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Abstract
Since my mother has entered her eightieth year she has taken to more frequently reminding me of my dream to build a small place out in Guyana. As she mentally tidies up the business of her life, her anxiety grows: not for the moment when I will have to do the same type of reckoning, but more for my continued safety in this white land. 'It might not be the same here always' she says to me, as if her caretaking days soon to be over can no longer ensure the protection a white Welsh mother gave to her five black daughters. Somehow my mother's sentiments don't usher in any alarm but they do capture some of the uncertainties of my second generation status - the sense of an invitation made to the parent generation that could be miserably withdrawn, that fine line between the beckon and the wave. The 'Why don't you go back to your own country?' question that was so oppressive and ugly in my childhood became for myself 'Well, why don't I?'.
CHARLOTTE WILLIAMS

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Since my mother has entered her eightieth year she has taken to more frequently reminding me of my dream to build a small place out in Guyana. As she mentally tidies up the business of her life, her anxiety grows: not for the moment when I will have to do the same type of reckoning, but more for my continued safety in this white land. ‘It might not be the same here always’ she says to me, as if her caretaking days soon to be over can no longer ensure the protection a white Welsh mother gave to her five black daughters. Somehow my mother’s sentiments don’t usher in any alarm but they do capture some of the uncertainties of my second generation status – the sense of an invitation made to the parent generation that could be miserably withdrawn, that fine line between the beckon and the wave. The ‘Why don’t you go back to your own country?’ question that was so oppressive and ugly in my childhood became for myself ‘Well, why don’t I?’.

In my thirties, seeking some resolution to this big ‘why?’, I decided to ‘go back’ to this country where I had never been and planned a cautious exile to my father’s land. I had some sense that my youth in Wales would now be complemented by a voyage of self-realization to a black country that only lived in the scrapbook of stories from my childhood. A passionate sense of a spiritual return home, nudged along by those thousand little sentences, ‘Where do you come from then?’, that overrode a certain knowledge that I had never truly known any other culture, any other land in any intimate way but Wales. Yet still there was a longing for some reconnection with something other, something that surely was my birthright.

I like the idea of ‘return’. I think this funny myth passes down like a beautiful poem in many black families. I find myself rehearsing it with my own daughters and yet at the same time in small, everyday ways, strengthening their possession of and their sense of belonging to Wales.

But belonging can’t just be plucked like a juicy fruit off that Caribbean tree; history and attachment don’t just flow into your body like the deep breaths of warm air blowing across black creek-water; that part of your identity can’t automatically fit you like the ‘I love Guyana’ tee-shirt you can buy anywhere on Main Street in Georgetown.

I had been in Guyana about a year when my dreams turned into black dreams. It suddenly struck me one day the extent to which my thoughts,
my way of thinking and even my dreams were peopled almost exclusively by white people. I was dreaming about my house in Wales. A beautiful woman was descending our staircase. The shock of the normality of this act coupled with the normality of her blackness and in my Wales house was immense. How could my brain have so wholly stolen from me any imagining of black people? How could my world be so white that I could only dream white dreams? Now the black people I experienced daily began to inhabit my dreams.

This startling little revelation brought to my consciousness the total normality of black life: the running for the bus, going on holiday, late for the hairdresser, dinner partying, playing golf-ing lifestyle that was just normal here. The high brow, the low brow, the middling normality of black life that had been so strangely distorted for me in Wales. When I went to see the bank manager she was black, the taxi driver, the librarian, the Minister, the lawyer and the hockey team, they were all black. Everyone was black and saying nothing about it. I would watch the minutiae of everyday actions performed by black people with relish, surprise and deep happiness: the idle low-voiced hum of the waitresses' chatter enchanted me; the bank-teller reapplying her lipstick after lunch; the lovers meeting for lunch at Palm Court Cafe; business men at my workplace. My observation was obsessive and thorough and through this observation I discovered aspects of myself that as always the only black face I had never known. I learnt that deference to white people's whiteness lurked in me like a cancer, that second class citizenship was my inheritance in a way these people didn't recognize. Their post-colonial temperament reminded me of my mother ...

I worked in an aid agency on Carmichael Street. It was part of the country's regeneration programme and our work was to translate big aid monies into small-scale welfare projects. The work suited me. I wanted to be part of putting back into Guyana what colonialism had taken out and as a newly reclaimed Guyanese national, I believed I was well placed. I recall one day at my workplace some American consultants arrived to 'show us the way'. I was consumed with anger as these white interlopers with their 'development' language picked over our work like overseers and later dated the girls from the office. The New Colonials in their white Landrovers and four-by-four Toyota trucks brandishing all the symbols of their forefathers' exploitations now reinvented in their Coca Cola mentality, their designer 'jungle explorer' garb and their voyeuristic fascination with the natives and 'their culture'. Armed with Camel cigarettes, their talk of 'Outside' and their hard currency, they took their pick of Georgetown's young women, whilst Georgetown's young men got angrier. There were more and more of them appearing everyday as the recently democratized country opened its doors to the West. I took to distancing myself from anything white – from anything that reminded me of the place of my kind in this country's slave history and now from its
New Colonials to whom I was intimately wedded.

‘Heh Sista, wha’ you do wi’ Babylon?’ a Rasta man asked me on the sea wall one evening. ‘you slavin’ on dis white fok?’ he continued, not waiting for any reply. This incidental but charged confrontation turned my own eyes to relook at the small town Welsh boy I had married all those years ago in my hometown. ‘Married? ... to he? ...!!’ This was the desk officer exclamation at the immigration desk at Timehri Airport ‘Don’ ya know gal dat’s all jus’ colonial rubbish?’ So how could this ever have been a true partnership? I asked myself. I think about my own mother growing up in Bontnewydd in the early 1900s and not speaking a word of English until she was 19 – how she found herself in the civil service in London and met my father – then an aspiring young black West Indian artist studying at the Slade school of Art on a colonial scholarship. Was theirs a relationship of equals? And then again of my older daughter’s marriage to a white native Welsh guy and my younger daughter’s politicized remonstrations that she is ‘definitely going to find herself a black husband’. These little twists and turns have been going on forever both in Welsh history and in the stories of the Caribbean and yet in the minutiae of our every day actions and the reaction of society to us they carry enormous personal costs and triumphs as we scale that interface between black and white, reminding both camps of their troubled relationships and yet the nonsense of the boundaries between them.

My distancing from ‘white’ ways of being continued with urgency. I immersed myself in the life of Guyana like my frequent submersion in Guyana’s creeks – brown skin concealed in the brown leaf-stained waters. My submersion was total: I rode the crammed-up minibuses daily and learnt that the ride held a language all of its own: ‘Room fo’ a squeeze?’ (room for one more but it’s not a full space) ‘wan’ me mek you a drop sista?’ (do you want a lift) ... I roamed the markets, engaged with the street sellers, walked streets I knew to be dangerous as if defying anyone to treat me as outsider ... and I danced and danced at every ‘jump-up’ or ‘road block’ where to big mega-watts I ‘backballed’ de hoi’ night to ragga, reggae, dob, soca ... I loved the pan yards, the heat, the rum shops, the heat, the sea wall at night, the heat ... that produced every plant, flower, leaf and fruit in XXL size. I felt refreshed; immersed; connected.

I had been in Kitty police station for two hours when the sergeant came to take my statement, and two before that standing on the road waiting for the PC to come and mark out the scene of the accident. But then, so had all the people on the minibus that ploughed into the offside of the Landrover. Nothing moves fast in Guyana. It was 3 o’clock hot hot by now. ‘So what was I doing driving a Union Jack stamped British High Commission landrover through Kitty? What was I anyway? Not a diplomat? Then who are you and where do you come from?’ The words were being spoken by the desk sergeant but the demand was silently made by the many eyes of the minibus occupants now seated expectantly
off-stage. I had offered to pay for the damage immediately but there was, of course, a process that I should not so soon have anticipated in getting to that same end. Perhaps I should have realized that I needed to be called publicly to account for the fact that I, alone, was the one who could not mentally conjure up the road markings and signs long faded or broken since the British colonial days. ‘How was I expected to know it wasn’t my right of way?’ is followed by a hum of disbelief from the crowd because EVERYBODY knows Shell Road has priority unless that is, of course, they are from ‘outside’.

‘So you a mix, rite?’ This official term to describe my origins was already being printed onto the proforma. That is not to say this classification was in any way on a par with ‘dogla’ or ‘putagee’, or any other variation of mixed race person, but clearly in this oldest of old pigmentocracies, a mix denoted that ‘superior’ union of black with white. This status meant that most definitely the minibus people would concede, that I would offer paternalistically to pay for all damage but that the black sergeant would find as many ways as he could to remind me that this was now a black people’s country and don’t I dare assume any of those colonial privileges.

The Kitty story crashed hard into my identity pattern and added to a growing number of bruises that damaged my yet fragile sense of self. The women in the market affectionately called people like me ‘reds’ – ‘Com buy here darlin, com Reds – look meh nice plantains ...’ – a description rather than anything pejorative, I was later told, but a clear marker of my ranking in this society. A dear black woman who I tried hard to befriend, ultimately treated me with the cautious mistrust that existed between ‘nigger woman’ and ‘coloured’. Yet I knew my great-great-grandmother had the experience of slavery, that my grandmother had been in colonial domestic service and I thought of the hundred ‘nigger’ women who were my ancestry.

I’m not comfortable with servants. That’s easy to say but there must be a certain ambivalence between black woman as mistress and black woman as servant. I felt it, even if Rati Naraine the housegirl didn’t. As children we had spent sometime in West Africa living on a university campus in Ibadan. We had servants in the house there, including a black man called Joseph who was essentially both servant and nanny. It was an easy relationship because Joseph was not in my command and anyway we were children. Joseph fed us, bathed us, played and storytold. He was black and he was an ordinary man. My father was black but he was not an ordinary man. He was very important. The relationship between my father and Joseph was always tense and sparky. Looking back I realize Joseph’s ordinary black self was a threat to my father – to who and what he had become – ‘a black British colonial in another British colony’. My discomfort with Rati Naraine was not of the same order however. Rather the opposite, because as much as Rati distanced herself from me respectfully, I tried to find every kind of social leveller I could to erase the
mistress/servant divide. After all she was a woman, a mother, and importantly an Indian in a country where Indians and blacks don’t mix. But my efforts were to no avail. Rati saw her service as a pleasure and a gift and my reluctance to accept it only wounded her.

I mention Rati because it was through her eyes that I began to unravel what was at issue for me. She was testing me out as she often did on her perceptions of ‘outside’: ‘Everyone in Inglaand sheer white white white rite Mistress?’ ... ‘dem say white people no wash every day like we people do’ ... ‘dem say Inglaand fulla ol’ people an’ dey sheer ogly rite?’ ...!

Rati clearly didn’t think I was English. But then she would say ‘No Mistress, you can’t wear your hair out big big like dat on de road, we Guyanese goin laaf at you’. Rati wasn’t telling me I’m not black: she was telling me I didn’t know how to be Guyanese but that I could be if I wanted. I understood from her that my cultural baggage wasn’t right even though my face and my body fit were quite fine. I recognized that what joined me to this country was far deeper: that my history was the history of this country but this was only part of my journey and that if I dug deep enough I could find the Africa of my origin; that I could join as any black person to black person anywhere in the world, but the temporal divide was culture.

I was reminded of my university days when at the height of the Welsh student protest, Welsh speaking students refused to stand with the English speakers for our graduation photograph. As the only black person in the cohort I was not at all clear where I should stand – was this a cultural affiliation, a language grouping, a Welsh/English divide ... was I Welsh enough to join them?

I thought about Wales often during these Guyana days. I thought about a Wales in which my way of being fitted on an everyday level but where my black history was punctuated and my Welsh history hadn’t anticipated me. I thought about the big noise I was going to make on my return to make a place for the black Welsh in the Welsh consciousness.