

## **You and Me Forever: The Shared Ancestry of Empire and the Burdens of Leaving\***

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If empire left us with anything it must be the *Word*, and in the Caribbean we really like words, big words, long words, words that are hard to pronounce. Think of exophilic. Indefatigable. Maudlin. Eschatological. We use them like the rushing flames that have been burning the sugar cane fields for hundred years from Guyana on the South American coast to Cuba, that indefatigable island once with a man and a movement. We use them in dramatic outbursts of virile manhood, when indeed boys begin to realize that they might after-all have something to say, not least to the *Big Man* on top of the hills of Kingston Jamaica or on the seawall by Pradoville II, Sparendam, on the East Coast of Demerara. The connotative is irrelevant, for it is the complexity of sound that really matters. The idea is to use vocabulary that the other person does not understand, that leaves them flummoxed. You know for sure when that happens ‘word would spread,’ the message will get around – to the rum shop, the bottom-house, the seawall, the ball-ground, bit by bit, about that brilliant man with that unfathomable vocab, like a man from England. For nearly a quarter of a century, I told my aunt what a cacophonous voice she has; just like a sitar, I used to say. She always acknowledged my compliment, beaming; a good woman indeed. Words and meaning have an elliptical, cryptic relationship where I come from. Words are what we are all about in that part of the world. Every utterance, every sentence is said or written as if it were irrevocable. The intent

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of the speaker is not to sway or persuade. It is to coerce into submission, sometimes playfully so, other times with diabolical intent, scorn, or just outright disdain. I don't know why, but in the Caribbean, language is like a piece of equipment employed to till the soils of pleasure and domination, to instantiate self, draw admiration, leave the listener, the audience, in awe. I have always liked when people say things with art, with complexity, effortless sophistication. The English way of doing things used to be like a gigantic cultural mandrel, and you and I from the Caribbean are now its living form. We are the ignoble or cherished aftermath, depending on peoples and contexts, locations, angles, or perhaps even the sardonic laughter deep in the belly of decolonial charisma. Today it is more like a quaint artifact. How could such a thing happen, so quickly? Could the answer be in one of England's masterpieces – 'That we but teach bloody instructions, which being taught, return to plague th' inventor?'<sup>1</sup>

I proceed with the assumption that at some time in our lives we must have been free, a time when the essential thingness of things was allowed, practically unfiltered, into bare, ungloved hands, and then, into the inner recesses of the distant unconscious. The things you see, touch, and hear, and the little actions of daily life, come to you directly in a kind of pure state of being, in the very absoluteness of now. You walk home from the late night movies, humming a tune from *Pyar Hi Pyar*, or perhaps a few lines of *The Last Farewell* by Roger Whitaker, or *Distant Drums* by Jim Reeves. This is the time before they have reached you – the ideologist and his political friends, the sociologist with academic methods, the philosopher waxing epistemological, the historian with her craft, archives, and commitments, the returnee from England, with his accent, suit and tie, and his tall tales of Covent Garden and the Cliffs of Dover.

I now recall just such a moment, when on the flat brown sand of the Atlantic coast, I leaned into the ball just short of a good length, and drove it handsomely through the covers for four. Not a man moved. Even the quick bowler recovering from his galloping delivery-stride offered up approval in the bent heat of ignominy. How sweet, how sublime. I see it now in evenings of dreams, memories of memories, in soft silhouettes after the game. And then you peddle the sling-shot bicycle, riding towards home, proud, happy, fulfilled, riding through Thomas Gray's 'Full many a gem of purest serene; the dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear; full many a flower is born to blush unseen; and waste its fragrance on desert air'.

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<sup>1</sup> *Macbeth*, Act I: Scene 7.



*The flat brown sand on the Atlantic coast with a mobile beer garden on wheels. (Photo by author)*

I have come here to try and work something out between us. We need to talk a little bit about empire. To face up to things. To recognize that we the peoples of the Caribbean, and you, have a common ancestry of sorts. And, try as we might to turn the page, to begin separate and anew, the deep sub-structure of old times keeps coming back in undulating strides just like Freddy Trueman or Sir Garfield Sobers offering an admixture of pleasures and responsibilities, feelings of belonging and guilt, propensities of cultural divestment, spatial anxieties on scales both proximate and global. I have been struggling with the thought that the cultural sovereignty which I have intellectually craved and fought for so long, though authentic in theoretical intent, is proving to be elusive in living form. Leaving the intimate is always difficult, even when walking away from empire.

I have come to share a secret with you from the deep of the colonial. It is about leaving empire and the trauma of that exit. I have also been wondering about you, about how you have been handling things at your end. These days I wonder if indeed ‘The tragedy of man is that he was once a child’. *Black Skin: White Masks*, of course. My thoughts are with Capécia, but then again, you might not understand.

Let’s get back to cricket, for that is something we truly have in common. At least on the surface. I recall Sankaran Krishna’s jovial refrain, or perhaps writing in a *Cricinfo* article that South Asian academics are basically failed cricketers. Much the same for the Caribbean. Our backyard wicket was just a patch of dirt, punctuated here and there with the droppings of the few creole fowls and ducks that we minded for special occasions. In the early days at the back street of Anna Catherina, that is I before we moved (back) to Cornelia Ida, I would get up on Sunday mornings with bat and ball in the imagination, tossing the ball from hand to hand, and then mounting a high action, spinning the cork ball from the off-stump, always calculating that the quicker one will beat bat and pad. To see the bails clipped and careen was but a secretive kind of vindication of the boy’s own cunning, failing which these bails, like two stoic watchmen would sit

there and watch him, mucking the high action come to nothing in that unforgiving equatorial sun.

Mid-day comes and the boys and men gather up at the immaculate Leonora Cricket Club ground. They are there to watch their village heroes from C.I. and Leonora. They come with rum, rum and radio, and elastic identities. These are identities that are at once complex and earthen, awkwardly cosmopolitan, built as it were on plantation life with masters and managers from distant lands.

The players take the field, men in brilliant whites, Gray Nicholas bats, and the red Wisden ball. Umpires Tulsi Kumar and Baksh, with flop hats and white overcoats, pace themselves gently out through the mid-day sun to the wicket, and in the same moment, the Land Rover of the English born Managing Director kicks up a little dust, announcing the entry. He disembarks sporting khaki shorts and gold-rimmed sun shades, shakes hands on his way up the pavilion. He receives salutations and in return offers smiles and pats on the back. He takes his position on the balcony, and starts pumping at a fat ruffled cigar, chasing down the smoke and stench with sips of rum and coconut water. It is time, and now our local commentator, Mr. Khan begins -

It is a marvelous day here for cricket at Leonora Park.

The Golden Arrowhead is fluttering gaily in the Atlantic wind, the wicket - a batting paradise, and the outfield like Lords

*(Managing Director offers a nod)*

This is the type of wicket that Geoff Boycott drives across the line without hesitation (a howl of protest; what about Rohan Kanhai, big one?)

The batsman settles over his bat after a bit of agriculture, and watches Sankar walking thoughtfully back to his mark at the far end.

Babu Sankar, broad shoulders, looks high into the heavens, turns, a few chips and now breaks into a run, long loping strides, black hair flopping in the wind

*(murmur in the audience; wah de patacake he trying fuh sound like – wah the man name fram England again?)*

Up comes his arms, bowls,  
and he is beaten and bowled;

*(you mussy mean Blofeld nah; dat man can talk like skunt)*

A stunningly vicious inswinger coming from wide outside the off-stump;  
the young batsman must have found the geometry of that magnificent in-swinger  
incomprehensible

*(man lashed with rum belts out, ‘wah maths gat fuh do wid did papa?)*

What a gem! A delivery that would have extracted the nodding approval of Jim Laker, no doubt.

Guyana has always been full of Mr. Khans, talented men and later women (though in smaller numbers) who in the olden days had done Junior Cambridge and Senior Cambridge, who had in them the fire and elegance of things grand and sophisticated, who dreamt big and should have, but who ever so often were brought back to the rugged realities of plantation life in the country, or perhaps a teaching job, or a little something in the civil service. Many have lived their lives reciting Coleridge and Tennyson, Wadsworth and William Shakespeare. Do you have a problem

with that? Tell me now, because I insist it is part of them, indivisible. That which has been written can only be erased in intellectual fantasies. This is why indeed, after all the stratagems of silencing the past (as told by M. Rolph-Trouillot), the archives of empire are alive and well, and can't be taken away from you or me. Contact is reciprocal inscription.

I have often wondered and I still do today, about early life up to the mid-1960s when we lived our lives just the way we did. My thinking about the past is now, and the reality of that past is today in violent confrontation with the current order of things. Which is the real reality - what I experienced then without epistemology and explanations, or now, through the critique of empire, imperialism, and the new dance of the de-colonial? The student of Gramsci, Stuart Hall, Laclau, or even Althusser reading this catharsis would quickly pounce with corrections, telling me that the epistemologies of empire were embedded in my cover drive to the boundary, when not a man moved, when it was just so sublime, there on the flat brown sand of the South American shoulder. The students of Shilliam and Inayatullah, Branwen Gruffydd Jones or L.H.M. Ling, M.K. Pasha or John Hobson, Gurminder K. Bhambra or Siba Grovoug, might insist that I should brush up on my Edward Said and especially his brilliant essay concerning the methodology of imperialism. And indeed I will go back and read my Spivak and Bhaba, my Walter Rodney and Charles Mills, my Ay kwi Armah, just like the snake that came to the water trough, on a hot, hot day.... Sometimes the thoughts come to me in subtle ways, in flashes of doubt, and then they are gone, just like that, in far-flung oblivions and abstractions, never to be touched again. Some of us live all of our lives with flashes of doubt, heaps of compunction, congeries of criticisms. Sometimes the encounter is more confrontational, Fanonic, more like Etna in a Sicilian July.

Mr. Khan was still at it, blazing away in superb narrational flourish, accent bending progressively North-North-West. Like the quick bowler in form, Mr. K begins to find in his commentary that splendid configuration of balance and rhythm. And then, with occasional glances of interest and approval from the Managing Director, the Big K picks up the first over after lunch.

S.N. Singh mops his brow; tosses the ball from hand to hand

(longish pause)

but wait, hold on,

The bowler is now engulfed in some demonstrable intent,  
he is signaling away some rude elements hunched in front of the sight screen.

Ranindranauth Seeram settles over his bat now,  
Singh bowls, and that one has left the bat with four runs written all over it;  
what a handsome shot; marvelous indeed

*(dat is more than marvelous chief; dat is the master!)*

Hundreds of brown hands reach for the sky in brilliant admiration!

I loved this kind of English, the flair, the elegance, the momentum in delivery. The words were – shall we say – enchanting. Mr. K would sneak in a bit of undulation, you know the bends and curves, the musical intonations characteristic of the speech of the Englishman. He struggled quite a bit at times, and when he thought someone might have detected the mimicry of it all, the Naipaulian moment, he would pull back and re-nativize his speech, muddy the grammar and pronunciation a little, making it more local than called for. Chuckles and grins, admiration and dismissal, and sometimes the pure pleasures of speech were all there, deeply ensconced in this

composite figure of colonialism and empire. No one quite objected, for if anything, the complaints were perhaps more about not getting the accent right, not quite there with the sweet, textured sophistication of a Henry Blofeld or John Arlott.

For the longest time I have struggled with the idea of being the colonized ones, one of the fellas that I actually read about, a soul flattened like the denuded hills of Martinique that once pushed Amié Césaire into brilliant anguish:

an aged life mendaciously smiling,  
its lips opened by vacated agonies;  
an aged poverty rotting under the sun, silently;  
an aged silence bursting with tepid pustules,  
the awful futility of our *raison d'etre*.<sup>2</sup>

I often wonder if we are all nameless little abstractions, footnotes here and there, locked-in and forever lost, in a formulaic monstrosity of empire, a passive mass of dark, undifferentiated, colonized flesh, living with all the absurdities and contradictions *in* the colonial imagination. I have often wondered if I should indeed admit, admit aloud that when I was barely fifteen I spent many a night pacing up and down in the dim lit, paltry back-room of my grandmother's wooden house, reading aloud from *Taming of the Shrew* and *Macbeth*, reading aloud with tropical bombast, rising like 'the swellings of the Adriatic Seas'. Empire's sophistication is at once textual and weaponized, and is everywhere, omnipresent and omnipotent, in the village, the school yard, the class room, in the jungles of Malaysia and the far flung reaches of the Kenyan countryside, on top of my exercise book, at the crime scene of Morant Bay, in the Proclamation that robbed twenty-three-year-old Laksmi Bai - the Ranee of Jhansi, and from the Bay of Bengal to the sandscapes of Basra and then across oceans and time, to the burnt cane fields in the ancient county of Berbice. Writing and killing; killing and writing. Here is a little something from Hume Nisbet when the Ranee of Jhansi, Tantia Topi and their fighters were besieged at Gwalior, on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1858. On the other side were Major McKay, Captains Green and Jackson, and the bugler Sammy Tompkins.

Above them swung that great eastern moon in its full lustre, making the landscape almost as distinct as an English daylight scene, only more weird and thrilling in its silver and warm intensity.<sup>3</sup>

And again

A cloudless ocean of sea-green atmosphere spread around the silver circle that seemed in its dazzling whiteness to float very close to the world; while the planets and stars gathered in brightness as they receded from that greater light, until they flamed out like beacons studding a measureless plain.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <http://kboo.fm/sites/default/files/AIME%20CESAIRE--NOTEBOOK%20OF%20A%20RETURN%20TO%20A%20NATIVE%20LAND.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Hume Nisbet, "Preface and Excerpt from *The Queen's Desire: A Romance of the Indian Mutiny*" quoted in Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter (Eds.) *Archives of Empire Volume 1. From the East India Company to the Suez Canal*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2003, p. 424.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

Let me share a secret. I was unfathomably enthralled with Blofeld and Shakespeare, Wadsworth and D.H. Lawrence, more so than I can tell you. Every act of reading or reciting *The Snake*, *Elegy Written in A Country Churchyard*, *Macbeth* or *King Lear* had an absoluteness of engagement, but also perhaps of Glissant's *errantry*. The details, the movement, the energy of these forms still follow me. What am I supposed to do?

The dialogical is constitutive. I think I have within me, and so do you, the requisite technologies to disarticulate, dis-interpellate, to counter-textify all that has been done. And yet, the same voice says to me that the critical theory you have learnt asks that you reflect. It may be the case that it is much easier to stand up to some things in the present about the past, than to stand *back* from the past.

So the question that I have with me, that barks at me when I make epistemological moves against empire – is this – what do I do with the past, about that past, those formative years? If we condemn the past in writing, for whom is it done, and for what purpose? Is it possible through countertextification to unmake the massive, multi-layered, multi-textured dialogical encounters inscribed?

I had heard quite a lot about colonialism while growing up in the Caribbean, but it never really made an impact. It was so routinized that 'it came through one ear and left through the other.' My high school course on West Indian history with Mr. C. Tiwari and my English classes with Mr. R. Chee-a-tow and Mr. R. Gobin did have some discussions, but we always felt that slavery was an American thing, even though we were reading about the Caribbean. We did hear about Cuffy and Accara and Kowsilla, though not Damon. A good deal of what was productive about those figures got lost in the offensive electoral politics combined with the scorching politics of inflexible identities. Much the same for me with indentured servants. Some pandits and a few rum-shop or street-head historians brought up the exploitation of Indians from India. These village intellectuals were mostly focused on Indian greatness, one of the oldest civilizations in human history they would say, for which all Indians should be proud. Some years later I met a former teacher with a B.A. from the University of Guyana and he almost assassinated me with what 'the great German philosopher' Max Muller (so described) had to say about Dharti Mata and Kundalini Shakti. I don't recall Muslims talk with the same zeal about this Max Muller.





*Representation of Kundalini Shakti.*

In my own mind's eye I could not see any remnants of colonial brutalities, excepting perhaps for the shantytown range at Leonora. Colonialism to me was something that had happened so long ago, that it had nothing to do with me. I saw history as a school subject, meaning a subject that I would write at the University of London's GCE *O Levels* and *A Levels*. I was, we all were, more bent on passing history with distinction than knowing about it in any meaningful way. History was for people who were not bright, a boring, easy subject filled with facts that no longer mattered. The only subject outside the sciences and maths with any prestige were English and Economics. In the popular idiom there was no equivalent for '*Phys, Chem, Bio*'; or '*Phys, Maths, Maths*'. History was for the weak.

British colonialism got off lightly in my time because the real beast was imperialism, especially American imperialism and also because of the struggles against apartheid. The politicians came to the villages where they unleashed murderous attacks against American imperialism. Once in a while colonialism was thrown in with imperialism, but I think it was more a matter of habit, perhaps even style. I never once heard or saw in print a criticism of the Queen, or of British royalty.<sup>5</sup> Never heard of British Intelligence, or of British *coups*, of British invasions of countries in the Third World, or the mustard gas propensities of Sir Winston. It was always the Americans, the CIA, the Pentagon, Yankees and their stooges. For years I did not like the Pentagon even though I had no idea what it was or where it was located. One of the most famous names in the speeches was one, Philip Agee, whom the proto-Marxist People's Progressive Party especially praised for exposing the CIA's internecine machinations in Latin America. Agee came across as a bit of a joke because Agee means grandmother from your father's side of the family.

The intellectuals from the city were never within reach. I did not know we had them. Doctors and lawyers were at the top of the respect ladder for brilliance. I learnt about the Denbow family, about Ashton Chase, a trade union leader, Sir Lionel Luckoo – a world distinguished attorney who we were convinced had won the most murder cases in the world. I myself like Mohammed Shabuddin and Sir Shridat Ramphal. They were both linked to the international stuff

<sup>5</sup> Is that supposed to be with a capital R, making it British Royalty? This is not a matter of grammar, but comes from the instinct of yesteryears.



for which I was beginning to develop some affinities. I do recall reading Martin Carter, the national poet in school. Maybe it was in the *Guyana Graphic*, because the only book of poetry I ever saw, touched, or owned was *A Book Narrative Verse*, a quintessential kind of English literary collection for upcoming students.

Daily life is a thing that moves on bit by bit, *thoda - thoda karake* – through long prosaic, mundane, routinized thoughts and activities, through already threaded and worn pathways. Village life is much like that. You get used to the barking dogs at night, the rustle of mango and palm trees, the enchantment of tropical birds in the morning. They are just there, fixtures, just like mud and rain. You wake up to the rising sun and step into what Tagore once described as the ‘dreary sands of dead habits.’ Life in a remote village, itself hidden in an unknown country once described as ‘the lost world’ can take a toll where the mind and body feel trapped, compartmentalized, ‘hemmed in,’ as Fanon would say. Body and mind come together in grand conspiracies to cut through the template of the known, the familiar, the fixed expectations you have been lodged in all your little life. The mind tosses about in great elliptical motions in the hours before dawn. I must leave, get out of this, save my sanity, and reach beyond mountains and oceans. Full ‘many a flower is born to blush unseen....’

The 1970s were not good for us politically and yet, I never really felt any positive urge to leave. Many did, and as in the drip-drip of daily life, they left bit by bit. In the 1950s many went to England; back then as I understand it from family, England was a natural extension of the sugar estate for those of us from the country, not to mention the city elites or the people with money from rice farms of Essequibo and Berbice. Going to England was not a matter of immigration; no one immigrated to England! It was simply going to England, no explanation needed. Even the harshest critics of colonialism went to England, not only to get an education or live the life in London, but to go ‘home’ – more of an intellectual home than anything else. Sometimes I think many must have gone there with an admixture of admiration and compunction, hope and angst, patent anger and pure joy. I might be bold to suggest some went to the see for themselves the origins, the planning board of massive world crime scenes, scattered on every continent, drenched with blood and tears. Listen to Martin Carter, a son of the British Empire, and one who mastered the *Word*, not as decoration, but as the leitmotiv of liberation.

This is the dark time, my love,  
 All round the land brown beetles crawl about  
 The shining sun is hidden in the sky  
 Red flowers bend their heads in awful sorrow  
 This is the dark time, my love,  
 It is the season of oppression, dark metal, and tears.  
 It is the festival of guns, the carnival of misery  
 everywhere the faces of men are strained and anxious  
 Who comes walking in the dark night time?  
 Whose boot of steel tramps down the slender grass  
 it is the man of death, my love, the stranger invader  
 watching you sleep and aiming at your dream.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Carter, Martin, ‘This is the dark time, my love,’ <http://openenglishtrinidad.weebly.com/this-is-the-dark-time-my-love.html>



*Martin Carter (right) going to prison for 'spreading dissension'. Cheddi Jagan is on the left.*<sup>7</sup>

What an indictment of empire, so powerful, so moving, so much grief and love, so much courage. He was once imprisoned by the British Empire for words, just these ones. You have probably guessed that he was not alone.

My own entanglement with empire only began in any kind of conscious way when I left the Caribbean and went to Canada in 1977. But even then, I had to go through a double transformation. My grandfather, who had lived in Canada for a year in the mid-1970s, told us upon his return that Canada does not have 'real white people'. I had no idea what he meant but when I moved to Toronto, I came slowly, very slowly, to the same realization. I thought Canadians spoke a kind of lower level 'local' English, with broken syntax, poor vocab, and that they could never tell the difference between principal and principle. While people did wear nice clothes to work I was shocked to see people dress in flabby, ill-fitting sweat pants. Baseball was nothing compared to cricket, and worse yet, baseball commentary sounded like the look of unpainted drywall, flat, sterile, lazy. A great line is – he swings and misses! Perhaps more than anything, I felt like Canadians had no sense of history, and had no history to brag about. The products were not solidly built like those 'Made in England'. No desert could match Blancmange.

I have no idea why I ever came to tendential English affections, because I had only seen a handful of English people before I went to Canada. We did not have TV and so it couldn't be that kind of effect. Movies, yes, but most of what I had seen were from Hollywood (and Bollywood). I still don't know if there is a British equivalent. It had to be the education and the cricket.

Education made and destroyed everything that empire sought and perhaps accomplished.

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<sup>7</sup> Photo courtesy of Mirror Archives, Georgetown, via Bruce Paddington. Accessed at: <http://caribbean-beat.com/issue-13/martin-carter-poems-man#axzz4bAIFTaJ1>

Not quite, because empire can never be fully destroyed, and certainly not only through resistance. The roll-back started at York University but had a complicated start. I was anti-imperialist, but not necessarily anti-colonial. I know this for sure because when another student tried to explain underdevelopment on account of colonialism, I flat out rejected the idea. I recall offering the strategy of improving education.

Most of the people around me in the home-circle front still feel education is the only path. Many around the home-circle also still believe that the worst thing that ever happened to Guyana and the Caribbean was the departure of the British. Many still believe in the Morris Oxford and the LSE. But then again, if a man is doing something that comes from all around him, from the very earth on which he stands, why is it mimicry, why is it not authentic, who is to say that the man is infantilizing himself? Does a supplement, a trace make something other than what it is? Why is it better, acceptable, cosmopolitan, worldly, sophisticated and all that jazz, if we designate the man's composite architecture with something like hybridity?

The intellectual is a product of hybridization; the commoner is a colonized soul, one who wallows in his own domination, Gramsci and all, waiting to be rescued by yet another concept. Yesterday 'twas hybridity; today it is de-colonial! Could the next moment be in Glissant's *poetics of relation* in the Caribbean, that vast arch from the brilliant blue Bahamian skies winding all the way down to the sprawling Amazon lands of Berbice, Essequibo, and Demerara? The cradle of trans-Atlantic suffering *is* now the womb of regeneration.