Between Europe and Africa there is this desert.... Between the white and black this mulatto divide. You cannot cross it, whoever you are, and remain the same. You change. You become, in a way yourself mulatto – looking both ways. Looking back to the vertical, sideways to the horizontal. Backwards to the old mastery, sideways to the timeless mystery.... I am a man hunting and running; neither infra nor supra, not Equatorial black, not Mediterranean white. Mulatto, you could say, Sudanic mulatto, looking both ways.

-- Denis Williams, Other Leopards (208, 221)

This passage written by the Guyanese novelist, painter and scholar Denis Williams appears at the end of Other Leopards, a novel published in the Heinemann ‘Caribbean Writers Series’ in 1963. In this quote, the double-named, first-person narrator – Lionel, Lobo – articulates a complicated sense of racial multi-consciousness in terms of
space, place and travel. For instance, his use of the gerund forms for ‘hunting’ and ‘running’ express a state of being through a linguistic movement from verb to noun, inflecting a multi-consciousness that moves from actions to processes to identities. This merger of form and content then expands outward in the phrase ‘looking both ways’, as he gazes from a distance and sees here and there, inside and outside, centre and margin to the image of being perpetually in-between places, spaces and races.

I do not seek to appropriate Other Leopards as a work of postcolonial travel writing. However, I want to suggest that it is fruitful to read Denis Williams’s text – a novel that meditates on migration, immigration, diaspora, exile, forced movement and displacement – alongside a highly influential work of postcolonial travel writing: Sugar and Slate (2002) by Charlotte Williams. Both texts, I argue, share thematic and formal qualities, but they are also linked in a much more intimate way: Denis Williams was Charlotte Williams’s father. In the autobiographical context of Sugar and Slate, then, this relationship plays a crucial role in the narrative of growth and development. But her father’s writing also had a profound influence on the ideas and conceptual paradigms that shape her own postcolonial travel narrative. In fact, in the opening
section of *Sugar and Slate*, Charlotte Williams quotes the above passage from *Other Leopards* to suggest that her father’s dilemma – the particular form of multi-consciousness he expressed as ‘Sudanic mulatto’ – was played out in the fact that he was ‘never staying’ but was always, in a sense, traveling (54). ¹

I am not suggesting that *Sugar and Slate* is derivative of *Other Leopards*. Rather, I seek to analyze how *Sugar and Slate* draws upon travel writing’s potential for cultural critique by expressing a politicized voice that articulates postcolonial experiences from Guyana to Sudan to Wales. For Charlotte Williams, the traveling subject engages in various understandings of dwelling and displacement to engender narratives that simultaneously reflect and question a postcolonial politics of global contacts. What I am particularly interested in is how *Sugar and Slate* removes representations of travel from the dichotomous interplay between home and abroad, and how, in so doing, Charlotte Williams pushes the envelop of Denis Williams’s theories of cross-cultural creativity and cultural syncretism. For she depicts postcolonial travel not as a

¹ In the paratextual Acknowledgments page that begins *Sugar and Slate*, Charlotte Williams states that two of her father’s books – *Other Leopards* (1963) and *Icon and Image* (1974) – provided a ‘deep foundation’ for her life and writing (v).
‘progress’ or an ‘arrival’ but as a process, a continuous activity of becoming.

**Detour: The Otherness of Other Leopards**

In *Other Leopards*, the classical trope of the journey as transformation is subverted: the symbolic and physical representations of travel do not follow lines of progression that lead to an ending or closure. Rather, travel is a continuous activity that is linked to a particular relationship between movement, place and an articulation of subjectivity. Here, travel lays the material foundations for cross-culturalism, and it is the relationship between travel and writing that provides the theoretical paradigm for Denis Williams’s most profound insights. Indeed, Williams’s own travels from Guyana to Europe to Sudan offer access routes into reading *Other Leopards*, a novel about a Caribbean man’s experience in the Sudanic Savannah. In fact, the autobiographical inflection of the novel is clear: Lionel/Lobo is, like Williams, an artist and scholar, his lover is a Welsh speaker from North-West Wales, and he consistently challenges characters who search for racial origins or argue in favour of racial purity and monoculturalism. More importantly, though, the autobiographical voice combines his subject-orientation
with a social awareness, a partnership that becomes cohesive in an urge to travel as a response to an inner conflict about belonging and a relation to broader socio-historical issues. The foregrounding of the traveler’s subjectivity, together with an awakening of social awareness, is therefore prominent in Other Leopards, as it is throughout postcolonial travel writing.

As an alternative to racial essentialism and monoculturalism, Denis Williams employs the term catalysis to convey the notion of a cross-culturality and cultural syncretism. Challenging the concept of ‘universality’ as a hegemonic critical tool to designate cultural hierarchies, Denis Williams saw the radically mixed populations of the Caribbean (particularly Guyana) as offering ‘unique possibilities for cross-cultural creativity unavailable to monocultural societies, or to those which aspire to monoculturalism’ (Ashcroft 149). The cross-culturality of catalysis, he argued, could lead to an interaction in which ‘each racial group qualifies, and diminishes, the self-image of the other’ (Williams, Image 19). Within this model, there is a psychic erosion and self-questioning within a totality of groups greater than the sum, thus avoiding the filiastic dynamic that ensures a subservient relationship to the imperial power, the so-called ‘mother
country’.

The result is a form of postcolonial catalysis that negates the parent-child relationship and stresses the creative meaning of the present in terms of the individual.

For Denis Williams, the problem of cultural and racial dialectics arises out of the limitations and pressures of a ‘pedigree consciousness’ that is vital to the essentialist language of racial purity found in white supremacy or Afrocentricism. In his work Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana, Williams condemns the monocultural ideologies that have demonized ‘mongrelism’ and miscegenation as a ‘nightmare’ of all so-called ‘pure’ races (7). The investment in an imagined notion of racial purity, he argues, cultivates a filialistic and idealistic relationship to an illusory racial ancestor. As an alternative, he proposes an appropriation of the ‘situation...of miscegenation, of mongrelism’ as exemplified in the ‘uniqueness and freedom’ of Caribbean peoples (7).

Sugar and Slate: Travel Writing and Postcoloniality

\footnote{In Image and Idea, Denis Williams writes: ‘Miscegenation is the nightmare of those ‘pure’ races who have invested the words half-caste, half-breed, crossbreed, with scorn, contempt, and as we all know, even with hatred. All ‘pure’ races have done this, African or Asian just as much as European.’ (7)}
Catalysis, cross-culturalism and mongrelism offer points of entry for considering the relationship between travel and postcoloniality in *Sugar and Slate*. However, it would be misleading to suggest that Charlotte Williams simply adopts the theoretical paradigms put forward by her father, for this would deny the cultural contexts of each writer’s work. Denis Williams’s texts are embedded in (and sometimes react against) the 1960s discourses of postcolonial liberation, nationalism, white supremacy and Afrocentricism, whereas Charlotte Williams is writing in the context of globalization and the emerging genre of postcolonial travel writing. Thus, as I suggest below, Williams does not romanticize catalysis or cross-culturalism, but instead recognizes that these ideas can be branded and commodified within the global tourist industry.

*Sugar and Slate* directly opposes the easy pigeon-holing of a trademark through its resistance to generic classification. Autobiographical passages are, for instance, interrupted by novelized descriptions, as well as poems and quotations from newspaper articles and of course *Other Leopards*. Williams writes that she wanted to ‘achieve a blend of art and politics’ in order to write herself back into Wales and ‘inscribe the nation’ (*Llandudno* 30). In so doing, her unique blend of genres has drawn the attention
of several critics and novelists: Leonora Brito, for instance, calls *Sugar and Slate* an ‘imaginative expansion of the autobiographical form’ and Francesca Rhydderch identifies it as an ‘autobiography which pushes against its own generic boundaries,’ a ‘*nofel ddu*’ (black novel) that moves far beyond the contemporary *noir* trend in Welsh writing in English (Rhydderch 4). By contrast, Glenn Jordan identifies the text as a diasporic narrative in which Williams articulates her everyday interactions and the processes of subjectification (Jordan 73).

Whatever the case may be, the genre-bending and the collage-like structure of the text offers a hybrid form that mirrors the thematic exploration of mixed racial identities and cultural diversities. ‘I grew up in a small Welsh town,’ she writes, ‘amongst people with pale faces, feeling that somehow to be half Welsh and half Afro-Caribbean was to always be half of something but never quite anything whole at all. I grew up in a world of mixed messages about belonging, about home and about identity’ (viii). In this, Williams represents, among other things, the search for a stable sense of subjectivity within an unstable web of cultural affiliations and ties to conflicting national, racial and gendered relations. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the critic Francesca
Rhydderch argues that the text represents a figurative journey; what she calls Williams’s ‘journey of self-awareness,’ her movement towards an ‘understanding of her cultural identity as a mixed race Welsh Guyanese writer’ (4). Critics, though, have yet to locate Williams’s text within the context of postcolonial travel writing. This is surprising if only because the text’s tripartite structure maps out a set of geographical coordinates which are specifically located in continents, countries and nations: Africa, Guyana, Wales. Moreover, the first chapter, ‘Small Cargo,’ immediately signals the voyage out, while the final chapter -- 186 pages later -- provides closure to the journey (and the narrative itself) through the direct, albeit unsubtle, title ‘I goin’ home.’

Sugar and Slate is, I want to suggest, consistent with other travel narratives in that it occupies a space of discursive conflict: it borrows freely from a wide array of textual forms and practices to exploit the formal flexibility of the travelogue’s amalgamation of autobiography, letters, journalism, fiction, poetry, etc. Accordingly, Williams adjusts the Western molds of the genre to the contours of a different episteme: she moves between a variety of perspectives and subject positions that continually resist binaristic depictions of colonizer
and colonized. She is the ostracized black girl in North Wales, the privileged ex-pat in Guyana, the re-memory of a Black Atlantic history, the voice of a diverse and confident Wales. In this, she does not depict travel as a universalized experience or a way of expressing a unified sense of self but she moves between the traveling identities of tourist and expatriate, immigrant and exile, migrant and displaced person.

This fragmented, hybridized travel text, then, begins with Williams’s early memories of traveling from north Wales to Sudan. At this early stage in her life and during her first trip to Africa, she does not identify with a diasporic culture that is oriented towards lost origins or homelands. Rather, she remembers ‘home’ as being in transit: her idea of belonging is not necessarily linked to an ongoing history of migration, transnational flows but more a highly personalized experience of travel with her mother. She writes,

So Ma and Dad became lovers, eventually married and moved on. That’s how we began to learn about movement. It was movement that was home. Home was not a particular place for us in the very early years. Home was Ma. We arrived in exile; into a state of
relocation that was both hers and his. And the journeys were more than physical journeys. They were travels across worlds of thinking, across generations of movements. These boat stories and seascapes, I now know, are part of a collective memory lying buried below the immediate moment. (11)

The critic Barbara Korte writes that for many postcolonial travelers ‘the question of defining one’s home still seems to be more urgent than for other travelers, and the search for home might even be the primary motive for travel’ (170). For Williams, though, home is not an idealized return to a real or imagined place; home is in the process and movement found in the mixture of ‘boat stories’, ‘seascapes’ and ‘Ma’. Thus, the retrospective voice of Charlotte does not describe her first voyage to Africa as a return; rather, her journey is a relocation to a place of stories and memories – an exile. Her sense of self is not expressed in her voyage ‘back to Africa’; but her identity is conceived as ‘in process, a matter of becoming rather than being’ (Jordan 74).

Yet Williams also reflects on this trip as being ‘more than physical’. Indeed, the ontological part of the journey – as she articulates later in the text – ties her voyage to
an imagined (subterranean?) collective of African diasporic consciousness. Once we begin to focus on inter-cultural processes, Williams suggests, the notion of separate discrete cultures evaporates; we become aware that all cultures have long histories of border crossings, diasporas and migrations. Here, we see the influence of Denis Williams’s theory of cross-culturalism on *Sugar and Slate*, for trans-continental movement engenders a relationship between subject-orientation and social awareness, a partnership that becomes cohesive in an urge to travel as a response to both an inner conflict about belonging and its relation to broader socio-historical issues. The foregrounding of the traveler’s subjectivity, together with an awakening of social awareness, is therefore prominent in *Other Leopards*, as it is throughout *Sugar and Slate*. In fact, Lionel-Lobo’s travels throughout Sudan bring him face-to-face with the irrational discourses of essentialism. Race, religion, caste, culture, aesthetics—all of these things are discussed and assessed in terms of ‘purity’ and ‘absolutes’. In the face of such certainties, though, the traveling subject in *Other Leopards* is neither black nor white, Christian nor Muslim, African nor European. Indeed, his cultural critique of absolutism
engenders a role-shifting sense of self as he grapples with conflicting cultural allegiances.

And yet throughout *Sugar and Slate* Charlotte Williams is wary about a capitalist co-opting of cross-culturalism. In Section One, for instance, she describes a young Black British man asleep in the Piarco Airport in Trinidad: he sports an over-sized wolly Rasta hat in ‘the colours’ and a crumpled T-shirt with a map of Africa printed on the front (8). ‘Africa’, then, is a commodified product – a brand that has a niche market within a cross-cultural demographic seeking to reconnect with an imagined set of roots.

In his major work of postcolonial travel writing, *The Atlantic Sound*, Caryl Phillips stresses the importance of travel, while also condemning the hapless African-American tourists on the ‘roots trail’ -- those looking for an imagined African ancestry.³ Phillips’s critique of these travellers is shared by Charlotte Williams, who refers to this conception of an African ‘elsewhere’ as an ‘imaginary hinterland’ (‘Llandudno’ 30). For her, the person who chooses to ‘go back’ is more than a tourist but much less than a returnee. Such travelers, she explains, subscribe to

³ Phillips’s *Atlantic Sound* suggests that a simplified conception of diaspora has led to a tourist industry that helps the mostly American returnees not only ‘to liberate their spirits’ but also to ‘view history through the narrow prism of their own pigmentation’ (138). Such limitations, he writes, lead to a ‘roots’ trail which fails to make tourists aware of the very system of oppression it is supposed to denounce or at least oppose.
and re-inscribe a Western construction of Africa: the packaging of the continent as a product. ‘I found myself,’ she writes, ‘thinking about all those African-Americans straight off the Pan-Am in their shades and khaki shorts treading the trail to the slave forts on the beaches of Ghana. And then I thought about all those who couldn’t afford it’ (3).⁴ Here, Williams calls attention to the complex ‘roots’ and ‘routes’ that make up the relations between cultures: travel in the present can forge an imagined connection to the past. But Williams understanding of these routes is also resistant to the framework of a postmodern celebration of inter-cultural connections through the economy of travel. For her representations of border crossings demonstrate an awareness that certain forms of travel run the risk of decontextualizing specific local instances. The African-Americans in their sunglasses and khaki shorts are not simply caught up in a seemingly universal postmodern condition that is innocent of specific economic determinants. Not at all. Williams, in fact, understands that the routes of international travel are determined by the forces of economic trade: the route to

⁴ Charlotte Williams’s poem, ‘Icon and Image,’ puts this even more cynically, when she writes, ‘I’ve seen Africa / I’ve seen it / in the Africa shop at the Liverpool dock...’ (Sugar and Slate 92).
one’s roots is open only to those who can purchase the packaged tour.

This is further explored in Section Two of Sugar and Slate. Here, the at-homeness in movement, which is central to Section One of Sugar and Slate, is problematized in the second part – ‘Guyana’ – when Williams moves from north Wales to her father’s homeland in the Caribbean. Here, she does not so much focus on the process of travel itself as on a failed attempt to fix herself to a location through dwelling. In Guyana, her desire to root herself in a specific place leads to a profound sense of ambivalence: she is ‘from here’ in terms of family and heritage and yet she shares complex forms of social allegiance to other places, pasts and cultures. She therefore searches for an adequate symbolic language to account for this sense of fractured and pluralistic identity. She writes,

I wanted to go native, to make the place [Guyana] my own. But belonging can’t just be plucked off a tree like a juicy mango. History and attachment don’t just flow into your body like the deep breathes of warm air... that part of your identity can’t automatically fit you like the ‘I love Guyana’ tee-shirt you can buy anywhere on Main Street. Still, I tried. (149)
In this passage, Williams’s desire for belonging – her longing to go native – is expressed in her attempt to merge body and place. She breathes the air and imagines herself rooted in the soil. But when this merger fails, she turns to the tourist industry, imagining herself draped in the ‘I love Guyana’ tee-shirt – another failed attempt to merge with the land. Williams, then, expresses a keen awareness of the ironies involved in her desire to ‘go native’. Belonging cannot be plucked off a tree, as she says, but nor can it be packaged, commodified or sold. Implied in Williams description is a critique of diasporic narratives that become idealized as a convenient myths of origin, authenticity or belonging. In such discourses, the ‘Mother country’ or the ‘fatherland’ is often erroneously identified as a single and static place that is associated with an imagined sense of belonging. Or as Caryl Phillips writes, the displaced children of the diaspora see the imaginary homeland as the solution to ‘whatever psychological problem they might possess’ (*Atlantic Sound* 172).

Williams comes to recognize that she cannot find belonging in Guyana. In this, she shrinks from romanticised views of diasporas. After all, diasporic sentimentalism
erases the complexities of people and places -- the very complexities which make it impossible for Williams to give satisfying answers to the questions, ‘Where are you from?’ and ‘So yuh’s a mix, rite?’ (135). In this, she returns to herself as an isolated individual and, as such, the solitary representation of self becomes a rampart against de-humanizing systems. But this does not preclude a belief in a community of experience, for she recognizes that the realities of uprootedness, displacement and unbelonging binds many people of African descent.

There are, for instance, passages throughout Sugar and Slate in which the writing takes as its subject the intersection between travel, community and identity. ‘Going away. Going back. Return. Going home,’ Williams says, ‘Both sides of the same coin’ (98). Indeed, it is at this cross roads – this intersection – that the traveling subject becomes overwhelmed by the genealogy of travel. Movement in her past, for instance, includes the remnants of the transatlantic slave trade (the ‘sugar and slate’ of the title), the migrations that followed the dismantling of the colonial system (her father in London and Sudan), and the shift to new forms of empire as represented in the global tourist industry.
For Williams, then, belonging is not located in a particular place: traveling itself offers a sense of at-home-ness. Repeated throughout Sugar and Slate is the story of the man who lived in ‘the in-transit no-man’s land of Schiphol airport for years’ as no country would accept him (7, 187). From Williams’s perspective, his situation does not necessarily lead to an existential crisis but gives him an unambiguous connection between his sense of self and a specific place. ‘Who am I?’ he asks. To which he answers, ‘I am that man at Schiphol Airport’ (7). Locating home within the airport transit lounge celebrates the conjunctures produced by ongoing histories of migration and transnational flows. According to the anthropologist James Clifford, it is hard to imagine a better figure for postmodernity than the transit lounge, a ‘brave new world order of disorder, of rootless histories and selves’ (7-8). And yet the transit lounge is far from universally accessible, a fact that Williams calls attention to throughout her text. We must be suspicious of the ease with which the airport imagines an interlocking of in-between-

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5 Pico Iyer presents similar descriptions of people of living in international airports. In the ‘Airport’ chapter of Global Soul (2000), for instance, he writes that ‘a dozen people or more often live, around the clock, in Kennedy Airport, Making the most of the ubiquitous snack bars, the climate control, the strangers rendered openhearted by jet lag or culture shock’ (43). Caryl Phillips in the European Tribe also describes visiting London while studying at Oxford and, unable afford a hotel, he would go to Heathrow airport and spend the night there.
ness and at-home-ness in the context of cultural flows crossing the globe. For this space, with its potential valorization of the cross-cultural connections, is the privileged site of those who benefit from the unimpeded flow of global capital.

But the figure of the transit lounge is a sign of the deadening of the imagination to local differences produced by a privileged cosmopolitanism. In this, Williams does not seek to transcend differences, but to find bridges and work across gaps that separate cultures. She writes,

I had been chasing the idea of a Guyanese-ness…. [But] until I changed my perception of what it was to be Welsh or what it was to be Guyanese, or both, I would never feel the satisfaction of belonging…. I would have to accept my role as the spectre at the feast and stay in my limbo, in transit at Piarco airport, somewhere and nowhere at all. (184)

The text, then, tries to evade essences – however strategic they might be – while also navigating around the pitfalls of an in-between spectrality or a state of limbo. The universalizing cosmopolitanism whose consciousness would be the product of a worldwide string of departure lounges is
not an answer, for it would simply buy into the historical imagination of the enlightenment and its universalizing ambitions.

By contrast, the flight itself - the journey from Trinidad to London - is described as a bridge that moves beyond universalizing imaginations. Here, diversity is not conflated with difference or alienation. Williams writes,

The plane takes off.... I don’t need to look around the plane to know the whole spectrum of the Caribbean/British link will be represented; the tourist, the trader, the student, the expatriate kid going back to school, the consultant, the aid worker, the missionary...the guy looking for his roots or reeling with discovery of his rootlessness.... I feel at home. (187-8)

The flight, then, is a space of convergence. It allows for complex forms of social and cultural allegiance in the context of the fractured and plural identities of those who are committed to the (postcolonial) Caribbean and yet participate in several cultures. In this context, Williams bares witness to a cohabitation that goes beyond the limited concepts of open-mindedness or tolerance. For she
articulates the experience of living on the inside and the outside, a heightened sensitivity to sensitivities and being captured by other manners of being and desires for becoming other. If there is belonging for her, then this is it. And it arises out of the process whereby the articulation of different, distinct elements can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary ‘belongingness’.  

What I want to suggest here is that the plane not only bridges the physical gap between the Caribbean and Wales; it also becomes a place of belonging where Williams becomes ‘reconciled to a life of to-ing and fro-ing’ (187). In this, the narrative comes full circle. For the conclusion of Williams’s physical and textual journey returns to the figure of her mother. Her mother, who was earlier identified as the site of home, is now reinvoked, as Williams’s sense of belonging on the flight reconnects with her early description of her mother’s experience of belonging on her voyages from North Wales to Sudan. ‘She like[d] these voyages [to Sudan]’, Williams writes, the ‘passage was part of her inner drive’. She was ‘suited to

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Iain Chambers describes ‘impossible homecomings’ in contemporary texts about travel that reappropriate the ‘return home’ topos in order to deconstruct it: ‘Always in transit, the promise of homecoming – completing the story, domesticating the detour – becomes and impossibility’ (5).
the...space of the voyage’, for the ‘place between somewhere and elsewhere was so right for her’ (7).

The inbetweeness of this spatial experience of travel allows Williams to conjugate difference into a sense of being and belonging. This is significant not only because it offers a way of articulating a sense of ‘outside belonging’ – a longing to be – but also because it represents a way of straddling parallel lives that does not lead to alienation or estrangement. In this, her writing extends the theoretical paradigm of catalysis and cross-culturalism by confounding location and embracing movement, while also baring witness to transculturality within the power dynamics of Empire. Williams leads us away from the nostalgic dream of ‘going home’ to a mythic, metaphysical location and toward a recognition that we will always cling to myths and stories about where we come from. But these stories are not composed in isolation; they arise alongside other stories, other fragments of memory and traces of time.

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