

In Review: *Back to Africa* by Louise Bennett

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Language Games and Ideological Warfare

In *Back to Africa*, Louise Bennett problematizes the repatriation movement by posing a set of rhetorical questions to underscore the complexity of claiming a single ancestral root. She writes:

Me know say dat you great great great granma was African,

But Mattie, doan you great great great grandpa was Englishman? Den you great granmader fader by you fader side was Jew?

An you granpa by you mader side was Frenchie Parlez-vous?

Miss Mattie stands in for those black folk including from the Rastafari movement who were convinced that Jamaica is but a temporary home and that freedom from socio-political hardships would be realized upon return to Africa. But given the violence of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade that demolished kinship and broader community ties, the rape of black women by Europeans and other moments of contact that resulted in the plurality that characterized the Jamaican society—the notion of Africa as home was a misnomer. For Bennett, there was the impossibility of fully locating oneself within that lineage even if the contemporary experiences of black folk in Jamaica was rooted firmly in the racialization of Africans. Bennett felt that there was power in claiming Jamaica as home and with that consciousness, work toward destabilizing the structures

of inequity and inequality especially since “ de balance a you family, you whole generation, oonoo all barn dung a bun Grung- oonoo all is Jamaican”. To believe anything less and worst, to work toward that repatriation would ensure chaos especially as Africans on the continent might feel differently about this claim to belonging. While Bennett’s reflection on this impossibility bears much fruit I wonder about its implication on the broader project of placemaking. Is national or geographical rootedness a necessity for claiming space when one’s social and material reality is inseparable from the designation of “African descendant” and how do we account for what seems to be the necessary erasure of aspects of one’s identity in our bid to ‘authentically’ claim space?

Bennett’s use of patios in this piece (as well as her other poems and stories) is a deliberate political act that aims to decenter and delegitimize “the queens English” as the only valid or formal mode of communication. Its usage moves simultaneously to center an already existing creole culture that should rightfully exist alongside if not replace the dominant mode of communication that circulates via the elites and grant access to the ‘common’ person whose limited access to education makes it difficult for her to interpret discourse on issues that affect her life - thereby creating an alternate frame for understanding those social issues.

It is important to note that while this is a reading of the piece, Bennet’s poems are meant to be heard- to be performed. Bennett’s poems reflect the communication patterns of local communities who generally get their “news” through conversations in their communities characterized as ‘labrish’ with a degree of gossip and humor- as opposed to reading. It is this form that helps Bennett to raise the consciousness of her audience while resisting the colonialist elitist frame - itself a form of violence that works toward the disappearance of local cultures. I

also note this oral tradition because patios, while the common way locals communicate, is not usually written and in fact, most Jamaicans find it difficult to read. Furthermore, her target audience falls in the category of people with varying degrees of illiteracy as well as those without any real commitment to learning through reading.

Beyond the substantive intervention that the piece makes around diaspora and belonging, the piece is an example of how humor, gossip, and oral traditions can be mobilized to challenge colonial epistemologies that require strict adherence to particular research methodologies and practices to be considered valid or useful.