Kunapipi

Volume 11 | Issue 2 | Article 11

1989

Children and History in the Caribbean Novel: George Lamming's In the Castle of my Skin and Jamaica Kincaid's Annie John

Craig Tapping

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Tapping, Craig, Children and History in the Caribbean Novel: George Lamming's In the Castle of my Skin and Jamaica Kincaid's Annie John, *Kunapipi*, 11(2), 1989.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol11/iss2/11

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Children and History in the Caribbean Novel: George Lamming's In the Castle of my Skin and Jamaica Kincaid's Annie John

Abstract

In my own research and teaching of Commonwealth hterature, I am ever more conscious of a dilenmia confronting those who would wrestle with contemporary theory and yet remain committed to the cultural practices and literatures being produced on the decentered margins of former Empire.^ Contemporary theory, first generated from within academics of the 'developed' world, is then exported for use in explaining, debasing, and re-inscribing subordinate positions for the subjects and creators of literature from the so-called 'underdeveloped' world Theorists either reinscribe the canonicity of the very texts they claim to 'decenter', or use Euro-American ideologies of language and textuality to re-colonize writing from newly independent, formerly silences regions of the world.^ Once again, the 'underdeveloped' world provides the raw materials for the careers and profits of more technologically advanced master-consumers who import the raw material (literature) and convert it to their own ends (theory)/ This unfortunate condition underwrites whatever it is I do - for example, in an essay such as this - with novels from the Caribbean.

This journal article is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol11/iss2/11

CRAIG TAPPING

Children and History in the Caribbean Novel: George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*

In my own research and teaching of Commonwealth literature, I am ever more conscious of a dilemma confronting those who would wrestle with contemporary theory and yet remain committed to the cultural practices and literatures being produced on the decentered margins of former Empire.[1] Contemporary theory, first generated from within academics of the 'developed' world, is then exported for use in explaining, debasing, and re-inscribing subordinate positions for the subjects and creators of literature from the so-called 'underdeveloped' world.[2] Theorists either reinscribe the canonicity of the very texts they claim to 'decenter', or use Euro-American ideologies of language and textuality to re-colonize writing from newly independent, formerly silences regions of the world.[3] Once again, the 'underdeveloped' world provides the raw materials for the careers and profits of more technologically advanced master-consumers who import the raw material (literature) and convert it to their own ends (theory).[4] This unfortunate condition underwrites whatever it is I do - for example, in an essay such as this - with novels from the Caribbean.

In my work, I am compelled to find readings which acknowledge that novels such as George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin*[5] and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*[6] reveal how language and its literary forms mediate a very real world in which peoples' lives depend on how we read and what we do with that reading. Despite contemporary theory's refutation of absolutist and logocentric categories, the new literatures in English - of which these two novels about childhood and education are particularly significant examples - are generated from within cultures and social groups for whom such terms as 'authority' and 'truth' are empirically urgent in their demands.

Too often, theories of postmodern fiction elide the historical and political contexts inscribed by the post-colonial, treating variant language

patterns, rhetorical structures, and fictional themes as reflections of universally shared epistemes. Differences of race, class and sexuality are thereby erased or defused, and the Western academic once again controls the production of meaning through sophisticated descriptions of various processes of representation.[7]

Therefore, I begin with a premise derived from dialogue with other critics in the same dilemma. Practice, the self-representations of formerly silenced, marginalized or negated subjects, is always already a theory of the other. Lamming explicitly signals this truth in his essays and in the Introduction to the American edition of his novel. Explaining how he writes, Lamming describes his fictions as the effort 'to change this way of seeing',[8] to offer an 'alternative direction'[9] through which readers and community may come to understand history anew.

But novels such as George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* are also more than this: each novel demonstrates clearly what we in our northern academies often forget or deny - that theory proceeds from practice, and not the reverse. To remember this is to begin re-reading novels like these two much more closely than we have previously done. It is an end to 'reading as tourism'.[10]

Both novels offer strikingly similar, and tellingly distinct, versions of one salient fact: the subject of Commonwealth literature is always historically situated. In George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John,* the Caribbean child is subjected to the lessons of history - how empire, caste, and race have conspired to reduce or negate his or her existence. As each child recognizes the lessons within the classroom, so each child also learns how to appropriate, alter and subvert the very history which would deny him or her personal identity and power. For that is the lesson of both fictions: history cannot be merely modified if the subject community or race are to determine their own futures, but must be confronted, written against, and written over.[11] This second lesson - how to survive strategically - is taught outside the classroom and is embodied in the forms which each novelist uses.

The structure of both novels is a lesson in how to engage with history. And each novel prefigures that engagement through a Biblical metaphor derived from childhod experience. For Lamming's G., the novel begins with Noah's Flood and is predicated on the construction of a new world, under a new dispensation. This explains the optimism of the enterprise and the communal vision of *In the Castle of my Skin.* Kincaid's eponymous heroine, in contrast, describes the Paradise she has lost (p. 25), prefiguring the shame, isolation and abandonment which the novel pursues. This figure may also explain the novel's curious

pretense of intimacy while it withholds information central to our understanding of its plot.[12]

Each novel confronts a system of representation which denies its protagonist his or her primacy, in order to construct a new model of reality. About halfway through Lamming's novel, for example, a group of villagers has gathered to discuss Empire, Marcus Garvey and the disjunctions between the history they've lived and the history they've been taught. This community wants another version of the past, which would offer them another, more empowering explanation for the present and another, more inspiring agenda for the future. Lamming articulates what contemporary theorists might call the epistemological dilemma of post-colonial fiction through the rustic figure and untutored dialect of the shoemaker who recognizes this problematic desire for another legitimate history: '"That's what I mean," said the shoemaker; "you say it ain't true too, and' that's what they say only in a different way"' (p. 104) What is further clear in both novels is that - despite the avowed beliefs and fervent hopes of administrators, parents and teachers - it is not art, literature or history which is taught in the schoolrooms, but submission and acquiescence. And both novelists analyze the lineaments of that submission and dominance using a system of literary-historical icons and measuring responses to those images. This figural system is remarkably consistent from one fiction to the other, and tellingly different.

This may well sound ingenuous: after all, the Empire does not disappear overnight, even after independence has been granted. And, regardless of what provincial capital we may inhabit, the ritual and forms of that control do not vary across the Commonwealth: everywhere, even today, we celebrate some memorial of the former empire. The image and power of Queen Victoria, whom Annie (almost blasphemously!) describes as 'a wrinkled-up woman wearing a crown on her head and a neckful and armfuls of diamonds and pearls' (p. 40), puzzles both children until she is understood as the icon of an empire which is hard to shake, let alone subvert, even after independence. Once naturalized, such obdience as these icons exact may even appear timeless. As Annie again explains, 'all of us celebrated Queen Victoria's birthday, even though she had been dead a long time' (p. 76).

The signifying differences between the two texts must be read as the revelation of two distinct ways of organizing existence and of constituting the self in situations where that self is faced with extinction by the very processes of acculturation which all who nurture the child commend.[13] Each figural system, therefore, offers instruction on subversion. Each novel suggests ways in which a rebellion can be fought and won, appropriating the very forces and tools which the enemy - the school-system in each case - would use to impose order, submission

and obedience. And each child sets out to remake history with the understanding, in the words of Lamming's schoolboys, that 'If you going to make hist'ry you got to think how you doing it' (p. 48).

In the Castle of my Skin is about understanding - how the village operates and why, and how it might operate differently. Each time any character or group within the novel recognizes the limitations of conventional history lessons, that recognition reveals and announces a radically alternative view and shape of both history and the narrative line. Before the contradictory claims of their lives and their encoded learning can be resolved, for example, the boys must recognize the socially constructed impediments to their understanding. The problem they first encounter is that 'There was something formidable, even sacred about a book. Only truth, it seemed, could be put in print' (p. 92). And, thus, we recognize the self-reflexivity of this novel: it is the truth about which it writes, and writes because other books have excluded the boys and their village from history. The novel is an alternative, socially derived construction of truth. And, by definition and consensus, the novel is sacred.

Initially sure of 'his'ry' because they've read about William the Conqueror, the boys decide 'to make hist'ry by Foster Fence' (p. 48) by stoning the teacher, whom the narrator recognizes as dangerous because of the repression and erasure which pass for learning in his classroom but who, the narrator also recognizes, is only a part of a much larger pattern.

'Pattern' is the signifying convention here, and *In the Castle of my Skin* abounds with clear and very explicit considerations of such system-building and analysis. The major figure, 'the pattern', reveals G.'s growing consciousness of village life and how its constituent population and geography construct meaning in relationship to authority and to the town. Of course, once the pattern is understood, history can be revised by appropriating and modifying the patterns of that received discourse. As one of the boys explains, '"It ain't his'ry. It's common sense"' (p. 155).

As Lamming in a comparatively straightforward manner writes against history, revising the lies of Empire with the truths of communally shared, daily lives, so Kincaid also confronts this alien chronicle. Her analysis, however, is less materially dialectic, and her method more psychologlcally indirect. Lamming's novel is organized in 'chunks' of experience, each laying the foundation for the next, and each grounded in the analysis of the socio-economic systems of empire and its attendant histories.

Annie John eschews the 'materiality' of *In the Castle of my Skin* to offer a variation on the classroom's history lessons which is woman-centered

and psychologically organized. Kincaid's novel is consequently very different of access.[14]

The real connection between the two novels' conception of history, however, begins with Annie's fascination with books, reminding us how Lamming's boys worried about the irreversible 'sacredness' of the published artifact. Annie's world is also mediated by a multiplicity of other texts: the library books which she pilfers and stores under the house, the childhood books which determine what she calls her friends and how she imagines the future, and the illustrated history books which figure so prominently in the classroom.

The chapter 'Columbus in Chains', in particular, foregrounds this intertextuality and the concerns of Kincaid's text to dislodge the kinds of history which Europe and previous writers - everyone, black or white, male - offer Annie. For example, a teacher amuses herself by reading an 'elaborately illustrated' edition of *The Tempest,* ignoring her students and neglecting her duties (p. 39).

One is tempted by such a casual reference to read the figural system of colonialism, usurpation, racism and the continued legacy of domination which Prospero and Caliban have clearly represented to other Caribbean writers such as Lamming: but Annie's reveries do not work by such direct reference and association. What must be understood is most frequently withheld. Here, for example, we must consider just what elaborate illustration Annie has surreptitiously glimpsed. If we can imagine it to be Caliban, depicted as African and slave, then we begin to understand what follows.

Like Lamming's schoolboys whose history begins in 1066, Annie has a primer for her history lessons: another lavishly illustrated text, *Roman Britain,* a chronicle of the conquering system's past which she must learn. In Annie's reverie, escape from that nightmare of history through homoerotic daydream is interrupted by demands for propriety and decorum. The lesson is carried semiotically, not narratively.

For example, in one of the many visual puns with which the novel abounds, punishment is reversed. Annie believes that the dunce cap looks regal on her young friend and is reminded of an illustration in yet another book she has read. This trick - the reversal of an image which condemns to an image which celebrates - prefigures the troping we approach with each seemingly casual aside in this chapter.

The same themes proliferate and are disrupted: fathers and daughters, England and the West Indies, history and discipline, memory and the present, ancestors and children, Africa and missionaries, eroticism and shame. The lessons, it seems, are embodied in various texts: learning to transgress their surface imagery determines our survival. For Annie John, nothing is as it seems or what it purports to be.

At the heart of the labyrinth, Annie imagines an alternative history, not found in any of the official books, but understood and transmitted outside the classroom:

> 'Of course, sometimes, with our teachers and our books, it was hard for us to tell on which side we really now belonged - with the masters of the slaves - for it was all history, it was all in the past, and everybody behaved differently now... But we, the descendants of the slaves, knew quite well what had really happened, and I was sure that if the tables had been turned we would have acted differently; I was sure that if our ancestors had gone from Africa to Europe and come upon the people living there, they would have taken a proper interest in the Europeans on first seeing them, and said, "How nice", and then gone home to tell their friends about it.' (p. 76)

Schooling and the illusions of independence and liberal progress operate to erase history/difference. History is the past, not the present. In history there is class and race war, but in the present we are all the same. Annie has understood the lessons of late capitalism very thoroughly, and can translate theoretical concepts such as bourgeois individualism and the liberal hegemony into an everyday language which her classmates and readers can easily follow without demur. Annie, as descendant of slaves and unlike Lamming's schoolboys, is very much aware of the truth and can envisage a more civilized encounter, with proper behaviour, between the adventurer and the defenseless.

And we are at the heart of the new inscription of history in *Annie John,* for now comes the long description of Columbus in the picture: another illustrated text from official history. Again, information is withheld but we understand that Columbus is an inflatedly important figure in local history. For the schoolchildren, this is when history begins. The education system, like the history which determines what is taught, is blindly eurocentric, silent about Africa and contemporary Antigua. Outside, the women go about their lives, nurturing, feeding, and fostering Annie's schooling which is figured as the rising up, the rejection of and moving on from such limited discourses. The schoolroom's instruction is a deadly lie, drawing Annie on to a final confrontation as she seeks relief from the discourse of European history by resorting to the visual. The novel's critique of classroom history focuses on the usurped iconography of Empire.

What matters is not the familiarity of the narrative but the violence of the image: Columbus takes a whole page, pictured as illogically elegant, in the guise of the slave (p. 77). His image is written over the opposing discourse, to deny it.

The image of Columbus effaces the crimes of Europe by appropriating the figure and signification of African slaves. 'Gold' is the dominant

feature of his dress, immediately contextualized by Miss Edward's outcry that these present Antiguan girls are 'worthless' (p. 77): it was their deemed worthlessness that led to their enslavement which led to the filling of Europe's coffers with the gold that can be worn for adornment and as a systemic code of wealth, but more importantly superiority and power over the girls who might daydream and thus wander away from the textual history to the pictures for relief. The 'triumph' of that discourse resides in the easy familiarity with which its main figures can invade the daydreams of a pre-adolescent Antiguan schoolgirl, doing her best to avoid listening to a history class.

Annie describes Columbus as 'dejected and miserable', his feet and hands 'bound up in chains' and he 'fettered in chains attached to the bottom of a ship': the arrogance of this iconography is its most appalling feature. Here, the Middle Passage is travestied, enacted by its instigator in a history chronicle which denies place or importance to the African past. For in this figuration of the European conqueror/instigator of history, Annie reads her own people and is moved to joy at the reversal of roles - a fantasy she entertained in the immediately preceding paragraph: 'if the tables had been turned we would have acted differently' (p. 76).

The history book, rather than imposing its discourse on Annie, invades her discourse but, paradoxically, offers her the image and model of how to confront and decenter - to trope - the very domination it pictures: 'elaborately illustrated', indeed!

Annie John's strategy for unseating power is far different from Lamming's boys' plans for seizing it. Whereas Lamming mastered the forms of discourse in order to write an alternative system into being - in the same legitimating mode of colonial histories, Kincaid sidesteps such obvious combat, refusing the mire of that rhetoric. Instead, Annie transposes her mother's words onto the text, across the picture.

Columbus was written over Africa, and a believable history: he usurped the figure, worth, minds and voices of those whose history he so tragically initiated by discovering the West Indies and claiming the territory for Europe. Annie defaces his text in a justifiable act of retribution which spurns codes of propriety and property and, not incidentally, affirms the community of women whose hope she is.

In other words, her graffiti earns Annie corporal punishment but frees her imagination from the chains of imperial history. The women outside are in the classroom with Annie, asserting their cultural truths, collective experience and lived knowledge against the school system's lies.

NOTES

1. See Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin, 'Introduction' to *After Europe: Essays in Post-Colonial Criticism* (Dangaroo Press, 1989).
2. This is certainly one implication, for example, of Barbara Christian's essay 'The Race for Theory', in *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring 1987), pp. 51-63.
3. This problematic is treated throughout *After Europe*, cited in note 1 above. See also Wole Soyinka, 'The critic and society: Barthes, leftocracy and other mythologies' in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York and London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 27-57.
4. This production-consumption image is indebted to Julianne Burton, 'Marginal cinemas and mainstream critical theory', in *Screen* 26.3-4 (May-August 1985), pp. 2-21.
5. George Lamming, *In the Castle of my Skin* (London: Longman Drumbeat, 1979 and New York: Shocken Books, 1983). Subsequent references cited parenthetically in text: both editions have the same pagination.
6. Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library, 1986). Subsequent references cited parenthetically in text.
7. See Suzanne Moore, 'Getting a Bit of the Other: the Pimps of Post-modernism' in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), pp. 165-192. See also Louise Spence and Robert Stam, 'Colonialism, Racism and Representation' in *Screen* 24.6 (November-December 1983), pp. 2-20.
8. George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London and New York: Allison and Busby, 1984), p. 36.
9. George Lamminq, 'Introduction' to *In the Castle of my Skin* (New York: Shocken Books, 1983), p. xi.
10. This concept of an end to 'reading as tourism' previously described the complexities visited upon readers and interpreters of Euro-American literatures by the avant-garde. I have appropriated it to describe instead earlier, often anthropological approaches to reading emergent literatures from the formerly colonized world - a practice which inscribes the 'literariness' of Western writing and the relative insignificance of other literatures. Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 19.
11. Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o defines African literature by its ability to confront and revise history in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey and Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1986). Malek Alloula offers an example of confrontation and writing over in *The Colonial Harem*, translated by Myrna and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). See also Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice In Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).
12. The withholding of information is implicit throughout the novel. For example, the reasons for the mother's departure from her home and island at a young age are never given; her joy at the news of her father's downfall is linked iconographically to Annie's simultaneous defacing of the pictures in her history book. The link here is suggestive and never explicit, despite the eponymous heroine's frank and often graphic descriptions of her own adolescence.
13. 'Everyone recognizes that the way one makes sense of history is important in determining what politics one will credit as realistic, practicable, and socially

responsible'. Hayden White, 'The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation' in *The Politics of Interpretation,* ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 135.

14. '...Woman's place within the discipline and as subject of history is *different* from man's all along the race-class spectrum, and ... a woman's right to "imagine" history is fraught with perils of a different kind." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Politics of Interpretations' in *The Politics of Interpretations,* ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicao and London: The University of Chicago Press 1983), p. 362.