A Foreign Familiarity

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Abstract: Growing up in Canada of Jamaican Canadian heritage, my racial identity was always called into question. Given that most of my Jamaican family remained in the Caribbean, I felt disconnected from that side of my heritage and in many ways imagined myself as disenfranchised from my own Jamaican identity. This isolation was reinforced by my ability to "pass" and by the constant critique of my "visible identity" by outsiders. While spending three months in Jamaica as a second-generation individual returning to the Caribbean, I was able to reflect on and investigate my family history, learn about my alternative reality, and come to encounter my Jamaican self and broader plurality of identities.

Keywords: Jamaica, identity politics, mixed-race studies, autoethnography, diaspora, Caribbean

Résumé : Ayant grandi au Canada dans une famille jamaïcaine-canadienne, mon identité raciale a toujours été remise en question. Dans la mesure où la plupart des membres de ma famille jamaïcaine sont restés aux Caraïbes, je me suis sentie déconnectée de cet aspect de mon héritage et, à bien des égards, coupée de mon identité jamaïcaine. Cet isolement a été renforcé par ma capacité à « passerpour blanche » et par la remise en cause permanente de mon « identité visible » par des étrangers. Lors d'un séjour de trois mois aux Caraïbes en tant que Jamaïcaine de deuxième génération, j'ai pu réfléchir et enquêter sur l'histoire de ma famille, découvrir mon autre réalité, et retrouver mon moi jamaïcain en même temps qu'une pluralité plus vaste d'identités.

Mots-clés : Jamaïque, politiques identitaires, études métisses, auto-ethnographie, diaspora, Caraïbes

Dear Jamaica,

A small island that feels so familiar and yet foreign at the same time – I am, as Mr. Walcott (1962) once wrote, "divided to the vein." A *Yardie gyal fram farin*, if you will – both from here and not at all. Canadian Jamaican or Jamaican Canadian, passing as one and not the other, but both experiences indelible on my identity. A white-brown-ness embossed with the anger of my captured ancestor(s). A slave and – possibly(?) – slave owner. How can one body house such contradictions? How can a body not? Mixed in with this is the indigeneity of a land I did not grow up in running in my veins from another ancestor whose name meant "bear." But, like me, was she really from here? Really Indigenous? A mere four-hour flight divides the two lands that made me, and yet they are thousands of kilometres apart. Divided to the vein indeed.

Before I came to Jamaica, I had a question mark surrounding my identity. I always felt like part of myself was foggy in some way. One half of me was clear, its corners crisp and in focus, the landscape easily traversed, but the other half felt different: blurry or shrouded – like discerning the Blue Mountains through the mists that hold them. When you look to the hills, they are obscured and hidden, but the largeness and certainty of their presence is palpable. As Goodison (1995, 1) writes, "For years I called the Blue Mountains home . . . I must now carry proof of my past existence." I grew up in Canada and visited Jamaica rarely, the funds that could abet such travels often lacking. But the connection and curiosity persisted.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall writes of identity and the Caribbean as being a "'production,' which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall and du Gay 1996, 91). Identity is a "matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' [and] belongs to the future as much as to the past" (394). What does it mean to have one's identity stretched across time and space? To have been formed in one place but from another, a piece broken off from the whole? Crawford (2004, 98) analyses this complication

of transnational identities for immigrants, noting that "'here' and 'there' are contested for those who maintain ties and connection to more than one place (real or imagined) at the same time. While this fluidity is expansive, it is complicated by negotiating feelings of belonging and not belonging to different locations resulting in an insider/outsider reality." Here, I reflect on this experience and its effect from the perspective not of an immigrant but of a second-generation individual returning to her place of origin.

The family I grew up with, the family I know well, is of Dutch and German heritage. My father's forebears were blue-collar spindle carvers, independent fur traders and writers. On my opa's side, my ancestors came as colonial settlers from Northern Germany to the newly formed Canadian state in the late 1800s. Reflecting on her life at the time, my great-grandmother Antoinette Bisch wrote, "Our house is built by the bend of a river / the nearest neighbour is a quarter of a mile / and the cold winter wind makes all of us shiver / but there's always lots of wood on the pile." My opa dropped out of school at age 11 to spend the afternoons pursuing his passion: he would escape to the park to draw, unbeknownst to his mother. Years later, at the end of the Second World War, he joined the army. He was sent first to British Columbia, where he trained as a medic and worked in an STI clinic, and then to the Netherlands. While on guard duty in Holland, he stopped a young woman as she made off with a chair – this woman was to become my oma, a war bride – and the rest is history. This is the family I know well, the side of myself I am quite familiar with.

And yet, a Jamaican element was always present. As a child, I remember my mother recounting stories of the long cast of characters who made up her youth and listened tirelessly as she read old Jamaican stories and sang folk songs. As a young woman, she left Jamaica out of a desire, from what my Aunt Betty recalls, to flee the country, like so many Jamaicans during the 1970s "exodus" (Crawford 2004, 97); my mother recalls simply a desire to travel and have new experiences. My Jamaican relatives were present in my life growing up, if in a much more limited capacity: we visited Jamaica, and my relatives stayed with us off and on. We sent remittances despite our working-class struggles: like so many displaced women from the Caribbean (Crawford 2004, 99), my mother worked for most of my life as a childcare/domestic worker. At one point, my grandparents considered moving to Canada and lived for a couple of years in Toronto.

As such, was the disconnect I felt merely geographical? Or was it from my mother's desire to be elsewhere? Or perhaps it was my own imagination of an "exotic authenticity" – that the uprooted "Jamaican" upbringing I experienced was somehow not truly Jamaican. A belief perhaps underscored by the quips of some outsiders who (de)racialised me, telling me repeatedly that I'm "not half-Jamaican," my "visible identity" (Alcoff 2006) or the "race" they transcribed onto my body not fitting into their image of what a Jamaican person is – while at the same time commenting on my brownness. Collectively, these experiences left me displaced, looking for scraps of my identity buried somewhere inside.

I returned to Jamaica in November 2016, after years away, for my grandfather's funeral. Upon entering his house, I was struck by the photos of myself and my siblings sprinkled throughout his living room on side tables and bookshelves, walls and corner cabinets – an experience that brought the absence of this part of my identity into immediate relief. How can you be such an everyday, ordinary presence in someone's life so far away from you? Was I often in his thoughts?

The other element that provoked this bout of self-exploration was of course my Aunt Betty – my mother's identical twin, whom I have been in close contact with my entire life. She is my "other mother," the version of my parent who lives in Jamaica, the representation of my alternative reality.

And so, after the short and sombre visit of the funeral, I knew that I needed to return.

It is a strange experience to feel like you are coming home to a place you didn't grow up in. And to feel the part of your identity that felt cut in half, like walking around unknowingly with a limp, start to piece itself together. I wondered if my mother felt this way when she initially moved to Canada – if she too felt a split sense of home and self. For three months, I set out to gather oral histories of my family's past from relatives and friends, and to gather experiences from cousins my age of what it would have been like to grow up here. What would my life have been like? What is Jamaica?

I had never experienced déjà vu before and am not inclined to believe in such experiences, being neither religious nor spiritual. But as the weeks unfolded during my time in Jamaica, I had several intense episodes of déjà vu, of being keenly aware of having already had some of the experiences I was moving through. The strongest of these events happened at my aunt's house in her living room, moving me almost to tears. "It is your ancestors speaking to you," a Jamaican friend tells me, lovingly.

My relatives recount to me our history. Of how it is mixed on both sides. On my grandmother's side, there is African and Scottish, English and, as per oral history, Indigenous Taíno. I hear stories of my grandmother, Marjorie Mae McClure, an insufferable matchmaker who

dedicated her life to coaching field hockey; of Rae, my mother's beloved grandmother, who would spend hours with her grandchildren, creating elaborate games and inspiring them with art; of her father, an early black pharmacist in Jamaica, Dr. Edmund Clarke Kinkead, who studied medicine and travelled the world. In 1910, the *Jamaica Times* described him as "kindly, sympathetic, good to the poor. A worthy son of a worthy father" (Jamaica History 2016). I hear of his mother, a Taíno woman who loved children, and of how Dr. Kinkead ultimately left his wife for Irene, an American actress. Finally, I hear of my obstreperous Aunt Carol, who's done everything naughty and both lives and loves to tell the tale.

On my grandfather's side, there is East Indian and Scottish – possibly indentured servants who were brought in following emancipation in Jamaica; there is Jamaican Irish; and there is African. At least one known ancestor was a captured African woman (my grandfather's great grandmother). This woman, I am told, had spiritual powers, and her name is so meaningful to my relatives that they won't speak it. It is her strength, my aunts recount, that has been carried through the generations – her power that shows up in us, entire lifetimes down the line. I hear of how her first partner was a Jewish merchant and how he arranged for her to marry a man named Hylton. I hear of how her son, my grandfather's grandfather, had over 100 children in Jamaica.

Today, my Jamaican family is made up of mostly women, all outspoken in their own right.

"Out of many, one people" is the (oft-criticised) Jamaican motto. A creolisation, a whole country in one person. An incongruence, though why should it feel so incongruent – aren't we all of mixed heritage? And yet the feeling persists. One of my great aunts writes poetry exploring this: it is so easy to pass, to hide behind the seemingly structured, compartmentalised rigidity of the European (or at least, appearance-wise, Mediterranean) and to go through life unknown as anything but this, she says. But underneath, there is something more. Underneath, there is an African element that disrupts that rigidity and provides a critical eye. It "commands the psyche." It is something I have felt my whole life. These identities come together as one but also in social contradiction: "Our bodies think in one language and move in another" (Walcott 1970, 31).

All of these people are in me, and that is what fascinates me. What elements of them come out in my being today? How am I similar and how different? The sense of the ones who came before me frame my experience as I navigate the comfortable and uncomfortable situations of downtown Kingston and imagine what it would have been like to grow here.

I struggle with the racialised class and the apparently different worlds that classes live in (or at least strive to – given the smallness of the island, separation is impossible). Many of my relatives are "brownin" – black or brown, by Canadian standards, but lighter skinned in Jamaica, which means a lot. There are lighter-skinned people in Jamaica who are poor, but for the most part, lightness of skin equals social power. This is why one of my cousins had the experience of being asked for money on a regular basis in school by her darker-skinned peers. And this is, in part, perhaps, why many Jamaicans bleach their skin. You see them walking down the street, socks pulled up and sleeves down to the wrist, waiting for the bleach to take effect. In Jamaica, being lighter skinned often (but not always) means you are more likely to receive better service, get a better job, or be successful (Charles 2012; Hope 2011).[1]

Kei Miller (2016) discusses the complications of the racialised class system in Jamaica in his novel *Augustown*. He reflects on the way this system is simultaneously mapped onto the landscape of the country, questioning what it means to have grown up literally looking down on others from the crests of the hills that surround Kingston. He writes, "Massa had only changed his name . . . He was now 'Boss' or 'Miss' or 'Sergeant.' Sometimes Massa even changed his skin from white to black, making this whole freedom thing complicated" (137).[2] While Jamaica has apparently cast off the shackles of slavery and become independent – while the country lauds figures like Marcus Garvey and Alexander Bedward and looks "to Africa where a black king shall be crowned" – many Jamaicans continue to work for meagre pay for lighter-skinned families or the white folks in resorts. At the same time, Jamaicans are confronted by a long line of light-skinned Miss Jamaicas and newspaper spreads with job ads looking specifically for "brownins."

I struggle with the omnipresence of "helpers" and how very little they are paid. I argue with my relatives about this; I don't feel comfortable being served. They counter with the argument about providing jobs and spreading money, and I am taken aback by the ways in which some helpers are considered to be family members and speak back so strongly to their employers, who seem to listen. I am not mistaken that this is the norm, however. I read in the newspaper how helpers are banding together to demand higher pay.

Then, of course, there is the violence. When outsiders think of Jamaica, the narrative tends to focus on either ganja-smoking, reggae-listening Rastafarians or the spectacle of gangland violence, both of which are fetishised. This narrow view of Jamaica is so limiting, and it is an insidious form of racism. As Deborah Thomas

(2011) writes, for example, violence is often seen as part of the "makeup" or "culture" of Jamaicans, the logic of historical and structural underpinnings not factored into the discussion in the same way they often are elsewhere in the world. Jamaicans are seen as violent for the sake of violence, whereas elsewhere, ethnic conflict or historical wrongdoings are pointed to for justification. Consequently, while I hesitate to focus my discussion of Jamaica on violence, on the heels of the 2010 incident in Tivoli Gardens or, more recently, the state of emergency in Montego Bay – and given the chorus of warnings I received both within and outside the country – violence merits discussion.

There is an uptown fear of the downtown violence, and while shootings are real, the reality of violence seems obscured in the discourse that surrounds it. The presence of violence shows up in the fact that houses here are locked behind bars or gated communities (in wealthier neighbourhoods). One house in Kingston actually has a cage over its entire structure. And districts in different cities across the country have taken on names of international war zones – there is, colloquially, a Gaza, Vietnam and Angola, among others. Walking downtown is not advised to anyone, especially women. One of my cousins was stabbed (she is thankfully alright), and I hear stories of friends who have been held at gunpoint or ushered away in renegade taxis as hostages. One police officer I met spoke to me of how he had killed 30 individuals, in perhaps one of the most uncomfortable conversations I have had to date. And so, while the violence is real, and the intensity of the city is palpable as you pulse through the streets, I still write this with a note of caution. I moved through both safe and known "violent" spaces and never once felt threatened or unsafe.

Marlon James (2014) discusses Jamaican violence in his novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. Although his book is problematic (among other things, James is an uptown person writing about downtown experiences for an uptown and international audience), it importantly deconstructs the violent image that has framed Jamaica for so long. While it shows the violence on the streets in chromatic hues, it points a finger to the real source of it all: international imperialism and state collusion. Relegated to the depths of poverty, the only way to achieve the surrealist dream of capitalism, the only way to achieve social status (for the inner-city male) is to become gangstas, shottas or dons, employing physical violence in the stead of the structural violence that is imposed on them.

My cousins and friends take me out on the town: to the cinemas and live theatres, where the audience is as much a part of the show as the production itself; to roots reggae revival hot spots, where modern day Rastas and tourists looking for an "authentic Jamaican experience" coalesce; to white and black sand beaches and turquoise waterfalls under green palms; to the dancehalls where class lines mix and the parties don't get started until 2:00 a.m.

Deep in the dancehalls, songs are associated with specific dance moves, and crews of dancehall boys perform in unison, at times incorporating props into the movements. Women whin' it up, "bruk back" and stand on their heads to twerk. The dances are extremely sexual, and the music follows suit – a throwback to African parties of the past, I am told by some. Cooper (2005, 1) provides an alternative explanation of these dances; she describes them as "a mode of theatrical self-disclosure in which the body speaks eloquently of its capacity to endure and transcend material deprivation."

The gender roles are strongly defined in these spaces, and are often homophobic; yet the style for the men has changed over the years to become much more "feminine" (Hope 2011) – the men pluck their eyebrows, bleach their skin, weave their hair in the most intricate patterns possible and adorn themselves in bling. Over the years, the move toward a pre-eminence of male dance troupes and a highly lacquered masculinity, according to Ellis (2011), has loosened the strictness surrounding masculine expression, allowing men to inhabit a queered space within this theorised strictly heteronormative (heterosexist) lexicon. Dancehall boys are thus able to balance on the edge of "masculine sartorial excess as well as the injunction against such excess" (Ellis 2011, 8). Ellis further notes, "Ding Dong puts it best. His 2005 hit 'Bad Man Forward, Bad Man Pull Up' announces the new regime of male dance with the following introductory claim: 'You know how long the real bad man want dance and cyaan dance? How comes? . . . Dancers! All out!'" (12).

While an assertive masculinity is detectable in these spaces, there is also, as a counterpoint, the figure of the Jamaican woman, whom you do not want to mess with.[3]

As the Patois becomes more discernible to my ears, I sense myself slipping into my other identity. Feelings of Jamaica become more tangible: Otaheite apples ripening, "the colour red of evening[,] . . . the parakeets and their feathers[,] . . . the cracked road, and zinc fences still graffitied with 'JLP' and 'NO TO COMMUNISSM' [sic]" (Miller 2016, 228). The sense of community is strong here. I move between spaces knowingly now. In addition to my blood relatives, senior family friends all go by "auntie" or "uncle." There is something in Jamaica that speaks to me on a level that feels undeveloped in me, in a language my ears are just starting to hear.

But what does it mean (and what right does one have) to feel at home in a place where most people arrived as a result of forced displacement? Or a place where Indigenous habitants were (and continue to be) forcibly displaced (a question that rings true for both of my homelands)? Crawford (2004, 97–98) reminds us that

> the Caribbean is a region of diasporas comprised of many different groups of people who originated elsewhere. Under varying circumstances both forced and free, "virtually everybody in the Caribbean came from somewhere else – the African slaves from West Africa, the white settlers, planters and administrators from Europe, and the indentured workers who arrived after the collapse of slavery."

The ongoing violent histories of displacement and colonisation frame our identities;[4] in turn, the poetics and politics of our identities frame all our movements and interactions.

There is much that is wrong with this small island, and in my responsibility-free state, I am conscious of the romanticisation I look to the land with. The injustices here cut deep, the disparity of wealth is overwhelming, and I know I have been living in fortune off the kindness of my friends and relatives. I recognise the privilege I was able to obtain abroad that would not have been possible here. But I also feel the intensity of passion, spirit and community and a rootedness I have not felt to the same degree elsewhere.

Before I came to Jamaica, I felt like my identity had a question mark associated with it. Since coming here, I have felt that other half come into sharper focus. I have greeted it and tried to converse. This other half is still smaller, more unknown, but it is starting to walk on its own. My identities come together now such that I feel at home in two places, thousands of kilometres apart.

The Jamaican identity I encountered in myself was not one of coherence, not purely privileged or disempowered, not purely black or white, but one of mixed heritage and mixed power, entire lifetimes of differences and correlations. Similarly, the experiences I encountered in Jamaica and of Jamaica were manifold and contained within themselves a kaleidoscope of interpretations – Jamaica is the imagined island of Bob Marley, and beaches and violence, but it is everything else as well: like me, it is made up of entire lifetimes of difference. A whole world in one place.

Marlon James once said there isn't one Jamaica, but hundreds of Jamaicas. And so, perhaps, like Jamaica, there isn't just one identity for me, but hundreds of iterations where I can exist with the contradictions of my identities coalescing, each stitch necessary for the whole. Where the captors and the captives come together, still in contradiction. Where I can exist in the worlds of Canada and the worlds of Jamaica, perhaps not so much divided to the vein but with both selves pushing against one another to form something old and new – in a similar way that Mr. Walcott (1992) speaks of the Antilles: a "cracked heirloom . . . a restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent." In the same way my mother has always been there for me, perhaps Jamaica has always been there for me as well – just not in the way the rest of the world imagines Jamaica to be. And so, as I work to obtain my citizenship in a country many people are trying to escape from, a citizenship that many people feel is a burden, I reflect on my privilege to take it up, but also on the feeling of necessity that pushes me forward.

As Derek Walcott (1970) concludes, "Either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation."

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Notes

1 Some companies in Jamaica, including banks and well-known enterprises such as Nestle, have specifically posted job ads looking exclusively for lighter-skinned individuals (Reid 2011; Watson 2016). For individuals who engage in skin lightening, multiple rationales inform their participation, in addition to (if not wholly outside) the primary theories of internalised racism, according to Hope (2011) and Charles (2012). Hope notes, for example, that "dancehall music and culture's signposts suggest that skin bleaching has moved beyond being solely a representation or display of patent Eurocentrism and a rejection of Afrocentrism" (168). For example, musician Lisa Hyper sings "Proud Ah Mi Bleaching," while the notorious Vybz Kartel has prominently praised and practised skin bleaching.

2 Carl Stone (1973) also famously examined Jamaica's pervasive class structure.

3 Although Jamaican dancehall is popularly critiqued as being misogynistic, homophobic and homicidal, Cooper (2005, 1–2) argues "transgressively for the freedom of women to claim a self-pleasuring sexual identity that may even be explicitly homoerotic"; she proposes that

> Jamaican dancehall culture at home and in the diaspora is best understood as potentially liberating space in which working-class women and their more timid middle-class sisters assert the freedom to play out eroticised roles that may not ordinarily be available to them in the rigid social conventions of everyday. The dancehall becomes an erogenous zone in which the celebration of female sexuality and fertility is ritualised as men pay homage to the female principle.

Barriteau (2003), Bailey (2004) and Lewis (2003) further take up and explore gender performance and power in the Caribbean and undermine the essentialising gender caricatures within the broader context of patriarchy.

4 As always, this violence is expressed in multiple ways, both directly and indirectly. When my mother was growing up, she was never taught Jamaican history in the school system – a relic of British violence on the island, which placed all things British as superior, from "proper" English to "good" hair and beyond. While the trend in education has slowly started to shift, the way in which the histories are presented is still problematic. The "official" story of the Taínos, for example, is that they were completely wiped out following colonisation (despite public outcries and current claims of Taíno identities; see, e.g., Williams 2014); similarly, the state has appropriated Maroon histories and symbols despite these communities' claims of indigeneity and separation from the Jamaican state (Elizabeth White, personal communication, 27 August 2017).

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