Aster Volta

Prof. Aisha Sibide

English Composition. Section D

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Naming practices: critical response to Jamaica Kincaid

In the autobiographical essay, “On Seeing England for the First Time”, Jamaica Kincaid gives a detailed description of growing up in Antigua, and how English culture permeated every aspect of her life. She writes about coming of age, and realizing how the real England was far removed from the country that she was taught to idealize and revere. Kincaid portrays the lasting psychological and social impacts of colonialism in Antigua by exemplifying the various ways in which society had their African roots stripped away and replaced. While Kincaid focuses on the relevance of these aspects of colonization, she does not emphasize names and naming practices as powerful ways of colonizing a society.

Children in Antigua were encouraged to behave in the English way by learning English history and geography, having English names, buying English cars and clothes, and eating English breakfast. Kincaid exemplifies that “the car, a Hillman or a Zephyr, was made in England. The very idea of the meal itself, breakfast, and its substantial quality and quantity was an idea from England” (33). She vividly explains how living in a colony affected her identity by emphasizing the mismatch between reality and the norms imposed by the English. According to Kincaid, the English colonized Antigua in more ways than language. They took over with British culture by changing their education, traditions, food and fashion.

According to African worldview, names have psychological, physical and spiritual meaning. “When one bestows a name upon a child that person is not simply naming the flesh of

the child, but rather the name is for the person's soul" (Bernhardt 28). During the Slave Trade, Africans were renamed by their masters with European style names like Mary, John and Sarah (Burton 38). In doing so, the masters dehumanized African people because names are not only part of individual identity, but help build a collective memory by recording their experiences. Hence, in order to get rid of African collective memories and identities, the colonizers assigned new names to the Africans or even left them nameless. This was a way of dominating and committing enslaved Africans to perpetual servitude. Moreover, future generations were bound to forget their cultural heritage because parents were not allowed to name their children. "The 'unnaming' and 'renaming' of new arrivants from Africa was, for the slave masters, an integral part of the act of taking possession" (Burton 41).

Throughout history, Africans were subjected to white supremacy and cultural ideology by being forced to adapt to white hegemony and culture. For example, Kincaid vividly describes how she was brainwashed by racist education, European produced clothing and names. Nevertheless, there is evidence of African cultural retention. The enslaved people brought to North America and the Caribbean named their children discreetly as a form of resistance. As such, African descendants resisted the process of obliteration of their memories by retaining some elements of their original names on the plantations. These practices helped preserve some aspects of African identify and collective memory.

After Emancipation, the names kept by the "free" Africans and names of places in the Caribbean usually belonged to their previous owners, masters or white public figures. As Kincaid explains, "John Hawkins was knighted after a trip he made to Africa, opening up a new trade, the slave trade. He was then entitled to wear as his crest a Negro bound with a cord. Every single

person living on Hawkins Street was descended from a slave" (32). Sigrid King in "Naming and Power in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" states:

> Naming has always been an important issue in Afro-American tradition because of its link to the exercise of power. From their earliest experiences in America, Afro-Americans have been made aware that those who name also control, and those who are named are subjugated. Slaves were forced to abandon their African identities when they were captured, and were renamed with their masters' identities when they arrived in America. In Orality and Literacy, Walter Ong points out that for primarily oral cultures (such as the early slave communities) naming conveyed a power over things, for without learning a vast store of names, one was simply, "powerless to understand" (33). This sense of powerlessness could extend beyond the individual to include an entire community of "unnamed" people. Naming is tied to racial as well as individual identity: "To have a name is to have a means of locating, extending and preserving oneself in a human community, so as to be able to answer the question 'who?' with reference to ancestry, current status, and particular bearing, with reference to the full panoply of time."

At this point in history, previously enslaved Africans had to adapt to their newfound freedom by figuring out how to piece together their fragmented history. I argue that changing names and naming practices helped build a new-shared collective identity, as independent entities. Embracing African names became a way of protest, a way of standing against white supremacy

and racism. This idea got traction during the late 1960s when the Black Power movement emerged to fight for the redefinition of African identity. The concept of self-definition was pivotal to the Black Power movement (Deburg 26). Hence, Black Power leaders rejected the notion of Africans with European names, which they referred to as "slave names". As such, large numbers of black people in the U.S. and Caribbean changed their "slave names" to African names. For example, in 1952, Malcolm Little, a famous leader of the Black Power movement, changed his name to Malcolm X. The surname "X" represented the Black identity and culture that was erased through centuries of enslavement. Furthermore, Kincaid also changed her name as an at an attempt "to do things without being the same person who couldn't do them—the same person who had all these weights" (112).

As discussed earlier, according to African mystical theology names hold immense power and connection to the spirit world. The Black Power movement inspired Africans to embrace their heritage and resist the lingering effects of colonialism. Thus names and naming practices among Africans are a way of rejecting the colonizers. In "Naming and Linguistic Africanisms in African American Culture" Mphande writes about the evolution of African American culture, specifically how it is tethered to renaming and appropriating African cultural forms as a way of empowerment in a hostile environment. The author further states that through re-naming themselves, African Americans have reclaimed African roots and continue the process of redefining themselves (104).

During colonialism, stripping African people of their names effectively erased their individual identity and collective memory. Thus, previously enslaved people who reject their European given names aid in the decolonization of the African psyche by reclaiming their roots.

Works Cited

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3. Ibid., 41.
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5. Van Deburg. New Day in Babylon, 26.
6. Mphande, "Naming and Linguistic Africanisms in African American Culture," 104.