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There is another Caribbean, beyond the blood, the beach and the banana

Why have so few people heard of the Caribbean that produced Walter Rodney, CLR James and Toussaint L'Ouverture?

Akala theguardian.com, Friday 20 June 2014 13:50 BST | Jump to comments (28)



A Port au Prince mural showing the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743-1803), a pioneer of the Caribbean revolt against slavery. Photograph: Jean-Marc Bernard/Réalis Agence/Corbis

As I sat in the heat of a Jamaican afternoon within touching distance of the Caribbean sea listening to Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Jamaica Kincaid read from their respective works, my mind kept returning to the phrase coined by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "the single story". Adichie's phrase describes the process by which entire nations, even continents, have their reality excised and a single, usually misguided or at the very least limited, image is allowed to become the dominant picture of a place and its people.

I was in Jamaica to record a BBC Radio 4 documentary about Rastafari and to perform alongside the above names at the Calabash International Literature Festival. Founded in 2001 and located in the grounds of Jake's Treasure Beach hotel, St Elizabeth, this three-day festival is the brainchild of the American poet, Chatter and Kincaid. It was the producer, Ceri, and the author, Justin Henzell, who witnessed the audience of more than 4,000 people and with one morning artists such as Jah9 and Jesse Royal. It was one of the most inspiring events I've ever attended.

I am someone whose worldview was born of the African-Caribbean radical tradition. Yet I was surprised at just how well managed and well attended the festival was. Why? Could I have internalised a single story about the Caribbean, that still sees it more as a place of carnival than cognition? Or could it be that thousands of people intently listening to writers read for six hours a day, in that heat, is just genuinely a unique phenomena?

You see, beyond the blood, the beach and the banana, there is another Caribbean – that is not violent, wine-rum-soaked, ganja-smoking cousin – seems to be of little interest to the outside world. It could not help but notice that, despite the top-class international line-up and Jamaica's huge tourist numbers, almost the entire audience was made of people from Jamaica and its diaspora. Perhaps this only reflects the festival's location on the quieter south coast of the island. Or could it be that what Jamaicans want from their island is at odds with what most visitors demand?

Either way, the festival is clearly thriving, so it really does not matter – but being at Calabash caused me to think about how much more interesting the real Jamaica is than the try stereotypical sither we are usually offered.

I have seen numerous documentaries about sex tourism, violence and homophobia – and even ones revolving around the absurd suggestion that "black men are fast because of slavery". But never have I seen anything on the Caribbean that produced Walter Rodney, CLR James, Marcus Garvey and Toussaint L'Ouverture. The Caribbean whose revolutions broke the back of the "infernal trade".

The impacts of this lopsided representation are manifold: those of us who internalise stereotypes of the lands from which we descend are likely to be racked by the kinds of psychic maladies that Frantz Fanon (another Caribbean genius) wrote about so insightfully, the nations being projected upon suffer the external stereotypes, but also those in the wider, white culture are left with the potential of some chance to expand their own humanity by appreciating the fullness of another's.

While none of this asymmetric cultural trade-off is exclusive to a Caribbean-western world relationship, the former slave colonies, along with their African cousins, seem to me to suffer the greatest distortion of their reality. Just look at the resurgence of those "please save a starving black child" adverts.

So my challenge is twofold: for the Caribbean intellectuals and creatives to scream even louder so they can be heard above the general din, and for those of us of African-Caribbean origin (and anyone else interested in a fuller human experience) to put more pressure on our media decision-makers to reflect the wholeness of our humanity. Oh, and if you can, visit a literature festival in the Caribbean to see it all for yourself.

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Leopold1904: Why have so few people heard of the Caribbean that produced Walter Rodney, CLR James and Toussaint L'Ouverture?

Well every lover of English poetry and of political verse knows of Toussaint - TOUSSAINT, the most unhappy man of men!

Wordsworth: Report. osekar: Leopold1904: what a lovely poem

Lavern McDonald: Leopold1904: This was on my syllabus for my Atlantic History course... This Wordsworth poem made me go back to reread the Daffodils...

UnTribalist: This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our community standards. Replies may also be deleted.

MarynInEurope: Probably because in a lot of the English speaking world the chances that people immediately recognise Frederick Douglass, Lynton Kew Johnson or Langston Hughes, are also pretty slim.

potouekspohia: "But never have I seen anything on the Caribbean that produced Walter Rodney, CLR James, Marcus Garvey and Toussaint L'Ouverture..."

DraganAria: That festival looks great.

SavannahLaMar: Great piece. Though people will always be drawn to Jamaica for the beaches, the rum, the gangs, and why shouldn't they? People go on holiday to feed the senses more than the brain.

And there is a culture war in the Caribbean itself. And the generally middle-class intellectuals and God-fearing botanists on one side, the type who have been successful in the West and have the cash to return for literary festivals, are in fear of the tougher, poorer elements of the urban underclass, who have much less of a stake in society.

I think music - which Jamaica and black populations in general, are massive exporters of, has a lot to do with how we are perceived.

We are at a cultural moment where as black people we too readily allow ourselves to be defined as outliers in the modern jazz era it was thing to be an intellectual, in the seventies we were politicised, in the early eighties we were spiritual.

Nowadays it's the street culture which is the thing - and it's been commodified and sold back to us and inaccurately defined as the typical 'black experience'.

We could say that as long as we produce artists like Vybz Kartel, we have only ourselves to blame. But artists like Vybz Kartel are the product of particular socio-economic circumstances - like Jamaica being under the cosh of the IMF, and the island's strategic position in the cocaine trade between latin America and the United States.

Bizarrely, the only TV shows where I have seen the reality of everyday West Indian life are 'Who Do You Think You Are' and 'World's Strictest Parents'.

Ultimately though, its parents and children who must embrace the most positive parts of our heritage, we shouldn't rely on the wider society for that.

We have to produce new artists who will tell the story beyond the stereotype - in the way Bobo Chimamanda did. Caribbean has done for Nigeria. Like Bobo said, quoting Garvey, 'Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves shall free our minds'.

IsthervilleonMars: Look here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Jamaican_writers

IsthervilleonMars: The more I investigate the better it gets. Sc-4 writer I shall definitely look her up. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nalae_Hopkinson

KevinYearwood: I have not only heard of but read both CLR James and his book about the Haitian slave revolt led by Toussaint. I'd be interested to know how well known they are in the Anglo-African-Caribbean community there.

I actually believe the Black Jacobins and the Haitian slave revolt generally should be on the school syllabus for all in the UK. These are events that should be celebrated and understood and acted upon universally, rather than the post-imperial petty national corrosive stuff Gove values, the hollowed out words and values the political class don't really own, understand or promote.

IsthervilleonMars: It would be good to include Caribbean History in the syllabus, the Haitian revolt was in a French colony?

KevinYearwood: Thanks for the pedant history lesson. Haiti was heavily penalised for freeing itself, being forced by slave-owning America and France to pay damaging reparations to France (for almost 150 years) so that the liberated Haiti would not be an inconvenient successful example of black liberation in the world of elite Western imperial interests.

But you suggesting that the British empire didn't see the advantage of that. Are primarily the Haiti revolution is an example of the French revolutionary values of liberty fraternity and equality at their most radical and progressive (the American revolution was just a changing of the aristocratic guard). Of course British children should learn about that rather than, say, the deeply conservative elite fuck Churchill.

That is one of the points C L R James makes a citizen of once British held Trinidad. The Black Jacobin revolution is a use quite a lot... literary achievement is an artistic, creative gift that may not be as intellectual to understand. That word implies intellectualism over others; when in fact that is an art where they, the authors, are proficient and completely different to someone who paints or performs within art, where the word intellectual is not applied... in any reporting or communication, of any sort.....

Lavern McDonald: NB :-)

annec1: Great article

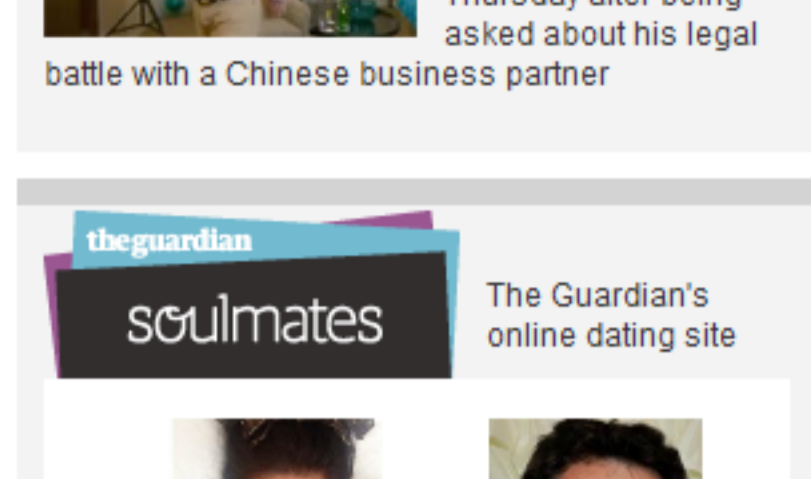
Charlotte Nanton: when literary comment is made... why is it so important to emphasise the word INTELLECTUAL, that Caribbean reports seem to use quite a lot... literary achievement is an artistic, creative gift that may have sufficed... the word intellectual implies superiority over others that would not be as intellectual to understand. That word implies intellectualism over others; when in fact that is an art where they, the authors, are proficient and completely different to someone who paints or performs within art, where the word intellectual is not applied... in any reporting or communication, of any sort.....

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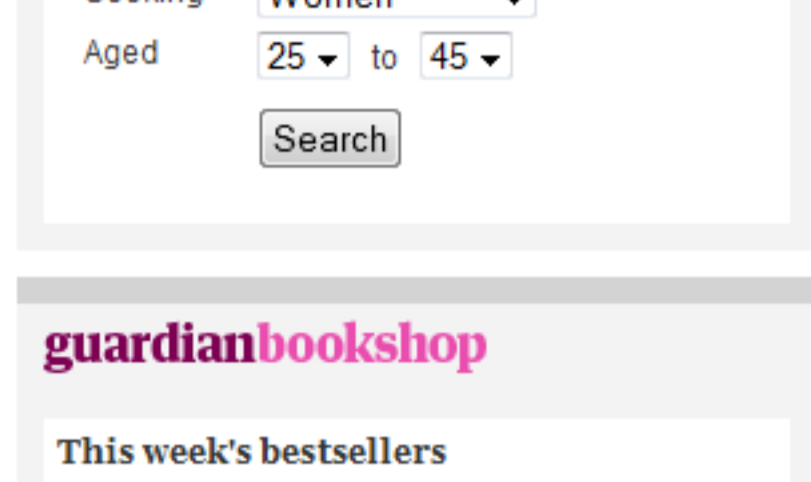
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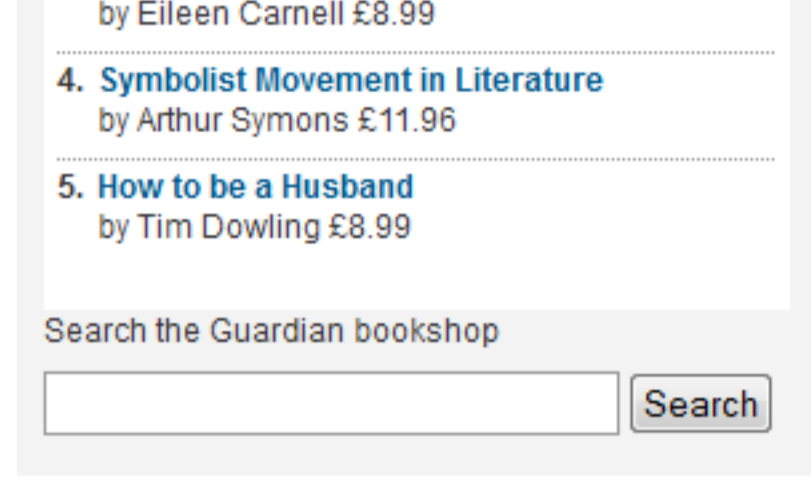
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