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On Naipaul's Cultural Positions in The Middle Passage

Shizen Ozawa
Kansai University

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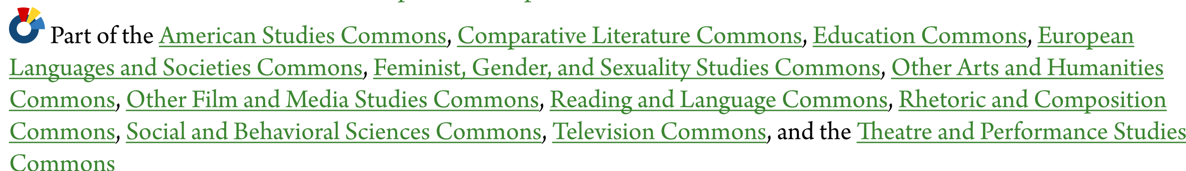

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Abstract: In his article "On Naipaul's Cultural Positions in *The Middle Passage*" Shizen Ozawa discusses V.S. Naipaul's first travel writing. An account of his "returning" journey to the five Caribbean "colonial societies," *The Middle Passage* constitutes a major turning point in Naipaul's literary career. Whereas his earlier novels depict his homeland of Trinidad ironically, although with a certain warmth and sympathy, from *The Middle Passage* on the world depicted both in his fictions and non-fictions turns bleaker. Correspondingly, his authorial persona changes from that of a West Indian writer to a controversial chronicler of chaotic postcolonial conditions. Ozawa analyses how Naipaul positions himself in relation to the Caribbean societies he describes and demonstrates that Naipaul characterizes himself strategically as a cultural insider in some passages and as an outsider in others. Naipaul's frequent references to Victorian metropolitan travelers are also discussed in terms of the Naipaul's cultural affiliations.

Shizen OZAWA

On Naipaul's Cultural Positions in *The Middle Passage*

In 1960, V.S. Naipaul, who had been seeking to establish himself as a professional writer in Britain, received a fellowship from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and "returned" to the Caribbean. *The Middle Passage*, a travelogue born out of this journey, is significant for two interrelated reasons. First, the publication of the work marked a new phase in the writer's oeuvre. *The Middle Passage* is his first work of travel writing, a genre which was to play a significant role in consolidating his controversial literary reputation. By the time of his travel, Naipaul had published three books of fiction. While in his earlier works he focused almost exclusively on the tragicomic lives of the Indian community of Trinidad, with *The Middle Passage* he starts to deal with the various socio-cultural problems of the Caribbean region and later of the "Third World" in general. Corresponding to this thematic development, his non-fictions and particularly his travel writings become increasingly important. As Rob Nixon argues, "by diversifying into nonfiction he has achieved a reputation of a unique different order, not merely as a powerful imaginative writer, but as a mandarin and an institution" (5).

Second, *The Middle Passage* also points to a significant change in Naipaul's cultural positions. Although various comments he subsequently made suggest otherwise, at the very beginning of his literary career, he was in fact strongly influenced by the cultural current out of which Anglophone Caribbean literature had been emerging at that time. His close involvement with the influential program *Caribbean Voices* should be recalled here; he started to hone his literary skills first as one of the contributors to the BBC Programme and later as its editor (see Ozawa). It is also the case that his early writings were often read and discussed alongside those of other West Indian writers. For instance, in 1961, L.E. Brathwaite contextualized Naipaul as one of the most important contributors to "the New Wave of West Indian writing" (275). Even the very fellowship which financially supported the travel in question testifies to his Caribbean connection. This scholarship was a part of a new cultural program which sought to lure back those artists who had established their reputation abroad (Hassan 178). It was Eric Williams, then the Premier of Trinidad, who initially suggested that the writer should produce a travel book (Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* n.p.). The work, however, points to a rapidly widening cultural gap between Naipaul and the Caribbean region. The very fact that it was published by the metropolitan publisher André Deutsch despite the source of its funding is somewhat suggestive of Naipaul's cultural affiliation. Correspondingly, other Caribbean writers responded with some hostility. John Hearne, for instance, gave the book a cold snub: "Mr. Naipaul's personal tragedy is that he believes his panic to be unique, or rather that the society from which he fled in panic is uniquely and horribly worthless" (65). To put it schematically, then, by writing *The Middle Passage* Naipaul ceases to be a West Indian novelist and starts turning himself into a controversial chronicler of what he regards as the chaos of the postcolonial world.

I explore how this self-transformation is reflected in *The Middle Passage*. In particular, I analyze how Naipaul positions himself in relation to the Caribbean societies he describes and demonstrate that Naipaul characterizes himself strategically as a cultural insider in some passages and as an outsider in others. It is this switching of cultural positions, I argue, that buttresses his controversial socio-cultural analyses and creates a certain narrative authority, which later becomes a hallmark of his travel writing. In order to analyze *The Middle Passage* from such a perspective, it would be helpful to consider briefly why travel became so important to Naipaul. In 1984, the writer looked back on the journey in question and elaborated as follows: "In 1960 I was still a colonial, travelling to far-off places that were still colonies, in a world still more or less ruled by colonial ideas … To travel was glamorous. But travel also made unsuspected demands on me as a man and a writer, and perhaps for that reason it soon became a necessary stimulus for me. It broadened my world view; it showed me a changing world and took me out of my own colonial shell; it became the substitute for the mature social experience — the deepening knowledge of a society — which my background and the nature of my life denied me. My uncertainty about my role withered; a role was not necessary. I recognized my

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own instincts as a traveller, and was content to be myself, to be what I had always been, a looker. And I learned to look in my own way" (*Finding the Centre* 11).

It is banal to say that travel provides various kinds of stimuli and expands one's cultural horizons. What is distinctive about Naipaul, however, is his claim that travel enabled him to get out of his "colonial shell." Travel provided Naipaul "with the substitute for the mature social experience" (11) which, it is implied here, is available to those who have not gone through the colonial experience, but not to those who have been colonized. While this questionable hypothesis can be read as one manifestation of Naipaul's allegedly uncritical internalization of Western cultural values, what is significant for my analysis is that travel — and writing about it — is clearly conceptualized as an effective method of self-fashioning. Journey becomes a means of gaining self-confidence, and of removing the ingrained cultural inferiority complex that derives from Naipaul's own colonial status. Nevertheless, at the time of writing *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul was far more uncertain about what travel meant to him. We can detect this uncertainty in the minor differences between the editions. While I cannot find any noticeable differences in the main text of the first edition and that of a recent paperback edition, there is a stark difference in the two versions of the foreword. The recent edition only briefly records the writer's initial hesitation as to whether he should write about his travel experiences. Interestingly, the reason for this unease is explained more fully in the foreword to the first edition: "To analyse and decide before writing would rob the writer of the excitement which supports him during his solitude, and would be the opposite of my method as a novelist. I also felt it as a danger that, having factually analysed the society as far as I was able, I would be unable afterwards to think of it in terms of fiction and that in anything I might write I would be concerned only to prove a point" (5). This passage reveals Naipaul's initial anxiety about the generic difference between fiction and travel writing. Presumably because of its non-fictional nature, the genre necessitates "analysis," which, as he seems to fear, might stifle his literary imagination. This anxiety suggests an interesting possibility that at the time of writing this foreword, he still very much intended to produce fictions that would be thematically similar to his earlier works. Whether this is the case or not, during the journey, he clearly defines himself as a "novelist," rather than "a travel writer." This self-definition is closely related to another significant difference between the two versions of the foreword: in the more recent one, Naipaul almost completely deletes the names of those who offered help at the various stages of the journey, thereby characterizing himself as a more independent traveler. These differences seem to be minor, yet they are revealing in that they reflect the writer's retrospective attempt to underline the narrative authority that is the distinctive feature of his travel writing. Thus, the main body of *The Middle Passage*, which did not go through such later modifications, should reveal all the more clearly how Naipaul at the time of writing struggled to find a voice that he deemed appropriate for a travel writer. To explore this dimension further, I now turn to the chapter on his first destination, Trinidad. Interestingly, he begins his narrative of "return" by confessing his anxiety:

> As soon as the *Francisco Bobadilla* had touched the quay, ship's side against rubber bumpers, I began to feel all my old fear of Trinidad. I did not want to stay. I had left the security of the ship and had no assurance that I would ever leave the island again. I had forgotten nothing: the wooden houses, jalousied half-way down, with fretwork along gables and eaves, fashionable before the concrete era … The years I had spent abroad fell away and I could not be sure which was the reality in my life: the first eighteen years in Trinidad or the later years in England. I had never wanted to stay in Trinidad. When I was in the fourth form I wrote a vow on the endpaper of my Kennedy's *Revised Latin Primer* to leave within five years. I left after six; and for many years afterwards in England, falling asleep in bedsitters with the electric fire on, I had been awakened by the nightmare that I was back in tropical Trinidad. (33-34)

This admission of anxiety is in surprising contrast with the earlier section of the narrative. There, in the description of the voyage from England to the Caribbean, a more self-confident persona is constructed. Naipaul achieves this by sketching the "middle passage" between the metropolis and the West Indies as the interstitial space where cultural meanings and identities become much more fluid. For instance, he muses on a passenger's personal effects: "in the baby's basket one saw the things of England, a few minutes ago commonplace, now the marks and souvenirs of the traveller" (2). In the in-between space, mundane objects assume different cultural connotations. Similarly, the sea voyage is perceived in terms of its transforming effects on the passengers: "As England receded, people

prepared more actively for the West Indies. They formed colour groups, race groups, territory groups, money groups" (13). One chief role of these descriptions lies in implicitly highlighting the writer's cross-cultural sensitivity; he is portrayed as capable of detecting subtle cultural transformations occurring across the geo-cultural boundaries.

For the purpose of characterizing the narrator as such a perceptive traveler, differentiation from other travelers is also an important strategy. For instance, in the description of his train journey to Southampton, he focuses upon a West Indian who fights back against the "mother" country's racism that is symbolized by "aggressive landlords and foremen and Please No Coloured signs" (4). Once aboard the ship, he gives a detailed explanation of a Mr. Mackay, who, "like all good West Indians," "was unwilling to hear anything against England" (10). Naipaul's slightly ironic tone creates a critical distance from his travel companions, who are more or less trapped in the colonial binarism. By way of implicit comparison with them, the narrator is portrayed as a more impartial observer. This self-confidence underscores, and at the same time is reinforced by, assertive cultural verdicts. For instance, the West Indian gets "lost as soon as he steps out of his own society into one with more complex criteria" (13), so the writer avers. By the time he declares that "history is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (20), the persona of a confident cultural observer is firmly established. For this reason, the acknowledgement of his "old fear of Trinidad" in the quote above leaves a strong impression.

While Gillian Dooley argues that Naipaul, by emphasizing the work's personal dimension, does not even try to be an impartial observer (39), such a reading seems to play down the controversies surrounding Naipaul's ideological position. To explore the significance of the passage quoted above from a more nuanced perspective, it would be helpful to recall here the role that arrival scenes perform in travel narratives. Mary Louise Pratt points out that scenes of arrival articulate the relationship between travelers and the places they visit, thereby defining the characteristics of travelogues (79-80). In the case of *The Middle Passage*, what is dramatized is the writer's ambivalent status as a reluctant returnee. Therefore, as John Thieme points out, there exists some "tension between the perspectives of foreigner and local" (141). Nevertheless, the tension in question is far more productive than Thieme sees it, in that it is Naipaul's returnee status that enables him to speak as a cultural insider as well as an outsider. Despite his intense anxiety, the very fact that he had left the island successfully and spent many years abroad implies the possibility that he can observe his home country from the somewhat detached perspective of an outsider. At the same time, his tie with Trinidad is still strong, even if it takes the perverse form of the fear that he might never be able to leave the island again. His ambivalence toward his "home" partly derives from the fact that he knows its darker sides too well; he "had forgotten nothing." This doubling of insider and outsider statuses, I argue, is precisely what rhetorically underscores Naipaul's questionable cultural analyses. In order to demonstrate my point, let me turn to a few typical passages.

As if trying to fend off his fear of being trapped again and protect his sense of self, Naipaul immediately starts criticizing Trinidadian society from various fronts. What he calls its "slightly flawed modernity" (34) is his particular target: "to be modern is to ignore local products and to use those advertised in American magazines. The excellent coffee which is grown in Trinidad is used only by the very poor and a few middle-class English expatriates. Everyone else drinks Nescafé or Maxwell House or Chase and Sanborn, which is more expensive but is advertised in the magazines and therefore acceptable. The elegant and comfortable Morris chairs, made from local wood by local craftsmen, are not modern and have disappeared except from the houses of the poor. Imported tubular steel furniture, plastic-straw chairs from Hong Kong and spindly cast-iron chairs have taken their place" (40). What underpins the argument here is the distance and difference between the writer and other Trinidadians. While the latter are implied to be blind to the US-American cultural influence that is epitomized by the magazine advertisements, the former can perceive what they cannot see, presumably because his cross-cultural experience enables him to see his native land from the perspective of a somewhat detached observer. At the same time, his difference from other metropolitan travelers also lends a certain authority to his cultural analysis. It would be difficult for an outsider to notice that excellent coffee is grown in Trinidad, let alone that only "the very poor and a few middle-class English expatriates" consume it. In this respect, the narrator is a cultural insider. The

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reference to the Morris chairs serves a similar function. On the one hand, it implicitly draws attention to the narrator's local knowledge; it is very unlikely that tourists would even know of the existence of the local products that have all but disappeared. On the other hand, it is a harsh critique of other Trinidadians, who have been, in his opinion, so completely brainwashed as to choose uncritically whatever is advertised. Only he is capable of appreciating the beauty and "true" value of the local product, so it is implied. Thus underscoring his authority, Naipaul presents the conclusion of his cultural analysis: "modernity in Trinidad, then, turns out to be the extreme susceptibility of people who are unsure of themselves and, having no taste or style of their own, are eager for instruction" (41).

It is not only in this passage that Naipaul uses his autobiographical anecdotes as supporting evidence for his generalized cultural views. This is how the writer explains Trinidad's long colonial history. According to him, the country "never hardened around the institution of slavery as it had done in the other West Indian islands." Ironically, however, for this very reason, it had to accept various ethnic groups in order to cope with the labor shortage. As a result, Naipaul claims: "Trinidad was and remains a materialist immigrant society, continually growing and changing, never settling into any pattern" (48-49). Denying any potential for cultural creolization, he concludes as follows: "All this has combined to give it [Trinidad] its special character, its ebullience and irresponsibility. And more: a tolerance which is more than tolerance: an indifference to virtue as well as to vice. The Land of the Calypso is not a copywriter's phrase. It is one side of the truth, and it was this gaiety, so inexplicable to the tourist who sees the shacks of Shanty town and the corbeaux patrolling the modern highway, and inexplicable to me who had remembered it as the land of failures, which now, on my return, assaulted me" (49). It is highly questionable whether Trinidad can be really characterized by "its ebullience and irresponsibility" and "the absence of a history" (49) as such. Nevertheless, Naipaul presents this controversial claim as "one side of the truth," once again by changing his cultural positions deftly. This time, he implicitly sides with the tourist; why Trinidadians could be so irresponsibly happy in the face of their country's grave social problems is "inexplicable" not only for the visitor but also for Naipaul the returnee. At the same time, his earlier experience in Trinidad corroborates the outsider's impression from the viewpoint of a local. Trinidad is thus branded as "the land of failures."

As this typical example shows, the image of Naipaul as an autonomous and self-conscious individual and the representation of the colonized as uncritical mimics define and reinforce each other (Nixon 133). Here is what Naipaul has to say about the contemporary situation of West Indian literature: "Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands. Here the West Indian writers have failed. Most have so far only reflected and flattered the prejudices of their race or colour groups. Many a writer has displayed a concern, visible perhaps only to the West Indian, to show how removed his group is from blackness, how close to whiteness … To the initiated one whole side of West Indian writing has little to do with literature, and much to do with the race war" (64-65). What is presented here is a highly dubious idea that Caribbean writers are obsessed with the colonial desire for cultural whiteness. Nevertheless, what makes this debatable thesis apparently convincing is that it is presented as what metropolitan observers would fail to notice; it is perceivable only to "the initiated." Here, Naipaul differentiates himself from Western critics who are presumably unfamiliar with the political and cultural conditions of the Caribbean. In a sense, he plays the role of a native informant, but his tone is much assertive. Noticeably, he confidently discusses the Caribbean literary scene in general, not limiting himself to the cultural situation of Trinidad. At the same time, he clearly distances himself from other Caribbean writers who have been allegedly too much preoccupied with "the prejudices of their race or colour groups." He differentiates himself by criticizing them. Unlike them, he is not conditioned by the "prejudices," and freely pursues a more "authentic" literature, so the narrative implies. It is this critical distance that underscores, and at the same time is underscored by, Naipaul's controversial conclusion that "if the West Indian writer is to be blamed, it is because, by accepting and promoting the unimpressive race-and-colour values of his group, he has not only failed to diagnose the sickness of his society but has aggravated it" (66).

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The frequent quotation from Victorian travel writings can be considered as another strategy for establishing the persona of a confident writer. Notoriously, Naipaul quotes what Anthony Trollope, Charles Kingsley, and James Anthony Froude have to say about the Caribbean region, without realizing, so it seems, the imperialistic dimensions of their texts. He even uses a passage by Froude as the work's epigraph, which ends with the provocative remark that "there are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own" (n. p.). The whole text of *The Middle Passage* can be read, then, as a demonstration of how the verdicts of Froude and others are still valid in the West Indies of the early 1960s, at the time when some of the islands were about to gain political independence. Of course, the ideological implications of these quotations have been hotly debated. Nixon, for instance, perceptively argues that "the effect of such rhetorical maneuvers is to support his contention that "no attitude in the West Indies is new" and, more dangerously, his insistence that the West Indies are permanently "half-made" societies, devoid of history and sealed against the possibility of change" (45). Highlighting the alleged continuity with the past, Naipaul implies that the cultural malaise he criticizes is too deeply rooted in history to be cured.

But how can we read such quotations from the Victorian travel writings in terms of Naipaul's strategic cultural positioning that I have been trying to pinpoint in this article? As we have already seen, Naipaul conceptualizes travel as a means of sloughing off his colonial background. Quoting Victorian travelers approvingly seems to be a way of associating himself with the metropolitan culture, and this is how most Naipaul scholars interpret it. In Nixon's reading, for instance, "the gesture of articulating his experiences through a Victorian tradition of travel is symptomatic of his need to rid himself of the West Indies by ventriloquizing an English identity" (49). Nevertheless, the crucial separation between Naipaul and Victorian writers lies in what they focus upon. Whereas Naipaul offers his devastating critiques of the so-called cultural myopia of the colonized, most of the passages he quotes as supporting evidence for his observations actually refer to the European settlers in the Caribbean. While it is certainly true that Froude imperialistically condemns the African Caribbean, his offending remark, which Naipaul uses as his epigraph, was originally made in relation to the alleged failure of European colonization of the West Indies (Froude 306). His views are so ethnocentric that he sees the West Indies only in terms of its relation to Europe. Tellingly, the title of his travel writing is *The English in the West Indies*. Similarly, a passage from Trollope, which Naipaul quotes as corroborating his own observation concerning the cultural mimicry of the West Indians (41), actually refers to "one phase of that love for England which is so predominant a characteristic of the white inhabitants of the West Indies" (Trollope 21). Therefore, it would not be entirely accurate to say simply that Naipaul, by quoting Froude and others, mimics an English identity. While he does inherit from them a certain self-confidence that underpins his questionably generalized views on the Caribbean, his identity inevitably emerges as subtly different from that of his predecessors precisely because he discusses the cultural condition of the colonized as a returnee. While his insider status lends apparent authority to what he has to say, it also betrays his difference from his Victorian predecessors.

In fact, the impossibility of his total identification with the earlier metropolitan travelers may be one factor that makes the narrative of *The Middle Passage* so strident. In his autobiographical novel *The Enigma of Arrival*, published in 1987, Naipaul looks back on his journey in question: "I knew and was glamoured by the idea of the metropolitan traveler, the man starting from Europe. It was the only kind of model I had; but — as a colonial among colonials who were very close to me — I could not be that kind of traveler, even though I might share that traveler's education and culture and have his feeling for adventure … The fight between my idea of the glamour of the travel-writer and the rawness of my nerves as a colonial traveling among colonials made for difficult writing" (153). No matter how much Naipaul desires to model himself on "the metropolitan traveller," the very cultural proximity to the travelees reminds him inevitably of his own status as "a colonial among colonials." The "fight" in question is most noticeable in the Trinidad section of *The Middle Passage*, simply because it is his "home" country, where travelees were the closest to him. If this is the case, how does Naipaul's ambivalent cultural position affect the subsequent narrative of his visit to other parts of the Caribbean region? Thieme argues that as Naipaul travels farther, the narrative becomes more personal, because metropolitan assumptions are reduced (146). However, it seems to me that Naipaul's confidence as a

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self-appointed analyst of the cultural problems of the West Indies becomes increasingly conspicuous. It is as if Naipaul presents his controversial judgment more freely once he is released from his ambivalent relationship with his "home" country of Trinidad. On the ethnic tension between "Negroes" and Indians in British Guiana, for instance, he asserts, "racial antagonisms, endlessly acting and reacting upon one another, and encouraged by the cynical buffoons who form so large a part of the politically ambitious in every population, are building up pressures which might easily overwhelm the leaders of both sides and overwhelm the country" (*The Middle Passage* 134). In Surinam he also criticizes the racial tension: "Despite all the talk of culture, however, Surinamers have little idea of the diversity and richness of their own country … One Nationalist even suggested that the existence of Javanese and Indian culture in Surinam was a barrier to the development of a national culture! This pointed to the confusion and the unexpected racial emotions that lie at the back of the Nationalist agitation" (175). These two examples typically show the confidence with which Naipaul delivers his verdicts. Regional difference does not prevent him from making questionable generalizations. It is also noticeable that similar observations are repeatedly made. This is partly because *The Middle Passage* "retains something of a diary's shapelessness" and therefore similar topics recur without any logical order (White 21). Such repetition results in a monotonously bleak picture of the Caribbean societies.

Naipaul also emphasizes how colonialism influences and distorts nationalism in the region. Highlighting the brutality of slavery in British Guiana, he writes that "the African, as a result, is passionate for independence, and for him independence is not so much an assertion of pride as a desire to be left alone, not to be involved. Hence the number of African prospectors in the interior of British Guiana, who never make a fortune but live happily beyond the claims of society and just within the law" (118). Even in Surinam, where there are apparently "no inflammatory political issues, no acute racial problem[s]," he finds the damaging effects of colonialism: "colonialism distorts the identity of the subject people, and the Negro in particular is bewildered and irritable … Nationalism in Surinam, feeding on no racial or economic resentments, is the profoundest anti-colonial movement in the West Indies. It is an idealist movement, and a rather sad one, for it shows how imprisoning for the West Indian his colonial culture is" (169). Naipaul cannot even imagine that nationalism might be an active response to colonialism on the part of the colonized. Also conspicuous in these passages is that his tone is particularly harsh when he discusses what he regards as the racial inferiority complex of the Afro-Caribbean that is historically determined. His prejudice against the black majority, which might derive from Naipaul's own Indian background (Thieme 142), seriously impairs his vision. As Gordon Rohlehr rightly points out, while the writer realizes that the self-contempt of the Afro-Caribbean is a product of history, he completely fails to notice their efforts to regain their lost dignity (131). As a result, the Caribbean people, and particularly the Afro-Caribbean majority, are described as totally determined by colonialism and therefore devoid of any potential for political and cultural autonomy.

Interestingly, however, there is one moment in which Naipaul's confident tone is very much, if not completely, diminished. This occurs at the very end of the chapter on Surinam. Naipaul visits the rural district of Coronie, feeling curious about its African-Caribbean inhabitants who are reputed to be "the idlest people in Surinam" (193). Initially, he is disappointed to find that there is nothing special about the town. Nevertheless, what truly surprises and disturbs him there is the presence of an old Indian man. Born in India, the man had come to British Guiana as an indentured laborer, returned to India after his indenture, and, indenturing himself again, came back to the Caribbean. Despite the man's abundant travel experiences, his worldview remains very limited, so he claims: "he could scarcely conceive a world outside British Guiana and Coronie — even India had faded, except for a memory of a certain railway station — but he felt that the outside world was the true, magical one, without mud, mosquitoes, dust and heat" (196). What Naipaul regards as the man's cultural unmooring leaves a strong impression on him: "A derelict man in a derelict land; a man discovering himself, with surprise and resignation, lost in a landscape which had never ceased to be unreal because the scene of an enforced and always temporary residence … I was glad to leave Coronie, for, more than lazy Negroes, it held the full desolation that came to those who made the middle passage" (197). Here, Naipaul seems to face a concrete manifestation of the effects of colonialism which he has discussed so far in a highly generalized manner. His strong emotion, which shows itself in the appearance of the "I" as a

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speaking subject in the quote, may partly derive from the fact that the old man, like Naipaul's own grandfather, was born in India and came to the Caribbean as an indentured laborer. The writer's attempt to characterize himself as a self-confident traveler à la Froude is temporarily disrupted, perhaps because the Indian man's life inevitably reminds him of his own background. However hard he tries to dissociate himself from the Caribbean, it continues to haunt him; he is forced to admit that he is affected by "the full desolation that came to those who made the middle passage." While Naipaul does not elaborate further on the impact of this encounter, it is certainly true that the issue of cultural rootlessness becomes a major theme in his subsequent works, such as *The Mimic Men* and *In a Free State*.

The last two chapters on Martinique and Jamaica can be read as a kind of damage-limiting exercise, wherein Naipaul seeks to re-establish his narrative authority. For the purpose, he pays particular attention to the pernicious effects of tourism. He critically observes that speculative land buying by US-Americans steadily dispossesses local people. Nevertheless, his criticism once again targets the latter, rather than the larger inequality of power. He asserts: "Every poor country accepts tourism as an unavoidable degradation. None has gone as far as some of these West Indian islands, which, in the name of tourism, are selling themselves into a new slavery. The élite of the islands, whose pleasures, revealingly, are tourist's pleasures, ask no more than to be permitted to mix with the white tourists" (198). Using the phrase "selling themselves," Naipaul attributes all the present problems to the Caribbean people themselves. By doing so, he seeks to articulate a distance between himself and the islanders.

The ending of *The Middle Passage* one more time repeats the gesture of differentiating himself from both the Caribbean and the West. Naipaul concludes his travel narrative with a report on his sojourn at a very expensive tourist resort. The cordial invitation by its owner who wishes "to offer hospitality to someone connected with the arts" (235) suggests that Naipaul was treated as a minor celebrity during his travels. Nevertheless, he cannot enjoy his stay there. In the end, he states, "I couldn't be a tourist in the West Indies, not after the journey I had made" (240). While one critic reads this episode as a "scene of metamorphosis where he ceases to be a local and becomes instead a visitor" (Mustafa 87), it is important to consider what type of "visitor" the writer has become. Here again, he sets himself apart from the putatively insensitive Western tourists who are able to enjoy their tourist experience despite the grievous political and cultural situations that he describes. At the same time, a sense of detachment from the Caribbean is implied by his high-sounding conclusion that Jamaica "was only generating selfishness, cynicism and a self-destructive rage" (234). In short, he presents himself as someone who chooses to stay in the cultural interstice between the Caribbean and the West. This narrative strategy underpins the writer's controversial claim that he arrived at what he had to say in *The Middle Passage* because he "refused to go in with preconceived notion" (Naipaul, "A Conversation" 83).

To conclude, most of Naipaul's cultural verdicts in *The Middle Passage* are problematic in that he interprets one-sidedly problems in the Caribbean societies as self-inflicted, rather than as imposed from outside (Nixon 64). Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that such dubious observations have been highly evaluated by a certain readership. Stephen Schiff's view is typical: "it is true that Naipaul has regarded most indigenous Third World liberators with a cold eye, but history has borne him out on that point" (151). One reason for the popularity of Naipaul's travel writing, this paper suggested, is that he manages to present his analysis with apparent conviction by switching his cultural positions rhetorically. While many critics view Naipaul as simply getting rid of his West Indian identity, he, when necessary, strategically retains his position as a cultural insider and uses it to the maximum extent. The title *The Middle Passage* can certainly be read as referring to the struggle that the Caribbean went through to establish a new sense of cultural identity at the time of Naipaul's journey (Rohlehr 128). With the benefit of hindsight, it is also possible to read the title as pointing to his own transition from a promising West Indian writer to a controversial chronicler of the chaotic postcolonial world. As if attempting to solve his ambivalent relationship with the Caribbean, from *The Middle Passage* onwards, he fashions himself more determinedly as an assertive analyst of the so-called Third World. Even if most of Naipaul's remarks in *The Middle Passage* are unpleasantly

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condescending, it does not mean that the work is unimportant in that it is here that Naipaul begins to establish his persona as a distinctive postcolonial traveller.

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Author's profile: Shizen Ozawa teaches postcolonial literature and culture at Tamkang University. His interests in research include Anglophone postcolonial literature, cross-cultural interactions, and travel writing. Ozawa's publications include "Mapping, the City, and Naipaul's *Miguel Street*." *Mapping the World, Culture, and Border-crossing* (Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and I-Chun Wang, 2010), "Erasing Footsteps: On Some Differences between the First and Popular Editions of Isabella Bird's *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*." *Asian Crossings: Travel Writing on China, Japan and Southeast Asia* (Ed. Steve Clark and Paul Smethurst, 2008), and "Connecting the Past and the Present: A Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*," *Journal of Comparative Literature* (2006). E-mail: <natural@mail.tku.edu.tw>