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Abstract

While recovering from the shock of having met somebody who has the audacity to describe themselves as a writer, the innocent, in my experience, generally scratches about for a while trying to think of something interesting to say about the curious profession of the person before them. 'Well, it must be quite insecure,' venture some; others might ask, 'Too you do anything else but write?' The more daring come straight to the point. 'I'd write if I had more spare time.' Occasionally somebody will say, 'It must be nice being able to live and work where you like.' This last statement is the one I wish to say a few words about, namely the rather romantic notion that writers can live and work anywhere, and, if you'll excuse the indulgence, I'll make the odd reference to my own situation as a writer born on the small island of St Kitts in the Eastern Caribbean, who came to England as a small child, grew up in England, but who has spent much of the last decade shuttling back and forth between the two places.

Caryl Phillips. Photo: Tara Heinemann.

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While recovering from the shock of having met somebody who has the audacity to describe themselves as a writer, the innocent, in my experience, generally scratches about for a while trying to think of something interesting to say about the curious profession of the person before them. 'Well, it must be quite insecure,' venture some; others might ask, 'Do you do anything else but write?' The more daring come straight to the point. 'I'd write if I had more spare time.' Occasionally somebody will say, 'It must be nice being able to live and work where you like.' This last statement is the one I wish to say a few words about, namely the rather romantic notion that writers can live and work anywhere, and, if you'll excuse the indulgence, I'll make the odd reference to my own situation as a writer born on the small island of St Kitts in the Eastern Caribbean, who came to England as a small child, grew up in England, but who has spent much of the last decade shuttling back and forth between the two places.

If the voice that began, 'It must be nice being able to live and work where you like' decides to press on, it often continues in this fashion. 'You're so lucky being able to move around the world. Look at Joyce in Switzerland, Lawrence in Mexico, Baldwin in France, Ibsen in Italy...' and so on, and so on... What our speaker pictures is a nice villa, a plentiful supply of wine, the writer outside in a straw hat, sleeves rolled up, sunning himself, polishing off a couple of thousand words a day, then taking a siesta. If only it were like this. Joyce, Lawrence, Baldwin and Ibsen all fled societies that were stifling their talent. They were compelled to leave if they wished to develop - they were no longer feeding off their societies, the society was feeding off them. Some writers cannot leave - I think of Pasternak. Others refuse to leave and their talent is gobbled up - I think of Mailer or Capote. Others are expelled by their societies and their talent stumbles - I think of Solzhenitsyn. The relationship between where a writer lives and how he is able to develop his talent is a very delicate one, and it is a relationship which may cause the writer a great deal of soul-searching and heart-

ache. If writers could just live and work anywhere then I suspect the Bloomsbury group and the Left-Bank group, and all other such metropolitan literary clubs and movements, may never have existed. History would record the Tahiti movement, who were opposed by those of the Honolulu tendency, and revolutionary theories of the newly-emerged Majorca school of thought. I would, in the course of this brief address, like to suggest that writers are not free to live and work where they wish, and that when a writer does choose to settle in a new locale it is very seldom a decision arrived at through romance. Writing is a very practical and tactile profession - one feels one's way along tentatively, clutching here, groping at that, clinging to the other. Knowledge of one's own stage of development, coupled with a desire to wrestle with a given society or societies (at either long-distance or close-in) will determine the piece of earth that a writer chooses to settle on in order to continue to wage the battle known as creativity.

Let me look for one second at the case of the Caribbean and Caribbean writers. The movement of native-born writers, generally in the direction of the United States, Canada or Britain, enabled many Caribbean writers to not only find their voices, but afforded them the opportunity to earn a living from their work. This exportation of Caribbean writing talent to the large cities of North America and Europe is by no means a recent phenomenon. The blossoming of talent in the fifties which produced such writers as Wilson Harris, Sam Selvon, Jan Carew, V.S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott, saw them all become exiles and certainly, in the case of at least one of the afore-mentioned writers, they are now sometimes viewed as little more than exotic adjuncts to the larger literary tradition of their adopted countries. For those who remained behind, or left and returned, such as Lamming or Brathwaite or Morris, the literary communities they operate in are smaller than they might be, indeed smaller than they ought to be. Naipaul has suggested that Caribbean writers in the Caribbean stop writing because 'they come to some understanding of the destitution of Caribbean society' and they cannot face it and go on. However, I wonder about the 'dstitution' of those Caribbean writers who live abroad, and continue to draw upon the Caribbean as a central theme, for as an Indian professor of English Literature once said to me, 'Nostalgia can only sustain a writer for so long.' I would like to partner this statement with an old Yoruba saying: 'The river that does not know its own source dries up.' You see, writers do need a people to feed off, they do need to grow and develop by nibbling at the table of a particular society, and it is possible that this continued exportation of Caribbean writing talent, an exportation which goes on until the present day, has in some

ways prevented the region from fully realizing the promise of the fifties.

In Britain, Caribbean writers of my generation, David Dabydeen, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Joan Riley, Fred D'Aguiar, and others, all have different degrees of attachment to the Caribbean. All of our branches have developed, and to some extent continue to develop and grow, in Britain, but our roots are in Caribbean soil. As I said, I think we all have different degrees of attachment to the Caribbean depending upon how old we were when we came to Britain, how often we get back, what family we have there, what family we have in Britain, and so on. Personally speaking, I have now had ten years of 'going back' and forth to the Caribbean, although it would be disingenuous of me to not mention that I have worked more consistently and, in some cases, more comfortably in Britain. However, in the last couple of years I have noticed things about British literary and non-literary society that have started to worry and irritate me.

My main observation concerns the lack of time that is afforded a writer in Britain, irrespective of background, subject-matter, or country of origin, to develop. As British publishing has become increasingly dominated by New York, it seems that New York-style pressures have descended onto the shoulders of British-based authors. The English writer Cyril Connolly had a recipe for how an author should deal with such pressures. The author should, he claims, 'refuse all publicity which does not arise from the quality of his work, [to] beware of giving his name to causes, [to] ration his public appearances, [to] consider his standards and the curve of development which he feels latent within him, yet not [to] indulge in gestures which are hostile to success when it comes...' Well, this is easier said than done, and especially in a country where writers are generally quickly embalmed and exhibited as cultural functionaries or celebrities on show. For the writer, particularly the young writer, a willingness to acquiesce to such treatment can stifle a nascent talent.

There is, of course, an additional pressure in Britain if one happens to be black. The missionary approach - the idea that the black writer should explain black people to white people - dominates the thinking of some publishers and many critics. Both this pressure, and that of unwelcome and over-attentive publicity, are antithetical to any real development in a career that has the rare benefit of longevity. As Thomas Hardy said, 'the important thing is not the vulgar applause at the outset - that comes to all - but the general feeling at the exit.' My growing feeling that I needed a long sabbatical from Mrs Thatcher's Britain, and my desire to try and spend more time in the Caribbean as a resident and not a visitor, led me to last year pack my bags, rent my

house in London, and get on a plane for St Kitts. I should explain that St Kitts, being a small island in the Eastern Caribbean of 68 square miles and having a population of 35,000, is hardly typical of the region as a whole. Trinidad, Jamaica, and Barbados all boast University campuses and the attendant benefits of bookshops and a more vigorous cultural and social dynamic. St Kitts is, however, typical of the smaller islands of the Caribbean, the newly independent Third Worlds within the Third World.

And so I left and arrived with my typewriter and practically everything else that I owned. As always the first few days back in the Caribbean were a pleasure. I felt warm, I could see the horizon, I swam in the sea, lay on the beach, chatted with old friends, drove up into the hills, and then up to the far end of the island to the village where I was born. But I also had to remind myself that I had work to do. St Kitts was no longer a holiday retreat, it was home now. I tried to impose some routine on the day. My family stopped seeing so much of me, and eventually my Great-grandmother asked what I was doing with my time. 'Writing,' I said. She sneered. 'That's not real work.' She glanced purposefully in the direction of a canefield. I got the message. My uncle leaned against the counter of his shop. I reminded him yet again that I write for a living. 'So you're like me then,' he said. 'You don't do anything and you don't start until noon.'

The lack of understanding of the role of a writer was in many ways liberating, but after a month or two things became rather wearing. It seemed to me that the only members of society who were afforded any status were cricketers and calypso singers. I did not resent this, for I love both calypso and cricket, but what I found myself yearning for was some kind of affirmation of my values. In short, I began to resent the lack of interest placed on the arts. Poetry, theatre, music, literature, painting, these activities were not encouraged or cherished, except by the odd eccentric individual. Certainly a Government which seven years ago saw the local library burn down, and has still done nothing about building a new one, cannot claim to have any interest in literacy, let alone the arts. It is true that education and health should be the priorities for any newly-emerging nation, but I believe that just as one deserves good roads and hospitals in exchange for taxes, one also has the right to expect facilities which feed the soul - in other words, a theatre, a decent newspaper, a decent bookshop, and yes, god forbid, a library. On St Kitts the sole Government concession to the arts is the cable television network with fourteen channels of American programming twenty-four hours a day.

Clearly much of my life, living and writing in the Caribbean, centres around a frustrating desire for values in the society to change. Essen-

tially I'm involved in a political struggle for I feel that a shift in the balance of power might facilitate change in the direction I would like. However, this political struggle frustrates me almost as much as the struggle of living and writing in Britain. Of late I have begun to wonder about the situation of the Barbados writer, George Lamming, who seems to have turned so much of his energy from writing towards political activity. I suspect this is as a result of having once more made his home in the often stifling socio-cultural climate of the modern-day Caribbean. It seems clear to me that because of my time in Britain I laboured under the illusion that indifference towards the writer was a blessing, a freedom that would enable the writer to get on with his work. I now know better, that indifference is as large a curse as over-attention and that writers cannot survive in societies that deem them worthless, they tire of the effort, they fall silent, they make a premature peace with mediocrity, they stop writing and the shroud of loneliness descends.

So what to do now? I feel as though I have exchanged membership of an exclusive and self-aggrandizing literary club for the attempted membership of a club that does not really exist, for Caribbean writers do not meet regularly on a regional basis, read each others' work and reviews, talk, or help each other. The geographical limitations are obvious, yet at the same time I know that the Polish poet Milosz is correct when he writes, 'no one inflates himself or runs away from his centre, his inner point of support, without paying for it.' I ask myself where is this inner point of support, for I have no desire to run off and discover a place or country with a peacefully uncomplicated, preferably exotic, backdrop. As I suggested at the onset of this talk, writers are not free to do such things for they are held or repelled by specific societies. The longer I thought the clearer it became that the inner point of support that Milosz writes of lies, for me, in both Britain and the Caribbean. Out of the tension between these two places is spun this thing called literature. And although the price to be paid for continuing to have an attachment to both places is high in terms of emotional, financial, and material cost and the resultant sense of almost permanent displacement, this price is not as high as that which would be demanded from me were I to beat a romantic retreat to the unmarked, unnamed, much-imagined villa in the sun where inevitably, like the river that does not know its own source, the writer's pen begins to dry up. In a sense my experiment, my living and writing in the Caribbean, as well as in Britain, is like being in love. You don't love somebody for what they are, you learn, after a while, to love them in spite of what they are. Failure to do so leads to nutritional deficiency.

I just want to say a final quick word about a great man of the Caribbean, possibly the finest critical intelligence the region has produced. Two weeks ago C.L.R. James died at the venerable age of eighty-eight. On glancing back through some of his writings I came across the following quote which seems a very apposite one with which to close my talk. 'It is when you are outside, but can take part as a member, that you see differently from the ways they see, and you are able to write independently.' If the new Caribbean writers, whether resident in Canada, Britain or the United States, can find the strength to hang on to both here and there, to, in C.L.R. James's words, 'take part as a member' even though they may occasionally feel 'outside', then the future of Caribbean writing will be healthy and one day soon I may feel that I do not wish to add the appendage, 'An Experiment' to my title - one day soon I may feel that the appendage should consist of the bolder and more positive words, 'Living and Writing in the Caribbean: THE REALITY'.