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Jamaica Kincaid’s Unnamed

Kincaid declares in just the first few lines of In History that she is dissatisfied with contemporary notions of history. She is incapable of comfortably situating herself within the grand narrative of popular history; incapable of determining her relationship to men like Columbus and Linnaeus, two distillations of the colonial shaping of the past. Her discomfort and alienation is evinced by a flood of unanswered and uncertain questions that she anxiously expels in one breath: “what should I do, how should I feel, where should I place myself?” (1). And yet, Kincaid’s very critique seems at first glance to fall into the same trappings that she accuses history of, taking a seemingly myopic perspective in narrating two famous stories from the seat of imperial power to the exclusion and erasure of everyone else.

Instead of offering any direct answer, Kincaid digresses into the apparently unrelated tales of Columbus’s discovery of the Americas and Linnaeus’s work in botanical classification, descending at points into almost inane detail. Throughout it all, however, Kincaid never names anyone but those in power, placing in her work only names that mentally invoke decaying oil portraits of dead old Europeans in history textbooks. Everyone else is demoted down to linguistic detours – for example, “people who look like me” (3) – that relegate them into serving only as background to that European foreground. She takes an indirect and even counterproductive path in repeating the very stories that have dominated history in an attempt to subdue that very domination: why, if the project is to interrogate history’s ties to power, only invoke the names of the powerful?

When describing the life of Columbus, Kincaid intentionally leaves the people that he colonizes vague, defined only in relation to their colonizer. While Columbus gets an origin story as a boy who “wandered up and down the Genoese wharf, fascinated by sailors” (1), no information at all is presented about the people Kincaid actually wishes to reveal to history. A similar trick is played with Linnaeus’s nomenclature when Kincaid quotes him in a large block, including names such as “cassias, acacias, tamarinds, pepper-plants, Anona, manicinilla, cucurbitaceous trees and many others” (6), again invoking tomes of academic writing not so far from history books. Even when Kincaid mentions the time before such an objective standard, no traditional names are brought up, but rather just mentioned in vague terms in contrast to Linnaeus.

It is only at the end of her essay that Kincaid presents her most direct acknowledgment of this contradiction, transforming the lack of unheard voices and untold stories from an uncomfortable absence into a didactic mechanism that further clarifies the personal nature of her project of creating a new understanding of history. This recognition of her own inability to escape the limitations of history is given in the closing of her telling of Linnaeus’s story, starting with him and ending with her:

… so too then does an invisible thread, a thread that no deep breath or large volume can contain, hang between Carolus Linnaeus, his father's desire to give himself a distinguished name, the name then coming from a tree, the Linden tree, a tree whose existence was regarded as not ordinary, and his invention of a system of naming that even I am forced to use? (7)

The existence and acknowledgment of this “thread” casts the rest of the essay in a new light; the absence of those away from traditional authority is now seen as an actively provocative choice that encourages an active search for the narratives that are missing. The stories of Columbus and Linnaeus become less important as ends in and of themselves but begin to function as reliefs against which the lack of other stories is made apparent. By ending this way, Kincaid invites the audience to partake in the act of deconstructing and rebuilding history, starting from her work and taking exactly note of the limitations that she too is bound by.

The strongest manifestations of these missing narratives in Kincaid’s essay are the presence and absence of names. For her, history is modeled in such a way that naming must come first, as into order “to have knowledge of things, one must first give them a name,” (2). In that sense, as Columbus names the land that he believes he discovered, he starts the history of that land, disregarding and discarding the old knowledge of those who lived there before; such an act is exactly why Kincaid is questioning history, and serves as an instructive moment for the reader, showing precisely why history can be incomplete. Columbus “named places, he named people, he named things” (2), reflecting the idea that “the people were new, the flora and fauna were new … it was the New World,” (1). Kincaid deliberately avoids naming those original people, keeping the focus directly on Columbus himself. By using this idea of names and finally invoking the new European name for the Americas, Kincaid subtly intimates her point that history is necessarily attached to a system of power: the colonizer’s history is the tale that gets told.

If Columbus created names that she is bound to use, such as the “New World”, Kincaid is also barred from knowing the original names of things. She deliberately avoids the mentioning of original names before the creation of an “objective standard” (7), instead leaving the peoples and civilizations of the past as shadowy inscrutable figures. Compare the circumnavigation of the phrases “same things by a name that made sense to them” (7) or “all who look like me” (7) to the incredible specification of Linnaeus’s name, to which Kincaid dedicates an entire paragraph of claims as precise as “Linnaeus is the latinized form of the Swedish word lind” (5). The purpose of this is to provide insight into what history can actually reveal, and what it cannot; by letting one group remain unnamed and delving into the etymology of the other, Kincaid illuminates that those former groups are lost to history.

Even when Kincaid detaches from Columbus and Linnaeus to talk about herself and her history, she is still bound by the vocabulary that they have forced upon her. She describes herself as being from “a place called Antigua” (3), somewhere that she will speak of “as if no one has ever heard of it before,” (3). But Antigua isn’t an indigenous name – it is derived from Spanish and it is given by Columbus; it is only possible for her to have originated there as a result of the Atlantic slave trade and the exploration of Columbus. A similar effect occurs when she invokes the name Vermont (3), which itself is pulled from French. It is a reminder of the imperial past that shapes the present; if Antigua invokes thoughts of the seventeenth-century slave trade explicitly, Vermont is Kincaid’s reminder that even laundered through both time and distance the center of history is still those with power. Even more, the lack of reference to indigenous people here also marks Kincaid’s limitations when operating in the scope of history. The narratives of the oppressed are separated, fragmented. She omits them in the essay and focuses on her own history out of necessity: while, because of the nature of history, she can easily speak of Columbus, she doesn’t have the history of all the past cultures which were taken and emptied by him, either in Antigua or in Vermont. The result is a picture of isolation, where even the idea of “ all who look like me” (1) is confused again, muddled by the limitations of the scope of history.

Kincaid is keenly aware of her own incomplete perspective as well, writing that even as she “can say all this in one breath or in one large volume,” (7) the thread that she is attempting to unspool is one that “no deep breath or large volume can contain,” (7). This final concession that she is bound by the history crafted by men like Columbus and Linnaeus refocuses the rest of the work and resolves the seeming dichotomy between Kincaid’s project and content. Through the lens that she provides, it is possible to trace back the thread that she mentions through her own work to examine who is missing from the stories that she tells, reversing the dynamic between the named and nameless. Each time when she avoids naming marginalized groups is now transformed into a gesture at the enormity of the project that she has undertaken, and an open invitation to join her in a radical act of creating a new post-history.

Works Cited

Kincaid, Jamaica. “In History.” Callaloo, vol. 20, no. 1, 1997, pp. 1–7. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3299280. Accessed 28 Jan. 2020.