Uncomfortable Identity and Ethical Knowledge in V. S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival*∗

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Abstract
Since its publication, V. S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* has been read as either a national allegory or English postcolonial literature. Based on the dual models, critics are prone to getting trapped in identity politics, unable to break away from the postcolonial interpretive framework. In this essay, I revisit the issue of identity from a transnational perspective in hopes of capturing the complexity and significance that Naipaul invests in his representation of identity in this novel. Specifically, I argue that *Enigma* mobilizes identity not so much as a fixated category but as a radically revisionary act of knowing the self. The perspectival oscillation between the narrating ‘I’ and the experiencing ‘I’ enables readers’ access into the narrator’s emotional responses to his uneven development, whereby he comes to a fruitful understanding of human identity. Through a series of vision and revision, *Enigma* enacts a cognitive process of inward self-examination that culminates in a kind of ethical knowledge, unravelling identity discomfort as a universal human experience at the global moment of cultural mixing in the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, Naipaul’s deconstruction of identity executes a critique of his own formation and thereby illuminates the great significance of recognizing the self’s foreignness to himself in cultivating cultural cohesion in a multicultural society.

Keywords
V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, identity, difference, ethics, transnational fiction, multiculturalism

∗ I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to Grant Hamilton and David Huddart for their reading of an earlier draft of this article. My thanks also go to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and criticism.
Hanif Kureishi: What do you think identities do? What are identities for?

Natasha Serret: They help you make sense of who you are. I have many different identities; that is how I’ve become comfortable. I went to a comprehensive school in Hackney, then I went to Oxford University; my identity has been challenged many times, but I know I have these many different ones.

Paul Gilroy: That sounds as though you are uncomfortable with your identity. Maybe that’s what we should be teaching people: how to be uncomfortable with their identities.

Colin MacCabe: At the theoretical level, I take everyone to be uncomfortable with their identity—that’s called being human.

—Colin MacCabe et al.
Excerpt from “Multiculturalism After 7/7: A CQ Seminar,” Critical Quarterly

The conversation about embracing the discomfort of identity in multicultural Britain offers a helpful starting point for decoding *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), an autobiographical novel that Naipaul wrote in rural England after almost forty years following his migration in 1950 from Trinidad to the United Kingdom. In this novel, Naipaul seeks for a new conception of the self by tracing the protagonist’s emotional responses to his transnational experience over the four decades. Within a larger spatio-temporal horizon, Naipaul’s critical reflection on his self-formation as well as the English identity in crisis is still relevant to and can shed light on today’s conflict-ridden human relationships across races and regions, of which the 7 July 2005 London bombings are but a symptom.¹ Read in light of Paul Gilroy’s pedagogical perspective in the epigraph—“teaching people how to be uncomfortable with their identities” (9)—*Enigma* serves as a site of identity formation and deformation where

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¹ The terrorist bombings on July 7, 2005 in London, often referred to as 7/7, were a series of coordinated attacks on London public transport system by four British Muslims, killing 55 people (including the four suicidal bombers) and injuring more than 770. The bombings occurred immediately in the wake of London’s winning of the bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games, which highlighted London’s international image as a multicultural metropolitan. The Critical Quarterly roundtable seminar on identity and multiculturalism was occasioned by the terrorist incident.
readers can be taught to reevaluate the trope of difference as an often-neglected and yet socially valuable dimension of the self in a multicultural context.²

*Enigma*—subtitled “a novel in five sections”—tells the story of an unnamed narrator’s growth as a writer from Trinidad (then a British colony) in first-person retrospective point of view. It can be further divided into two parts. Three sections—“Jack’s Garden,” “Ivy,” and “Rooks”—concern the narrator’s new life in a village cottage on Waldenshaw estate in the Wiltshire valley and his intimate encounters with the local inhabitants. Intersecting with the three segments, two remaining sections—“The Journey” and “The Ceremony of Farewell”—look back at the narrator’s physical and literary journey, which begins with his departure from Trinidad in 1950 and ends with his return to his hometown to attend his sister’s funeral, tracing the process of self-formation as a writer and a man. While the first part constitutes a fictional story set in pastoral England, the second bends toward autobiography that records the writer’s career trajectory and global movement across South Asia, Central Africa, America, and Europe.

Thematically speaking, the novel is about a colonial writer’s inquiry into the enigma of human identity during the rapidly changing time of transcontinental migration. The central theme of identity has been well established by a number of *Enigma*’s readers, though different in their critical orientation. Here I leave out scattered and tangential readings of the novel as “existential assertion of man making himself” (King 142) or as Naipaul’s literary endeavor to “create a self” (Levy xi), and list a few more sustained and representative criticisms around the issue of identity. Derek Walcott, for example, wrote a review article immediately after *Enigma*’s publication. Walcott criticizes Naipaul’s eagerness to write himself into an “elegiac pastoralist” as a peer of William Cobbett in both style and spirit at the expense of denigrating his Caribbean identity (27). Similarly, in his “materialist reading” of Naipaul’s work, Selwyn Cudjoe describes *Enigma* as the writer’s attempt to “search for his identity (ego),” arguing that the novel creatively reflects Naipaul’s “primal fantasy” for an English identity in lieu of his colonial origins (215). Ian Baucom connects Naipaul’s identity with an affect of sadness for the ruin and decline of natural England, “a sadness which issues from his profound investment in an idea of Englishness given to him as a child and a young man by the imperial custodians of

² By “multicultural,” I refer especially to the deep cultural diversity of Britain following the massive immigration from its former colonies. Related to this idea, multiculturalism is used to describe the political accommodation of ethnic or religious minorities who immigrated to Britain from the 1950s to the 1980s, see Modood.
English identity,” and reads *Enigma* accordingly as a pathetic narrative of post-imperial melancholy (275).

In contrast with these negative appraisals by Walcott, Cudjoe, and Baucom, Helen Tiffin considers *Enigma* as a postcolonial counter-discourse that debunks the ideologically constructed idea of Englishness, contending that Naipaul’s very act of writing about himself constitutes resistance against colonial subjectification (28–46); taking note of Naipaul’s siting of *Enigma* within the metropolitan country’s heartland which is believed to embody authentic Englishness, W. John Walker argues that the novel engages with the “demise of imperial authority” and refashions the writer’s own self-image arising thereof (67). While these bifurcated readings make a great deal of sense within each interpretive community, they all seem a bit too invested in the nationalist notion of an essential identity, which limits their critical scope and makes their interpretation largely predictable. A product of British colonialism, Naipaul has been torn between an inculcated desire for an English identity and a need for a sovereignty-derived national identity. The blurred boundaries of identity that imperial history has caused in colonial victims ought to be taken as an established condition before readers enter Naipaul’s work. Without taking account of this ambivalence, critics might get trapped in easy identity politics that might predetermine the way and terms in which to read his work, as we have seen above.

To capture the identitarian ambivalence we need the largest possible scale, one that expands beyond regional territoriality and chronology, for Naipaul’s intellectual thinking on and literary imagination of identity have been largely set in motion by global forces. Since the twenty-first century, literary study has witnessed a phenomenal turn to the global and the transnational for a more inclusive framework of interpretation.³ Paul Jay regards the “transnational turn” in literary study as a critical response to globalization which affects both the production and reception of English literature. Despite the discontents globalization is fraught with, Jay argues that if engaged critically, globalization actually mobilizes cultural exchanges, interactions, negotiations, and transformations and thus should be seen as an empowering force. In his view, globalization is not a new phenomenon but has a long history, which means “cultures all over the world have always evolved syncretically in the context of complicated interactions” (49). This is of special significance for English literary study to move out of its nationalist paradigm.⁴

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³ Within the camp of postcolonial theory, especially, critics tend to investigate the postcolonial in conjunction with the global, see Gikandi; During; Krishnaswamy and Hawley. For less optimistic view of the effect of globalization on literary study, see Said.

⁴ In an attempt to critique and reassess the national paradigms that once dominated literary
globalizing process complicates and complements the way we approach postcolonial literary texts by drawing attention to the multidirectionality of cultural flows between different nations, ethnicities, or religions. Jay’s advocacy for Anglophone literature to be studied in its transnational context inspires us to read Naipaul’s fiction transnationally, yet he does not elaborate on the nature of “transnational” or transnational fiction. This issue is compellingly explored by Stephen Clingman, who revisits questions of identity and location by using such conceptual categories as transitivity, navigation, and the generative. For him, transnational fiction does not have to be written by authors who travel beyond national border or books that get published abroad; instead, it constructs in literary narrative a specific time and space through which readers “get a sense of transitivities and boundaries, of transitivities that exist only and because of the boundaries” (10; emphasis in original). Clingman takes as his example of the definition none other than Enigma, in which he believes there is a clear reflection of self-formation “in its various phases and transitions, from Trinidad to England and beyond, across various routes in Naipaul’s life” (10). Though Clingman only briefly refers to the novel as a transnational one, particularly relevant to my discussion is his observation that by exposing the way it is written across and between the narrator’s life journeys, the novel suggests the fluidity and complexity of the relationship between the self and place.

Seen on a global scale and as a transnational novel, Enigma imagines a frame of reference that moves beyond its interpretive deadlock and into new possibilities for the conceptualization of identity. I argue that Enigma mobilizes identity not so much as a fixated category but as a radically revisionary act of knowing the self. The perspectival oscillation between the narrating ‘I’ and the experiencing ‘I’ enables readers’ access into the narrator’s emotional responses to his uneven development, whereby he comes to a fruitful understanding of human identity. Through a series of vision and revision, Enigma enacts a cognitive process of inward self-examination that culminates in a kind of ethical knowledge, unravelling identity discomfort as a universal human experience at the global moment of cultural mixing in the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, Naipaul’s deconstruction of identity skillfully executes a critique of his own formation and thus illuminates the great significance of recognizing the self’s foreignness to himself in cultivating cultural cohesion in a multicultural society.

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studies, the January 2001 issue of *PMLA* was devoted to the special topic “Globalizing Literary Studies,” see Gunn.
Ambivalence of Identity and Ethical Knowledge

The realist account in “The Journey” of the protagonist-narrator’s itinerary works toward the nature of his transnational experience. At the heart of his hard-won self-understanding is “a gap between the man and the writer” (Enigma 102), a radical incongruity between two identities: the man as a colonial subaltern and as a metropolitan writer. This internal division has been epistemologically inflicted by the legacy of colonialism. A sound British-style education at Queen’s Royal College during the colonial period has inoculated him into the ambition of becoming a cosmopolitan writer in London, but its ideological underpinning is to produce obedient subjects rather than to train anti-establishment citizens in the art of questioning their inferior status as colonial subalterns. Put differently, he has been interpellated in the Althusserian sense—at the site of colonial institution—to identify with British culture and form an exclusive personality as a Western writer. The narrator’s epistemic fracture is thus marked by his inability to put into perspective the fraught relation between his dream profession and racial unconscious. Naipaul transposes first-person narration into free indirect discourse to highlight the younger self’s blindness to his split identity:

Yet he knew little about his [Indian] community in Trinidad . . . And he knew nothing of other communities. He had only the prejudices of his time, in that colonial, racially mixed setting. He was profoundly ignorant. He hadn’t been to a restaurant, hated the idea of eating food from foreign hands. Yet at the same time he had dreamed of fulfillment in a foreign country. (103)

Within the national and territorial boundary, emotional antipathy to racial otherness and a fantasy of authenticity can go well together without eliciting problems in regard to the subject’s own sense of identity. Preoccupied with colonial culture and Western modernity, Naipaul’s narrator identifies himself exclusively as a professional writer based in Britain, at the cost of repressing the complexity of his ethnic make-up (Indian-Trinidadian-British).

The stability of the migrant’s ego, however, is disrupted in the liminal space of his first transcontinental journey on a scholarship to Oxford for university education. The disjunction between man from the periphery and writer at the center ultimately enters into the eighteen-year-old student’s critical consciousness. Registered as a negative emotion, the boy’s identitarian ambivalence occurs at the very moment of
his journey from Trinidad to Britain—“Port of Spain to Puerto Rico to New York, by air [and] New York to Southampton, by ship” (111). In a liner across the Atlantic, what he had expected to be a romance ends up being a painful, later fruitful, revelation about his identity. The narrator is luckily given a higher class cabin absolutely to himself, but then a crew brings in another passenger to share the cabin. The passenger is a black man who rejects the arrangement by arguing that “[i]t is because I’m coloured you’re putting me here with him” (116). The word “coloured” comes as a shock to the inexperienced writer-to-be who, until then, has been avoiding that word to describe himself: “Coloured! So he was a Negro. So this was a little ghetto privilege I had been given. But I didn’t want the Negro or anybody else to be with me. Especially I didn’t want the Negro to be with me, for the very reasons the Negro had given” (116). Such humiliating and indignant sentiments are evoked by the taboo word that the young narrator is made to confront the inherent splitting of his subjectivity as a racial other. Worse still, he is affectively overcome with people’s attitudes toward and perception of him, when he gets to know that the black man would rather crowd into some three-or four-berth cabin with white passengers than share with him:

Satisfactory to him, the black man; but at what price, at what cost in strain and tension for the days of journey across the great Atlantic. Frightening, that glimpse of another man’s deprivation and drive. Yet I was also ashamed that they had brought the Negro to my cabin. I was ashamed that, with all my aspirations, and all that I had put into this adventure, this was all that people saw in me—so far from the way I thought of myself, so far from what I wanted for myself. And it was shame, too, that made me keep my eyes closed while they were in the cabin. (116; emphasis added)

The irony of the experiencing self’s emotive responses—fright, anger, disillusionment, and shame—lies in his refusal to recognize the man as his own mirror-image or, more precisely, his own image refracted. Caught between a historically acquired yearning for Englishness and an intrinsic ethnic root, the narrator goes through a heightened sense of discomfort about his identity, and this feeling comes to a head with the bitter awareness that people see him in a way drastically different from his self-conception. Despite apologies made the next morning by the man, who turns out to be an American and on his way to Germany to live with his German wife, the narrator’s younger self cannot bear to see him in the
eyes and face up to the African-American’s “racial passion,” for it is exactly what he has repudiated and suppressed over the years.

It takes more than thirty years after the transatlantic encounter that the narrator finally comes to terms with his racial and ethnic constitution. Reflecting on this transformation, he writes:

In each [black man] there were aspects of myself. But, with my Asiatic background, I resisted the comparison; and I was travelling to be a writer. It was too frightening to accept the other thing, to face the other thing; it was to be diminished as man and writer. Racial diminution formed no part of the material of the kind of writer I was setting out to be. Thinking of myself as a writer, I was hiding my experience from myself; hiding myself from my experience. And even when I became a writer I was without the means, for many years, to cope with that disturbance. (117)

This passage shows the mature narrator’s proximity to the enigma of his identity in all its complexity. From initial resistance against his racial identity to gradual acceptance, the narrating self reenacts his psychological, intellectual, and emotional growth over the years of global travel and dwelling in a piecemeal fashion. Taken together, Naipaul’s accounts of the protagonist’s obsessive meditation on identity build toward a kind of ethical knowledge that involves a renewed understanding of self and other. Ethical knowledge can be seen as a pedagogical framework in which Naipaul’s work stages a heuristic process of impression, self-questioning, and discovery, a dynamic praxis that continually re-inscribes the self, other, and interpersonal relationships in a multicultural society. The knowledge the protagonist gains from human interactions, in turn, structures the entire novel around a series of humanistic inquiries into identity formation. At the heart of ethical knowledge is the role of human affect as a crucial vehicle through which the perceiving subject can yield insight into identity.

**Affective Experience and Uncomfortable Identity**

Personal emotion, however vague and indescribable, initiates a process in which the perceiver starts to engage with the world and establish meaningful connections with it. The evoked emotions do not have to be understood on purely irrational or epistemologically adequate terms, but a critical reflection on the
production and operation of them allows the perceiver to reassess the affective experiences and thereby make better sense of these experiences. Naipaul’s fiction written between the 1960s and 1980s is characteristically saturated with such subjective feelings as abjection, shame, and anger (Mimic); alienation and schizophrenia (“Tell”); disorientation, frustration, and indifference (Guerrilla); despair, nihilism, and helplessness (Bend). Produced at the moment of characters’ diasporic experience, these emotional responses figure prominently in the narrative construction of ethical knowledge. Spontaneous, slippery, evasive, and evanescent, they play a cognitive role in conjuring up alternative views on identity.

Taken as a whole, Naipaul’s transnational work articulates characters’ cross-cultural identities mainly through their discomforting experiences of discordant emotions. The epistemic status of emotion is fulfilled at the moment when characters, often via the act of writing, discover their subjective feelings and self-reflexively process information they consider relevant to their feelings and lifeworlds. For example, Ralph Singh, the protagonist of The Mimic Men, comes to understand the socio-political dimensions of his identity formation as a colonial living in a boarding house in London where he revisits his pent-up emotions of abjection and shame by writing these feelings into his memoir. Similar to Singh, Jimmy Ahmed, the black power leader in the 1960s England and guerrilla in the 1970s Caribbean, also attempts to give verbal expression to his sense of restlessness and frustration but fails to bring his innermost feelings beyond “words alone” (Guerrillas 35). It is this keenly felt failure of his literary power to capture those emotions that makes Jimmy aware of the irony which attends his identity as a “half-Chinese Negro” who remains an outsider in either England or the postcolonial Caribbean island.

Integral to Naipaul’s realist narrative, human affect has been deployed as an organizing grammar to such a great extent that it fuses the aesthetic with the political, the cognitive with the ethical, and the personal with the public. Using emotion as a trope, Naipaul blends a variety of epistemological categories into an intricate texture of literary narrative in ways that his transnational work itself becomes a constitutive part of the pathos it intends to bring out. As Sara Suleri subtly puts it, “Naipaul’s mature writing no longer conceives of the literary as a recourse from the political, but instead internalizes the imperial tradition represented by both modes into a dazzling idiom that no longer needs to indicate the referents of its discourse” (155). What comes out of the internalization, as a result, is a narrative style that does not so much identify a clear object of accusation as conveys the “objectlessness of postcolonial indignation” (155). It is this ambivalent feeling that provokes readers into thinking
about textual aporia and thereby invites them to become critically engaged with the text.\(^5\)

To a great extent, Naipaul’s work never poses an explicit challenge to the racist textual attitude prevalent in European colonial discourse about other peoples, races, and cultures. Indeed, it seems that he fully absorbs the discursive practice of racial stereotyping and submits his work to an imperialist ideology. And yet, the sheer intensity of characters’ emotional ambivalence speaks resoundingly to the psychological and epistemic violence the colonial subjects have gone through. Naipaul’s risky appropriation of colonial discourse foregrounds the signifying power of those often untargeted emotions and resentments, whereby to retrace the historical, social, and political circumstances that have indelibly marked individual’s identity formation in the first place.

In *Enigma*, it is through the narrator’s experience of disturbing emotions evoked in his transnational encounters with racial other (as well as the other-ed self) that he has come to know the multiple dimensions of his identity and the various forms of socio-cultural arrangement of his world that define his self-formation. For the mature narrator, uncomfortable affects serve as cognitive prism through which he views the identity gap between the writer and the man and makes reliable assessment of his situation. In Satya Mohanty’s words, emotions encourage the perceiver to reinterpret his past experience so that he can “redefine the contours” of his worlds (49). *Enigma* shows the complexity of the re-interpretive process when emotions are played out in a global arena where the perceiver inhabits more world than one. Born into the power structure of British colonialism, the narrator-protagonist has been seduced into a lopsided sense of self that undermines the local in favor of the European. At the core of his identity he is neither purely Indian nor English but instead a deformed combination of English and Hindu Indian Trinidadian—deformed in the sense that the latter has been historically repressed by the cultural superiority of the former during the colonial period. However, the narrator’s travel into the global sphere in 1950 brings to light his repressed ethnic and regional roots. At the same time, a multiplicity of global forces subjects his cultural identity to an unprecedented degree of change in motion, rendering it highly indeterminate. Its ambivalence and enigma must therefore be positioned within the tension between postcolonialism and globalization. Ultimately registered as affective discomfort, the narrator’s unsettling sense of identity is to be transformed under that constant tension.

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\(^5\) For example, see Zhang.
Queering Identity in a Global Context

As I have noted, the unpleasant incident with the African-American passenger mirrors back the young colonial’s own fractured identity, a psychic trauma he was ill-equipped to cope with at the time. Reflecting back on that encounter over thirty years later, the narrator can see more clearly the cultural and material conditions that overdetermine his identity divide. In the cognitive process, what’s at stake is the protagonist’s narrative reconstruction of the affective fluctuation over the course of many years, by dint of which he comes to locate his identity and its materiality. By recollecting his lingering emotions, the narrator pieces together a picture of changing self-perceptions that his first transnational journey inaugurates. From elation to humiliation, the eighteen-year-old goes through a renewed sense of self:

A family farewell in the morning, thousands of miles away: a farewell to my past, my colonial past and peasant-Asiatic past. Immediately, then, the exaltation: the glimpse of the fields and the mountains which I had never seen; the rippled or wrinkled sea crawling; then the clouds from above; and thoughts of the beginning of the world, thoughts of time without beginning or end; the intense experience of beauty. A faint panic, then; even an acted panic; then a dwindling of the sense of the self. A suppressed, half-true, but also half intensely true, diary being written in a small dark room of the Hotel Wellington in New York. And already a feeling of being lost, of truth not fully faced, of a world whose great size I had seized being made at night very small for me again. (104-05; emphases added)

Anxious to escape from his colonial past, the teenager subjects the indigenous landscape to an abstract sensation that derives from literary imagination. With the deeper progression of the transnational journey, however, his romantic idea of the deterritorialized beauty is undermined, and changing perceptions of the self set in. A much-anticipated break with his “ignominious” ethnic root turns out to be a movement toward it. Propelled by transnational mobility, the narrator’s surprising entanglement with his suppressed past—a “truth not fully faced”—brings into crisis the old, stable, and comfortable sense of self. As the narrator himself refers to the identity crisis at the symbolic moment of his first global travel by plane, “[t]he separation of man from writer which had begun on the long aeroplane flight from Trinidad to New York became complete” (135). And once again, the narrator tracks
this incipient change in self-perception with no other means than residual emotions, even when the memory of the change fades away:

My memory retains nothing of the hotel room in daylight, nothing of the room in which I awakened. Perhaps, then, some embarrassment obliterated the memory. Less than twenty-four hours out of my own place, the humiliations had begun to bank up: *to my own developed sense of the self was now added another sense of the self*, a rawness of nerves and sensibility against which from now on for many years all my impressions, even the most exalted, were to be set. (105-06; emphasis added)

The youth’s sojourn in a New York hotel prompts a newly gained dimension of self-conception. It is not unlikely that the provincial boy “out of [his] own place” finds himself in a thoroughly different, even oppressive, social and racial situation as a minority. Owing to the reversal of racial structure, his old sense of security is disrupted and mutated into embarrassment and humiliation. Of this George Lamming once made an insightful observation. According to Lamming, it is almost impossible for the colored and dispossessed people in the West India to feel like a minority because the colored far outnumber the white. The “numerical superiority” enables the West Indian to feel at ease in the presence of white expatriates on the one hand; on the other, it may cause great trouble when the West Indians travel beyond regional border (33). If the narrator’s Indian identity as ethnic majority could well be maintained in Trinidad, its stability has become no longer tenable in the global arena, where the hidden trouble that attends his ignorance of split identity in his Caribbean hometown flares up in the shape of psychological discomfort.

This uncomfortableness, invoked at the outset of his journey, is further deepened and complicated in his subsequent encounter with white Europeans in a London boarding house at Earls Court and in his college room in Oxford. Remarkably, the protagonist’s contact with other people and his repeated accounts of these physical encounters finally lead to his “greatest” discovery that “[m]an and writer were the same person” (102). Worthy of our attention here is Naipaul’s demonstration of the discovery process by showing how the act of writing and the sense of self are intricately intertwined and mutually dependent. At the start of his writing career in Britain, he wrote a story titled “Gala Night.” It draws from what he observes at the gala night held on the aforementioned ship to Southampton. In some versions of the
story, notably, the novice writer leaves out a young Southerner’s talk about “colored people.” The mature narrator explains thus:

But that topic of race—though it was good, familiar material, and could prove my knowledge of the world—formed no part of “Gala Night.” It was too close to my disturbance, my vulnerability, the separation of my two selves. That was not the kind of personality the writer wished to assume; that was not the material he dealt in. (115; emphasis added)

His evasion of racial difference has been fatally in the way of his own creative writing. Not until nearly five years after his arrival in London, through many trials and tribulations, does it dawn on him that his subject turns out to be the “simple things in my memory,” “the worlds I contained within myself, the worlds I lived in” (135). This excruciating process is rendered with a great level of accuracy and emotional intensity: “only very slowly, man and writer came together again. It was nearly five years... before I could shed the fantasies given me by my abstract education. Nearly five years before vision was granted me, quite suddenly one day, when I was desperate for such an illumination, of what my material as a writer might be” (135).

The mature narrator traces his uneven development as a writer by examining his aesthetic education in colonial Trinidad. When he is a high school student at Queen’s Royal College, British ideas about being a writer are transported to Trinidad; they are closely associated with the late nineteenth century aesthetic movement and Bloomsbury. Having acquired a sound knowledge of colonial history and English literary tradition, the narrator explains that these aesthetic ideas “bred essentially out of empire, wealth and imperial security” and therefore are irrelevant to his background and social reality (134). It takes three-year education at Oxford, five-year writing apprenticeship in London, and many travelling experiences around the world before the protagonist finally finds his material. Concomitant with his discovery of writing material is an active recognition of his ethnic root. The narrator intriguingly lays bare the interrelatedness between the writing personality and the ethnic self: “Concealing this colonial-Hindu self below the writing personality, I did both my material and myself much damage” (134).

At this point, the sophisticated narrator incisively recapitulates the socio-political and aesthetic conditions under which he is formed and deformed over the years. The moment he embraces the suppressed half-truth about his skin color and ethnicity—half-truth in the sense that the ethnic root is conceived as diametrically opposite to Britishness—marks a significant mind-change in self-conception as well
as the idea of identity generally. Of particular importance in this mind-change is the discovery of the role of (ethnic, color, religious) difference as a productive force in both his writing (as a writer) and everyday life (as a man). The difference in cultural identity breeds from a colonial and postcolonial history, and culminates in crisis at the global level. To be specific, British colonialism in Trinidad condemns the narrator’s younger self to a state of subalternity, of which he has not been acutely aware until he travels across regional borders. It is through the protagonist’s global travels thereafter that he begins to grapple with his problematic identity and learns to make out his Indian-Trinidadian-Englishness. Getting rid of his colonial fantasies and facing up to this “difference,” the narrator experiences a surge of creative energy:

I wrote very simply and fast of the simplest things in my memory. I wrote about the street in Port of Spain where I had spent part of my childhood, the street I had intently studied, during those childhood months, from the security and distance of my own family life and house. Knowledge came to me rapidly during the writing. And with that knowledge, the acknowledgement of myself (so hard before it was done, so very easy and obvious afterwards), my curiosity grew fast. (135)

Thus, the painful experience to accept and live through difference in a transnational social space might be transformed into a powerful source of literary creation, similar to Homi Bhabha’s view that globalization creates a sense of “unsatisfaction” that nonetheless cultivates “a global or transnational imaginary and its ‘cosmopolitan subjectivities’” (204). Furthermore, by foregrounding the enabling trope of difference on Naipaul’s part, Enigma ethically orient readers toward the potential existence of an uncanny otherness as constitutive of the seemingly familiar, readily graspable sense of self-identity. Provided that we concur with a conception of ethics as a “process of formulation and self-questioning that continually rearticulates boundaries, norms, selves, and ‘others’” (Garber, Hanssen, and Walkowitz viii), the ethical knowledge in Naipaul’s text then can be properly construed as a valuable lesson about one’s imperative openness to an elastic vision of self and other. Just as the coming-of-age narrator turns to embrace difference and develops, albeit unevenly, a renewed sense of self (“I defined myself” 135), readers might be able to learn from him and keep alive a spirit of receptiveness toward alterity as an irreducible part of (self-) identity. Rather than being too assertive in their knowledge about identity, they might do better to adopt a critical stance and allow for difference, even when that difference
can be uncomfortable and deeply disturbing. To a great extent, readers’ ethical knowledge derives from a self-willed restriction in their contact with others.

In her compelling article “Towards an Ethics of Knowledge,” Tina Chen proposes an ethics of knowledge as a product of and integral to the teaching of multiethnic literature. My formulation bears on Chen’s and yet differs in one key aspect. Both of us attach importance to “the roles and responsibilities of authors, readers, and critics in the production of knowledge about those who are culturally different from themselves” (158); still, whereas Chen underscores more the readers’ valuation of difference in and of the Other, I endeavor to draw attention to difference as a significant dimension of self-conception. With this shift of focus, we might be able to see the ethical demand on Naipaul’s part to discover and confront the unfamiliar, even dehumanizing undercurrent that washes away the perceiving self’s stable sense of identity in his or her encounter with others. This imperative made to exercise self-regulation is of profound value especially in a global and multicultural environment where interaction among people from a diversity of cultural, ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds is predisposed to conflicts, collisions, and violence. Identifying the dynamic factor of difference at work in self-formation, the perceiver not only comes to understand the socio-political arrangement that underlies the difference but is also called upon to negotiate a sustainable self-other relationship for the sake of harmonious cohabitation in a multicultural society. This mode of understanding identity as fluid and resilient cautions against the subject’s stubborn claim to authenticity and purity, and is thus conducive to multiculturalism.

Naipaul’s stance on identity, literarily constructed in Enigma around the trope of difference, is similarly echoed by his Caribbean contemporary Edouard Glissant’s definition of cultural identity:

This is what I call cultural identity. An identity on its guard, in which the . . . relationship with the Other shapes the self without fixing it under an oppressive force. That is what we see everywhere in the world: each person wants to declare its own identity. (169)

Articulated at roughly the same time (in the late 1980s), their views on identity both put an emphasis on its changing and non-coercive nature. If we are in agreement with Naipaul’s figure of difference as a constraining force instrumental in one’s peaceful contact with others, Glissant’s vision of identity, then, can also be rightly interpreted as one that emerges from the self’s continual negotiation with and respect for the Other. Rather than “declare its own identity,” the two men of letters seem to be
suggesting, citizens of a multicultural society ought to grant a proper degree of submission to the Other, in an effort to curb aggressive imposition of its own identity on others. This shift of gravity from authentic ethnicity or race onto difference not only applies in the 1980s; it still holds true, if not more so, in the present-day multicultural Britain.

Multiculturalism in British society has been preoccupied with such notions as “ethnicity” and “culture” in the past two decades. This preoccupation, in Tariq Modood’s view, carries with it a burden of “assumed behavioral or normative baggage” that prescribes essentialist notions of minority life experiences (42). Critical of its effectiveness and validity, Modood suggests a recentering of the debate around multiculturalism to focus instead on “identity” as an analytical category, on the ground that identity captures the role ethnic and cultural backgrounds play in individual experiences as significant yet not solely determinant. For one thing, the concept of identity allows the “insider” to speak for itself because it claims to know something by virtue of its bodily experiences and emotions. For another, as a relative concept, identity “is not just in relation to individual self-definition but in relation to the outsider perceptions, treatment and social expectations” (41). The insider knowledge, therefore, can be communicated to and shared with larger social groups than one minority community. Central to the concept of identity, the difference in question is constituted both from the inside of a minority culture and from outside—social representations and governmental policies. In a way, Modood’s suggestion has been presciently crystallized by Naipaul’s vision of identity in Enigma in terms of the epistemic status of cultural identity.

In the light of Modood’s suggestion, we might be better able to tease out Naipaul’s literary construct of identity in a multicultural context. One lesson we can learn from this conceptualization, among other things, is perhaps the realization that the way identity is construed is more important than the way it really is. To be specific, the protagonist’s difficult reconciliation with his racial and ethnic backgrounds seems to be suggesting that people, living in a multicultural community and who have a membership in a minority group, should embrace their roots and, more importantly, make sense of the colonial and postcolonial history within which they are formed. Identity as such is more than simply an easy identification with a

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6 This dynamic conception of identity is wonderfully articulated by Stuart Hall: “actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside, representation” (4).
certain ethnic group. Rather, it involves an act of historicizing, a process of discovery, and a form of education. By bringing to light the twin and fractal effects of (post-) colonialism and globalization on Trinidad (then a nation-state in embryo) and the Caribbean migrant, Enigma stages the narrator’s twisty cognitive path to the mystery of his own formation as the product of these two historical forces. The retracing of self-formation thus diverts identity from, following Paul Gilroy, roots to routes. Gilroy makes a famous distinction between root and route in The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. Critical of the traditional tie of identity to roots, Gilroy points out that “modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes” (19). At the core of the identity linked to routes is the trope of difference that constantly queers the stability of a root-oriented identity. For minority individuals, put simply, the lesson is to live with that difference, which requires both an acknowledgement of roots and a knowledge of routes.

In this aspect, George Shire, who spent his childhood in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland—established by the British government in 1953—and who arrived in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s, offers us a wonderful example. As a minority, Shire in his early years in Britain experienced what the Enigma protagonist has gone through, “drifting from one sort of colonial subjectivity to another,” and gradually coming to understand “what is meant by the struggle to live with difference” (10).

Some people misunderstand living with difference to mean that you can simply give up yesterday and just start happily living together. There is a vogue for living with difference that operates at that level—just moving on. I want pluralism in a much more real sense. Before I can even choose whether I like Bourdieu or not, I am still dealing with something that came to me early on in life. So I want to lock living with difference and postcolonialism together. They have to enter into conversation with one another. (10)

Shire’s pluralist sense of identity as lived difference in conjunction with postcolonialism well illustrates Naipaul’s model of identity as existing in a dialogic relation between roots and routes.

Apart from living with difference, minority individuals are called upon to make a reasonable effort to bend that difference toward a desirable proportion of
assimilation into the adopted culture so that people with distinct ethnic/religious roots and political loyalty can live within the same community. This lesson has been crucial to any multicultural society, and appears especially profound against the backdrop of the 7 July London bombings, which seriously undermined the British multiculturalist ideal that heterogeneous cultures peacefully coexist under the rubric of Pax Britannica. In the CQ seminar “Multiculturalism after 7/7,” Salman Rushdie articulated the wider contexts about a multiethnic and multicultural society, and, notably, raised “the question of our time:” “how does a fractured community of multiple cultures decide what values it must share in order to cohere, and how can it insist on those values even when they clash with some citizens’ traditions and beliefs?” (4). Rushdie’s tentative answer to the question covers two sides: the social and the individual. According to him, society as a whole should address such intractable issues as racism and social justice in order to make people feel included in the national project of building a plural society; on the part of individual citizens, they must subscribe to the society’s “core freedoms and primary loyalties” and “prize what their citizenship means” (4). It is not insignificant to note the striking resemblance in undertone between Rushdie’s meditation on citizens’ responsibilities and Naipaul’s ethical call for self-restriction.

In an interview with Rachel Donadio, Naipaul offers a more concrete version of a multicultural citizen’s self-restriction in the form of a proper dose of assimilation. Speaking of 9/11, he points out one big issue Western Europe is facing: that it lacks “a strong cultural life” (“Irascible”), which makes it vulnerable to terrorist attack and Islamicization. To this problem, Naipaul puts forward what can be considered as his solution: “If you decide to move to another country and to live within its laws you don’t express your disregard for the essence of the culture.” Donadio, the interviewer, was particularly impressed by the “painful prescience to Naipaul’s observations on Islam and the West.” She writes:

That prescience was in evidence once again when, just two weeks after our meeting, bombers struck the London Underground and a city bus, killing more than 50 people. Naipaul was at home in Wiltshire that day, and professed no surprise that the attacks appeared to have been carried out by British citizens. (“Irascible” n. pag.)

For him, as it were, in a deeply multicultural society like Britain, such violent attacks are something inevitable given the lack of “a strong cultural life” as well as the absence of a core national identity. Naipaul’s remarkable insight into the aggravating
multi-ethnic situation in the West, as with his solution to it, stems from his fieldwork investigations in non-Arab Islamic countries, the results of which were written into his two travelogues Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey (1981) and Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples (1998). The books concern with questions of great account, such as the necessity of secularism, religious belief and its limitation on intellectual freedom, the future of the non-Arab Islamic countries, and the fraught relationship between one’s ethnic/racial/religious identity and metropolitan citizenship. The last issue is majorly dealt with in Enigma, a book written also in Wiltshire during the intervening years (1984-86), as I have shown by way of its narrator’s retracing of self-formation. Interestingly enough, Rushdie’s 1987 review of this novel as “one of the saddest” he has read in a long while focuses largely on its negative affect and tone of “unbroken melancholy” (“A Sad Pastoral”), failing to note Naipaul’s unique vision of identity invoked by these emotions, a vision that turns out to be shared by Rushdie himself, as is made clear almost twenty years later by their kindred concerns about and stance on the 7 July 2005 London bombings.

Similar to Rushdie’s mandate on individual citizens, therefore, Naipaul’s literary strategy is to mobilize difference as an enabling force that decenters the self so as to relate to the other. Here Naipaul’s vision of the self somewhat concurs with Judith Butler’s argument in Giving an Account of Oneself, that “my very formation implicates the other in me” and “that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others (84). In Enigma, Naipaul makes concrete Butler’s moral philosophy, and accentuates the ethical value for the self to confront his own foreignness or difference in a multicultural community. As we have seen, a transnational perspective allows us to examine the difference of the protagonist’s identity as embodying neither authenticity or indigeneity nor Englishness proper; but rather as a transitive and transformative dimension through which the migrant comes to appreciate the historicity and multiplicities of his identity as he crosses various borders. To reiterate, the lesson we can learn from the migrant narrator’s self-inspection of his transnational experiences is to face up to difference, live with that difference, and refashion it to facilitate human communication and connection in a multicultural context.

Works Cited


**About the Author**

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[Received 27 June 2015; accepted 6 November 2015]