

One

Productive Contradictions

Afro-Caribbean Diasporic Feminism and the Question of Exile

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me.
—William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

How difficult and time-consuming it is to have to reinvent the
pencil every time you want to send a message.
—Audre Lorde, *Sister/Outsider*

Exile: An Afro-Caribbean Women's Perspective

The condition of exile has been dissected at length in literature as it has been in criticism. It is one which, even if not experienced directly, each of us has come to know intimately as synonymous with an alienation more complex than the philosophical quest of coming to terms with one's individual self. The condition of exile crosses the boundaries of self and other, of citizenship and nationality, of home and homeland; it is the condition of consistent, continual displacement; it is the radical uprooting of all that one is and stands for, in a communal context, without loss of the knowledge of those roots. It is, in fact, this knowledge that renders the experience of exile so cruelly painful, for what one has lost is carried in this forced nomadism from one geographical space to another; all that one has lost remains "over there," in that place once known as home,

now a distant vague shape on the world map, no longer the place in which we, the exiles, find ourselves.

To begin to define exile, then, is to acknowledge its irrevocability. That is to say, that exile brings with it an irreparable fissuring of self from homeland. And yet, as I envisage exile throughout this work, it cannot be defined simply as the expulsion of individuals through overt, political, governmental force from one's homeland with all the flourishes of a Shakespearean tragedy. Exile, in my heart and mind, is more basic than this, more banal, perhaps. It is what makes remaining in one's homeland unbearable or untenable: the threat of governmental/political persecution or state terrorism; poverty enmeshed through exploitative labor practices that overwork and underpay; social persecution resulting from one's dehumanization because of color, gender, sexuality, class standing; the forever of lack of choice in one's profession; the impossibility of imagining moments of leisure, moments for the nurturance of the soul; the flickering wick of hope extinguished through despair. Such indignities lead to suicide, violence, more poverty, a vicious cycle of hopelessness, or, finally, self-imposed exile, that is, emigration.

I am speaking of exile in the Afro-Caribbean context and, more specifically, as it pertains to Afro-Caribbean women, as a process of forced migration equivalent to the image of the banished, deposed nobles of yesteryear, or of mass expulsions of entire populations in times of war or civil strife on the African continent or the Middle East, or, even, of members of the literati who, because of their political convictions, are stripped of their citizenships but spared their lives through expulsion. Not only is the migration undertaken by the majority of Caribbean people—an individual or small trickle at any given time—equivalent to those expulsions, it is often compounded with the semblance of having been undertaken for capitalist or material accrument. It is this "appearance," real only to those in whose self-interest it is to look no deeper for the causes of such migrations, which has been used over and over again to deny Haitians, for example, asylum in countries such as the United States over the last several decades, both pre- and post-Duvalier. Haitians, living in a country that remains the poorest in the Western hemisphere, because it provides the hemisphere with its cheapest labor pool, have been considered economic rather than political refugees, even as Duvalieran terrorism reigned supreme, and even after the departure of Baby Doc Duvalier, violence remained an everyday facet of life. Should we be more sympathetic to-

ward the expulsion of famed Haitian writer René Depestre, who fled to Cuba and then to France during the Duvalier years, or toward a Haitian mother who wants to ensure not only that her children will have something to eat, every day and more than once a day, but simply that her children will remain alive on dry land? Should we not be equally sympathetic? Should we not be able to discern the added plight of a woman who cannot leave the island unless she first works her fingers to the bone in the hope of buying that ticket out or, if she cannot find work that pays, would rather take her children to sea than see them die on shore? It is this qualitative difference in how exile can be experienced that concerns me here, not only by class, but by gender. For if we have come to know the condition of exile through literature, we have come to know it primarily through a male prism.

We have come to think of those in exile as “novelists, chess players, political activists, and intellectuals” because of their mobility, according to Edward Said (1990, 363). Said also writes that “the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider” (362); the exile is aware of his/her condition and suffers through that consciousness of difference. And yet, Said asserts that different forms of exile must be noted, that “although it is true that anyone prevented from returning home is an exile, some distinctions can be made between exiles, refugees, expatriates and émigrés” (362). For Said, the exile’s condition is the most aberrant, for refugees are for him “large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance,” “expatriates voluntarily live in an alien country for personal or social reasons,” while émigrés are those who “enjoy an ambiguous status” through their choice to emigrate (362–363). In Said’s litany, émigrés are barely distinguishable from expatriates, neither group departing from their homeland through political motivations, while refugees lack the intellectual acumen deserving of investigation. Said’s exile is a nostalgic incarnation of a poet-figure, an idealized insurgent. Hence he writes: “‘Exile’ carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality” (362). Again, I am concerned here that the exile is in fact a *privileged* individual whose privilege goes unrecognized by Said: his/her solitude and spirituality is gained from not having to be concerned with mere survival; she or he lives in a contemplative state not unlike that reserved for the upper class in the Victorian age.

We have also come to think of exile in the Caribbean context as “the

colonial . . . slowly and ultimately separated from the original ground where the coloniser found him" (Lamming 1959/1960, 159), as "Caliban's" colonized self, speaking the language forced upon him by his colonizer. Here, in Lamming's invocation of the tragedy of exile (which I return to at greater length later in this chapter), Shakespeare's Caliban functions as the image of the West Indian who is alienated from himself (and Lamming does intend Caliban and the West Indian to be figured as male) through the very tools he has at his disposal to disrupt that exile, his modes of communication, words, language, writing. But what writing? The words of Afro-Caribbean women who themselves survive and live at a remove from their home islands betray both Said and Lamming's points of view in the sense that these women foreground what it means to be dispossessed of one's homeland in every facet of one's identity and to have had little or no choice in one's state of exile.

A consciousness of difference appears to be the only marker of what differentiates the true exiles from those whom Said does not consider "exiles," although they, too, cannot return to their homelands whatever the reason. That awareness is for Said "contrapuntal" (1990, 366), an ability not only to have a sense of the doubleness of one's existence (where one is from as opposed to where one lives, the home culture as opposed to the one negotiated in the country of adoption), but even to be able to combine these cultural disparities with elegance, as in music when two or more melodies are combined to harmonize with one another in simultaneity. This ability to counterpoint cultures is rendered all the more complex if we grant Said's non-exile exiles the possibility of achieving this "contrapuntality." If we deromanticize the condition of exile from this idea of spiritualized aloneness, we might be able to acknowledge that within this sea of exiles there are those who do not achieve the harmony inherent in the contrapuntal, but whose lives are a constant balancing act between more than two conflicting cultural codes.

I want to go back to the space in which Afro-Caribbean women in exile reside, that space in which the balances struck are, in fact, a question of life or death in the most complex of forms. Because Afro-Caribbean women are not only forced to strike a balance between the land of their exile, which is usually also that of a colonizing force, and their homeland, any number of Caribbean islands, they must also overcome the negation of their identities as women in a world that defines itself as male. Our bodies form the very nexus of the battle that begins at

home and carries into exile. For those Afro-Caribbean women whose bodies are literally abused, physically or sexually, in order to strip them of their autonomy, class becomes an all-important dimension of their consciousness of the ways in which they are multiply disadvantaged; their response, then, must be one that speaks to class imbalance without themselves, however, repeating or inverting those imbalances. For other Afro-Caribbean women, the body becomes a representation of who they ought to be (wives, mothers, mammys, sapphires, and the rest) rather than who they know themselves to be; for such women, their Black and female bodies become the source of their fulfillment. And it is in exile that such awareness of the limitations imposed upon the body becomes much clearer; for "out there" women have the opportunity to speak out against their marginalization in a culture which is not theirs and which is not likely to punish for speaking out against the emigrants' culture that it feels the less threatened by. Women within the Caribbean are also speaking out, but their voices are often lent to the cause of nationalism (more or less male-defined) or coopted to service male versions of women's identity. In exile, Caribbean women can ironically politicize their discourse and be heard in more than one culture simultaneously, making their consciousness and those they reach "contrapuntal" at once. In so doing, they nonetheless resist assimilation, for their goal is not, in fact, to harmonize with the country of adoption which is also a target for their criticism. Their vision is informed by the various ways in which their bodies or the representation of their bodies has led to the limiting of their aspirations, as well as those of their children, especially their female children.

Afro-Caribbean women's literature speaks to all of these issues, and more, from within a politicized consciousness of how exile functions at the level of the corporeal, of the nation-state, of the homeland, of the adoptive culture/nation, of the psychological, of the social, of the generational, of the spiritual. This spirituality of exiles is not invoked in the form of nostalgia for the home country but in the form of a centering in the self, in the Black female body recovered through women's language, relationships to one another, and through women's writing and words. Afro-Caribbean women's condition of exile is not so much contrapuntal, then, as it is decisively *selective* in its assertion of a recuperated and rearticulated identity that is both individual and communal, here and there, of self and of other, in ways which reaffirm the roots of origin while the

self always remains cognizant of the fissuring, the inability to return to one's homeland.

For me, Afro-Caribbean women's description of the state of exile in their fiction, poetry, personal narratives, essays, and oral testimonies, is the product of painful insight into their dispossession; this insightfulness is rendered productive through an acceptance of the contradictions inherent in the state of exile. Afro-Caribbean women's expressions of exile in literature are thus, to extend Said's musical analogy further, not unlike the "fugue," which Webster's defines as "a musical composition in which a melody (the subject) is taken up by successive 'voices' in imitation, so that the original melody seems to be pursued by its counterparts. . . . In its full elaboration the fugue has further subjects introduced into its structure, and the themes may be elaborated, inverted or otherwise varied." Afro-Caribbean women's literature has for its main "melody," or subject, the condition of Afro-Caribbean women at home and in exile; its writers attempt to represent them as accurately as possible but in a variety of formats, which lead them to reformulate the genres in which they write to suit that primary subject. Their writing can be understood, then, as imitating dominant literary conventions, but always in such a way as to buoy the "original melody." On another level, since the writers' task is undertaken in exile, the representations they offer are often imitations of their former lives, an attempt to recapture all that has been lost; this is an exercise that lends itself well to fiction, which is, by its very nature, fabulous, imitative, a simulacrum of reality. As in the fugue, these representations (fictive or otherwise) are structured through multiple themes: those of race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and flight. The "fugue," from the Italian *fuga*, meaning flight, thus accurately speaks to Afro-Caribbean women's plight before and after exile, the necessity of fleeing conditions that adversely affect their lives and their futures (along with those of their families or loved ones): poverty, lack of jobs and health care, sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect, in old age, sexism, racial oppression abroad, intolerance of sexual choices including bisexuality and lesbianism, the silencing of political points of view—to name only the most salient. These issues serve to construct the most elaborate of fugues, intertwining themselves like jazz riffs upon the main melody of women's oppression, to provide the eager listener with a tapestry of sounds and perspectives on what it has meant for Afro-Caribbean women to take control of their bodies, their lives, and, in order to do so, to have re-