WEST INDIAN-NESS OR CARIBBEAN-NESS: 
THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSCIOUSNESS

By John Harewood

“Nothing was created in the British West Indies, no civilization as in Spanish America, no great 
revolution as in Haiti or the American colonies. There were only plantations, prosperity, decline, 
neglect: the size of the islands called for nothing else. How can the history of West Indian futility 
be written? What tone shall the historian adopt? The history of the islands can never be 
satisfactorily told. Brutality isn’t the only difficulty .History is built around achievement and 
creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.”

(An excerpt from The Middle Passage by V.S. Naipaul, 1961)

The Nobel Laureate Sir Vidia Naipaul, whom literary history will undoubtedly regard as one of the 
greatest writers of the English sentence, thus differing from the man himself who has his own 
opinion as to who is the greatest, offended many a West Indian by the afore-mentioned 
indictment.

Confronted with the statement, whether or not you had any connection to the West Indies, you 
might understandably ask yourself a number of questions. What was really the intent of the 
celebrated author? What did he mean by West Indian futility? What criteria was he using to define 
creativity and achievement? Is or was his assertion justified in the light of the facts?

We will return to these questions later, but first, let me describe my immediate reaction to 
Naipaul’s critique.

Although having read West Indian history much too infrequently, I began by trying to recall what I 
knew about it, at the same time relying more on my experience of living in the region. I asked 
myself once again two questions rooted in my consciousness ever since adolescence, that is, 
What is a West Indian? What is West Indian-ness or Caribbean-ness?

Questions like these are related to a sense of belonging which exists in any society whose 
members, either individually or collectively, claim a shared history, adhere to certain values and 
may be identified by their peculiar manner of expressing and conducting themselves. For my part, 
I regard the idea of belonging as strongly connected to fact and feeling. And here I emphasize 
feeling foremost.

I felt West Indian or Caribbean-ness long before I came into contact with Naipaul’s harsh 
dismissal. I was an adolescent who read anything in sight, often without appropriate discretion. 
The three papers published in the island, The Barbados Advocate, The Observer and The Truth, 
the last showing more characteristics of a gossip-rag than a transmitter of news, were high on my 
list.

The weekend Advocate became the most attractive for me in the 1950’s because it highlighted 
excerpts from Edgar Mittleholzer’s work. I quickly learned that he was Guyanese, and his 
characters and their setting vividly reminded me of daily life in my own island environment. It 
wasn’t difficult to feel that I was connected to something bigger, something which I could
understand even if only through my imagination and the world created by this writer with an unusual name,— as I thought in my ignorance.

My *feeling* of connectedness and excitement increased with my discovery of *Bim*, a magazine small in size but in much larger demand, which carried the short stories and poetry of even more writers from the Caribbean; then, there was the appearance of George Lamming’s *In the Castle of my Skin* (1953) which quickly became a Caribbean classic.

But, for me, certainly no two events of the 1950’s nurtured my sense of Caribbean-ness like the establishment of the Federation of the West Indies and the victory of the West Indian Cricket team over England, celebrated in calypso throughout the islands with the seductive lyrics,

> Cricket, lovely Cricket
> At Lords where I saw it
> Cricket, lovely cricket
> At Lords where I saw it
> Yardley tried his best
> Goddard won the test
> They gave de crowd plenty fun
> Second Test de West Indies won
> With those little pals of mine
> Ramadhin and Valentine

Like me, each member of the Anglophone Caribbean could have stayed in his or her own territory and shared that euphoria, the *sense of belonging to something bigger* now sealed by historical reality.

I left Barbados for university studies in 1958. Although the words of the victory calypso had made me feel closer to all West Indians, I had never met a Jamaican, Dominican, St. Lucian or Vincentian, not to mention a Guyanese or others from the region. And now, suddenly, on the campus of the University of Toronto or on one of the city’s busy streets, we would meet and greet one another, without any thought of formal introduction, and engage in conversation as if we were continuing an exchange which we had begun in an earlier encounter. Somehow, an invisible link seemed to join us together and manifest itself in spontaneous welcome. No need for imagination here. It was Caribbean-ness face to face and brings to mind Lamming’s observation that

“No Barbadian, no Trinidadian, no St. Lucian, no islander from the West Indies sees himself as a West Indian until he encounters another islander in a foreign territory…. The category of West Indian, formerly understood as a geographic term, now assumes cultural significance.”


Perhaps one explanation is that we carry in our collective memory the remembrance of the village ethic when we were involved in each other’s lives because of mutual dependence, so the sense of engagement continues despite the changes brought about in our educational and socio-economic status. Young or old, upper, middle or lower class, you don’t pass your neighbour without saying “Good morning”; it’s considered a greater travesty of manners if you are young and fail to defer to older people.

My most memorable experience of this *feeling of involvement* occurred some years ago when I had gone to a bus stop in Barbados to await downtown transportation. I had wished my potential fellow-passengers “good morning” when I felt a hand at the back of my neck. Turning, I saw a man whom I had never seen in my life take his hand away. He gestured toward my shirt to
indicate that the collar needed to be turned down and he had made the necessary adjustment for me. When I thanked him, he made another gesture emphasizing that he had done nothing extraordinary. The look on his face said that “things had taken their normal course”. He had displayed “Caribbean-ness”.

This, the first in a series of articles, has described a part of my own concept of West Indian and Caribbean-ness, prompted as I was by Sir Vidia Naipaul’s negative comments regarding West Indian history, lack of achievement and creativity. The articles which follow will treat the question about the justifiability of Naipaul’s claim by citing some of the relevant historical facts, bringing the opinions of some leading Caribbean thinkers into the discourse and showing how the sense of Caribbean-ness developed from the late 19th century and continues today.

_The West Indian Intellectual_ in 1968 that “This work of John Jacob Thomas, the Trinidadian schoolmaster without European or university education of any kind, shows that the impact which the West Indian writers, our writers of fiction and the politicians and political writers of the day have made upon the consciousness and civilization of Western Europe and the United States, is the result not of the work of certain brilliant individual men, but is due in reality to our historical past, the situation in which our historical past has placed us. This historical situation produced a particular type of social and intellectual activity which we can definitely call West Indian” addresses first, the question of the validity and justifiability of Naipaul’s earlier and most recent statements. Next, my own feeling about Caribbean-ness. And finally, the extent to which this consciousness of Caribbean-ness has been raised, discussed and defined by some of the region’s most influential writers and thinkers over the years.

I look upon the question of belonging as one related to fact and feeling. I felt Caribbean before I came into contact with Naipaul’s provocative statement which suggests that neither the colonizer nor the colonized, which is the undeniable historical experience of Caribbean people, achieved or created anything. I was a teenager who read anything that came to my attention, including the three papers published in the island at the time, _The Barbados Advocate_, _The Observer_ and _The Truth_, the last named having more the characteristics of a gossip-rag than a transmitter of news.

After all, even those nations of the metropolis whose identity has supposedly been established for centuries produce pundits who are quick to remind us that, for example, such and such a behaviour in un-American, un-French, un-British, un-Canadian or un-what have you. It is as if the characteristics of such nationals are so well known that any action which is inconsistent with the definition generally accepted, is easily recognized and rejected. Presumably, the instant rejection.

© John Harewood

**John Harewood** is a First Reads columnist, a literary critic and an educational and communications consultant. He is originally from Barbados but lives in Ottawa, Canada.