function within the text depends on how the relationship between the subject and the object is structured at the narrative level. If, for instance, the author locates the “ancient” or the “medieval” in a contemporary society he is investigating, then, as Fabian argues in the context of anthropology,³⁰ it is technically a descriptor applicable *exclusively* to *their* (the object’s) time and not to the author’s (or to extend the comparison, to the reader’s). So, describing the object’s time as “ancient” or “medieval”—and by that same logic, as not coterminous with the “time” of the one who describes or perceives it as such—indicates the denial of coevalness.

In the section entitled “Medieval City,” Naipaul describes Srinagar in the following words: “Beyond the Bund it was a *medieval* town, and it might have been of *medieval* Europe. It was a town, damp or dusty, of smells: of bodies and picturesque costumes discoloured and acrid with grime [. . .]” (*An Area of Darkness* 129; emphases added). Manifestly, the expression “*medieval* town” does speak of a temporal dislocation, but less obviously, it also points towards the disturbing notion of spatial/temporal inexactness (“it *might have been* of medieval Europe”). Likewise, the term “medieval” in the current context is purely connotative—being equally amenable to the ideas of distance, regression, decay, nostalgia for the past, etc. Also, if one calls to mind the representative aspect of writing—in the sense that writing *is* a mode of representation, a process involving, oftentimes, both the intentional construction of the object as well as a detached description of it—the semantic possibilities of verbal markers denoting temporal relations only seem to multiply.

³⁰ For more on this, see Fabian’s *Time and the Other*, especially ch. 3.

It is thought-provoking to note that Naipaul's use of "time" often seems to entail the intriguing juxtaposition of *different* times as evident in the following passage from *An Area of Darkness*:

Until that morning religious enthusiasm had been a mystery to me. But in that street, where only the police lorries and the occasional motor car and the microphone and perhaps the ice-cream sold by hawkers in shallow round tins were not of the middle ages, the festival of blood had seemed entirely natural. (134)

The "festival" in question is the Muslim festival of Muharram which believers observe by whipping themselves with sharp weapons and chains to mourn the murder of Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, in Kerbala. The association of the "festival of blood" to the Middle Ages also labels the flagellants—the believers—as allochronic, almost mythical figures belonging to a time that is certainly not the author's own. On the other hand, situated in a relation of relative propinquity with the author's "time" are only the police lorries, the motor cars, the microphone and the hawkers selling ice-cream. But these come across as just incidental to the spectacle of faith. Like the manifestly anachronic clock in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, they belong to a different age, a different time—their very modernity strikingly odd in the midst of a formidably medieval scene, almost to the point of being profane—they remind us that, at the narrative level, there are multiple formulations of time at work.

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