September 2019

The Place is What You See

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“The Place is What You See”

Postcolonial Gazes, Labels, and Identities in V.S. Naipaul’s *A Flag on the Island*
Introduction

*A Flag on the Island* is V.S. Naipaul’s story of a Caribbean nation much like his own Trinidad and Tobago. It is thoroughly marked by the layers of complication formed as subjects construct and understand themselves through negotiation, performance, and opposition. In the very title, symbols and space are important elements of the story, which explores the effects of colonial and neocolonial presence. Naipaul tells the story across two timeframes, an earlier time when colonial presence was military, political, and thus confined and locatable, and a later time when the presence of the global north has become economic, and thus pervasive and diffuse. This results in each important element of the story possessing a kind of dual identity, one set of relationships for each of the two temporal settings of the story. These identities change not only through the intention of the characters, but importantly through the perception of others. The flags above the unnamed island and the way characters relate to them alert the reader to investigate what is happening when places and peoples are given labels. Whose flag flies over the island? What relationship does it create? In the context of the story, these questions become: who labels the Caribbean? How do the diverse individuals there think of themselves? How does the act of naming affect he who names? This close reading will consider the bidirectional effects of the gaze in hopes of understanding its operation in Naipaul’s story. When examined using the theories of Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, and Rey Chow *A Flag on the Island* begins to unfurl.

Many of Naipaul’s works are suitable for any postcolonial reading list, but *A Flag on the Island* is so rich as to warrant extended examination. By turns ironic and symbolic, *A Flag on the Island* is a good target for extended critical attention, of which it has seen little.¹ In this essay, I will provide a more in-depth examination of *A Flag on the Island* than has yet been done with

¹See Boxill (1976), Mohan (2004), Antoine-Dunne (2007) and King (1993). Complete citations can be found in References below.
attention to the narrator’s status as a white American. One of Naipaul’s few stories featuring a white narrator, *A Flag on the Island* invites us to examine both sides of the colonial relationship. Theorists have long examined the hegemonic gaze as it constructs and circumscribes the marginalized subject, and *A Flag on the Island* turns this formula around onto the imperialist. Naipaul does this by depicting two visions of the Caribbean: a ‘flagless island’ of creolization and play across boundaries and roles, and a more contemporary ‘tropical island,’ where the divisions between white European and Caribbean have become entrenched and impassable. *A Flag on the Island* opens the possibility of understanding the consequences for all of constituting identities through binary opposition, forcing us to examine the responsibilities and potential of the white European in the postcolonial Caribbean. What is at stake in postcolonial space is nothing less than the maintenance of the identity of the developed world, and though this dependence is ignored, it is not without consequences.²

**Theoretical Foundation**

Binary opposition, in the simplest sense, is the structuralist concept that things are defined relationally by what they are not. Another key concept for my reading is that of social performance, or the ways in which subjects attempt to control the behavior of others and meet the expectations of a social audience. These concepts meet in a third: that of the gaze. Social performance is demanded by the gaze of another, which calls on the subject to meet the notions that shape the viewer’s expectations. Jacques Lacan provides a concise, introductory description of the subject’s experience, appearing in another’s view: “what determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside” (Lacan 106). Lacan attended to what he

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²In Naipaul, Fanon, and Gilroy’s formulations, this dependence is ignored by the European, but has been described compellingly by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*, regarding the construction of ‘Englishness.’ See references below.
felt were the universal consequences of this experience for the subject, but the power of the gaze is different in different circumstances. The circumstance in question in Naipaul’s stories is the postcolonial space, shaped by a long history of othering gazes.

Rey Chow lays the groundwork for a reading of Naipaul that attends to gazes and expectations, connecting postcolonialism to Hegel’s concepts of objects, notions, and what things can be said to be-in-themselves and which are beings-for-others. Describing the postcolonial space in Hegelian terms, Chow tell us “it is a space in which the object (women, minorities, othered peoples) encounters in notion (Criterion for testing object), or in which the ‘being-in-itself’ encounters the ‘being-for-an-other’”(177). During this encounter, the individual is being called on to account for herself, and learns she is being seen not as existing in-herself, but as an object being tested against an essential criterion which it will either meet or fail to meet. Meeting this criterion then becomes a double-bind, as existence becomes conditional. The subject caught in this gaze loses the option of being-in-itself, and must either meet the criteria of the onlooker or disappear. Hegel adds that the necessarily imperfect correspondence of the object and the viewer’s knowledge of that object can create room for development of the notion: “the criterion for testing is altered when that for which it was to have been the criterion fails to pass the test” (qtd. in Chow 177). Challenging the notion of the viewer however, is not always the result of these encounters. Frantz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks* about the precondition of that alteration.

“Here I am,” writes Fanon, “an object among other objects. Locked in this suffocating reification, I appealed to the other so that his liberating gaze, gliding over my body suddenly smoothed of rough edges, would give me back the lightness of being I thought I had lost” (89). The smoothing of rough edges Fanon mentions is perhaps the erasure of that which does not fit
the notion the viewer holds. For Fanon, the dialectic fails the colonial subaltern: the antithesis has no existence. In order for the notion to be challenged, the object must have an ontology, and for Fanon this is impossible. He writes “The black man has no ontological resistance to the white man” and thus the gaze of the white man, even when it encounters an object which challenges its notion, remains unchanged: the rough edges are smoothed over (90). Fanon thus pessimistically articulates the suffocation of the subaltern or colonial subject under the gaze of the hegemonic, dominating Other. This is a destructive gaze, which simultaneously assigns to the subject negative characteristics, and does not allow the subject existence by which these notions could be challenged. In the gaze, Fanon feels “responsible for my body, responsible for my race, responsible for my ancestors. I ran an objective gaze over myself, discovering my blackness, my ethnic characteristics, and then I was deafened by cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships” (185-6). Fanon goes beyond Lacan by loading the gaze with history, insisting along with Chow that the Hegelian and Lacanian understandings of the effects of a gaze are insufficient when they fail to address key differences between subjects.

Having established Chow’s reading of Hegel in the postcolonial space and Fanon’s complication of the gaze which ruins the experience (*erfahrung*), and before approaching an alternative to the binary oppositions this encounter creates, we need to briefly discuss performance. Erving Goffman, whose name is perhaps most closely affiliated with this concept, writes in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, “When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him [. . .] information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them, and what they may expect of him” (120). Through social interaction, roles and expectations are created. In other words, the gaze of others informs the behavior of a subject as
he or she becomes aware of the situation. Importantly, Goffman adds that “regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind, and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interest to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him” (121). Performance appears in the postcolonial space as the othered person recognizes the futility, according to Fanon, of challenging the notion of the onlooker. Goffman however presents performance as an essential element of human interaction. Moving forward, we must recall that situations do not only demand performances, they are created by them. Thus, any situation calling on a subaltern other to perform and meet a notion is created in part by the onlooker’s naturalized performance of superiority. Our terminology now mostly developed, these brief definitions will find clearer articulation through the close reading below. Lastly, Stuart Hall will provide useful terms for describing the paradigm of binary opposition and the performances it demands (and by which it is supported), but he will also offer an alternative which we find in *A Flag on the Island*.

Stuart Hall’s descriptions of Caribbean identity provide the final terms for our foundation. Writing on Caribbean identity in the essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall insists that identity be thought of as ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being,’ so as to “properly understand the traumatic character of ‘the colonial experience.’ The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subject-ed in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization” (Hall 236). Whether or not identity is free to ‘become’ is dependent on one or more of these regimes of representation. We might think of these dominant présences as extended or hegemonic Goffmanian situations: a présence is a situation created not by interpersonal power but by historical power. The use of such power to normalize, to create new standards and expectations, is key to understanding the
change and loss that takes place over the course of *A Flag on the Island*, as identities which were once ‘becoming’ are forced to sit still and ‘be,’ characters are forced to meet the notion of the gazing Westerner, and “constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West” (Hall 236). This ossification of the subaltern subject’s performance into an identity occurs under the regime of what Hall names the *Présence Européenne*, which exudes a gaze that seeks out and understands identities through difference and opposition. It is “that which, in visual representation, has positioned the black subject within its dominant regimes of representation: the colonial discourse [...] the tropical languages of tourism, travel brochure and Hollywood” (Hall 242). This is some of the history with which the notion of the Caribbean subject is loaded. The *Présence Européenne* reveals “the dominating European presence not simply as the site or ‘scene’ of integration [...] but as the site of a profound splitting and doubling” as the subject must create an alter ego to appease the European gaze (Hall 242-243). This is in contrast to the *Présence Américaine*, which is “not so much power as ground, place, territory. It is the juncture-point where the many cultural tributaries meet [...] where strangers from every other part of the globe collided [...] it is the space where the creolizations and assimilations and syncretism were negotiated” (Hall 243). The *Présence Américaine* is then the place where diaspora experience begins for Hall. It is an alternative to the oppositional relation of self and other that constructs identity in the *Présence Européenne*. Hall’s diaspora experience “is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite difference” (Hall 244). In the *Présence Américaine*, ‘becoming’ is added to ‘being’ as the negotiations and creolizations of the Caribbean take place. Both présences appear in Naipaul’s story.

**Before and After**
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<td>Nucleus</td>
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We are now ready to attempt to articulate how the gaze functions in Naipaul’s *A Flag on the Island*. It appears as a gaze particular to what is sometimes called neocolonialism. In the latter of the story’s two temporal settings, the island is no longer politically dominated, but remains constrained by the lingering power of the global north; because the island is economically dependent on tourism, ‘the tropics’ must be created to meet the tourist’s expectations. The tropics are built from the inarticulate yet overdetermined notion of the audience, and their effective performance encourages the viewer to buy. ‘Buying it,’ in the sense of believing, is indeed an apt double entendre for our purposes, tying belief in the performance to economic support of the island. Beyond Fanon’s assertion that challenging the western notion is useless, the risk of challenging the criteria and the expectations of the visiting viewer becomes that the tourists, the audience, will not ‘buy it.’

In the end it is Naipaul himself who will challenge the reader’s expectations repeatedly, as he strives to remind us of the implicit consequence of binary opposition: that which seeks definition is always dependent on its opposite, haunted by its supplement. As the tourists arrive, we read the following passage (245), which deserves to be quoted in full:
In the smart reception building, well-groomed girls, full of self-conscious charm, chosen for race and colour, with one or two totally, diplomatically black, pressed island souvenirs on us: toy steel-drums, market-women dolls in cotton, musicians in wire, totem-like faces carved from coconuts. Beyond the wire-netting fence, the taxi drivers of the city seethed. It seemed a frail barrier.

“It’s like the zoo,” the woman said.

“Yes,” said her embittered husband. “They might even throw you some nuts.”

In this passage, our first sight of the ‘tropical island,’ Naipaul has packaged his vision of the postcolonial encounter in brilliant irony. We first see an obvious performance of the tropics to please the tourists, in the form of the reception committee, composed significantly of young women. But with the husband’s quip, the formula reverses: the tourists are the ones on display. Repeatedly, after this first encounter, Naipaul seeks to remind us that the roles on both sides of the gaze exist in mutual dependence. The role of the tourist and the deeper role on which it depends both exist in relation to the tropics. The deeper role I am thinking of is that of the European colonizer, for it is only through an ongoing belief in the superiority of the white master, which in the neocolonial space manifests as the smug satisfaction of the audience member, that the notion of the tropics and thus its opposite Europe finds definition. This is the cost of the Présence Européenne: neither party is free, both are fixed in their places.

This is the essence of the gaze as it functions in Naipaul’s story: the gaze is not only projected by a passive, unchanging viewer onto the objectified other but rather a relationship of other-seeing and self-defining which occurs simultaneously. In the belief that he is a neutral audience member, the dominating tourist is able to ignore the fact that his identity too is circumscribed, he too is a performer in costume. In believing his identity is self-determined, he is in denial of its performative and contingent nature, and is reassured by displacing performance

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elsewhere. The tourist avoids suffering under the weight of the notion, its existence is denied, he is deluded and blissful in his ignorance. If however the situation were reversed, and the tourist were called to account for himself in the way the othered person must, he would be nearly as shaken as Fanon. *A Flag on the Island* is the story of just such a reversal, where the white American man’s identity becomes circumscribed. Through his eyes, the installation of a flag on the island is shown to be a loss not only for the islanders, but for all who could have embraced that same space in the spirit of the *Présence Américaine*.

Understanding our narrator Frank and the tragedy of the story as a whole requires a clear division between the earlier, flagless island where Frank could intermix with others, freely changing his costume, and the later, tropical island where he feels compelled to choose against his will. The earlier island of wartime is one of encounters and free exchanges across cultural divides. But by the time the war ends, the island is becoming the tropical island of the tourists. During the war, Frank and his friends created a community where movement across and between cultures is possible. Frank finds this freedom at Henry’s, itself a creolized place (at once bar, club, house) where he can lose his uniform. Opposed to Henry’s (and never shown), the Army base is not presented as an American presence, but a tropical one: “it was we who brought the tropics to the island [. . .] the land was reclaimed from the sea, and the people [. . .] disappeared. On the reclaimed land we built the tropics” (Naipaul 258). The old version of colonial power on the island is confined to the base: Frank can leave it behind and go to Henry’s, where the Army bugle is saluted by soldier and islander alike, understood to be a mere custom which anyone can practice (Naipaul 263). Frank says of this time that “the island had seemed to me flagless. There

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4“Short for Frankenstein” (Naipaul 247). Spoken by Leonard the first time we learn the narrator’s name. Leonard is another fascinating character, a white European whose joke suggests that Frank’s mixed identity is terrible, unnatural to Leonard.
was the Union Jack of course, but it was a remote affirmation. The island was a floating suspended place to which you brought your own flag if you wanted to” (Naipaul 247). Most importantly, the affirmation of the Union Jack is “only one in a city of ridiculous affirmations [. . . ] on the flagless island we, saluting the flag, were going back to America; Ma Ho was going back to Canton as soon as the war was over; and the picture of Haile Selassie was there to remind Mr Blackwhite,⁵ and to remind us, that he too had a place to go back to. ‘This place doesn’t exist,’ he used to say, and he was wiser than any of us” (Naipaul 248). On the flagless island names and allegiances are understood to be essentially equal. The floating suspended place without a name, without a (single) flag, without existence, is the place of the *Présence Américaine*. When he returns to the island however, the Caribbean/Western divide has spread out onto the island, leaving Frank no place to reside. The boundary is no longer created by the fence around the base, it exists now in the minds of the people.

**Roles and Costumes**

On the flagless island, the nucleus of the story is Henry’s: a setting which is representative of the *Présence Américaine*, where each character brings something different to the place. When he first arrives, Frank tells us “I didn’t know the rules of Henry’s place and it was clear that the place had its own rules” (Naipaul 265). In some cases, the rules are strict: an American who lies about what he had to eat is banned,⁶ but when Frank’s clothing is stolen the next morning, Henry has no problem with it (Naipaul 263, 268). In *A Flag on the Island*, clothing is perhaps the most

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⁵Mr H J Blackwhite is without a doubt one of the most interesting characters in this story, and deserves significant critical attention which I unfortunately do not have room to provide here. He is, at different points in the story, an excellent illustration of the ideas of Paul Gilroy and Rey Chow’s ‘third-world’ intellectual.

⁶The lying American is given a chance to shed his role: offered the role of waiter, he fails by lying about what he owes, remaining the soldier. By taking advantage of the perceived power relationship between the Westerner and the islander, he reveals his allegiance to the *Européenne*, and must be banned from Henry’s.
obvious visual identity signifier, and Frank’s entry to Henry’s Caribbean family comes when his clothing is taken. Clothing is the clearest example in the story of the visual basis on which another’s gaze captures the subject. Changing clothing is therefore symbolic of departing from and playing with identities. As Frank lies with Selma, a regular of Henry’s he develops a relationship with, he watches his uniform disappear out the window. Later, Frank asserts that this is the moment that entangled him with Henry’s and the people there (Naipaul 268). The next day, Henry gives Frank a shirt to wear, symbolically marking him as hybrid and compatriot, one of the family. Giving a visitor a shirt, a costume, is central to the initial story of Henry’s. Henry, the creator and enabler of the Américaine diversity of the flagless island tells Frank “Any time I want a shirt, I just pass around these stores, and these girls give me shirts. We have to help one another” (Napiaul 267). Clothing another person is equated with helping them, symbolically tying help to identity play and change. Henry helps Frank by clothing him in a new role, by seeing him as other than a soldier, and insisting that his uniform is a changeable costume. We should refer to this special kind of help by Henry’s own term ‘corporation,’ meaning sharing culture and simultaneously acknowledging and allowing fluidity in the identity of others, as any meaningful (in the sense of the Hegelian erfahrung) cultural encounter must allow. ‘Corporation’ is central to Henry’s role as mediator and overseer of the culture mixture his home encourages. Describing how he seeks out help from Chinese and African friends, he tells Frank, “We all have to corporate in some way” and after Frank’s clothing is stolen: “Some people corporate in one way, some in another” (Naipaul 262, 269). The verbal slippage of corporation/cooperation

7Frank also symbolically changes places with an Afro-Caribbean man, Mano during this period of nudity, when caught in the gaze of other soldiers: “I heard someone say from the jeep, ‘Doesn’t it look to you that he went in white and came out black?’” (Naipaul 270).
creates the perfect term for the hybrid development of the small community around Henry. Through sharing (cooperating) the characters become a unified whole (corporate) that is united in its common hybridity, as in Hall’s definition of the *Présence Américaine*: “‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite difference” (Hall 244). The reason Frank’s clothing has been stolen, we learn, is to be used as a costume for Carnival. Through this plot device we learn that the means of pursuing corporation is costumery and performance. Carnival appears on the flagless island as a kind of cultural drag: “Henry was Uncle Sam; Selma was Empress Theodora [...] the streets were full of great figures, Napoleon, Julius Caesar, Richard the Lionheart” and Frank has provided much of the material for this performance, including army jeeps and uniforms (Naipaul 275). Through this exchange Frank becomes a part of the community on the flagless island, in the *Présence Américaine*.

When Frank returns after the war, he finds a distinct contrast on the tropical island; when they arrive, Naipaul’s tourists are “easy targets in their extravagantly Caribbean cottons stamped with palm-fringed beaches, thatched huts and grass skirts. The tropics appeared to be on their backs alone” (Naipaul 247). In another wonderfully ironic reversal, the tourists are here defined and recognizable by their notion of the tropics. They continue to ‘build the tropics,’ bearing the most important material for this construction on their backs: the Western regime of knowledge, the notion that the islanders must perform. In this moment Naipaul again indicates the mutual constitution of identity that occurs when the *Présence Européenne* defines itself against an other with which it might grow dialectically through a Hegelian experience (*erfahrung*), if the other was allowed to exist in-itself. Unfortunately, the boundaries are, by now, entrenched. Henry’s

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8Language sharing represents another angle from which to approach the syncretism of Henry’s. Quotes are rarely attributed to a particular character, and often they are deliberately misleading to the reader. The most intriguing examples of this are during Frank’s first visit to Henry’s (Naipaul 265-266) but examples can be found throughout the story.
has become the Coconut Grove, the army base has been torn down, and a shirt factory built in its place (Naipaul 292).

After the war, when Frank returns to the island, he becomes “jumpy, irritated, unsatisfied, suddenly incomplete” and although he wants to avoid the island, the fear and discomfort of its allure are converted into a mood of excitement, where he decides to go ashore (Naipaul 242). This mood is full of ambivalence and insecurity: “I feel the whole world is being washed away and that I am being washed away with it. I feel that my time is short” (Naipaul 243). In this insecurity he suddenly creates a character (243), a child, to describe his experience:

The child, testing his courage, steps into the swiftly moving stream, and though the water does not go above his ankles, in an instant the safe solid earth vanishes, and he is aware only of the terror of sky and trees and the force at his feet. Split seconds of lucidity add to his terror. So, we can use the same toothpaste for years and end by not seeing the colour of the tube; but set us among strange labels, set us in disturbance, in an unfamiliar landscape; and every unregarded article we possess becomes isolated and speaks of our peculiar dependence.

What is the loss that Frank fears? He is about to step into a setting where his white American identity will be affirmed in opposition to that of the native performance of the tropics. The answer comes when the child’s terror appears again, later in the story. Frank has returned to the place where his house once stood on the island and finds that it has been destroyed. Before the second part of the story begins, which is temporally prior, he tells us “it was just in this way [. . .] that I had first come to this street. The terror of sky and trees, the force at my feet” (Naipaul 258). At both his initial arrival to the island and the later return, Frank felt his identity being undermined. Importantly, the object of his terror has changed with what he stands to lose. On his first visit, it was the terror of a subject who is accustomed to the safe solid earth of an unexamined identity, which the moving water of the Caribbean threatens to erode. Returning later, he recalls the flagless Présence Américaine but knows that it is no longer what he will find on the island. The Présence Européén has taken over, and the terror that was once the terror of
losing his firm, unexamined identity now becomes the terror of being forced into a dichotomy of colonizer/tourist and colonized/islander which he cannot stomach.

**Dance and Drama**

To return to the original denuding, when Frank’s clothing is taken in the name of corporation, Naipaul writes that the clothes were “Dancing out the window. They danced; it was as though they had taken on a life of their own” (Naipaul 268). Dance appears here connected to Frank’s loss of costume. The first dance we see is during Frank’s first visit to Henry’s, when he is still merely a viewer, still wearing his uniform. The dancers in Henry’s yard “drew watchers to them; they converted watchers into participants [. . .] people drifted in steadily to watch. Each dancer was on his own. Each dancer lived with a private frenzy [. . .] Henry put his arm around my shoulder and led me to where Selma was standing. He kept one hand on my shoulder; he put the other on her shoulder. We stood silently together, watching. His hands healed us, bound us” (Naipaul 267-268). An encounter which allows for growth and corporation, we might call this dance-in-itself, a healing, unifying act. This is the dance of ‘Henry’s in the old days’ and it becomes all the more significant in contrast to what Henry’s becomes on the tropical island: the Coconut Grove and the site of the dramatic dancing-for-an-other.

The dance-for-an-other we see at the Coconut Grove is a virtual enactment of the history with which the Caribbean native’s notion is burdened. Just as Fanon feels his responsibility for his racialized past, the dancers at the Coconut Grove are made to meet the criterion of the tropics for an audience of tourists and men from ‘Foundationland,’ British arts patrons. On stage at the Coconut Grove, the dancers perform for an audience of tourists and men from ‘Foundationland,’ British arts patrons. The dance-in-itself is a healing, unifying act. This is the dance of ‘Henry’s in the old days’ and it becomes all the more significant in contrast to what Henry’s becomes on the tropical island: the Coconut Grove and the site of the dramatic dancing-for-an-other.

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9Dancing might also be read in opposition to the nausea and sexual dysfunction Frank experiences when he returns to the tropical island. He is in less control of his body, craving shellfish, drinking compulsively, and unable to perform sexually. Dancing in this reading would be autonomous control of the body (an expression of being-in-itself) while dis-ease results from the constraints of the *Présence*. 
Coconut Grove, “Men and women in fancy costumes [performed] a fancy folk dance. They symbolically picked cotton, symbolically cut cane, symbolically carried water. They squatted and swayed on the floor and moaned a dirge. From time to time a figure with a white mask over his face ran among them, cracking a whip; and they lifted their hands in pretty fear” (Naipaul 294). Here in the tropics, the gaze creates an impenetrable divide between comfortable audience and performing other. Frank cannot step onto the stage, but he does not want to take his seat with the tourists. The audience applauds, and Henry explains the transformation: “They give we, we give them. A two-way process [. . .] You see the place is like a little New York now. I imagine that’s why they like it. Everybody feel at home. Ice-cubes in the fridge, and at the same time they getting the exotic old culture” (Naipaul 296). The two-way process is of course the opposition of the tourists and the performers. The performance reassures the audience: it is an enactment of the notion they hold, it is not at all troublesome, it is just what the Présence Européenne needs to see. The audience might be chastened or saddened by the performance, but in the context of dance and costume so central to this story, their applause merely emphasizes the divide of stage and audience. For providing this contribution to the arts, Henry has been made a member of the Order of the British Empire. Despite this, Henry wants things to go back to how they were before, on the flagless island: “Sometimes you want the world to end. You can’t go back and do things again [. . .] I wish the hurricane would come and blow away all this. I feel the world need [sic] this sort of thing every now and then. A clean break, a fresh start” (Naipaul 296). And in fact, an impending hurricane does offer this fresh start, threatening to blow the tropical flag away. Its danger empties the Coconut Grove, and Selma declares this empty stage “The perfection of drama. No scenery. No play. No audience. Let us watch” (Naipaul 308). When the hurricane does arrive, we see the perfection of drama, returning to dance-in-itself, with the
distinction between audience and performer abolished and dancing as a beckoning towards unity, as it first appeared at Henry’s.

Welcomed as salvation, the hurricane offers all people in this postcolonial space to repent their divisive roles and ways. In the fevered conclusion of the story, Naipaul writes, “The city was convulsed with music and dance. The world was ending and the cries that greeted this end were cries of joy. We all began to dance. We saw dances such as we had seen in the old days in Henry’s yard. No picking of cotton, no cutting of cane; no carrying of water, no orchestrated wails. We danced with earnestness” (Naipaul 312-313). The tourists too, rejoice;\(^\text{10}\) “happy now like people who had forgotten the meaning of the word, which implied an opposite” (Naipaul 313). The happiness of the tourists here is explicitly a departure from oppositional thinking: their happiness is pure precisely because it is no longer a word with an opposite; their dance is pure precisely because it sheds a named identity, and no longer relies on its opposite. Frank’s happiness (“no terror of sky and trees [. . .] the empty, total response”) and the happiness of the tourists comes only when they stand up out of the audience to dance on “a flat stage, stretching to infinity before our eyes [. . .] through the streets flattened to stage-boards” (Naipaul 313). Naipaul believes that a fresh start is possible: the audience can embrace the opportunity to dance away from their seats in the theatre and see the island as the *Présence Américaine*: a stage for experimentation and expression rather than a theatre to suit the European gaze.

**The American and the Américaine**

What do we make of Frank, having examined his experience with two different versions of a single island, first flagless and later tropical? Our narrator has in fact played a significant role in the change, both personally and as a representative of the capitalist global economy; his second

\(^{10}\)The only characters who do not dance are the men from Foundationland.
visit to the island is a detour with a shipping company (Naipaul 242). In corporation with Henry, Ma Ho, Mr Blackwhite, and the others, Frank shapes their futures and the future of the island. Beginning with the acquisition of the costumes for Carnival, Frank is engaged in illicit trade between the American base and the islanders. Selling a jeep, a truck, and typewriters, Frank becomes a “purveyor of naval supplies. First to Mr Henry and to Mr Blackwhite and then to the street. I brought uniforms; money changed hands. I brought steel drums; money changed hands” (Naipaul 273). Frank’s form of interaction with the island is thus capitalistic and actually helps lay the groundwork for the creation of the tropics. Perhaps one of the steel drums he takes from the base is waiting to be sold back as a steelpan souvenir when he arrives as a tourist. He also gives advice to Mr Blackwhite on how to make his books more marketable to European publishers (Naipaul 271-272). Financial success comes to Henry and Blackwhite in correspondence to their performance of the tropics, created by Frank’s efforts to help them. But as Henry tells him, “Some people look at black people and only see black. You look at poor people and only see poor. You think the only thing they want is money. All-you wrong you know” (Naipaul 280). Although Frank accepts the cultural fluidity of the Caribbean, his understanding of the benefits of this fluidity are economic, rather than liberatory or expressive.

In the crystallizing moment of Frank’s interference in the development of the island, Frank recommends Mr Blackwhite write stories about the characters at Henry’s. These manuscripts would presumably be received as more authentically ‘tropical’ than the English-style romance novels Blackwhite has been writing (Naipaul 273). Blackwhite responds by revealing to him “the fraudulence of [Frank’s] position in the street,” telling him “You like Mr Lambert sitting on the steps [. . .] You like seeing Mano practicing for the walking race [. . .] You look at these things and you say, ‘How nice, how quaint, this is what life should be.’ You
don’t see that we here are all mad and we are getting madder all the time, turning life into a Carnival” (ibid). Now a believer in corporation, Frank sees no problem with the madness of Carnival, it has been highly profitable to him. But the costumes he provides are all figures of Western historical fame. Frank accepts the desire of the islanders to change costume, but the costume he assumes they desire is Western. Thus his understanding of the purpose of hybridity and the Présence Américaine is constrained: he does not see black as simply black, but he does see poor as simply poor. In trying to help the people around Henry’s, he unwittingly writes the neocolonial script that creates the tropics.

The question then becomes: what is the responsibility and the potential of the westerner in the postcolonial Caribbean? By making our narrator a white American, Naipaul is trying to explore this. We see that Frank is willing to allow for cultural exchange and hybridity, but retains his understanding of capitalist values, not recognizing the cost they will exact from the islanders when they are later made to perform the Carnival of the tropics. But Naipaul offers a hint towards what Frank’s potential role could have been in restoring the Présence Américaine on the island. Selma tells him that in the place of his house which has been torn down “They are going to put up a national island theatre [. . .] It’s only for happenings. No scenery or anything. Audiences walking across the stage whenever they want. Taking part even. Like Henry’s in the old days” (Naipaul 306). Selma connects ‘Henry’s in the old days’ with the disappearance of the line between audience and stage. In articulating what Henry’s was like on the flagless island, she shows us the way forward which might be delivered by the impending hurricane. Restoring the Présence Américaine of ‘Henry’s in the old days’ is an act of erasing the horizon between the tourist onlooker and the performing islander. Foreshadowing the flattening of the island into a “flat stage stretching to infinity” during the hurricane, the national island theatre, in imitating
Henry’s, would be the seed of the *Présence Américaine* to come back to the island. Importantly, Frank’s house must be torn down to build it: the house built by the wealth of selling the islanders a western script.

*A Flag on the Island* is instructive as neocolonialism persists in the Caribbean as a dominant exploitative paradigm. First and foremost, the story insists that the economic model Frank assumes will benefit the island ought to be closely examined; Naipual tells us people do not always want what we think they want; he asks us to see beyond ‘poor.’ But most importantly, and in keeping with the story’s focus on the creation of tropics and West through labels, clothing, and performance, Naipaul suggests that the Westerner in the Caribbean must stand up from the audience. He must refuse to be a tourist bearing the tropics on his back, supporting their imaginary construction. He must seek out and accept the dialectical challenge of the Caribbean to his predetermined notion, meaning, as Fanon tells us, he must acknowledge the existence of the other even though this opens the door to an unsettling recognition of his own performance. This can be understood as Frank’s “terror of sky and trees,” the terror of leaving ‘being’ behind in acknowledgment of the ways in which his identity is ‘becoming’ (Naipaul, 243, 258, 313). Frank’s terror brings him to terms with the truth of oppositional identity creation. Just before his description of that terror, he tells us, “I too had tried to give myself labels, and none of my labels could convince me that I belonged to myself,” because by now he has learned that he does not belong to himself (Naipaul 243). He is in the postcolonial space, confronted by the ways in which his identity exists only in relation to others. The terror can disappear only when the hurricane comes, promising to erase the Western hotels and the Coconut Grove, and the invisible line between them, their shared foundation, reducing the island to a space for dance.

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11See: Nixon (2015). A complete citation can be found in References below.
Conclusion

In *A Flag on the Island*, the performance of the tropics is seen to be a result of the tourist’s gaze, and a reinforcement of the notion that calls forth that same gaze. This cycle is encouraged not only by the economic pressure on the island to create the tropics for the visitors, but also by the tourist’s need to seek out a subaltern other against which to define himself. In the story, these two dress each other, they speak for each other, all to support the idea that they are not each other. As Naipaul shows us however, this construction haunts the Western audience just as it defines the performing islander. Frank’s return to the island is the confrontation of the Western individual with the truth of the creation of the tropics to support Western identities through binary opposition. As Frank hears from Henry, (the first words Henry ever speaks) as he first arrives, “as though explaining everything, [Henry] said ‘The place is what you see it is’” (Naipaul 261). Henry truly is explaining everything in this moment, alerting us to the importance of the onlooker, trying to determine whether Frank will sit in the audience, expecting the tropics to be performed for him, or grant existence to the other, rise out of his seat in the audience, lose his costume, and dance.
References


Works Cited


