

THE SERIAL ART OF GEORGE LAMMING: MYTH AND ARCHIVE

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Last year I wrote a paper on the revolutionary aesthetic of George Lamming in which I drew on Julia Kristeva's concept of the work of art as activist politics, as an act of revolt.¹ In Kristeva's words, a revolutionary poetics implies "a state of permanent questioning, of transformation, change and endless probing of appearances" (Revolt, She Said 120). On this occasion, I retrace my steps part of the way in order to develop an unexplored aspect of those arguments. Drawing on concepts of the 'archive' and 'intertextuality,' I wish to explore the values of what I call Lamming's serial art as a self-reflexive revolutionary poetics.

In the creative act of producing meaning, the artist shapes a world as he or she experiences it to particular ends. Or, as Julia Kristeva put it: "While protest and confrontation, violence and dissent may shape its form and content, while it may be designed to bring about social and political change on one level or the other, in art political activism is transposed into the field of representation" (Revolt 121). In George Lamming's case, that field of representation is the novel, a space where political activism is subjected to the rigorous scrutiny of the creative imagination. In Lamming's words, "The novel does not only depict aspects of social reality. It explodes it. It ploughs it up" ("A Visit to Carriacou" 29). His images here are urgent, even violent. As he explains, "The serious revolutionary writer must always try to make that which is only seen and felt as possible into a moment of living reality" ("Carriacou" 29). In this context, the political novel can be understood as a kind of testing ground for the aspirations of the writer as political activist, or an archive of narrative possibilities; a space where emotional, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic levels of experience come into play.

But it is not the twinning of activism and art in itself that interests me here: the work of art as activist politics, as an act of revolt. Rather, it is the archival scope of Lamming's artistic quest, which is nothing less than the etiology of the modern Caribbean; he asks questions, he wants to know. "In the myth," writes Kristeva, "Oedipus interrogates the Sphinx, he asks questions, he wants to know. What does he want to know? He wants to know the potential of desire and death, two of the great themes that structure human experience" (Revolt 120). To frame my arguments I will draw on Michel Foucault's concept of the 'archive' in The Archaeology of Knowledge and Roberto González Echevarría's theory of Latin American narrative in Myth and Archive, to explore the what and the why and the how of Lamming's artistic enterprise as cultural myth of foundations and archive. Lamming's novels in sequence are dynamic and revisionary, both horizontally and vertically. Drawing on Kristeva's concept of intertextuality in "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," I will argue that while the individual novels can be read as a direct communication between writer and reader, within the framework of Lamming's serial fiction, the individual novel absorbs, destabilizes, and transforms the others within the sequence.² If a process of demythification is underway

¹See my "George Lamming: the Political Novelist and his Revolutionary Aesthetic."

²Julia Kristeva puts it this way here:
The word's status is thus defined horizontally (the word in the text

in Lamming's sequence of novels in respect to a colonial myth of "English superiority in taste and judgment" (*Pleasures of Exile* 27), this coincides with a carefully constructed parallel design that is also about a cultural myth of new beginnings, and thus about creating a record or archive.

One might ask, as Foucault does, if an archive has something to do with the past, how then does one construct an archive in the present? Where does this past begin?³ I take the position that the past begins anew in *In the Castle of My Skin* with boyhood recollections of rebellion and resistance that are causally linked to the forging of a new destiny in a series of novels that reflect a revolutionary artistic consciousness engendered in a boy's experience of the labor riots of 1937, and the writer's memory of it. Lamming is in effect engaged in an ideologically driven, highly inventive process of displacement and transformation that defines the limits of colonialism in a series of breaks or ruptures with a history of colonial domination. His serial art figuratively generates new beginnings, new foundations in the contours of a new myth of origins. Lamming conceptualizes in his sequence of novels, moments of threshold, rupture, break, mutation, and transformation that give his serial art the trappings of discontinuity with a colonial past envisioned as achievable, and frames them in a regional revolutionary quest for liberation from a colonial stranglehold on the region.

My point of departure is actually a well known, often cited interview with George E. Kent in 1973, after the publication of *Water with Berries* and *Natives of My Person* in 1971.⁴ Here, Lamming describes all his fiction as "the unfolding of one work" (Kent 104): *Natives of My Person*, was a way of going forward by making a complete return to the beginnings; it's actually the whole etiology of *In the Castle of My Skin*, *The Emigrants* and *Season of Adventure*. I think it might be possible to find in *Natives of My Person* elements, parallels and so forth in each of the preceding volumes. (Kent 104)

The serial design he described in that interview outlined in brief the scope of his artistic quest:

If you take *In the Castle of My Skin*, where the realization of the world is seen through the boys — this is the growing up; and then the next book, *The Emigrants*, with these men moving out to England. The emigrants on that ship can be seen as the extensions of the boys of *In the Castle of My Skin*.

belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as vertically (the word in the text is oriented towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus) . . . each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read . . . any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. (65)

³You will recognize these as questions framed by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse of Knowledge*, 4.

⁴I cite the version of this interview republished in Richard Drayton, et al., eds. *Conversations*.

This was in a way the logic of development. Society made up with people who always saw their fulfillment elsewhere, outside of the society. That aspect of migration is going to be very central to the psychology of that whole generation of people. The question was not so much 'what am I going to do here,' but 'when will the opportunity arrive for me to leave?' And this is how we see the journey of the men who, in a sense, could be said to be the boys, except that where the boys of In the Castle are held to one particular territory, the men are drawn from all the territories of the Caribbean. (Kent 104)

Here, artistic quest is conceptualized as a continuous process, embodied in a series of fictional narratives that steadily strip away layers of illusion or imprisonment that envelop the colonial Caribbean at different levels of experience. For example, in *Castle*, the boys are pivotal interpretive centers of feeling in their extreme distance from the imperial power that organizes their lives.⁵ If the men of The Emigrants are extensions of the boys of Castle, their journey to England, a mythical source of power and promise in their lives uncovers the extreme nature of their illusion that the Mother Country cares anything about their individual futures. If The Emigrants can be read as a sequel, it is nonetheless part of an even larger enterprise, as Lamming indicates in the Kent interview:

Then, in the third book, we see that, after the special disillusionments of that voyage, after these men, too, have put the idea of where they're going beside the reality of where they are, the next logical step was for their return, which was in Of Age and Innocence (1958). What we see there is the society of In the Castle of My Skin now extended to be the whole area in its last stages of colonialism. When Of Age ends, we are on the eve of the independence arrangements, and when we move into Season of Adventure (1960), we have a study of the fall of the first independent republic. (Kent 104)

This, in fact, describes the genesis of a serial historical narrative that begins with the boys of one place and is subsumed in the men of the region, seemingly in an attempt to recover the origins and weave an understanding of interlocked elements of colonial revolt, decolonization, and subsequently national construction; all of which he was in fact living through. Artistic quest is embodied in a series of fictional narratives constructed around seminal political events that steadily strip away layers of illusion or entrapment that envelop the colonial and postcolonial Caribbean at different times and levels of experience. In this fashion he generates a fictional chronology, each novel ordered within the parameters of a progressive movement towards an anticipated fulfilment of rupture or break with the region's colonial beginnings that culminates in Season of Adventure the fourth novel in the series. The fictional quest narrates a myth of new beginnings as a process of liberation fashioned out of an accumulated knowledge about self and collectivity.

⁵See John Plotz's essay, "One-Way Traffic: George Lamming and the Portable Empire," for a brilliant elaboration of this point through an analysis of the parable of the pennies in Castle. The parable of the boy (ignorant of the facts as they are) and the pennies makes a central point: in this incident the boys resort to imaginative speculation and uncover the illusion of benign kingship that organizes the conditions of their everyday lives.

Within the first leg of this sequence (four novels between 1953 and 1960), Lamming situates himself self-consciously as a creative writer at a specific moment in history, as he describes it subsequently: "at the periphery of colony or neo-colony ... [where] the imagination resists, destabilizes and transforms the status of the word in action."⁶ At this point in Lamming's serial art, the process of demythification is well underway; illusory colonial social and symbolic paradigms based on the state, the family, and colonial privilege are subverted. Positionality is everything.⁷ In his hands, the language of colonization is its undoing; his medium of choice is the novel through which he redefines the differentiated structure of the colonial and postcolonial speaking subject at different stages. For example, in The Emigrants he uncovers new frameworks, new images, and new modes of thought in a historically aware, politically informed fiction that embodies the lived reality of an unprecedented intensive interaction (in scale and proportion) of different classes of West Indians, newly arrived in the hyper-idealized space of their ambitions as colonials. All are in the same boat, so to speak, that timeless floating signifier.

This continuous political and artistic quest develops as a form of self-questioning that takes author and audience to the colonial root of the contemporary Caribbean through related, but distinct, bodies of work. Readers of the entire corpus, without any obligation to do so since each novel is self-sufficient, have the option of carrying the memory of one work when reading another, with sequence less important than the perceptual experience of what happens intertextually between and among them. Lamming's figuration, by imaginative design, is the site of multiple, complex, even contradictory sets of experiences intersecting and interacting with each other. One set of experiences flows into another in an increasingly intensive interconnectedness that, I would guess, is as liberating to the author as to the reader, since it enables and invites unanticipated interactions of experience and knowledge.

In Lamming's fiction, the continuous act of questioning is evident everywhere in the rejection and renewal of old codes of representation. In the historical, sociological, and psychological contexts of a collapsing British Empire in the Caribbean, from the labour riots of the 1930s in Castle to the uncertain ground of West Indian collectivity in The Emigrants, the growth of independence movements and the crisis in race-based structures of power in Of Age and Innocence, a popular uprising that topples the government of the first republic in Season, and so on. This is why I think Wilson Harris's criticism of Lamming's Of Age and Innocence in "Tradition and the West Indian Novel" (1967) is misguided. While Harris proposes a brilliant new figuration for West Indian

⁶In "Language and the Politics of Ethnicity," linking historical, political, economic, and cultural issues in his inimitable way, Lamming put it like this: "If the metropole directed what is standard and required by the cultural establishment; it is at the periphery of colony or neo-colony that the imagination resists, destabilizes and transforms the status of the word in action."

⁷Rosi Braidotti reminds us that "the same historical condition . . . can be alternatively perceived as positive or negative depending on one's position" (2).

subjectivity in his own fiction, as a critic of the 'new' West Indian writing he remains heavily invested in the criteria governing the so-called English novel of persuasion, what John Plotz calls "the Portable Empire" of cultural signs exported by Britain as free floating emblems of English social and cultural superiority. Harris does this no doubt in high anxiety about his own distinctive projection of Caribbean subjectivity in a state of flux; his sense that "the series of subtle and nebulous links which are latent within him [her], the latent ground of old and new personalities" (140), might go unrecognized in a commitment to the shaping of national consciousness. Though Harris invokes the imaginative breakthrough of Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and William Faulkner among others, as a measure of his own preoccupation with the inner drama of individual human consciousness, he fails to recognize the elaborate architecture of Lamming's novel as a sign of the rejection and renewal of old codes of representation: a means of unveiling, discovering and starting over. In fact, given this novel's discernible fictionalizing of Guyanese politics at the time, what is so disconcerting and illuminating about it is precisely its dialogic structure, in which different voices are rendered contrapuntally. The contrapuntal dynamic embraces various, even contradictory constructions of individual and collective selves within the Caribbean. One result is the destabilization of established forms of consciousness, one of Harris stated goals. In Lamming's corpus, this translates into a style of thinking in which subjectivity, individual and collective, is fashioned as a Gramsci-like inventory of traces.⁸

Within the framework of artistic quest, one starting point for this inventory in Lamming's fiction is the differentiated structure of a variety of speaking subjects. In Lamming's political fiction these are defined by overlapping variables such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and so on. As Plotz observes, with respect to Castle and Natives in particular, these myriad experiences "assert a kind of corporate unity that underlies the apparent disaggregation of persons: all these voices that you hear, scattered all over the social map, are in reality joined together within 'my' experience" (318). The 'my' in this case is the author's, reminding us that, fictionally, "Lamming seems to contain all of his characters" (Plotz 319), imagined as they are as natives of his person and collectively as part of the historical process that has shaped the region. This underscores that while the elaborate architecture of these novels individually and collectively, can be read as a process of artistic self-questioning, unveiling, discovery, and starting over, while they have taken on the archival weight of a master story about the Caribbean, by design they are elaborately constructed as polyphonic; narrative paradigms of experience and interpretation that rest on self-reflexive paradigms of discourse, of dialogue and polyphony.⁹

A pathfinder from the very beginning, Lamming's novels from In the Castle of My Skin (1953) to Water with Berries (1971) and Natives of My Person (1971) are structurally and thematically preoccupied with the question of liberation, explored over time from

⁸In the epigraph to "Western Education and the Caribbean Intellectual," Lamming cites Gramsci on the need to compile such an inventory.

⁹This is a crude paraphrase of James Clifford: "Paradigms of experience and interpretation are yielding to paradigms of discourse, of dialogue and polyphony" (41).

many different angles. As he explains, liberation is word which suggests process. It is a process of trying to free self and society from various forms of imprisonment. The imprisonment of social injustice, the imprisonment of intellectual backwardness, the imprisonment of disfigured spirits. We liberate ourselves from a condition that is undesirable or intolerable but there is an implication in this word that we have to liberate ourselves into some other kind of being. You fight a struggle in order to construct something of the future. ("Carriacou" 27)

In this context, there are singular discourse-defining elements in each of the first four novels that authorize their archival value individually and collectively. Incidentally, I make it a practice of reminding myself that these were all written and published in the 50s over a span of some seven years, and written in the historical moment of narrative possibilities. For example, there is from the start, the signature use of an intrusive 'I' that selectively establishes and reestablishes the element of witness, of firsthand experience that collapses the boundaries of fiction in a self-authorizing and self-critical way. I, among other, have studied the role of the enigmatic G in Castle, the first person narrator at the beginning and in the third and last section of The Emigrants, not to mention the much-debated "Author's Note" in Season of Adventure:

I got a public scholarship which started my migration into another world, a world whose roots were the same, but whose style of living was entirely different from what my childhood knew. It had earned me a privilege which now put Powell and the whole *tonelle* right out of my future. . . . I forgot the *tonelle* . . . and attached myself to this new world which was so recent and so slight beside the weight of what had gone before. (332)

This is powerful art that registers reminders from time to time that what we are reading is fiction managed and informed by a living memory of parallel historical events. Hence, the centrality of political events, of place-names, of identifiable persons, ethnicities, social and religious rituals, oral narratives, etc. that are a recurring reminder of the historicity of the fictional archive that is in process. The artistic quest is nothing less than myth conceptualized as a new Caribbean narrative of origins, and it is authorized from within.

The last two novels, Water with Berries and Natives, parallel each other in richly fashioned allegories (of the postcolonial rather than the Medieval variety; see in this regard Stephen Slemon and John Thieme) that restage the early modern period as a pivotal point of illumination in the contemporary Caribbean experience. Cultural archive and documents of history that Lamming had anticipated in The Pleasures of Exile are redeployed as instruments and objects of scrutiny with the paradoxical effect of refocusing the fictional quest for new beginnings, the previous novels seemingly authorize. The culmination of both novels is the stripping away of illusions on the one hand of Euro-America's doctrine of imperial responsibility then and now as anything other than a smoke screen. And on the other that West Indians can settle amicably into the culture that colonized their history: "That horror and that brutality have a price, which has to be paid by the man who inflicted it — just as the man who suffered it has to find a way of exorcising that demon" (Kent 100). It is also about the inefficacy of the quest for new beginnings and the persistence of that quest.

If Water with Berries dramatizes yet another radical discontinuity, rupture, and break

with tradition, this is now been established in Lamming's fiction as another stage in an ongoing process of decolonization. However, the allegorical designs of Water with Berries and Natives of My Person, introduce multiple levels of myth and history in their summoning of a remote past, made simultaneous with the author's present in and out of time. The carefully constructed fictional archive of present history that characterizes the first four novels is resituated to recover and contextualize the critical and analytical value of a remote colonial archive that is muted in the first four novels to privilege points of rupture as they unfold in the historical present. As my colleague Patricia Saunders observes, these novels contain the tools for demystifying (laying bare) the pathways of power and oppression. Lamming's revisionary use of traditional allegory generates another level of intertextuality altogether in Water with Berries with his explicit use of Shakespeare's The Tempest, and in the case of Natives of My Person of sixteenth and seventeenth century documents and pseudo documents of West Indian history, to name a few. In doing so, he is questioning the value of the archive as authoritative source of transgenerational memory and essential history of culture, and also the myth and archive he so carefully constructs in the antecedent texts, in a web of retrospective historicity that Roberto González Echevarría in his theory of Latin American narrative describes as archival fiction. Given the sequence of Lamming's fiction, and the simultaneous publication of Natives of My Person and Water with Berries in New York and London respectively in 1971, after a break of ten years or so, these last two novels suspend the continuity of the earlier novels as if to establish the limits of his initial trajectory.

In retrospect, the popular revolt of Season of Adventure repeats that of In the Castle of My Skin, and echoes the violence in Of Age and Innocence. In Water with Berries and Natives of My Person, the notion of rupture and break with the past as rendered in the antecedent novels re the subject of new and rigorous philosophical scrutiny. The ensuing paradox rests on a pattern of continuity that links the revolt of the postcolonial artist to the precedent anticipated in Shakespeare's Caliban, and links the failure of postcolonial regimes of power to models that date back to the utopian dreams of sixteenth and seventeenth century settlements in the Americas.

In Water with Berries and Natives of My Person, the problem of freedom is explored on different levels. In Water the limits of the Caliban model are measured in terms of the contemporary artist in a fictive Albion that culminates in a Wide Sargasso Sea style of conflagration. But in Lamming's allegorical design, island space coincides with that of Albion even as it does in Wide Sargasso Sea. Since she anticipates no resolution to the legal bind in which she finds herself, Antoinette recovers incendiary violence as a measure of last resort among the oppressed Africans of Coulibri, and thus begins to dream and thus to frame a death of her own choosing in the attic of Thornfield Hall. In Lamming's Water with Berries, three artists figured as latter day Calibans come to understand that their autonomy is circumscribed and their unresolved quarrels with history and tradition follow them to what they mistakenly anticipate is be a safe and productive space. As in Wide Sargasso Sea, violence is the last resort of an unfulfilled quest for liberation in its many forms, though in the American edition of Water with Berries, Teeton, one of the three artists appears to escape the conflagration motivated by a continuing dream of liberation.

Lamming returned to the question of violence in his 1983 retrospective to a new edition

of Castle, where he questions the fact that the landlord who has been ambushed by a group of men armed with knives and stones is allowed to escape unharmed:

When I read this scene some twenty years after its publication, I was surprised by the mildness of its resolution. From the distant and more critical vantage point of London, the past now seemed more brutal. I wondered why I had allowed the landlord to go free. (xi)¹⁰

Lamming pauses in his retrospective to debate the issue and concludes, "So for a long time I remained haunted by the feeling that the white landlord should have been killed; even if it were presented as the symbolic end of a social order that deserved to be destroyed" (xi). Other Caribbean writers have done this, for example, Jean Rhys in Wide Sargasso Sea, Derek Walcott in Dream on Monkey Mountain, and more recently, Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night and Elizabeth Nunez in Prospero's Daughter. Lamming detaches himself ideologically from that scene of violence averted in Castle in a paradigmatic then and now of the confessional mode to observe:

The novel was completed within two years of my arrival in London. I still shared in that previous innocence which had socialized us into seeing our relations to empire as a commonwealth of mutual interests. The truth is there was never any such reciprocity of interests, and the various constitutional settlements which would gradually lead to the recent status of independence had a decisive influence in preserving much of the social legacy of the colonial period. (xi)

This ideological distancing from the earlier narrative illustrates the quality of self-scrutiny and self-questioning that distinguishes Lamming's revolutionary aesthetic and also marks an 'epistemological break' in the relationship of Natives of My Person and Water With Berries to the earlier novels.¹¹ Here Lamming emerges as a kind of Althusserian 'super-reader' who rereads and decodes the earlier texts 'symptomatically.' Intertextuality deepens as old themes of rupture and new beginning are replayed in time and out of time.

Another explicit example of this kind of ideological detachment and decoding appears in Lamming's introduction to the 1984 edition of The Pleasures of Exile, in which Lamming mediates the values of his own text as evidence of a specific consciousness and practice:

Much has changed in the fate and names of places; but the central issues have remained the same. Some of the judgements on people and events may have seemed extravagant and provocative, but these may also serve

¹⁰See Lamming's introduction to the Michigan edition of Castle, xxxv-xlvi.

¹¹I take my cue here from Foucault's invocation of Bachelard's concepts of 'epistemological acts' and 'thresholds': they suspend continuous accumulation of knowledge, interrupt its slow development, and force it to enter a new time, cut it off from its empirical origin, and its original motivations, cleanse it of its imaginary complicities; they direct historical analysis away from the search for silent beginnings, and the never-ending tracing-back to the original precursors, towards the search for a new type of rationality and its various effects. (4)

as reliable evidence of a particular way of seeing. There was a great temptation to revise and update, but that would have led to a different kind of book at a later stage of development.¹²

When Lamming calls attention in the Kent interview to “elements, parallels and so forth in each of the preceding volumes” (Kent 104), I do not read this as evidence of a rewriting of the earlier novels, so much as a kind of counter-narrative; what Gonzalez Echevarría might describe as counter-archive. The fictional archive holds its own even as it is suspended as a kind of floating signifier.

As I, among others, have pointed out, in Natives of My Person while the enterprise as designed and attempted fails to materialize under the leadership of the Commandant and his officers, the dream of new beginnings remains alive in two distinct spheres of experience, the women and the crew. They travel separately to new beginnings, naïve and untested in their creative endeavors, except that this story has been told before; the dream of liberation collapses only to be mediated and no doubt reinvented by competing factions: the women, the crew and their visionary painter, and the technical man of the whole operation who inherits in part the material assets of the aborted enterprise and as survivor and witness will write his report for the record.

So what then of serial art, fictional archives and archival fictions? Lamming has pulled it all together: he has inscribed a narrative of new beginnings, authorized it, deconstructed it in one fell swoop of six novels over a period of about twenty years. The creative enterprise claims great privilege, like the witness in Lamming’s Introduction to The Pleasures of Exile:

He says: I am chief witness for the prosecution, but I shall also enter the role of Prosecutor. I shall defend the accused in the light of my own evidence. I reserve the right to choose my own Jury to whom I shall interpret my own evidence since I know that evidence more intimately than any man alive. Who then is most qualified to be the Judge? For the Law itself, like the men involved, is in some doubt about the nature of this charge. The result may be capital punishment, and I shall be hangman, provided I do not have to use the apparatus that will put the accused to death. It is likely that the accused, when he is found and convicted and forgotten, may turn out to be Innocent. That is unfortunate, for I am working on the fundamental belief that there are no degrees of innocence. (Pleasures 11)

I rest my case.

¹²For more on this subject, see my Foreword to The Pleasures of Exile, xxii-xxiv.

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