

Beyond Calypso: New Perspectives on Sam Selvon

Warwick University, Millburn House, 2 July 2011

SCHEDULE

- 09.00-10.00** **Registration (tea, coffee, snacks)**
- 10.00-10.15** **Welcome address**
- 10.15-11.15** **Keynote 1: Alison Donnell (University of Reading) “The Island and the World: Kinship, Friendship and living together in selected writings of Sam Selvon”**
- 11.15-12.15** **Panel 1: Selvon’s Neglected Texts**
- “Island Philosophy: Thinking Between the Particular and the Universal in Sam Selvon’s *An Island Is a World*” (Lorna Burns, Glasgow)
 - “Selvon’s Black Britons: On the Page, on the Air, and on the Silver Screen” (Stephanie Decouvelaere, Lyon 3)
- 12.15-12.45** **Selvon Sound Archive: Interview & Short Story with Introduction by Selvon’s Niece, Alison Gibb**
- 12.45-14.00** **Lunch**
- 14.00-15.00** **Panel 2: Selvon in Context**
- “Selvon in the Archive” (Letizia Gramaglia, Warwick)
 - ““The Sex Life Gone Wild’: Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Andrew Salkey’s *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960)” (Kate Houlden, Queen Mary University London)
- 15.00-15.30** **Reading by Vahni Capildeo**
- 15.30-15.45** **Break (tea, coffee and biscuits)**
- 15.45-16.45** **Keynote 2: Kenneth Ramchand (University of Trinidad and Tobago) “The Other Sam Selvon”**
- 16.45-17.00** **General Q & A and Close**

This event is supported by the Warwick University Yesu Persaud Centre for Caribbean Studies, the Lyon 3 University Institute of Transtextual and Transcultural Studies, and the School of English, the Humanities Research Centre and the Research Skills Programme at Warwick University.

A WORD OF WELCOME

Welcome to Beyond Calypso: New Perspectives on Sam Selvon. With this event, we want to celebrate the literary legacy of Sam Selvon by providing a forum for new approaches to his work. This conference grew out of conversations between Malachi and Stephanie at the Society for Caribbean Studies UK conference 2010, when we realised that our papers offered reconsiderations of the existing scholarship on the two well-known aspects of his work: the Indo-Trinidadian experience of creolization, and the Caribbean experience in London. It seemed that the time had come for a new cycle in thinking about Selvon's classic, humane works. Having enlisted the help of Letizia, we are pleased to present a gathering of distinguished and emerging critical and creative voices to give tribute and reflect on the legacy of Sam Selvon.

The speakers today will contribute to this new cycle by changing the perspective: the focus will be on taking a wide-angle view by addressing the entire scope of his oeuvre, from lesser-known novels to works for the radio and the cinema, and by focusing on Selvon's place in the literary scene, whether of his time or in the present day through interventions by contemporary writers reflecting on his influence and legacy.

As well as moving forward towards an enriched understanding of Selvon's work, this will also be a time for looking back and remembering, as sound archives bring us back to his activities as a writer. We are delighted to welcome you to this event and we look forward to fruitful dialogue and reflection throughout the day.



ABSTRACTS

KEYNOTE 1

The Island and the World: Friends and neighbours and living together in selected writings of Sam Selvon

Alison Donnell (Reading)

The movement of inquiry must be directed towards humanization – the people's historical vocation. The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed. No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so. (Paulo Freire, [1970] 1996 66)

Much is written theoretically about the liquidity of Caribbean identity and yet the failure of lateral solidarities is an enduring and vexing issue facing many West Indian societies. The complicated entanglement of mutual hostilities and shared hopes for substantial freedoms across different ethnic, class and sexual groupings may be traced to the distinctive history of the Caribbean region. The differently marked arrivals of Africans, Indians, Chinese, Irish, Syrians and other Europeans who were brought to the region as part of forced, misled and opportunist migrations, alongside the decimation of the majority of the indwelling populations by disease or violence meant that in this region, in a way that is more pronounced and extreme than almost anywhere else, the relation between people and place is discontinuous, layered and precarious. It

is in this context that we might best understand why the relations between peoples and their claims to belonging have assumed a competitive rather than supportive basis. Yet it is also in this context, of imagined, crafted and invented relations to others, that we may find the (literary) resolution to such lateral hostilities.

In his 1955 novel, *An Island Is a World*, Selvon's character Foster recognizes himself, as a Trinidadian, to be a citizen of the world, his subjectivity forged with an openness to others that he does not encounter on his travels to the motherland: "No one thinks: 'I am a human being, and you are another'." In his classic 1960 analysis of colonial relations, *The Pleasures of Exile*, George Lamming also highlights the exceptional cosmopolitanism of West Indian subjects:

We in the West Indies can meet the twentieth century without fear; for we began with colossal advantages. The West Indian, though provincial, is perhaps the most cosmopolitan man in the world. No Indian from India, no European, no African can adjust with greater ease and naturalness to new situations than the West Indian. (Lamming 1960: 37)

This lecture will reflect on the ethical privilege of West Indian sensibility that both Selvon and Lamming imply by reading across a series of acts of "living together" as neighbours and friends that Selvon's literary works represent. Whereas the family may serve as a microcosm of the conservative self-interested nation, "elected families" of friends and neighbours offer a different model of kinship in which concentric affiliation and solidarity is based on good will, care and kinship that can also accommodate diversity, strangeness and even rivalry.

PANEL 1: Selvon's Neglected Texts

Island Philosophy: Thinking Between the Particular and the Universal in Sam Selvon's *An Island Is a World*

Lorna Burns (Glasgow)

Written during the period immediately preceding the short-lived West Indian Federation, Sam Selvon's *An Island Is a World* reflects on the complex political climate of late 1940s Trinidad. National unity and identity, creole culture and the coherence of intra-Caribbean relations all fall under the spotlight as Selvon's characters seek to escape the confines of their small island. The novel's protagonist, Foster, in particular, spends much of the novel contemplating his own existentialist crisis and from the outset he appears almost incapable of action due to his feelings of insignificance. However, it is through him that Selvon frames a philosophical interrogation of the relationship between the particular existence of individual and the world (a relation signalled by the novel's title). This paper explores the philosophical arguments set out in Selvon's narrative, revealing their relevance both to the politics of nationalism and inter-Caribbean unity that shaped the context out of which the author wrote, but also to contemporary questions of postcoloniality. Contrary to the arguments of contemporary postcolonial theorists such as Parry, Hallward and Bongie, for Selvon's Foster submersion in the specificity of everyday life (as opposed to the universalist concepts that occupy his mind) represents a form of escapism and a forgetting of 'the actuality of life' (106): 'Life as it intrinsically is cannot be depicted. The artist steps over life to get at the person' (129). While for Foster, his obsession with

'Life' and his relative insignificance in the face of such universalist concepts prevents him from actually living, Selvon's art is well aware of the necessity of representing both the particular experience of this person or this place, while nevertheless reflecting something of the universal, of the world. Indeed, despite the charges of those postcolonialists who have rejected the literariness of postcolonial studies, this is precisely the value of literature. This paper argues that through Foster and other characters such as Andrews, Selvon's novel exposes the necessity of both particular and universalist ways of thinking about the world. At its heart, this novel like later works such as *The Lonely Londoners* probes the tensions between individual and society, but in doing so makes a case for the political and philosophical value of thinking about both the particular and the universal within a globalising world.

Selvon's black Britons: on the page, on the air, and on the silver screen.

Stephanie Decouvelaere (Lyon 3)

Selvon's novels set in Great Britain are best known for their depiction of the Caribbean immigrants who arrived in Britain to work during and after the Second World War. While children of Caribbean parentage born in Britain make brief appearances in *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and *The Housing Lark* (1965), only one black British character is prominent in Selvon's novels, the Black Power activist Brenda who challenges Moses in *Moses Ascending* (1975). The peculiar, in-between position and struggles of black youth born in Britain to Caribbean parents nevertheless formed an important part of Selvon's creative explorations in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Brenda has several precursors in original works Selvon wrote for the radio in 1968 and 1975, and in the young characters of Horace Ove's *Pressure* (1975), the screenplay for which Selvon co-wrote. These works in varied media are based on research and materials that are not related to Selvon's calypso-infused novels on the Windrush generation (unlike some of his other radio plays such as *Eldorado West One*, an adaptation of *The Lonely Londoners*). Taken together, they represent a distinct strand of Selvon's oeuvre. This paper will examine Selvon's detailed depictions, inflected by class, gender, and a reflection on the Caribbean experience, of generational conflict and ambiguous cultural positioning among black British teenagers and young adults.

PANEL 2: Selvon in Context

'The Sex Life Gone Wild': Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Andrew Salkey's *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960)

Kate Houlden (Queen Mary)

A number of critics have discussed the Summer time passages of Selvon's seminal 1956 novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, with analyses tending to emphasise the narrator's joyful response to the transformation of the city as the seasons change.¹ Here, I am more interested in the darker undertones of this well-known excerpt and the commentary it provides on the repressive aspects of British sexual culture. Offering abundant evidence for Selvon's claim that, 'in the big city the sex life gone wild', these passages detail the fantasmatic desires

¹For example, Susheila Nasta, *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1988).

of voyeuristic white men, cautious ‘pansies’ and English women ‘who want you to live up to the films and stories they hear about black people living primitive’.² In so doing, they not only refute the critical commonplace that there was little coverage of sex in postwar Caribbean literature but, I argue, they also anticipate later discussions of black male sexuality by writers such as Kobena Mercer, Rinaldo Walcott and Daniel Coleman.³ At the same time, Selvon gestures towards ideas made more explicit in the writing of his friend, Andrew Salkey. For that author’s 1960 novel, *Escape to an Autumn Pavement*, expands on such themes, ultimately contrasting the degenerate, racialised heterosexual fantasies of white populations against the ‘pure’ and brotherly love of a Jamaican man and his white, male friend. Although the heteronormativity of Selvon’s novel closes down any such alternative possibilities for loving, I nevertheless make a case for *The Lonely Londoners* being part of a body of postwar migrant writing, which can be mined for its illustration of the ways that the plantation lingered on in the British sexual imaginary.

Selvon in the Archive

Letizia Gramaglia (Warwick)

This paper offers a brief reading of letters and documents relating to Selvon's early career, his association with the BBC and in particular with Caribbean Voices. As well as conveying Selvon's ambitions and frustrations as a young aspiring writer, the materials selected encourage reflection on issues of literary canon formation, audience and circulation in the 1950s.

KEYNOTE 2

The Other Sam Selvon

Kenneth Ramchand (Trinidad and Tobago)

In his lecture, Professor Ramchand will ask what picture emerges when we consider the Sam Selvon who is not the creator of Tiger and Moses. He will consider the novels *An Island Is a World* (1955), *I Hear Thunder* (1963), *The Plains of Caroni* (1970), and *Those Who Eat the Cascadura* (1972).



PRESENTERS' BIOGRAPHIES

Lorna Burns is a postdoctoral tutor in English Literature in the School of Critical Studies at the University of Glasgow, where in 2007 she was awarded a PhD in contemporary Caribbean writing and postcolonial theory. From 2010 to 2011 she was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh's Institute

² Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (New York: Longman, 1979), 105-9.

³ See: Mercer, Kobena and Julien, Isaac. "Race, Sexual Politics and Black Masculinity: A Dossier", in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, (eds) Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford, 97-164. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988; Walcott, Rinaldo. "Fragments of Toronto's Black Queer Community: From a Life Still Being Lived (2005)", in *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles*, (ed) Thomas Glave, 360-7. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008; Coleman, Daniel. *Masculine Migrations: Reading the Postcolonial Male in 'New Canadian' Narratives*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.

for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, pursuing a research project entitled 'Caribbean Enlightenment'. She is the co-editor (with Birgit Kaiser) of *Deleuze and Postcolonial Literatures: Colonial Pasts - Differential Futures* (Palgrave, forthcoming), and co-editor (with Wendy Knepper) of a special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* dedicated to the writings of Wilson Harris (forthcoming, 2013).

Vahni Capildeo is a Contributing Editor for the *Caribbean Review of Books*. After a Research Fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge, Capildeo's sense of the living language was deepened forever by her time in the offices of the Oxford English Dictionary. She is glad of an enduring connexion with the North of England, following stints at the Universities of Sheffield and Leeds. Capildeo has since worked as a volunteer in Oxford Head Office and a Lecturer at the University of Kingston-upon-Thames. Her poetry and prose has been widely anthologized, most recently in *Identity Parade* (Bloodaxe) and *Trinidad Noir* (Akashic). Current influences include India's *Almost Island* and collaboration with Trinidad-based artist/urban observer Andre Baggio. *Dark & Unaccustomed Words* is the most lyrical and playful part of a three-part project exploring the boundaries of the human and the natural, and the oceanic or musical possibilities of poetic form. *No Traveler Returns* (Salt, 2003) is an oblique autobiography, where voices and places, past and present, are layered with a shinethrough effect. *Person Animal Figure* (Landfill, 2005), a shapeshifting dramatic monologue, is at the heart of *Undraining Sea* (Egg Box, 2009; Forward Prize Highly Commended poem). A companion volume of essays is to follow.

Stephanie Decouvelaere is teaching and research attaché in English at Jean Moulin Lyon 3 University in France. She completed a jointly supervised PhD in postcolonial and comparative literature at the universities of Kent and Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3, focusing on Caribbean and Maghrebi writing of post-war migration to Britain and France. Her research interests include postcolonial literatures, gender in black British writing, and literature, migration and psychosis.

Alison Donnell is Reader at the University of Reading, where she is the leader for the arts and humanities faculty research theme on Minority Identities, Rights and Representation. She is a founding and joint editor of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* and is on the editorial board of *The Journal of West Indian Literature* and *MaComere*, co-edited the *Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (1996) and edited the *Routledge Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture* (2002). She is also the author of a book-length revision of Caribbean literary history: *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (Routledge, 2006). She is currently working on a British Academy / Associated Commonwealth Universities sponsored project, 'Breaking Sexual Silences', with Professor Evelyn O'Callaghan of the University of the West Indies, Barbados, and a monograph study in the same field of enquiry, *Caribbean Queer: desire, dissidence and the limits of literary subjectivity*. Her 700-page *Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, co-edited with Michael Bucknor, was published in June 2011, and her monograph on Una Marson and Louise Bennett is forthcoming with Ashgate in 2012.

Alison Gibb is a poet living in Cambridge. She holds a BA (Hons) in Fine Art and a MA in Writing Poetry

from Kingston University, where she is currently completing a MFA in Creative Writing. Her poetry has appeared in a number of arts and poetry publications and her first pamphlet, *Parallel To Red In Chorus* is due out this summer, published by The Knives, Forks and Spoons Press. She also collaborates with artists and choreographers to produce live performances and recently participated in Beyond Text Conference 2011: Making and Unmaking Text Across Performance Practices and Theories.

Letizia Gramaglia is an Associate Fellow in the Centre for Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick. She obtained her PhD in Comparative Literature from Warwick with a thesis focusing on representations of madness in Indo-Caribbean writing. Her research interests include colonial and post-colonial literature, women's writing, Indian diaspora, and colonial psychiatry. Her edited collection (with David Dabydeen) *Coral Identities: Essays on Indo-Caribbean Literature* is forthcoming from Peepal Tree Press.

Kate Houlden has completed an AHRC funded PhD in the English Department of Queen Mary, University of London. She works primarily on questions of gender and sexuality in postwar Caribbean Literature, although she also has an interest in post-war British literature and Australian fiction.

Kenneth Ramchand is President of the University of Trinidad and Tobago, Professor Emeritus of English at the St. Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies, former associate provost at the University of Trinidad and Tobago, former Independent Senator in the Senate of Trinidad and Tobago, former Leverhulme Fellow of Warwick University, and an Emeritus Professor at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. He is one of the founding fathers of contemporary Caribbean literary criticism; his book *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* opened the field of study for Anglophone Caribbean literature in the academy. Professor Ramchand's research interests are in the sphere of Caribbean literatures and cultural and artistic expression. His work and his contributions to this artform have seen him rewarded with the conferment of the Chaconia Medal (Gold) of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.



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