

After Midnight: Naming, West Indians, and British Children's Literature

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As British explorers and colonizers spread out over the world, they used the act of naming as one of many tools to indicate ownership of their new-found empire. British children's books, which were a major part of the colonizing and imperial effort, subtly (and not so subtly) indoctrinated young readers into their positions as owners and managers of the many nations around the world within the British sphere of influence. Because the area known as 'the West Indies' formed some of Britain's earliest colonies, it is instructive to follow the history of West Indian naming in British children's books. Naming in these books show how young readers were taught first to dominate, and then (as the empire crumbled) to try and contain, and only lastly to try and understand the lands and peoples of the Caribbean Sea.

At last we landed at Jamaica, low down on the side of a hill. And there were the men cutting the sugar-canes with a kind of knife. They looked just like the men we saw in the picture. Their house was not far away, and three fat little black babies were playing about, and sucking a bit of sugar-cane. 'Dear little pets!' said Anna.

A Nursery Geography (1920), 83

British literature has for centuries been tied up with notions of colonialism, empire, and ownership, particularly in the West Indies. The site of many of Britain's earliest colonies, the West Indies encompassed a wide geographical range, including islands such as Jamaica and Trinidad, as well as (sometimes) portions of South and Central America. In British literature for children, the connection between naming and ownership was doubly fraught with the patriarchal hierarchy between adults and children. Children's literature about the West Indies historically has reinforced British ownership, both of land and people. However, with the migration of many West Indians to Britain, especially after World War II, white Britons were forced to confront these long-held notions about hierarchies, and the literature produced for children changed accordingly. This change is particularly reflected in the act of naming throughout the texts.

The naming of 'the' West Indies is problematic. Although even early accounts suggest that the name is 'erroneous' (Campe, 1828: 109), its use continues up until the

present time. What it signifies, however, has changed. In Campe's *Columbus; or the Discovery of America* (1828), the narrator comments that 'under that denomination are now only comprehended the American islands, situated in the great Gulf of Mexico' (109). By the Victorian period, however, Britain often enfolded its territorial holdings in Central and South America, including British Guiana (now Guyana) and British Honduras (now Belize) into its definition of the West Indies. Seemingly anachronistic, the logic of this inclusion stems from two sources: first, the connection of the continental territories with a piratical history (Guyana and Belize formed part of the so-called 'Spanish Main'); second, the history of slavery and indentured servitude in Guyana, particularly, was similar to that of British island territories, especially Trinidad. Thus, G.A. Henty, in *Under Drake's Flag* (1883) has Francis Drake taking the young Ned Hearne on a voyage 'to the West Indies' (9) and 'on the Spanish Main' (2) interchangeably throughout the story. And George Parkin's geography text, *Round the Empire* (1892), slides easily from the term West Indian 'islands' (79) to 'colonies' (81) as soon as the slave trade and indentured servitude are introduced: 'In some of the West Indian colonies, where a regular and sufficient supply of negro labourers could not be obtained, coolies, or East Indian working men, have been imported in great numbers' (82). Given that the introduction of East Indian labor was greatest in Trinidad and Guyana, this subtle word change is not coincidental. 'The' West Indies is portrayed throughout children's literature, not as a simple geographic region, but as a British possession, whose borders expanded with Britain's fortunes.

In the twentieth century, British children's literature continued to emphasize both the indistinguishable nature of 'the' West Indies as well as British domination over it. Bessie Marchant's *Sylvia's Secret: A Tale of the West Indies* (1924) is set (at least initially) in Kingston, Jamaica, but the significance of this setting is only to establish that the main character, Sylvia, comes from 'one of the oldest families in Jamaica; they were closely allied to the English aristocracy ... her colonial ancestors had held their own in many a crisis, using their influence on the side of right and of progress' (10). The action quickly shifts to the imaginary island of Bellington Breck, owned (of course) by Sylvia's family. The ability of British authors to imagine new West Indian islands and give them particularly British names (both Bellington and Breck are place-names connected with Derbyshire) suggests a right of ownership — which is the central theme of novels like *Sylvia's Secret*. Similarly, in Alice Berry-Hart's *To School in the Spanish Main* (1953), British children are being evacuated from Liverpool to 'the West Indies, to Badanda College' (8). The children eventually reach the island of *Tripadoes* (48), a portmanteau of Trinidad and Barbados — islands that are several hundred miles apart and massively different in both history and culture. Their conflation in Berry-Hart's text suggests a need for securing the boundaries of the West Indies by containing them and reasserting ownership over them. Berry-Hart's use of 'Badanda' is also significant, as it is not a real college but a city in Kenya — a country that, in 1953, was very much in the news due to the Mau Mau uprising, and another area that the British felt needed 'containing.' As Ian Baucom points out, imperial narratives often depend upon 'a vision of the empire as an expanded locale, as a series of adjacent or contiguous territories brought under the happy dominion of a metropolitan seat of finance and government' (263). The idea

of containment and domination surrounds the use and choice of place-names in British children's literature during this time.

However, as the British population changed after World War II, with mass immigration from West Indian colonies and former colonies, this designation of *the West Indies* was used less and less in children's literature. If a character had West Indian heritage or background, a specific island was mentioned. Thus, in Bernard Ashley's *The Trouble with Donovan Croft* (1974), Donovan is introduced as *Jamaican* (8) before he is called *West Indian* (12). By the time Ashley publishes *Seeing off Uncle Jack* (1991), the specific island — in this case, the much smaller and less well-known island of St Lucia — is the only place-marker in the text; the phrase 'West Indies' has disappeared.

It is not only place names that undergo a significant shift in British children's literature about the West Indies, however. Names of people — particularly people of African descent — change markedly, particularly over the course of the twentieth century. Donnarae MacCann writes, in 'The Sturdy Fabric of Cultural Imperialism,' that, 'Colonialist children's books are agents of art that help produce a colonial-based socialization. Colonialism operates to dehumanize, and imperialist discourse only makes this condition more intractable' (186), and indeed, this is the function of the naming in these books.

Slave names, for example, either ironically mark the low status of a figure (Caesar is an extremely popular slave name in children's literature) or highlight the slave's physical features (usually through names that denote darkness, such as Inky or Midnight). These names tend to have additional connotations as well. Characters named Caesar, though enslaved, frequently have some (often ironic) noble or monarchical qualities associated with them. In Maria Edgeworth's 'The Grateful Negro' (1804) the eponymous character is Caesar, whereas the story's ungrateful character is named after the Trojan warrior Hector. This tendency to give slaves Greek and Roman names, particularly in mock-fashion, accords with David DeCamp's findings about names given to slaves by white masters in the West Indies: 'Classical names were the most popular . . . In naming or renaming an adult slave, it was sometimes considered a good joke to name an exceptionally stupid man Plato or Socrates' (1967: 142).

Although these mock-heroic monikers would fade out as character names by the 1960s, even in historical fiction, the other sort of slave name, where the character is named in relation to his or her color, does not. Both Morna Stuart's *Marassa and Midnight* (1966) and Marjorie Darke's *The First of Midnight* (1977) name main characters Midnight, and in both cases, the name connotes psychological as well as physical characteristics. In Stuart's book, Midnight is the 'more forward and fierce' (5) of the title's twins. Darke's Midnight is a boxer who, though he marries a white servant woman, yet remains unknown to her and to most white people. His wife comments, 'there was a large part of him she didn't understand and suspected she never would' (166). In similar fashion, Matthew Morten in Robert Leeson's *Maroon Boy* (1974), the most notable black character is, 'so ugly, men called him "Satan"' (71); his ugliness is paired with cruelty and silence as his primary traits. These characters reinforce negative associations of both black and dark.

The notion of certain names as 'slave names' may have been an historical fact, but their use in fiction continues to underline the concept of ownership by whites of

blacks. Additionally, Handler and Jacoby point out that, 'The names the masters knew are the names that appear in the primary sources, and it can be misleading to assume, as scholars sometimes do, that these were the only names that slaves possessed' (1996: 690). As the population of Great Britain changed after World War II, writers with West Indian roots provided a needed corrective to this sense of British ownership. One example is in V.S. Reid's historical novel, *The Young Warriors* (1967). The novel, which tells the story of a Maroon colony before the end of slavery, dispenses with names that might highlight the main characters' 'otherness'; instead, the five boys are named Tommy, Charlie, Johnny, David, and Uriah (who plays only a minor role). Although it may seem that the use of Christian/biblical names continues to enforce the white power structure, Richard D.E. Burton points out in *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean* that the use of Christian names was not only common, but celebrated by Blacks: 'Christian names and surnames taken by the slaves on baptism or emancipation testify to a new sense of self-ownership through religion' (94). It is significant that this change, from British ownership to self-ownership, was not immediately accepted in British publishing; Reid's book was not published in Britain until twelve years after its initial Jamaican publication.

If a British author wanted to include West Indian characters without alluding to slavery by use of loaded names, the most common tactic was simply to avoid referring to non-whites by name. In Stella Mead's *The Adventures of Peter and Tess* (1945), while white British children Peter and Tess meet several other white people by name, the non-white residents, if they are referred to at all, are denoted by profession or occupation. Thus, the children are guided around by 'a new friend, a Scotsman named Alan Baird' (n.p.) and in Trinidad meet up with old friends; 'Peter and Tess had once stayed with Auntie Sophie, as they called Mrs. Murray, in Scotland' (n.p.). In contrast, a child with leprosy recites for Peter and Tess, but is not given a name, being only 'A bonny little girl from Jamaica' (n.p.). Nutmeg growers, schoolteachers, and 'a coloured doctor' (n.p.) are only referred to by profession. While Mead goes a long way toward professionalizing West Indians, she does not individualize them in the Peter and Tess stories.

However, Mead also produces one of the earliest children's books to name both a specific child character and a specific area of the West Indies in its title just two years later, *Bim: A Boy in British Guiana* (1947). Bim, whose name echoes the journal of Caribbean literature first published in 1942, is also significant for another reason: he is part East Indian. Prior to this time, only native people (mostly Caribs and Arawak) and Afro-Caribbean people appeared in children's literature in any significant way; the Caribs and Arawak as a part of the distant past and the Afro-Caribbean as the inhabitants of the recent past and present. East Indians had remained, up until this time, almost invisible subjects. Belinda Edmondson argues in 'Race, Tradition, and the Construction of the Caribbean Aesthetic,' that, thanks to the Pan-African movement, 'essential blackness . . . [and] West Indianness [are] two categories which have become so conflated in the discourse as to be interchangeable' (110). The definition of the West Indian as only of African descent is challenged by Mead, whose characters interact with and cross various racial categories.

Contemporary stories in the 1960s and 1970s written by white authors continued to mark somehow the main West Indian character by name. A common trope was to

give characters overly long or pretentious names, as Eric Allen does in *The Latchkey Children* (1963). In this book, the West Indian family is all named after famous black musicians, hence, Duke Ellington Binns, Fletcher Henderson Binns, and so on. O.R. Dathorne, writing around the time of Allen's book, suggested that jazz was a way for white Europeans to understand Africa and the West Indies 'through the back door' (1965: 257). The characters in Allen's book highlight this, as they are generally referred to by their full names, and yet remain an unknown quantity throughout. Other authors of the period use names to mark a character; Donovan Croft in Bernard Ashley's book, is also generally referred to by his entire name, making him an object rather than an individual.

When writers of West Indian heritage began writing, they continued to use names that marked their characters as different, but in different ways. Whereas main characters in novels by white authors had names that marked them by their connection with a colonial past, many Black British authors used names that invoked potential. The main character in two of Kate Elizabeth Ernest's novels — *Hope Leaves Jamaica* (1993) and *Birds in the Wilderness* (1995) — is Hope Byfield. In similar fashion, Valerie Bloom names the main (and semi-autobiographical) character in her novel *Joy* (*Surprising Joy*, 2003). Even when names are less obviously significant on their own, Black British writers pair their names with positive titles; thus, one of Petronella Breinburg's books about a small Black British boy is named *Doctor Sean* (1973), and a book in Iolette Thomas's picture book series about a little girl of Antiguan extraction is *Princess Janine* (1990). It is perhaps significant that all of these writers are women; Sigrid King argues that naming is one of the tools Black women authors use for 'giving back power to the culturally disenfranchised' (1990: 685). However, the tendency to create and highlight positive character names would spread to white authors as well; perhaps the most famous of these is Mary Hoffman's *Amazing Grace* (1991).

Catherine Hall writes that 'identities can be understood as strategic and positional rather than essential. They are constantly transformed and re-worked, shifting and unstable rather than fixed, never unified, constructed within representation and derived from narratives of the self' (1999: 303–04). Children's literature about the West Indies has played a role in the understanding of West Indian identity, and naming is one of the key markers of that identity. Historically, naming of land and characters indicated ownership and domination by the (white, British) name-giver; however, the use of names has changed over time. As midnight descended on the British Empire, West Indians were among the first to see a new dawn. Children's literature now offers a range of West Indian identities to its readers, and at least some of those identities come from West Indians themselves.

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