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Redemption Song: A Commentary on Caribbean Society

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ABSTRACT

This essay unpacked and analyzed the seven-part documentary series, *Redemption Song,* narrated by Stuart Hall, about the Caribbean in the early 1990s. Given the diversity of the Caribbean, *Redemption Song* unified the Caribbean by framing how the Caribbean's past of foreign influence has shaped its present. Thus, this essay linked historical causality and the Caribbean's present as a cultural mosaic to argue that *Redemption Song* demonstrates how contemporary Caribbean society is a product of its history of foreign influence and colonialism. This was accomplished by discussing a scene from each episode of *Redemption Song* and connecting it with secondary literature on Caribbean society to touch upon how the series represents and comments on contemporary Caribbean society. Namely, this essay discussed issues concerning the economy, identity, citizenship, race, class, sovereignty, borders, and tourism and how they relate to British, African, Indian, French, Spanish, and American influences in the Caribbean

Introduction

Redemption Song is a seven-part documentary series narrated by the late theorist Stuart Hall about the Caribbean in the early 1990s. An overarching study of the Caribbean is challenging, considering its diversity of ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures.[1] This begs the question, what unites the Caribbean as a topic of discussion and study? While the series covers many cases, many

[1] Kamala Kempadoo, "Introduction: Thinking About the Caribbean," in *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race and Sexual Labor* (Routledge, 2004), 5.

contemporary issues represent critical aspects of Caribbean society. Sidney Mintz argued that the Caribbean is distinct due to its social form, which stems from the colonial history that has shaped the region.[2] Therefore, this essay will play with the dynamics of historical causality and the Caribbean as a "cultural mosaic" to argue that the content explored in Hall's *Redemption Song* exemplifies the linkages of Caribbean society and its history of colonialism and foreign influence. This will be achieved by analyzing a central theme or scene from each episode of *Redemption Song* to show how the series may comment on issues of Caribbean society contemporary to the filming of the series. These issues comment on how foreign or global forces influence different areas of life in the Caribbean, showing the relationship between the Caribbean's past and its present.

Episode 1

The first episode in the series, "Iron in the Soul," laid the foundation of the series. As a result, Hall began by addressing a seminal component of the Caribbean: its history with, and legacy of, colonialism and slavery. At the core of a discussion of slavery in the Caribbean is the institution that organized and maintained slavery, the plantation. As Mintz argued, the intersection of slavery, plantations, and sugar reshaped the Caribbean society and the economic landscape.[3] The plantation was integral because its economic structures brought different people from the world together in a particular way, shaping the population and social composition of the Caribbean.[4] On top of bringing together diverse peoples, the plantation system controlled the lives of the people within it, and so, one's status within the plantation shaped how one related to others and was perceived.[5] "Iron in the Soul" depicted the plantation in its historical form describing slavery in Jamaica, and its contemporary vestiges, by featuring the Cave family plantation in Barbados. The Caribbean's history with the plantocracy also contextualizes its current economy. Beckford discussed the unequal distribution of land in Jamaica, where the few existing plantations account for 56% of the available farmland in the country.[6] As a contrasting point, small farms (of less than five acres), which occupy 71% of the farms in Jamaica, only encompassed 12% of the country's farmlands, thus restricting the opportunities of these small farmers.[7] The difficulty of local Caribbean farmers in attaining land attests to the continued monopoly the plantation has on land in the Caribbean. Despite this, Steven Cave, the current owner of the Cave plantation, expressed concern over the Barbadian government threatening to nationalize his family's plantation.[8] When held against the economic angle of an uneven distribution of land skewed in favour of the plantation, his words appear short-sighted or conveniently ignoring the benefit of the country and many small farmers over his personal preferences. This attitude of entitlement is a vestige of the plantocracy, demonstrating how the Caribbean's historical plantation system, and its embedded class structure, continued to impact contemporary Caribbean society and economy.

Episode 2

The second episode, "Out of Africa," attests to the continued presence of Africa in the Caribbean. *Redemption Song* used this standpoint to describe Haiti's history and the expressions of African identity and culture in contemporary Haitian and Jamaican society. As the episode presented, Vodou served as an amalgam of different West and Central African rituals that came over with slavery and survived due to Haiti's isolation.[9] In Jamaica, Africa is intentionally drawn upon as inspiration with Rastafarianism and Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement.[10] Thus, Caribbean society is a product of assimilation and retention in response to its history of encroachment, colonialism, and slavery.[11] Slavery worked by trying to instill a sense of inherent inferiority in the enslaved people, especially in comparison to the superiority of their Retaining African customs and traditions within music, dance, religion, and language has allowed those in the Caribbean to survive the

[2] David Scott, "Modernity that Predated the Modern: Sidney Mintz's Caribbean," in *History Workshop Journal* 58, no. 1 (2004): 199.
[3] Scott, 200.
[4] George L. Beckford, "Introduction," in *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World* (University of West Indies Press, 1999), 3.
[5] Beckford, 9.
[6] Ibid., 23.
[7] Ibid.
[8] *Redemption Song*, "Iron in the Soul."
[9] *Redemption Song*, "Out of Africa."
[10] Ibid.
[11] Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," *New Left Review* no. 209 (1995): 7-8.

rupture of displacement and overall, the trauma of slavery.[12]

As "Out of Africa" elaborates, Africa evoked a rediscovery of roots, the recreation of one's history, and a reclamation of one's agency.[13] Thus, Rastafarians believed they were in exile and aspired to return to Zion or Africa, showing that repatriation is vital to their belief.[14] Africa becomes idealized as a powerful symbolic point of reference for home, roots, and source of identity. Additionally, the Biblical references of Ethiopia provide a counternarrative of liberation and dignification which contrasted with the conditions of slavery.[15] This reinforces the notion that societies in the Caribbean have been influenced and shaped by resistance to slavery and the plantation.[16] Therefore, *Redemption Song* celebrates the role this cultural retention has played in the past and present, contextualizing the African influences in contemporary Caribbean society.

Episode 3

"Paradise Lost" describes the differing conditions of life in the Dominican Republic, ranging from wealthy individuals such as Senora Puccini, who can afford to travel all around the world and host extravagant parties, to Haitian migrant workers, whose lives have been compared to slavery. The juxtaposition between the two speaks to the intersection of race, citizenship, statelessness, and nationalist ideologies in the Dominican Republic. Hall frames the discussion with a remark that even the poorest Dominican citizen would not be caught dead cutting sugar cane.[17] Instead, it is the work of migrants from Haiti. This intentionally contrasts the Dominican citizen against the Haitian migrant in the Dominican cane fields. Other scholars, such as Samuel Martinez, have also used the word "slavery" to describe the situations of the Haitian migrant workers within the Dominican sugar industry.[18] Haitians have migrated and worked in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic since the beginning of the twentieth century.[19] By the 1930s, the "piece-rate" wage system was instituted, where cane cutters were only paid according to how much sugar cane they cut, resulting in economic coercion due to such low wages.[20] Additionally, 25,000 Haitians were killed in 1937, but those living on the sugar estates were spared, establishing that the only safe space for Haitians on Dominican soil was within the bateyes.[21] *Redemption Song* sheds light on the lives of these Haitians and the forced labour, constant surveillance, horrible living conditions, and debt to the company store they faced.[22]

Additionally, Hall described Haiti as "the Republic's traditional enemy."[23] This wording contextualizes the conditions of Haitians in the Dominican Republic and links it to a history of a racialized construction of the Dominican Republic in opposition to Haiti. The Trujillo dictatorship led a propaganda effort in the 1930s to depict Haitians as culturally and racially distinct from the Dominican people, establishing Dominican identity and citizenship along racial lines while isolating and Othering those of Haitian descent.[24] This mistreatment of Haitian workers coincided with the redefinition of the Dominican Republic and Haiti along racial lines, with the populace of the former depicted as Spanish and the latter as African, which limited the opportunities for Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic to the cane fields. Ultimately, the fear of the "Haitian menace" justified Trujillo's dictatorship.[25] Overall, the depiction of Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican Republic in *Redemption Song* has been used to show the stark contrast between classes in the country. Still, this case study is the tip of the iceberg in discussing race, style, and national identity in the country.

Episode 4

The fourth episode, "La Grande Illusion," explored society in Martinique in light of its historical and contemporary connections with France. Martinique's connection with France is evident in its everyday community, as seen

[12] Hall, 7, 12.
[13] *Redemption Song*, "Out of Africa."
[14] Chevannes, 1.
[15] Ibid., 34.
[16] Ibid., 17.
[17] *Redemption Song*, "Paradise Lost."
[18] Samuel Martinez, "From Hidden Hand to Heavy Hand: Sugar, the State, and Migrant Labor in Haiti and the Dominican Republic," *Latin American Research Review* (1999): 57.
[19] Martinez, 60.
[20] Ibid., 66-67.
[21] Martinez, 70.
[22] *Redemption Song*, "Paradise Lost."
[23] Ibid.
[24] Martinez, 69.
[25] Ibid., 71.

through the country's widespread French culture and language. The pervasive French influence in Martinique speaks to the colonial tendency to transfer its culture, language, and education systems to its Caribbean colonies.[26] The Caribbean middle class was seen as having the social and cultural capital to rule the Caribbean post-colonial state because they adopted the West's cultural capital and consumptive patterns.[27] However, such features of the West were incompatible with the Caribbean's economy and nature due to clashes with the natural racial hierarchy in the Caribbean.[28] This racial hierarchy necessitated the negotiation of one's identity within or against their "inherent" social rank within the racial hierarchy.[29]

An example of this can be seen in the episode's depiction of the white population in Martinique, with interviewees stating that they do not mix with other racial groups to maintain their racial and cultural superiority.[30] Martinique's education system also teaches French language and history but ignores, sidelines, and ultimately erases black history.[31] The varying value and attention placed on different histories and cultures show the uneven racialized landscape of the Caribbean. *Redemption Song* acknowledges this condition in the title of the episode. As elaborated by Aime Cesaire, "La Grande Illusion" refers to the belief that the enduring French influence in Martinique would allow its citizens to be considered equal to Black Frenchmen.[32] The status of being an equal Black Frenchmen remains an illusion due to the racialized nature of Caribbean society.[33] This racial hierarchy is present in Martinique, so while French culture and language transfer was transferred, it was placed on top of the racial order. Thus, the denial of this order perpetuates the "Grande Illusion." Therefore, in Martinique, there is a disjuncture between the valorization of French identity and what this French identity embraces and hides, which has repercussions on the identity and self-recognition of those living in the Caribbean.

Episode 5

"Worlds Apart" highlights the linkages between history and contemporary society in portraying Trinidad and Guyana's racialized divisions and tensions. The Caribbean post-colonial state is ultimately a racial state based on how The connection between race, colour, culture, and class shapes Caribbean society.[34] In Trinidad and especially Guyana, there is an ideological divide between those of African and Indian origins. This divide is believed to have begun when Indian indentured workers were brought in by colonial powers after emancipation, taking away the bargaining power of formerly enslaved people to better conditions and wages.[35] The tension between those of African and Indian descent in the Caribbean was fostered by colonial powers, dividing society to prevent the union of these groups against the colonial administration.[36] Despite the perceived differences between the groups, they share the common interest of being shaped by foreign influences, which pit them against each other.[37] However, this ideology also produces material consequences, leading to ethnic polarization and political violence.[38] This racial divide is present in Guyanese politics between the People's Progressive Party (PPP), which Indo-Guyanese broadly supports, and the predominantly Afro-Guyanese-supported People's National Congress (PNC).[39] These parties are perceived to be inherently different even though they are ideologically similar, with liberal-democratic views, following the 1990s.[40] Thus, *Redemption Song* depicted the naturalization of ethnic polarization due to a specific history.

Additionally, "Worlds Apart" provides a new avenue to consider how racial identity and ethnic divisions can be subverted in Caribbean society through featuring the singer, Drupatee. As an Indo-Trinidadian, Drupatee is part of a community that strongly draws upon the largely patriarchal

[26] *Redemption Song*, "La Grande Illusion."
[27] Aaron Kamugisha, "The Coloniality of Citizenship in the Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean," *Race & Class* 49, no. 2 (2007): 24-25.
[28] Kamugisha, 24-25.
[29] Hall, 8.
[30] *Redemption Song*, "La Grande Illusion."
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] *Redemption Song*, "La Grande Illusion."
[34] Kamugisha, 26.
[35] Kevin Edmonds, "Race and Conflict in the Caribbean," Lecture at the University of Toronto.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Perry Mars, "Ethnic Politics, Mediation, and Conflict Resolution: The Guyana Experience," *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 3 (2001): 366.
[38] Mars, 357.
[39] Ibid., 356.
[40] Ibid., 357.

Indian family values.[41] Thus, she was expected to be a housewife in a private, supportive role in the domestic sphere. Despite this expectation, and with her husband's support, Drupatee challenged traditional Indian patriarchal expectations and became a famous public singer. Drupatee also subverted racial lines by appealing to Afro-Trinidadian audiences by singing Calypso.[42] Thus, the portrayal of Drupatee in "Worlds Apart" showed that it is possible to transverse these gendered and racial divisions, showing how these seemingly "inherently different" groups were not, in fact, worlds apart. This subversion reiterates that the tale of a historical rift between Guyanese of Indian and African descent is a myth based on relatively recent antagonisms.[43] Race is seen as a pervasive reason for divisions shaping many aspects of Caribbean society, such as politics and gendered family structures. Still, the episode furthers this topic by showing how this preconception of race as an end-all can be subverted and challenged.

Episode 6

"Following Fidel" focused on life in Cuba. Within this episode, Hall also touches upon Guantanamo Bay. By doing so, Hall reasserts that despite the hard borders and security measures between Guantanamo Bay and the rest of Cuba, it is still part of Cuba. The physical and ideological maintenance of separation between Guantanamo Bay and the rest of Cuba links to a more extensive discussion of sovereignty and the nature of foreign intervention in Cuba. The story of Cuba is intertwined with foreign influence, as expressed through the vintage American cars found on its streets or the Soviet-style clothing tailored for Eastern European women, available in Cuban stores.[44] The case of Guantanamo Bay reinscribes the nature of the foreign occupation, as it represents a portion of Cuba that still belongs to the United States but also hardly resembles Cuba.[45] The Cubans in Guantanamo Bay must commute to work over large distances and face security searches. Meanwhile, the Americans who live on the base are isolated, with no communication with the outside. So few can compare the conditions in Guantanamo's well-stocked shelves and the bare ones surrounding Cuba.[46] The case of Guantanamo is one of security, management and, ultimately, dissociation, where the "savagery and barbarism" of its surroundings are kept outside its gates.[47]

Guantanamo Bay is a space of containment and management for those that could potentially "trouble" the nation, namely Haitian migrants.[48] However, the terms of the lease of Guantanamo Bay to the United States dictate that the Cuban government has "sovereignty" over the area even though the United States operates and exercises its military control.[49] Therefore, Guantanamo Bay serves as "a carefully crafted legal absence" which allows the United States to use simultaneously and remain unaccountable for this space in Cuba.[50] Thus, this shows how space can be constructed in a way separate from its surroundings, allowing foreign occupation to co-occur unimplicated. Despite this, Hall challenges this dismissal of accountability by bringing Guantanamo Bay back into the conversation of Cuba by featuring clips of the site and its workers and contrasting it with the rest of Cuba.[51] This speaks to a more significant pattern of the illusion of accountability and (non)sovereignty found in the discourse of imperialism, occupation, and foreign intervention compared to its reality in the Caribbean.[52]

Episode 7

"Shades of Freedom" ends the series by discussing how, despite the formal end of colonialism and slavery, Caribbean society has attained freedom in differing degrees. Perhaps one of the most poignant examples of this conditional emancipation from foreign influence is seen with tourism in the Caribbean. The Caribbean has been a source of desire for its natural beauty and "tropical sensuousness."[53] Colonial portrayals of the Caribbean as welcoming and open for conquest are repurposed by the current tourism industry, distorting the Caribbean's reality and presenting

[41] *Redemption Song*, "Worlds Apart."
[42] Ibid.
[43] Mars, 366.
[44] *Redemption Song*, "Following Fidel."
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Yarimar Bonilla, "Ordinary Sovereignty," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 3 (2013): 161.
[48] Bonilla, 160.
[49] Bonilla, 161.
[50] Ibid., 160.
[51] *Redemption Song*, "Following Fidel."
[52] Bonilla, 161.
[53] Kempadoo, 1.

an orchestrated Caribbean caricature to the tourist.[54] This is motivated by the fact that many of the economies of Caribbean countries rely on profits from a particular view of the Caribbean.[55] However, as expressed in *Redemption Song*, the money and services brought in by tourism is not used to benefit the country's people but to enrich those who own the tourism sector.[56] Actions undertaken to help the locals, such as replacing a statue, are only accomplished if seen benefitting the tourist industry.[57] The attention and effort put into the tourism industry, rather than national development, contributes to the alienation of Caribbean peoples.[58] As discussed in the episode, the local becomes incidental, a second-class citizen, and sidelined against the needs of the tourist.[59] The material and ideological construction of the Caribbean according to foreigners' desires and consumption patterns is a simultaneous act of violence towards its locals.[60] Thus, Hall ends the episode with a message that links all the episodes of Redemption Song to Caribbean society in general: an awareness that the Caribbean's past was cast in "different images of Europe" and now must determine if its present reshapes or breaks away from these images to depict the Caribbean in its likeness.[61] The balance between the benefits of the tourism industry in the Caribbean against the damaging effects of Caribbean alienation, commodification, and reproduced inferiority must be negotiated as Caribbean society redefines itself from its past.

In conclusion, contemporary Caribbean society is a product of its past and has been shaped by cultural continuity and change. This essay has analyzed each episode of Hall's *Redemption Song* and has put it in conversation with topics relevant to Caribbean societies today to demonstrate that Caribbean society is shaped by its history of foreign influence. Thus, this essay has touched upon issues of economy, identity, citizenship, race, class, sovereignty, borders, and tourism and how it has related to British, African, Indian, French, Spanish, and American influences in the Caribbean.

[54] Kamugisha, 29.
[55] Kempadoo, 1.
[56] *Redemption Song*, "Shades of Freedom."
[57] Kamugisha, 28.
[58] Ibid., 29.
[59] *Redemption Song*, "Shades of Freedom."
[60] Kamugisha, 29.
[61] *Redemption Song*, "Shades of Freedom."

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