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Ethnography, Translation of Cultures and History in V. S. Naipaul's India Trilogy, *The Loss of El Dorado* and *A Way in the World*

The genre of travel writing is not only informed by an interdisciplinary aesthetic but also involves the description of peoples and the translation/re-presentation/re-interpretation of cultures. This article provides important clues as to how ethnography can be made to function as a legitimate mode of cultural and literary criticism. In doing so, this article seeks to establish that just as the ethnographer's systematic study of the Other entails the possibility of gaining knowledge about the self, the travel writer's knowledge of the Other, too, can often lead to a veritable gain in consciousness. Representation of the past or of history so to speak, as well as of the present which springs from that history, form a major preoccupation in Naipaul's travel writing. To construct the present which, as a temporal category, is fairly problematic insofar as it is ephemeral and ever-fleeting and cannot be described without referring to *what was* or *has been*, one must begin with what one believes to be an understanding of the past – of history, per se. This study demonstrates how intensely emotional encounters with *pastness* inform the ways in which history is developed and narrativized within the discursive field of travel writing.

Keywords: V. S. Naipaul; travel writing; ethnography; history; translation of cultures

Introduction

The literary oeuvre of V. S. Naipaul is characterized mainly by its penetrating examination of migration and displacement in the context of the great historical, geo-political, and socio-cultural shifts springing from Europe's colonial practices in the so-called Third World. In addition to this, Naipaul's work, which is also perceived as a searing critique of postcolonial societies, reflects his engagement with the history of colonization, the historical and cultural complexities contributing to the eventual failure of decolonization and their far-reaching impact on peoples and societies. Much of Naipaul scholarship focuses on these (and other related) aspects of his work. This article, for its part, focuses on the rich and complex relationship between Naipaul's India trilogy, *The Loss of El Dorado* and *A Way in the World* on the one hand, and the discourses of ethnography, history, and culture, on the other. It is divided into two sections.

The first section of this article takes a long look at the persona of the travel writer as an ethnographic commentator writing from an avowedly introspective position. The structures and effects of the Indian labour migration of the nineteenth century cast a long, dark shadow over Naipaul's work and although he never quite addresses the issue either directly or at length, it is felt to inform and shape some of his deepest convictions about colonial rule and relations. It is to the Indian/Hindu Diaspora of the Caribbean that he owes his earliest impressions of India. And even though that India of his childhood – a place which he physically visits only in middle age – turns out to be primarily heterotopic in import, it is nonetheless a crucial starting point of the arduous structuring of the Other, the hauntingly ambiguous ancestral land of the India trilogy.

The second section of this article focuses on Naipaul's confrontation with the varied elements in the history and culture of the ancestral land and the New World. It examines the travelling persona as a point of crucial convergence: that between the individual and the changing externalities of history and civilization. This is especially important in understanding the author as an individual addressing her/his subject and the subject's fashioning of the author into the narrative he produces. Besides, this section – in its analysis of Naipaul's 2001 Nobel Lecture, "Two Worlds," alongside the other primary texts at issue – takes a long look at Naipaul's aesthetic engagement with landscape as cultural memory. In summary, this section seeks to show the ways in which Naipaul uses an amalgamation of travel writing and fiction to narrativize the ancestral land and imaginatively reconstruct the aboriginal past of Trinidad.

Travelling to Translate: The Travel Writer as an Ethnographic Commentator

The applicability and extension of the label of "ethnographer" to the contemporary travel writer may no longer be relevant – given the virtual erasure of homogeneous communities and the subsequent de-mystification of the romantic idea of the *pure native* – but the role of the travel writer as an ethnographic commentator still continues to be significant for the purpose of analyzing cultures. This is especially true of the kind of travel writing that evinces a shift from the directness of geographical exploration in favour of a more introspective position. For instance, in Naipaul's India trilogy (comprising *India: An Area of Darkness* [1964], *India: A Wounded Civilization* [1977] and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* [1990]), the geographical setting is often peripheral – particularly, when it is made to serve as a backdrop for the discursive construction of authorial subjectivity. Naipaul's formulation of "location" in the India trilogy (as also elsewhere in his travel writing) echoes James Clifford's exposition of the concept (*Routes* 1997) as "an itinerary rather than a bounded site – a series of encounters and translations" (*Routes* 11).[1]

It must be remembered that Naipaul's journey to India in the latter half of the twentieth century is founded on the historical facticity of the large scale labour migrations from Asia to the New World that took place in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.[2] For had his forebears not emigrated to Trinidad to work on the plantation farms of the Caribbean, the unique circumstance shaping the logic of his inquiries in India would hardly have actuated his travels in the subcontinent a little over half a century later. Consequently, and as the India trilogy goes on to confirm, Naipaul's decoding of the ancestral land (India) is undertaken in the context of specific histories (for example, labour migration and the establishment of the Indian Diaspora in the Caribbean) and their respective courses of development.[3] While it is interesting to note that Naipaul's triptych study of India is inflected by elements of travel writing, history, autobiography and anthropology, the subject of cultural translation – which is inextricably tied to the method of travel writing – seems, albeit predictably, to problematize representation.

It is in relation to the challenges posed by cultural translation that this section of my article seeks to examine the liaison between travel writing and the anthropological discourse or, more

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[1] Clifford writes: "Thinking historically is a process of locating oneself in space and time. And a location . . . is an itinerary rather than a bounded site – a series of encounters and translations" (*Routes* 11).

[2] In *The Way of the World* and *The Loss of El Dorado*, Naipaul thematizes the history of labour migrations in the New World.

[3] For more on Naipaul's representation of the ancestral land, see my article, "Decoding the Ancestral Land: The Poetics of Place, Space and Time in V. S. Naipaul's India Trilogy." *Postgraduate English: A Journal and Forum for Postgraduates in English* 36 (2018).

specifically, that between travel writing and ethnographical writing. While Naipaul's methodology in the India trilogy cannot be comprehensively equated with that of the ethnographer's fieldwork, this study seeks to touch upon some points of convergence which underscore Naipaul's use of ethnographic techniques within the discourse of travel writing. However, his espousal of these techniques is less obvious than, say, those evinced by white, European anthropologists whose racial difference from the (veritably non-white) "objects" of their inquiry not only legitimized their authority as the progenitors of knowledge about the (essentially non-white) Other but also reinforced the notion of anthropology's provenance in the academe of the West.

Just like the ethnographer who travels to the "field site" in order to study localized societies of *natives*, the travel writer, in essence, travels to, and writes about, sites of cultural encounters – raising, in the process, important questions about some of the commonest assumptions pertaining to social existence. Concomitantly, approaching the actual experience of travel from a perspective similar to that of the ethnographer's would be to both acknowledge the complexities inherent in the experiences of *dwelling* and *displacement* and to critically examine the cultural effects of movement and stasis. For instance, Naipaul's journey to the land of his forebears can, justifiably, be read in connection to the history and effects of (European) colonialism and imperialism and the resultant socio-cultural structures of such formidable historical forces. As this article indicates, not only is Naipaul concerned with highlighting the cultural effects of colonialism on India and its people in his India trilogy, but also (perhaps, with a greater urgency) with the synergistic experiences of displacement and attachment transforming and rearticulating postcolonial futures.

On the other hand, to the modern ethnographer the field site comprises a space of continual cultural encounters – a space marked as much by dwelling as travelling. Such space, as the ethnographer's study would likely yield, is ambivalent, heterogeneous, just as the space that the traveller travels *in* and *through* is, in its being a complex concatenation of routes and experiences. Therefore, instead of taxonomies, theories and pronouncements (reminiscent of traditional methodologies of travel and anthropological research), the discursive practices of travel/ travel writing and ethnography – in their most earnest endeavours – seem to offer what one may broadly call *cultural translations*. So, to consider the traveller/travel writer as an ethnographic commentator is also to emphasize his role as a cultural translator. Such a view is principally based on two primary theoretical positions: that "the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts" (Geertz 452) and that it is possible to *read* (or, decode or, decipher) forms of culture through representational/ translational practices.

The convergence of travel and ethnography can be further illustrated through the example of Amitav Ghosh's 1992 book, *In an Antique Land*, which is tellingly subtitled, "History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale." The book, which is a curious amalgam of history, travel writing, ethnography and autobiography, fuses ethnographic research (undertaken in the two Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy in the early 1980s) with the imaginative reconstruction of a twelfth century Jewish trader's (Ben Yiju) and his slave's ("the slave of Ms. H.6") lives from extant documents found in the Cairo Geniza.

What is of foremost concern in the current context is the fact that Ghosh's book is founded on travel: Ben Yiju, a medieval Jewish merchant, "originally of Tunisia, who had gone to India by way of Egypt, as a trader, and had spent seventeen years there" (Ghosh 19), travels to India; his slave, Bomma, to Egypt. So does Ghosh, the writer, who is from India and who travels to Egypt (via England) to conduct his research. The translation of cultures is common to both travel and ethnography – both the traveller/travel writer as well as the anthropologist/ethnographer travelling to, writing about, or researching on cultures and societies other than their own. Apart from linguistic

issues which often pose a veritable challenge to the act of translation (as Ghosh obviously faces in Egypt and Naipaul, if only partially, in India – not being "native" to Egypt and India, respectively), interpreting "modes of thought" (Lienhardt 95) or particularized and unique ways of representing reality is essentially the most formidable challenge facing the ethnographer/travel writer.[4]

As Ghosh's evocative (if somewhat hostile) conversation with the "Imam" of the Egyptian village where he was staying at the time clearly demonstrates, these "modes of thought" often lead to unexpected discoveries. Amidst his palpably "alien" subject, Ghosh comes to realize, by way of an angry confrontation with the Imam, that "(w)e were both travelling, he and I: *we were travelling in the West*" (236; emphasis added). While on the surface this admission seems to speak of the impacts of colonialism and imperialism on indigenous societies, at a deeper level, it goes on to confirm the pervasiveness of Western paradigms of knowledge in the non-West.[5] What is particularly significant in this context is the ethnographer's realization of an "objective" truth about himself through a systematic study of the Other.[6] This personal element to an otherwise objective study of an indigenous society is also observable in Naipaul's use of the travelogue in the Indian context.

To read *An Area of Darkness*, for instance, is to experience the contingency and conflicts of postcolonial identity.[7] Here, the narrative tone – reflecting the author's self-consciousness pitched against the challenges of objective cultural study – vacillates between a sense of belonging and premeditated detachment resulting in what Rob Nixon calls "a forceful instance of the potential for interference between the goals of self-portraiture and cultural description" (80). That *An Area of Darkness* embodies these discordant voices of belonging and separation, secrecy and rupture, and promise and anguish bespeaks its narrative complexity together with the problematic nature of identity formation and the development of selfhood:

> And in India I was to see that so many of the things which the newer and now perhaps truer side of nature kicked against – the smugness, as it seemed to me, the imperviousness to criticism, the refusal to see, the double-talk and the double-think – had an answer in that side of myself which I had thought buried and which India revived as a faint memory. And to me it is an additional marvel that an upbringing of the kind I have described, cut short and rendered invalid so soon, should have left so deep an impression. (*An Area of Darkness* 30–31)

Part of Naipaul's vulnerability in India, his ancestral land, stems from the shedding of the protective carapace that is forced on him by the greater disregard of the Bombay crowd naturally and naively ignorant of his ethnicity. This, again, doubles as a rather traumatic experience of exclusion:

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[4] This is, however, a relatively modern phenomenon. While it is no longer normative to ignore the "social context" underpinning the interactions between the itinerant writer/researcher and her/his "alien" subject(s), according to John Beattie, "[f]or the earlier anthropologists problems about the modes of thought of so-called 'primitives' scarcely arose with any complexity. It was easy for the Victorians to assume that such thinking as they did was simple and 'childish' (this was one of their favourite adjectives); a very inferior version of their own" (65).

[5] This includes Ghosh himself, as both men (Ghosh and the Imam) end up ceding their pre-eminence only to the West. Both men – through their spontaneous acceptance of the superiority of Western technology – seem to confirm the essentially imperialistic view noted by Michael Adas: "Those involved in the colonies and intellectuals who dealt with colonial issues came to view scientific and technological achievements not only as the key attributes that set Europe off from all other civilizations, past and present, but as the most meaningful gauges by which non-Western societies might be evaluated, classified, and ranked" (144).

[6] In the Introduction to his *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, anthropologist Paul Rabinow describes the objective of his book as "the comprehension of the self by the detour of the comprehension of the other" (ix). Rabinow's insight is particularly relevant here as it can be used to emphasise the latent link between travel (writing) and ethnography.

[7] For a relatively recent critical evaluation of Naipaul's contradictory subject positions, refer to Lisle 112–15.

And for the first time in my life I was one of the crowd. There was nothing in my appearance or dress to distinguish me from the crowd eternally hurrying into Churchgate Station. In Trinidad to be an Indian was to be distinctive. To be anything there was distinctive; difference was each man's attribute. To be an Indian in England was distinctive; in Egypt it was more so. Now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being denied part of my reality. Again and again I was caught. I was faceless. I might sink without a trace into that Indian crowd. I had been made by Trinidad and England; *recognition of my difference was necessary to me. I felt the need to impose myself, and didn't know how. (An Area of Darkness* 39; emphasis added)

However, as a travel writer, Naipaul feels obliged to retain the objectivity of the observer and an "illusion of complete knowledge" of his surroundings, an idea inherited from Dickens.[8] Furthermore, his own homelessness, a condition central to his personal experience, brings into sharp focus the wider issues of migrancy and dislocation. Naipaul's sojourn to India occasions the revelation of his curious position as a colonial Trinidadian East Indian with vague but discernible echoes of an Aryan/Brahmin heritage. His identity as a colonial and a cosmopolitan travel writer in post-Independence India is further complicated with his insistence on his differentness from the subject he sets out to explore. The constitution of his persona, as the India trilogy clearly demonstrates, relies to a great extent on this differentness, the cultural disparity that separates him from the land of his ancestors and its people.

Travel Writing and the Artifice of History

Naipaul embodies a global rootlessness, a ubiquitous displacement that sets him apart from his peers as the solitary writer in exile.[9] As Rob Nixon observes in *London Calling*, Naipaul "has come to be celebrated as the ultimate literary apatride" (17). It is a rather curious coincidence that he is also the most autobiographical of travel writers of the twentieth century, playing off his detachment against the well-established literary traditions of his time. The autobiographical elements in his work not only form an integral part of his literary discourse but also, to a great extent, formulate it. Consequently, the great body of his literary narratives, of which travel writing constitutes an important part, can be read as a synoptic analysis of both his personal history as well as the history of the literary canon that traces its transit from the West Indies to the United Kingdom in the 1940s and 50s.

But how far, in reality, does the art of the imaginative writer differ (if at all), from that of the historian? Does the "literature of fiction" counterpoint the "literature of fact" (White, *Tropics of Discourse* 121) so much so that they come to represent purely opposed and opposite sensibilities? Given the fact that conventional historiography was considered as literary art even well into the eighteenth century,[10] it is worthwhile to examine the nature of the circumstances and the social

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[8] For more on this, see V. S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*, 145.

[9] Naipaul's peers include George Lamming, Sam Selvon and Derek Walcott, who like Naipaul, headed towards the metropolitan culture of London in search of a literary tradition that was conspicuously absent at the time in the West Indies. However, as pointed out by Rob Nixon in *London Calling*, for authors like Lamming and Walcott, life in London was intricately tied to their experiences as a minority community in the metropolis. Naipaul was already a member of the minority group in Trinidad – although not an underprivileged member, given his upper caste affiliation within the resident Indian community.

[10] "Prior to the French Revolution," writes Hayden White, "historiography was conventionally regarded as a literary art. More specifically, it was regarded as a branch of rhetoric and its 'fictive' nature generally recognized" (*Tropics of Discourse* 123).

processes that led to the consolidation of the ideological difference(s) between fiction (as in literary art: for instance, imaginative travel writing) and fact (as in historiography, or the traditional representation of the past in the form of factual and coherent written discourse). According to Hayden White, "[i]n order to understand this development in historical thinking, it must be recognized that historiography took shape as a distinct scholarly discipline in the West in the nineteenth century against a background of profound hostility to all forms of myth" (*Tropics of Discourse* 123–24). Emphasizing a similar predilection for fact over fiction (primarily, characterizing the Western empiricists), Joan-Pau Rubiés in his essay, "Travel Writing and Ethnography," has attributed the rapid proliferation of (European) non-fictional travel writing throughout the Renaissance to a more or less generalized desire for useful information,[11] a trend that can be seen as a precursor to the romantic idealization of authenticity (as opposed to fanciful depictions of other cultures and peoples) in modern and postmodern cultures.[12]

One of the implications of a positive bias for methodical empiricism and objectivity is the emergence and intensification of the perception that travel writing as a literary form is naturally committed to objectivism or realism and that, in this respect, its representative value derives from its conscious (or sometimes even inadvertent) attempts to de-fictionalize or demythologize that which it claims to represent. However, such a view is as susceptible to short-sightedness as was that of the nineteenth century historians who obstinately clung to the position that facticity alone was sufficient to produce authentic knowledge about peoples and cultures. As Naipaul's travel writing so explicitly suggests, the imaginative reconstruction of history does not benefit from facticity alone. In the Prologue to *The Loss of El Dorado*, for instance, he writes:

> To the conquistador where there were no wonders there was nothing. A place was then its name alone, and landscape was land, difficult or easy. Valleys, mountain ranges, peaks, woods, meadows, rivers, plains and springs, with naked, noble natives: this inaccurate catalogue is a Spanish priest's description of Trinidad in 1570. The spareness of much Spanish narrative is a Spanish deficiency. Untouched by imagination or intellect, great actions become mere activity; it is part of the Spanish waste. El Dorado becomes an abstraction; deaths become numbers. (27)

While on the one hand, Naipaul insists on the significance of both "imagination and intellect" for his task of reconstructing the past from his personal memory or archival records, he is wary of fiction's presumptive (if flawed) disassociation from truth. "The legend of El Dorado," he writes, "narrative within narrative, witness within witness, had become like the finest fiction, indistinguishable from truth" (*The Loss of El Dorado* 26). He further emphasizes the surprising propinquity between fact and fiction in his commentary on the transformation of myth (that of El Dorado) into the colonizers' (here, the Spanish conquistador Antonio de Berrio) fantasy: "Fact and fiction meet" (*The Loss of El Dorado* 27). In this connection, it will be rather useful to investigate the relationship between veracity and reality – particularly, in the context of travel writing – and the relationship between the narrator and what s/he narrates.

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[11] Rubiés writes: "Despite the variety of forms of travel writing, it may be possible to generalise that the desire for information, for mainly practical purposes, lies behind the growth of the European genre of non-fictional travel writing throughout the Renaissance" (243).

[12] This is evident in the rise of mass tourism in the twentieth century that was propelled to a great extent by the tourist's search for authenticity – the real, the unspoiled past and the purity of others that endorse the differentness of her/his personal experiences.

This section of the article refers to the Greek concept of *parrhesia*[13] [παρρησία] or, as most commonly translated in English, free speech (or, "frankness in speaking the truth"), using it as the theoretical framework for Naipaul's India trilogy. According to Foucault, telling the truth about an event is a specific activity involving a specific role within a given socio-cultural context. Consequently, the emergence of multiple "truths" or different versions of the reality, though natural, problematizes representation. Since travel writing presupposes a certain degree of fictionalizing, one might, on this occasion, recall that the origin of the word "fiction" is in the Latin root, *fingere* (form, contrive, shape). *Fingere* may imply a certain degree of falsehood as in the usage that connotes the action of "making up" rather than the infinitive "to form." "Hermeneutic philosophy," writes James Clifford, "in its varying styles, from Wilhelm Dilthey and Paul Ricoeur to Heidegger, reminds us that the simplest cultural accounts are intentional creations that interpreters constantly construct themselves through the others they study" (*Writing Culture* 10). Concomitantly, it is relevant in the current context to investigate what Foucault fashioned as "the problem of the truth-teller, or of truth-telling as an activity" (Foreword *Fearless Speech*).

Foucault initiates a comparison between the Greek conception of *parrhesia* and the Cartesian conception of evidence by suggesting that while the "coincidence between belief and truth" in the former occurred in a speech activity (i.e., *parrhesia*), in the latter such coincidence came about purely in an evidential experience. In other words, according to Foucault, the classical *parrhesiastes* is confident about the truth of her/his belief – so much so that there is no room for doubt – whereas the Cartesian *parrhesiastes* cannot be certain of the truth without the support of clear and indubitable evidence.[14] However, there always remains an element of risk in *parrhesia*; by telling the truth, the *parrhesiastes* risks her/his reputation, valence, social standing – even her/his life, in the most extreme of cases.

The writer (or the social/cultural/political critic, for that matter), as the truth-teller, is faced with a similar problem: by telling what s/he believes to be the truth, s/he risks the authority and veneration central to her/his aspect. This might be tantamount to a situation where the writer, in her/his endeavour to tell the truth, positions herself/himself in and through her/his writing against the views of the majority and thus risks losing her/his popularity.[15]

Naipaul's unpopularity in the so-called Third World, when viewed from this perspective, can be explained without much difficulty, although his role as a *parrhesiastes* in the classical sense may

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[13] According to Foucault: "In parrhesia, the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks. The word 'parrhesia' then, refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says." (*Fearless Speech* 12). This introduces one to the complex nature of truth and the problems inherent in the act of truth telling.

[14] Since the validity of cognition is limited and changes in relation to time, truth, too, is subjective and is likely to change in relation to time. Truth is almost always wedded to a "standpoint" which restricts its cogency – making it dependent on human perception and the social forces that shape it (see Horkheimer). Similarly, it is worthwhile to consider Kant's view on things as "representations" or "appearances" in the current context.

[15] In *Fearless Speech*, Foucault writes: "the *parrhesiastes* risks his privilege to speak freely when he discloses a truth which threatens the majority. For it was a well-known juridical situation when Athenian leaders were exiled only because they proposed something which was opposed by the majority, or even because the assembly thought that the strong influence of certain leaders limited its own freedom. And so the assembly was, in this manner, 'protected' against the truth" (18).
The role of the truth-teller, is therefore problematized as it generates a spate of complex questions: *Who* is entitled to assume the role of the truth-teller? Is evidential experience imperative for truth-telling or is the "coincidence between belief and truth" that occurs in verbal activity sufficient? And finally – in line with the Foucauldian theory of power – *what* has the activity of truth-telling to do with the "exercise of power"? Does the truth-teller, by telling the truth, threaten to upset the existing power equations in her/his society?

be disputed on the ground that the relationship between the speaking subject (i.e., Naipaul himself or his surrogate self) and the grammatical subject of his discourse (i.e., India or Indians, in the current context) is not analogous to that between a relatively powerless speaker and his relatively dominant audience. However, as an individual critic of India and its civilization (as evident in the India trilogy), Naipaul does qualify as a political *parrhesiastes* – someone who, willingly and at the risk of losing his popularity and credibility as a writer, takes upon himself the task of revealing truthfully the shortcomings of the society he surveys. For instance, in *An Area of Darkness* – a book that many consider to be a deeply pessimistic account of India – vivid descriptions of dereliction, poverty and squalor attest to Naipaul's fixation with the afflictive and the disconsolate realities of the places he travels *in* and *through*. Alternatively, this whole exercise of "negative sightseeing"[16] and its subsequent chronicling can be interpreted as the evidential experience of truth that the writer has as a *parrhesiastes* in the Cartesian sense. In other words, the coincidence of belief and truth in *An Area of Darkness* precludes uncertainty as it derives from the certitude proffered by evidential experience.

As the purpose of this study is also to examine the extent to which travel writing and history correspond with and inform each other, the subsequent paragraphs of the article will discuss Naipaul's *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969) and *A Way in the World* (1994) with the objective of assessing the extent to which narratives of travel interact with and, in a sense, generate the histories of places they seek to describe, (de)fictionalize or represent *differently*. This, most certainly, transports one to the domain of historical travel writing; to the dialogic relationship between the travel writer and the history of the place s/he writes about; to the cultural processes that dictate the imagining and conceptualization of the Other as an epistemic category; and, finally, to the travel writer/historian's treatment of history as a function of her/his perception of strangeness and alterity. It is in relation to these ideas and, most importantly, to the cultural encrustations that inform Naipaul's travel writings that this article seeks to analyze the complexities of historical consciousness underlying the traveller's *I*.

Just like historical discourse, the discourse of travel writing is a verbal structure – organized in the form of prose narrative – that seeks to represent past events from a certain ideological orientation. In his 2001 Nobel Lecture, Naipaul emphasized the complexity inherent in representing the past by acknowledging that his "background is at once *exceedingly simple* and *exceedingly confused*" ("Two Worlds;" emphases added), describing it thus:

> I was born in a small country town called Chaguanas, two or three miles inland from the Gulf of Paria. Chaguanas was a strange name, in spelling and pronunciation, and many of the Indian people – they were in the majority in the area – preferred to call it by the Indian caste name of Chauhan. I was 34 when I found out about the name of my birthplace. I was living in London, had been living in England for 16 years. I was writing my ninth book. This was a history of Trinidad, a human history, trying to re-create people and their stories. I used to go to the British Museum to read the Spanish documents about the region. ("Two Worlds")

He found out about the Chaguanes – the aboriginal tribe that once lived on both sides of the Gulf of Paria – from archival documents in the British Museum. The Chaguanes were, most likely, obliterated by Spanish colonizers for resisting Spanish hegemony and colluding with the British.[17]

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[16] See MacCannell.

[17] In an official letter to the then governor of Trinidad (dated 12 Oct 1625), the king of Spain Philip IV ordered punitive action against the intractable Chaguanes. Naipaul quotes the English translation of this letter he discovered in the British Museum in his Nobel Lecture, "Two Worlds" (2001).

It is, therefore, ironical that the memory of the Chaguanes and their history should be exhumed from colonial archives – with British government scholars having copied the documents from the Spanish archives in Seville. The reconstruction of pre-colonial history in *The Loss of El Dorado* and *A Way in the World* owes much to archival knowledge although the close connection between archives and power remains, for the most part, veiled.

The fragmentariness of historical knowledge pertaining to the aboriginal Indians contributes to a profound epistemological crisis in which the fragment is all that is possible to salvage from the ruins of time. Such crisis, it must be remembered, tends to mythologize any conception of totality. The resurfacing of the Chaguanes in the British Museum is particularly revealing – given that both "museum" and "archive" are heterotopias[18] or non-places, existing outside of time. The role of the archive, as well as that of the museum, in the production of subjectivity is evident in Naipaul's subsequent imagining of the Chaguanes:

> There was a vague story when I was a child – and to me now it is an unbearably affecting story – that at certain times aboriginal people came across in canoes from the mainland, walked through the forest in the south of the island, and at a certain spot picked some kind of fruit or made some kind of offering, and then went back across the Gulf of Paria to the sodden estuary of the Orinoco. The rite must have been of enormous importance to survive the upheavals of 400 years, and the extinction of the aborigines in Trinidad. Or perhaps – though Trinidad and Venezuela have a common flora – they had come only to pick a particular kind of fruit. I don't know. I can't remember anyone inquiring. And now the memory is all lost; and that sacred site, if it existed, has become common ground. ("Two Worlds" 2001)

The fascinating resurfacing of a forgotten tribe from the annals of the British Museum affirms the function of the archive as a political and epistemological technology,[19] a logical technique of power used to organize and categorize people both spatially and temporally. The extent to which archival knowledge is implicated in relations of power and the extent to which it mechanizes epistemological beliefs (also assumptions) can be reasonably assessed from Naipaul's rendition of the Caribs in *The Loss of El Dorado*. The Caribs, "reportedly" practitioners of cannibalism, are portrayed as "savages," the very opposite of their (civilized) Spanish colonizers. This position is reiterated in *The Middle Passage*, where the aboriginal Amerindians are thus described by Naipaul:

> Everyone knows that Amerindians hunted down runaway slaves; it was something I heard again and again, from white and black; and on the Rupununi, and wherever one sees Amerindians, it is a chilling memory (98).

In her essay "V. S. Naipaul and the Interior Expeditions" (2007), Sandra Pouchet Paquet has pointed out that colonial administrators struck deals with local tribes with a view to easing administrative hassles. Whether one faults Naipaul's description (of the Amerindians) on grounds of elision or epistemological assumption, it is clear that both epistemic ambivalence and the inadequacies of the archival apparatus are responsible for pushing the idea of history as absence: "(a) disappearance, and then the silence of centuries" ("Two Worlds" 2001).

For Naipaul, as his philosophy of history would attest, history (or any systematic study of the past, for that matter) presents an impression not of progress but of decay. His dismissive attitude

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[18] Foucault defines heterotopias as places "which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality." For more on this, see Foucault's "Of Other Spaces."

[19] Here, the word archive is used broadly in the sense of a modern artefact and a political instrument wielded by the state.

towards the Amerindian (in *The Middle Passage*) is counterpointed by the elegiac tone with which he apprehends the history of Trinidad (in the Nobel lecture, for instance) – the mystery of the name "Chaguanas" where he was born and the uncertain genealogy of collective memory:

> The people who had been dispossessed would have had their own kind of agriculture, their own calendar, their own codes, their own sacred sites. They would have understood the Orinoco-fed currents in the Gulf of Paria. Now all their skills and everything else about them had been obliterated. ("Two Worlds" 2001)

This naturally brings us to the question of the conceptualization of history in the Naipaulian oeuvre that engages a number of significant cultural and literary discourses. To be specific, Naipaul engages with critically relevant issues, such as the strategic use of travel writing and narrative fiction in the imaginative reconstruction of the past, and the possible means of articulating an idea of "historical consciousness" in and through his writing.

In the section entitled "New Clothes: An Unwritten Story" in *A Way in the World*, Naipaul appraises the problems of reconstructing the past: "The narrator is going up a highland river in an unnamed South American country. Who is this narrator? What can he be made of? This is often where fiction can simply become false" (45). But when it comes to the imaginative reconstruction of history, his tone is unmistakably tragic – as if in viewing the aboriginal land from the same vantage point as the travellers of yore, he is already aware of the fact that the (purportedly) accessible history which the archive affords is technically irretrievable – being just a "fragment" of the absent "whole." The dispossession of the Amerindians and the Chaguanes (also, more generally, of the immigrant) as Naipaul informs, concomitantly, adds up to a cataclysmic commotion – an obliteration of the old, familiar world – which is, paradoxically enough, not wholly devastating as it is almost always (but hardly for the victims of such monumental disturbance) appended with a "gain in consciousness."[20]

Following the two World Wars of the twentieth century and the resistant movements that rocked the erstwhile European colonies soon afterwards, travel writing came to occupy a position of particular political relevance. The post-war period was also marked by active debates and developments in the field of literature which enabled the reading/ interpreting of texts from different theoretical perspectives. This critical emphasis on interpretation not only affected how one made sense of non-native cultures but also how one *read* history as a record of man's political, social, cultural and economic development over the ages.

Conclusion

The attention accorded to travel writing in recent decades is not merely due to the genre's capacity to provoke questions with regard to the politics of representation, the complexities inherent in inter-cultural translation or the visible or invisible grids of power dissecting human societies across the globe but also, as Naipaul's travel writing indicates, on account of the insights it has generated pertaining to the nature of fact (as opposed to fiction) and the use of rhetorical figures in the construction of meaning. However, travel writing as a literary form continues to be preoccupied with problems of representation, the principal among these being the truth value of representation, the difficulties of cultural translation and the complexities immanent in the implications of the (original) desire to travel and explore.

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[20] As to what the nature of this "gain" might be, Hayden White informs that it "is thought to consist in the epiphany of the law governing human existence which the protagonist's exertions against the world have brought to pass" (*Metahistory* 9).

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