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Identity in the Postcolonial Caribbean

In the late 20th century, the Caribbean world, formerly under the now-deceased British Empire's grasp, was freed from entrapment in an era of post-colonialism. What was once named the West Indies by the Empire, the Caribbean is home to a uniquely mixed culture with people of many different backgrounds. The struggles of living under British rule for Caribbeans–both in their homelands and the British Isles themselves–are well documented in the region's literature and music. The works of Jamaica Kincaid, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Louise Bennett (also known as Miss Lou) exemplify a culture in transition, one that is still coming to terms with the aftermath and trauma of British imperialism while also simultaneously carving out an identity that acknowledges their respective nations' histories of oppression and leaves room to grow and move forward as independent, important, and distinctive individuals in a postcolonial existence.

The British Empire, for several centuries, conquered and colonized numerous nations and enslaved millions of people. Such a long and storied reign over many nations, and their relatively recent moments of independence, has left such an impact that the after-effects can still be felt today. After nearly three centuries of rule under the British Empire, the island nation of Jamaica gained independence in 1962. Antigua, another island nation, would also gain full independence almost two decades later, in 1981. Jamaica and Antigua are both still monarchies as part of the Commonwealth realms, even though they are independent and operating under their respective laws and governance. These nations no longer exist under the United Kingdom's rule, although

they still have the current English king, Charles III, as the Head of State. Having a deeply destructive and harmful past to the places it conquered, artists and activists in and from the Caribbean have found the Empire's reign to be an important source of inspiration for their works. These artists–Jamaica Kincaid, Miss Lou, and Linton Kwesi Johnson–all tackle subjects that do not shy away from the realities of what they and their nations were subjected to. Their works are inherently political and challenge the assumed and inherent conceptions of society from Caribbean and British perspectives.

Jamaica Kincaid of Antigua, author of *A Small Place*, writes with such fury about the effects of colonialism on her homeland that one might mistake it for a manifesto calling for dramatic and violent changes for the sake of upending immense injustice. Writing in the second person, she calls out the idea of "tourism," equating it to yet another form of colonialism, continuing the legacy of local peoples becoming subservient to visitors. She argues in her work that tourism reinforces the power imbalances that were supposed to disappear after the end of colonialism, with the economic benefits of tourism unequally distributed among the locals in favor of upholding and propping up this inherently fake identity around a real nation, robbing Antigua of its true identity. As she writes repeatedly at the beginning of *A Small Place*, assumedly to the readers unaware of their role in society or their place historically as an oppressor, "You are on holiday; you are a tourist."

Keith E. Byerman, writer of "Anger in a Small Place: Jamaica Kincaid's Cultural Critique of Antigua," says her use of the English language in *A Small Place* is, in fact, ironic. As he states, "In order to articulate her hostility to colonialism, [Kincaid] must revert to the objectifying language of the English masters. She must linguistically do to them what they have done to the Antiguans" (Byerman 93). Having to articulate the anger and frustration at the sheer

lack of progress her homeland has made in the time since her nation's colonizers gave them their freedom, all in the language that those very colonizers forced upon the Antiguan people, is a deep shame in the sense of how much of Antigua's real, original identity was lost in the process of colonization. She is aware of this irony, of course, and uses it to great effect, particularly when describing just how despicable, how "bad-minded" and "so ill-mannered" they were (Kincaid 34). That is Kincaid putting the British under the same terminology and language they would use against native Caribbean peoples, inverting the message and sharing how, as Kincaid sees it, the Antiguans, the Caribbean peoples, and enslaved individuals of the world truly see their oppressors.

Michael de Freitas, a civil rights activist born in Trinidad and living in England, was quite puzzled at how the native English treated the "West Indians," what Caribbean peoples were called at the time, so poorly in the country. In an archival interview most recently featured in the BBC documentary series *Can't Get You Out of My Head,* directed by Adam Curtis, de Freitas is asked by a white English interviewer why he wanted to stay in England if he had such a poor experience and feelings of his people being unwanted there. His reply is quite telling: "This was the heartland of the whole thing, and one hoped against hope that what one saw was not right" ("Bloodshed on Wolf Mountain," 9:30-9:38). The whole thing, in this case, meaning the British Empire. At that point in history, Trinidad, much like Antigua or Jamaica, was merely an extension of England, and generations of Caribbeans were "weaned on the concept of the Empire," as de Freitas calls it ("Bloodshed on Wolf Mountain," 8:41-8:44). They would only gain independence around the same time as Jamaica, in the early 1960s.

de Freitas here portrays the flipside of what Kincaid does to the English in *A Small Place*. What de Freitas describes is the harsh reality of what many of the colonized populations of the

Caribbean faced when moving to the center of their understood universe. These people suffered under Englishism, a term de Freitas coined to describe the English peoples' attitude toward the formerly colonized, stemming from the “anger and melancholy at the loss of their empire” (“Bloodshed on Wolf Mountain,” 34:36-34:42). Just as with Kincaid and *A Small Place*, de Freitas here is using English as a language for the resistance, or what Byerman calls “an expression that comes only through "mastery" of the language of [the] others,” (95). For both Kincaid and de Freitas, their place on the world stage growing up under colonial rule forced them into using the language of the oppressor, as it was the only viewpoint they ever had from a young age and how they understood the world around them. Their way of taking back their identity, to take control of their lives, is through using that language against the Empire rather than for it.

Using such language, Kincaid and de Freitas similarly called for more violent action against these rulers. Kincaid ponders in *A Small Place* the possibility of turning a Barclays bank with her and the Barclay brothers in it into ashes, asking quite sarcastically, “Do you ever wonder why some people blow things up?” (Kincaid 26). de Freitas would cry out in a civil rights rally in London under much the same breath: “I can't live in this system. I don't like it, I don't want it, I want to destroy everything down to the ground, the lot, ashes. That's what I want,” (“Bloodshed on Wolf Mountain, 1:07:52-1:08:03). For them, violence was a valid and reasonable answer; the hundreds of years of enslavement and torture by the Empire afforded them peace and a feeling of righteousness with what they called for. This line of thinking, however, was not shared among every revolutionary.

The island of Jamaica, a place some thousand or so miles away from both Trinidad and Antigua, suffered similarly under British rule until the early 1960s, around the time when a

young Linton Kwesi Johnson would move with his family from their homeland to Brixton, in London. Growing up under conditions similar to those of Michael de Freitas, he felt unwelcome in what should have been the recently-former motherland of his people. Johnson became a part of the British Black Panthers in secondary school, striking an interest in poetry that would follow him to the present day. Some of Johnson's most famous poems include "Sonny's Lettah" and "Inglan is a Bitch," both of which, quite obviously from their titles, purposefully make use of Jamaican patois rather than standard British English. "Sonny's Lettah" is about a young man's experiences with discrimination and police brutality in London, tackling head-on the harsh realities that immigrants had to face in England at this time. "Inglan is a Bitch," as the title implies, quite literally captures the frustration and anger of the marginalized, taking issue with the asphyxiating reach the empire had among its decolonized immigrants in the country and the menial labor so many of them were forced into just to make ends meet. The "chorus" of Johnson's poem "Inglan is a Bitch" shows this without hesitation: "Inglan is a bitch / dere's no escapin it / Inglan is a bitch / dere's no runnin' whey fram it."

This deliberate use of patois rather than British English is a resistance to the oppressor's language, acting as a kind of inversion to how Kincaid and de Freitas utilize language in their works and efforts. According to "The Construction of Afro-Caribbean Cultural Identity in the Poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson," written by Dilek Sarikaya for the Journal of Caribbean Literature, Johnson, through his poetry, "...awake[s] his people to the present day realities, and asks them to fight for their rights and to retain their identity, and above all, to become conscious of their own race" (Sarikaya 166). His poetry is also highly influenced by dub and reggae music, which, while originating in Jamaica, would also greatly expand and flourish in England, influencing generations of musicians.

Throughout his career, Johnson has frequently performed his poetry to an audience accompanied by music, marking him as a pioneer in dub poetry. He has also frequently collaborated with peers in the genre. Louise Bennett, better known as Miss Lou of Jamaica, has performed with Johnson several times, bringing her take on poetry while similarly expanding into music and stories. Her most notable works include "Colonization in Reverse," which details the immigration of Jamaicans into England after the end of the British Empire's reign, effectively flipping the script and taking over the country and its identity, as seen here in the fourth stanza: "What a islan! What a people! / Man an woman, old an young / Jus a pack dem bag an baggage / An tun history upside dung!" Here, we see a call to action, not in violence or hate, but in taking advantage of the opportunities this newfound freedom in a post-colonial world affords. At the end of the poem, Bennett even makes a very sarcastic reference to just how frustrated the English would be seeing all this unfold before them: "Wat a devilment a Englan! / Dem face war an brave de worse, / But me wonderin how dem gwine stan / Colonizin in reverse." No wars, hardship, or famine could compare with the irony of their own Empire's formerly colonized people taking the reins over their lives and their identities.

Carol Bailey, author of "Looking in: Louise Bennett's Pioneering Caribbean Postcolonial Discourse," finds Bennett's work emblematic of her "central place" within a group of female creative writers in the Caribbean. She draws special attention to how Bennett focuses on "colour, class, and personhood and her turn to vernacular cultures for expressive tools illustrate her specific attention to local concerns [of Jamaicans]" (Bailey 20). This use of Jamaican patois is a direct line to the Jamaican people, for much like Linton Kwesi Johnson, Miss Lou is unapologetically so. She will not contort or dampen what she has to say for any English person to understand the struggles of her people better. Both of them create poetry and art as Jamaicans,

for Jamaican peoples, first and foremost.

While Kincaid and de Freitas expressed their anger in their works and efforts in civil rights far more visceral than Johnson and Bennett, they all shared the same frustration with the damage that colonialism has done to their nations and their people. The injustices, inequalities, and racism, even after the end of the British Empire and firmly in a post-colonial world, still take a toll on the people of the Caribbean. However, thanks to the art and activism of these pioneering figures of post-colonial Caribbean conversation, there now exists a lineage of brave souls who fought to express and portray the reality of their people's struggles without censorship, who can inspire the activists of tomorrow. These individuals fought to express their identity as Caribbean people and not as merely de-colonized, encouraging and calling upon their brothers and sisters to do the same. The British might have had control over their nations back then, but that was in the past, and what they and their people have is the now, and the future to look forward to. Now, these identities can live free, unashamed of who they are, and unwilling to stand aside any longer.

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