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Jamaica Kincaid’s *In History*

Kincaid makes clear in just the first few lines of *In History* that, somehow, she aims to overturn standard understandings of history. It is unclear to both her and the reader exactly what will be the stakes – personal and academic – of such an upending, evidenced by the flood of unanswered questions that she poses to her audience: “what should I do, how should I feel, where should I place myself?” (Kincaid 1). She begins this idea of an anti-history via the stories of Christopher Columbus and Carl Linnaeus, two distillations of the European shaping of popular history, focusing on their acts of naming things new to them, marking a break from older traditions and truths and revealing the necessary existence of partiality in historical narrative.

For Kincaid, the ability “to have knowledge of things” (Kincaid 2) must be preceded by the act of naming. In that sense, as Columbus names the land that he believes he discovered, he too starts the history of that land, disregarding and emptying the old knowledge of those who lived there before; such an act is exactly why Kincaid is questioning history, and serves as a didactic moment for the reader, showing precisely why history can be incomplete. Columbus “named places, he named people, he named things” (Kincaid 2), reflecting the idea that “the people were new, the flora and fauna were new … it was the New World,” (Kincaid 1). By using this idea of names and finally invoking the new name for the Americas, Kincaid slyly elucidates her point that history is necessarily attached to a system of privilege: the colonizer’s history is the old that gets told.

Linnaeus plays a role in the essay not only as someone who names other things but also as something that is named himself. In a sudden shift away from Columbus, Kincaid moves to the creation of surnames which stem from the linden tree, something seen as natural and old, “grown for generations” (Kincaid 5) as if separate from human affairs. Such acts of naming, such as Linnaeus, the Latin form of lind (Kincaid 5), mark her idea on the socialization of history, that people take the world – the linden tree – and imprint their own agendas unto it. The most explicit that Kincaid gets in explicating her idea of anti-history is the end of the essay, where she links that original naming of Linnaeus to the naming of so many plants by the man, claiming the existence of a thread which hangs between that original goal of distinction that the final “invention of a system of naming that even I am forced to use,” (Kincaid 7). This final acknowledgment of the extent of the naming system is a reminder that even her work is marked by ideology which has masked older, different histories.

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.