

JOURNEY TO AN ILLUSION: ENGLISH NATIONAL HERITAGE CULTURE AND CARIBBEAN  
DISINHERITANCE

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Germaine Greer once described heritage as "the cultural expression of what makes us what we are, our spiritual DNA." What Greer's genetic metaphor suggests is the ease with which the idea of cultural heritage is simultaneously naturalized and spiritualized. This is true, above all, for national cultural heritage.

Today I want to consider the cultural logic of national heritage discourse and the way it has been used as an instrument of disinheritance. I'll be talking about the experience of Caribbean writers in England, although I believe my comments have a wider resonance. My argument is that, unlike say, Poles or Koreans immigrating to the U.S., many Caribbean immigrants to England already felt themselves to be English in some deep sense, they felt that English national heritage as their own.

I'll return to what I call the emotional geography of the Caribbean relations to England in more detail later. I wanted to introduce at this point my primary theoretical interest: namely the way through heritage discourse, national culture becomes naturalized. Let me put this another way. In circumstances where blatant biological racism is taboo, the idea of absolute, insurmountable cultural difference can acquire an almost biological authority. In other words, instead of the idea of genetic difference between communities, what we see come into play is the idea of a "cultural chromosome." And a cultural chromosome that is inviolably national.

I want to explore this idea of a kind of national cultural chromosome through the testimony of Caribbean writers who traveled to England believing that they were already part of English culture, only to be disabused of that assumption on arrival.

When the Barbadian writer, George Lamming, traveled to England for the first time, he saw his journey as a way of claiming his English cultural heritage. Through his imperial education he had come to think of himself as English, even though he had never been there. He describes this sensation in the introduction to his novel, In the Castle of My Skin:

"Migration was not a word I would have used to describe what I was doing when I sailed w. other West Indians to England in 1950. We simply thought that we were going to an England which had been planted in our childhood consciousness as a heritage and a place of welcome. It is the measure of our innocence that [we doubted] neither the claim of heritage nor the expectation of welcome. . . England was for us. . . the name of a responsibility whose origin may have coincided with the beginning of time.

Today I shudder to think how a country, so foreign to our own instincts, cld have achieved the miracle of being called Mother."

Of course, through African\_American culture, the dominant we have grown familiar with the convention of the black journey in search of heritage or roots as the journey back to Africa. We're all familiar with the African\_American genre of the maiden voyage to Africa which is also a homecoming to heritage. But what Lamming is describing is a heritage journey of a very different kind. For in his psychology of expectations, it is first voyage to England that will reunite him with his heritage. This is a measure to the degree to which his British imperial education had imbued in him the sense that he was in some geographically expansive sense, already English. Many Caribbean writers—Sam Selvon, George Lamming, Jamaica Kincaid, Michelle Cliffe, VS Naipaul, and most brilliantly, Austin Clarke, in his memoir, Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack—they have all evoked their

childhood experiences of sitting in geography and history lessons which were imbued with the certain knowledge that England was the spatial and historical epicenter of the earth.

Jamaica Kincaid, in her essay, "On First Seeing England," recalls how: "When I saw England for the first time, I was a child in school sitting at a desk. The England I was looking at was laid out on a map gently, beautifully, delicately, a very special jewel. . . . When my teacher had pinned this map up on the blackboard, she said, "This is England"\_\_and she said it with authority, seriousness, and adoration, and we all sat up. . . . We understood then\_\_we were meant to understand then\_\_that England was to be our source of myth and the source from which we got our sense of reality."

For Lamming, as for Kincaid, England was already seen and felt its claim on him before he had seen it in the flesh. Thus he stresses, his journey to England was not an act of migration: he experienced it instead as a movement that occurred within the imaginative space of England, from the imperial periphery to the imperial center. The traumatic irony of all this was that Lamming would never feel as English again as he did before he first set foot on English soil. Moreover, he was alarmed to discover, on arrival, that not only was he viewed as an immigrant, as an outsider, but that the term immigrant was a racial marker that demarcated the limits of English national culture.

Crucially, there was not just an imaginative but a legal basis for Lamming's perception that in traveling to England for the first time he was in fact traveling home.

As a colonial subject, he was, under the 1948 act, was entitled by law to British citizenship.

What is often forgotten is that this Caribbean projection of England as heritage and home was not entirely one-sided. The Caribbean immigrants had been invited to England in response to an acute post-war labor shortage\_\_they came as nurses, bus drivers and conductors, post office workers. In the late 40s, many white English people also viewed the Caribbeans as returnees, people coming home, not as immigrants.

For instance, on June, 21 1948, the front page of the London Evening Standard paraded a photograph of the first group of Jamaicans disembarking at Portsmouth: The banner headline read: "Welcome Home!"\_\_this to people who had never seen England except in the kind of schoolroom fantasy of the kind Jamaica Kincaid described.

It was only on being metamorphosed by English national culture into an immigrant, that Lamming discovered that his true heritage was not Englishness but imperial amnesia. The Guyanese writer and critic Jan Carew recalls a similar process at work: Carew writes how "The journey from the Caribbean to London was envisaged as the end of exile." Instead it became the starting point for a second exile in which the anticipated embrace of English national heritage became instead the measure of the newcomers' disinheritance.

I want to turn now to consider the term heritage from the other side\_\_to look briefly at the implications for black British culture of the national heritage idiom in England.

If we compare the term national heritage, with the terms national culture or national tradition, heritage is more categorical and exclusive term than either culture or tradition because it is more explicitly naturalized. Heritage is a family affair, grounded in an etymology of inheritance. It combines narratives of continuity of property with a powerful genetic undertow. National heritage discourse, is a reproductive discourse whereby the passing down of property becomes an alibi of nature. Heritage identity is self-selecting: it involves a disavowal of agency.

As I suggested at the outset, in circumstances where overt biologism in public policy was more difficult to articulate, the language of national heritage has permitted a kind of back door biology. It possesses a neo-genetic authority that reintroduces a deterministic racial element into national self-definition. In other words, the language of heritage serves as a kind of cultural chromosome. It's all in the national family.

In these terms, someone like George Lamming could make no claim to English space or history. He stood outside the naturalized assumptions of bequeathment. As Joseph Keith has observed: "Rather than coming home, Lamming entered a society whose own conceptions of home and heritage were defined, in no small measure, by his exclusion."

What becomes evident here, is that the way the seamless lang. of national heritage is premised on spatial severance and historical amnesia. Heritage discourse suppresses the memory of the way, through the experience of empire in particular, the idea of Englishness has undergone a multitude of expansions and contractions. Heritage imposes on that history a false continuity.

Most importantly, in the context of English nationalism, heritage isn't just a discourse but an industry. The heritage industry in general has played a crucial role in narrowing the dominant meanings of Englishness. The lucrative market in American tourists seeking the real England provided an extra motive for freeze-framing national

heritage and air\_brushing it with nostalgia\_\_projecting England as theme park of seamless antiquity for visiting Americans starved of deep history.

I've suggested so far that the heritage industry naturalizes Englishness by positing a history of natural succession. I should add that heritage discourse naturalizes Englishness in a spatial sense too. For heritage England is projected as quintessentially rural\_the deep England, the definitive England is rural England. "Naturally," natural England is the true England. This despite the fact that England has had an urban majority for over 150 years. Given that 95% of black Britons are urban, the symbolic centrality of rural England in national heritage discourse is another way of institutionalizing even English\_born Britains as outside of the natural nation.

In closing, I do want to say that I believe that in the 1990s the authority of this naturalized national heritage discourse considerably. It is nothing like as hegemonic as it was in the Thatcher years. This most evident in the change of the touristic image of England that is being projected. The British Tourist Authority has shifted its promotional strategy from Rule Britannia to Cool Britannia, targeting youth tourists, for whom London is Europe's capital of cultural diversity. Through fashion, music, art, literature, and the new media, London is selling itself as a global center of iconoclasm, irreverent style, and happening impurity. In this context, Caribbean immigrants are no longer outside a geneticized national heritage discourse. Instead they've symbolically crucial to the image of an England that is cosmopolitan, heterogeneous, a center of happening impurity.

As Stuart Hall put it recently: "What we had before was an Afro\_Caribbean presence in Britain. . . But now, for the first time, being black is a way of being British." As Hall continues, "They've turned marginality into a v. creative art form. . .and they've done so at the level of youth culture, of music, of dress. They've styled their way into British culture."

Thirty years ago, George Lamming prophesied that [the English] will have to deal with the new reality in our experience\_that is the increasing world of Blacks in England. They will have to confront the transformation of their home." That transformation has never been more evident than now in the role that black culture, especially in the arts and sport, is playing redefining Englishness in ways that erode the power of national heritage discourse and the idea of Englishness as predicated on a cultural chromosome.

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