Jamaica Kincaid and the Genealogy of Exile

Belinda Edmondson

I would like to begin this paper with a series of quotations from the fiction and non-fiction of Jamaica Kincaid. The first quotation is from the novel *Lucy*, Kincaid’s sequel of sorts to her first novel *Annie John*.

At the very beginning of *Lucy* the reader is introduced to Lucy, an Antiguan au pair who lives with an American family in New York. Lucy is obsessed with the idea of a return to her homeland:

In books I had read . . . someone would suffer from homesickness. A person would leave a not very nice situation and go somewhere else, somewhere a lot better, and then long to go back where it was not very nice. How impatient I would become with such a person, for I would feel that I was in a not very nice situation myself, and how I wanted to go somewhere else. But now I, too, felt that I wanted to be back where I came from. I knew where I stood there. If I had had to draw a picture of my future then, it would have been a large gray patch surrounded by black, blacker, blackest.¹

If we read Lucy as a fictive version of Kincaid herself — a dangerous conflation, I realize, but nevertheless an irresistible one given the innumerable similarities — this passage suggests that Kincaid experiences a desire — albeit desire that is conflicted and devoid of nostalgia — for the Caribbean homeland.

Let us contrast this quotation from *Lucy* to the author’s ‘real life’ ruminations on her current mode of self-imposed exile from her homeland:

[When I was growing up . . . ] I was very influenced by Dickens, Milton, Shakespeare, and the Bible; but after I read these other things [here Kincaid is referring to experimental realist writing such as Alain Robbe-Griller’s] I knew, for instance, that I would never go back to Antigua, that I would never be able to live comfortably in Antigua again. I somehow felt free of the West Indies, in a strange way, which is to say that I couldn’t live there again in the way that I had lived there before, that if I did live there again it would have to be under some other terms. I thought that I could never go home because it would kill me, drag me down. It was a total act of liberation.2

Lest we mistake this for a political position, let us note that, like V.S. Naipaul, Kincaid emphatically denies the political nature of her writings: “When I write I don’t have any politics. I am political in the sense that I exist. When I write, I am concerned with the human condition as I know it.”3

It is particularly noteworthy that, in both quotations, ruminations about the idea of the return to the homeland are framed within the context of literature; the character Lucy refers to “books [she] has read” on the subject before she states her own feelings on return, while Kincaid makes the decision not to return to Antigua only after having read European experimental literature. This suggests to me a certain causative relationship between Kincaid’s imaging of ‘exile’ and her consumption of canonical or ‘high modernist’ European literature. Since the positioning of European canonical literature within Caribbeanist discourse is, de facto, a political event, I propose that Kincaid does indeed hold political views regarding the Caribbean. These ideas are clearly in evidence in *A Small Place*, and yet that polemic is not unrelated to her views on the psychic alienation of the Caribbean female subject, as depicted in her novels and interviews. The connection between Kincaid’s concern with European canonical discourse and her politics vis-à-vis the Caribbean are tied in both subtle and unsubtle ways to the meaning of literary authority, as represented by the history of the discourse of exile, in Caribbeanist discourse. This paper will attempt to contextualize Kincaid’s version of literary exile by situating her within the exile discourse of earlier Caribbean writers.

Kincaid is not usually — if ever — described as a writer ‘in exile’, and has never to my knowledge described herself with this term, despite the striking similarities

---


between her reasons for staying away from the homeland and those of other Caribbean — male — writers who are categorized 'in exile'. Like her character Lucy, Kincaid entered the USA as a domestic labourer, and therefore had a very different entry into the metropolitan societies of Europe and America than did other 'literary exiles' such as V.S. Naipaul, C.L.R. James and George Lamming. I assert that the difference in perception is embedded in the currency of two key words in the Caribbean author's lexicon: 'exile' and 'immigrant'.

These two related yet opposed terms of national subjectivity carry a weight of meaning in the literary history of the anglophone Caribbean. As is commonly known, a first generation of Caribbean writers wrote 'in exile', usually in London or, in the case of the French Caribbean, Paris. Naipaul is the most famous of these Caribbean writers in self-imposed exile, yet Naipaul is certainly not the only West Indian who has positioned himself thusly, or indeed the first to gain currency from this particular relationship to the Caribbean. There are scores of books on West Indian narrative that feature the term 'exile' prominently, and one can scarcely find a text on Caribbean literature that does not refer to the canonical figures as "writing in exile".\(^4\)

The exile referred to is conceived of as a kind of double exile. On the one hand, there is the internal exile of the intellectual from society as an alienated or inauthentic West Indian subject. On the other, there is the exile of self-imposed physical displacement from the Caribbean, from which the author can now "objectively" view his society and his relation to it. The premise undergirding the latter view is that physical distance in the metropole is necessary for eventual reintegration into the Caribbean landscape, such as Bita Plant must undergo in Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*.

McKay, and other emigrant writers such as Lamming and James, conceived of this kind of exile then as a necessary component of *nationalism*, and indeed Edward Said contends that "the interplay between nationalism and exile is like Hegel's dialectic of servant and master, oppositions informing and constituting each other. All nationalisms in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement."\(^5\) However, the fact that, historically speaking, exile for West Indian writers means choosing to live in the country of the ex-colonizer from whom he seeks relief at home

---


causes, as Lamming delicately puts it, "certain complications". Certainly, Lamming’s choice of England was made easy because his generation owned British passports at the time of leaving. But it is of key importance, of course, that the only female literary symbol of nationalist-in-exile, McKay’s Bita Plant in Banana Bottom, travels to England to be educated, and thus cannot be confused with a mere immigrant who goes there to work.

Unlike exile and nationalism, immigration and nationalism are not perceived to have any relationship to each other. The immigrant’s motives are to make money (often, in the case of West Indian women — who constitute the largest portion of West Indian immigrants to the USA — to support families ‘back home’); her focus is on ‘making it’ in the metropole, as opposed to the apparently loftier aims of the exile, who remains preoccupied with the meaning of the native land in one way or another.

The reasons for travelling to the metropole, then, the conditions of that journey, are of far more importance than the fact of actually being there, because the capacity in which the Caribbean national travels to that society will dictate how that society will ‘read’ the immigrant (right down to the difference between a domestic labourer visa and a professional H-1 visa). Consequently, the immigrant who comes to Europe or America to be a scholar is likely to have a different sort of experience of the First World based on his or her ability to illustrate a facility with the signifiers of the European and American professional classes than one who comes under less prestigious conditions. Significantly, the blurb on the front pages of the earlier versions of Naipaul’s books published in England notes that he began to write after he came to England to do a university course and that “He has followed no other profession”.

This is not to say that West Indian migration to England was simply a traffick of scholars on their way to university: the vast majority of immigrants to England from


the Caribbean were the rural poor who, like their contemporary counterparts migrating to the USA, were interested mainly in England’s economic benefits. Moreover, I do not mean to imply that all male West Indian writers went to university, or that even those who did so never had to engage in the same kinds of physical labour that other immigrants did out of financial necessity. My argument is not a materialist one. Rather, my point is that, with the authority of the university or professional credentials in the background, West Indian male writers, writing from England in self-imposed exile, gained a certain kind of literary authority by their particular negotiation of the space between ‘home’ and ‘exile’. Shortly put, their intellectual labour became the source of their cultural capital.

Unlike the exiled writer, identified as he is with the professions, the immigrant author brings no cultural capital to bear in his invocation of literary authority. In contrast to the glamoured image of the educated — if tortured — exile, thinking and writing in a ‘cultured’ cosmopolitan centre where he can finally be understood, the image of the immigrant calls to mind very different scenarios: depressing urban sweatshops and low-status jobs; physical, not intellectual, labour. The question of commercial and cultural value undergirds the importance of these signifiers, and their value is predicated on their power to invoke authority. As such, my point is that these terms have acquired gendered connotations in anglophone Caribbean narratives through their status as signifiers of commercial or cultural power elsewhere. These connotations affect the author’s construction of both the authorial self and that self’s relation to the nation that is being written into existence.

I would like to make it emphatically clear at this juncture that I am not arguing that Kincaid is not as valued in international literary circles as the canonical male writers: quite the contrary! Her connections to a powerful publishing family in the USA, as well as to the New Yorker magazine and Harvard University are well known. What I am interested in here are the categories of literary analysis that we as literary critics use to assign meaning to particular works and particular authors. In other words, What is at stake in the assignment of key words of Caribbeanist discourse?

Exile implies, as we have seen, a distance from and therefore an understood ‘objectivity’ towards the place of origin, the ‘homeland’. It also implies enforced banishment, the condition of political enemies of a nation — dethroned monarchs, writers whose novels inspire dissent, and so forth. Exile is usually defined in terms of expatriation, the state of being driven away by some law or edict from one’s native land, explains Shari Benstock. Thus, exile is “etymologically conjoined with the law of
the father/ruler whose law effects and enforces expatriating." However, Rob Nixon contends that

exile, in the domain of literary history, possesses a very specific genealogy that by this stage has less to do with banishment and ostracism than with a powerful current of twentieth-century literary expectations in the West. Writers domiciled overseas... commonly imagine and describe themselves as living in exile because it is a term privileged by high modernism and associated with the emergence of the metropolis as a crucible for a more international, though still European- or American-based culture.

Simon Gikandi challenges this reading in the Caribbean context, arguing that, unlike the European literary experience, “exile is not a subjective quest by the Caribbean avant-garde to escape their fixed and fetishized places in the colonial culture”. He goes on to quote Jean D’Costa and Barbara Lalla, editors of a collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jamaican texts: “The experience of exile is central to Jamaican history and to the making of language in a Jamaica which spelled banishment for most of its people.”

D’Costa and Lalla are referring to both the exile of the black Jamaican slaves from their native Africa, and that of the English landowners and overseers who would rather be home in England. What Gikandi’s example does not address, however, is the question of the consequences of this ancient exile for the black West Indian subject. An eighteenth-century black slave speaking in the banished African mother-tongue is in danger of colonial retribution; a twentieth-century black West Indian intellectual writing novels in English, hardly. The relationship of the anglophone Caribbean writer ‘in exile’ to the state is distinctly different from that of, say, African writers in exile, who have often received swift and severe punishment for their literary critiques of the state. (I am thinking particularly of Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o, whose Devil on the Cross landed him in jail, as did his efforts at establishing a people’s open theatre; also, Nigerian playwright and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, who, like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, must live in exile in the West for fear of retribution from the Nigerian government. At last report Soyinka has been charged with treason in absentia by the Nigerian government.) The difference between the two finds its basis in the originary relationship of the English-speaking Caribbean to Victorian England, where the aim of the latter to produce ‘gentlemen’ in the former is tied to England’s vision of the

Caribbean as a crossroads of civilization and savagery. If authorship is a gentlemanly attribute, then the very act of literary production in the Caribbean necessarily has a very different — more benign — relation to the state's conception of itself. Exile may well be necessary for the Caribbean writer, but not necessarily under the same conditions as for African or other Third World writers.

Therefore, I would like to suggest an alternative reading of Caribbean 'exile' that takes into account both Benstock's and Nixon's formulations. I wish to gain from the former the gendered connotations it reveals within the term, and in the latter, the classed connotations therein ('class' referring here to global hierarchies that position the 'developed' countries of the West at the top of the global social ladder). The clarification of these meanings of exile should illuminate my reading of Kincaid's version of exile and return.

If exile for Benstock is predicated on the banishment of the writer by patriarchal authority, the place 'he' is banished from, the native land, the matria, is maternalized. Similarly, Freud equates exile from one's native land with exile from the mother: the nostalgia for the home country is in actuality a nostalgia for the mother's body. The land-as-mother thus plays the object to the exile's subject status. A return of the exile to the 'motherland' is then a reappropriation of it. The matria is the 'internal exclusion' of patria, "the other by and through which patria is defined". Its exclusion or 'exile' therefore is the very condition of patriarchy's existence, since "matria is always expatriated". Benstock's argument builds upon Luce Irigaray's assertion that Western patriarchal culture is founded on a "symbolic matricide". This symbolic function of women leads to women's exile as women within patriarchal culture. Irigaray believes that because the woman-mother constitutes the foundation of patriarchy, the nation itself, she cannot exist as a subject within the patriarchal nation:

And so woman will not yet have taken [a] place . . . Experienced as all-powerful where "she" is most radically powerless in her indifferenzation. Never here and now because she is that everywhere elsewhere from whence the "subject" continues to draw his reserves, his re-sources, yet unable to recognize them/her.


This reading suggests that, contrary to the public association of exile with masculine status, its hidden, real meaning is to be found in the female role, which is always/already exiled from national subject status that it yet constructs.

However, the limitation of this reading is that it cannot account for Kincaid — or indeed other writers in self-imposed exile such as Naipaul — for whom the primary emotion elicited by the motherland is not nostalgia but ambivalence or even repulsion, unless we reconsider that colonialism and its aftermath of neocolonialism are, like Irigaray’s ‘woman’, a state of perpetual exile in, of and from itself.\(^\text{14}\)

If for Kincaid her lost Caribbean self is one associated with poverty and immigrant labour, she recuperates a new, intellectual, Caribbean self, paradoxically, by her psychic and physical exile. She does this with a literary gesture in keeping with that of so many of her masculine counterparts in Caribbeanist discourse: her fictive and non-fictive references to ‘highbrow’ or canonical European/American texts effectively clear a space that replaces the image of the labourer with that of the reader and producer of texts. For Kincaid, therefore, exile becomes an essential component in the construction of the modern Caribbean self.\(^\text{15}\)

---

14 In support of this conclusion, Simon Gikandi points out that a generation of Caribbean writers conceived of colonialism as a state of "perpetual exile", a reference to the psychic alienation of the Caribbean intellectual from his society. See Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo*, p. 36.