

**AN IMAGINATIVE RECREATION OF THE HISTORY OF THE WEST INDIES****¹Daizal R. Samad and ^{2,*}Ashwannie Harripersaud**¹University of Guyana, Berbice Campus, Guyana²Canje Secondary School, Ministry of Education, Guyana**Received 24th December 2021; Accepted 16th January 2022; Published online 21st February 2022**

Abstract

This piece is not meant to solve the puzzle that is the West Indies and the West Indian consciousness. Rather, it attempts to identify the pieces of the complex cultural jigsaw of the place and its people, those that were forcibly brought and who came often under false promises. This paper reaches back imaginatively to those who were our ancestors; it imagines what they thought and think, long gone as they are, remaining as they do. Taken as a whole, this piece attempts to show to us who we were and who we are, what we were and what we are. It demonstrates that our outer initial separate plurality has become our heterogeneous inner singularity.

Keywords: Heterogeneous, History, Lucayos, Racism, Native.

INTRODUCTION

It is our intention in this paper to move behind the façade of history towards a body of consciousness that is authentically West Indian in nature. This is a difficult journey to make for several reasons. First, it is not easy to avoid succumbing to the temptation of being conscripted into the ranks of this or that race, this or that homogeneous entity, and therefore stress the suffering of one or another group as being more or less than that of any other. Second, it is no easy thing to recall ancestral linkages, a miracle of roots, without both hurt at great and tragic loss and without trembling in awe at the fact of survival even in the face of monolithic systems of terror and chaos. Finally, it is difficult in the extreme to look at the footnotes of history, to which the story of the West Indian has been relegated by European historians, and claim history; to look at a discontinuous story line and tell a story. How do we find the voice to tell the story of those who have been silenced with such desperate finality? Therefore, let the voice be muted, the tone hushed. Let the story be told in the dark, in a fractured narrative, from a distance as in an echo, faint as memory. The ancestor of which we write is many-faced, many-coloured, a composite. When we speak of this or that ancestor, see that ancestor as one of many spectres inhabiting the land and the consciousness of the West Indian. This essay, therefore, is not history; nor is it a historical document in the conventional sense; rather, it is but a riddle of psyche, a mystery of muddled consciousness, heterogeneous character. Most of us are acquainted with the journeys of Christopher Columbus and about the state of Spain, specifically, and Europe, generally, in the latter half of the fifteenth century. We know also that early in the morning of October 12, 1492, some Arawakan Indians from the Lucayos people awoke to the astonishment that they had been discovered. On the question of "discovery", there is indisputable evidence today of the immigration of the Vikings to America via Greenland, long before Columbus sailed. It is also indisputable thanks to Ivan Van Sertima's *They Came Before Columbus* (2003)- that Africans had had direct contact with South and Central America, long before Columbus landed.

At any rate, Columbus set eyes on an island that the people called Guanahani Island. There are many accounts of the Lucayos, and we may imagine without too much difficulty what it was like for them to have awakened to the *Santa Maria*, the *Pinta*, and the *Nina*. From all accounts, including Columbus's, this was another Eden. There are many accounts of the peaceful, giving and friendly nature of these Arawaks. What *they* did not know was that the planting of the Spanish flag symbolized a stake driven to the very heart of the culture, their existence. Yet, the first meeting between the invaders and their future victims, between the "savage" and the "civilized", was conducted with amity and inquisitiveness on both sides. They grinned at each other, struggled hopelessly with strange tongues, and fell back on gestures. The newcomers produced red caps and glass beads, with which the Lucayos were delighted and eagerly decked their persons. Running back to their village to fetch gifts in return, the "savages" brought cotton thread in balls, parrots, even household utensils and spare weapons, which were pressed upon the Spaniards. Finding that some boats had already left shore, the Lucayos plunged into the ocean and swam after them, to make sure that no visitor failed to receive a present. The first prophetic note was struck on this day when the Arawaks tried to examine the Spanish swords--they took them by the blades and, through ignorance, cut themselves. Mournfully, they pointed to old wounds made by arrows, and indicated that they had been received in battle with enemies from other islands who had sought to capture them. The existence of the war-like and marauding Caribs (or, correctly, Cariban peoples) thus impinged vaguely on history. The first prophetic note was, as it were, written in blood. The second note was struck early the next day, October 13, 1492. Thirteen canoes, each carrying forty-five natives, came out to the ships. They brought their products for barter. Columbus had never had experience with such unmercenary traders. He noted: "All that they do possess they give for anything which is given to them, so that they exchange things for broken pieces of pitchers and bits of broken glass". A few wore small pendants of gold as ornaments for their nostrils--and they gave these away with the readiness of the truly innocent at heart. The trinkets held a deadly fascination for the Europeans, who solicited by signs the hint that there was more of the yellow

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metal to the southwest. The second prophetic note was struck when Columbus noted in his journal on the 13th: "I was attentive, and took the trouble to ascertain if there was gold". The second note of impending doom was struck in letters of gold outlined in the vermilion of blood. With this began the treachery and rapacity that were to mark the course of European civilizers for centuries. Other ominous notes were struck when, later the same day, Columbus seized seven of the friendly Lucayos to educate them as interpreters, and to deliver them to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella as specimen. The seized youngsters, though frightened, did not seem to have been too resentful; they may have thought it a privilege to depart with demi-gods. They were to be the first slaves, first specimen, first educated. About Hispaniola, Columbus later wrote: "In the interior are mines of metal and the population is without number. Espanola is a marvel". This, then, was the origin--these were our first ancestors: the Arawakan Amerindians. This may be said of them: They were soft and kind, and all they wanted was peace in their islands where there were no beasts of prey, no poisonous snakes. They were eaters of corn-meal and cassava; this grain and that root were grown in abundance. Fruit were a passion to them; and fruit were wonderfully plentiful. They played games with a light ball. Tournaments between villages were staged; the losers had to pay a price--happily, they had to entertain the winners at a feast. We know that they loved to dance, an art at which their sensuous grace was remarkable. Peter Martyr, who heard the language spoken, wrote that the Arawak language was "soft and not less liquid than the Latin...rich in vowels and pleasant to the ear." We too have heard the language and can attest to the truth of Martyr's remarks. When an Arawak tells you, in soft syllables, "Danshikabu", she or he means "I love you". We can, like Columbus, say that they were many--millions. Now, there is no single record of an Arawak (or Carib, for that matter) alive in any of the islands in the archipelago. There are few alive in Guyana, but they are but few. They were the subject of indiscriminate slaughter. The Spanish priest, Bartholomew de Las Casas, records with the kind of stark clarity that only a first-hand witness can, the utter devastation of thousands of Arawak at a time. The Spanish raided villages and as the savages ran to them in greeting, were butchered. Las Casas records the cutting open of children; pregnant women were gutted and fetuses ripped out and bloodily held aloft.

*Without ceremony
They take the axe to the
Tree of Life:
Blade whistles,
Bark weeps.
Fruit caves in on
Its decayed seed and
Ants, red like flames,
Celebrate the murdered
Root.
The flight of white metal
Tears the moon's side;
The wound streams loss and
Moonbeam bends like
An exposed rib unused.
Pierced sky and chopped tree:
Nightmare's origin.
Hope collapses
Like the deflated moon.
This is the dark time,*

*But further darkness
Stalks the land,
And the sky is emptied of stars.*

In remembrance more than in protest, this is what we may say of our first and tragically ignored ancestors: They lived in peace abundant; and they were murdered for little cause.

THE CARIBAN PEOPLES

The Caribans, war-like cousins of the Arawaks, succumbed less willingly to the tyranny of the Europeans. They fought fiercely but were no match for the civilizers and Christianizers. Taken to work on labour-intensive tobacco plantations, they died from want of freedom as they would from want of air. Thousands preferred to leap off cliffs to their death. Even to this day, one precipice in Grenada from which they launched themselves to death is called Le Mourne des Sauteurs, Leapers' Hill. The Caribans were literally exterminated by the French and the English.

To justify this for centuries to come, the white people will call us cannibals. We raided and made war, for that is the nature of the beast, wheresoever the beast may be. We take women, for they are of great beauty and grace. They will provide us children so that we may not be lost in the dark time. But before we are worthy, we must refashion ourselves into their image. We must eat their spirit of peace, play the music of their valour in defeat. Thus, we cut a morsel of the defeated and eat in ceremony and become as one with those which our nature led us to kill. And now we extract a bone with which we will make a flute and play a tune of mournful celebration. Their flesh will become our flesh, their bones our flutes. The victor and victim are enjoined in ceremony, and life continues. Life, in the supple sinew of our children. Whatever you may hear or read in books is not the story; the story is written in the sand. Their stories are as they who tell them. Remember, as you drink piwari and eat cassava bread. Remember.

What is tragic about all of this, apart from the practical annihilation of an entire people (as if anything can be *apart* from that) is that there is little or no sense of our ancestral aboriginal pain or malaise. Even now, the legacy--the nebulous, subterranean legacy of these people, their link to us--has been ignored endlessly, remorselessly unaddressed by historians. In school, we are not given a *sense* of them as living spirits within the castles of our skins. Even something as fundamental as the origins of the word "Caribbean" has failed to permeate our taught and sometimes willingly learned callousness. It is entirely understandable that European historians have ignored or white-washed this aspect of Caribbean history. It is unforgiveable that local historians, with precious few exceptions, have followed the pattern. Our artists, on the other hand, attempt to call their spirits into characteristic being. Wilson Harris, the brilliant novelist, has been most notable in this regard. Martin Carter, Derek Walcott, John Hearne and V.S. Naipaul have given them some attention.

AFRICANS

When sugar replaced tobacco as the main crop (*King Sugar* as Eric Williams calls it in *From Columbus to Castro*) in the West Indies, there was a desperate need to import vast quantities of cheap labour. At first, the slave trade fell almost

exclusively into the hands of the Portuguese--at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Then, in 1572, King and Emperor of Spain, granted a patent to a group of favourites to fetch four thousand slaves to the Antilles. After the smuggling activities of John Hawkins in the 1560's the hunt for "black ivory" became booming business. The English, French and Dutch joined the Spanish and Portuguese in this horrific race to dehumanize human beings. True to monarchical morality, Charles V of Spain gave his permission and royal blessings; James I of England and Scotland issued the first exclusive slaving charter to Englishmen in 1618; Charles I issued new blessings to slaving enterprises in 1618. Under Charles II, there was a Royal African Company headed by the Duke of York with the King as his partner. Louis XIV of France, not to be outdone, joined with his royal blessings in 1673.

As we know or should know, soul-shuddering descriptions exist of the journeys of slaves across the Atlantic from Africa to the Caribbean. Charles William Taussig in *Rum, Romance and Rebellion* (1928) describes the journey in these terms:

On the larger ships, there was no more humanity than on the smaller ones, for the black men were packed in rows between decks with the roof only three feet, ten inches above the floor on which they lay. With from ten to sixteen inches surface room for each, they often had to lie spoon fashion. It must not be forgotten that the voyages frequently took several months. At times they were packed so that the head of one slave would rest between the thighs of another, and thus they would remain for weeks during the voyage across the ocean.

In this manner was another group of ancestors introduced onto the emptied but bloodied stage of the West Indies. These ancestors were trapped, chained, beaten, and placed in the bellies of slave ships which were spiritual, psychological, emotional tombs. They were packed there in less space than Europeans afforded their dead in coffins. The space, the horror of enclosure and hopelessness, is too narrow for us to contemplate. In the dark they lay with their private, ubiquitous fears echoing in their heads, their lives a nightmare. There they lay for weeks on end in the cramp dark of their own silence and their own screams. They lay there awash in their own sweat and blood and urine and faeces. Then they were landed, auctioned, and herded onto plantations. They were nameless, abandoned by the gods. Slowly, they lost their languages from lack of use, for such use was punishable by severe whippings and mutilations. They were subject to the endless grind of fruitless labour, the long days in the sun which lashed them like the master's whip. Their nights were spent in dread of the coming day when the process would begin all over again. It was upon this foundation that the pyramid of neo-classical England was erected. But there was struggle against the odds, survival in the furnace of exploitation. *Obeah* and *Vodun* remain, potent fragments of language are used, rituals and habits of the old world are enacted, foods of that old world eaten. They come from Africa, but are now West Indian. Irreversibly. They made songs in Creole, the precursors of Reggae and Calypso, which mocked "massa" and "missie" even as the colonizers watched in admiration the shining bodies of their happy slaves, "assistant planters" as they were called by a youthful Romantic poet. To be sure, there are forgiving and more glamorous pictures painted of the slaves and slavery. Historians like L.J. Ragatz wrote, "If the African suffered hardships and the mortality among them was high, it must be acknowledged that the same was true with respect to

the white seamen removing them to their new homes" (138). This sentiment persists with astonishing frequency, even in the face of hard evidence. While this attempt to self-forgive and self-justify by false equivalency and twisted logic this is unconscionable, it is understandable. The Pontius Pilate syndrome, save Pilate was more honest and possessed more integrity. What is equally astounding but not so forgivable is that non-European, non-white people who hold themselves up as "experts" of what is called Post-Colonial Literature, who teach to students the works of West Indian writers like Walcott, Naipaul and Jean Rhys, conspire with their former masters, still admired and held in awe in spite of the rhetoric made in safe terms and in safe places and under safe circumstances. What is unforgivable is the homogenization of colonial circumstances: "We all went through the same thing!!!" is a refrain heard often in literary conferences on what is called Post-Colonial Literature. This is not a singular view; it is a view which prevails at academic conferences which have become forums for the shameful display of war wounds that have not been suffered. When examined, these wounds reveal themselves to be so much make-up. One of the most insidious results of the many literary theories that prevail today, and that are held up as all-embracing and perennially applicable is that it negates the history of people, especially those of Africa and the West Indies. This disqualifies them to teach or to speak of ANY Post-Colonial literature because it demonstrates a profound ignorance of what happened in history. And this is a charitable view. The other explanation is simpler and more damning: racism. This is much more reprehensible than white men and women forgiving themselves with the ease of justification.

Our ancestor is African, but we West Indians are not. Our ancestor is Arawakan, but we West Indians cannot claim this vanished solidity. Our ancestor is Cariban, but we cannot make that claim. We are all of these. We are none of these. We are a composite, a hybrid. Listen well with eyes half shut. Hear our ancestors:

Hell is dark and close; it smells of all the foul discharge of people. Hell is without ceremony, without grace. Hell is where I lie with hundreds of others, in the belly of a wooden whale, swallowed up, lost. How I ache to stand up against this indignity, but I cannot raise my head three inches. I gulp for air, but my open mouth receives the urine and sweat from the others that are packed above me. How I miss the grass, trees, light, breeze. My father and mother, brothers and sisters. How I miss friends. Games, talks, stories. It is dark in hell. How can they mistake me for a slave? And even slaves are not to be treated such. There are strict rules. Guidelines. Slaves may win their freedom after a time. They may buy their freedom and may marry into the people. How now this slavery? How am I become a slave? By what logic, by what decree? Have our gods been beheaded by the white man that they hear not my prayers, that they see not my suffering? Have they fled in fear of the white man's god?

I lie beside a stranger who is a brother, who is myself, so closely is he fitted into the curves of my body, his head betwixt my heels, mine between his. I hated his weakness for whimpering, but I realize that the sound is mine. And I hated what I had become, hated the creature into which I was being refashioned. To roam free upon the solid land of my home. Air. Space. Blue skies and white clouds adorning. Where is

home? To die here would be to lose my soul; not to die would be to stay in hell. I wish for death, but only parts of me die, and by degrees.

THE WHITES

The whites are our ancestors also. We carry that ancestry in the clothes we wear, in the language we speak, in the structures of our government, and in our education and justice systems. We also carry that legacy in the games we play, in our everyday habits, and in many strands of worship. That ancestry stubbornly remains in our values; we cherish the "fair-skinned" and almost loath the "dark-skinned", for instance. Richard Ligon's *History of Barbados* was written in 1653, six years after he left the West Indies; he offers important clues of the role of whites in Barbados. The island was populated by Englishmen in the 1620's, and Ligon estimates that, soon after, there were eleven thousand white peasant farmers on that island. It is significant that Barbados became known as "little England". Indeed, they were on their way to becoming what New England became later in the USA. This European heritage, not acknowledged often, is undeniable. But these peasant farmers were not slaves: they became the ones in control, the ones with the whips and guns. They became gentlemen and gentlewomen who returned home to England in triumph, in wealth. It is only those without knowledge or integrity or honesty or conscience who would insist on equating the lot of the whites, however mean, with that of the slave. We may recall a statement which is still used to justify the treatment of slaves, even after 400 years; it was used by the white regime in South Africa not too long ago. The language might have evolved somewhat, but the sentiment is identical. This statement comes from a document called the Moyne Report. It was written in 1838 and published in 1945.

A number of excellent English gentlemen and ladies, of broad views, sympathetic to the West Indies, were sent to the islands by King George V in 1938 on a Royal Commission. They wrote the Moyne report which is the foremost ever written about the West Indies. It is important to stress that they were not hostile to the West Indies, that they were liberal of view. They were merely profoundly ignorant of that which they were dealing. Here is the statement: "negroes were taken from lands where they lived no doubt in a primitive state."

This is the kind of blindness, the kind of cultural arrogance which prevails today, and not only in the white world. The report goes on to say that "Their transfer to the West Indies unlike most other large-scale movements of population did not involve the transfer of any important traces of their traditions and customs, but rather their complete destruction." It is almost impossible to produce a sentence that contains more mistakes and more gross misunderstandings and misrepresentations. Yet, our own writers, notable, celebrated writers have echoed this: Orlando Patterson, for instance, writes about the "historylessness" of the slave. V.S. Naipaul writes, equally erroneously, of the "storylessness" of the West Indies. Under such enormous pressure, there was great erosion, great fragmentation. But there was always transformation, always metamorphosis, always survival. And that survival, as we have said before is manifest in the sound of words and the strains of music, the rhythm of dance, and the drama of habit. It is embodied in Queh-Queh, Carnival, Kukumina, and Rastafarianism. The African spirit was tested severely, but was undefeated. The Arawakan and Cariban ancestors remain

behind every blade of grass, mapped in the form of every flower, in each tear-drop that drips like dew from the tip of a leaf. And then the Chinese were brought in, but were found to be unsuitable for the kind of labour demanded by King Cane; so they became, of their own initiative and genius, part of the "merchantry" by opening small businesses and cake shops. The English encouraged Portuguese to come as labourers, for they provided a useful racial and classist buffer zone between themselves and the darkest members of society. West Indian society was a series of solitudes, divided along spectra of colour which became synonymous with class, wealth and privilege.

THE EAST INDIANS

One final group was introduced: East Indians (so named to differentiate them from North American Indians and Amerindians). They were brought from India as indentured labourers after the emancipation of slaves in the British colonies in 1833, the British being scrupulous to have a dependable source of cheap labour to generate wealth from sugar plantations. In 1814, one of the most prominent planters in Trinidad, William Burnely, proposed the importation of indentured workers from India on a large scale. He was joined in this regard by Governor Woodford of Trinidad and by the combined Court of British Guiana in 1850. Between 1838 and 1914, no fewer than 238,000 East Indians were introduced into British Guiana, 145,000 into Trinidad, 21,500 into Jamaica, and 39,000 into Guadeloupe. They were introduced also into Surinam, St. Lucia, St Vincent and Grenada. The significant West Indian poet, Martin Carter, has pointed out that they were introduced onto the stage of the West Indies as lesser players, into a system which was already established as exploitative and brutal. In 1889, Lechmere Guppy, mayor of San Fernando, Trinidad's second town, was harshly critical of the degradation imposed upon the "new slaves" as he called them. They lived in squalor, and for their labour received nothing but broken promises and scorn. But, apart from providing cheap labour, they served the vital function of drawing the resentment of slaves away from the British. The slaves, freed into economic slavery, saw the Indians as usurpers, interlopers. The British encouraged this view. Today, we the decedents of our African ancestors and those of our Indian forefathers continue stupidly to play the deadly game created by their former masters. In doing so, we enslave ourselves in perpetuity. In many ways, we are less free than our ancestors, for our imprisonment is self-imposed. After independence in the sixties, West Indian politicians in Guyana and Trinidad especially attempted to ride to power on the backs of either Indo-West Indians or Afro-West Indians. The most notorious of these was Forbes Burnham whose inflammatory rhetoric fed the flames of resentment between the two races. In 1963-64, these two peoples, blinded to what they shared, killed each other for what set them apart: the colour of their skin. Through the fog of the past, our ancestors wail:

*So we children gnaw upon the bone of contention
Like dogs of war.
We look down pondem
And shake we head in shame.
On earth, we shed tears and
Blood for we children to go
School, learn, and become lawyer and doctor and teacher.
We hope then dat we children learn to live
In peace wid all neighbours,*

To pass fruits and eggs over fences
 To shout "maanin' neighbour maanin'"
 To cry at their neighbours' loss
 And celebrate at their gain,
 To share in joy and pain.
 To learn that loving others
 Is the best part of living.
 We hope that we children live
 Lives better than we did.

But we children still hate what we
 Were made to hate, who we were made to hate.
 Through generations this hate remains.
 We children learn only to count money
 Weigh gold and measure property.

In heaven we shed tears.
 Tears seed rain.
 Rain fuh wash dem of foolishness and meanness.

When you meet dem, tell dem that
 They job is to learn from we pain,
 Not fight over it?
 Ask dem how we can shower dem with blessing
 When all dey deserve is a good cussing?

Add to this list of Amerindians, Africans, Chinese, Indians, and Europeans, immigrants from various North African Islamic states, Madierans and Japanese, and we obtain an idea of the bewildering complexity of the region. These, then, are the ancestors of all West Indians, if they want them. These are our ancestors, all of them. In these many and diverse roots roots of people, roots in people; roots of pain and roots of love and endurance reside the origins of the West Indies.

The West Indies contain the only man-made culture on this scale in the history of the human race. There has never been anything like it, nor will there be anything like it again. In *Caribbean Voices* (1971) John Figueroa, a West Indian critic writes:

This mixture of people making up the West Indies is remarkable and, as the history of the world goes, new. Where else above Africans, Asians, Amerindians, Europeans, and every possible mixture of these, come together to form a new people? Our ragout makes the "melting pot" [of the United States of America] look like an innocent cup of tea!

This, importantly, is not only an issue of *society*; it is an issue of *consciousness* which looks beyond what we may appear to be. West Indians do not have the luxury of superficial analysis, shallow differentiation as we look at our black, brown, white, yellow brothers and sisters in the streets. The way we appear is irrelevant, for no matter what we look like, we are all mixed. This is an issue of psyche, not an issue of the accident of skin colour.

We in the West Indies cannot afford to and cannot with any correctness claim that home is Africa, China, India or Europe. We can and should feel an affinity to each, but to think that we belong in the cultural skin of Africa is sheer folly and self-delusion; it is sheer arrogance as well, for that skin is too taut with the sinew of history, too firm with the muscles of tradition. Africa is a part of us, but no longer are we part of Africa. We could feel for Indians, and we may feel as Indians do; but we cannot be Indians. We do not have their history, their traditions which stretch over centuries. Time, distance and circumstances have made us unique. The same holds for China and Europe. None of them, noble as they may be, has our unique though artificial heterogeneity. This is what torments us and makes us unique. We can claim all of them, but not any one of them. And we can claim our Arawakan and Cariban ancestors; and we must, for they cry out for the claiming.

Where, then, is home? Home is not Africa, Asia or Europe...these places are not inhabited by our original Amerindian Muse. Home is the West Indies, and the Muse of the Caribbean which addresses our artists and writers like a paradoxical *stab* of blessing, has a face that is fissured and fragmented...like our islands.

When we look at our red, black, brown, white, yellow, and our visibly mixed brothers and sisters in cities and countrysides, we should not see an image of ONE of them, but ALL of them. In EACH of them, in ALL of them reside aspects of our psyche, our fragmented, wonderful, wondrous rainbow carnival of consciousness.

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