

ABSTRACT

Historical consciousness in George Lamming's fiction: *In the Castle of My Skin*, *The Emigrants* and *Natives of My Person*

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History and the quality of awareness it fosters in the West Indies have always been among George Lamming's preoccupations as a novelist, beginning with his re-writing of his personal history in *In the Castle of My Skin* and climaxing with his imaginative re-construction in *Natives of My Person* of the central fact of collective West Indian history, the archetypal voyage of the explorer from "Old" world to "New", in the ship, that definitive vehicle of change and process. For Lamming, all his novels are to be seen as "the unfolding of one work", with each of them integrated into the project of narrating and dramatizing the emergence of a consciousness that will correct the traditional myopia of the colonial. As such, his work has always had the intention of educating the imagination made defective by the systems of power which colonialism was able to implement.

In the Castle of My Skin chronicles the first stage in this process of emergence: the awakening from sleep of an adolescent boy and a fundamentally innocent community; the unfocused stirring of a formerly quiescent and unacknowledged presence, simply there, into shapes that disturb the air. The young protagonist "G" and the community of his village are both left suspended at the end of the narrative, but each has been brought to a point of no return, and each knows it. It is this knowledge that becomes the focus of Lamming's enquiry in *The Emigrants*, the novel that chronicles the next and crucial phase in the emergence of the historical consciousness. The narrator of *In the Castle of My Skin* is caught, four years later, in transit: on the way to England, he is brought to the point of recognizing what his nearly opened eyes have barely begun to register. The journey of migration becomes a metaphor for the acceptance of the responsibility to see clearly.

Lamming extends this responsibility in *Natives of My Person* to the colonizer, the other actor in the drama of the encounter between the Old and the New World. This novel enforces a sense of history as a continuum whose middle and end cannot be understood if its beginning is not re-experienced. To read the novel is both to witness the full development of an awareness of history's meanings, and to participate in that awareness. For Lamming, such

participation must involve an ability to see through the eyes of the holder of power, to *become* the other as a way of understanding oneself. The awakened consciousness measures its alertness by its capacity for re-defining the imagination. It thus transcends the very categories that were maintained by the power that had kept it asleep. In providing this insight, Lamming's fiction has itself demonstrated the transformative energy of the historical synthesizing consciousness.