

A Legacy of Violence: On Dealing with the Trauma of History

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Deep within the Thai countryside, there is a bridge that looks like any other. Spanning across the depths of the River Khwae, the bridge is a hulking mass of stone and steel; slightly decrepit yet still standing tall, it is built upon a foundation of blood, sweat, and cement. A solitary train track runs its length, leading beyond the horizon to who-knows-where. When I first saw the bridge, I remember being taken aback by the tranquility of the scene before me, an impression that belied the harsh reality of the bridge's creation. Constructed during the Japanese advance into European colonial territories in mainland Asia during the Second World War, the bridge on the River Khwae was built at the cost of the flesh and bone of the *romusha*, the thousands of Indonesian prisoners of war who had been snatched from their homes throughout the country that I call home. To me, the bridge on the River Khwae is not just a bridge—it is the last echoing scream of imperialism, the vestigial remains of the scars left by a legacy of violence.

Standing atop the bridge on the River Khwae, I can't wrap my head around the abject cruelty and brutality that once took place here. I feel righteous fury well up inside of me. White-hot rage shoots through me, unlike anything I have ever felt before. But even then, I know it is all for naught. I know that there is nothing I can do—I am over half a century too late to even begin to make a difference. The sins of the past have to remain exactly that—the sins of the *past*. The bridge over the River Khwae remains deaf to my anger, stone-faced and resolute in the face of my judgment.

To claim that time heals all wounds is to commit a grave oversight. For some, the scars of history are wounds that remain raw and bloody, cut deep into the very foundations of our identities. In her essay “On Seeing England for the First Time,” Jamaica Kincaid gives an account of her life in Antigua under the shadow of British colonial rule, revealing a glimpse into the existential nightmare wrought by the inequity of imperialism.

Angered by a lifetime spent in a culture that idealizes Britain and suppresses her own Antiguan identity, Kincaid expresses a deep desire to “take [England] into [her] hands and tear it into little pieces” (724). But standing in the way of Kincaid’s desire to seek vengeance is a lack of power—an abject impotence that is a direct result of the legacy of colonial trauma that haunts her. The injustices that Kincaid faces are the consequences of a complex history of subjugation—a history that spans hundreds of years. Indeed, Kincaid’s life is rife with echoes of this painful past. Her family members are named after British monarchs; the street she lives on is named for the slave merchant who exploited her ancestors. In Kincaid’s post-colonial world, the passage of time has led to the disappearance of accountability; the entities responsible for the crimes of colonialism are long gone. When Kincaid makes her fateful first trip to the United Kingdom, she encounters a nation that is apathetic to her plight: to the English, the remnants of the colonial era are akin to “old decoration in an old house, dirty, useless,” nothing more than the ghost of a memory (724).

It is in this lack of acknowledged liability—and the resultant impossibility of confronting those who wronged her people—that Kincaid experiences powerlessness. With none of the responsible parties left to confront, Kincaid “indulge[s] in not-favorable opinions” of England and its people, resorting to rage as a coping mechanism (724). In one notable internal outburst, she imagines directing her rage at an English woman, admitting to her, “I find England ugly, I hate England; the weather is like a jail sentence, the English are a very ugly people” (726). Kincaid recognizes her remarks as prejudices, but notes that they “have no weight to them . . . no force behind them,” as they are the prejudices of a people who “are powerless to do evil on grand scale” (726). And yet, for all its futility, a state of stubborn, private rage is notable even in Kincaid’s final response to England, seemingly her only recourse in confronting her people’s poisonous history.

But I find little comfort in the arms of anger. Standing atop the bridge over the River Khwae, I feel no solace. In my fury, I feel no consolation, no grand sense of catharsis easing my mind—my anger is directed towards nothing but ghosts, the shades of the imperial enterprises that sought to conquer my homeland time and time again throughout centuries. All I feel is rage, cold and unresolved. But my anger feels dangerous—justifiable as it is, it feels

cancerous, more likely to engulf and destroy me than grant me retribution for the centuries of sins against my nation.

To an extent, Kincaid recognizes the danger of her own rage. She describes her anger as manifesting itself within the “space between the idea of [England] and its reality”—a neutral space that becomes “filled with [her] hatred” (724). Kincaid locates the source of her anger in the disparity between “the idea of something and its reality,” which she explores through an analysis of the life of Christopher Columbus, whose voyages sparked the colonial legacy that haunts her (724). In Kincaid’s account, the space between Columbus’s idea of what lay beyond the Atlantic Ocean and its true nature grew increasingly wide, until, upon reaching the longed-for land, his idea became “more powerful than the reality he met, and so the reality he met died” (724). Kincaid’s rage is also destructive, as it prevents her from seeing the reality of England when she lands on its shores. There is danger—for Kincaid and for her targets—in her prejudice, however impotent she claims it to be. Yet despite this danger, Kincaid remains fixed in her anger, offering us no other way to contend with the colonial legacy. Herein lies one of the most problematic aspects of Kincaid’s essay: although she recognizes the danger inherent in blind rage, she seems, to me, to see no alternative. In Kincaid’s world, the disenfranchised victims of colonialism are offered only an endless cycle of barren fury.

Kincaid’s strategy of taking refuge in anger is not a unique phenomenon. Rage remains a constant in dealing with trauma—historical or otherwise. It is a safety-blanket for humanity at large, offering consolation and protection in the face of great terror. In his essay “Vermeer in Bosnia,” Lawrence Weschler ruminates on the wide-ranging consequences of the cycle of rage that he observes when attending the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal and on his own attempts to come to terms with the horrors that he uncovers there. Much in the same way that Kincaid is obsessed by the specter of Britain’s colonial past, the people of the former Yugoslavia are, according to Weschler, “incapable of forgetting the past but barely seem capable of thinking of anything else” (784). Weschler believes that their preoccupation with past traumas fuels the fires of new conflict. He cites James Joyce’s characterization of history as “two bloody Irishmen in a fight over bloody nothing” as a fitting parallel and describes the Yugoslav War as a cycle of “vengeance

for vengeance for vengeance for who-any-longer-knows-what” (784). In their pursuit of retribution for crimes committed against them over the course of their complex history, the people of the former Yugoslavia have “transformed into pale, wraithlike shades haunting the ghosts of the long-dead rather than the other way around” (784).

If this is the fate that Weschler ascribed to those who remain mired in their own dark histories, it becomes clear that, at least according to Weschler, there are dire consequences of Kincaid’s inability, or unwillingness, to put aside her rage at historical wrongs. Such unrelenting grudges enable the continual cycle of violence, a cycle that inevitably leads to destruction. And while Kincaid presents her anger as the inevitable result of a life spent with “an iron vise at the back of [her] neck,” Weschler proposes that there are options when grappling with the darkness of history, alternatives that lead to a process of healing and reconciliation rather than ruin (Kincaid 723).

Distressed by the accounts of the violent crimes of the Yugoslav conflict that he hears at the Tribunal, Weschler finds solace in the works of renowned Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. The paintings are steeped in contradiction: despite the fact that he painted during a time when Europe was “awash in incredibly vicious wars of religious persecution and proto-nationalist formation,” Vermeer eschewed depictions of violence for tranquil representations of European life (779). This, according to Weschler, is “Vermeer’s achievement,” his talent for “finding—and, yes, inventing—a zone filled with peace, a small room, an intimate vision . . . and then breathing it out,” freeing his subjects from their context and transforming each into “the very emblem of peacefulness and serenity” (780, 781, 779). Weschler’s examination of Vermeer’s work offers him an inversion of Kincaid’s conception of history-as-trauma; by reflecting on Vermeer’s work, Weschler finds himself able to “[invent] peace,” to subdue the chaos of the world and the echoes of its horrors (785). It is in this very process—the process of *creating* peace through deep and careful reflection on the events of history—that we find an alternative to Kincaid’s restless frustration.

Of course, I must acknowledge the fact that Weschler’s ability to comment on the damaging capacity of history is complicated by his distance from his subjects—Weschler is but an observer to the after-effects of the Yugoslav War, and his ties to the historical conflict to which he bears witness do not

run particularly deep. In contrast, Kincaid's entire life has been affected by Antigua's colonial history. But Weschler's solution of turning to and reclaiming history as a healing mechanism remain significant all the same. Weschler's assertions find support in James Baldwin's essay "Stranger in the Village," in which Baldwin describes his own use of history as a form of consolation while examining race relations in 1950s America. The legacy of colonialism and slavery in America drives Baldwin to a rage similar to that which Kincaid experiences, the "rage of the disesteemed" that he claims is "absolutely inevitable" and "so little understood" (Baldwin 193). But despite recognizing that his anger is "personally fruitless," he notes that "no black man," himself included, "can hope ever to be entirely liberated from this internal warfare," lifelong feelings of "rage, dissembling, and contempt" that stem from "his first realization of the power of white men" (193). Much like Kincaid, Baldwin's life is one filled with rage at the nightmare of his history, "the nightmare from which no one *can* awaken" (192).

But unlike Kincaid's resignation to futile fury, Baldwin's attitude towards history is emblematic of resistance—he actively searches for historical instances that challenge the colonial legacy. He understands history as both a source of pain and a source of solace and, like Vermeer, invokes and inverts history to assuage his emotional wounds. Baldwin does this through an exploration of the "history of the American Negro problem," which he views as "not merely shameful" but also as "something of an achievement," for it reveals the extent to which American history does not only encompass but is inextricably linked with the history of black Americans (197). He finds vindication in the fact that the "challenge posed by this problem was always, somehow, perpetually met," that the persistent challenges facing black Americans led to a distinctly American "black-white experience" and response, thereby transforming the conventional horror at the history of slavery into a progressive sense of fulfillment (197). Although he remains enraged by the history of slavery in America, Baldwin finds hope in the culmination of the centuries of oppression faced by his ancestors in a bittersweet victory—" [t]his world is white no longer, and it will never be white again" (197). Baldwin's words have become an act of defiance, a hopeful alternative to the fruitless rage that has threatened to consume so many of those marginalized and wronged by their histories.

When I consider Baldwin's ability to find the light of achievement in the darkness of history, I think back to my own relationship with the bridge over the River Khwae. Brutal and horrific beyond any comprehension, the Japanese campaign of imperialist aggression into mainland Asia has left a permanent scar on the history of the region that can still be felt to this day. Yet, as Vermeer and Baldwin have shown me, there is light to be found in the darkness. Prior to the Japanese imperialist campaign, the South-East Asian region had been held in the iron grip of European colonialism for centuries—it was only with the Japanese incursion into mainland Asia that European nations finally began to lose influence in their territories. For the first time in centuries, the dream of an independent Asia—one free from the yoke of European colonialism—seemed an imminent reality. I can see now that this is the achievement hidden in my history—a melancholy victory unearthed from memories of violence. And while it may not soothe all the scars, recognizing and celebrating such an achievement is all that prevents me from facing a lifetime spent languishing in impotent rage.

It seems that Kincaid finds rage the only available form of resistance against a history of oppression, but rage cannot lead to consolation—it is ruinous, self-destructive to the highest degree. To wrench ourselves free from the legacy of violence that we have been allotted, the disesteemed sons and daughters of colonialism must find an alternative, steering clear of the rage that inevitably leads to new conflict. Recognizing the danger of rage is difficult for those of us whose histories are marred by violence: putting aside our anger can shake the very foundations upon which our identities are built. But ultimately, the task of coming to terms with the dark legacy that history leaves behind proves to be the one bridge that we all must cross, lest we fall back into an endless cycle of violence.

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