



Voices
from the
Gaps

Exile According to Julia by Gisèle Pineau

Exile According to Julia is a novel about longing to belong, longing for stability, longing for a sense of self, a home. This autobiographical work is Gisele Pineau's third novel and a beautiful tribute to the grandmother who provided her with pieces of this precious belonging, and in return Pineau bears tender witness to this grandmother, "Man Ya" (a.k.a. Julia of the title), revealing her joyous secrets of life in the process.

The novel begins by recounting how the narrator's own parents met and came to live in Paris in search of better opportunities for their children, far from their roots in Guadeloupe. Being a black child, the narrator feels overwhelmingly rejected by France and longs to live in a country where she is not merely a "bamboula," or "negresse a plateau." Something vital is missing from her life—not only is she suffering from alienation but she is also longing for the calming, substantive presence of cultural authenticity. Enter the narrator's paternal grandmother, Julia (affectionately called "Man Ya"), a benevolent healer who "clear[s] mines from the minefields of existence" (pp 58).

The family has decided to "deliver" Julia from the hands of proverbial evil (Asdrubal, "the Torturer," her abusive Antillean husband), but the problem is that Julia doesn't want to be in Paris, and rather than feel "delivered" she desperately longs for home, for Guadeloupe, for Astrubal. We learn that Astrubal, a WWI veteran, is actually tormented by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, leaving him to rehash the horrors of war in the fathomless silence of the night. In reality he loves Julia-- he loves her freshly brewed coffee, "the way she browns meat, the way she cooks rice and peas. He loves to wear the shirts that she washes, starches and irons. He loves everything good she does, all her little tricks to make something good from very little" (pp 20)... and yet he can't seem to stand the sight of her and beats her mercilessly, perhaps resenting her impossible peace of mind.



Translated by Betty
Wilson
Publisher: University of
Virginia Press, 1996

Reviewed by April
Adamson



Exile According to Julia by Gisèle Pineau

Once away from this tyrant, much of the novel explores Julia's concerted (if unsuccessful) attempts to acclimate herself to France. She cultivates a garden, tries to learn to speak, read and write proper French, learn the layout of the city, etc. But Julia is quite consistently unhappy. She disdainfully likens the Parisian sun to "a fat, lazy pig that gets up grudgingly"-- contrasting its slow, slovenly rise with the more brisk sunrise of the tropics. Although Julia is illiterate and somewhat provincial, such colloquial expressions are subtle and comedic, illustrating Julia's keen insight into the nature of things. Julia is also keenly aware of the nameless void within all her "exiled" grand children, growing up "in the prison of these concrete houses [of Paris], losing the way to good sense, wandering about so far from the essences of life [...] dulling feeling, taste and touch" (pp 94). Julia is silently determined to set an example for her grandchildren. She takes pleasure in rising early, scrubbing, sweeping, weeding, looking after things and reconciling herself to the earth; giving the "best part of herself with each word, thought, action" (pp 47).

With her humble servitude lives an inexorable dignity, and it is obvious that Man Ya represents to her grandchildren all things eternal and whole: generosity, intuition, understanding, respect, honesty, a love of hard work, and deep religious consolation, not to mention delicious Creole cuisine.

The narrator appreciates the presence of Man Ya with an awareness that only children raised without constant proximity to this older generation can-- cherishing her with a reverence for that which is transient. "Going to bed, I look at her differently. She is praying, kneeling on both knees. I listen and watch her intently: her words, her sighs, her hand, which passes over her face. I tell myself that some day very soon, she will not be there when I wake up. To escape from life's woes, she will have asked the Lord for two great wings and flown away" (pp 53). When Man Ya eventually does leave the family and return to Guadeloupe, the children are bereft. Julia leaves behind an absence that is almost as powerful as her presence was, and the children honor it prayerfully.

Pineau includes over thirty letters that the narrator writes to Man Ya during her absence, to which Man Ya never responds. The narrator seems to use creative writing to reconnect with the essence of Man Ya, imagining what her life is like back in Routhiers; "I am writing Julia's tales and legends..." (pp 106), savoring flavors, textures, temperatures, longing. Just as the children are left wondering about the fate of Man Ya, so is the reader. We speculate hopefully that she is safe back home in Guadeloupe, looking after a newly docile Asdrubal while making chocolate tea and fertilizing her vanilla patch in remotely distant warm evenings. Meanwhile, we as readers accompany the narrator on her discovery of language, of the deliciousness of words.



Exile According to Julia by Gisèle Pineau

Following the resignation of French President Charles de Gaulle in 1969, the narrator's family decides to leave France and return to the Antilles. The family lands in Martinique for a few years before returning to Guadeloupe. Once in the Caribbean, the narrator still does not feel at home, and remains on the outside. She is not sexually advanced enough to fit in with Martinique schoolgirls, but is too sophisticated otherwise with her pleated skirts and Parisian "RRR's." Additionally, the narrator itemizes all the subjectively distasteful aspects of Martinique: the garish colors, the enormous flying cockroaches, flesh-eating mosquitoes, wretched mabouyas (little frogs), the tales of witchcraft and the ceaseless advances of over-sexed men. The narrator reconciles herself to each, even the cockroaches (which she eventually recognizes to be a sign of rain-- sometimes letting one escape out of pity, because she sees that it is "nothing more than a hunted creature, a heart beating wildly, in a shield of ugliness..." pp 147). Frequently, Pineau slips from the first person narrative into the second person, drawing the reader directly into the experience to great effect, allowing us to taste and touch this Martinique.

Eventually the family leaves Martinique for Guadeloupe-- for Man Ya; leaving behind "the dust of dreams, [the] empty spaces in your heart, like those light colored spots that are left on the walls when pictures are taken down" (pp 159). The grandchildren discover that the spell of their childhood in Guadeloupe was somehow broken, that "everything now seemed vulnerable and fragile" (pp 161). No longer do they salivate over the sweet puddings of youth, preferring instead to wait patiently for the salty substance of the Creole midday meal (savory courtbouillon fish stew). Man Ya is in her element now—laughing, gardening, sharing and delighting in her Guadeloupe, imperfect though it may be. The narrator watches Man Ya intrepidly climbing trees in spite of her old age, impishly proving that wisdom and heritage infinitely outweigh the French alphabet, which Man Ya was never able to learn.

Exile is an exquisite novel full of sensory detail and emotional clarity. There is a woody organic style to Pineau's writing-- she can effortlessly string together somewhat odd collections of words, managing to tap into the way the mind wanders by casually passing her hand over the dreamy landscape of subconscious thought. At the times when the narrative transitions into Julia's first-person perspective, Pineau maneuvers with precision and depth, harnessing the many dimensions that her grandmother undoubtedly possessed. We are left with the knowledge that the narrator's sense of "belonging" is not necessarily born of one city or a single cultural identity—sometimes the essence of "home" can be found in the lingering spirit, heritage and love of one person. Man Ya is alive and wholly present, even when she is gone.