

Preface

One of my earliest memories is of a cloudy day (around 1965), when I watched my father stuff crumpled newspaper into a broken windowpane, in anticipation of “spraying.” Not long after, a truck drove slowly up and down our street, releasing a fine mist into the air. Years later, I learned that that mysterious mist was DDT. As part of its campaign to eradicate malaria from the tropical Americas, the World Health Organization had doused my island with a chemical no Jamaican at the time knew to be a carcinogen. In those early years of self-government, the administering of a “harmless” insecticide must have seemed an appropriately forward-looking measure. While this advancement put a nail in the coffin of Jamaica’s ecosystem, there was a sense, too, in the 1960s and 1970s that the postcolonial condition was already poisoning our new nation. For example, because Jamaica exported bauxite and alumina, as opposed to aluminum, the ore’s end product—or better yet, *finished* aluminum products such as cooking utensils, vehicle parts, and metal sheeting—we were far, far away from reaping the full benefit of our natural resources. If you threw in OPEC and the global oil crisis, in addition to the ever-growing national debt, Jamaica’s foreign currency reserves rapidly verged on *empty*—or, to borrow my father’s favorite metaphor, it was as if we were subsisting on fumes. The only question seemed to be, When would we finally come to a standstill?

Don’t get me wrong—there were wonderful things about growing up in Jamaica in the years under Prime Minister Michael Manley: fantastic, if brutally strict, teachers who gave me an outstanding primary education; the amazing National Dance Theatre Company; wonderful, locally produced music by people who were not international reggae stars; Sangster’s Bookstore; and the tingling down my spine every time I stood to sing the national anthem. But

even with these precious gifts, there was no escaping the sense that the nation was in an economic free fall. Crippled by predatory loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, Jamaica could afford next to nothing. When the price of petrol and kerosene went up, condensed milk, flour, and cooking oil moved beyond the reach of the poorest Jamaicans. During periods of drought, water shutoffs were a way of life. At home, a steady supply of matches and candles got us through regularly scheduled blackouts. School textbooks from overseas vanished from bookstore shelves. Crucial car parts went from being horrendously expensive to entirely unavailable. When a vehicle owner parked on the street overnight (particularly if they owned a Volkswagen Beetle), by morning the headlamps were missing. But the black market in car parts was merely the benign edge of a horrific crime wave marked by countless armed robberies and home invasions, frequently accompanied by beatings, rape, and murder. Depending on your income, you fought back with an angry dog chained up in clear view, a firearm, a fancy alarm system, or all of the above. Everyone who could afford it welded iron bars and gates across not just doorways and windows, but indeed *any* crack or crevice that might admit even the smallest human being. And everywhere there were guns, guns, and more guns. On call-in radio talk shows, political commentators and members of the public bemoaned the debt, the government, the criminals, the United States, OPEC, the IMF, and on and on.

In search of relief, my parents, my sister, and I regularly made the two-hour winding drive across the Blue Mountains to Port Antonio, home of my mother's aging Lebanese-born parents. Despite the political and economic chaos, my grandparents' shotgun-style house seemed peaceful and constant. Every room emitted the comforting smell of mahogany and bay rum. To accommodate an ever-expanding family (eight children in all), my grandparents had tacked on rooms wherever, so that exterior French doors in the living room creaked open into a large, high-ceilinged guest room. The terrazzo-tiled kitchen sat just beyond a set of dining-room sash windows that once opened onto a side yard. A bathroom trip in the middle of the night required tiptoeing through Grandma's room to access the house's central hallway. The house's two bathrooms were really one gigantic room, partitioned by an ancient beadboard divider. Since the divider had regular gaps where it met the floor, as children my sister and I passed notes and comic books back and forth, while we pretended to take our showers.

Right on the water, where the northeastern foothills of the Blue Mountains ended in the Caribbean Sea, Port Antonio bore the brunt of every weather system coming in from the Atlantic, taking the prize as the wettest spot on the

island. To foreign tourists passing through, the town's mold-stained concrete walls and ramshackle brown zinc roofs must have seemed quaint and bucolic. If they entered my grandparents' country store and saw that all purchases were wrapped in pages of the *Gleaner* and tied with cotton string, they marveled that Jamaicans had the wherewithal to produce a daily paper. One summer while I took a turn helping out in the store, a skinny white American with long hair and a struggling beard ran his hand across the newspaper sheets laid out at the wrapping station. With wide-eyed astonishment, he asked if he could take one of the sheets with him. "Ahmm, we do know how to read and write, you know," I said, with quiet indignation.

None of these strangers had the least interest in the dark secrets of slavery and colonial atrocities behind the breathtakingly green landscape; nor did they care to know how the rich racial and cultural diversity of Jamaica came to be. But it was in Port Antonio that I supplemented my father's family stories of African slaves, Scots-Irish immigrants, and British Baptist missionaries with the much more recent history of my mother's Catholic Lebanese parents, a pair of Arabic-speaking first cousins from turn-of-the-century Choueifat (pronounced *Sch-why-fate* by my mother), who grew up in what was still the Ottoman Empire. Just before World War I, they migrated first to Haiti and then to Jamaica, where they learned to master the local patois, albeit with a very thick Arabic accent. Eventually, as shopkeepers, they began supplying small farmers and town locals with pots and pans, nails by the pound, cloth by the yard, shovels, kerosene lamps, coal stoves, Dutch ovens, handmade brooms, schoolchildren's exercise books, rubber work boots, and, occasionally, dress shoes, both secondhand and new.

Neither British nor of African descent, my grandparents would have learned early on that in Jamaica's complex class- and color-obsessed society, they would never achieve anything akin to racial equality with European whites. Consequently, as with many newly arrived groups bent on success, they took every opportunity to put themselves above the island's Black population: the modestly dressed market women, the ragged small farmers, the United Fruit Company pickers on whom their living depended. However, my grandparents did have several things in common with the people they looked down upon. As with a number of their customers, they could neither read nor write English. And they ate the same food. Indeed, over time their Eastern Mediterranean cuisine merged with local dishes rooted in the experiences of African slaves and Chinese and South Asian indentured workers. To be sure, my grandmother went on making kibbeh, *labnah*, and cabbage-leaf *meshi*, but more often than not we ate rice, yams, avocados, curried goat, roasted breadfruit, boiled green

bananas, escovitch fish, and fried plantains. With seven daughters and one son, they at first hoped to orchestrate marriages among the handful of other Christian Lebanese families on the island, but as happened to successive waves of English, Irish, Scots, Portuguese, German, Chinese, South Asian, and Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants, their children and their children's children married across color, class, and religious lines, the obvious consequence of life on a small island.

To a Jamaican, there is nothing odd about being the product of two or three different ethnic histories. And regardless of how far back you trace your lineage, the journeys embarked upon by your ancestors had much to do with imperial profit seeking and territorial domination. Though at first glance the ability to reinvent yourself would seem to rest with those who were European and free, regardless of race there were limitations, especially with respect to class, ethnicity, and place of origin. Though they were Christian and had always worn Western-style clothing, my grandparents were still regarded by the British as Arabic-speaking "Orientals." As with everyone else trying to fit into Jamaica's colonial society, they had to learn the appropriate colonial script and rub shoulders with Port Antonio's tiny mixed-race and Black colonial elite, while also working hard in their business to establish a class identity that put them above their Black housekeepers and yardmen, from whom they expected perfect obedience, despite paying miniscule wages. If they were upset that their grandchildren ended up being racially mixed (Chinese and Black) it was hard to tell, since all of us had the run of their small garden and the whole house, especially that airy and light-filled guest room, with bay windows looking out onto one of Port Antonio's two natural harbors.

As one of these grandchildren, I witnessed contradictions in terms of class and race long before I had the words to describe them. But none of that prepared me for the moment when I spied a peculiar photograph in an aunt's family album. Black and white and probably dating back to the 1920s, the image featured a short, unsmiling, and apparently white man in a pith helmet, staring defiantly into the camera, his light eyes overhung by thick dark brows that almost met in the middle of his forehead. With thin lips tightly pressed together, he wore a very wrinkled khaki jacket with pleated breast pockets, a pair of shorts, and puttees. Off to his left side and slightly behind him stood a small-boned, bare-breasted Black woman, fabric draped around her waist, as she steadied a clay jar atop her head. She was equally blank-faced, but her eyes were averted, and though tonally distinguishable from the darker tropical foliage behind her, her Black skin created a sharp contrast to that of the man, making him appear almost luminous.

The photograph reminded me of an early silent film still, or an illustration cut from an ancient issue of *National Geographic*. I immediately asked my aunt for an explanation. She replied, “Oh, that’s Uncle C in Africa.” A little later on she added, “That C was a brute,” with no further explanation. The quiet bitterness informing that last detail discouraged further questions. Going to my grandparents was out of the question, since broaching what seemed to be a difficult family topic would have meant a tongue-lashing from my mother. In the intervening years, and after a bit of digging, a few more facts surfaced. Apparently, C visited Jamaica from Lebanon, ending up in Port Antonio, where he fell in love with my grandparents’ oldest child, sixteen-year-old R. After they married, C took his Jamaican-born bride back to Lebanon. Having very little money to begin with, C had great difficulty finding employment back home. Perhaps driven to financial desperation, he left R in the care of his parents and set off for the African continent to pursue some moneymaking venture. Ironically, no one in the family seemed to recall where he went or if he made any money. Instead, there was an enduring sadness for years afterward because R had been separated from her Jamaican family, then essentially abandoned by her husband to an unfamiliar household. According to family reminiscences, R may or may not have suffered abuse at the hands of her in-laws, who may or may not have used her as their scullery maid. Looking at a teenaged photo taken on the eve of her wedding, I thought that to her in-laws, R’s jet-black hair and alabaster skin must have seemed at odds with her West Indian food ways and her patois, and especially the hint of a Jamaican accent lacing her Arabic. However attenuated, the African diaspora had entered C’s Lebanese home, even as he worked hard in Africa to acquire a racist colonial lexicon that might mitigate (at least within the figural boundaries of the photograph) his own nonwhite status.

During colonialism, countless European and American fortune hunters set out to make it in Africa, and Middle Easterners were no exception. Men such as C arrived as peddlers and small shopkeepers to operate as middlemen supplying more or less the same items sold in my grandparents’ store, this time to petty white colonial officials and African and South Asian laborers laying railroad tracks or erecting bridges. As an antidote to his own poverty and alienation as an “Oriental” in colonial Africa, C needed that African woman to embody stasis, silence, and powerlessness, so as to highlight himself as akin to Richard Francis Burton or Henry Morton Stanley, producers of African “knowledge” and seemingly capable and commanding in any situation that arose on the backward continent. Of course, C could assert a white Western colonial manhood only within the safety of the photograph. And he had the image made not to convince a middle-class European viewer that he was of equal status but

rather to update his family in Lebanon and his in-laws in Jamaica that he had “made it” in Africa. Therefore the photograph functioned as both an artifact of and a commentary on his sojourn abroad. To his two families he signaled that his sacrifice of a stable homelife in Lebanon had paid off because he had embraced imperial racism. Instead of revealing him as (to play on Homi Bhabha’s phrase “almost the same, *but not quite*” from “Of Mimicry and Man”) a not-quite-not-white Middle Eastern trader, C’s photograph suggested that imperial travel had accorded him a new competency, a new freedom to remake his identity. In this way, he may have replicated the same racial maneuvers enacted by my grandparents when they arrived to the Caribbean in the first years of the twentieth century.

But what of the carefully posed African woman? Reduced to a colonial cliché, she functioned as the feminized continent ready for takeover. As the object rather than the subject of the image, she lacked the means of shaping and broadcasting her own story. However, though C’s centrality depended on silence, that silence did not mean absence. As a teenager, I couldn’t abide the suggestion that she had no story, so in her African face I imagined the Jamaican faces of my teachers, my public-school classmates, female cashiers in the local corner shop, elderly ladies in church, and women selling produce and household goods in the market. Having grown up in the violent context of early postcolonial Jamaica, I also wondered if C had done her any harm before or after the staging of the photograph. However, from my own temporal and geographical location, I was as much an outsider as C. And, as a part of the family to which C had directed the image, I too consumed her through the superficialities of race and gender. Even today, because of my own diasporic position as a Jamaican immigrant to the United States, and my fantasies of what long-dead Uncle C might have been like, I risk projecting a history of my own design onto who that African woman might have been. That projection assumes a colonial-era African woman automatically dispossessed and immobile, even as her presence helped C to prove his apparent social advancement.

It would be simplistic to make C the clear villain of this narrative because I, too, am entangled in a neocolonial script that highlights my education and agentive mobility as a “successful” immigrant to the United States and a privileged global traveler. Still, the thought of both individuals, and especially the unequal relationship staged in the image, continues to elicit a range of questions, not least of which are: Can travel be transformative for the racialized and sexualized Other? How do racial regimes change or shift for an immigrant versus a sojourner? What impact does the phenomenon of intersecting migratory patterns have on the individuals involved? What essential powers are gained

or lost as the regimes of race, ethnicity, and class subtly shift and recombine, depending on location? How does gender identity shape strategies for agency in relation to stasis or mobility? What valence does national identification have, in the absence of the nation-state?

These early musings proved to be the seeds from which *Moving Home: Gender, Race, and Travel Writing in the Early Black Atlantic* has emerged. Writing as a scholar on a range of nineteenth-century Black American, West Indian, and West African travel literature, I still feel the imperative to provide a space for that African woman standing behind my uncle. This book marks a step, but it is certainly not a resolution.