Dining with Dickens in Trinidad: Meals and Meaning in V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr Biswas

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Dining with Dickens in Trinidad: 
Meals and Meaning in 
V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*

Paul Vlitos

**Introduction**

The outlines of V.S. Naipaul’s career are well known, both from his own writings and from the vast amount of critical attention paid to his work.¹ Vidhiadar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in 1932 in Trinidad (a British colony from 1802 to 1962). As the biographical note to his novels puts it, Naipaul is ‘of Indian ancestry.’ He attended Queen’s Royal College in Port of Spain, and in 1950 won a Government scholarship to read English at University College, Oxford. After four years at Oxford, Naipaul moved to London to write full-time and became a contributor to the BBC’s *Caribbean Voices* radio programme. His first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, was published in 1957. He has since published ten other novels, two collections of short stories, and sixteen works of non-fiction, including a history of Trinidad and eight books of travel writing. Awarded a Knighthood in 1990, Naipaul was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001.

In his essay ‘Jasmine’, first published in 1964, Naipaul reflects on his earliest encounters with the novels of Charles Dickens, which he read as a boy in Trinidad. ‘To open a book was to make an instant adjustment’, Naipaul writes, and explains that:

All Dickens’s descriptions of London I rejected; and though I might retain Mr Micawber and the others in the clothes the illustrator gave them, I gave them the faces and voices of people I knew and set them in buildings and streets that I knew. The process of adaptation was automatic and continuous. Dickens’s rain and drizzle I turned into tropical downpours; the snow and fog I
accepted as conventions of books. Anything—like an illustration
—which embarrassed me by proving how weird my own reaction
was, anything which sought to remove the characters from the
made-up world in which I had set them, I rejected.²

The difficulties he experienced as a reader, Naipaul continues, would
be difficulties he was forced to confront more directly when he him-
self was attempting to become a novelist. Again, Dickens is the focus
of these anxieties.

‘I might adapt Dickens to Trinidad’, Naipaul writes, referring to his
inventive but flawed early readings:

But it seemed impossible that the life I knew in Trinidad could
ever be turned into a book. [...] It was embarrassing to be
reminded by a Dickens illustration of the absurdity of my adapta-
tions; it was equally embarrassing to write of what I saw.³

This essay will explore the ways in which Naipaul’s novel A House
for Mr Biswas (1962) responds to these anxieties. The novel follows
the eponymous Mr Biswas, a Trinidadian of Indian descent, from his
birth in a rural Indian community in Trinidad to his death in the late
1940s, by which time he is a householder and journalist in racially-
heterogeneous Port of Spain. Naipaul’s best-known novel, A House for
Mr Biswas is often described as ‘Dickensian’, and I want to examine
what such a claim might mean in the context of Naipaul’s comments
on Dickens in ‘Jasmine’. Rather than arguing that Naipaul succeeds
in A House for Mr Biswas in reconciling Dickens and Trinidad, I will
argue that the novel instead stages a series of demonstrations of the
failure of such attempts, demonstrations of the incongruity and even
impossibility of writing like Dickens about Trinidad. Furthermore, I
think that this failure is telling for what it reveals about Naipaul’s fic-
tion and its relationship both with Trinidad and with the question of
literary influence.

Such an argument is not altogether new. Perhaps the most percep-
tive previous attempt to explore the relationship between Naipaul and
Dickens is that of Sara Suleri. While praising the ‘Dickensian verve’
of A House for Mr Biswas, Suleri adds the qualifying comment that
Naipaul’s work must be understood as being produced by the tension
between ‘the excessive novelty of postcolonial history and the exces-
sive anachronism of the canon.’⁴ Homi Bhabha makes a similar point
less concisely in his assault on critics who have praised A House for
Mr Biswas for its ‘universality’—that is, as a novel which rises above or ‘transcends’ its content to become a timeless, placeless masterpiece. Bhabha argues that in discussions of Naipaul’s novel:

Universality is achieved by introducing a split in the text such that the signification of the colonial content is set as fact against a retrospective literary or fictional value which is represented in the progress of the narrative, its ability to transcend or resolve the colonial contradictions of cultural heterogeneity, racial mixedness, historical and social anomie.

According to Bhabha, A House for Mr Biswas pointedly and creditably refuses to offer this kind of transcendence or resolution. Indeed, it is the problematic relationship between content and form that Naipaul identifies as the greatest difficulty he faced in trying to write. Likewise Naipaul’s comments on his early reading experiences might lead us to reconsider the ways in which claims about the universality of Dickens’s novels can be made.

It is the particularity, and more precisely the materiality, of Dickens’s novels that gives Naipaul as reader the greatest difficulty. It is buildings, weather, faces and voices that puncture his fantasy that David Copperfield takes place in Port of Spain. I want to focus in this essay on an aspect of cultural particularity which Naipaul does not mention in his essay, but which plays an important part in A House for Mr Biswas: food. I have already claimed that A House for Mr Biswas repeatedly stages the breakdown of attempts to adapt Dickens to Trinidad. It does so, I will argue, through Mr Biswas’s repeated failures within the novel to tell a story about eating.

I want to claim two roles for food in A House for Mr Biswas. Firstly, that it is through food and what people eat that the novel explores the racial heterogeneity of Trinidadian society and the often fraught questions of ethnic and national identity in this setting. Secondly, it is through its depictions of the act of writing about food that the novel engages with the difficulties of adapting Dickens to such a society. Here I break with Suleri and Bhabha by claiming that it is primarily through food that A House for Mr Biswas again and again reflects on these questions. I must also, of course, establish what it means (at least for Naipaul) to write like Dickens. I will illustrate my argument with reference to Great Expectations. Although it is rarely commented upon, Great Expectations (like A House for Mr Biswas) can be seen as a novel structured around a series of meals.
The essay is in three parts. The first section looks at the role of food in *Great Expectations* in order to explore more closely the question of what it might mean for Naipaul to try to write like Dickens. The second section offers a brief outline of Trinidad and its history, as well as Naipaul’s non-fictional comments on this topic. Having looked at the role of food in *Great Expectations* we will then be in a position to ask where the mismatch Naipaul perceives between writing like Dickens and writing about Trinidad comes from, and what conclusions can be drawn from it. I will ask these questions in the third section of the essay, which will furthermore attempt to demonstrate my claims for the importance of the role of food and eating in *A House for Mr Biswas*.

**What is Food? (Or, ‘If You Want a Subject, Look at Pork!’)**

The richness and frequent obscurity of references to food and drink in Dickens can be illustrated by looking at the notes provided to an annotated edition of any one of his novels. In Angus Calder’s Penguin Classics edition of *Great Expectations* there are 109 explanatory notes, 11 of which are dedicated to food and eating. How big, for example, is a ‘jorum of tea’? Where is the ‘liver wing’ of a chicken, and is to be hoped for or avoided? What, exactly, is in a ‘small salad’? Of course, these are only a small proportion of the specific period allusions with which Dickens’s novel is peppered, alongside its ‘dutch-clocks’, ‘shark-headed screws’ and ‘Hammercloths’. As literary critics, and as general readers, we do not feel that we are missing much when we are momentarily puzzled by a reference to ‘Hardbake’ or ‘Flip’, or at least that we have missed less than we would have done if we had failed to observe the teasing biographical reference to the ‘blacking ware’us’, or the allusion to phrenology when Magwitch tells Pip and Herbert about the jailors measuring his head, or the literary references to Lillo’s *George Barnwell* and Collins’s *Ode to the Passions*. As general readers our curiosity may be briefly raised (and quickly sated); as literary critics our professional competence is rarely put at stake over the specifics of what people are eating.

For Naipaul, however, it is precisely such specificities that cause the difficulties. It could be argued that all readers of Dickens have to go through some similar procedure of adaptation and translation. Why does it cause Naipaul such particular anguish? Perhaps part of the answer is found in a peculiarity of the way Naipaul describes his attempts at
adapting Dickens. It is ‘Mr Micawber’ who needs adaptation, not the novel from which he is taken. Later Naipaul comments that, for the purposes of translation to Trinidad, ‘Mr Murdstone worked; Mr Pickwick and his club didn’t.’ This is in contrast to Naipaul’s observations about the difficulties posed for him by any other writer than Dickens. For every other writer he discusses in the essay, it is the novels, not the characters, which are his focus: ‘Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights worked; Pride and Prejudice didn’t.’ Naipaul engages not with a series of novels, but with an imagined world.

The leap this essay is asking the reader to make with me is in arguing that food plays a particularly large, or at least a particularly revealing, part in Naipaul’s sense of being excluded from this world. There is much more at stake for Naipaul, I think, than being puzzled by a ‘liver wing’ or a ‘small salad’. I think this leap is justified by the repeated and insistent way in which Naipaul writes about food in A House for Mr Biswas. In order to suggest why food plays such an important part in Naipaul’s responses to Dickens, we should begin by asking: what is food?

‘For what is food?’ is also the question Roland Barthes asks, in his essay ‘Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption’, and his answer is a helpful one for us:

'It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical and nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of uses, situations and behaviour.'

‘Proceeding step by step,’ Barthes claims, it would be possible to ‘make a compendium of the differences in signification regulating the system of our food.’ Rather grandiosely, he suggests the possibility of ‘a veritable grammar of foods.’ For Barthes, food itself is a kind of text.

In Cooking with Mud, a study of the ideas of waste and mess in nineteenth-century art and fiction, David Trotter playfully suggests that those anthropologists who have regarded food as a system of communication—he cites Barthes, Mary Douglas and Claude Lévi-Strauss—can be included among the ‘heirs’ of those nineteenth-century fictions in which: ‘Each meal is potentially a feast, a ceremony, in so far as it expresses an […] understanding of the basic requirements for social and moral order.’ Trotter’s claim could be taken as the starting-point for a reading of Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations (1860-1), a novel which, as Maud Ellmann has
noted, ‘consists of a series of repasts, each revelatory of the class and character of its participants.’ Indeed, almost every event in *Great Expectations* is either marked by, or takes place over, a meal. Throughout the novel every stage of Pip’s rise and fall is reflected in the food he eats, symbolically measured against Miss Havisham’s mouldering and unconsumed wedding breakfast at (the inappropriately named) Satis House.

Early in the novel Mr Pumblechook, searching during dinner for the subject of an improving moral lecture to deliver to young Pip, seizes upon their meal itself. Describing his dinner as a ‘text’, Pumblechook declares: ‘If you want a subject, look at Pork!’ Pumblechook’s ludicrous mental exertions take the form of an exploration of the religious significance of swine—‘the companions of the prodigal’—and a reminder to Pip to be grateful he is not a pig—‘If you had been born such would you be here now?’ However, the meal is also a ‘text’ for Pip himself, a text in which can be read the unequal social ordering of the dining table: ‘I was regaled with the scaly tips of the drumsticks of the fowls, and with those obscure corners of pork of which the pig, when living, had had the least reason to be vain’. In contrast, when at the height of Pip’s career as a gentleman he again encounters Mr Pumblechook over the dining-table, Pumblechook helps him to ‘the liver wing and the best slice of tongue (none of those out-of-the-way No Thoroughfares of pork now)’. Mr Pumblechook is ridiculous not because he takes food as his text, but because his reading of the meal ignores what is so clearly inscribed there in *Great Expectations*: class.

What happens to meals in the process of attempting to ‘adapt’ the nineteenth-century England of Dickens’ novels to the twentieth-century Trinidad of V.S. Naipaul’s? Do they remain legible ‘texts’? If so, what is written in them? The experience of reading Dickens that Naipaul describes in ‘Jasmine’ is paralleled by that of Mr Biswas in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Biswas is a great fan of Dickens, in the ‘grotesques’ of whose novels ‘everything he feared and suffered from was ridiculed and diminished’. But in order for this effect to be achieved, Biswas must first have ‘transferred’ Dickens’s ‘characters and settings to people and places he knew’. The novel makes explicit what difficulties and anxieties are attendant upon such a transferral. In ‘Jasmine’, Naipaul commented upon the embarrassment he faced when confronted (by an illustration, say) with the ‘absurdity’ of his adaptations; but he also claims it was ‘equally embarrassing to write of what I saw’.
I have already suggested that I think *A House for Mr Biswas* chronicles the repeated failure of Biswas’s attempts to transfer Dickens’s meals to Trinidad. I now want to go further. For Dickens it has been argued that, in David Trotter’s words, each meal ‘expresses an […] understanding of the basic requirements for social and moral order’. Biswas’s attempts to write about meals fail, I suggest, because (according to Naipaul) Trinidad lacks just such an understanding. Naipaul’s embarrassment, when reading Dickens, is not only for his failings as a reader. It is an embarrassment on behalf of his society. Reading Dickens, Naipaul writes, ‘made me despairingly conscious of the poverty and haphazardness of my own society.’¹⁹ The next section of this essay will explore what it is about Trinidad that proves so embarrassing to Naipaul, as well as his non-fictional attempts to explain why.

**V.S. Naipaul and Trinidad: ‘Plantations, Prosperity, Decline, Neglect’?**

Like Naipaul himself, Mr Biswas is an Indo-Trinidian, a descendent of the indentured Indian labourers brought from to the Caribbean in the nineteenth century. As Naipaul explains, ‘After the abolition of slavery the Negroes refused to work on the estates, and the resulting labour shortage was solved by the importation of indentured labour from Madeira, China and India.’²⁰ The majority of these labourers came from India, 134,000 being brought to Trinidad between 1834 and 1917. ‘Most of them were from the provinces of Bihar, Agra and Oudh,’ Naipaul records.²¹ This community was mainly Hindu, with a small but distinct Muslim minority. The labourers were offered five-year contracts, housing, medical care and clothing. At the end of five years they were to be offered the choice of a small grant of land or a return passage to India. Many of these promises were not honoured, and the scheme was denounced as a return to slavery by other means. It was ended in 1917 following agitation by Gandhi, among others. This essay follows Viranjini Munasinghe’s work on race and the cultural politics of identity Trinidad in its use of the terms “Indo-Trinidadian” and “Afro-Trinidadian” to indicate Trinidadians of Indian and Trinidadians of African descent respectively. As Munasinghe observes, “Although *East Indian* is the more common term, it signifies a greater degree of marginality than the term *Indo-Trinidadian*.‘
The use of these terms is intended not to reify the existence of these groups as “natural categories”, but rather to reflect the role they play in the debates around Trinidadian racial and national identity in which Naipaul’s texts are located.\(^\text{22}\)

Despite the praise Naipaul’s work has attracted, it remains hugely controversial. Indeed, the readiness of some European and American critics to lionize him as ‘exceptional, unique and painfully truthful’\(^\text{23}\) in his fictional and non-fictional depictions of the Caribbean and India has often been seen as suspicious in itself. Aijaz Ahmad brusquely dismisses Naipaul as a writer whose success is based on a readiness on the part of his admirers to hear their prejudices about the postcolonial world confirmed. While Naipaul is ‘now fully established as a major English novelist’ and as a cultural and political commentator, Ahmad acknowledges, it is ‘a different matter’ whether this canonisation is ‘well deserved.’ He deplores the ‘flip confidence’ with which Naipaul presumes to judge India and the Caribbean for an implied Euro-American audience.\(^\text{24}\) In *The Middle Passage*, his “Impressions of Five Colonial Societies” on a return to the Caribbean in 1960, Naipaul notoriously writes of racial tension in Trinidad that:

> Like monkeys pleading for evolution, each claiming to be whiter than the other, Indians and Negroes appeal to the unacknowledged white audience to see how much they despise one another.\(^\text{25}\)

Naipaul turns to Caribbean history to explain how such a situation might have come about, but concludes that ‘History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies […] There were only plantations, prosperity, decline, neglect.’\(^\text{26}\)

Critics including Rob Nixon, Chris Searle, Wimal Dissanayake and Carmen Wickramagamage have explored the ways in which Naipaul’s judgements adopt colonial and neo-colonial ‘discourses of power, empire, ideology, postcoloniality and subjectivity.’\(^\text{27}\) These analyses engage not only with the often unacknowledged ideological commitments of Naipaul’s own work, but those of the critics who praise it. This essay’s response to such a charge, in the particular instance of *A House for Mr Biswas*, hinges on its claim for the distinctness and complexity of the novel’s response to the challenges of exploring identity in a colonial society.\(^\text{28}\) Naipaul’s fictional depiction of Trinidad will be read against his comments in *The Middle Passage* and his other travel writing in order to suggest how Naipaul’s novel complicates the claims of his non-fiction.
Looking back in his non-fiction at his Indo-Trinidadian childhood, Naipaul reflects that:

> It was easy to accept that we lived on an island where there were all sorts of people [...]. We ate certain food, performed certain ceremonies and had certain taboos; we expected others to have their own. We did not wish to share theirs; we did not expect them to share ours.\(^{29}\)

George Lamming, the Barbadian critic and novelist, has taken issue with Naipaul’s depiction of the relationship between Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trindadians. In a review of *A House for Mr Biswas* entitled ‘A Trinidad Experience’ Lamming argues that Naipaul’s fictional ‘world leaves us with the impression of one race surviving in isolation […] He is particularly careful to avoid that total encounter which is the experience of any Trinidadian, whatever his race may be.’\(^{30}\) According to Lamming, Naipaul’s novels focus on the Indian community to the detriment of a more balanced portrayal of Trinidad as a whole. In *An Area of Darkness*, his 1964 travel book about India, Naipaul responded to Lamming in the following terms:

> The confrontation of different communities, he said, was the fundamental West Indian experience. So indeed it is, and increasingly. But to see the attenuation of the culture of my childhood as the result of a dramatic confrontation of opposed worlds would be to distort the reality. To me the worlds were juxtaposed and mutually exclusive. One gradually contracted. It had to; it fed only on memories and its completeness was only apparent. It was yielding not to attack but to a type of seepage from the other. I can speak only out of my own experience.\(^{31}\)

What Lamming imagines as a ‘total encounter’, and Naipaul as a ‘seepage’, is the process referred to as creolization.

Kamau Brathwaite, arguing primarily from Jamaican examples, defines creolization as:

> A cultural process [...] which [...] may be divided into two aspects of itself: ac/culturation, which is the yoking (by force and example, deriving from power/prestige) of one culture to another (in this case the enslaved/African to the European); and inter/culturation, which is an unplanned, unstructured but osmotic relationship proceeding from this yoke. The creolization which results (and it is a process not a product) becomes the tentative cultural norm of the society.\(^{32}\)
Sidney Mintz, an anthropologist who has written a history of the relationship between sugar and power in Britain and its Caribbean colonies and is a key theorist of creolization, uses food as an example of such a process. In *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* Mintz notes that the food the slaves ate came from all over the world. It included ‘aboriginal New World cultigens’ such as cassava, maize and peanuts, which had already been transported to Africa and then returned, ‘Africanized’, to the Caribbean; foods imported from Europe including swine and eggplants; salted codfish and herrings imported from Canada; and foodstuffs from the American mainland including papaya, potatoes and tomatoes. Mintz argues that Caribbean cuisine has its origins in the food of the slaves, and is a distinctly new ‘*bricolage*’ reflecting their ingenuity and ability to improvise. Neither African nor European, this creolized cuisine furthermore began to be taken up by the European masters themselves in one of the osmotic movements Brathwaite describes as typical of creolization. While not attempting to play down the enormous suffering caused by slavery, or deny that slaves were often starved or underfed, Mintz offers this cuisine as an improvised and distinctly new cultural creation. Such valorization of creolized cultural products challenges Naipaul’s assertion in *The Middle Passage* that because of its history (or lack of one) ‘nothing was created in the West Indies.’

Where Brathwaite describes a process with two poles, European and African, Lamming and Naipaul’s dispute is over the place of Indo-Caribbeans in such a society. Later in *An Area of Darkness* Naipaul offers food as his main example of the ‘seepage’ he writes about:

Black pudding and souse, favourite street-corner and sport-ground dishes of the Negro proletariat, were regarded by us with fascinated horror. This might suggest that our food remained what it had always been. But this was not so. It is not easy to understand how communication occurred, but we were steadily adopting the food styles of others: the Portuguese stew of tomato and onions, with which almost anything might be done, the Negro way with yams, plantains, breadfruit and bananas.34

Naipaul’s word ‘seepage’ seems close to Brathwaite’s osmosis, but for Naipaul the process is entirely one-way. The seepage of ‘food styles’ is from the Portuguese and Afro-Trinidadian population into that of the Indo-Trinidadian population, rather than vice versa. Creolization is imag-
ined as a one-way process through which the distinctness of the Indo-
Trinidadian community is slowly eroded. While his non-fiction simply
observes that ‘It is not easy to understand how such communication
occurred’, in contrast Naipaul’s fictional presentation of the relationship
between food and identity is more complex. In *A House for Mr Biswas*,
other Trinidadians are shown valuing and coveting Indian food. The
very distinctions Naipaul uses food to imagine are undermined by this
supposedly subterranean and mysterious process of cultural exchange.
This disjuncture is precisely the source of the ‘fascinated horror’ that
colours Naipaul’s fictional depiction of food and eating.

Where food was tied to class in *Great Expectations*, in Naipaul’s
non-fictional depictions of Trinidad, food primarily reflects race.
But it is necessary to emphasize a further difference between meals in
*Great Expectations* and *A House for Mr Biswas*. In Dickens’s novels,
as we have argued, Pip’s meals with Pumblechook restate the social
order, revealing the relative social positions of the participants. They
do so against a background of shared understanding as to what a
meal means—one which both author and reader understand. It is this
understanding that marks for Naipaul the greatest difference between
Dickens’s society and his own. Food in Naipaul’s non-fiction, rather
than restating the social order, is used to present the absence of a set
of shared values that can transcend race. As he puts it in ‘Jasmine’, his
experience of reading Dickens in Trinidad was one of encountering
not only a different society, but a more ‘elaborately ordered’ society.
‘Such a society’, he writes, ‘was more than alien; it was excluding.’
When Naipaul writes of the ‘made-up world’ in which he tries to
set Dickens’s narratives, it is revealingly difficult to tell whether he is
talking about the ‘world’ he imagines in his head, or Trinidad itself.

Naipaul draws his fullest (and most provocative) conclusions from
this experience in *The Middle Passage*. ‘The West Indian is incapable
of comedy’, Naipaul argues there. ‘A literature can only grow out of
a strong shared framework of social convention’, a framework that
Trinidad (according to Naipaul) lacks. The ‘West Indian’, Naipaul
claims ‘knowing only the values of money and race, is lost as soon as
he steps out of his own society into one with more complex criteria.’
By extension, a form like the novel developed in a more ‘complex’
society is inappropriate for the society about which Naipaul writes.
How does Naipaul respond to this problem in *A House for Mr Biswas*?
For obvious reasons, critics of V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) have tended to focus on houses as the central metaphor of the novel. Naipaul himself has described the novel as ‘the story of a man’s search for a house, and all that a house implies’.  

As critics including Homi Bhabha and Selwyn Cudjoe have argued, Biswas’s search for a house is also a search for identity. As a young man, Biswas marries into the extended Tulsi family, a family of Hindu Brahmins who consider themselves to be holding firm to traditional Indian ways, despite their new location in the Caribbean. Among these ways is the assumption that members of the family will live in one of the various communal Tulsi dwellings. Biswas’s search for a home of his own, a house for the nuclear family consisting of his wife Shama and their two children, Anand and Savi, is contrasted with the various houses of the extended Tulsi clan. These houses, Hanuman House, Shorthills, the old plantation house in Arwacas, and the Tulsi house in Port of Spain, represent, as Homi Bhabha puts it, the Hindu Indo-Trinidadian rural or provincial petty bourgeoisie, protecting their fragmented, traditional, migrant culture in the face of a growing Caribbean Creolization. This ascriptive realm is also called the world of ‘women’, where there are only congealed nameless collectivities and statuses, such as the Hindu joint family confers.

Similarly, Selwyn Cudjoe locates Biswas’s search for identity against the background of this wider crisis: ‘Caught up between the demise of the old feudal order and the rise of nascent capitalist relations, Mr Biswas is forced to articulate a sense of self within the context of these two contradictory movements of social organization.’ The Tulsi’s Hanuman House embodies this isolationist feudal order: ‘The House was a world, […] everything beyond its gates was foreign and unimportant and could be ignored,’ [188]. In contrast the house Mr Biswas acquires at the end of the novel can be read as the guarantee of his escape from the ‘nameless collectivity’ of the Tulsi clan and its dependents, but an escape into the less certain and more unsettling wider society of multi-racial Trinidad.

I would like to suggest that the (understandable) critical emphasis on houses has overlooked the importance played by eating in the novel. Biswas’s relationship with the Tulsis is negotiated through food:
The husbands, under Seth’s supervision, worked on the Tulsi land, looked after the Tulsi animals, and served in the store. In return they were given food, shelter and a little money; their children were looked after; and they were treated with respect by people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis. [97]

To marry into the Tulsi collectivity, as Biswas has done by marrying Shama, is to become nameless. The exchange is one of food in return for renouncing identity as an individual. This exchange is made against a background in which hunger and lack of food are present and vivid threats. Childhood malnutrition gives Biswas ‘eczema and sores […] the shallowest of chests, the thinnest of limbs; it stunted his growth and gave him a soft rising belly,’ [22]. ‘Is the first time in your life you eating three square meals a day,’ Shama reminds Biswas at Hanuman House [118]. ‘You must complain only when you start providing your own food’ she tells him [132].

Throughout the novel Biswas’s relationship with the world is expressed through eating. Meals of varying degrees of awkwardness and hostility mark every major event in the novel: the end of Biswas’s apprenticeship to Pundit Jairam [52-7], his reunion with his mother [57], his marriage to Shama, his strained relationship with his sister Dehuti and her husband Ramchand [69-74], his rivalry with Owad at Hanuman House [133] and with the other Tulsi husbands at Shorthills [421] and his meetings with his journalist mentor Burnett [367-8].

Unsurprisingly, Biswas’s rebellion against the Tulsis begins with what he eats. The ‘fascinated horror’ which Naipaul depicts in An Area of Darkness as typical of Indian-Trinidadian attitudes to the food of the ‘negro proletariat’ is attributed to the Tulsis:

Mr Biswas bought a tin of salmon and two loaves of bread. The bread looked and smelled stale. He knew that in his present state bread would only bring on nausea, but it gave him some satisfaction that he was breaking one of the Tulsi taboos by eating shop bread, a habit they considered feckless, negroid and unclean. […] As he ate, his distress increased. Secret eating never did him any good. [140]

While in An Area of Darkness Naipaul refuses to engage with the actual process of how food moves between ethnic groups in Trinidad, here it is his focus. But if the metaphorical and actual search for a
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house marks an escape for Biswas from the ‘old feudal order’ of the Tulsis, into a society of ‘nascent capitalist relations’, focussing our attention upon this rebellion through food presents a much more ambiguous process.

‘To see the attenuation of the culture of my childhood as the result of a dramatic confrontation of opposed worlds would be to distort the reality,’ Naipaul argues in *An Area of Darkness*. We should note the word ‘world’, which echoes the apparent stability of Hanuman House, also described in *A House for Mr Biswas* as a ‘world’. But Biswas’s rebellion through food does not present two worlds in collision—rather, it emphasises the ‘seepages’ between them. Biswas’s act of self-fashioning carries significance not in the wider creolized society, but only in relation to the world of Hanuman House. Biswas’s self-assertion only has meaning from within the framework of Tulsi prejudice. Equally, however, the novel keenly observes the elements of creolization that have entered even Hanuman House. The Tulsis keep pigs [168], the boys of the family wear crucifixes to their exams [125], and Biswas gleefully calls Mrs Tulsi the “Roman Cat’ (holic) [117]. What Selwyn Cudjoe describes as ‘two contradictory movements of social organization’ are seen to have interpenetrated each other. By focussing on the slippages between Indo-Trinidadian and other foodways, the novel undermines Naipaul’s attempt to ignore the implications of such movements in *An Area of Darkness*.

One inviting way of analyzing Biswas’s rebellion would be to use Mary Douglas’s classic discussion of disgust and pollution in *Purity and Danger*. Discussing the dietary regulations laid down for the Israelites in *Leviticus*, Douglas argues that it is a mistake to treat ‘bodily margins in isolation from all other margins’. Instead, she argues, we can see in *Leviticus*’s anxiety about diet and pollution a reflection of the anxieties of a minority culture under threat: ‘The threatened boundaries of their body politic would be well-mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity and purity of the physical body.’ It is those creatures that transgress the boundaries of *Leviticus*’s attempts to categorize and classify the natural world that are declared abominable, and moreover inedible: shellfish, winged insects that move on four feet, creatures that swarm on the ground, creatures that crawl on their stomachs, and so on. However, as David Trotter has noted in an excellent account of the implications of Douglas’s work: ‘its most enthusiastic exponents have not always taken full account of Douglas’s remark that the “pollution behaviour” which concerns her is only
likely to arise in circumstances “where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined.” Despite the Tulsis’ assertions to the contrary, this is not the case in *A House for Mr Biswas*. The ‘lines of structure’ Biswas thinks of himself as transgressing are already blurred and confused. Rather than rebelling against the Tulsis, Biswas can be seen as joining them in the unacknowledged but ongoing process by which the Hindu rules governing food and behaviour that they pay lip service to are eroded. To give this process another name: creolization.

Mr Pumblechook may have *Leviticus* partly in mind when he discourses on the Biblical significance of the pig, but there are two vital distinctions to be made between Pip’s eating and Mr Biswas’s. The first is that rather than a transgression, Pip’s dinners instead reaffirm the social ordering of the novel. The second is that the rules which govern dining (who serves who, which bits of food they get) remain stable throughout the novel. It is Pip and Pumblechook who change relative positions in a novel where the ‘lines’ of ‘social ordering’ remain ‘clearly defined’. Unlike the ‘world’ of Hanuman House, or even the ‘world’ of Trinidad itself, the ‘world’ Naipaul discovers in Dickens is complete, self-contained and stable.

If transgressive eating is one way in which Biswas tries to rebel against his circumstances, the other is through narrative. Here, as we have observed, his explicit model is Dickens, in whose novels he finds everything ‘everything he feared and suffered from […] ridiculed and diminished.’ Significantly, the novel depicts Biswas attempting to narrate a meal in such a way as to produce the same ridiculing diminishing effect. Equally significantly, he is shown repeatedly failing to achieve it.

As a boy, Biswas is apprenticed to Jairam, a Hindu pundit, who performs religious rituals for the Indo-Trinidadian community. In return for his services, Jairam has been given a bunch of ‘Gros Michel bananas’—long ‘bananas cultivated for export’ with ‘brown stained yellow skin’. Biswas steals and eats two of the bananas, and is punished by the pundit, who forces him to eat the rest of the bunch. It is a pivotal moment, both for Biswas and the novel itself. The punishment:

> marked the beginning of his stomach trouble; ever afterwards, whenever he was excited or depressed or angry his stomach swelled until it was taut with pain. [55]

More directly, the punishment triggers Biswas’s expulsion from the
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pundit’s house, ending the possibility that he too would become a pundit. Forced in the night to relieve himself, and doing so in his room out of fear of disturbing the Pundit, Biswas manages to deposit his excreta over Jairam’s oleander tree. Its flowers are no longer suitable for use in the puja ceremony as a result, and Biswas is sent back to his mother in disgrace.

Food marks their eventual reconciliation:

> Her rage spent itself and she became as understanding and protective as he hoped she would have been right at the beginning. But it was not sweet now. She poured water for him to wash his hands, sat him down on a low bench and gave him food—not hers to give, for this was the communal food of the house, to which she had contributed nothing but her labour in the cooking—and looked after him in the proper way. [57]

Like the young Pip in *Great Expectations* Biswas is vividly aware of the social ordering underlying eating arrangements. In *Great Expectations*, however, Pip is allowed the final word: his narration, among other things, shows up as ludicrous the meanings Mr Pumblechook attributes to food. Indeed, it is by exposing the hypocrisy and absurdity of Mr Pumblechook’s little narrative about pork that Pip ‘ridicules and diminishes’ him.

Unlike Pip, Biswas does not narrate the novel itself. But within *A House for Mr Biswas* Biswas is given three opportunities to narrate these childhood incidents. He does so differently each time, but in each attempt he fails to achieve the ‘ridiculing and diminishing effect’ to which he aspires. His first account of what happened is told to his aunt Tara:

> He told about the bananas, blusteringly at first, but when he noticed that Tara was giving him sympathy he saw his own injury very clearly, broke down and wept, and Tara held him to her bosom and dried his tears. So that the scene he had pictured as taking place with his mother took place with Tara. [58]

The narrator observes that the behaviour of Biswas’s mother is simultaneously ‘absurd and touching’ (57). In contrast, each of Biswas’s attempts to retell the story of these events attempts to render it either as comedy or tragedy. In this first attempt, Biswas’s narrative slips uncertainly from one to the other.

Biswas’s second attempt to tell the story is narrated to his son
Anand, many years later. Anand has fouled himself at school [235-6], and Biswas tells his son of the ‘misadventure at Pundit Jairam’s, caricaturing himself and ridiculing Anand’s shame’ [236]. In this version of events, Biswas becomes ‘the buffoon’ [236]. Like the Pip who narrates *Great Expectations*, Biswas is distanced by time from the events he narrates. What *A House for Mr Biswas* emphasizes, however, is not the similarity between Biswas’s stories and Dickens’s, but their difference. Biswas’s discomfort and embarrassment, his return home in shame and the subsequent disappointing behaviour of his mother, must all be excluded from this comic version of the story. To paraphrase Homi Bhabha, what happens in this story is that Biswas can only achieve ‘a retrospective literary value’ by excluding its uncomfortable content. The content that Biswas feels forced to exclude - the eating arrangements Biswas shares with his mother, the transgression of pollution taboos that underlie the Pundit’s outrage at Biswas’s theft of his bananas, the religious significance of the tree Biswas befouls - is also that content which emphasises that the story is neither unproblematically ‘universal’, nor taking place in Dickens’s England.

Biswas’s third attempt to tell the story comes thirty years after the event, when he writes a prose poem about his return from Jairam’s house to his mother:

> To do honour he had no gifts. He had no words to say what he wanted to say, the poet’s words, which held more than the sum of their meanings. [...] He addressed his mother. He did not think of rhythm; he used no cheating abstract words. He wrote of the coming up to the brow of a hill, seeing the black forked earth, the marks of the spade, the indentations of the fork prongs. He wrote of a journey he had made a long time before. He was tired; she made him rest. He was hungry; she gave him food. He had nowhere to go; she welcomed him.  

Here, it would seem, Biswas has finally resolved the problem of how to write about Trinidad. He explicitly rejects literariness (‘rhythm’, ‘cheating abstract words’) although we might note the ways in which the poem, supposedly free of literary influences, echoes Matthew’s Gospel: ‘For when I was hungry you gave me food; when thirsty you gave me drink.’

It could be argued that Biswas’s poem reflects the kind of short fiction called for and written by a number of Trinidadian writers in the 1930s (including V. S. Naipaul’s own father, Seepersad Naipaul),
and published in the literary magazine *The Beacon*. In an attempt to steer Caribbean writing away from over-reliance on foreign literary models, such writers ‘put into practice their theoretical demands that West Indian writers should utilize West Indian settings, speech, characters and conflicts.’ Biswas’s story would seem to meet these criteria exactly. It is at the meeting of a literary group closely modelled on those held by the *Beacon* writers at this time that Biswas reads his poem:

> He disgraced himself. Thinking himself free of what he had written, he ventured on his poem boldly, and even with a touch of self-mockery. But as he read, his hands began to shake, the paper rustled; and when he spoke of the journey his voice failed. It cracked and kept on cracking; his eyes tickled. But he went on, and his emotion was such that at the end no-one said a word.

While this time Biswas slips from comedy into tragedy, his attempts to diminish the events about which he writes have advanced little from his first attempt to tell the story to his Aunt Tara thirty years before. The attempt to disentangle colonial content (in Bhabha’s phrase) from literary value has again been unsuccessful. Indeed, such attempts fail precisely because each of Biswas’s narratives becomes entrapped ‘the colonial contradictions of cultural heterogeneity’. The contrast between what Sara Suleri has called the ‘excessive novelty of post-colonial history’ (that history which Naipaul traces in his non-fiction, and to which he ascribes the problems he diagnoses in Trinidadian society) and the ‘excessive anachronism of the canon’ (the problems Naipaul encounters when reading Dickens) is repeatedly demonstrated in Biswas’s attempts to narrate his own story. Nor does *A House for Mr Biswas* itself resolve these ‘contradictions’. Instead, it stages them over and over again. It does so primarily, I have argued, through food and through writing about food.

**Conclusion**

Both *Great Expectations* and *A House for Mr Biswas* follow their protagonists from childhood on, and both mark key incidents with a ‘series of repasts’. But in Dickens’s novel, in which ridicule and resolution triumph over the forces of the past, meals locate and con-
tain the diners. They demonstrate class, greed, and snobbery, for example. In Naipaul’s depictions of Trinidad, there is no shared or stable code of behaviour that will allow this process to take place. As a result, food undermines Biswas’s attempts to narrate the events of his life. For the novel itself, neither the colonial society nor the literary canon can be rejected, and Naipaul disrupts attempts to disengage one from the other. Rather than transcending or resolving the difficulties Naipaul found in his early encounters with the novels of Charles Dickens, *A House for Mr Biswas* enacts them. Paying close attention to the meals and attempts to ascribe meaning to meals in *A House for Mr Biswas* suggests the ways in which Naipaul’s novel engages with the anxieties but also the possibilities he first encountered as a young man reading Dickens in Trinidad.

**Notes**

1 Selwyn R. Cudjoe’s full-length study, *V.S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading* records that ‘at least nine books, thirteen doctoral dissertations, and ten master’s theses have been devoted to Naipaul’s work’ (Cudjoe, *V.S. Naipaul*, 4). Helen Hayward’s *The Enigma of V.S. Naipaul* is a recent attempt to engage with Naipaul’s work as a whole.


3 Naipaul, ‘Jasmine’, 47.

4 Suleri 150, 151.

5 Bhabha has in mind, to a certain extent unfairly, Landeg White’s *V.S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction*.

6 Bhabha, ‘Representation and the Colonial Text’, 114

7 A ‘jorum’ is a large drinking bowl, usually used for punch. The name of the ‘liver wing’ alludes to the practice of serving the right wing of a chicken ‘with the bird’s liver tucked under it’, and it was considered a delicacy. A ‘small salad’ contained mustard and cress. See Angus Calder’s notes to *Great Expectations*, 507, 503 and 511. These terms appear in the novel in Chapters 37, 19 and 54.

8 For more on which see Calder 499, 502 and 504, and *Great Expectations*, Chapters 2, 15 and 20.

9 ‘Hardbake’: almond toffee (see Calder, p.502; *Great Expectations*, Chapter 13); ‘Flip’: ‘A mixture of beer, spirits and sugar, heated with a red-hot poker’ (see Calder 503; *Great Expectations*, Chapter 19).

10 The reference to a ‘Blacking Ware’us’ comes in Chapter 28 of *Great Expectations*, and is explained at length by Calder on 506. Calder puts Magwitch’s mention of having his head measured into cultural context on 508. It occurs in Chapter 42. Calder explains the reference to William Collins’s *Ode* (in Chapter 7), on 501. For the *George Barnwell* reference see Calder 502 and *Great
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**Expectations**, Chapter 15.

12 Naipaul, ‘Jasmine’, 47.
13 Barthes, 167.
14 Barthes, both quotations 168.
15 Trotter, *Cooking with Mud*, 239.
16 Ellmann, 24.
17 Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 58 and 57.
19 Naipaul, ‘Jasmine’, 47.
20 Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 49.
21 Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 49.
22 Munasinghe, xi, x.
23 As Cudjoe glosses their responses. V.S. *Naipaul*, 9.
24 Ahmad, *In Theory*, 111.
25 Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 49.
28 Unfortunately there will not be enough space to consider the role of food in Naipaul’s other novels in depth in this essay, although I do refer to its significance in some of his early non-fiction. For a fuller discussion of Naipaul’s work see Paul Vlitos, *Eating and Identity in the Novels of V.S. Naipaul, Anita Desai, Timothy Mo and Salman Rushdie* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cambridge, 2004).
30 George Lamming, ‘A Trinidad Experience’, 1657. Born in 1927, Lamming is the author of novels including *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) and *Of Age and Innocence* (1958) as well as works of criticism including *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960).
32 Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens*, 6. Brathwaite is developing the insights of his seminal earlier work *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820*.
33 Mintz, 40. Jeffrey M. Pilcher agrees with this hypothesis in “The Caribbean from 1492 to the Present”, in *The Cambridge World History of Food*.
37 Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 66.
39 Naipaul, ‘Foreword to *A House for Mr Biswas*’, 131.
40 The word ‘Tulsi’ itself, the Hindi for ‘basil’, appears in the text in the context of the puja ceremony [51], highlighting the Tulsi’s much vaunted Brahmin status and traditionalism.
41 Homi Bhabha, 116-7.
42 Selwyn R. Cudjoe, ‘V.S. Naipaul and the Question of Identity’, 91.
David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism*, 73. Trotter quotes Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 113. My argument here is strongly indebted to Trotter’s elegant and thought-provoking comments on Douglas’s work and Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (Trotter, 71-3), although Trotter’s remarks are made in relation to a very different context. Of Kristeva, it is interesting to note that *Powers of Horror* actually uses Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness* as a case study in its psychoanalytical approach to disgust.

Robuchon, *Larousse Gastronomique*, 73.


Sander, 9. Contributors to *The Beacon* included V.S. Naipaul’s father, Seepersad Naipaul. See V.S. Naipaul’s ‘Foreword to *The Adventures of Gurudeva*.’ V.S. Naipaul’s relationship to his father’s work is discussed by John Thieme (26-45), and in White’s *V.S. Naipaul* (92-7). See also Hayward, 6-38.

Ellmann, p.24.

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