ePublishing

ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΤΕΚΜΗΡΙΩΣΗΣ
NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 14 (2021)

Dissident Self-Narratives: Radical and Queer Life Writing

Untitled © Maro Germanou 2018

Dissident Self-Narratives: Radical and Queer Life Writing

Synthesis 14. 2021

General Editors
Mina Karavanta and Stamatina Dimakopoulou

Special Issue Editor
Aude Haffen

Narrating the Self, Making a World: C. L. R. James, Edward Said, and the Errancy of Postcolonial Life-writing

Adam Spanos

doi: 10.12681/syn.32410

Copyright © 2022, Adam Spanos

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0.

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 20/01/2026 13:33:09

Narrating the Self, Making a World: C. L. R. James, Edward Said, and the Errancy of Postcolonial Life-writing

Adam Spanos

Abstract
Critics of postcolonial life-writing and autobiography typically assess these works according to their capacity to give recognizable and consistent narrative form to the histories and lifetimes that they recount. The normative foundations of these judgments are the assumptions that postcoloniality supersedes coloniality as a distinct historical phase, and that the individual writer's conscious transcendence of the trappings of colonial alienation marks a similarly redemptive break. The narrative philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, depends on the assumption that a postcolonial writer like C. L. R. James discovers the integrity of his life, and recapitulates it in narrative form, through the identification of his relation to the various traditions—Trinidadian, philosophical, and athletic—of which he forms an organic part. Against MacIntyre's theory of self-representation and his interpretation of James's eclectic and hybrid memoir *Beyond a Boundary*, this essay argues that postcolonial life-writing is most successful when it reflects the incompleteness of postcolonial history and the overdetermination of postcolonial sociality at the level of narrative construction. Taking James's memoir and Edward Said and Jean Mohr's intimate photo-essay *After the Last Sky* as its orienting coordinates, the essay offers a theory of postcolonial life-writing as errant cognitive mapping: attempts to situate the self in relation to broader dynamics of collective becoming that acquire their epistemological purchase, political utility, and moral heft from their refusal to embrace determinate narrative shapes.

Introduction

Postcolonial life-writing is vexed at every level of its conceptualization and implementation by conditions of subjection to imperial rule in our not yet

decolonized world. The outstanding fact of this writing is the incompletion of that process of collective liberation from all manners of domination, an open and perhaps unsuturable wound that inheres both existentially and cognitively. This in turn has consequences for the postcolonial writer's efforts to give narrative shape to her or his life. For in the absence of a just resolution to the violence of imperial rule, any account on one's own life will necessarily reflect something of the frustration of anticolonial aspirations. The postcolonial writer's thwarted becoming must be seen as part of the more general imperial proscription of collective autonomy.

Yet the historical experience of postcoloniality doesn't only manifest as privation. On the contrary, it serves as an incitement to discourse, and what is more, as a provocation. Indeed, the absence of reconciliation may suggest to the writer various forms of incipience, forms of futurity that, whether spectral or actual, imagined or attributed to historical logics, inspire creative attempts to grapple with colonial remains. This future-directed aspect of postcolonial writing is important to recognize, since this work is so often understood as retrospective and conciliatory. While it is undoubtedly true that much colonial and postcolonial writing does involve a search for the roots of identity, what is often forgotten is that this work creates rather than only recapitulates. And what it introduces into the historiographical archive is not just invented traditions or mythological accounts of a people's past. More significantly, if less frequently, postcolonial writing may elicit novel cognitive mappings, new understandings of the present conjuncture in its relation to past and future and to the broader world system in which it is located.

The first obstacle to such a mapping is, uniquely for the postcolonial subject, the very material facts of neocolonial exploitation and extraction, stolen archives, land theft, and underdeveloped or debarred institutions. To produce a representation of self that is adequate to the circumstances in which individuals or collectives find themselves therefore requires more than especially sharp powers of discernment. On one hand, nothing about those structural impediments necessitates the kind of creative response to dispossession that will be of interest in this essay. On the other hand, it would be the "rankest Panglossian dishonesty"—to trope on Edward Said—to tell the story of postcoloniality so far as one of redemption and transcendence (Said, *Culture* 332).

How then should the tale be told? And where should the individual postcolonial writer locate herself in relation to this story? What obligations, if any, does she have to be faithful to what has happened so far, and how should she weigh these in relation to her duty to leave room for an appreciably more just future? Is it fair to compromise fidelity to the historical record for the sake of possible instrumental gains to be had from the performative or imaginative power of creative memorialization? What are the rhetorical figures, patterns of emplotment, generic conventions, and narratological fixtures through which the postcolonial writer can do justice to the historical conjuncture, epistemologically, ethically, and politically? What mood or affective tonality is appropriate to reflecting on an unfinished history?

This essay examines two works of postcolonial life-writing that answer these questions in ways quite distinct from a dominant understanding of narrative widely presupposed in the field of postcolonial studies and recently reconstructed for distinct purposes by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Against MacIntyre's account, it will show that postcolonial life-writing is most successful when it eschews the measures of accomplishment on which its Western analogue is most often judged: linear development, generic consistency, subjective integrity, and narrative resolution. The attempts of Edward Said and C. L. R. James to take the measure of their lives in relation to the wider collectivities with which they identified are radically open in every sense: not only the narrative form but the very understandings of self and collectivity are left underdetermined. Acknowledgment of this indeterminacy should lead us to acknowledge that postcolonial life-writing has a much wider scope than has usually been allowed, and to recognize errancy in such writing not as a symptom of failure but as a signature of perspicuous and secular engagement with the specificity of postcolonial historical experience.

Alasdair MacIntyre's Integralism

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre concludes his 2016 work *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* by recounting the life stories of four exceptional yet, for his purposes, illustrative individuals: Soviet novelist Vasily Grossman, American Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, Irish priest Denis Faul, and Trinidad-born Marxist and cultural theorist C. L. R. James. While MacIntyre's approach is entirely

sympathetic, he enlists James for the sake of demonstrating a theory that, one suspects, James would not have accepted. Furthermore, it depends on a reading of James's masterpiece of self-reflection and cultural analysis, *Beyond a Boundary*, that seems to miss important aspects of what James wishes to communicate and to distort those details of the work on which it fixes. Yet MacIntyre's commentary, while misleading in these ways, nevertheless opens up questions about postcolonial life-writing that may otherwise go unrecognized.

MacIntyre argues that James's "Puritan" upbringing—this is James's term—fostered discipline, self-respect, restraint, and care for others. James's profound embeddedness in a moral tradition—the fundaments of which were located in the Anglican Church and the sporting code of cricket—allowed him to understand his life as a single, directed project. Moreover, the consistency of James's pursuit of his goals and the integrity with which he comported himself in the various spheres of his life allowed him to develop an extraordinarily integrated outlook on the various social and cultural phenomena that he studied. James's thought was thus marked by his refusal to "compartmentalize" the study of sport and literature, the insights of the novelist and of the theorist, or the worlds of high art and popular culture (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 276). But if James lived his life in pursuit of a single, refined understanding of the world and his place in it, this does not mean that he didn't experience abrupt crises. James's argument with Trotsky on the relationship between the vanguard party and Black Americans, his perception of the inability of existing Marxist theories to explain why or how workers should resist capitalism, and his recognition of the general indifference if not hostility of Marxists to popular activities like cricket contributed to his break with Trotskyism. As MacIntyre represents James's life story, however, none of these theoretical issues troubled James in an existential sense. It was rather setbacks in the real world of political affairs that caused James to rethink his priorities: his expulsion from the United States in 1953 because of his suspected communist sympathies; his marginalization by erstwhile comrades who had moved into circles of power in Trinidad and Ghana, Eric Williams and George Padmore; and more generally his disillusionment with the endurance of authoritarian structures in postcolonial governance (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 287). Yet the moral conversion that James subsequently underwent, according to MacIntyre, was more in the manner of a return to the resources of his youth than a break.

MacIntyre alludes to an exchange of letters between James and his lover, later wife, Constance Webb, in order to demonstrate the poverty of James's ethical understanding during the period of his involvement with Trotskyist politics and early pan-African organizing. Webb "posed the question of what shape her life should take" and so indirectly prompted James to reflect on his own. James responded by telling her that the best anyone could do would be to "give expression to powerful feelings that surge within us" (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 283). MacIntyre, who has devoted the later part of his career to contesting this kind of subjective, "emotivist" moral reasoning, which he sees as predominant in modernity, faults James for this advice, since, he alleges, one can't be sure which emotions to trust and which to mistrust (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 283; cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*). MacIntyre insinuates that James was captive in this early moment to his instincts and desires, lacking an objective criterion with which to discriminate between them and so bound to drift from one inclination to the next. Luckily, James was "rescued by cricket," which allowed him to "reidentif[y] and rediscove[r] that in his life which gave him and it point and purpose" (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 287). Having reported on cricket as a young man in Trinidad for the *Manchester Guardian*, James resumed his occupation as a sports journalist upon his return to England. James's moral crisis was precipitated, according to MacIntyre's reading of *Beyond a Boundary*, by his dismay upon learning that some American college basketball players had taken bribes to fix games. MacIntyre no doubt hears an echo of his own critique of emotivism in James's statement that "These young people had no loyalties to school because they had no loyalties to anything. They had a universal distrust of their elders and praeceptors…Each had had to work out his own individual code" (quoted in MacIntyre, *Ethics* 288). In MacIntyre's estimation, James drew four lessons about cricket, and about himself, from the experience. First, James identified cricket as an art and labor of love rather than a mere instrument of self-aggrandizement: "To say that it [cricket] is an art is to say that there are standards of excellence internal to it and that the good of achieving such excellence is what gives cricket its point and purpose." Second, James recognized his own "educable" quality and his capacity for discrimination, "qualities of character" that had been inculcated by parents and teachers. Third, he realized and came to insist on a "shared allegiance to a code," one that categorically prohibited certain kinds of behaviors in order to make possible "the achievement of genuine excellence." Finally,

because James had inherited "a tradition of thought, judgment, and action" which made possible his reflexivity, he wanted now, in writing the book, "to transmit [it] to others" (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 289). Whereas James took his choices in the 1940s to reflect his commitment to the veracity of his emotions and his obligation to gratify them, "[b]y the 1960s this individualist conception of himself had been displaced. He now understood those same choices as an expression of his formation by and his allegiance to a complex tradition or set of traditions" (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 293). And he didn't just live that commitment, he theorized it in his own uniquely literary way. MacIntyre concludes that "James was a philosopher" (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 296).

This is a rich portrait, one that usefully condenses and exemplifies more than three decades of MacIntyre's thought (in ways I find more relevant than the three other biographies he offers). Moreover, it opens up new terrain in James studies, which, in spite of being in the midst of yet another renaissance in recent years, has yet to fully grapple with James's ethical thought. Still, I have grounds for doubt about the picture MacIntyre presents. In particular, I would like to trouble MacIntyre's provocative equation of the narrative logic through which someone like James makes sense of his own life—a central preoccupation in the preceding parts of the book, as it is in much of MacIntyre's philosophical writing—with the narratives that MacIntyre himself supplies to reconstruct such a life. As MacIntyre acknowledges, he is "deeply indebted to their various biographers, both for the facts of their lives and for their illuminating perspectives" (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 244). He is also indebted to the writings of the figures themselves, including O'Connor's autobiography, Grossman's wartime writings and novels, Faul's exposé of British prisoner abuse, and James's various essays and historical tracts. At issue isn't simply the discrepancy between an autobiography and a biography, for it is certain that both of these depend upon a set of mediations—cognitive, hermeneutic, narratorial, linguistic, and otherwise—in order to body forth readable accounts of a human lifetime. The question is rather how a *life* or *lifetime* itself comes to be known, and in turn what relationship this knowledge has to the actuality—if it is possible to speak in this way—of someone's experience. MacIntyre's questions, by contrast, are practical. He is interested in the manner through which individuals come to understand both the nature of the good and the movement of their lives in relation to the norms that subtend the good, tasks for which narrative reconstruction is, he believes, indispensable.

In MacIntyre's narrative, if not his philosophical schema, "life" acquires significance on four different registers: it is the preconceptual totality of an individual's experiences, that which is narrated by the individual in the process of trying to come to terms with her or his own life, the representation and interpretation of a life as it appears in the variously mediated forms of published narrative, and the subsequent reconstitution of that life for the sake of philosophical demonstration within MacIntyre's own book. Since the first category is the most difficult to apprehend, I will address these modes in reverse order. The kind of narrative which MacIntyre provides of James's life is obviously not a complete biography.[1] MacIntyre's aim is rather to narrate the trajectory of James's character in relation to the problematic that interests the philosopher—the grounding of norms in either subjective experience or 'nature'—and to identify the aim toward which James was working, which, MacIntyre argues, was to be a philosopher. MacIntyre thus uses James's lifetime, as he understands it or anyway represents it, as a means with which to validate his own ethical schema. A crucial supposition of this project is that the relatively late work *Beyond a Boundary* offers the "true story" of James's life, one that belies the false understandings that James had of himself at earlier moments in his life, notably during the periods of his involvement with Trotskyist and Pan-African organizing (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 293). Yet MacIntyre also allows that the book participated in eliciting the "integration" that James sought, and that it did so by allowing him to bring together his aesthetic and political commitments (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 294). There is thus a good deal of equivocation in MacIntyre's account between what I have identified as James's existential attempt to get a hold on his own life, the writing of a life, and MacIntyre's own summary. Moreover, MacIntyre supposes that the first level, the actual, unmediated experience of an individual in finite duration, is available for *ex post facto* narration, even if individuals do not experience their lives as narratives (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 241). Narration clarifies the events, decisions, and arc of one's life in a way that facilitates ethical living, but it does not fundamentally participate in constructing that unity; at most, it allows for a potentially powerful recognition of an already existing integrity of value and purpose. It is for this same reason that he rejects the argument, which he attributes to Sartre but that can be found in much poststructuralist thought as well, that narrative falsifies events by imputing to them a false teleology (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 233). In fact, MacIntyre insists, human life does have a basic

directedness, and it is the task of narrative—of whatever sort—to reconstitute the movement of an individual toward its goal.

This universalizing, Aristotelian approach to the concept of a lifetime becomes especially problematic from a postcolonial vantage point. In the first place, it deserves mentioning that although the concept of tradition may have connotations that are widely desired, such as a sense of belonging, existential orientation, and bodies of wisdom to inform action, it cannot be assumed that everyone is in fact embedded in a tradition or is afforded the same resources by the traditions in which she or he participates. As Frantz Fanon argues most powerfully, colonialism "distorts…disfigures…and destroys" tradition as much as it does the cultural memory of a people (Fanon, *Wretched* 149); likewise the Western slave trade, whatever resistances it encountered in its drive to efface those "survivals" of African lifeways and sheer human persistence, nevertheless involved a proscription on tradition that could only be circumvented surreptitiously or with the greatest risk.[2] More significantly for my purposes, the identification of narration with an assessment of progress on the path toward the individual realization of collective ends forecloses other narrative logics. Furthermore, it depends on an ahistorical account of narrative, one in which narrative itself has a determinate and universally shared function. I would like to cast doubt on the equivalence MacIntyre establishes between James's narrative and his life, and more importantly between his life and any other. My claim is that colonial and postcolonial conditions create demands on writing and solicit different kinds of narrative forms. It is for that reason that I will study two postcolonial works of life-writing that have very idiosyncratic forms, ones which resist assimilation to any teleological model: James's *Beyond a Boundary* and Edward W. Said's *After the Last Sky*. These works also refute MacIntyre's claim that life-writing recapitulates preexisting historical trajectories. For James and Said, writing is a means of worldmaking.[3]

C. L. R. James and the incipience of history

C. L. R. James describes *Beyond a Boundary* as "a personal record of a journey through cricket country" (James, *Beyond* 257). This pithy formula doesn't capture the ambition of this unclassifiable text, which offers a history of cricket and of organized sports more generally, extended biographical remarks on three great cricketers, reflections on the nature of art, an excursus on nineteenth-century

British culture and pedagogy, glimpses of the economic and social conditions of Trinidad, accounts of British colonization and allusions to American neo-colonialist efforts, as well as various observations about James's youth and upbringing in a colonized society. In a crucial respect, the polyvalent nature of the text responds to the social realities of which James is trying to make sense. As he represents himself, James is somewhat at odds with and eccentric to the cultural tendencies of the world of cricket. If, on one hand, James identifies his youthful self as a perfect specimen of a British colonial education, the moral code it imparted, and the system of color hierarchy that sustained it, he finds himself, on the other hand, increasingly distant from the most dominated classes—the Black underclasses—by virtue of his education and his affiliation "with people lighter in complexion than himself," as exemplified by his decision to join a cricket team "founded…on the principle that they didn't want any dark people in their club" (James, *Beyond* 52, 50). In other words, it is just the nature of colonial Trinidad, organized around numerous artificial hierarchies, that precludes the identity of that society with itself and of James with his society. James describes his internalization of this split, writing for instance that "[t]wo people lived in me: one, the rebel against all family and school discipline and order; the other, a Puritan who would have cut off a finger sooner than do anything contrary to the ethics of the game" (James, *Beyond* 28).

Sylvia Wynter's brilliant reading of the book foregrounds James's effort to write an "autosociography" and make some sense of his multiple, incoherent identities:

> a Negro yet British, a colonial native yet culturally a part of the public school code, attached to the cause of the proletariat yet a member of the middle class, a Marxian yet a Puritan, an intellectual who plays cricket, of African descent yet Western, a Trotskyist and pan-Africanist, a Marxist yet a supporter of black studies, a West Indian majority black yet an American minority black. (Wynter 69)

Wynter argues that the complexity in Trinidad's social structure prevents James from privileging a single, determining site, whether class, race, or otherwise; instead, he is set off on a "quest for a frame to contain them all" (Wynter 69). She claims that *Beyond a Boundary* resorts to the "voyage-quest motif" because of the epistemological confusions caused by his official education and his desire to understand the overdetermined nature of domination in Trinidad and the broader world of which it is a part (Wynter 71). Wynter suggests that James attempts to

produce an integrated theoretical understanding by studying what he took to be the "great unifying [cultural] forms" of his time; his "quest" is an attempt to produce in theory, if not in actuality, the unity and self-coincidence that was denied to him by historical circumstances (Wynter 87). If the merit of James's insights in the book derives from the fact that he thinks and writes from the specificity of his location, refusing the inevitably reductive view from nowhere, we might also say that James is motivated by the urgent existential task of grappling with a social complexity that has elicited in him a "pluri-consciousness" and that threatens to engulf him (Wynter 69). The appeal to narrative, the development of totalizing theoretical models, and the desire to integrate the hitherto fractured domains of his life thus disclose a lack about which I will have more to say shortly.

There is a certain resonance between Wynter's identification of a quest motif in James's book and MacIntyre's account of the teleological structure that James imparted to his life's narrative. Still, I have reservations about whether this is the best way to read *Beyond a Boundary*. I will argue that the form of the text suggests an opposing conclusion, and that James didn't want to offer a theory of society as such or even a coherent and directed story of his life. If there is an ethical norm to be discovered here, it is rather that of persistence in intellectual errancy, itself a form of fidelity to the vicious contingencies of modern history.

In one sense, Wynter's remark that the book takes the form of a quest is on the mark. A quest implies a privation. And *Beyond a Boundary* is filled with observations about James's failures to understand. Remembering his boyhood fascination with Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, he asks himself: "What drew me to it? I don't know, a phrase which will appear often in this book" (James, *Beyond* 17). Of his introduction to cricket, he writes:

> We know nothing, nothing at all, of the results of what we do to children. My father had given me a bat and ball, I had learnt to play and at eighteen was a good cricketer. What a fiction! In reality my life up to ten had laid the powder for a war that lasted without respite for eight years, and intermittently for some time afterwards—a war between English Puritanism, English literature and cricket, and the realism of West Indian life. (James, *Beyond* 21)

Of his education at Government School, he says the following: "What do the British people know of what they have done there? Precious little. The colonial peoples, particularly West Indians, scarcely know themselves as yet. It has taken me a long time to begin to understand" (James, *Beyond* 24). James reports the comment of a shoemaker, who hoped the Black cricketer Wilton St Hill would

redeem Trinidad on an English playing field: "You know what I waitin' for? When he go to Lord's and the Oval and make his century there!" James comments: "It took me years to understand. To paraphrase a famous sentence: It was the instinct of an oppressed man that spoke" (James, *Beyond* 81). Most famously, James asks: "What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?" (James, *Beyond* 233; cf. 252). While these quotations suggest the movement from ignorance to awareness, striking revelations, and of James's gradually dawning realization of realities he had been taught to disregard, nowhere do they suggest arrival at a state of certainty or even intellectual maturity. Those are metaphors that James refuses to adopt. If he recalls a quest, it is not one that eventuates in personal growth or the realization of a goal but rather one that consists in a series of breaks with those mental constructs that had proven insufficient to grapple with the new realities he encountered.

One of those breaks concerned Trotsky's theory of revolution and his doctrine of the vanguard party. James had met Trotsky in Mexico in 1938 and was disturbed by Trotsky's insistence that Black Americans should be tutored in the doctrines of the party and should subordinate their own revolutionary efforts to class struggle.[4] In *Beyond a Boundary*, James recalls a different rationale for his break:

> As early as 1941 I had begun to question the premises of Trotskyism. It took nearly a decade of incessant labour and collaboration to break with it and reorganize my Marxist ideas to cope with the post-war world. That was a matter of doctrine, of history, of economics and politics…In my private mind, however, I was increasingly aware of large areas of human existence that my history and my politics did not seem to cover. What did men live by? What did they want? What did history show that they had wanted? Had they wanted then what they wanted now? The men I had known, what had they wanted? What exactly was art and what exactly culture? I had believed that, more or less, I knew. (James, *Beyond* 151)

This line of questioning, first mooted in his unpublished manuscript *American Civilization*, entailed a major shift in his political orientation. As Anthony Bogues has helpfully described it, this research agenda was geared toward developing a richer understanding of the "moral economy of the proletarian revolution," and it resulted in James's new appreciation of the popular desire and capacity for a freedom that would allow for self-transformation even under conditions of domination (Bogues 157, 170-1). Andrew Smith likewise argues that James ascribed agency to the oppressed and others subject to overwhelming external

force; James therefore intuited that audiences, whether of sport, cinema, or literature, constantly struggle for better living conditions through their various manners of engagement with cultural phenomena (Smith, "C. L. R. James" 21).[5] But it is precisely because James recognized that these popular engagements were free, creative, and responsive to particular historical conditions—rather than predetermined by ideological manipulation or mass psychology—that he couldn't answer the questions he posed once and for all. James's approach to those collective energies, Smith argues, was inductive in the extreme (Smith, "C. L. R. James" 22; cf. Smith, "'Concrete Freedom'" 490). James had discovered a question, not a new doctrine to replace the old. That the question— "What did men live by?"—itself foreclosed an intellectual encounter with women, subject to their own forms of domination and creative refusal, is an indication of the unfinished nature of his intellectual project.[6] But there is nothing to indicate that James understood his quest as anything other than endless.

James's embrace, after this break, of a democratic and humanist politics has several consequences in *Beyond a Boundary*. It is sufficient to recall James's previous literary investment in the figure of the world-historic individual, a historiographical conceit he adapted from Hegel's lectures on world history. That principle had allowed him to impart a great deal of coherence and directedness to earlier works on the Trinidadian labor leader and proto-nationalist Arthur Cipriani and especially to his study of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*. The hero in each of those histories supplied a pivot that allowed James to draw manifold events and dynamics into a single web of relations. If James occasionally writes, in *Beyond a Boundary*, of certain individuals in that Hegelian vein, the lesson he derives from them is a novel one. James remarks of the great nineteenth-century English cricketer W. G. Grace that

> He seems to have been one of those men in whom the characteristics of life as lived by many generations seemed to meet for the last, in a complete and perfectly blended whole… There he was using his bat like an axe, building as much of that old world as possible into the new, and fabulously successful at it. (James, *Beyond* 177, 178)

Yet he goes on to acknowledge that,

> [b]urly as the figure was, it was sustained and lifted higher than ever before by what has been and always will be the most potent of all forces in our universe—the spontaneous, unqualified, disinterested enthusiasm and goodwill of a whole community. The spontaneity was only in appearance. (James, *Beyond* 184)

Here James transforms the people into the agency of Grace's success. If he remains interested in such exceptional figures, it is no longer because he thinks them essential to channeling popular energies but because they serve as a medium in which to observe those passions, which otherwise remain anonymous.

James turns the people into the real "subject" of *Beyond a Boundary* (Westall).[7] But this people isn't to be understood simply as the people of Trinidad, the West Indies, or the African diaspora. The territorial dimension of James's political imagination was not fixed in such a way; he explored a number of different options for regional federations, at varying levels. The subject of *Beyond a Boundary* is the fractious, agonistic body politic that, significantly, James refuses to name or demarcate. It is this indeterminate *we*, saved from complete anarchy by its anti-colonial commitment, passion for "self-governance," and "enthusiasm" for cricket, that motivates James's writing. And because this "we" is not reducible to any actually existing community, any empirically verifiable entity in James's contemporary moment, it has a great deal of suggestive power for readers even today.

The form of the book might be viewed as an attempt to draw on the unruly energies of that as-yet uninstantiated community without corralling it or otherwise seeking to transpose it into a more legible order. I have already commented on the proliferation of genres; to this willed heterogeneity might be added several other formal features, all of them indications of an intention to transgress received understandings within a narrative mode. First, the narratorial voice undergoes frequent modulations. At times James is funny, channeling and satirizing the judgments of his "puritanical aunts" about the wholly "unsatisfactory", "ne'er do-well" quality of the poor Bondman family that rents from his family (James, *Beyond* 4). He occasionally pokes fun at his own pretensions, as when he writes of his own attempt to redeem Wilton St. Hill from ignominy, that he is like a bowler "playing a single-wicket match on a perfect wicket against a line of mighty batsmen. But great deeds have been done under similar conditions. This is my opportunity to make history" (James, *Beyond* 82). Yet he concludes this scene with an unabashedly sententious claim: "They are blind to the grandeur of a game which, in lands far from where that which gave it birth, could encompass so much of social reality and still remain a game" (James, *Beyond* 91). Sometimes he writes at great length, the pedagogue evident, as for example when he explains the nature of drama and criticizes a traditional

aesthetician for his narrow views (James, *Beyond* 195-211); at other times he is gnomic, favoring the laconic remark over the careful disquisition—"what do they know of cricket who only cricket know?"—and producing a series of short sentences, many with only a single clause. Second, there is an episodic quality to the entire book. This is true not only in the stories he tells about his childhood, which he prefaces by indicating that he will offer a list rather than a narrative—"Here briefly are some of the experiences of a lifetime" (James, *Beyond* 7)—but of the structure of the book itself, which, divided into seven parts and twenty chapters (including the "Epilogue and Apotheosis"), has the markings of a compendium or anthology. James values the break—one is tempted to say the cut, troping on the cricket term—and he is not inclined to smooth the movement between parts. So, third, we observe the logic of adjacency rather than verticality or subordination that informs the relation between successive moments in the text. On occasion the transition is completely unexplained, not to say unmotivated; at others it is informal, conversational, perhaps suggesting the workings of memory. A fourth and related feature is the nonlinear nature of the narration. The story of Grace, who played from 1865 until 1908, is told toward the end of the book (James, *Beyond* 171-185), not long after James describes the career of George Headley, a West Indian cricketer who played in the interwar period (James, *Beyond* 139-148). Finally, although the ending brings us up to the present, to James's campaign to have Worrell appointed as captain, it is far from the "apotheosis" that James calls it. The concluding lines are apt but anticlimactic: "Clearing their way with bat and ball, West Indians had made a public entry into the comity of nations. Thomas Arnold, Thomas Hughes and the Old Master himself would have recognized Frank Worrell as their boy" (James, *Beyond* 261). Here James asserts the importance of self-determination and reminds readers of the link between literature and sport that he has been keen to demonstrate throughout, but he hardly offers any grand synthesis or message of transcendence. If anything, this ending is in tension with James's insistence on the need for West Indian self-determination.

There is thus a way in which James's style can only be characterized as an errant one. This is not a value judgement but a central feature of his literary intention, so far as I am able to describe it. Errancy is a figure of movement, which James describes as central to his interpretive and ethical project:

> Time would pass, old empires would fall and new ones take their place, the relations of countries and the relations of classes had to change, before I discovered that it is not the quality of goods and utility which matter, but movement; not where you are or what you have, but where you have come from, where you are going and the rate at which you are getting there. (James, *Beyond* 113)

MacIntyre has read this passage as evidence of James's belief in the directedness of human lives and his commitment to practical reasoning and self-narration (MacIntyre, *Ethics* 295). Others have read in it a statement of James's opposition to essentialism. By contrast, I would like to suggest that James means for these ends to be understood as contingent ones within an encompassing, ceaseless, and more significant interrogation of selves, collective and individual. Consider this passage, which offers a complementary reflection:

> No, I have not forgotten the third reason why I wanted to write about George Headley. And note it well, you adventurous categorizers…We West Indians are a people on our way who have not yet reached a point of rest and consolidation. Critics of a sociological turn of mind had proved that we were a nation which naturally produced fast bowlers, when in 1950 Ram and Val, both under twenty-one, produced the greatest slow-bowling sensation since the South African team of 1907. We are moving too fast for any label to stick. (James, *Beyond* 148)

Setting aside the details of James's polemic here, what should be observed is the absence of any determinate destination for this movement. James describes the relevant "we" here as one that is in flight, moving, changing, and experimenting in ways that foil any attempt to assign them a place.[8] Indeed, James suggests that there is a virtue in being unidentifiable, since it preserves the ability to keep moving.

Yet if one crucial ethic and aesthetic in James's project is errancy, it is also important to recognize the persistence that is discernible in the narrative James provides about his journeyings from the gifted child who was carefully sealed off from the underclasses and nationalist insurgency to the erudite, committed proponent of an expanded Marxist theory and pan-African solidarity. In this sense MacIntyre is correct to say that there is a directedness to James's life, and it is one that James has discovered, perhaps through the very act of writing this book. Yet even as there is definite development in James's thought, one must acknowledge the frequently stunted nature of his projects, the result of specific political and social circumstances beyond his control: thwarted by Trotsky in his efforts to introduce a revolutionary Black perspective into his revolutionary organization,

expelled from the United States before he could bring *American Civilization* to completion, boxed out of Eric Williams' Peoples' National Movement upon his return to Trinidad. So, too, the broader aspirations toward human liberation and universal incitement to creativity remained unrealized for James when he wrote *Beyond a Boundary*, as they of course remain for us today. And although I will not develop the point here, it is imperative to mention that it was exactly the understanding of his education as a tradition from which he had to liberate himself in order to make use of Western thought for his own purposes.

James had to tell the story of his life, had to face himself and gather the elements of a narrative through which he could make sense of where he'd been and where he still wanted to go. So much was necessary for one such as he who conceived of the struggles that concerned him as unfinished. The experience of life, in its unmasterable and often pernicious cruelty, its indifference to human will or aims, often prompts such stocktaking; for those who have experienced a defeat that was the result of political machinations, such introspection is all the more urgent.[9] If this is so, if, that is, the experience of defeat and stunted futures elicits self-reflection and self-narration in those who have the courage and time necessary to undertake them, then we must also admit that one such as James had infinitely more reason to conduct this self-inquiry than the generic subject of whom MacIntyre writes in the theoretical sections of his work and of which he treats James as an exemplar. For the experience of and exposure to those kinds of obstacles, setbacks, and defeats that compel individuals to take an inventory of themselves are not equally distributed. Conversely, the mode of narration adopted by one such as James who understands the broader historical movement in which he situates himself as incomplete assumes a unique form. For James has greater need of the metaphysical powers of narration than does MacIntyre, and still more than the anonymous human subject of philosophical reason; as one struggling for West Indian self-determination and the liberation of workers from the deadening effects of capitalist production, James required not one but a series of narratives to measure the movement of those projects at sequential conjunctures.

My contention is that *Beyond a Boundary* takes the errant form I have tried to reconstruct precisely because it is a faithful account of the unfulfilled nature of James's revolutionary aspirations. Errancy is not just rhetorical ornamentation or a signature of James's style, but a response to the dispersive and unmastered nature of his present. It is no slight to say that James had

revolutionary intentions that were unrealized, and that those failures are registered in the form of this idiosyncratic, non-linear, profoundly aporetic work. James ran up against both epistemological and political impasses in his life, both of which are subsumed in the work in the form of argumentative ellipsis, nescience, unexplained narrative leaps, and prompt tonal shifts. But these forms should not be understood in solely privative terms, as failures to gain a handle on a reality that escapes him. They are in fact attempts to mold a sensibility about the world that can both bear him up in his struggles and constitute a people of which he is a part.

Said's attention

Edward Said describes *After the Last Sky* as "an unreconciled book in which the contradictions and antinomies of our lives and experiences remain as they are, assembled neither (I hope) into neat wholes nor into sentimental ruminations about the past. Fragments, memories, disjointed scenes, intimate particulars" (Said, *After* xi). *After the Last Sky* is an unreconciled book in the formal ways Said suggests because Palestine, the object on which it meditates, is unreconciled: without territorial integrity, unaccepted by the most powerful actors on the international stage, lacking a historical archive, and devoid of a legitimate representative authority. The predicate also applies to Said himself, both in his lived experience of exile and in the narratorial persona he elaborates in this work. Said, committed as he is to grapple with the world as it is rather than as he might wish it to be, nevertheless has not reconciled himself to the realities of which he gives such an intimate and attentive account. There is a marked tone to Said's essay, one that cannot easily be characterized but that demonstrates neither resignation nor anger, but something like measured refusal.

Like *Beyond a Boundary*, *After the Last Sky* is a transgeneric work. Although it has mostly been studied as a photographic essay (Schloss; Kauffmann; Mitchell, "The Photographic Essay") or as a reflection on exile (Ganguly), I would like to approach it as an effort in "autosociography" that is comparable to James's own. That is, I am interested in the ways Said figures his relationship to the Palestinian people, writes his story as a part of theirs, and puts writing to the task not only of reflecting on but of constituting that collectivity of which he is a part. In particular, I will attend to the ways in which the form of the text—the arrangement of photograph and essay on the page, but especially Said's manner

of writing itself—constructs meaning that supplements the denotative content of text and image.

The starting points of Said's extended essay are two observations about the difficulty of writing about Palestine. The first is a meditation on beginnings: "[N]o one writing about Palestine…starts out from scratch: We have all been there before, whether by reading about it, experiencing its millennial presence and power, or actually living there for periods of time. It is a terribly crowded place, almost too crowded for what it is asked to bear by way of history or interpretation of history" (Said, *After* 4). In *Beginnings*, Said had made the case that texts necessarily carry precedents, and that the idea of an absolute origin is a "magical" or religious idea, unworldly; a beginning, by contrast, entails some responsibility to what actually exists in the world and marks the intention to make something new with or from what is given (Said, *Beginnings* 14). In *After the Last Sky*, that secular position remains at work, but the active disposition of the intentional agent is tempered by acknowledgment of the extraordinary circumstances of Palestine's occupation. If Said's early conception of beginnings supposed a certain combination of autonomy and heteronomy, as Marx also understood and succinctly formulated in a phrase that Said appreciated,[10] his calculation changes when reflecting on Palestine, at once the most religiously overdetermined place on earth and a meeting place of imperial and settler colonial projects: the inter-imperial space par excellence (Doyle). Here the balance of forces inclines toward greater heteronomy, for sure, given the libraries of discourse devoted to it; the carefully managed limitations on public speech in the United States further restricts what one can say and what will be heard about, for instance, Palestinian pasts, grievances, fears, and desires. And whereas in *Beginnings* the sources of constraint on beginning are basically discursive, here they are that but also quite material: walls, checkpoints, and border regimes, not to mention the permission to narrate granted or withheld by a publishing industry with determinate financial interests. Said cannot begin (or end, as his conclusion makes clear) without taking into account the massive state power that literally and not only figuratively weighs on him.

His second observation is that "no clear and simple narrative is adequate to the complexity of our experience;" Said rejects the idea that "a clear, direct line can be drawn from our misfortunes in 1948 to our misfortunes in the present" (Said, *After* 5). Said is not, of course, rejecting the idea that the *nakba* was an

injustice and a traumatic event that reverberates in the present and still demands redress. He is arguing rather that events since that moment, events which didn't follow as necessary causes, have added further difficulties that need to be measured in any Palestinian collective self-assessment. These events, we might surmise, include the end of military rule over Israel's Arab villages in 1966, which allowed the state to claim a veneer of pluralistic inclusion; the 1967 War, which extended Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and Gaza, and led to new displacements; the normalization of relations between Israel and Egypt in 1978, which highlighted the isolation of Palestinians from the larger Arab world; and the emergence of the fedayeen, the Palestinian left, and (just after the book was first published) the First Intifada, all of them promising but subject to enormous counterrevolutionary pressures. For Said's project, however, what is even more significant is the dispersion of Palestinians across the Middle East and indeed the world. Not only does he belong to this large group, on the "outside" as he suggests in the book, but he, like anyone else attempting to write about Palestinians, must grapple with how to represent the incredibly diversity of experiences among people living as second-class citizens in Israel, under military control in Gaza and the West Bank, in refugee camps or in relative luxury in the Gulf or the U.S., as naturalized citizens of Jordan, as stateless inhabitants of Lebanon, and otherwise. This is the primary sense in which the Palestinian realities Said sets out to realistically record demand some rhetorical, formal, and conceptual experimentation. Fragment and montage are not deployed for their own sake or as part of a postmodern rejection of narrative but rather out of fidelity to the terms of contemporary Palestinian collective life.

The following extraordinary passage distills a further challenge to representation:

> in the world system today there is no method, no way, no perspective that gives us an existence as a people independent of…the very events and factors that have reduced us to our present pass. I can put this more starkly. There has been no misfortune worse for us than that we are ineluctably viewed as the enemies of the Jews. No moral and political fate worse, none at all, I think: no worse, there is none. (Said, *After* 134)

There is a cryptic quality to this passage, a radical foreshortening of reasoning, that is reminiscent of many passages in *Beyond a Boundary*. What Said seems to be arguing is that Palestinians cannot, at least at the present moment, define themselves in positive, immanent terms but must instead define themselves in

relation to, perhaps even as an unintended consequence or afterthought of the Western solution to its own "Jewish question." Any Palestinian account of the self will therefore have to take account of Jewish history, not only for the prosaic reason that it has imposed itself on Palestinian lives in unavoidable ways but also in the sense that any self-manifestation by Palestinians, any self-assertion or public demand, will, in the court of international public opinion, immediately be weighed against contemporaneous claims made by Jews. We can go further: Said is not merely suggesting that Palestinian claims today are subject to a mandatory comparison with Jewish ones but even more importantly that they are invariably reframed within the Zionist worldview so that they are not even intelligible on their own terms. This is a compelling argument, which powerfully suggests the misfortune of being dragooned into a moral economy that is, from a Palestinian perspective, extrinsic and irrelevant to their own existential and political needs. But what is so striking about this passage is its use of repetition and negation: six times Said uses "no" as a determiner, and twice more he uses "none" as a pronoun. This is a far cry from Fanon's "no": "No to man's contempt. No to the indignity of man. To the exploitation of man. To the massacre of what is most human in man: freedom of refusal" (Fanon, *Black Skin* 197). Whereas Fanon describes the "no" of the subject in emancipatory revolt, Said specifies the circumstances in which such revolt has been made to appear nihilistic rather than world-engendering. Fanon's "massacre" is the starting point for Said's reflection. But precisely as a starting point, we must expect that it harbors some creative potential.

One way to think about the book is as an essay on *ṣumūd*, the quality often translated as steadfastness or staying power and that is frequently used in discussions about the resoluteness of will and sheer physical perdurance necessary to rebuff the Israeli project to wear Palestinians down, force them to emigrate, and cause them to relinquish their claims to the land. Steadfastness has an obsolete sense in contemporary American English that commends it, in my view, as a translation; its anachronistic quality parallels, in an uncanny way, the very attitude against which Palestinians are fighting and that consigns them to the status of one of history's lost causes. But the datedness of 'steadfastness' doesn't do much to instruct non-Palestinians in the significance of *ṣumūd*, at once an ethic and the most prevalent—if least visible—form of resistance to occupation. One of the tasks Said has set for himself in composing this work is to substantiate the term through both personal reflection and descriptions of Palestinians engaged in

the tasks of everyday life. Although he uses the Arabic term on one occasion, Said in fact offers a number of terms and phrases throughout the book that characterize the spirit of Palestinian *ṣumūd* as he understands it (Said, *After* 100). One of these is obduracy: "…why so much denial of, and such energy expended on, what was not there? Could it be that even as alien outsiders we dog their military might with our obdurate moral claim, our insistence (like that of Bartleby the Scrivener) that 'we would prefer not to,' not to leave, not to abandon Palestine forever?" (Said, *After* 42). Obduracy, presented in this way, suggests a less stoic, less honorific, more self-consciously stubborn sensibility than is typically associated with *ṣumūd*. With this characteristically deflationary gesture, Said suggests a way of engaging with a legitimate nationalist struggle while avoiding the temptations to romanticize or glorify it so as to blind participants to the dangers of turning their own projected polity into another source of exclusion and debasement. Other formulas suggest a similar insight. Consider for example an anecdote Said offers, in which a Palestinian man living in Jerusalem takes the opportunity presented by a visiting European woman, an acquaintance of Said, to deliver a message to him on the outside (Said, *After* 55). The message, transcribed on a piece of notebook paper, informs Said "of the writer's great expertise in world karate championships 'under the name of Palestine'" and "nothing else" (Said, *After* 56). Said identifies in the "comic insistence" on the man's abilities an "uninspired…assertion of self all of us seem to possess" (Said, *After* 56). Said makes a similar interpretive move in his reflection on the penchant of Palestinians for arranging their domestic interiors in elaborate ways to mark the occasion, for instance, of a shared meal. Noting that there is always something "slightly off" and excessive in such efforts, he sees a "compulsion to repeat" (Said, *After* 58) that reveals a "comic dislocation, the effect of too much for too little a space or for too uninteresting an occasion" (Said, *After* 60). Self-assertion as a practice that reveals one's fragility, an exacting attention to detail that discloses lack of mastery of a space: these are Said's transliterations of practices that sustain Palestinians in a world that seems not to want them. Repetition, then, or what Said calls "beginning again" (Said, *After* 96, 100), are practices that compensate for in sheer tenacity what Palestinians lack in the way of a "great [historical] episode," "dominant theory," "central image," "coherent discourse," or territorial "center" (Said, *After* 129). But repetition is not only compensatory; it is a political practice that highlights its actors' finitude and so preempts—or at least counsels against—

the temptation to assign their fate to some higher and more perfect logic or authority. As Said writes elsewhere, "repetition is useful as a way of showing that history and actuality are all about human persistence, and not about divine originality" (Said, *The World* 113). *Ṣumūd*, as Said characterizes it, already contains the two poles of the problematic I have identified in the composition of James's *Beyond a Boundary*: it marries a determination born of political necessity to the eccentric energies of a people who are unable to see themselves comfortably at home in the world.

For all their differences—and I shall return to the question of what distinguishes them in the conclusion to this essay—the two authors also share a reticence about making positive claims and, more generally, about the epistemological standing of their respective objects. Recall that James frequently expresses reservations about the real scope of his knowledge: "What drew me to it? I don't know, a phrase which will appear often in this book" (James, *Beyond* 17). Similarly, Said, in one of his many criticisms of the Palestinian liberation movement broadly speaking, emphasizes the lack of and yet

> growing realization of the need for an unusual and, to some degree, an unprecedented knowledge. For, having had the experience of limits, we are thrown back on ourselves…and forced to raise the issues of whether we have learned what it is that has brought us this fate…whether there is anything we can do to change it, and whether, based on the realities of our past, we can responsibly articulate a sense of the future to which all of us can adhere and aspire. Can we 'put on' knowledge adequate to the power that has entered and dislocated our lives so unalterably in this century? (Said, *After* 159)

Said directs the questions he poses at himself along with other Palestinians, questions that are no less urgent and unresolved because he has elsewhere taken positions on them. It is, in fact, just this uncertainty that suggests the exceptionally personal, even confessional, nature of the work. What was almost certainly intended as a book with a didactic intention—to humanize Palestinians for a hostile, indifferent, or confused Western audience, to correct for the fact that "Palestinians remain virtually unknown" —nevertheless bears the mark of profound uncertainty, not about any of the normative questions associated with Palestinian claims but about the standing of Palestinians in the contemporary conjuncture (Said, *After* 4). Even Said's concluding statement about the purpose of the work reveals more by way of negation than positive proposition:

> we are also enveloped by a nagging disquiet at how much yet needs to be done by us. We live in a protracted not-yet, which is not always a very hopeful one. I feel it particularly as I end this book. Not yet has there been a full history of us as a people, not even a full record of what has been done to us, what outrages have been done in our name, and what we have done to others. My own purpose here was, with Jean Mohr, to give a sense of what our essential national incompleteness is now…The absence of resolution in this book is a true one: It comes from exile. (Said, *After* 165).

One reading of this statement would situate it in terms of the affective profile that Said maintains throughout the narrative and that oscillates between feelings of the author's "depressed" feeling or perception of "depressing" spectacles (Said, *After* 49, 112, 128, 146) and some opposing, unnamed feeling that readers may surmise when Said begins to talk about emergent Palestinian projects.[11] Yet it is the tension itself that I think is most significant, for it indicates Said's ambivalence about the present circumstances of which he writes. Overall, the signature of Said's voice in this book is its equivocality, tentativeness, uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and sense of incompletion.

That Said frames his remarks both about the book and the Palestinian people in temporal terms is especially striking given that it is ostensibly a commentary on a series of photographs taken by the Swiss photographer Jean Mohr. Said commissioned the photographs for an exhibition he had proposed for the UN International Conference on the Question of Palestine, requesting that they be displayed at the entrance of the conference site in Geneva. When Mohr returned, however,

> the official response was…puzzling and, to someone with a taste for irony, exquisite. You can hang them up, we were told, but no writing can be displayed with them. No legends, no explanations. A compromise was finally negotiated whereby the name of the country or place (Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, West Bank, Gaza) could be affixed to the much-enlarged photographs, but not one word more. (Said *After* 3)

As Said explains, the opposition was led by Arab member states, who have always supported Palestinians publicly while fearing their democratic determination and sabotaging them behind the scenes. In any case, it is the forbidden captions that immediately motivated Said's contribution to the book, and so readers may expect to encounter an exercise in ekphrasis—or even epigram, the total subordination of text to image. Ekphrasis, as a long tradition of criticism documents, seeks not only to transpose a picture into language, whether through description of an actual picture or the verbal presentation of detail suggestive enough to conjure an image

in the minds of readers, but also to produce a spatial figure. It is thus significant that Said and Mohr's book establishes a relationship between text and image that resists the framework of ekphrasis, at least in this traditional sense.[12]

It does so, first, by means of an indeterminate spatial arrangement of words and images on the printed page. Some of the images occupy full pages; others are placed at the top, bottom, side, or middle of the page and set next to the text; one image, which introduces the third chapter, is laid out across two full pages.[13] Each of these images has a corresponding caption, printed in Italics, which provides basic information about the photograph and where it was taken: "*Damascus, 1983. Two boys at the camp at Sayida Zeinab*" (A, 66); "*Nablus soap factory*" (A, 109); "*Geneva, 1983. Yasir Arafat, leader of the PLO*" (A, 121). Other captions suggest interpretive work: "*Sidon, South Lebanon, 1983. Camp at Ein-El-Hilwé. Time Passes: destruction, reconstruction, redestruction*" (A, 39); "*Ramallah, 1984. Proudly displayed, the picture of a man first sentenced to life imprisonment, then expelled to Algeria and then to Jordan*" (A, 69). Said's own essay, meanwhile, makes frequent references to Mohr's photographs without using deictic terms to indicate the specific photograph about which he is writing. Sometimes his narrative makes the relationship quite clear—for example, when he writes about a photograph depicting a group of men in a classroom that "To look at the perhaps plodding efforts of a group of Islamic school students in Jerusalem is therefore to feel some satisfaction at how their unexceptional attention to the Koran…furnishes a counterweight to all the sophisticated methods employed to wish them away" (A, 142-4). At other times, the photograph suggests a general theme that he takes up, as when images of recently detained men on a bus or pedestrians crossing a bridge lead him to reflect on the "de-centered" and "in transit" nature of Palestinian life more generally (A, 130). The indeterminacy of the relationship between text and image, the relative independence of Said's commentary from the photographs' ostensible referents, permits Said more flexibility in developing an argument that has a dynamic—temporal if not linear—quality.

Second, Said's reflections indicate his attention to the movement of Palestinians themselves. Many of Mohr's photographs already suggest movement, whether through the blur of a student's leg or the teacher's hand as she seeks to bring her classroom to order (A, 44), a boy's arm falling in such a way as to indicate that he has thrown the rock in the picture's foreground (A, 64), the dust rising

from a line of sheep following a shepherd across a field (A, 86-7), a pose impossible to sustain for any length of time (A, 54, 135), or a body in midair (A, 136, 137, 138). Yet Said discerns movement even in photographs that depict apparent stillness:

> Strip off the occasional assertiveness and stridency of the Palestinian stance and you may catch sight of a much more fugitive, but ultimately quite beautifully representative and subtle, sense of identity. It speaks in languages not fully formed, in settings not completely constituted, like the shy glance of a child holding her father's knee while she curiously and tentatively examines the stranger who photographs her. (A, 36)

As several commentators have observed, Said is keenly aware of the propensity of the camera to objectify its targets and render them available for surveillance and control; one of the strategies he adopts to disarm that apparatus, here and elsewhere, is to focus on the subjective power of the photographic object, to demonstrate the capacity of Palestinians to return the gaze. I would like to slightly shift this insight, which essentially concerns agency, to foreground Said's manner of characterizing the subjects of Mohr's images in terms that suggest a change of position, disposition, or state. Here, the child's glance speaks; it constitutes an identity that is transitory, uncertain, aware. Another of Mohr's photographs, which depicts a smiling boy holding aloft a small bird, leads Said to comment that

> movement need not always be either flight or exile. In the boy's cheerfully vulnerable triumph, you can see a hint of that provisional success and momentary flair that many of us have developed in our lives: To be a Palestinian often entails mastery without domination, pleasure without injury to others. These are fugitive qualities of our existence, to be sure. (A, 165)

It is not just that the photograph is a symbol of some kind of minimal or transient victory that Palestinians may someday have: Said rather uses the occasion of *ekphrasis* to assert the temporality of Palestinian life, the sense that Palestinians are a people "on the move," even if not always of their own volition (A, 164). Movement therefore isn't a good in itself, but it does suggest the lack of finality of any historical fate such as that which led to the expulsion of so many Palestinians from their homes in 1948. Indeed, one ought to discriminate not only between autonomous and heteronomous movements in Said's narrative but also between the movement he attributes to history, the imminent change of state he sees in photographic subjects, the transformations he seeks to elicit in readers, and the affective modulations of Said's own narratorial persona. Viewing a photograph of

several people on a stone terrace far in the distance, Said discerns the ominous presence of some imperceptible authority,

> and once again I am depressed by the transience of Palestinian life, its vulnerability and all too easy dislocation. But another movement, another feeling, asserts itself in response, set in motion by the two strikingly marked openings in the buildings, openings that suggest rich, cool interiors which outsiders cannot penetrate. Let us enter. (A, 49)

Here, movement works at all four levels: it is characteristic of Palestinian life generally because of forces beyond their control, a power, perhaps of invitation, that Said accredits to the photograph—one that has the power to move him from despair toward something like interestedness—and a prerogative that he exerts in his role as narrator and tour guide for readers.

Said's own term for this cautious alternative to melancholia is attention. In the last pages of the book, he returns to this term again and again, suggesting that it may facilitate Palestinian survival. Subjacent to *ṣumūd* in the sense that it prefigures and sustains that labor of resilience, attention also inheres at the most infrapolitical level. So it is that photographs of

> Palestinians at work or study…revea[l] an intensity and seriousness at odds with the episodic and storyless nature of the photographs…These are quiet but powerful photographs whose common theme is the communication of attention and alertness…[and] an immediacy that is surprisingly strong. (A, 145)

Said is keenly aware that this ethic implies a metaphysics of presence, but insists that the contemporary reality of Palestinian existence preempts any such closure. Because Palestinian ties to the past have been "severed" and "periodically and ritually resevered,"

> [y]ou learn a certain kind of caring for and attention to your immediate situation if you know that in time it too can become the place you will have lost forever, the place whose identity is retained only in the repeated experience of staying and then moving on. Homecoming is out of the question. You learn to transform the mechanics of loss into a constantly postponed metaphysics of return. (A, 149, 150)

In other words, the experience of deracination and the Israeli assaults on Palestinian history and cultural memory elicit a kind of radical presentism. But Said suggests that it is possible to transvalue this condition of being reduced to a "people without history" by learning to take care in and of the present, by, for

example, becoming more sensitive to one's labor, the questions that one pursues, and those with whom one shares a place; one might also become more alert to the historicity of the present itself by attending to the distinctions that make one present distinct from the last. It is as if Said is saying that the destruction of Palestinian pasts and ties to place has made involuntary existentialists of them all. But whereas existentialism would mount its assault on past and future in the name of a philosophical anthropology, Said commends radical attunement as a response to contingent historical circumstances. The ethic of attention so construed demands that self-understanding take a narrative form, and that it be responsible to actual historical circumstances:

> A part of something is for the foreseeable future going to be better than all of it. Fragments over wholes. Restless nomadic activity over the settlements of held territory. Criticism over resignation. The Palestinian as self-consciousness in a barren plain of investments and consumer appetites. The heroism of anger over the begging-bowl, limited independence over the status of clients. Attention, alertness, focus. To do as others do, but somehow to stand apart. To tell your story in pieces, *as it is*. (A, 150)

Much more could be said about the themes of tactics, nomadism, criticism, fragments, freedom, and distinction that Said broaches in this passage. What I would like to develop, in closing this section, is the relationship between attention and responsible self-narration. Curiously, the sentence fragments in which Said suggests the virtue of these twinned efforts are the only ones in this resonant passage that are not structured around an antithesis. I don't think this is because they don't have opposing terms, for surely, they do; rather, attention and self-writing are positive projects Said is recommending as complementary to the other, negative labors of resistance. Self-knowledge, he has already established, is in short supply: this must be corrected through rigorous attention to the self and to the circumstances of the present time and place. To move from a privative to a plenitudinous condition requires cognitive (and other) efforts that are first and foremost relational, that demand a certain kind of attunement both to matters of environment and to the self, individual and collective.[14] Of course, attention is also a means of sustaining an investment in one's immediate surroundings and resisting the urge for otherworldly promises or, on the other hand, resignation and despair. Attention is opposed to those kinds of consolations and easy answers, and remains faithful to reality "as it is." But this disposition does not only offer a diagnostic power. It has a worldbuilding capacity insofar as it sharpens

consciousness, heightens the sense of being an actor in the world, and strengthens bonds between self and others.

Concluding reflections

For postcolonial life-writing, the moment between raw experience and published autobiography, which I have called self-narration, assumes an especially urgent status. It is here that individuals grapple with the "historically fated" nature of their identities, the constellations of facts that have contributed to making them who they are (Scott 125). For colonial and postcolonial subjects, such interrogation is vital insofar as it both corroborates the fact of their difference and also locates the causation of that difference in historical processes. Contingent yet utterly real, those identities cannot be put on or taken off like clothing; yet insofar as it is the temporal nature of human history that is ultimately discovered through self-inquiry, the narration of the self affords possibilities for assessing that which exceeds the merely given or imputed. Said:

> We too are subject to time, development, change, and decline, a fact that must dispel any notion that Palestinians are a sort of essentialized paradigm of permanent homelessness and terror. We deny such a notion both politically and philosophically…a mature consciousness investigates, confronts, and meditates on the concrete genealogy of its present self-awareness. (Said, *After* 162)

There is however an important difference between the way the two authors construe what may be made out of the determinants of social and political existence. James ascribes an almost utopian sense of possibility to the popular desire that he so sincerely—some might say naively—devotes himself to understanding.[15] We might wonder, however, whether he hasn't sacrificed some hold on the differential worldmaking capacities of the powerful and the dominated. Said, on the other hand, projects realism, but offers no reason to think that anything might or even could change for the better for Palestinians. That is to say, Said's insistence on criticism, attention, and worldliness commits him to a stance in which the imagination of alternatives may come to seem like a betrayal of reality "as it is" and perhaps also a concession to religious thinking.

Beyond these manifest differences in tone and sensibility, both books can be understood as working not simply toward such genealogical understandings of the self but toward what Wynter calls autosociography. James discerns traces of

his class formation in his early attitude toward cricket, a mental disposition that tended to sequester it from all political, social, and economic matters. Although the British self-consciously deployed the game in their colonies as a means of cultivating habits among the colonized that they thought were conducive to prolonged rule, they occluded this fact by describing cricket as a game on which all other social relations had no bearing: "It's only cricket." James's discovery that cricket did in fact have a history, that it was thoroughly wrapped up in the history of international, racial, and class domination, simultaneously caused a profound self-reckoning. For insofar as he was the bearer of that "compartmentalized" view of sport, he was also in a sense an unwitting agent of the British Empire. For his part, Said describes no such revelation, but he does come to recognize himself in the images that Mohr gave to him. Conversely, he understands his own inability to articulate a coherent representation of Palestine as the basis for a profound insight about the contemporary state of Palestinians: that they lack a coherent history, unified territory, or autonomous self-definition. James's and Said's works of self-narration necessarily begin with objects that are ostensibly extrinsic to the core questions of personal identity—cricket and photographs—because who they are is inseparable from the processes that are external to them, and this in a much more profound way than the abstract philosophical paeans to the alterity at the core of the self would suggest.[16]

Both James and Said seem to be making a claim about writing one's way out of a disaster. Both suggest that writing about the self can have a productive effect, one that exceeds the function of clarification of ends that MacIntyre ascribes to self-narration. For these writers, writing the self is in fact self-constituting in the sense that it clears the ground for establishing relations with others who share a common subjection on autonomous, or what Said calls affiliative, terms. If the "world-system" produces linkages as well as lifeways beyond the discretion of individual subjects, postcolonial self-narration re-grounds those bonds by fashioning them as the substance of its form, however eccentric this may be. For James, the re-narration of his life in cricket led him to appreciate the involvement of the despised classes in his own formation. For Said the examination of photographs taken by someone foreign to him in every way perhaps besides sympathy and sensibility allowed him to recall an already existing ethic of Palestinian life, *ṣumūd*, which he would elaborate and transpose into the

basis for a new community of practice. These two thinkers apprise us of the altogether greater stakes and possibilities of postcolonial life-writing.

---

[1] For useful biographies of James, see Buhle and Worcester.
[2] The "natal alienation" of the individual born into slavery has, among many other consequences, the elimination of the primary relay for the intergenerational renewal of tradition (Patterson). But precolonial traditions have been and continue to be suppressed or distorted through a vast range of techniques, ranging from the confiscation of archives and assassination of intellectuals to propagandistic colonial education.
[3] I borrow the concept of worldmaking from Adom Getachew, who theorizes anticolonial internationalism as an insurgent alternative to imperial institutionalization.
[4] James's response to Trotsky and various other relevant materials have been collected in James, *C. L. R. James on the 'Negro Question.'*
[5] For a powerful defense of the productive role that James ascribes to the audience, see Lazarus.
[6] For a career-spanning assessment of James's celebration of male revolutionary heroes and relegation of women to the role of "abjection," see Carby, 113-132. In a fascinating and informed analysis, Robert Gregg has also identified the absence or marginalization of the Indo-Caribbean from James's work.
[7] Westall views *Beyond a Boundary* as a *Bildungsroman*, a view which I am contesting in this essay.
[8] Kenneth Surin has identified a processual, fugitive, and pluralist self-understanding in *Beyond a Boundary*, one opposed to the sovereign, consolidating subject of standard autobiography. See his "The Future Anterior."
[9] I have in mind Carl Schmitt's argument about the historiographical privilege of the defeated, which was developed by Reinhart Koselleck. See Schmitt, 30, and Koselleck, 45-83.
[10] "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth* Brumaire; Cf. Said's remarks on Marx's essay in *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, 121-5.
[11] Keya Ganguly notes that while *After the Last Sky* has largely been received as a melancholic text, it resists this description by "giving voice to the lesson of endurance under duress" (72).
[12] Murray Krieger addresses ekphrasis in Western literature in terms of the desire for spatial fixity that it expresses, but he also captures the instability of the genre (or "topos") and the intrusions of temporality that inevitably occur.
[13] Both the selection of images from Mohr's portfolio and the arrangement of the images on the page were made by Said, as he indicates in an interview with W. J. T. Mitchell, "Panic of the Visual."
[14] R. Radhakrishnan's recent work powerfully asserts the ontological significance and priority of being together.
[15] Several otherwise sympathetic readers have criticized James for ignoring the extent to which cricket has functioned as a safety valve for popular discontent, carried ideological contents associated with colonial rule, and been commodified to such an extent that it cannot serve as a vessel for the popular will. See especially Surin, "C. L. R.," and Tiffin.
[16] See, for example, Ricoeur.

Works Cited

Bogues, Anthony. "C. L. R. James and the Politics of the Subject, Culture and Desire," *Beyond Boundaries: C. L. R. James and Postnational Studies*, ed. Christopher Gair. London: Pluto Press, 2006. 157-164.

Buhle, Paul. *C. L. R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary*. London: Verso, 2017 [1988].

Carby, Hazel V. *Race Men*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998.

Doyle, Laura. *Inter-imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2020.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove, 2008 [1952].

—. *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove, 2021 [1961].

Ganguly, Keya. "Exile as a Political Aesthetic." *After Said: Postcolonial Literary Studies in the Twenty- First Century*. Ed. Bashir Abu-Manneh. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2018. 69-85.

Getachew, Adom. *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2019.

Gregg, Robert. "Beyond Silly Mid-Off: C. L. R. James, Ranjitsinhji, and the Boundaries of Englishness." *Inside Out, Outside In: Essays in Comparative History*. London: Macmillan Press, 2000. 96-123.

James, C. L. R. *Beyond a Boundary*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993 [1963].

—. *C. L. R. James on the 'Negro Question.'* Ed. Scott McLemee. Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi P, 1996.

Kauffmann, Krista. "'Double Vision': Visual Practice and the Politics of Representation in Edward W. Said and Jean Mohr's *After the Last Sky*." *ariel: a review of international English literature* 43.3 (July 2012): 93-122.

Krieger, Murray. *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.

Koselleck, Reinhart. *The Practice of Conceptual History*: *Timing History, Spacing Concepts*. Trans. Todd Samuel Presner et al. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2002.

Lazarus, Neil. "Cricket, Modernism, National Culture: The Case of C. L. R. James." *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1999.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2016.

—. *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame UP, 2007 [1981].

Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers, 1998 [1852].

Mitchell, W. J. T. "Panic of the Visual: A Conversation with Edward W. Said." *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power*. Ed. Paul A. Bové. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000. 31-50.

—. "The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies." *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994. 281-322.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2018 [1982].

Radhakrishnan, R. "Notes Towards an Exilic Co-existence," *Synthesis: An Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies* 13 (2020): 154-180.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992 [1990].

Said, Edward W. *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*. New York: Columbia UP, 1999 [1986].

—. *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975.

—. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

—. *The World, The Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983.

Schloss, Carol. "Double-Crossing Frontiers: Literature, Photography, and the Politics of Displacement." *Photo-Textualities: Reading Photographs and*

Literature. Ed. Marsha Bryant. Newark, NJ: U of Delaware P, 1996. 141-151.

Schmitt, Carl. *Ex Captivitate Salus*. Trans. Matthew Hannah. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017 [1950].

Scott, David. *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999.

Smith, Andrew. "C. L. R. James, *Vanity Fair* and the Audience." *New Formations* 73 (2011): 11-25.

—. "'Concrete Freedom': C. L. R. James on Culture and Black Politics." *Cultural Sociology* 5:4 (December 2011): 479-499.

Surin, Kenneth. "C. L. R. James's Material Aesthetic of Cricket," *Liberation Cricket: West Indies Cricket Culture*. Eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Brian Stoddart. Manchester, UK: Manchester UP,1995. 313-341.

—. "'The Future Anterior': C. L. R. James and Going *Beyond a Boundary*," *Rethinking C. L. R. James*. Ed. Grant Farred. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996. 187-204.

Tiffin, Helen. "Cricket, Literature and the Politics of De-Colonisation: The Case of C. L. R. James." *Liberation Cricket: West Indies Cricket Culture*. Eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Brian Stoddart. Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1995. 356-369.

Westall, Claire. "C. L. R. James and the Arts of *Beyond a Boundary*: Literary Lessons, Cricketing Aesthetics, and World Historical Heroes," *Marxism, Colonialism, and Cricket: C. L. R. James's* Beyond a Boundary. Eds. David Featherstone Christopher Gair, Christian Høgsbjerg, and Andrew Smith. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2018. 173-190.

Worcester, Kent. *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography*. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1996.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poiesis," *C. L. R. James's Caribbean*. Eds. Paget Henry and Paul Buhle. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1992. 63-91.