

## **The Outsider Inside: Retracing Carpentier's Lost Steps in the Eastern Caribbean**

**Ian Craig**

**Abstract:** This reading of Carpentier's four 1958 chronicles on Barbados analyzes how they rhetorically enact the skills of intercultural self-positioning that Carpentier had acquired by this mature stage of his journalistic career as an expert Caribbean chronicler but first-time visitor to Barbados. Furthermore, whilst these chronicles at least partially vindicate autochthonous Caribbean cultural expression, this analysis identifies the conspicuous absence therein of any direct engagement with social realities such as the continuing colonial status of Barbados and interrogates these omissions through other critical readings of Carpentier's approach to race and political engagement, and through his response to the Guadeloupean poet St. John Perse. Though Carpentier's fictional oeuvre repeatedly confronts the claims of humankind's theoretical perfectibility through historical progress with those of the subjective ego, his Barbados chronicles exemplify a countervailing tendency to erase sociopolitical contexts from his travel writing in a manner that can be regarded as problematically apolitical.

**Keywords:** Carpentier, intercultural, race, colonialism, Barbados

**Résumé :** Cette analyse des récits de voyage de Carpentier en Barbade (1958) examine l'aptitude à l'auto-positionnement bien développée chez l'écrivain alors qu'il était déjà dans la force de l'âge, notamment ses nombreuses « traductions culturelles » d'éléments de son nouvel environnement. Bien que ces récits valorisent l'expression culturelle dans les Caraïbes, elles omettent certaines réalités sociales. Nous explorons l'attitude de Carpentier à l'égard de la race et de l'engagement politique en puisant à d'autres lectures critiques et à la lumière de sa réplique au poète guadeloupéen St. John Perse, cité par le chroniqueur dans sa traduction. Alors que l'œuvre de fiction de Carpentier confronte à maintes reprises les contextes sociopolitiques et l'expérience subjective, ses récits de voyage manifestent plutôt une tendance à effacer le contexte d'une manière qui risque d'être apolitique et problématique.

**Mots clé :** Carpentier, interculturel, race, colonialisme, Barbade

**Resumo:** Esta leitura das 1958 crônicas de Carpentier sobre Barbados analisa como se apresentam as habilidades de autoposicionamento intercultural que Carpentier teve de adquirir nesse estágio maduro e que incluiu repetidas "traduções culturais" das características de sua nova esfera. Enquanto as crônicas reivindicam a expressão cultural caribenha, algumas omissões das realidades sociais são questionadas através de outras leituras críticas da abordagem de Carpentier para raça, engajamento político, bem como através de sua resposta ao poeta Guadalupenho St. John Perse, citado na tradução do próprio Carpentier. Embora a ficção de Carpentier constantemente confronte os contextos sociopolíticos com a experiência subjetiva, estas crônicas exemplificam uma tendência compensatória de apagar tais contextos de sua escrita de viagem de forma preocupantemente apolítica.

**Palavras-chave:** Carpentier, intercultural, raça, colonialismo, Barbados.

**Resumen:** Este artículo propone una lectura de las crónicas de 1958 de Carpentier sobre Barbados en la que se analiza cómo estas ilustran la capacidad de autoposicionamiento intercultural que Carpentier había adquirido para la etapa madura de su obra, y que suponía repetidas "traducciones culturales" de características de su nuevo entorno. Aunque las crónicas reivindican la expresión cultural del Caribe, algunas omisiones de las realidades sociales se cuestionan a través de otras lecturas críticas del enfoque de Carpenter con respecto al compromiso racial y político, así como también a partir de su respuesta al poeta guadalupense St. John Perse, la cual se cita en traducción del mismo Carpentier. Aunque la ficción de Carpentier confronta reiteradamente los contextos sociopolíticos con las experiencias subjetivas, estas crónicas ejemplifican su tendencia compensatoria a borrar tales contextos de su escritura de viajes de una manera que podría ser problemáticamente apolítica.

**Palabras clave:** Carpentier, intercultural, raza, colonialismo, Barbados

## Introduction

In late August 1958, Alejo Carpentier travelled with his wife Lilia Esteban from Caracas, where they resided at the time, to spend three weeks in Barbados, which still had the better part of a decade to run as a British colony before becoming independent in 1966. Though the trip subsequently appears in accounts of his life as a holiday (Cancio Isla 211), Carpentier announced on his return to Maiquetía airport outside Caracas that he had finished the first draft of *El Siglo de las Luces* during his island retreat, though the novel was not published until 1962 (Chao 118). In the intervening years, having been summoned by events to Havana in 1959, Carpentier modified the manuscript in ways now lost to history, as he began his work as head of the national publishing house under the new regime. This and other official tasks led to a dramatic decrease in his journalistic activities after 1959, so that the Barbados trip can be seen as coming at the apogee of his powers as a non-fiction chronicler. It thus perhaps unsurprising that he also found time to pen four pieces on the island for his column "Letra y Solfa" in the Caracas daily *El Nacional*, despite the "holiday" and the novel.<sup>1</sup>

Carpentier's sojourn in Barbados captures him at an intriguing moment, before he had become generally well known as a novelist and certainly before the English-speaking world had begun to take note of him to the extent it later would; at the same time, he was a Caribbean "man of the islands" by conviction and vocation, but much better known in Paris or Caracas than in Kingston, Port of Spain or Bridgetown. As a Cuban fluent in French and with an extensive network of personal and professional relationships in both the Francophone and Hispanic intellectual milieus of the era, the Anglophone Caribbean can perhaps be seen as his "asignatura pendiente" on the path to becoming "ecumenically Caribbean" (a term he liked to use). His visit to Barbados was thus a foray into an unfamiliar corner of a highly familiar archipelago, where his relatively modest command of spoken English and lack of previous experience inevitably placed him at some remove from the almost immediate insider's vantage point he might have enjoyed if visiting a Francophone or Spanish-speaking territory. Whilst not entirely a "fish out of water" then, neither could he negotiate the island "como pez en el agua".

The first section of this analysis of his Barbados chronicles will thus examine how he negotiated rhetorically this in-between status as perhaps the ultimate Caribbean cultural insider of his era in a territory he had never previously visited. For this purpose, I use Michael Byram's model of intercultural competence to evaluate the persona Carpentier constructs through his Barbados chronicles in this mature phase of his journalism, charting his modes of engagement with his new environment as he seeks to subsume it into his already extensive and nuanced repertoire of Caribbean expertise. Whilst the application of a typology of intercultural competence to Carpentier's journalistic endeavours may at first seem a strange methodological choice, as we shall see below, his outsider-insider positioning in relation to Barbados

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<sup>1</sup> This article arose from a project to translate Carpentier's Barbados chronicles into English for the first time, sponsored by the Cuban Embassy in Barbados, whose support is gratefully acknowledged. Dr. Grisel Pujalá Soto and I completed the (as yet unpublished) translation; a multimedia exhibition was also created by Leandro Soto and Mario Porchetta as part of a symposium on Carpentier in Barbados including Cuban essayist, literary critic and the editor of Carpentier's *Crónicas caribeñas*, Emilio Jorge Rodríguez, in March 2013. The assistance of the Director and staff of the Fundación Alejo Carpentier in Havana is also gratefully acknowledged.

required a high degree of intercultural sophistication that Byram's instrument helps to elucidate. In the second section, I will seek to draw out the resonances of these chronicles across Carpentier's wider poetics of the Caribbean, analyzing those elements of Barbados he chose to evoke and connect to his broader concept of the region, and particularly pointing out what he chose to leave aside. This is the particular utility of Byram's typology in this instance: its breadth of reference to include critical attention to the dynamics of social relations, beyond the more anthropological or purely humanistic framing of "culture" traditionally deployed in discussions of intercultural capacity, tends to reveal a certain distaste for the less edifying facets of Barbadian social reality on the part of Carpentier, a reticence not shared by an approximately contemporaneous chronicler, Leigh Fermor, as noted below.

Whilst it may seem tendentious to interrogate the lack of a sociopolitical dimension in these particular instances of a column that rarely encroached on this territory, it is precisely Carpentier's habit of skirting such a dimension throughout his authorship of "Letra y Solfa" that is most at issue here: as Cancio Isla notes (233-34), Carpentier was consciously aware of emulating Martí as a prominent Cuban man of letters writing a column of seemingly encyclopaedic scope in a Venezuelan daily – the only glaring difference being the relative dearth of political references in the later author's output in this medium. Given this precedent and Carpentier's overall sophistication as a forger of associative connections between apparently diverse realms of experience, Byram's typology helps expose lacunae that might be seen as effectively amounting to a form of self-censorship whose origins may be both biographical and temperamental.

The identification of certain conspicuous absences, then, to which end I will also cite other analyses of Carpentier, principally by Bongie and Brennan, will help confirm the paradox that Carpentier, the historical novelist *par excellence*, could sometimes be willfully ahistorical—and therefore rather idealizing—in his non-fictional portrayal of the Caribbean, as a result of an aversion to engaging directly with certain aspects of contemporary sociopolitical life.

In considering this sociopolitical facet, we will island-hop briefly from Barbados to Guadeloupe, 395 kilometres to the northwest, the birthplace of the poet Alexis Leger or Saint-John Perse, whose verses were a lifelong passion for Carpentier. The purpose of this digression will be to analyze, in Carpentier's responses to Perse, his evolving position on how to tackle the issue of racial difference directly in his non-fiction writings, and his views on political engagement. As we shall see, both of these mutually intertwined issues—race and politics—constitute areas of intermittent opacity in his non-fiction writings in particular, and his Barbados chronicles serve to reinforce the impression that, whether consciously or not, he tackled certain subjects only obliquely whilst nonetheless arguing for an increasingly self-defining Caribbean cultural praxis.

### **The Outsider Inside: Carpentier's intercultural rhetoric**

Some degree of admission of Carpentier's novice status was required for a Venezuelan readership of his Barbados chronicles in particular, since Barbados has historically been a popular tourist destination for Venezuelans and cultural and

diplomatic relations have always been close.<sup>2</sup> Carpentier would thus have known that a number of his readers would be familiar with the island and would read his reports with interest to see what this avowed "man of the Caribbean" would make of these 430 square kilometres of "Little England" lying 845 kilometres northeast of Caracas. As we shall see, Carpentier navigates a narrow channel between tourist ingénue and seasoned world traveller by rhetorically shuttling back and forth along a continuum of professed expertise and acknowledged ignorance, presenting himself by turns as modestly unassuming and feistily opinionated, but with a tendency to claim ever increasing insider sensibility as the chronicles progress.

Byram's typology defines the following components of a mature intercultural capacity:

- *Intercultural attitudes (savoir être)*: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own.
- *Knowledge (savoirs)*: of social groups and their products and practices in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.
- *Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre)*: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own.
- *Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire)*: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.
- *Critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager)*: an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries. (Byram 50–54)

As might be expected given his pedigree as a travel chronicler by this point in his life, Carpentier rhetorically enacts these skills of self-awareness, self-positioning, interrelation and engagement to a high degree in his Barbados pieces, which are dense with keen cultural observations and connections, but I will argue that he can be faulted on the second and the final criteria, referring to "knowledge of social groups" and to *critical* engagement, as a result of his reluctance to make any explicit connection between the cultural phenomena he describes and the sociopolitical reality of Barbados in the summer of 1958, including relations between white and black Barbadians.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Venezuela is the only Spanish-speaking country to have a fully developed cultural mission on the island, with a Venezuelan Institute that has offered Spanish classes and hosted cultural events for many years. Various articles on Venezuela appeared in the *Advocate* during and around the period of Carpentier's stay—most worryingly for Carpentier, reports of a coup attempt by the military police in Caracas ("Military Police Must Be Disbanded"). Cuba was not mentioned at all in the *Advocate* in the period of his stay, though a number of syndicated reports on US and Canadian hostages taken by the "Cuban rebels" in Oriente Province appeared in the early part of July of that year ("Cuban Rebels Grab Two More Americans").

<sup>3</sup> Carpentier's own definition of "culture" as a personal capacity most closely resembles the connection-building character of Byram's *savoir comprendre*, with the added dimension of temporal as well as spatial scope: "el acopio de conocimientos que permiten a un hombre establecer relaciones, por encima del tiempo y del espacio, entre dos realidades semejantes o análogas, explicando una en función de sus similitudes con otra que puede haberse producido muchos siglos atrás [...] esa facultad

In the opening of his first chronicle, entitled "Música del Caribe", Carpentier places us in time before his arrival, receiving dispatches by the hand of informed sources:

Muchos visitantes de Trinidad y Barbados me hablaron, en estos últimos años, de la existencia en las islas, de orquestas populares de un carácter absolutamente excepcional: las llamadas *steelbands*, muy diferentes, en cuanto a sonoridad, de otros conjuntos folklóricos de las Antillas, dominados por los timbres de tambores, maracas o claves (*Crónicas caribeñas* 311).<sup>4</sup>

He acknowledges his skepticism about this new musical form: "desconfiaba de ellas, creyendo, sin razón, que se trataba de una hechura artificial, sin energía propia, destinada a servir de atracción a los turistas de las *West Indies*." Having now heard a steel band live, he is quick to retract his previous misgivings: "debo reconocer mi error: lejos de ser un engendro circunstancial, las *steelbands* constituyen una originalísima manifestación de lo que podríamos llamar el «folklore portuario» del Caribe" (*Crónicas caribeñas* 311).

As a rhetorical exercise in conceding his neophyte status without forfeiting the authority to make erudite observation, this opening shows a deft touch. He acknowledges that his initial skepticism was a prejudice based on ignorance ("creyendo, sin razón..."), thereby offering a pleasing sensation of "I told you so" to readers who have discovered the steel band already; however, his later pronouncement is not only categorical enough to assert his modified opinion as an expert one ("constituyen una originalísima manifestación"), but also classifies what he has heard within a whole new regional genre, coined on the spot: "lo que podríamos llamar el «folklore portuario» del Caribe." Carpentier thus reassures us quickly of his *savoir être*—he is both curious and ready to suspend disbelief—and quickly moves on to establish his *savoir comprendre*: having gone on to describe the history of the steel band with the professional musicologist's breadth of reference—"una sonoridad absolutamente semejante a la del *pizzicato* de contrabajo" [...] "suenan como una formidable orquesta de xilófonos o «balafones» africanos"—he introduces a critique that chimes with his opinions on the importance of originality in contemporary Cuban music expressed elsewhere in his *Crónicas caribeñas*: "Falta a esas *steel bands*, sin embargo, un repertorio enteramente original. [...] Les falta literatura propia—sobre todo si pensamos que el calypso no es de una gran originalidad" (217-18). However, the piece closes on a characteristically Carpenterian upswing that not only augurs the ongoing refinement of steel band music, but also asserts the global primacy of the Caribbean as the fountainhead of musical invention in the modern period: "Pero esta

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de pensar inmediatamente en otra cosa cuando se mira una cosa determinada, [es] la facultad mayor que puede conferirnos una cultura verdadera" (Cancio Isla 236).

<sup>4</sup> This sentence begins a series of italicized linguistic borrowings in Carpentier's Barbados chronicles: *steelbands*, *West Indies*, *cricket*, *lattes* (from French), *collision*, *sketch*, *jockey*, *speaker*, *income tax*. As well as exhibiting the author's increasing connectedness with the Anglophone milieu (five of the eight Anglicisms appear in the final chronicle), these might also be seen as calculated to flatter the linguistic skills of his readership, or as asserting a mildly foreignizing discursive strategy designed to engage interest by making some modest inferential demands on the reader. For a writer so commonly associated with the Francophone world, it is interesting to note how frequently Anglicisms find their way into Carpentier's discourse in *Crónicas caribeñas*.

[originalidad] no tardará en surgir, ya que el pueblo antillano es, por tradición, maravilloso inventor de ritmos y melodías, que se vienen imponiendo al mundo desde los primeros años de la Conquista" (312).

In the second chronicle, "Los fantasmas de Barbados" (*Crónicas caribeñas* 313–14), Carpentier hops nimbly from music to literature, and from present to past, noting that Barbados "es una isla prodigiosamente marcada por el romanticismo inglés" and then embarking on something of a tour de force of *savoir comprendre*, invoking five authors and three works to illustrate this connection between Barbados and English Romanticism (Walter Scott, *Night Thoughts* by Edward Young, *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis, *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, and Anne Radcliffe). The marked air of Englishness is supplied not only by the imprint of the Romantic on manmade structures, but also by the peculiar husbandry of the natural landscape:

Barbados realiza el milagro de reconstruir los muy británicos paisajes de Sussex o del Devonshire, usando en tan insólito menester las plantas y los árboles que mejor conocemos. Y es maravilla ver cómo la caña de azúcar se presta al juego, pareciéndose de pronto al trigo verde; cómo la palma real cobra un acento inglés al mecer sus hojas sobre un campo de cricket, y cómo la modesta enredadera criolla, al trepar sus cundiamores en una cerca de piedra, se transforma de pronto, en yedra muy llovida por las garúas de alguna novela de Walter Scott. (313)

Here, the first-person plural "que mejor conocemos" is a typical Carpenterian gesture of invitation into the unfamiliar through the familiar, an urbane rhetorical appeal to common cultural reference points even as he evokes the comparative strangeness, in Caribbean terms, of the landscape around him. This strangeness, and his novice's wonderment in the face of it, is expressed in the phrase "es maravilla ver".<sup>5</sup>

Carpentier uses the first-plural again later in the chronicle in response to a rhetorical question, but this time in the "royal we" sense to allude to himself alone, thereby creating a sense of his own increasing expertise in the lore of the island, the details of which are too involved to relay to his readers at this time: "¿Cómo vino el último Paleólogo de prosapia imperial a dar con los huesos—que ese es el caso—a esta umbrosa parroquia de St. John? Es una historia larga y complicada que acaso narremos otro día" (314).<sup>6</sup> Carpentier thus continues to appeal simultaneously to a common insider's perspective on matters Caribbean in general, whilst hinting that his own initially outsider status with regard to Barbados specifically is shifting toward a

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<sup>5</sup> Carpentier's characterization closely resembles Leigh Fermor's, for whom the Barbados landscape resembles "a shire that had drifted loose from the coast of England and floated all the way to these tropic waters, its familiar fields having acquired outlandish flowers and trees on the journey, but never in great enough quantities to impair the deception" (136).

<sup>6</sup> Carpentier includes both the tomb of Palaeologus and references to several of the same novels mentioned here in the account of Sofía's brief sojourn in Barbados in *El Siglo de las Luces* (368–69, 372–73). Leigh Fermor offers a detailed genealogy and a full answer to Carpentier's rhetorical question of how the last Palaeologus came to be buried in St. John's Church cemetery (145–49). Carpentier was apparently familiar with Leigh Fermor's account of Barbados: in González Echevarría and Müller-Bergh's *Alejo Carpentier: Bibliographical Guide*, the authors include a reference to a "Letra y Solfa" column for *El Nacional* on 10 January 1957 entitled "El paleólogo de Barbados", with the following note: "Leigh Fermor en su visita a Barbados en busca de material para un libro acerca de las Antillas encontró una lápida en el cementerio con la Cruz de Constantino de Fernando Paleólogo, descendiente de la dinastía imperial del último emperador de Grecia" (128).

more informed position as he experiences his surroundings and integrates them into his vast and fluidly interconnected cultural repertoire.

In the third chronicle, "La isla privilegiada", he has taken in enough to admit to another prejudice overcome, this time relating not merely to steelpan music, but to the island as a whole, of which he now confesses to having previously formed "un cuadro sombrío" as a result of reading an account of it by the Spanish intellectual Luis Ariquistáin: "[D]esde mi lectura de ese equivocado ensayo, me representaba Barbados como una isla superpoblada, pobre por fuerza, amargada por conflictos sociales nacidos de una probable persistencia de anacrónicas normas de vida colonial" (315).<sup>7</sup> He roundly rejects this characterization, finding instead "una de las islas más rientes y mejor organizadas de todo el Caribe", whose manifold bounties he goes on to enumerate: impeccably maintained parks and roads; the working class relaxing to the strains of Brahms and Handel; minimal illiteracy and an apparent absence of "la sórdida miseria que he podido observar en otros lugares de América"; a thriving culture of letters; and in general, exceptional virtues "de limpieza, de cultura y de orden" (Carpentier, *Crónicas caribeñas* 315–16).

In his steady move along the insider-outsider spectrum, he is careful to try to preempt accusations of ingenuous idealization:

No pretendo decir con esto que Barbados sea algo así como el Paraíso Terrenal de los cartógrafos antiguos. Alguna injusticia soterrada debe haber allí, como las hay en todas partes. Por lo pronto, me es difícil explicarme la decencia del nivel general de vida, cuando conozco el bajísimo monto de ciertos sueldos. (316)

This acknowledges his inevitably superficial penetration into the island's social fabric, which doubtless hides "alguna injusticia soterrada", but also suggests that some hard empirical research—Byram's *savoir apprendre/faire*—has by now accompanied purely touristic sensory immersion ("cuando conozco el bajísimo monto de ciertos sueldos"). The tone of his conclusion is categorical, nonetheless: "Es todo lo contrario de la «isla de negros» que nos pintaba Araquistáin. En todo caso, una «isla de negros» que bien podría servir de ejemplo a muchas «islas de blancos»" (316). This final rebuttal of Ariquistáin's dubious dismissal of the island on the grounds of its increasing "Africanization" is a simple assertion of the mid-century Creole intellectual's more progressive stance on race when measured against earlier European analysts, even of the Left. In its tone of conviction, however, as a summative judgment on the island, it implicitly asserts the degree of expertise required to issue such a judgment: I have now seen enough, Carpentier is saying, to know of that which I speak. The question of whether this assumed air of sociological expertise, this claim to *savoir s'engager*, is in fact fully justifiable is discussed in the next section.

By the time the fourth and final chronicle returns us to the subject of Caribbean music, Carpentier is ushering readers into the Empire Theatre in Bridgetown with the

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<sup>7</sup> Aviva Chomsky (457) alludes to a work in which Araquistáin avers that Cuba—not Barbados—was "Africanizing" in the late 1920s as a result of significant immigration from Haiti and Jamaica. Araquistáin's argument likely drew on Ramiro Guerra's influential 1927 work *Sugar and Society in the Caribbean*, which asserted that "the history of the British West Indies is fundamentally one of social and political decay" (22) and that "just as in the seventeenth century, the sugar planter in Barbados continues to work for the fortune and welfare of the few at the expense of the poverty and suffering of the masses" (20).

air of a seasoned tour guide, this time with the first person plural in invitational subjunctive form: "Y para terminar con estas impresiones de un corto viaje a una amable isla del Caribe, vayamos hoy al teatro de Bridgetown donde habrá de ofrecerse un espectáculo que se anuncia a tambor batiente desde hace varias semanas, una suerte de desafío público entre los dos «gigantes del calypso», Lord Melody y King Sparrow" (317). Exhibiting his chronicler's eye for context, Carpentier spends most of the rest of this column discussing not the calypsonians (he steps back again, humbly acknowledging "no soy juez en la materia"), but the toing and froing in the theatre before the show begins and the warm-up act by legendary comic Joe Tudor: "Apenas hace un gesto, se reconoce el auténtico actor, dueño de un estilo propio, dotado de tremendas «tablas»" (317). Carpentier then offers a brief genealogy of the Cuban *caricato*, Havana's Creole theatre in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which he sees reflected in Joe Tudor, though more as a result of having taken root in analogous Caribbean cultural substrates than through any supposed direct influence. The columnist also offers some idea of the content of Tudor's comic performance: "La obra maestra de este 'caricato' barbadense es, sin duda, un *sketch* unipersonal en el cual interpreta simultáneamente los papeles de un caballo de carrera, del *jockey* que lo monta y de un *speaker* de radio que narra la competencia deportiva" (317).

What he does not explain at any time is how he was able to understand what was going on in this sketch, or indeed in any part of Tudor's set. Judging from extant examples of Tudor's performances, it seems implausible that Carpentier would have acquired sufficient command of Bajan vernacular to have followed it linguistically, suggesting either that a local interlocutor was providing ad hoc interpreting services—a scene perhaps worthy of a sketch in itself—or that Carpentier's understanding was based entirely or mostly on Byram's *savoir apprendre* ("the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction"), here instantiated as a Caribbean fellow-feeling that allayed the normal sense of alienation felt by someone in the midst of a laughing crowd whilst having a drastically reduced capacity to understand the source of its mirth. Whilst Tudor's vaunted skills as a physical comic may doubtless have aided this sympathetic identification with the Barbadian audience, it is also surely evidence of Carpentier's ability and willingness both to engage wholeheartedly with the popular register in performance art and to tap into deeper sources of regional kinship than the purely linguistic, even some distance outside his own immediate cultural milieu. This was a skill of empathy he cultivated across a lifetime in the role of intercultural mediator through his journalism and other activities, starting with his early sojourn in Paris, where he performed "la doble misión asumida de mostrar a los franceses, en sus inicios, la cultura cubana, y a los cubanos la cultura europea" (Rodríguez 14–15) and where he argued tirelessly for the frequent arbitrariness of the line drawn between "high" and "popular" culture.<sup>8</sup>

### **Treading Carefully: race and politics in Carpentier's Eastern Caribbean**

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<sup>8</sup> For information on Joe Tudor, see Sealey. The "Lord Simpleton and Banksby" sketch forms part of *Alfred Pragnell Reads Timothy Callender and Recalls Joe Tudor: Barbadian Short Stories* and can also be found on YouTube by searching for "Lord Simpleton and Banksby".

Though Carpentier finds the marginalia of the Sparrow vs. Melody performance of particular interest, he does briefly address the main event. His summary of its content is noteworthy for constituting the only reference in his chronicles to the sociopolitical concerns of late-1958 Barbados: "Sus calypsos regocijan tremendamente al público porque son sátiras de actualidad. Allí se pone en solfa el *income tax*, el gobierno local, algún suceso reciente, las últimas disposiciones reguladoras del tránsito, sin retrocederse ante crudas alusiones a los acontecimientos de Little Rock..." (318). As suggested above, the cursoriness of Carpentier's allusions to sociopolitical matters, here and throughout the Barbados chronicles, might be seen as constituting something of a deficit in his otherwise convincing self-representation as a fully realized intercultural chronicler.

The final reference in Carpentier's brief enumeration of Tudor's subject matter, to the crisis that ensued after Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus defied a Supreme Court order to desegregate all US high schools, found a strong echo in the *Barbados Advocate*, where the story was repeatedly front-page news throughout Carpentier's stay. We know that Carpentier read the *Advocate*, since he makes admiring reference to it as a paper in which "pueden leerse editoriales y comentarios de la actualidad internacional dignos de un periódico de Londres", high praise indeed from a newspaperman of some forty years. Given his insider status as a seasoned columnist and editor, we might infer that he paid more than the passing attention to the paper that a different, less journalistically inclined intellectual might have paid it. The *Advocate* archives thus allow us to explore by inference the lacunae in Carpentier's text, what we know was there but what he chose not to evoke in his account.

Whilst the major controversies of the United States civil rights movement were naturally of interest in an Anglophone colony whose population was overwhelmingly of African descent, relations with the "mother country", and particularly the plight of the many West Indians now living in it, were even more prominent, as "race riots" broke out in Nottingham and London in the summer of 1958, prompting Jamaican Chief Minister Norman Manley to visit the English capital in solidarity. Manley's visit was also extensively covered in the *Advocate*, particularly as he was heading a "West Indian team"—representing not Jamaica, but the West Indies Federation, the short-lived political union of Anglophone states constituted in January 1958 and intended as the precursor of a unified independent nation.<sup>9</sup> Particularly since Barbadian Sir Grantley Adams was the first Federal premier, the *Advocate* of the period naturally made repeated reference to the newly minted federal experiment, including a regular "Federal Focus" opinion column on Sundays, and an "Around the Federation" news roundup.

In Barbados specifically, the "injusticia soterrada" alluded to by Carpentier was not nearly as buried as his remark might suggest, according to one letter to the editor published in the *Advocate* on September 9, 1958:

There is no real social intercourse between the races here. What exists is a master-servant association which renders it impossible for the two to meet at any other level. There is no suggestion of equality. It is possible

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<sup>9</sup> For local coverage of Little Rock, see for example Fox and Kavanaugh; on the UK race riots see for example the front page of the *Advocate* on 2 September 1958, which includes titles such as: "Mock Fight Blamed for Race Riot"; "Colour Riots Might Curb Immigration" and "Renewed Race War Erupts in London". For Manley's visit see "Manley Will Go to U.K. About Race Riots".

for anyone who has been living in Barbados say for five years to go through the island and be able to tell, merely by looking at the house, the race of the person living in it, with at least 95% accuracy. (Monroe 4)

As implied above, it may not be surprising that Carpentier does not allude to such secular matters from the strictly cultural pulpit of his Caracas column. The Cuban author's reluctance to enter a certain kind of contemporary political terrain in his travel chronicles has been noted by Cancio Isla, who also paraphrases González Echevarría's suggestion that Carpentier's entire biography can be read as a series of ultimately futile attempts to stay away from politics (Cancio Isla 155). As Cancio Isla acknowledges, this is of course not to say that subsequent to his period in jail under Machado, Carpentier never chose to write on subjects that were politically sensitive, but there can be no doubt of a certain distaste for being classified as a political commentator: "Yo no haré política", he writes in a letter to Rodríguez Feo in 1949, in which he goes on to excoriate fellow members of the *Minorista* generation for their descent into "politiqueo, entregados a la verborrea semanal" (Cancio Isla 248). As we shall see, however, despite the Cuban's reluctance to cross into the fraught terrain of the political on an island whose inhabitants were already wondering whether Federation was a misstep and fairly bristling with latent tensions between sclerotic white colonial capital and increasingly restive black labour (Beckles 195–96), Carpentier still implicitly manages to propound an emancipatory thesis between the lines of his chronicles—a thesis that is necessarily partial because it applies only to the arena of cultural self-expression, which he seems to locate as an apparently discrete realm of endeavour, oddly adrift from its sociopolitical points of anchorage.

At this point, it will prove useful to take our short detour from Barbados to consider two articles Carpentier wrote in reference to its closest geographical and political counterpart (as a fellow colony) in his journalism; namely, the French overseas department of Guadeloupe. Carpentier was famously inspired to write *El Siglo de las Luces* by a chance encounter during an unscheduled stay in Guadeloupe in 1955, during which time he also wrote a brief travel chronicle ("La isla de Guadalupe", *Crónicas caribeñas* 285–86). His interest in the island came from much earlier, however, and was typically rooted in literature: as suggested above, his two articles on Guadeloupian poet Alexis Leger, also known as Saint-John Perse, are worth analyzing here for what they reveal about Carpentier's self-representation in relation to racial difference in his non-fiction, on the one hand, and on the other, his view of the negotiation between the political and the literary for the Latin American man of letters ("Un poeta y sus islas", *Crónicas caribeñas* 137–39, and "Saint-John Perse, *urbi et orbi*" 426–29).

The chief point of interest here is a specific mutual echo that links Carpentier's two articles on Perse, which are spaced in time between his early-middle period (the first is from 1944) and the beginning of his mature phase (the second is from 1957), just before his sojourn in Barbados.<sup>10</sup> In the first of these articles, for the flourishing Havana daily *Información*, Carpentier exhibits his qualities as a translator, as he renders stanzas from Perse's *Eloges* into Spanish, beginning with the following:

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<sup>10</sup> No original date is given for this later article either in *Crónicas caribeñas* or in the posthumous volume of Carpentier's essays in which it was first collected, *La novela latinoamericana en vísperas de un nuevo siglo y otros ensayos*. An expert source reports that in a 1983 review of the latter work, Carpentier bibliographer Klaus Müller-Bergh gives its likely date as 1957.

"Entonces se te bañaba en agua de hojas verdes y también el agua era de sol verde; y las sirvientas de tu madre, largas mozas relucientes, movían sus piernas cálidas cerca de ti, y temblabas" (*Crónicas caribeñas* 138). In the later article, centred on an impassioned evocation of reading Perse during his travels up the Orinoco River in 1947, the now fully mature Carpentier cites this exact same verse in the original French, but this time only after recalling a parallel scene from his own biography:

Tras de los guayabos olorosos, era el camino por donde, los viernes, acudía la lavandera de chal azafrán, ajorcas doradas y fino perfil yoruba, seguida de la anciana portadora de cestas, arrugada y sentenciosa, que, ciertos días se daba a hablar de un larguísimo viaje hecho en su juventud, con argolla al tobillo, en los sollados de un barco negrero. Pero yo, desatento a sus cuentos, solo tenía ojos para contemplar a la mulata silenciosa, de largas piernas relucientes, altos pechos y mirada esquiva, que aguardaba, paciente, el recuento, hecho por mi madre, de las ropas traídas en una cesta olorosa a vetiver... Y muchos, muchos años más tarde, habría yo de encontrar nuevamente la emoción de esos momentos, el sabor de un agua que creía olvidada, los inexplicables estremecimientos anunciadores de una adolescencia ya próxima, abriendo, un día, un libro de Saint-John Perse. (*Crónicas caribeñas* 427)

The repetition some thirteen years later of this exalted allusion to Perse's evocation of prepubescent erotic stirrings elicited by the presence of *mulata* servant girls, a memory shared by Carpentier, is testimony to its enduring hold on the Cuban's nostalgic imagination. What is most noteworthy here, however, is not what is the same, but what is different; namely, Carpentier's inclusion in the later piece of a counterpoint to the object of his puerile desire, in the form of a much older and altogether more voluble woman who provides a rather shocking soundtrack to these encounters with the beguiling "mulata silenciosa"—the older woman's first-hand account of surviving the Middle Passage. From "ciertos días se daba a hablar", it is clear that the older woman revisited this experience repeatedly, but the boy Carpentier was persistently "desatento a sus cuentos" as a result of the overwhelming force of attraction exerted by the younger woman. Whilst it may be as well to resist the temptation to read too much into this juxtaposition of the black, aged, formerly enslaved basket carrier droning of the Middle Passage to no avail, and the young, mixed-blood, perhaps self-employed child of the new Republic, silently bewitching the asthmatic émigré intellectual-to-be, it is hard not to see something revealing in this anecdote that the mature Carpentier clearly tells against himself, this re-visioning of the exact same childhood evocation (as González Echevarría wryly remarks "Carpentier is always a problematic but persistent context for Carpentier" (*Alejo Carpentier, the Pilgrim at Home* 24)).

In order to see how this apparent evolution of Carpentier's self-representation in relation to racial difference might relate to his Barbados chronicles, it is worth considering here some relevant critical perspectives. On the one hand, Carpentier is rightly lauded as a tireless champion of Afro-Cuban cultural expression, and much of his oeuvre speaks for itself as a re-historicization of the Caribbean that moves the black experience from the margins to the centre (*El reino de este mundo* being the most obvious example). On the other hand, as Bongie asks, "does his positive assessment of *mestizaje*, which has an extensive genealogy in nineteenth-century

Cuban thought, serve—despite its apparently egalitarian intentions—as a convenient excuse for avoiding the problem of social injustice?" He goes on to quote and summarize Kutzinski (94), who feels that Carpentier, via Ortiz, may be guilty of just such an effacement:

"[T]he equality Ortiz casually implies, the same idea of equality that underlies popular notions of Cuba's *mestizaje* and Caribbean multiculturalism," is deceptive, [Kutzinski] argues, not only because it overlooks the continued oppression of "blacks" by "whites" in Cuba, but because it submerges the often violent sexual relations that were, in the Caribbean context, one of the most prominent means by which such mixing was furthered. (Bongie 9)

Bongie himself then goes on to point out the "rather troubling" absence of Africans in a passage in *El Siglo de las Luces* in which Esteban, sequestered in the "shady hold" of the revolutionary pirate vessel *L'ami du peuple*, contemplates a cargo of wine, triggering an extended narratorial evocation of the process of transculturation that brought wine and its commerce to the New World. The absence of any reference to the African component of the Caribbean *mélange* at this point leads Bongie to ask:

Might this absence not point toward Carpentier's continued need—a need that is most visible in his early work on Afro-Cuban culture in the 1930s—to see them, and the people of the Maize as well, in primitivist terms that somehow escape the creolizing process? [...] Is Carpentier, in other words, still partially engaged in a "foundational enterprise" that runs counter to the "translation sensibility" of a truly "critical criollism"—or has he by this mature point in his career gone beyond the primitivism of his early modernist work and created, as his most astute critic [Roberto González Echevarría] has argued, a cross-culturalized world in which peoples of African descent are actually the carefully hidden motors of the (con)fusing experience that is being theorized (and thus, I will be suggesting, inevitably betrayed) in Esteban's shipboard encounter? (9-10)

These questions imply a double fetishization on the part of Carpentier and other Ortizian "transculturalists": firstly, of blackness as a component of Caribbean hybridity that is somehow more "original" than other components, with a concomitant claim to a greater cultural "authenticity" that would seem to cut against the "'translation sensibility' of a truly 'critical criollism'", as Bongie puts it; secondly, of the mestizo as an idealized culmination of the hybridizing process, "the inscription of a desire for cultural synthesis upon a field of sociopolitical contingencies that is accordingly distorted" (Kutzinski 165). Bongie is ultimately convinced that the Carpentier of *El Siglo de las Luces* is painfully aware of these conceptual perils and deploys a variety of strategies to "emphasize this inescapable failure of (his) language to be anything but duplicitously allegorical in its approach to the transcultural mixing he describes and champions" (10).

What the contrast between Carpentier's two evocations of Perse adds to this analysis, perhaps, is a curious non-fictional sidelight that can be seen to support Bongie's notion that in his middle period Carpentier was deeply engaged in the task of

formulating a new way of looking at race in fiction, and by now more prepared in his non-fiction to address not only racial difference as a culturally significant phenomenon in the abstract, but also, and rather more revealingly, his own sexualized response to it – a response he locates in his childhood and not the present day, it should nevertheless be noted. In both fictional and non-fictional arenas, then, Carpentier increasingly squares up to the more problematic aspects of racial difference in Caribbean identity formation, but only from the comfortable distance offered by history, through the historical novel and the anecdotal memoir respectively.

His first evocation of Perse's stanzas in the 1940s is thus notable for making no direct mention of the echoes they conjure up from his own childhood, populated by servants darker skinned than himself; by the time of the later essay, in contrast, the more interculturally self-confident Carpentier writes himself retrospectively into the story as perhaps the least edifying corner of a white-brown-black triad, a racial context entirely missing from the earlier, blander evocation. He thereby not only foregrounds and ironizes his shared class origin with Perse and the consequent similarity of his eroticized positioning of the figure of the *mulata*, but is also prepared to set this against his obliviousness to the old woman's account of the Middle Passage in a somewhat rueful comic tableau. Indeed, this scene appears to be somewhat archetypal of Cuban race relations of the era—and therefore something of a self-caricature—if we consider the vernacular theatre of nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Havana, where the norm was that "the *negra* character type is distinct from the *mulata* in that she tends to be older and not as sexually appealing" (Moore 49).

The fictional analogue of this younger Carpentier for whom racial difference is equated with irresistible titillation is Esteban in *El Siglo de las Luces*, who is repeatedly distracted from loftier engagements with History by the allure of brown skin:

Esteban, muy atento a los gestos de una mulata cuyo madrás de tres puntas iba pregonando un «todavía-tengo-lugar-para-ti» en el lenguaje de nudos que era entendido por todos los habitantes de la isla, se hallaba demasiado sumido en la contemplación de mohines, dedos llevados a ajorcas, hombros que se ahuecaban sobre un espinazo suavemente sombreado, para prestar la atención debida al discurso [de Víctor Hugues] que, en aquel momento, bautizaba la Plaza Sartines con el nombre de Place de la Victoire. (Carpentier, *El Siglo de las Luces* 216)

At practically the same moment as Carpentier was evoking the eroticization of the *mulata* in portraying Esteban's distracted presence at historically momentous events, then, his non-fiction evinces a willingness to face this aspect of his own biography and landscape of desire through a train of thought that again leads back to Guadeloupe. Personal memoir thus echoes historical narrative in seeking to ironize around race in a manner that can perhaps be seen as a counterpoise to his earlier, more earnest evocations of Cuban racial difference. In 1933, it will be recalled, he had published *¡Écue-Yamba-Ó!*, in what might be read psychologically as an attempt to assuage the retrospective discomfort of his earlier sexual objectification of blackness (or brownness), and consequent blindness (or deafness) to its historical implications in the Caribbean, by vindicating it as the lodestone of Cuban cultural richness. As is well known, Carpentier later disavowed this early treatment because "me di cuenta de que todo lo hondo, lo verdadero, lo universal del mundo que había pretendido pintar en mi

novela había permanecido fuera del alcance de mi observación" (*Tientos y diferencias* 13). Whilst this disavowal was mostly an issue of narrative style, it was also partly rooted in his ongoing intercultural development (he was, after all, still only in his twenties when he wrote and published the novel), a dawning awareness that he had written the work whilst still essentially an outsider whose access to Afro-Cuban culture was based mostly on observation of ritual, rather than thorough study and lived day-to-day experience, including "el animismo del negro campesino de entonces; las relaciones del negro con el bosque" (13). Even in the area of ritual, his latter studies through Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera revealed that his younger self was at times quite simply duped, as he identifies "ciertas prácticas iniciáticas que me habían sido disimuladas por los oficiantes con una desconcertante habilidad" (13).

The revelations contained in the later article on Perse, then, seem to show a fully mature Carpentier who, as a white Cuban brought up in the early to mid-twentieth century, has now worked through the complexities of his own sense of race sufficiently to ironize the eroticization of the *mulata* and the concomitant dehistoricization of the black experience it frequently entailed. Taken with his fictional output subsequent to the flawed first attempt, the latter Perse chronicle can be read in the context of his overall biography as the implicit gentle self-mockery of the more earnest younger man who strove perhaps a little too hard to prove his autochthonous Creole credentials by vindicating in his first novel a reality he had only just begun to learn to navigate.<sup>11</sup> In his own analysis, he had not yet become enough of an "insider" to plumb the depths of the Afro-Cuban experience; somewhat paradoxically, in the context of his search for a narrative mode that would lift Latin American fiction out of the parochial morass of *costumbrismo* whilst avoiding the gratuitousness he perceived to be lurking beneath much of the avant-garde, the result of this first attempt left him both too far "inside" and too far "outside"—by missing "lo hondo", he had also failed to evoke "lo universal".

### **"Una suerte de civilización completamente original": Carpentier's Barbados<sup>12</sup>**

Returning to Barbados, then, we might continue to probe Carpentier's evolving treatment of racial difference in his middle period by further examining the parallelism he draws between Barbadian comic Joe Tudor and the stock characters of the vernacular theatre of early nineteenth-century Havana. In his introduction to *La música en Cuba*, Brennan also attributes an equivocal position on the matter of race to the Carpentier of the mid-1940s:

If *Music in Cuba* is guilty at times of racial insensitivity, it was also critical. Carpentier claims that the "the Afro-Cuban tendency often remained superficial and peripheral, with its romanticized evocations of the 'black man under palm trees, drunk on the sun.'" Elsewhere, he laments "the false conception of the 'national' that those in my

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<sup>11</sup> This is of course not to suggest that the young Carpentier's sense of cultural kinship with Afro-Cubans was merely the intellectual faux-pas of a callow youth: Pagni has persuasively argued his self-conscious contestation, in *Lettres des Antilles*, of the ethnographic gaze that mediated the ecstatic view of all things African held by the French avant-garde of the 1920s, an early, interculturally sophisticated endeavour whatever his subsequent misgivings about *¡Écue-Yamba-Ó!*

<sup>12</sup> Carpentier (415) offers this characterization of the island in the portentously titled "La cultura de los pueblos que habitan en las tierras del mar Caribe", *Crónicas caribeñas* 413-25.

generation had in those years," and calls his *¡Écue-Yamba-Ó!* "overblown, an abominable example of futurist bad taste". (30)

Brennan's accusation of "racial insensitivity" rests on Carpentier's failure to spell out fully in *La música en Cuba* that the vernacular *bufo* theatre—the same form he cites as analogous to Tudor's performance in Barbados—was performed mostly by white or light-skinned actors in blackface. Brennan finds it "puzzling" that Carpentier fails to "comment more directly on the grotesque quality of such performances regardless of their historical importance. His portrait here is uncharacteristically muffled" (29).

On the face of it, the repetition of this oversight in the context of Tudor's 1958 performance at Bridgetown's Empire Theatre seems more egregious still, given Tudor's role as a "real" black comic known to participate, for example, in skits alongside a white character called "Lord Simpleton": the mockery of blackness implicit in many of the traditional *negrito* performances is here not just subverted but fully *inverted*, with much of the humour deriving from the inability of the colonial character to keep up with the wit and language of the wily local. The omission starts to seem outrageous when we take into account Robin Moore's observation that "Afrocubans were systematically denied employment in the theater as late as the 1950s" and that "the popular theater [at the turn of the twentieth century] effectively reinforced associations held by the largely white audience between Afrocubans and a wide variety of largely negative personal characteristics, including greed, lechery, stupidity, incompetence, wanton sexuality, and deceit" (45). This, then, seems "puzzling" indeed: the racial politics of Joe Tudor's stage personae—performed before overwhelmingly black audiences in an ethos of white colonial decadence—and that of the Havana *negritos* would seem so considerably at odds that failure to mention the difference starts to look like a willful evasion.

But perhaps Carpentier does in fact mention it here, though only in an implicit form decodable by readers with sufficient cultural knowledge. His opening "lo curioso con Joe Tudor" is freighted with possible interpretations, including—to the initiated—the following possible paraphrase: "the strange thing about this mid-twentieth-century black colonial performer who commands the stage before an Anglophone black audience is the similarity of his delivery and comic style to blacked up white performers in the Cuban Creole theatre of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries". Given the relatively very recent currency at the time of blackface performance in Latin America, in carnival as well as theatrical manifestations, it might be argued that Carpentier may have been relying on at least some of his readership's capacity to infer the racial difference between the objects of his comparison, through their understanding that the term *negrito* implied a performer in blackface (Moore 67). They would thus theoretically be able to draw their own—largely political—conclusions about its significance.

It seems much more likely, however, that Carpentier simply and genuinely did not see the potentially problematic racial dynamics of his comparison as significant. This is inferable in that he makes no mention of either the blackface of the early Cuban vernacular theatre exponents, or of Tudor's "actual" blackness. Given its status as the warm-up act to a calypso contest on an island with an overwhelmingly African-descended population in an era of Anglophone Caribbean independence movements, even culturally and historically aware readers of *El Nacional* who picked up that a *negrito* meant a blackface minstrel character probably did not mistakenly infer that Tudor's performance was also in blackface; however, there is nothing in Carpentier's

account that reveals that Tudor was not a white (or other non-black) Barbadian, particularly given the explanation of his deadpan style: "imperturbable, flemático, con una economía de gestos muy propia de los excéntricos ingleses." On the face of it, Carpentier's comparison thus appears entirely decoupled from pressingly relevant racial and political moorings and seems intended to float freely in the realm of aestheticized cultural analysis as an erudite observation on common theatrical technique in the region. Given the obviously cultural nationalist underpinnings of his referencing "un teatro típicamente criollo" and "un auténtico teatro popular [está naciendo en Barbados]", however, the failure to mention race at all in this context looks at best like a missed opportunity for some salutary historicizing, and at worst like another example of the selective apoliticism that others have seen in Carpentier's journalism.<sup>13</sup>

It may be read as significant, however, that Carpentier specifically references Arquímedes Pous in his reference to the Havana vernacular theatre: as Moore points out, Pous was "an interesting case in that rather than mocking AfroCubans, he is considered a champion in the fight against racial discrimination in Cuba" (Moore 48). Pous was clearly a different intercultural animal from many traditional stage *negritos*, proving more successful initially because he had a genuine mastery of black Cuban physical expression, being "one of the few white actors capable of dancing various distinct forms of rumba based on the choreography of the traditional *columbia*, *guagancó*, and *yambú*." His success burgeoned as he began to write his own material "that addressed important racial issues" (Moore 48). It thus may be entirely plausible that Carpentier considered the *caricato* both racist and at the same time vindicatory of an emergent Cuban nationalism that embraced blackness (Pancrazio 163–64), an entanglement that would seem to validate Bongie's reading of the "shady hold" scene in *El Siglo de las Luces* as a kind of confession of the lingering impossibility of talking clearly about race in the Caribbean until a new terminology for doing so had been wrought.

Whilst we might thus still agree with Brennan that glossing over the issue of race when discussing the *caricato* in a work of such an encyclopedic scale as *La música en Cuba* seems both "puzzling" and "uncharacteristically muffled", it is harder to fault Carpentier, ultimately, for failing to unpack the manifold valences of the comparison between Tudor and the *caricato* exponents within the straitened confines of his column in *El Nacional*. Given his defence in the third chronicle of Barbados as an "«isla de negros»" that might well prove exemplary to many "«islas de blancos»", the emergence of "un auténtico teatro popular" on the island can be viewed alongside his initial endorsement of steelpan as a valorization of an agglutinative black popular culture, emergent from beneath the colonial veneer of the Haydn and the Brahms, the ghosts of Byzantine aristocrats and the afterglow of Romanticism that he finds

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<sup>13</sup> By way of contrast, in his account published eight years earlier Leigh Fermor is quite frank on such issues, remarking that "many travellers find in the island a tropical exuberance of exactly those values to which they had most joyfully bidden farewell in England" (134). He concludes that: "The club system runs all through Barbadian life and the cold shoulder and the open snub are resorted to only when no legal quibble is available. It segregates the two races of islanders just as effectively as the most stringent colour discrimination in the United States, and not half so honestly. [...] It must be one of the most disgustingly hypocritical systems in the world" (153). The salience of race in local politics is also signalled by his account of attending Parliament, where "the coloured M.P.'s were protesting that they had been affronted by not being invited to a party at Government House to celebrate the Royal Wedding" (150). He does concede, however, that "in writing a book like this, one is often warned that all reference to the Colour problem must be made with the utmost circumspection" (133).

elsewhere and that gave the colonial landscape of the island its fusty air of the Gothic and its superficial "Little England" charm.<sup>14</sup>

Viewed through a generous interpretive prism revelatory of both political and cultural emancipatory encodings, then, his four chronicles on Barbados might be read as unfolding according to the following scheme:

- Discovery: the steelpan, a potential instrument of new autochthonous musical development
- Vestiges: the colonial past and its persistent imprint on the landscape of the present
- Redress: the rebuttal of Ariquestain's doom-laden prophecy based on the equation of an increasingly "Africanized" territory with poverty and social strife
- Vindication: the nascent popular theatre as a new space of black contestation and solidarity, with echoes across the region

The problem with the political strand of this reading, however, arises in the specific character of his eulogizing of the island in chronicle three, "La isla privilegiada". The title of this chronicle itself is intriguing, since "privilegiado" in Spanish has a broader semantic field than in English in that it refers to that which is *naturally and intrinsically* well endowed, as well as that which is benefited by mere circumstance or favour, so that "privilegiado" ends up lying simultaneously across the meanings in English of "privileged" and "blessed".<sup>15</sup> The polysemy obviously works for 1950s Barbados, in that the somewhat undesirable class connotations of "privileged", as advantage bestowed rather than earned, are doubtless applicable, but so are the wholly positive attributes of the island, its inherent bounties, so that at a stretch this title, in conjunction with Carpentier's remark on "alguna injusticia soterrada" might be read simultaneously as critique—the island is "privileged" within the British colonial system, and the notion of "privilege" undoubtedly informs its class system—but also as praise for the sheer beauty Carpentier finds in it, together with the admirable traits of its populace.

But it is a considerable stretch: taken *in toto* and in political-historical context, Carpentier's admiration for the order, infrastructural efficiency, hygienic environment and exposure to European high-cultural currents ends up looking suspiciously like a vindication of what he appears on the face of it to find a benign species of colonialism, notwithstanding his high hopes for increasing cultural self-determination for the black population implicitly expressed in chronicles one and four. This inference of a rather politically incorrect assessment of Barbados's continuing colonial status is particularly hard to avoid as a result of the glaring omission of any direct mention of that status anywhere in the chronicles: though he does make reference to "una probable persistencia de anacrónicas normas de vida colonial", this is only in allusion to the

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<sup>14</sup> Though Carpentier's blunt reference to an "«isla de negros»" might seem to contradict the suggestion that he "treads carefully" around the issue of race, the quotation marks are key: he is citing or paraphrasing Araquistain's outmoded assessment of the island when using this term and thus places his own parallel coinage in quotation marks also: "«islas de blancos»". The quotation marks clearly signal a generalization based on terminology Carpentier finds problematically freighted.

<sup>15</sup> María Moliner's *Diccionario de uso* defines one usage as follows: "Se aplica a algo que está excepcionalmente bien dotado de cualidades naturales: 'Un ser privilegiado. Un lugar privilegiado'. Superior o especialmente bueno; se aplica en especial a '\*inteligencia' y '\*memoria'."

mistaken or outdated view of Arikvistáin that he is in the process of dismissing, though it is a phrase that some would doubtless use to diagnose certain social ills in Barbados even today. This is not to suggest, of course, that Carpentier in fact held a favorable view of any kind of colonialism. In his tendency to forcibly separate the realms of culture and politics in contexts where head-on consideration of the latter might prove discomfiting, or provoke a lapse into what he regarded as the unforgiveable intellectual sin of demagoguery, however, he inevitably and perhaps inadvertently ends up generating evasions that might easily be mistaken by the uninitiated for, at best, a certain willful blindness, and at worst a degree of complicity.

## Conclusion

Carpentier's Barbados chronicles stand as testimony to his persistent advocacy of a distinctive Caribbean sensibility and mode of cultural expression, on the one hand, and on the other to the intercultural facility he had acquired at this point in his life, allowing him to evaluate, synthesize and incorporate the features of a new Caribbean landscape into a sophisticated repertoire of cultural reference points within and beyond the region. This same capacity allowed him, with considerable intercultural and journalistic finesse, to position and represent himself rhetorically by turns as both a Caribbean expert cultural commentator and traveller, and a captivated tourist. The opacities and interstices of these chronicles, however, tend to confirm the impression that he was decidedly not "un periodista de trincheras políticas" (Cancio Isla 155). His reluctance to engage directly on potentially thorny political issues such as colonialism might be seen as the conditioned reflexes of diplomacy and discretion of a man who had spent time in jail under one dictator, Machado, whilst barely out of a childhood in which he was "un muchacho aquejado de asma, bastante huraño y tremendamente solitario" (Cancio Isla 39), and had very recently lived through the bombing of Caracas that led to the ousting of another, Marcos Pérez Jiménez, a leader with whom he seems highly unlikely to have sympathized either.

We might also return to his earlier evocation of Perse to be reminded of his general conviction up until this point that the literary life and work was of more transcendent value than the political. Carpentier initially appears to admire Perse's élan as a public figure at the centre of events, alongside his apparently dilettante approach to literary creativity:

[F]ue, durante mucho tiempo, el *strong man* del Quai D'Orsay o Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Francia. Vivió los momentos de Stresa y de Locarno. Fue amigo, colaborador y secretario de Briand. Ambos, en los días más dramáticos de la historia europea, descansaban de conferencias diplomáticas y de juegos a la carta forzada, leyendo novelas policíacas. Cuando hablaban a Léger de su poesía, solía responder que la política era mucho más interesante. (Carpentier, *Crónicas caribeñas* 136–137)

Carpentier's final judgment, however, comes down firmly on the side of the literary over the political: "¡Y sin embargo!... Poco ha quedado de la política hecha por Francia entre las dos guerras. Los poemas de Léger, en cambio, cobran hoy el relieve de una obra de precursor" (137). The irony of this continuing advocacy of the cultural contribution over the political one, of course, is that on visiting Barbados, Carpentier

was less than a year away from moving definitively from Caracas back to Havana (and subsequently back to Paris), where he would occupy official positions within the Cuban state that might be seen as bringing his later biography into a strange parallelism with that of Perse. As such, his culturally upbeat, politically disengaged chronicles of Barbados can be seen as the final voyage of an avowed man-of-culture still apparently determined to steer clear of the maddeningly fickle buffets of Caribbean political winds. Perhaps to his surprise, history would determine that his next return to the Caribbean would perforce be a politically committed one, as the Cuban Revolution finally offered the promise of a coalescence of his vision of an inclusive national cultural ethos and a fully self-determined political establishment.

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