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Carol P. Marsh-Lockett and Elizabeth J. West

INTRODUCTION:
CARIBBEAN WOMEN WRITERS IN EXILE

A generally dated, albeit powerful and persistent, conception of "exile" is banishment from one's own land—a condition often associated with a form of punishment for crimes and political offense in ancient civilizations or, in more recent historical periods, periods of banishment for civil and political offenders to remote areas within a national realm, such as colonies in the Americas and Australia, or distant contiguous regions, such as Siberia in the former Soviet Union. In contemporary times, however, exiles are likely to be those who have fled political tyranny and/or economic disenfranchisement or those seeking greater opportunity for intellectual and professional expression.

In his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), a significant discussion of the intersections and links between imperial endeavor and cultural expression of both the colonizer and the colonized, Edward Said identifies his text as "an exile's book." He goes on to describe his exile status and then appropriates the term *exile* from its earliest punitive associations: "Yet when I say 'exile' I do not mean something sad or deprived. On the contrary belonging, as it were, to both sides of the imperial divide enables you to understand them more easily" (xxvii). He states further that his own positioning in New York, "an exilic city *par excellence*," one that "also contains within itself the Manichean structure of the colonial city described by Fanon," has furnished him with an awareness of belonging to more than one history and group (xxvii).

This sense of belonging notwithstanding, "exile" paradoxically still connotes separation from home. Said also makes this concession in his essay "Reflections on Exile" (1994), in which he writes that the exilic experience constitutes an "unhealable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (137). Exiles, he adds, are in effect "cut off from their roots, their land, their past" (140). Similarly, Julio Cortozar, in "The Fellowship of Exile," maintains that exile marks "the end of contact with the leaves and trees, the end of a deep rooted relationship with the land and the air" (173). We must note here, however, that exile means neither "out of hand psychological dismissal" nor "amnesia"; thus,

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the psychic relationship remains intact. Implicit, however, in the natural imagery of Said and Cortozar is the premise that exile in its keenest sense occurs in relationship to the homeland, the premise that also informs this collection of essays focused on Anglophone Caribbean women writers in exile.

The tradition of widely studied Caribbean writers in exile in Britain, the colonial seat of the Anglophone Caribbean, largely began as a post-World War II phenomenon when, as Samuel Selvon describes in his novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), large numbers of Caribbean emigrants made their way to Britain in search of employment. In addition, several talented young writers also found their way to London not only to avail themselves of existing stimulating writing environments but also in search of publishers. George Lamming captures the experience and perspectives of these writers in his essay collection *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), in which he anticipates Said's insights in an essay titled "The Occasion for Speaking": "The pleasure and Paradox of my own exile is that I belong wherever I am ... and yet there is always an acre of ground in the New World which keeps growing echoes in my head" (50). While the earliest Caribbean writers in Britain and those most widely studied were largely men of color, we should also be aware of the works of Phyllis Shand Allfrey and Jean Rhys, white Caribbean women. Allfrey's *The Orchid House* (1953) and Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) capture the experiences, peculiar condition, and shameful history rooted in the Caribbean Creole plantocracy, whose distinct narratives until relatively recently had been either ignored or subsumed under larger national stories. Later, the ranks of newer women writers would include such figures as Joan Riley and Beryl Gilroy, who bring a distinct female perspective on the immigrant experience in Britain as well as a gendered gaze on the history and psycho-cultural impact of the country of origin.

This collection of essays addresses the output of Caribbean women writers specifically in North America. Indeed, a Caribbean female presence has established itself in the literary canons of both Canada and the United States. These writers might identify themselves as citizens of either the United States or Canada. Others might embrace the designation of "Afrosporic" (45), as in the case of Canada-based Marlene Nourbese Philip. Yet others might claim membership in the larger Indian diaspora by virtue of an ancestral history of indentured servitude. As Caribbean immigrants or as first- or second-generation United States or Canadian citizens, however, they exist in a line of Caribbean writers whose active presence

in North America can be identified as early as the Harlem Renaissance, in which the poet and novelist Claude McKay was a prominent figure.

One of the first widely read female-authored novels to address the Caribbean immigrant experience in the United States was Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). The daughter of Barbadian immigrants, Marshall centers her fiction with a Caribbean frame of reference while setting it in various locales. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, she challenges the soul-destroying materialism resulting from a narrow and distorted interpretation of the American dream to which Caribbean immigrants could fall victim in their pursuit of economic opportunity.

Between Marshall's 1959 novel and the present exists a plethora of texts authored by Caribbean women in North America. The increasing number of these texts is consistent with the surge in the Caribbean immigrant population. Often longing for home, yet finding life in their homes of origin either impractical or impossible, these women both systematically and creatively address the gender, race, and class variables peculiar to women that not only lead to exile but which also characterize the life in exile. As such, their works, in enhancing the literary mosaic of the site of exile, give voice to the public discourse and private concerns of an increasingly varied population.

Given the complexities of internal and external struggles of women in exile, perhaps the most effective articulation of their struggles and triumphs is women's literary output. The essays in this collection examine the work of six writers who successfully negotiate to maximum advantage the condition of exile. Using a variety of approaches, the contributors probe both the writers' rewriting of home and their gendered visions of the new landscape for immigrant communities.

In his essay "Theorizing Spirit: The Critical Challenge of Elizabeth Nunez's *When Rocks Dance* and *Beyond the Limbo Silence*," Melvin Rahming calls for more rigorous and open-minded scholarly exploration of the working of the spirit in transnational literatures. While Rahming applies his theoretical reading of spirit-centeredness to specific works by Elizabeth Nunez, his approach can readily be appropriated for similar analysis of other transnational African diasporic writings. Rahming identifies the complex self that emerges in Nunez's protagonists who struggle to find meaning and place in their splintered worlds. Nunez's protagonists evolve into more completed selves through West African spiritual influences that dictate the course of their journeys. Although they are disconnected from Africa in body and consciousness, Africa becomes the source for the spiritual restoration of Nunez's fictional female protagonists.

Yakini B. Kemp examines Audre Lorde's use of the erotic in her literary constructions of self, particularly the multiple layers of self that Lorde unearths. Kemp's essay "Writing Power: Identity Complexities and the Exotic Erotic in Writing by Audre Lorde" is grounded in Lorde's premise that both her Caribbean and lesbian selves had to be recognized for full understanding of her work. Kemp explores the layers of exile in Lorde's life and narrative: Lorde is the sexually exiled child of a mother who lives in America but clings to memories of her Caribbean past. The Caribbean as site of erotic experience and as liberating medium prevails in Lorde's biomythography, *Zami*, and Kemp traces Lorde's narrative construction of the Caribbean as the redemptive source of peace and reconciliation.

Shirley Toland-Dix's essay "Re-Negotiating Identity: The Challenge of Migration and Return in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*" considers Cliff's exploration of the dilemma of migration and return through her protagonist Clare Savage. Toland-Dix argues that Cliff's fictional exploration of migration and return is informed in particular by questions of nationality as well as questions of racial categories that plague her mulatto protagonist. While the fictional Clare experiences geographical and national displacement as she leaves Jamaica, Toland-Dix points out that, even prior to her physical dislocation, Clare has suffered alienation from her maternal African roots—particularly when she was banished by her grandmother, an action that takes place in *Abeng*, the prequel to *No Telephone to Heaven*. In the latter novel, her exile in the United States leads Clare into a fabricated existence framed by whiteness. She returns to Jamaica in a parallel quest for national and geographical understanding and to discover and reclaim her Afro-Jamaican roots.

Emily Allen Williams focuses on the poetry of Canadian resident and Trinidadian immigrant Claire Harris. Williams's essay "Triadic Revelations of Exilic Identity: Claire Harris's *Fables from the Women's Quarters, Dipped in Shadow* and *She*" traces Harris's musings on alienation. Williams frames her critique by looking at the three volumes of poetry as coming from three different narrative perspectives—biography, autobiography, and diary. Although Harris anchors the questions of self, identity, and place in her African Caribbean roots, Williams turns to Harris's emphasis on the community of women at large—those who must reshape their identities as exiles or immigrants. Williams focuses on Harris's poems as critiques of contemporary social ills, particularly abuse against women and children and the legacy of teenage pregnancy.

In her essay "Défilée's Diasporic Daughters: Revolutionary Narratives of Ayiti (Haiti), Nanchon (Nation), and *Dyaspóra* (Diaspora) in Edwidge

Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*" Jana Evans Braziel reads Danticat's work as an exploration of nation and gender in the Haitian imagination. Braziel finds that Haitian notions of nation are informed and framed by gendered paradigms and persons. She explores the connections between dislocated/isolated mythical Haitian women and Haiti's own inter- and intranational disconnectedness. Ultimately, Braziel posits that Danticat's transnational vision of Haiti paints Haiti's rebirth as possible only through its maternal kindred.

Vivian May also explores connections between gender and nation in her essay "Dislocation and Desire in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*." May focuses on Mootoo's fictional island space, which allows a look at the diasporic fallout that results from trauma and exile. She suggests that Mootoo captures these complex overlaps of experience through a main character who is raped by her father and whose psychological exile is further complicated by the overlapping, complex dynamics of migration. Much like Trinidad's history of cultural meldings, Mootoo's fictional isle reflects the complex nature of exile and migration in a nation that ultimately becomes the product of native Caribbean, East Indian, African, and European ancestry. This fictional space is defined by a society in which people are exiled or are migrating among several layers of identity/nationality. Through Mootoo's character Mala, May examines the ways in which exile entails political resistance, and she maintains that Mootoo uses Mala's family trauma to incite a re-examination of our notions of home—both personal and national.

The writers under discussion in this volume, having chosen to live and write in North America, reinforce Said's assertion that the exile is far from a sad, isolated entity. Rather, these writers support the idea that existence on both sides of the imperial divide affords the exile an increased sensitivity and heightened insight into each side of that very divide. On the one hand, as Carol Boyce Davies has indicated in her discussion of Caribbean women writers in the United States, "migration creates a desire for home, which in turn produces a rewriting of home" (113). Yet, on the other hand, their discourse simultaneously indicates that they, too, like Lamming, belong wherever they are. Exile thus furnishes a new gaze, one that facilitates both the rewriting of "home" and the shaping of new, hybrid, metropolitan narratives.

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