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Abroad At Home: Xenomania and Voluntary Exile in The Middle Passage, Salt, and Tide Running

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The Caribbean writer today is a creature balanced between limbo and nothingness, exile abroad and homelessness at home, between the people on the one hand and the colonizer on the other. Exile can be voluntary or it can be imposed by stress of circumstances; it can be a punishment or a pleasure.

Jan Carew, *Fulcrums Of Change*

Alienation and exile have long been preoccupations of both creative and critical postcolonial writing, and Anglophone Caribbean writing is no exception. Authored for the most part by members of the more schooled or educated and, therefore, so-called elite class, these works tend to represent characters alienated in one way or others from their cultures through their education at home and/or abroad. Due to this tendency, a common but circumscribed critical view is that alienation and exile are primarily problems of native intellectuals, resulting strictly from external forces operating upon them. Here, I aim to be more circumspect by examining subtler, arguably more dangerous agents of externality, whether the externalization of the state or the state of being externalized, which operate on the elite and “the people” alike. My central argument is that V. S. Naipaul’s *The Middle Passage* demonstrates externality does follow colonial incursions or international travel by the colonized between home country and host country (normally the colonizer’s) for educational purposes, experiences which engender ambivalence and psychological trauma stemming from negative feelings about the native land and culture, or the perceived lack thereof, in comparison to the colonizer’s culture. However, Earl Lovelace’s *Salt* and Oonya Kempadoo’s *Tide Running* show that in the Caribbean exile and alienation also result from emotional or psychological migrations, forms of “travel” within the home state and the mind that change the native’s position and disposition relative to the hegemonic cultural body and mind. These migrations are sometimes the result of neocolonial mechanisms closely tied to globalization and they engender interstices in Caribbean linguistic and/or cultural continuity. Such gaps or
breaks enable further the success of neocolonial interventions in that, as a result, Caribbean natives are turned or, voluntarily, help to turn themselves into objects, a process that is, after all, at the root of exile and alienation.

This essay finds its beginning in three confluent sources. The first is Edward Said’s insightful observation regarding exile in *Representations of the Intellectual*:

So while it is true to say that exile is the condition that characterizes the intellectual as someone who stands as a marginal figure outside the comforts of privilege, power, being-at-homeness (so to speak), it is also very important to stress that that condition carries with it certain rewards and, yes, even privileges. So while you are neither winning prizes nor being welcomed into all those self-congratulating honor societies that routinely exclude embarrassing troublemakers who do not toe the party line, you are at the same time deriving some positive things from exile and marginality. (36)

The second is Jan Carew’s position concerning the Caribbean writer highlighted in the epigraph above, especially his acute notice of the precarious limbo state between forced or voluntary absence abroad and lack of residence at home. The third and equally important source is George Lamming’s groundbreaking exposition of the Caribbean writer’s experience of emigration and exile, *The Pleasures of Exile*, which offers a plethora of provocative postulations. For instance, downplaying the concern with “what the West Indian writer has brought to the English language” (36), he declares, “A more important consideration is what the West Indian novelist has brought to the West Indies. That is the real question; and its answer can be the beginning of an attempt to grapple with that colonial structure of awareness which has determined West Indian values” (36). It is precisely with this consideration of what the Caribbean novelist has brought to the region in mind that I examine here what Naipaul, Lovelace, and Kempadoo contribute to our conception of exilic conditions with respect to migration, national culture and the colonial and postcolonial psyche. Though for the greater part of his writing life he has made a “home” for himself in England, Naipaul is certainly one of Said’s “troublemakers” who has long lived without the solace of “being-at-homeness.” But he seems to revel in that state of independence, from which he has prospered significantly while judging cynically the emergent nationalism of burgeoning independent states. *The Middle Passage* is consistent with long-standing understandings of exile, especially intellectual

exile, such as Said’s, which have dominated postcolonial critical perspectives. Lovelace and Kempadoo both write more from the state of being-at-homeness in the interest of developing Caribbean national consciousness. However, *Salt* and *Tide Running* demonstrate that whatever privilege may exist in that state is not debilitative for either author, since they offer new ways of seeing exile.

In her foreword to the 1992 edition of *The Pleasures of Exile*, Sandra Pouchet Paquet observes correctly that it “anticipates the postcolonial critic’s preoccupation with the politics of migration, cultural hybridity, and the prerogatives of minority discourse” (viii). Iain Chambers is, like the late Said, preeminent among such critics, and in one of his texts exhibiting this preoccupation, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, he argues for “the need for a mode of thinking that is neither fixed nor stable, but is one that is open to the prospect of a continual return to events, to their re-elaboration and revision” (3). One could make the case that in historical narratives such as *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969) and the related *A Way in the World* (1994) Naipaul reflects Chambers’ sense of continuously returning to, re-elaborating on, and revising events, enabled by anomalous, unfixed thinking. But these works are not the focus here. *The Middle Passage* is, and part of my argument is that as a detached exile Naipaul reflects a colonial mode of thinking paradoxically fixed and regressive. In contrast, as they grapple with the “colonial structure of awareness which has determined West Indian values,” Lovelace and Kempadoo present discerning perspectives on the complexities of Caribbean dislocation, and through those progressive perspectives they offer the Caribbean the possibility of transcending that colonial structure of awareness and of transforming those values. What all three works have in common is the sense that xenomania, the obsessive attachment to and extraordinarily high value of imported customs, institutions and such, is a fundamental cause of Caribbean alienation.

1. Naipaul’s “Nervous Condition”: The *Middle Passage*

   ‘It’s the Englishness,’ she said. ‘It’ll kill them all if they aren’t careful.’

   Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*

   In *The Pleasures of Exile*, Lamming argues, “The historical fact is that the ‘emergence’ of a dozen or so novelists in the British
Caribbean with some fifty books to their credit or disgrace, and all published between 1948 and 1958, is in the nature of a phenomenon. There has been no comparable event in culture anywhere in the British Commonwealth during the same period” (29). First published in 1962, The Middle Passage is not among the fifty books referred to, but its author is certainly among those dozen or so novelists, otherwise known as the First Wave, and their books. Though Miguel Street (1959) and especially A House for Mr Biswas (1961) would be more indicative of Naipaul’s future successes, The Mystic Masseur appeared in 1957. Equally important, throughout his long writing career Naipaul has certainly been in for his share of lauded credit and lowly disgrace. Its subtitle, “The Caribbean Revisited,” indicates The Middle Passage is not a novel, but a piece of travel writing resulting from the Trinidadian government commissioning Naipaul to revisit the island and region of his birth and to record his impressions. As a travel narrative by a Caribbean about the Caribbean the text is novel, but it is somewhat unoriginal in conception and representation in that it mimics a number of stereotypes and clichés from European travel writing about the region. Indeed, the template is set by its epigraph, taken from James Anthony Froude’s The English in the West Indies as a pretext of Naipaul’s observations: “There has been no saint in the West Indies since Las Casas, no hero unless philonegro enthusiasm can make one out of Toussaint. There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own.”

Naipaul’s disgrace, at least among some Caribbeans, arguably germinates from what Barrie Davies describes in “The Sense of Abroad: Aspects Of The West Indian Novel In England” as Naipaul being “outspoken in The Middle Passage” (69). Of course, to say that in this and other works Naipaul is outspoken about the former colonized is to put the case mildly. Davies finds it fitting that Naipaul begins The Middle Passage “with his experience among West Indian emigrants” (68), since “their journey is the climax and futility of the West Indian experiment.” In addition, Davies argues, “That an area relies on exporting large numbers of its people every year is indicative of a malaise not altogether explained by poverty, over-population and unemployment.” Large-scale emigration remains a Caribbean norm, so much so that it may actually be considered a tradition. Indeed, a contemporary Caribbean joke is that the favorite pastime of Caribbeans is leaving. If not causes such as unemployment and poverty, what then may explain that malaise? Davies also finds Naipaul’s diagnosis of Caribbean society as “philistine, cynical, uncreative and so on” (69) inadequate as an explanation. His own diagnosis is located in his appropriation of James Baldwin’s assessment of Negro writers in Paris: “They were all now, whether they liked it or not, related to Europe, stained by European visions and standards, and their relationship to themselves, and to each other, and to their past has changed” (70).

We will now turn our specific attention to how Baldwin’s prescient observation applies to Naipaul’s visions and standards and how these inform his relationship to his past. That relationship indicates Said was for the most part accurate in claiming that “to some degree the early V. S. Naipaul, the essayist and travel writer, resident off and on in England, yet always on the move, revisiting his Caribbean and Indian roots, sitting through the debris of colonialism and postcolonialism, remorselessly judging the illusions and cruelties of independent states and the new true believers, was a figure of modern intellectual exile” (54).

Among Naipaul’s most infamous judgments which have caused widespread, venomous derision and lingering resentment from certain critical camps is his scathing declamation underlying what he calls the “futility of the West Indian adventure” (19), his return to the region for the first time after having left: “For nothing was created in the British West Indies, no civilization as in Spanish America, no great revolution as in Haiti or the American colonies.” This sense of a lack of history and culture in his homeland is at the root of his fervent desire to emigrate, a self-defeating attitude reflected in Dr. Chedi Jagan’s declaration to Naipaul of the fate accompli inducing the Caribbean intellectual’s exile: “If you want to think at all, you have to go abroad” (141). Said portrays the exiled intellectual as existing “in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another” (49). Naipaul differs somewhat from such exiles in his apparent lack of nostalgia for and connected desire to return to his native land; also, his remorseless judging is entirely unsentimental. He does fit in many ways the mold of Said’s exiled intellectual, but he doesn’t fit neatly. As Naipaul says of his feeling of distress at having returned to his native land, “The years I had spent abroad fell away and I could not be sure which was the reality of my life: the first eighteen years in Trinidad or the later years in England. I had never wanted to stay in Trinidad” (34). The main reason for
this is he sees Trinidad as “unimportant, uncreative, [and] cynical.” Examined carefully, one finds that it’s not so much that Trinidad is uncreative or lacking in culture. For instance, on the same page Naipaul makes reference to one of the most widely known of Trinidadians creative cultures in the rest of the world, steel bands and steel band music tied to the tradition of carnival, which he links to its “vigorous” however “slightly flawed modernity.” But, in the tone of Evelyn Waugh, he adds dismissively, “And the city throbbed with steel bands. A good opening line for a novelist or a travel-writer; but the steel band used to be regarded as a high manifestation of West Indian Culture, and it was a sound I detested.” Calypso, which Naipaul apparently unwittingly admits is an original cultural form, is also tied to the local carnival: “It is only in the calypso that the Trinidadian touches reality. The calypso is a purely local form. No song composed outside Trinidad is a calypso. The calypso deals with local incidents, local attitudes, and it does so in a local language” (66).

Obviously, to detest the steel band sound is to detest an essential feature of Trinidadian culture, but the question is why does he detest his native land’s creative culture? Why is the culture produced there so alien to him and he so alien to it? The answer lies in the value system he had long bought into, indeed, that was the only possible outcome of his colonial education, continued and apparently reinforced after he emigrates to the colonial center for further training: he is stained by standards imported from abroad, from England in particular, and his vision of himself and his homeland is handicapped forever. In Naipaul’s view of the local response to creative people (such as writers, of course), “such people had to be cut down to size, or, to use the Trinidad expression, be made to ‘boil down’. Generosity—the admiration of equal for equal—was therefore unknown; it was a quality I knew only from books and found only in England” (35). This very telling moment is effectively understood in light of Naipaul’s following statement from a 1971 interview with Adrian Rowe-Evans for the journal Transition:

One of the terrible things about being a Colonial, as I have said, is that you must accept so many things as coming from a great wonderful source outside yourself, and outside the people you know, outside the society you’ve grown up in. That can only be repaired by a sense of responsibility, which is what the colonial doesn’t have. Responsibility for the other man. As a colonial, you must first seek to remove yourself from what you know, and become blest personally, before you can become responsible for others. (57–58)

Here Naipaul regurgitates and appears to blindly accept one of colonialism’s tried-and-true tropes: responsibility. He is a colonial who values those “things” from the perceived “wonderful source outside” himself and in his case that source is no other than England. In this respect, his condescending attitude towards his native culture is consistent with Lamming’s explanation of the role of British hegemony in the cutting down to size of the colonized: “When the exile is a man of colonial orientation, and his chosen residence is the country which colonised his own history, then there are certain complications. For each exile has not only got to prove his worth to the other, he has to win the approval of Headquarters, meaning in the case of the West Indian writer, England” (24). Moreover, Lamming notes, “It begins with the fact of England’s supremacy in taste and judgment: a fact which can only have meaning and weight by a calculated cutting down to size of all non-England. The first to be cut down is the colonial himself” (26–27).

That hegemonic influence is also evident in Naipaul’s response to an engraving made by Charles Kingsley around 1870, which represented the ethnic diversity of Trinidad at that time. Upon his return home in 1960, Naipaul contends, “Today these cultures, coming together, have been modified. One, the Chinese, has almost disappeared; and the standards of all approximate to the standards of those who are absent in the engraving: the Europeans” (46). Given the unconscious way in which hegemony works at its best, it is little surprise that Naipaul ascribes a form of alienation to the Afro-Caribbean, apparently without any inking that he is simultaneously speaking of himself: “This was the greatest damage done to the Negro by slavery. It taught him self-contempt. It set him the ideals of white civilization and made him despise every other” (62). In terms of imitating previous representations, Naipaul defers to Anthony Trollope’s description of the Caribbean Negro “aping the little graces of civilization” offered by the European, a problem he would expound upon in The Mimic Men (1967). Here, he concludes, “In the pursuit of the Christian-Hellenic tradition, which some might see as a paraphrase for whiteness, the past has to be denied, the self despised” (63), and one sees the signs of such self-loathing, such alienation in Naipaul himself. Hence, Lamming seems justified in assailing Naipaul for his out of hand...
denunciation of the Caribbean as philistine. It’s a judgment indicating a limited colonial awareness, a “colonial who is nervous both in and away from his native country” (Lamming 30). It’s the opinion of a writer in exile, akin to Jan Carew’s “honorary marginal”: “The honorary marginal is a supreme mimic and in addition to this quality can perform a literary ventriloquism. He can imitate his colonial master so perfectly that the master hears himself speaking through the servant” (Carew 105).

Of course, Naipaul has managed to acquire all the comforts of privilege and power from his being-at-homelessness, if you will. He has won the greatest of literary prizes and others (he is, after all, a Knight); he has been welcomed into those exclusive honor societies precisely while being a troublemaker who more or less toes the British party line, embarrassing Britain’s and Europe’s former colonies and their representatives in the process. Thus, Naipaul has received many blessings from his exile and marginality and many curses from Caribbean and other critics for his portrayals of former colonized people. Whatever his prejudices though, as vexing as it may be to such critics, Naipaul does at times capture critical matter at the core of Caribbean exile. For instance, he is among the earliest to observe that modernity in Trinidad “means a constant alertness, a willingness to change, a readiness to accept anything which films, magazines and comic strips appear to indicate as American” (40). The “willingness” and “readiness” hint at the certain voluntary aspect of Caribbean exile, which is partly our concern here. Also, by pointing to US influence he is quite observant of the changing of the guard, so to speak, which has tremendous, further exteriorizing implications for local culture.

Indeed, there is some irony in the fact that Naipaul perceives externalization as a condition that may precede emigration. For example, writing of A Bend in the River, Said puts the case succinctly: “By the end of the novel—and this of course is Naipaul’s debatable ideological point—even the natives have become exiles in their own country, so preposterous and erratic are the whims of the ruler, Big Man, who is intended by Naipaul to be a symbol of all postcolonial regimes” (49). The problem is that in his patented rush to remorseless judgment of “independent” politicians and states, Naipaul elides other causes of that externalization, such as the salient influence of the former colonizing power. That said, he is just in declaring, “Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands” (64). Earl Lovelace is among Naipaul’s generation of writers who has taken up that challenge, but who has remained comparatively underappreciated, which may be due in part to his commitment to writing, despite his own migrations, of the Caribbean for the most part from the Caribbean. That is, unlike Naipaul, wherever Lovelace writes from physically, even when he excoriates Caribbeans for their foibles, he appears to do so with the care for and in the interest of their national and cultural (trans)formation.

2. Interrogating Caribbean Flight: Salt

What is this new odour in the air
that was once salt, that smelt like lime at daybreak...

Derek Walcott, “Preparing for Exile.”

In his treatise on the function of exile in Caribbean Modernist discourse, Writing in Limbo, Simon Gikandi proposes that many of the first wave of acclaimed Caribbean writers used exile “as an instrument for transcending the prison-house of colonialism” (34). He adds: “In both a psychological and an ideological sense, exile would be adopted as an imaginary zone distanced from the values and structures of colonialism.” Born three years after Naipaul, also in Trinidad, Earl Lovelace appears to be closer to such pursuits. The specific incitement of Caribbean exile seen in Naipaul, captured effectively in the sentiment that to think one must go abroad, is also a central focus of Lovelace’s Salt. It is one of the novel’s many themes suggesting Lovelace has much in common with the group of Caribbean writers and critics who, as Gikandi puts it, “define colonialism as essentially a state of perpetual exile” (36). But in Salt Lovelace doesn’t merely represent exile, he interrogates it along with its exteriorizing causes as the foundation for developing a progressive, post-independence national consciousness. It is clear from the outset that one of the narrative’s interests is grounding Trinidadian consciousness on the island as opposed to in flights of fancy abroad, precursors of actual flight. This is figured in the parable of Guinea John, whose children curse him for not passing down to them “the mysteries of levitation and flight” (3). Guinea John’s symbolic destination is Africa, likely a reference to the Fan-Africanist, Rastafarian influenced desire of some Afro-Caribbeans for repatriation to Africa, but his appearance in a dream to his daughter Titi is really the occasion for a caution to all islanders about where their real future lies: “So, because now their
future would be in the islands, he preferred not to place temptation in their way by revealing to them the mysteries of flight.

The ramification of the temptation of flight, dislocation, is played out in the story of the novel’s central protagonist, Alford George, whose alienation develops from his strong desire to go abroad, in a pattern resembling that described by Ngugi wa Thiong’o in *Decolonising the Mind*, involving “the disassociation of the sensibility of [the colonized] from his natural and social environment” (17). Such alienation, wa Thiong’o insists, is “reinforced in the teaching of history, geography, music, where bourgeois Europe is always the centre of the universe.” The problem begins at home in Alford’s identification with the adventures and world of heroes from the books he reads, an identification that begets his dream “of one day going out into the vastness of that world” (27). The son of a former British colony, that world, “the world” (27/34), inevitably means England, which he feels bound for, the ultimate destination where he would test the initial success of and further develop his refinement, further “purify himself and straighten out his defects” (34). From a psychological perspective, Alford is more bound by that world than for it, especially since, even while he remains at home in Trinidad, he “feels himself a stranger far from home.” He’s a prisoner of an externalizing colonial mentality that persists even after independence and that precedes actual emigration, of a value system so dominated by the supremacy of European culture and standards in his mind that there’s no issue of whether or not local standards can even measure up. At this point, there’s hardly room in Alford’s value system for local considerations. Thus, when as a teacher he takes his pupils on a tour of their island the object lessons are the insignificance and inferiority of their world relative to the larger world and, therefore, the desirability of leaving: “He filled them with the idea of the bigness of that world, with the idea of escape” (62). Alford’s budding literary imagination also creates a schism in his relationship with his brothers and father, the former suspecting him of “using his reading as a trick to escape the chores required of him” (27), and the latter suspicious “that he was harbouring a traitor [. . .] whose reading had given him the idleness to plot and the distance for contempt” (27). The growing variance among them is only exacerbated by Alford’s attempts to appease them by being amenable to the physical requirements of their world: “All he managed was to disclose an ineptitude that confirmed for them that he was indeed an alien, an inferior, weakened by reading and the treason of his dreams, not quite fit for the rigours of the life they had mastered” (28).

Alford’s ambition and Anglophilia grow and further his alienation when he begins attending public school. For example, the narrator describes his failure among his schoolfellows at particular sports inherited from the British, cricket and football (soccer). But, in a moment reminiscent of Naipaul’s own motivations and assessment of the predicament that drives would-be native intellectuals away from their nations, Alford reasons that it is not his failures that vex his classmates as much as “his ambition to be better than his gifts dictated” (30). The point is that whereas his gifts at physical sports may be limited, his mental talents are not, and his ambition in the latter area presumably surpasses the horizons offered by his island nation. Alford’s developing Englishness is indicated, for instance, in the nickname he is given by his classmates, Sir, after he becomes both a teachers’ pet and prefect of sorts: “It was his air of Simness, his stiff, grave, wooden intensity, as much as his greater size, that in the beginning set him apart from his fellows and kept him an outsider for most of his school days” (29). That “Simness” alludes to the British colonial school system still in place on the island, but the demeanor connoted by the “air” of his Simness, his stiffness and such, is more indicative of his copying English mannerisms. Indeed, the phrase “in the beginning” suggests there are more than these initial exhibitions that will contribute to his greater dislocation, and we shall see these. But first, what Alford displays here through his body language is informed by a key passage from Austin Clarke’s memoir, appropriately titled *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack*. It’s a moment that similarly highlights the perilous operation of colonial hegemony in Caribbean public schools, though in this case the mimicry is of verbal language: “Our masters at Combermere spoke with the accents of the gentlemen of England. When one of the younger masters passed the examination, the Intermediate to the Bachelor of Arts Degree, External [. . .] all of a sudden he became very intelligent and educated. Because he was our master and we too wanted to be educated, we spoke like little black Englishmen” (49).

It perhaps goes without saying that both types of imitation signify Caribbean people without the sense that their own language, whether physical/liminal or verbal, can signify their intelligence and be the bearer of real culture. Both types of imitation indicate the two interlinked forms of colonial alienation
described by wa Thiong'o as "an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment" (28). Clarke continues,

We had in our midst the British Major, a 'true-true' English man, on whom to pattern the strange inflections of spoken English. We could not know, because of the vast Atlantic which separated us from England, that the speech we were imitating was really working-class London fish-seller's speech. We, the black aristocracy of an unfree society, exchanged our native speech for English working-class patois. (49-50)

The irony here is potent, and given the potential for alienation it begs the question of where the language of freedom for this "unfree" society is to be located if the would-be leaders of the society perpetuate their own imprisonment, their own othering, by the myth of the Queen's English. The corollary of this displacement of local language in Salt occurs when Alford begins practicing for his prospective life in England: "There was so much to learn. He needed to improve his vocabulary, to get the correct pronunciation of words, to have quotations at his fingertips. He needed to be able to talk of novels, the theatre, opera, to know what wines to choose when he went to restaurants in England" (33). The hidden assumptions about English culture and the local lack thereof underlying Alford's attitude toward language seen here have grave, transporting consequences:

At times though, the language defeated him. His thinking was in another language and he had to translate. He began to speak more and more slowly to make sure that his verbs agreed with his subjects, to cull out words of unsure origin and replace them with ones more familiarly English. Caribbean words like jook, mamagny and obzocky all had to be substituted. He felt his meanings slipping away as he surrendered his vocabulary. But, he had to surrender meanings; he couldn't take his words out into the world.

In other words, a variation of Lamming's formulation, Alford's colonial orientation effectively cuts him down to size and makes him an exile even while he still resides in his own land.

Lovelace challenges the paradigm of intellectual exile—the notion of going abroad for development in particular—by confining Alford and his exilic conditions to the island. This restriction also calls to mind the consequences of the Caribbean brain drain, the literal flight of its best and brightest minds abroad, resulting in the loss of intellectual capital and skilled labor that may be otherwise put to use for the benefit of the local economy and culture. Despite the best initial intents, it's a flight from which too few return, and even those who do, do so irreparably damaged by the rupture. In the interest of immediately helping his financially s/trapped family, Alford postpones going to England, which is itself a reversal of one of the main causes of Caribbean emigration, even of the would-be intelligentsia: helping the family financially. Given his unfulfilled desire to go abroad, Alford still exhibits classic symptoms of alienation. He remains at home, but is half-detached for some time, in a mode similar to Said's "median state" (49). During this time he is nostalgic and sentimental, not about something of his home nation that he has really lost, but about things in the larger world, in England, that he had only imagined and never actually experienced. This warped nostalgia is further evidence of his psychological extremity, a sort of madness. The idea/ideal of going abroad is still central in his imagination, as is detailed in the chapter titled "Becoming a Madman":

As he walked with his buttoned-down sleeves, a stern vexed melancholy surrounding him, using the words he had learned, the bigger the better, recalling the quotations he had memorized, becoming something of a spectacle in the town, until the headmaster Mr Penco, wanting, as he told Alford, to put to use the expertise he had acquired at Training College, asked him to teach the College Exhibition class. At first Alford was reluctant to accept, believing that it would identify him too closely with permanence at a time when he was still unwilling to give up the idea of going abroad. (55)

At this point Alford's values are still colonial; thus, his motivation for accepting the job involves projecting his external aspirations onto his students: "he took it, as a project for the focus of his energies, his force, his anger, as a challenge that would give more meaning to his waiting and allow him to help at least a few children escape the humbling terror of the island" (55).

One of the ways in which Lovelace disputes the exile encouraging development ideal is by having Alford's real growth, his shift from hegemonic values, take place at home. Alford eventually becomes disillusioned with the colonial mechanisms
and structures of awareness that produce going abroad imaginatively and physically, and it’s in challenging that structure that he begins to find his own voice. After some nineteen years as a teacher, he becomes enlightened about the problematic system he helps to perpetuate:

What redeemed this system? How many [students] did escape? How many did in fact win a College Exhibition? In all the years the school had been preparing students for the examination, three of them had won College Exhibitions. Those left behind were the failures, the dregs. He realized that saving two or three, if you could call it saving, was not enough for his life’s vocation. If he was to go on, he would have to begin afresh to prepare children for living in the island. (76)

His attempt to prepare the children for island life includes, among other things, “his objective now to root them in their world” (88) as opposed to uprooting them and transporting them abroad even while they remain at home. That rootedness includes an emphasis on local culture’s oral narrative tradition: “He introduced his class to literature by having his students tell and discuss Anancy stories.” Additionally, “he made them sing and discuss the structure and content of calypso.” (88). In another inspired moment signifying his new awareness, a stark contrast to his early formed, constricted views of the world, Alford realizes that his newfound mission must include work to make the island “a place where people didn’t have to leave to find the world” (90). Interestingly, given this objective, the first significant project that comes to his mind is to organize a band for carnival, the very manifestation of local culture. Alford’s authentic intellectual formation, then, is grounded in local realities, and the novel’s vision is one not merely of transforming those difficult realities, but of attempting to transform them by turning to native resources. Alford’s transformation is therefore correlative in nature to the conditions for the termination of exile theorized by Michael Dash: “The end of exile, the triumph over the estranging sea, is only possible when the subject feels his or her bonds with the lost body of the native land. The ego-centered attitude of savior or reformer must yield to the humble realization that the discourse of the island-body is more powerful” (332).

3. Tribulations of Living Abroad at Home: Tide Running

The psychology of the dispossessed can be truly frightening.

Chinua Achebe, Home and Exile

Oonya Kempadoo is one the younger generation of Caribbean writers who has taken up the challenge of telling Caribbeans exactly where they stand. Her second novel, Tide Running, captures nicely the latest manifestations of the predicament being explored here. Kempadoo is herself literally a migrating product of the new world order under globalization: British born of Guyanese parents, but raised mostly in Guyana from four years old, she has also lived in the Netherlands, St. Lucia, Trinidad, Tobago, and is presently residing in Grenada. This migrant experience informs her work, especially, it seems, her ambivalence regarding the promise and the pressures of globalization, dominated by the United States. Set around 1998 on Trinidad’s sister island, Tobago, one of the central themes explored in Tide Running is the mental imprisonment and cultural bankruptcy in store for natives of so-called Third World nations when they become connected to and controlled by USA led global market forces. The contest between the two worlds is metaphorically alluded to early in the text with the sea representing the force of the USA and the hills representing the Third World nations or people. At this point, Cliff, the main male character, narrates: “The hills don’t take-on the sea beating-up on they feet. Them hills stand the way they always was” (4). The promise of the USA’s influence includes its power and agenda, for instance, the rhetoric of “freedom”; that promise is suggested when Cliff continues, “If there wasn’ no sea, I must would feel lock-up” (4). He adds: “If I could’a never see it at all, nowhere ’round me, it go be like you lock me up. Drain something out’a me and leave a hole in me chest” (5).

But, the promise of the sea, the freedom promised by the US is ironic. What follows in Tide Running is a story about the shifting nature of national cultures and sensibilities when faced with the pressures of globalization. It concerns the destructive power of the poseur mentality resulting from poverty and the lack of meaningful opportunities, the instability of local culture, and the projection of the imagination and self abroad when the abroad, referred to as “foreign” in the novel, acts as a substitute for such poverty and lack. Such shifting or instability, indeed, the lack of proper
foundations that might allow withstanding the USA’s neo-colonial pressures, is marked in the symbolism of the sea operating upon sand as Bella, the female protagonist and other narrator, speaks of the foundation of her relationship with her husband, Peter: “The difference in our backgrounds—he postwar England, me post-hippy Caribbean [...] the differences and the sameness made us walk softly on that sand. We played with it. Scooped big handfuls, covered our legs, buried each other, rubbed it in our hair. Grew bold together, like children. Knowing it could wash away. Could wash away from right under you” (91). Through their relationship, Peter and Bella represent the collision of two worlds, and they need to be vigilant because the differences may far outnumber the sameness underlying their relationship. In other words, it may not be an equal or balanced relationship. Peter is, after all, British, and he is therefore a foreign importation of the old order who still carries the privileges of the British colonial heritage.

The new, US based order, determined by its exportations, is the greater danger. This is indicated early in the novel when Cliff describes the role of American television interrupting what is left of the postcolonial Afro-Caribbean family: “In we house, Baby Keisha is the everyday smile’a we lives. When we all watching TV, is Keisha that does make us feel like a family. She make us have something that is ours, we own flesh and blood” (10). A strong connotation here is that television in Tobago (and the rest of the Caribbean) is having an impact on the world, as an opiate for the masses, entertainment as a distraction from harsh realities. Ironically, what is portrayed on the screen is not their own, and it threatens whatever bonds of kinship might be otherwise reinforced by conversation among themselves, with their “own flesh and blood.” In fact, precisely because of their television habits, Keisha will very soon not be theirs, as she is externalized from childhood. Part of the problem is that the squalid conditions of their lives are far removed from the romantic and other fantasies of the United States they are spoon-fed. Their family is the antithesis of “that family in Days of Our Lives, he going out to work and she staying home with they lovely rosy baby” (11). The result, then, is that whatever inactivity is induced coexists with a monomaniacal xenomania: an obsessive identification with abroad, and an active projection of their selves abroad.

The sense of being exiled from one’s own home is further reinforced in the complex relationship between Tobago and its larger, more modern or, better, postmodern sister island, Trinidad.

The nature of that relationship may be aptly described as a version of island envy, or small versus big, intra-island complex, reproduced inter-island in the Caribbean. This much is evident when George Antoine, proprietor of the Immortelle Valley Restaurant, tells Bella and Peter of an encounter he had with Vaughn Jagdeo, a business prospector who complains too loudly about government officials in Tobago: “He [Jagdeo] funny, but he not laughing. Carrying on about what they doing to tourism, juking out li’l businessman eye. I tell him he better watch he mouth before they throw him out, you know Trinis is foreigners too” (119). George adds, “Who tell me say that? Is then he start, ‘Foreigners!’ If you hear him, about how Tobago would sink if wasn’t for Trinidad and what-not” (119). The problem is also referred to when Cliff describes lazying away, watching another soap and the surrounding conversation between he and his brother, Ossi:

The big-city Bold and Beautiful music twang out before the KFC ad come on.
We watch.
‘Finga-lickin!’ Ossi rubbing he belly under his shirt. ‘I could eat a piece’a dat now!’
‘Dem brown-skin people is from Trinidad, yuh-know.’
‘Na.’
‘Yeah boy. Dem is Trinis. Watch it again next time, you go see.
Dat is a KFC in Trinidad.’
A Mutual Life ad on now.
‘Some’a dem Trinis does look like black people from foreign.’
(15-16)

Here is Americana simultaneously imported to and exported from the “local” market.

One of the effects of contemporary globalization is the blurred boundary between local and foreign, and here globalization’s subalterns have tapped into or, more appropriately, have been tapped for the foreign market of mass consumption of mass and fast food (KFC: Kentucky Fried Chicken). Having imported this aspect of American culture, Trinidadians now export it to the locals in Tobago. In the process, they have all become processed, in that they have lost some of their unique identity as Trinidadians and Tobagons. As Cliff puts it,

Is true, when them Trinis come over to Tobago, they look like they come from foreign. Even when they ain’ wearing all the Ray
Ban and beach wrap and sporting Carib Beer towel, something does make them look like foreign. The skin look like it don't get much sun. Air-condition skin with darky knees and elbows—even the black-black Trinis. Is something 'bout the hairstyle or the way they walking and smelling a suntan cream. (17)

The reference to air-conditioned skin is one way of marking the distinction between the natives of Tobago and the more “modern” Trinidadian natives, more of whom live and work in buildings with artificially and mechanically cooled air. But in some ways, it is precisely their modernity that causes them to be abroad while still at home, a condition played out when they mimic tourists from the United States, Canada, and Europe by vacationing in Tobago with so much of the accoutrements of the tourists: Ray Ban sunglasses, Carib Beer towel, suntan cream, and such. One imagines that the cultural arrogance of many foreign tourists, who, we are told later, “expect smiles” (120), may be adopted as well.

The “foreign” tale of the two island-cities is furthered when SC (Small Clit), Bella’s childhood friend from Trinidad, pays a visit. Bella describes the gaze of the taxi-men upon SC in the airport scene: “The way they watched her was real hungry-looking in true. This is Black Entertainment Princess come true” (132). The allusion here is to former Black Entertainment Television (BET) hostess, Rachel, who has apparently come to epitomize beauty and the object of desire personified in a woman. There is some irony though in that Rachel was originally from the Caribbean (specifically, Jamaica), but the beauty she now represents back to the Caribbean is heavily filtered through a United States lens. The language of that lens, television, is infused in the description: “they didn’t even have to see her face before the close-up of chocolatey-smooth full features smooched onto their screens [my italics].” The men’s perception of her is only interrupted by olline acts, emanating from her body, which suggest that she is anything but foreign: “Till she cut the Toni Braxton video playing in their heads with one ice-water look and a long steups. They could smell Trinidad on her after that” (132). The “steups,” otherwise known as a kiss-teeth or suck-teeth, localizes her, but not entirely: “Not American but ‘Foreign’ still. Air-conditioned skin, city-style clothes, and a confidence in the way she used a car, all set her apart from the local beauties [my italics].” The setting apart is the critical issue here. Along with being seen through the lens of US television, SC is alienated because of her socioeconomic circumstances that, after all, allow her to play tourist in Tobago. Those socioeconomic circumstances possible in Trinidad are a function of globalization, which underlies the homogenization of Trinidadian city dwellers or, more importantly, middle class workers. This is what Bella means by “the safe middle-class uniform” (134), creating an effect that is “same as everywhere else in the world.” It is a homogeneity constructed by needs of and the need to fit into the market economy: “The women wanne’d too, like in the Mutual Life Insurance ad. Nothing too wild or short. Straightened hair, straight skirts and pumps. Young and Restless blouses and hairstyles.”

An equally disturbing aspect of the pervasiveness of US music videos, soap operas and such, observable in the Bold and Beautiful scene referred to above, is that it suggests readily one of the natural consequences of such domination, even when locals act as substitutes for the real players from abroad/foreign. That is, the commercials for KFC, as all commercials, manufacture an unnecessary desire to consume on a mass scale, or at least on a scale beyond local needs and means. For instance, Ossi does not work, does not appear to want to work, cannot afford Kentucky Fried Chicken, and should therefore be content with what he is able to get to eat by the grace of his mother who is in many ways slaving for the family (the father is and has been absent). She gets up everyday and goes out and tries to find whatever work she can to make a little money, to “catch her hand” as the saying goes in the Caribbean. Yet, because of the desire created in him, when their mother returns home, obviously tired, while they are watching the soap, Ossi asks, “Mammay, yuh bring Kentucky?” (18). The callousness of this act is reinforced as his brother narrates, “Ossi akse, he ain’ even look ‘round at she,” and he therefore seems to deserve the vituperative response he receives from her: “Wha’ de fuck yuh t’ink it is, boy? Yuh t’ink I scrutiny me arse in town all day to bring fucking Kentucky fuh you?” Cliff continues, “Yeah boy, da’ is junk food nuh. Ossi like all dat ole chicken fry up in ole oil.’ I shove out’a the chair and go in the kitchen for me food. ‘And he eat a-ready!” That he ate already confirms that his behavior is really the consequence of an artificially created want versus an actual need. Or, if it is a need, it is a perceived “need” that results directly from the KFC commercial: if he ate already, he shouldn’t still be hungry. But faced with the assumed glamour and superiority of food from abroad and the lifestyle vicariously associated with it, Ossi does not have a meaningful mechanism through which he might filter the fictions of that lifestyle, and the
fiction that he is actually hungry even though his belly is full. This manufactured desire for mass consumption is again demonstrated with the impact of a pizza commercial on Ossi while they are watching Baywatch later: “Dem Amerycan can real eat plenty, boy.” If he watching the man eating pizza, mouth henging” (33). The speaker obsessed with “plenty” here is Ossi and, to be clear, it’s his mouth that is hanging, open with craving.

Ossi is not the only one affected by the commercials: the entire family is. For instance, their sister, Lynette, demonstrates the same condition as Ossi and another aspect of the problem, the threat of local language displacement:

Lynette say she could stay and listen to Oprah [Oprah Winfrey] talk whole day. Sometimes Baby Keisha does say half a word in the TV talk and Lynette does feel real proud, repeat it to the neighbour. When she have a little money she does try to buy [things seen on] TV for Keisha—Ultra Pampers, Pringles, Bounce Fabric Softener, even though the clothes drying stiff on the line, no machine to put them in. (177-8)

TV talk includes that which carries the ideology of consumerism or conspicuous consumption, the new “word” from above, if you will, emitting from the US through television. Such “talk” or Americanism also involves the way in which American English is spoken and consumption and other American based ideals are enunciated liminally, through body language for instance. That Lynette has, like her brothers, bought into the value system of the television programming is disturbing enough. All the more disturbing is that Keisha is at the age when she is most receptive to and apt to be formed by the linguistic and cultural influences she ingests. Those influences include, of course, products from the United States that displace local products consistent with local culture or general lifestyle. For example, there’s the obvious wastefulness in Lynette buying modern products such as fabric softener that are useless given the means of dealing with laundry in Tobago (hand washing and hang drying). In a sense, the text suggests that in the new global economy national borders are meaningless, especially when, through television, the borders of the mind have been crossed and those minds have been effectively conquered. Those conquered minds belong to a new sort of migrant culture where, in the absence of the means of physically going abroad, natives are projected or project themselves abroad, aesthetically, culturally, and otherwise, even while they remain at home: “Lynette feel if she really try, if she had money, she could make Baby Keisha look like foreign” (178-9). This is evidence of the construction of “foreign” or abroad as the more if not the most desirable state or state of being, marking the condition of being protracted but perpetually abroad at home.

The detrimental consequence of the lack of appropriate biological and cultural parenting combined with American hegemony as a substitute is similarly registered when Cliff’s mother visits Peter and Bella after he has run afoul of the law: “I never sit down and wait for no man to give me nothing, yuh know. Everyt’ing I have—is me put it dere. I work hard to feed dem chi’en. Me one. I tell dem stay in de house, I don’t want dem mixing with bad company. Stay inside. Watch TV. Lynette say, dat ain’ go keep dem, she can’t stop dem. But it have no work for dem these days. Cliff need somebody to follow” (211-212). The great irony here, of course, is that by encouraging her children to stay inside and watch TV, the mother essentially abdicates her role as parent to the new “parent” country, the United States. The US’s latchkey syndrome is literally exported abroad, with dire consequences. So, in a sense, also part of the irony is that Lynette is right. TV will not really keep them at home: it will kidnap them and transport them abroad, emotionally, psychologically, and culturally. As the story moves to its conclusion, Bella points to the crucial issue: “How to run through old ways to new, to Foreign and back, without getting caught” (212).

According to Timothy Brennan,

Many words in the exile family divide themselves between an archaic or literary sense and a modern, political one: for example, banishment vs. deportation; émigré vs. immigrant; wanderer vs. refugee; exodus vs. flight. The division between nationalism and exile, therefore, presents itself as one not only between individual and group, but between loser and winner, between a mood of rejection and a mood of celebration. (61)

Furthermore, he writes, the tension behind this division “has led in some recent Third World literature to what Barbara Harlow has called ‘a full-scale counter-hegemonic aesthetics’, with a striking absence of hostility toward ‘modernity’ and an attempt to preserve identity (if not traditional values) by acquiring the technologies, the diplomatic strategies, and the ‘worldliness’ of the former rulers.” Harlow is right in some respects. Tide Running is one of those texts in which there is an absence of hostility toward
modernity. But absent also is any attempt to preserve local identity or the worldliness of the former rulers. This absence along with the apparent absence of any feeling of bond with the body of the native land (Dash's sign of the end of exile) suggest, on the one hand, a continuation of the type of exile exhibited by Naipaul in *The Middle Passage* and by Alford in *Salt* before his transformation. On the other hand, they suggest that in the Caribbean something entirely different and arguably more dangerous is undertow.

**Works Cited**


