

“Collective Human Substance”: Power and Community in George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*

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Abstract

George Lamming’s novel *In the Castle of My Skin* establishes a major theme of both Lamming’s writing and his politics: a conflict between what power people possess, especially in their labor, and the circumstances of subjection in which they live. Up to now, scholars have taken a rather melancholy view of the novel’s characters’ capacities, even describing them as “sterile” and “unreflective.” Through a careful reading of *Castle*, attention to Lamming’s comments in later interviews and lectures, and especially reference to the archive of Lamming’s papers at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, this essay argues for a new interpretation of collective power in the novel.

Keywords

George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin*, labor, collective power, community

Decades before readers meet the character whom everyone calls Pa in George Lamming’s first and most autobiographical novel *In the Castle of My Skin* (1983), he was one of many Black workers from Barbados who built the Panama Canal. It was hard, dangerous work, but to Pa, it meant that “money flow like the flood through these here hands,” and it also gave him pride: “I help to build the canal, the biggest an’ best canal in the wide wide world,” he says (Lamming, 1983, 85). When readers encounter him in the novel, Pa is an old man, but when he was young in Panama, his muscles must have ached from digging, drilling, or dynamiting. Pa’s labor power, multiplied by thousands of workers, reshaped the earth.

The wages he made in Panama helped give Pa and his wife, whom all the locals call Ma, a decent life in Barbados, even an “air of dignity” (Lamming, 1983, 252). Pa and Ma rent their land from a white man, Mr. Creighton, a representative of the old colonial regime who gives the land his name, Creighton’s Village. While the wages Pa earned in Panama “had been spent in one way or another, he had never been dissolute. He never seemed to regret anything, not even his present poverty which seemed tolerable” (Lamming, 1983, 252). Late in the novel, however, after Ma dies, Pa faces eviction.

As this development indicates, Barbados in Lamming’s novel is changing in both spectacular and subtle ways. The labor strikes of the 1930s, woven together with resistance to British colonialism,

are prominent but just offstage in Lamming's novel, yet they set much of the novel's conflict in motion. One result of this tumult is that Mr. Creighton sells the land, unbeknownst to most people in the village, to a character called Mr. Slime, a local teacher turned entrepreneur, who hides greed behind a cynical claim to sovereignty. The land that Pa rents is sold again by Slime, without Pa's consent, to some unnamed buyer, and therefore Pa must move (Lamming, 1983, 250). To Slime, these exchanges are a clever avenue to profit; to Pa, the eviction is cruelty.

The character whom Lamming calls the head teacher visits Pa to give him the news, "to prepare him for the shock" (Lamming, 1983, 251). The head teacher has knowledge of both the new capitalists and the people who live in the village and it is from this "double understanding" that he feels he must arrange, with the old landlord, to move Pa to the Alms House, a place that the novel describes as "the final stage of human degradation" (Lamming, 1983, 251, 253). Pa asks the head teacher a series of pointed questions about this arrangement, suspecting, correctly, that he's getting swindled (Lamming, 1983, 248-57).

Pa and Ma's story points to a major theme of both Lamming's novel and his politics: a conflict between the power people possess, especially in their labor, and the circumstances in which they live. For Pa, as for many caught up in the dynamics of the British plantation regime in Barbados at the time, there is an almost impossibly wide gap between his life's capacities and its conditions. This gap, Lamming indicates, poses fundamental questions about the degree to which people in the country control their own lives, about where and how they work, about what relationship people have to the place they call home, and about how the dynamics of class, capitalism, colonialism, and racism influence them.

Furthermore, Pa and Ma's situation is not an isolated case in the text. Sandra Pouchet Paquet writes that "[c]haracters such as Ma and Pa in *In the Castle of My Skin* are collective characters in the sense that they express the cumulative experience of the village community"; "in Pa and Ma," she argues, "Lamming contains and personalizes the cumulative experiences of the village and island poor" (Paquet 1982, 5, 25). Paquet's argument echoes what Lamming writes in the introduction to the 1983 edition of *Castle*:

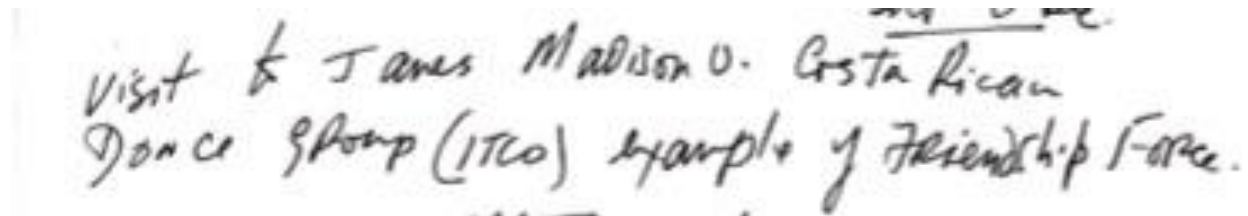
The book is crowded with names and people, and although each character is accorded a most vivid presence and force of personality, we are rarely concerned with the prolonged exploration of an individual consciousness. It is the collective human substance of the Village itself which commands our attention. The Village, you might say, is the central character. When we see the Village as a collective character, we perceive another dimension to the individual wretchedness of daily living. It is the dimension of energy, force, a quickening capacity for survival. (Lamming, 1983, xxxvi)

The issue here—and one source of the novel's richness—is that Lamming's characters live out the conflict between their power and their circumstances. The novel presents a mix of evidence about this "collective human substance," both wretched and capacious. This is why Lamming invokes Pa in Panama, full of "energy" and "force," and also his prospect of loneliness in the Alms House.¹

¹ In the essay "Journey to an Expectation," which closes the collection *The Pleasures of Exile*, Lamming writes about a person he refers to as Papa, "whom a wicked arrangement of money had forced to move... The land had been sold to a new syndicate who were black men; but Papa had to leave because he couldn't afford to pay cash for his tenancy,

While Lamming points to this power, a “capacity for survival” at times in the text, other parts of the novel present a dim view of anything that looks like success for its characters. In a heartfelt scene, Pa and Ma question whether all their striving was worthwhile (Lamming, 1983, 85). Later, Lamming’s narrator describes residents of the Alms House as “caged in their impotence” (Lamming, 1983, 252).

The term “impotent” strikes a harsh note, here and elsewhere in the novel. Boy Blue “looks so impotent” after a fisherman saves him from drowning (Lamming, 1983, 151). When the riots begin and the old landlord, Mr. Creighton, is very nearly beaten, he wears “an expression of impotence [that] was inhuman” (Lamming, 1983, 206). At another moment, the head teacher goes so far as to declare outright, “The villagers had no power” (Lamming, 1983, 67). Yet there are still other moments in the novel when the characters recognize their “power to say” and their “power to know” (Lamming, 1983, 76, 79). One of the villagers sees their collective labor power clearly: “without we,” he declares, “work come to a stan’s still” (Lamming, 1983, 96). Lamming tellingly refers to such moments of communal capacity in a 1981 diary entry as “friendship force” :



Some of the novel’s most perceptive critics read this mix of evidence and arrive at a rather melancholy view of the text. Paquet writes that the “impotence of the ‘mob’ is in evidence on every level in the village and appears a necessary prelude to its eventual dislocation. [... A] fear of incapacity hangs ominously over the village community” (Paquet, 1982, 26). Paquet builds from this observation to a general analysis of how the novel depicts its political situation, writing that the “villagers do not understand the nature of their political power and have no thought of organized resistance to the sale of the land. This inability to organize in their own interests parallels the death-in-life image of the Alms House.” Paquet ultimately describes this situation as one of “powerlessness” (Paquet, 1982, 27). In a similar vein, Neil ten Kortenaar writes that “[t]here is no possibility of acting on the world or of making one’s own world” in mid-century Barbados; he concludes that the novel is a study in “sterility and paralysis” in an “unreflective” community (ten Kortenaar, 1991, 50, 53, 49).

Admittedly, *Castle* is not a novel of spectacular clashes. Its characters more often grapple with and comment upon the situations they face, rather than making grand interventions. The action in the novel is intimate, an intimacy that seems to read as claustrophobia to critics like Paquet and ten Kortenaar. While the above readings of the text are understandable given the text’s events, this essay argues that they turn the characters’ dilemma into a situation from which no exit is possible. While we see the characters’ despair, we do not agree that they are powerless; the characters may not have adequate power to change their situation, but that does not mean they have none. Contrary

or risk installments on behalf of a future which could not be very long. He was already over seventy. [...] [T]he meaning of Papa’s departure is the story of *In the Castle of My Skin*” (Lamming, 1992, 227, 228).

to melancholy readings of the text, this essay focuses on the subtle, but nevertheless substantial, moments of collective power that Lamming features in the novel. We highlight here the palpable vitality of the villagers' everyday kinship; Lamming constellates their collective consciousness and the text rests on the strength of that consciousness.

The people of Creighton's Village, we argue, show a prime example of "friendship force" at work: a space in which relationality generates anti-colonial energy, even if that energy is not yet put to clear use. The community in *Castle*, we recognize, is not liberatory or utopian, nor does it idealize "tradition," especially when that tradition is vulnerable to self-promoters like Slime. However, we hope to counter interpretations of the novel as a kind of cul-de-sac for its characters, interpretations that tend to disregard the collective energies of those characters, in favor of recognizing veins of incipient power in the "chorus" that is Creighton's Village (Lamming, "About" n.d.).

From January through February of 2018, we worked in the archives at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill in Bridgetown, Barbados, where Lamming's papers are held. The Lamming Collection includes ephemera like lecture posters, correspondence with other authors and editors, and notes for lectures that Lamming delivered about *Castle* and other works. The archives also hold Lamming's annotations on important documents, like his photocopies of the Moyne Commission Report, the document produced by the colonial administration about the labor unrest in the Caribbean in the late 1930s, which Lamming drew upon and reacted against in order to frame *Castle's* story (Lamming, "Moyne Annotations").² This essay is an effort to think with Lamming about the nature of what he calls "collective human substance" as represented in *Castle*, using these archival materials and Lamming's essays and lectures. It is difficult to present the fullness of Lamming's thinking on the subject of collective power over the course of his career, but we nonetheless wish to produce an interpretation of *Castle* that reflects more fully the vibrant lives of the characters whom Lamming so carefully and lovingly sketches there.

Since our time in the archives, the world in which we live has also changed—not in the same ways that Lamming's characters experience in *Castle*, but also not completely differently, either. On 4 June 2022, George Lamming died. Four years later, we are thinking about autocratic exercises of power, about the fracturing of community, and about what forms effective resistance might take. Although we could not have anticipated these changes when we visited Lamming's archive, our writing became a search for how Lamming's work might guide our actions today. Friendship force, a critique of racial capitalism, and the relationship between literary criticism and labor movements are, we suggest, as important to the 21st century as they were to the 20th.

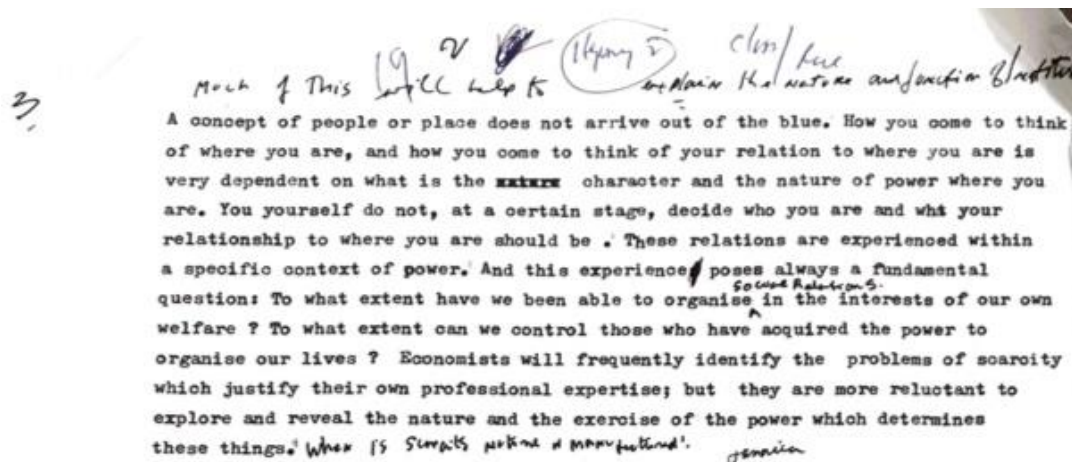
The Character and Nature of Power Where You Are

A good first step to understanding how power and community work in *Castle* is to see that Lamming's thoughts about them are informed by the historical contexts about which he wrote, by his allegiances to Caribbean working-class people, and especially by the importance he placed on

² At the time of our visit, Lamming's papers had only recently been donated to the library and were therefore largely unprocessed, which means that documents did not have uniform titles or reference identification numbers. Therefore, we have assigned titles to documents here, following when possible Lamming's own headings. For details about the Lamming Collection at UWI-Cave Hill, see <https://caribbeanliteraryheritage.com/collections/s/site/item/1480>.

language. In a lecture at the Centre for Caribbean Thought, University of the West Indies, Jamaica in 2003, which was subsequently published in *Conversations III*, Lamming said:

a concept of people and places does not arise out of the blue. How you come to think of where you are, and how you come to think of your relation to where you are, is very dependent on what is the character and the nature of power, where you are. You yourself do not at a certain stage decide who you are, and what your relationship [is] to where you are should be. These relations are experienced within a specific context of power, and this experience within a specific context poses always a fundamental question: to what extent have we been able to organize in the interest of our own welfare? To what extent can we/have we been able to organize in the interest of our lives? (Lamming 2009, 20, and Lamming, “Contexts of Power”):



These were enduring questions for Lamming, from the time he wrote *Castle* through his last lectures and interviews. Such questions also shaped the debates of his generation of Caribbean writers and thinkers, and they continue to be pressing concerns for theorists of emancipatory politics.³

In his published and archival materials, Lamming developed, refined, and complicated his understanding of the ways in which we can “organize in the interest of our lives,” using various terms to describe related concepts: “the sovereignty of the imagination”; “collective human substance,” and “friendship force” (as we have suggested) among them. Lamming also frequently used concepts developed by other thinkers on this subject, such as Martin Carter’s “free community of valid persons” (Scott 2002, 124). While each of these concepts has its own complicated nuances, the parsing of which would require another essay, the point is that all of them rest upon a recognition of human power, especially labor power. How to understand that power is complicated, but for Lamming, a writer who thought so deeply about language, an answer must build on that ground.

³ See, for example, David Scott’s discussion of the problem of vindication in *Conscripts of Modernity*, in particular pp. 61, 84, 83.

Lamming wrote in English, which only has one term for power, whereas other languages have two or more. This fact may be the stumbling block for the entire debate about *Castle*'s characters: even though English has only a single word for power, the word has two distinct meanings. One meaning is the power over others—the ability to rule, to dominate. The other meaning is the power to act—to exercise one's capacity or potency. These different powers do not necessarily cancel each other out; some people having the power to rule does not deprive others of their capacities. Collapsing the two definitions reduces the complexity of novels like *Castle*, and leaves no way to see the difference between what Lamming calls "people of power and authority" on the one hand, and, on the other, people who have "the power to say" and the "power to know" (Lamming, 1983, 43, 76, 79).

Languages other than English treat the two meanings of power with different terms. French, for example, uses both *pouvoir* (authority; holding a position of power) and *puissance* (the ability to act). The French translation of *Castle*, *Les Îles Fortunées*, for example, renders the moment when the head teacher chastises his students, saying that they should not misbehave, by invoking *pouvoir*: "en présence de personnes respectables, de personnes qui détiennent le pouvoir et l'autorité" ("they should not misbehave in the presence of respectable people, people who hold power and authority") (Lamming, 1954, 48). Latin has the terms *potestas* and *potentia* to describe this distinction. From the second term, English gets the words *potent*, *impotent*, and *potential*. When Lamming uses the word "impotent" to describe his characters, therefore, he is not (or not only) making a comment about their sexual aptitudes, but also about their intrinsic power—about what capacities they have to act in the world, and to what degree those capacities are being curtailed by the structures and circumstances under which they live.

Recognizing these two meanings shows that different types of power also derive from different sources. Power over others is often granted by institutions—governments, schools, or property; that is, by being invested with capital or social capital. Capacity, however, comes from human qualities: from intrinsic abilities, from the relationships people have, and from the webs of words in which those relationships are enmeshed. Curdella Forbes (2022) argues that there is a single "existential question around which Lamming's thought, across all his writings, is distilled: the question of what it means to be human and, within that, the idea of language as a human relation [...] There is, across all of Lamming's [work] ... a prismatic and singular pursuit of this simple and complex equation: to be human is to speak; to speak is to be human" (9). Language and speech are the foundations of an understanding of power in Lamming's work—they are the primary aspects of human experience that provide a counterargument against a conclusion about powerlessness in *Castle*.

To this point, Lamming's archive at UWI-Cave Hill includes his handwritten annotations on the Moyne Commission Report, the document that frames, from the colonial perspective, the labor unrest throughout the Caribbean in the years 1936-38.⁴ In Lamming's view, per his marginalia and also his comments in conversation with David Scott published in 2002, the purpose of this Commission and its report was to "diffuse" those labor and anticolonial movements; to dissipate

⁴ The report was subsequently published in its entirety; see *The Moyne Report: Report of the West India Royal Commission*. For discussions of the era's labor uprisings and their relation to decolonial movements, see Fraser, "The Twilight of Colonial Rule in the British West Indies: Nationalist Assertion vs Imperial Hubris in the 1930s" and Lewis, *Labor in the West Indies: The Birth of a Workers' Movement*.

their power (Lamming, “Moyne Annotations” and Scott, 2002, 89). As Richard Drayton writes, Lamming’s “life was decisively shaped by events which surrounded his eleventh year. In July 1937, riots and civil disorder directed against merchants, planters, and the colonial administration broke out throughout Barbados. Both the labour movement and mass politics in that island had their beginnings in these July days, and their mark is clear in all of Lamming’s mature work” (Drayton, 1992, 18).

The novel shows these disturbances at some distance, as the young Lamming experienced them from his own home in Carrington’s Village (the area just outside Bridgetown on which Creighton’s Village is loosely based). In interviews, Lamming recollects the public experience of the Moyne Commission’s work, explaining how the proceedings were broadcast to crowds of people outside in Bridgetown’s Queen’s Park square. These crowds at times responded to what they were hearing by shaking their heads and shouting “That’s not true! That’s not true!” Lamming calls this period “a fascinating moment in a kind of popular democracy” (Scott, 2002, 78). Bill Schwarz calls it “the production and dissemination of historical knowledge as a democratic practice, in the sense of understanding all men and women as ‘already’ historians. It is a wonderful way of thinking of historical knowledge as *popular*” (Schwarz, 2002, 65). This question of “popular” energies, those stemming from the *populus*, are central to Lamming’s work.

The assembled evidence here—Lamming’s comments about the character and nature of power, the language of power and the two meanings of the term, and a recognition of the history of labor and anticolonial movements in 1930s Barbados—is the ground bass to which Lamming tunes his characters. What Lamming notes in *The Pleasures of Exile* about Sam Selvon’s characters also accurately represents his own characters in *Castle*: “he never sneers at [them]. He is always with them in what they are doing, the foolish things as well as the beautiful things” (Lamming, 1992, 229). Lamming’s characters are neither complete arbiters of their fates nor powerless to act. They are neither sterile nor unreflective; their all-too-human combination of “foolishness” and “beauty” makes Lamming’s characters more compelling and complex, not less.

Castle’s “Friendship Force”

Contrary to interpretations of *Castle*’s characters as powerless, we argue for a broader understanding of how power works in the novel. To get to that argument, though, we must first look closely at the major piece of evidence for the melancholy view of the text. This view comes in large part from a comment made by the head teacher early on in the novel, well before he visits Pa to break the news of the eviction.

The head teacher is exactly as his name, the only name Lamming gives him, suggests: “a strict and sensible school master” (Lamming, 1983, 64). He grew up in the village, and he sees himself as a “poor boy who had done well” and who had become a “public man”; as one of his students says with respect to the village school, “He got power and authority here” (Lamming, 1983, 67, 48). But when the head teacher discovers evidence of his wife’s infidelity—an intimate photo connecting her to Slime, who, at the time, is a teacher under the headmaster’s jurisdiction—he feels a “strange impotence of action” (Lamming, 1983, 64). His thoughts go immediately to what public knowledge of the situation would mean for him. He reflects on his relationship with his wife only briefly; he worries more about what people may think or how they may sneer at him. He

wonders whether scandal would undermine his authority to a degree that might jeopardize his position.

It is at this moment that the head teacher delivers his assessment of the community: "The villagers had no power" (Lamming, 1983, 66). Seen in its context, the comment is a salve that the head teacher applies to himself to ease his worry. It represents a common human failing more than an accurate assessment of the villagers' capacities: the head teacher feels powerless, so he projects powerlessness onto others. It is an overly sweeping judgment, made in a moment of weakness, when the head teacher hopes that others will be weak and will be unable to challenge him. It is a comment to read critically; it is also a questionable piece of evidence upon which to base a general assessment of the novel's characters.

So, although the head teacher's statement seems to have some purchase in the scholarship about *Castle*, in this section we respond to that scholarship by analyzing the network of community in the novel—or, to borrow Lamming's phrase, some of the "substance" of the novel's "collective human substance." The novel's multivocality, its shifting access to characters' interior worlds, and its seemingly meandering wanders through the villagers' day-to-day lives reflect Lamming's investment in communality and cooperativism—in the potential possibilities of Creighton's kinship structures. At one point in the novel, Trumper says, "Everybody in the village sort of belong. Is like a tree. It can't kind of take up the roots by itself; we all live sort of together.... An' 'tis the same in the other villages" (Lamming, 1983, 144). Both formally and thematically speaking, *Castle* bears out this collectivism.

In an undated set of lecture notes, Lamming constellates the elements of the novel, sketching its scenes and connecting characters in their relationships: (Lamming, "What *Castle* is About."):

- ① What *Castle* is about! -
 Ch. 1: Head / address -> change
 Footers: Color is important! Social structure!
- ② The *STANTHUR* -
 House - Road - Village - Town -
 Island - Region. [The *CLAN*].
- ③ Language - 19-9 Ma - Pa
 13-14 Miss Fenty
 131-135 - No wedding
 The Tale: 78 Ma.
 = 233
- ④ INSTITUTIONS:
 The School - Land. Institute / Head.
 135 - 26
- ⑤ Pa - ROTS. 1930's.
- ⑥ Trumper: Pa - Rose Duntion!
- ⑦ Slavery. The African Connection.
 = 233

- Ch. 4: First Chorus.
 Introduction of back: Society etc.
 "We do not see them in the same way. They are
 history, they are by the way."
- Ch. 5: Ch. 5: Shantur etc. Most means of
 Land 50 ft. Shantur etc. with the
 No 50 ft. Shantur etc.
- Ch. 6: The Tale: wedding. 1930's
- Ch. 7: No religious meeting
 visit to party at the House
- Ch. 8: Ma - Pa. [On boys' behavior]
- Ch. 9: No 60's.
- Ch. 10: Ma's death: No
 history of the country
- Ch. 11: The people: no left side
 mention of Trumper
 Return
- Ch. 12: No 60's
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- ⑫ she as the Man
 on side of land.
 and old Ma's rejection.
- ⑭ Boy / Mother: on side of
 Boy's departure!

These notes show what a global look at the novel also demonstrates: rather than championing a single protagonist, Lamming favors a web of relationality. As Claudia Marquis (2012) observes, “*In the Castle of My Skin* places emphasis on a local world that official society barely notices—the village—and transfers narratorial authority to a crowd of speakers” (36). The book opens by gesturing towards the lived experiences of this “local world”: the physical proximity and the material insecurity of the houses in Creighton’s Village prevent against families withdrawing fully into their own private lives. The first line of the novel finds G’s mother “put[ting] her head through the [neighbour’s] window” to notify those nearby of G’s ninth birthday (Lamming, 1983, 1), and shortly thereafter, she,

br[eaks] into a soft repetitive tone which r[ises] with every fresh surge of feeling until it bec[omes] a scattering peal of solicitude that soar[s] across the night and into the neighbour’s house. And the answer c[omes] back louder, better organized and more communicative, so that another neighbor respond[s] and yet another until the voices seem ... to be gathered up by a single effort and the whole village sh[akes] with song on its foundation of water. (Lamming, 1983, 4)

This call-and-response opening demonstrates that, of geographical and architectural necessity, the villagers’ lives are intimately intertwined.

What is more, this early scene sets the novel’s tone: *Castle* is throughout a chorus of voices. Although the book initially adopts the perspective of one principal character, a boy simply and semi-autobiographically named G, Lamming soon disperses the novel’s narrative authority. While *Castle*’s early pages are filtered through G’s consciousness, shortly thereafter, the novel briefly becomes a script of sorts, with “First Boy,” “Second Boy,” “Third Boy,” and so forth accorded lines in the dramatic action. A few pages later, readers suddenly find access to the Head Teacher’s internal monologue, and then enter into a dialogue between Ma and Pa, the village elders whom Lamming explicitly refers to in lecture notes collected in the archives as the novel’s “chorus.” While some critics take this structural “inconsistency” as a formal failing of sorts, we argue that it is actually Lamming’s way of expressing the importance of the collective.⁵

Lamming’s sense of the village as a space of communal intimacy in the novel is also underscored by a number of his other formal choices. He often leaves characters unnamed, using the turns of phrase “someone said” and “another added” rather than clearly identifying a scene’s speakers (Lamming, 1983, 106). Individuals are not unimportant to Lamming (after all, we occasionally follow the particular exploits of G and his friends Boy Blue, Trumper, and Bob), but the *relations* of individuals to one another, he implies, are paramount. It is in the spaces between people, in other words, that “friendship force” can be found. It is in this sense that the novel treats its characters as a “chorus” (Lamming, 1983, 75, 299).

For instance, when Lamming describes daily life in the village in the novel’s second chapter, his language reflects this almost visceral intimacy. Here families are collective, land is collective,

⁵ J. Dillon Brown, for example, writes that the “difficulty” of Lamming’s writing, in the context of the era in which he wrote it, “takes on the guise of a potent political strategy that helps articulate a sense of Caribbean nationalism and anticolonial protest.”

roads are collective, and people share their confidences while life flows through them. This is a moment worth quoting at length:

Miss Foster had six children, three by a butcher, two by a baker and one whose father had never been mentioned. Bob's mother had two, and my mother one. The difference between six and two and one did not belong to the piece itself. In the corner where one fence merged into another, and the sunlight filtering through the leaves made a limitless suffusion over the land, the pattern had arranged itself with absolute unawareness. Outside at the street corner where villagers poked wreckage from the blocked canal, it had absorbed another three, four, fourteen.... Here where the fences penetrated each other and in silent collaboration produced a corner there were three. Outside where the roads crossed there were more: thirteen, thirty. The three were shuffling episodes and exchanging the confidences which informed their life with meaning.... Outside the others were shoveling earth. They too exchanged confidences while life flowed through them. In the broad savannah where the grass lowcropped sang in the singeing heat the pattern had widened. Not three, nor thirteen, but thirty. Perhaps three hundred. Men. Women. Children. The men at cricket. The children at hide and seek. The women laying out their starched clothes to dry. The sun let its light flow down on them as life let itself flow through them. Three. Thirteen. Thirty. Three hundred. (Lamming, 1983, 25)

Lamming's descriptions of the village here are inescapably communal; they reveal a web of affective relationships in which G is enmeshed. A common life force flows through Creighton's "Three. Thirteen. Thirty. Three hundred," producing a "pattern" that far exceeds the neat grid of the nuclear family. In fact, while Lamming points to particular characters throughout this passage—some children are Miss Foster's, some are Bob's mother's, and G himself is an only child—the idiosyncrasies of these characters are less relevant to "the piece itself" than are the "confidences" exchanged between them: the network of kinship that "informs" the villagers' lives "with meaning" (Lamming, 1983, 25).

The passage above also reflects Lamming's broader suspicion of the effects of the colonial-capitalist class of 1930s Barbados—the twinned evils of colonial domination and capitalist exploitation that curtail shared structures of feeling, to borrow a term from Raymond Williams—and a clear-eyed belief in both the potential and the perils of cooperativism. On the latter point, Lamming does not promote the intimacies of the village at the expense of individual creative freedom—this kind of freedom is something that Lamming protected throughout his career. However, while Lamming values what he describes as "the capacity you have for *choosing* and making and remaking that self which you discover is *you*, is distinctly you," particularly in the realm of artistic production, he also acknowledges that "[t]he creative act cannot be an exclusively private and subjective matter" (Scott, 2002, 145-6) and highlights the ways in which everything that appears proper to the individual is also collective. As Boy Blue explains in the novel, if one imagines oneself to be an island, "You start to believe you see things nobody else see, an' you think things nobody else think ... nobody will want to see you, an' you yourself won't want to see anybody.... Boy, you'll get so lonely 'twould be a shame. You'd be a sort of man on a rock with nobody else standin' near you" (Lamming, 1983, 156). In other words, denying the ways in which one is shaped by friendship and kinship amounts to alienation.

The novel also suggests that the alienation of the individual under the gaze of Barbados' plantation owners is more likely to limit one's freedom than are the village's collective commitments. British colonizers in Barbados disrupted collectivities that they perceived as threats to their dominance, as they did throughout their Empire. As carla bergman and Nick Montgomery (2017) write, "the free individual of modern, Western capitalism ... is a sad and lonely vision: a strange fiction invented by a violent and fearful society, walled in by morality and self-interest. This is an uprooted being who sees his rootlessness—his very incapacity to make and sustain transformative connections—as a feat of excellence" (82). Indeed, Mr. Creighton, the white landlord of the village, is precisely such a "sad and lonely vision" in the novel, self-sequestered on his property. As the privations of capitalism fan outward in Barbados, this loneliness multiplies. When the opportunistic Slime purchases land from Mr. Creighton, he necessarily distances himself from the rest of the villagers, and as the land is further subdivided, the village finds itself at risk of fracturing irreparably. The result, for G and his friends, is a tension between belonging and becoming that is evident throughout the novel.

G's alienation plays out most clearly at school. G is initially pleased to be singled out for his academic promise and to be sent away from the village to study at the High School in town. However, he quickly learns that the village and the school are "two worlds," worlds strategically divided by the colonial education system. G explains his newfound isolation by saying, "It was as though my roots had been snapped from the centre of what I knew best, while I remained impotent to wrest what my fortunes had forced me into" (Lamming, 1983, 224). G begins to learn that Barbados' political issues have practical value for people in the villages, whereas "[a]t the High School the battles took place ... within the limits of the text-book" (Lamming, 1983, 225). The colonial apparatus seeks to sever the brightest native subjects from the stuff of collective resistance, and G finds himself taking an abstract view of politics while "the shoemaker [and his] friends [in Creighton's Village] [a]re more interested and concerned because they seem ... to understand the issues much better" (Lamming, 1983, 225).

When G graduates, he wonders, "[w]ould it have made any difference if I hadn't gone [to the High School]? My interest in the games and the people I had known [at the school] was exhausted and my feelings were gradually moving back to the village" (Lamming, 1983, 230). Ultimately, he recognizes that the High School, with its slavish devotion to the British curriculum, is in fact a tool of oppression, a means of better dividing and conquering native subjects. Once he returns home, "there [i]s a sense in which the village ... restore[s] what the High School had destroyed" (Lamming, 1983, 299): the structures of feeling in which G feels he shares are those of his immediate community, despite the school's best efforts to dismantle those structures.

In an interview with David Scott, Lamming talks about a passage he loves from Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* wherein Marx says, "If we assume man to be man, and his relation to the world to be a human one, that love can be exchanged only for love, trust for trust, and so on." Glossing this passage, Lamming continues,

really what he is getting at there is the communal nature of man as a social animal and that the two most vital needs for the solidarity of that community, the two most vital needs, that need of love and that need of trust, these are the two that are not negotiable in the marketplace. Each can only be exchanged for itself. You may do bribery here but you

cannot be assured of love except by the exchange of love, and you cannot be sure of trust except by the exchange of trust. (Scott, 2002, 179)

In *Castle* we frequently see love exchanged for love and trust for trust in the village. If the characters were as powerless as some critics contend, those human exchanges would not be possible. To the contrary, such exchanges are evidence of a kind of grassroots community among the “folk from down below” with the capacity to resist—even if only partially and provisionally—colonial hierarchies and forms of domination (Lamming, “*Castle* Production”). This is why G feels “restored” by his return to the village after having been “snapped from [his] centre” by his High School curriculum (Lamming, 1983, 299, 224).

Although the villagers are ultimately betrayed by Slime—a move that Lamming explains in notes collected in the archive as “Men of colour trying for ‘ownership power’ as protection against [the] White oligarchy ... [and preying upon the] Black Masses ... [as the] only means whereby they could undertake this”—the residual strength of their affective economy is nonetheless significant (Lamming, “*Castle* Production”). When Slime’s first buyer, a mixed-race “chief sanitary inspector who live[s] in one of the big-shot residential areas of the island,” appears in the village to claim his new land from the shoemaker, Bob’s father tells the shoemaker, “Don’t worry yuh head, ... [w]e by yuh side always” (Lamming, 1983, 240, 241). This heartfelt promise of solidarity and hospitality, though not yet operationalized for organized resistance, is nonetheless a resistant gesture. The fact that nearly all the villagers’ homes are treated as shared spaces is also a rebuke of sorts to colonial alienation; when Po King is killed by the police, his distraught mother is taken into the Fosters’ house, where “the women” bring her tea, wipe her tears, and change her vomit-fouled clothes, and “the men ... gr[ow] suddenly fierce” in the face of her tale (Lamming, 1983, 201).

As Richard Drayton explained in a 2000 letter to David Scott in advance of Scott’s interview with Lamming for *Small Axe*, “if you read G[eorge]’s novels from the 50s carefully, you will find that even as early as *Castle*, that there is great skepticism about what popular politics amounted to, doubt about the phenomenon of the political leader and worry about the fragility of leadership” (“Drayton to Scott”). In *Castle*, Slime recapitulates Empire’s desire for hierarchy by promoting and assuming the “head’s” leadership of the “body,” but the buoyant life of the body is still palpable throughout the text. While the High School tries to strategically sever G from the village’s affective claims, and while it does, for a time, manage to sow in him the ugly feelings of superiority and resentment that might produce a docile colonial subject who could become complicit in oppressing his own people, the “sprawling dereliction” of shared life in the village ultimately counters the estranging effects of the colonial curriculum. As G puts it, “I knew now that somewhere in my heart, already riddled with fear, ambition and envy, there was a storage of love for ... that life [in the village]” (Lamming, 1983, 228). This is a subtle but substantial way for Lamming to represent the power and potential that his characters have, especially in their relationships, while also not falsely granting them any straightforward path to revolutionizing their lives and their community.

Lamming is also careful to note how this power can be disrupted by external pressures or internalized fears. He does so by offering, by way of example, the tale of Bots, Bambina, and Bambi. Bambi initially lives in two different homes with two different women, Bots and Bambina,

and he fathers a number of children with each woman. Bots and Bambina are “the best of friends,” and the children “who was half brother an’ half sister live like real brother and sister without any talk ’bout half or quarter” (Lamming, 1983, 134). The strength of this system of affinities and affiliations is profound: “Everybody says there never know in all the village from top to bottom a set of people who live in love an’ harmony like Bots, Bambina an’ Bambi, with the children there, not in the same house, but in the same sort of feelin’ of you belong to me an’ I to you” (Lamming, 1983, 134). However, a German anthropologist (“a white woman ... comin’ to take some notes ’bout the people”) arrives in the village and convinces Bambi that he must marry either Bots or Bambina in order to free himself from “mortal sin” (Lamming, 1983, 135). Since Bambi loves both women and cares for all of his children, he simply flips a coin and marries Bots—and before long, the entire community is in disarray. Bots, Bambina, and Bambi begin drinking and fighting, and soon Bambi drops dead of a heart attack. After his death, the two women row so angrily over his funeral rites that the body is relinquished to the state for a pauper’s burial, and Bambi ends his life in unmarked ground.

This story reveals the limitations of the kinship structures of Barbados’ colonial-capitalist ruling class—competing privacies are poor substitutes for a vibrant collective—and it also exposes the efforts of that class (and its affiliates, like the academic interloper described above) to dissolve “unconventional” relationships perceived as threatening to Western hegemony. Bots, Bambina, and Bambi’s extended network represents a “dangerous closeness,” a closeness that colonial powers and their representatives “work to eradicate” through “relentless violence, division, competition, management, and incitements to see ourselves as isolated individuals or nuclear family units” (bergman and Montgomery, 2017). Although G and his friends are still young boys, they feel the weight of this “eradication.” Trumper says, “it seem [that marriage] don’t belong to certain people, meanin’ a lot of people put together, like the village for instance.... [T]here’s always that said same breakin’ up when marriage makes his appearance. I don’t know. I only know I ain’t ever goin’ get marry” (Lamming, 1983, 142). This sentiment, though still somewhat inchoate, reframes the anthropologist’s privileging of nuclear family ties as a fracturing of community and thus a form of subjection. Trumper sees the path forward in terms of collective action: the power of “a lot of people put together” (Lamming, 1983, 142).

In the Castle of My Skin ends with three conversations that G has with his mother, with Trumper, and with Pa. G’s mother faces a change that many parents face, seeing her child shift from belonging to her and the local community to becoming an adult and moving away. She sees the power of movement, of emigration, and she is scared for G, fretting for him. As G finishes school and contemplates emigrating to Trinidad, Trumper travels to America to work. When he returns to Barbados, he talks to G about his newfound sense of race-consciousness: “If there be one thing I thank America for, she teach me who my race wus. Now I’m never goin’ to lose it” (Lamming, 1983, 304). Trumper plays for G a recording of Paul Robeson’s *Let My People Go*, explaining that the concept of “My People” ought to extend beyond the village, encompassing the more expansive affective and political claims of Blackness. G then asks Trumper, “You remember you were saying about a feeling, ... a big bad feeling in the pit of the stomach. A feeling you were alone in a world all by yourself, and although there were hundreds of people moving round you, it made no difference[?]” Trumper responds, “A man who know his people won’t ever feel like that.... Never” (Lamming, 1983, 309-10). In other words, while Creighton’s Village offers a local, grassroots example of “friendship force” in action, this broader notion of “My People” indicates

how affinities and affiliations might operate even at a distance. Trumper delivers a message of Black militant collectivity, energized by Paul Robeson's voice and politics, that G will have to learn. G and Trumper correctly feel that the scheme to dispossess Pa is a "tremendous injustice," and that this injustice is part of a broader current of anti-Blackness; they wonder together, but cannot yet answer, quite how far that current extends (Lamming, 1983, 287).

In the novel's last scene, Pa shares with G a tender recognition that they are both moving away from the village. G meets Pa as Pa takes one last look at his home before he will leave it the next day. Exactly where Pa is going is ambiguous—undoubtedly, he has been mulling the ultimatum that the head teacher gave him—but he is clear-eyed about the indignities of the Alms House. In any case, Pa says to G, "We both settin' forth tomorrow [...] I to my last restin'-place before the grave, an' you into the wide wide world" (Lamming, 1983, 302). This statement sums up neatly the energies of the novel as a whole: some of the community's power is spent and some is poised to grow.

In Lamming's terms from his 1983 introduction, these characters, each in their own way, experience life's wretchedness, but also show their energy, force, and capacity for survival. There is power in the village community and in the characters' relationships, but that does not mean that the characters are fully able to determine their own fates—the world is more complicated, more cruel than that. When the novel concludes in the mid-1940s, it will still be more than twenty years until Barbados gains its independence from Britain. The evictions depicted in the novel will continue across the island for a long time to come: in 1980, when the Freehold Purchase Act was finally passed in Barbados, roughly 70% of Bajans were still living in chattel houses, movable structures designed to be disassembled and rebuilt in some new temporary perch when families were instructed to leave their land (Potter, 1986, 255).

Perhaps it is unsurprising that G feels the need to move away from the island at the end of the novel; as Lamming explained years later, upon reflection, the colonial experience in Barbados was "a daily exercise in self-mutilation" (2002). In fact, he wrote in the 1983 introduction and repeated in a 2002 article that he thought perhaps he ought to have killed Mr. Creighton in the 1937 riots depicted in *Castle*—although no white men were *actually* killed during that period, "the most authentic response to the long history of shame and humiliation that produced the riots" would have been the landlord's death: "the symbolic end to a social order that deserved to be destroyed" (Lamming, 1983, xii-xiv and Lamming 2002). But even though Lamming did not make that choice, the evidence from the novel still shows a dynamic community that is a substantial counter to that destructive "social order." After all, while the strikes and riots take place off stage, they still take place. The situation to lament is not a strike that tries and fails; the situation to lament is when injustice exists but provokes no resistance.

We are sympathetic to characters who are disappointed with the state of the world in which they live, whose power meets with the seeming brick wall of structural prohibitions, who exist amidst a social order that "deserves to be destroyed." Ours is no argument for finding solace in disappointment. We prefer to see labor strikes win and colonial (and neo-colonial) regimes end, *fiat justitia ruat caelum*. The more common situation, however, closer to the story in *Castle*, is that rights are won by collective action, and that such collectivity is rooted in relationships like the ones Lamming depicts in his novel. Rights that should have become universal must be defended

again and again, and each new generation must learn its role in that struggle, as G and Trumper discuss at the novel's end. That realization is not heartening, but neither is it a form of powerlessness. Rather, it is a call to find power in relationality, to maximize "friendship force," and to bring "collective human substance" to the cause of countering injustice.

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