

JAMAL: Adult Literacy Decolonizing Knowledge and Activism in 1970s Jamaica

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Abstract

In the summer of 1978, at Church Teachers College in Mandeville, Jamaica, a class of advanced students participating in the Jamaica Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL) wrote, cast, rehearsed, and performed a play that satirized several major institutions—the family, the church, and the business sector—as well as class and gender relations. This essay locates this nearly forgotten event in the context of the opportunities JAMAL offered for decolonizing knowledge and activism for poor and working-class Jamaicans. The reactions the play provoked on the micro and macro levels help to explain JAMAL's subsequent trajectory, which follows the broader trajectory of the conflicting visions for the purposes of adult education in Jamaica's pre- and post-Independence era: from the efforts of Jamaica Welfare starting in the 1930s through active decolonization in the 1970s, through global and local institutional neglect in the 1980s, to contemporary insertion into the neo-liberal global economy. Recovering this instance of popular education and performance illuminates both gaps in the historical record and possible foundations for reinvention in the 21st Century.

In the summer of 1978, at Church Teachers' College in Mandeville, Jamaica, a class of advanced students participating in the Jamaica Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL) wrote, cast, rehearsed, and performed a play that satirized several major institutions—the family, the church, and the business sector—as well as class and gender relations. The students reconstructed everyday experiences into a narrative that not only depicted how literacy empowered the normally disenfranchised to overcome structures of repression, but also challenged the expectations of the program and its administrators.

Here, I hope to locate this nearly forgotten event in the context of the opportunities JAMAL offered for decolonizing knowledge and activism for poor and working-class Jamaicans. I will briefly analyze the reactions it provoked on the micro and macro levels, through JAMAL's subsequent decline and recent reinvention as the Jamaica Foundation for Lifelong Learning. JAMAL's trajectory follows the broader trajectory of conflicting visions for the purposes of adult education in the pre- and post-Independence era: from the efforts of Jamaica Welfare starting in the 1930s through active decolonization in the 1970s, through global and local institutional neglect in the 1980s, to contemporary insertion into the neo-liberal global economy. Re-

covering this instance of popular education and performance illuminates both gaps in the historical record and possible foundations for reinvention in the 21st Century.

The question of archive and authority is a pressing one in Caribbean Studies, where the traditional archive contains the records of imperial conquest, human trafficking, and exploitation, but the record of those who were conquered, trafficked, and exploited remains fragmented, dispersed, oral, and full of gaps (Thomas 27). For this work, I am interweaving imperfect recollection, i.e., myself as archive, with historical records, family history, and academic theory. There are moments where these elements intersect gracefully, and others where they collide and clash against each other, reflecting the uneven processes of decolonizing knowledge and activism in the academy. In short, there is much more to be said about who and what is legible and illegible, to whom, and why.

Our Story

Summer 1978, Mandeville, Manchester, Jamaica. My mother has sent me home to Jamaica from the States to my uncle's house for "turning into too much of a damn Yankee," and under the pretense that I will be my grandmother's physical therapist as she recovers from foot surgery. But working with Grandma takes a grand total of about a half hour every day. That leaves a lot of time for a teenager to occupy.

On the television, there are recurring ads for something called JAMAL. I am literate, seventeen, and have completed two years of community college. I find out that the nearest JAMAL classes are offered at Church Teachers' College, so I walk over to volunteer. The administrator says I don't have the training to teach the literacy classes, but they are looking for a cultural activity for the advanced students. Would I write a play about why it was important to learn how to read and write, and the students could perform it? OK, I say, and walk home.

I am excited, but also completely daunted. I have no idea why somebody would choose to read and write, because it had never been a choice for me. I was automatically enrolled in school at a certain age and expected to become literate. So, I think, well, let me ask the people who actually had to answer that question before enrolling in JAMAL.

A JAMAL staff member introduces me as a volunteer from the States, and I am left on my own. I explain that I have Jamaican roots and attended Bishop's—a local girls' school—for a couple years, am home for the summer, and am looking forward to working on this project with them. Our group is small, maybe ten to fifteen people. I share the charge: a play about why reading and writing is important. I invite each person to say why they had come to JAMAL and ask if we could build a play from that together. The oldest lady—Grandma's age—says she wants to be able to read her Bible for herself. A Rasta, younger than me, wants to qualify to go to a high school. Several young women, slightly older than me, want to qualify for office jobs. The older Rasta agrees with the elder lady: Bible-reading is a goal. I'm sure there are other reasons for gaining greater literacy, but my memory hasn't held on to them.

Over the course of the next month, we come up with a plot, cast characters, write a script and learn lines, assemble props and costumes, and make flyers to advertise the one-time performance. The JAMAL administrators—maybe teacher trainers or teachers in training at the Teachers' College where the project is housed—pretty much leave us alone; we call on them for help with furnishing the stage, but that is about it. This is a no-budget enterprise.

The administrators must have heard about the play because they ask to attend a rehearsal. What they see is a classic farce. I don't remember characters' names, but let's say Dulcimina is our illiterate hero. She works as a helper, the recently adopted polite title for maid, in the household of a businessman and his wife. She is constantly making errors, like mistaking the salt for sugar, or not buying the right things at the shop, because she can't read the list the wife has made. Things get more complicated when it turns out that Pastor is having an affair with the businessman's wife, and our Dulcimina is supposed to be passing the right notes between them about when to meet up while also fending off the amorous attentions, or what we call now the sexual harassment, of the businessman himself. The upshot is that the businessman catches the pastor with his wife, and Dulcimina somehow extracts a bag of money to go to JAMAL so she will have better choices about how and where to make a living. At least, I think that's how it ended. Alas, I no longer have a copy of the script.

The administrators can't help but laugh, but they are also a bit horrified. This is not a respectability narrative; rather, it satirizes several institutions that a properly literate person should be aspiring to: marriage, middle-class household, business, church. Still, it is too late to write a new play, and they must admit that it meets the stated mission. They did make one casting request: perhaps the Rasta could be the businessman instead of the pastor. We agree to that. The performance goes on. It is recorded by the Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation for future broadcast—I don't know if that ever happened—and a good time is had by all.

Our play's co-authors envisioned having more choices, having more agency, and being less vulnerable to the institutions and their attendant literacies, such as schools, banking, and the church, as a basic goal. Thus, literacy was important because it offered more choices than illiteracy. The co-authors of the play did not need literacy to think, to have relationships, to raise children, to be creative, to worship God, to work, or to live their lives. But literacy offered more ways to go about doing those things, and new forms of expression, such as writing a play together that critiqued the middle-class respectability politics. It also made possible other ways of earning a living if jobs could be found.

The play's composition process is recognizable to those familiar with the work of Jamaica's Sistren Theatre Collective and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. As one critic notes:

In the Jamaican context, theatre...involved addressing the injustices of neo/colonialism. Those who had previously been silenced by Jamaica's colonial system were given the opportunity to express the latent anger that had accumulated through centuries of oppression and, through observing themselves

in performance, to understand their past subject formation under oppressive regimes. (Smith 238)

I had come to the play composition process through the oppressive regime of childhood. Boarding school at Bishop's was boring. As a troop of nine-year-olds, we entertained ourselves by making up skits to songs by Tom Jones or based on characters in TV shows. We also regularly roasted our teachers and headmistress. We inherited and embellished an underground school song, sung to the tune of "My Darling Clementine":

Come to Bishop's, come to Bishop's,
For a life of misery.
There's a signpost on the corner
Saying "Welcome Unto Thee."
Don't believe it, don't believe it,
Cuz it's just a pack of lies.
If it wasn't for the teachers
We would be in Paradise.
Build a bonfire, build a bonfire,
Put Skemps [the headmistress] at the top.
Put the teachers in the middle
And burn the (bleeping) lot.

Collaborative and critical play-making was the only kind I knew, informed by my Jamaican classmates and our experiential understanding of the power dynamics of a colonizing Anglophile boarding school.

Forty-one years later, in 2019, I wrote and performed an earlier version of this essay as a reflection *about* a community writing project/workshop *for* a community *reflecting on* community. The workshop where I debuted this piece, "Decolonization, Social Movements, and Performance in the Caribbean 1968-1988," was organized at York University, Toronto, Canada, by Caribbean activist-scholars Professors Honor Ford-Smith, Ronald Cummings, and B. Anthony Bogues. The workshop gathered several generations of cultural workers, activists, and academics, many of us wearing all three hats. It was a hybrid space where those of us who have been crossing national borders, languages, roles, and audiences knew that this time we were performing for each other, and so there was a tremendous freedom to bring our whole fractal selves into dialogue, to reflect on an era of collaborations and hopes and failures, and to extract what was still useful and had promise for the future. Thus, this essay builds on the themes of the workshop to illustrate decoloniality as a complex process taking place in and between the individual, the community, the nation-state and its institutions, history, and performance.

Jamaica Welfare

Mandeville in 1978 is not home for my grandmother and me. We are at my uncle's house because Grandma can no longer live alone at her house in Seville Heights, Pri-

ory, St. Ann, the only home in Jamaica I truly recall. A half-acre with a two-bedroom house, three mango trees, four coconut trees, one guava, one lime, one pimento, one breadfruit, banana, chicken wire fencing strung with red and gungo peas, numberless chickens, and one bad dog. Supposedly Grandma's little and productive half-acre was part of the first housing scheme established in Jamaica by barrister, labor activist, and statesman Norman Manley. Could be, since one of the streets in the area is named for him.

Housing schemes like Seville Heights emerged from efforts to institutionalize decoloniality via the organizing of Jamaica Welfare, whose program was education and economic development on the co-op model of shared ownership by workers and participants. In 1969, Sybil Francis complicates Phillip Sherlock's 1949 history of the founding of Jamaica Welfare in the late 1930s. Sherlock describes a gentleman's agreement between Norman Manley and the president of United Fruit to donate one cent per stem of bananas to fund the programs of Jamaica Welfare. Francis argues that Jamaica Welfare's origins actually emerge from discontent and agitation among the independent banana growers and the banana plantation workers, who had to rely on a monopoly market—United Fruit—for their product. Both groups argued that they were underpaid for their labors. Thus, she restores the agency of both groups as instigators of the grievances that Norman Manley's championing of Jamaica Welfare is supposed to address.

The program's initial model involved building staffed community centres to provide an "educational and recreational programme for the improvement of rural life in all its respects" (Francis 45), including literacy classes. But it soon became clear to Jamaica Welfare administrators that the community centre model reproduced relationships of paternalism that contradicted the goals of community self-help. The community centre model was sidelined, and Jamaica Welfare shifted to using existing structures—for example, schools and churches—for community groups led by local leaders. Jamaica Welfare supported local efforts with project grants and outside expertise. Vincent George records the success of the more grassroots approach to community development: "After only 11 years of existence, the efforts of Jamaica Welfare...had resulted in the formation of 1,180 organised groups, 183 savings unions and a Fisherman's Federation and had embraced 236 villages" (275). Francis describes a "spirit of excitement and challenge which accompanied the birth of nationalism in Jamaica...The Community Development movement developed a strong emotional content" (47). In this way, Jamaica Welfare's efforts became tied to the emergence of the nation-state, and the expectations of working-class Jamaicans for what an independent nation can offer. However, despite the successes, the promise of self-governance on the local level, with national support, was not to be fulfilled by the emerging nation-state. Between the 1940s and the 1960s, community development in Jamaica shifted from this decolonizing and successful bottom-up model to full government and ministerial responsibility, "professionalization," and bureaucratic infrastructure by the time of national independence in 1962. In the wake of those developments, many, if not most, of the community councils disappeared.

By the time I get to Grandma's yard as a little girl in the late 1960s, she has achieved the Jamaica Welfare goals: a solid house of her own, literacy to correspond with her overseas children, and nutritional well-being from her own little property. But I don't recall community involvement beyond her immediate neighbors and her church, and there is no obvious aid for the squatter's village that has come up around the bend.

By the time we get to my uncle's yard in the late 1970's, there has been a sea change. Since Norman Manley "gave" my grandmother her house, "no one name Manley could do any wrong." His son Michael is now Prime Minister, elected on a campaign of democratic socialism, trying to navigate a path between the US and the USSR, two supremely self-interested and antagonistic superpowers, while pursuing as national government policy the recognizable mission of Jamaica Welfare: an "educational and recreational programme for the improvement of rural [and urban] life in all its respects." As part of that program, Manley invigorates JAMAL.

JAMAL

While efforts had previously been made to address the functional illiteracy of nearly half of the Jamaican people, the Manley government declared the eradication of illiteracy urgent, one of the top ten priorities in the 1973 national development plan. In 1974, JAMAL was formed. Its aims were to:

1. Eradicate illiteracy in Jamaica within the shortest possible period.
2. Improve the literacy skills of the adult population of Jamaica.
3. Develop human resources and so enable each adult citizen to participate meaningfully in the social, economic, and cultural development of the country (Miller 13).

The educational goals of the program had thirteen elements: Identity and Self Image, Citizenship and Government, Consumer Education, Community, Continuing Education, Home and Family, Health and Hygiene, Nutrition, Food Production, Occupation, Work, Communication, and Inquiry and Critical Thinking (Miller 15). If we understand decolonization as "ongoing struggles to transform the unequal legacies of racial colonialism and to reconstitute ways of knowing, acting and being" (Ford-Smith), we can trace a narrative of decolonizing educational efforts starting and re-starting from the founding of Jamaica Welfare to the founding of JAMAL. We can also note the complicated origins of such efforts in private-public collaborations reliant for their material resources on donations from the state and private donors.

While such educational efforts often claim that the content and actual enactment of such projects' aims will come from the people they are intended to serve, there are definite, if unspoken, barriers in place. Such barriers include program donor or administrator assumptions about learners—that learners differ culturally according to a deficit model, which positions donors or administrators as role models. In effect, even in situations where the discourse is supposed to be learner-driven, a soft colonialism often prevails. There can be a whiff of the "civilizing mission" about such programs,

whether foreign or domestic, that seeks to devalue learners' own ways of knowing or thinking or doing in the name of "improvement."

Our play's co-authors had their own ideas about how literacy would improve their lives. I don't know what would have happened if we had decided that our play would be about how literacy enables organizing a revolution. That didn't come up as a theme because the students had a sophisticated understanding of their context, which did not in that historical moment include any immediate possibility of revolution. Further, they knew exactly what JAMAL was intended to prepare them for, and they knew just as exactly the limitations of this brave, supposedly new, world. Thus, they chose to reveal their critical knowledge about that.

I would argue that the ordinary Jamaican people who are targets of these "improvement" schemes are always already aware of their positioning vis-a-vis supposed efforts to include them in "modernity." We have, in fact, been part of modernity since our ancestors were shipped as economic cargo from Africa to the Caribbean, and when we entered the factory economies of the plantation. The dissonance between the supposed civilization of colonial ideology and the lived experience of being its disposable labor is never forgotten. Hence the abandonment of the plantations by, first, the Maroons, and then the newly-freed Jamaicans, and the sophisticated calibration of when and where to enter these improvement schemes. When Jamaica Welfare builds and staffs community centres, the people enter them as institutions belonging to Jamaica Welfare and use them for handouts, better known as reparations. When Jamaica Welfare abandons that model and meets the people on the people's own ground, a space is opened for collaboration and cooperation. When JAMAL is founded, it meets its learners where they are: The Rastas are not required to cut their locks, the curriculum materials reflect ordinary Jamaican life, and we are left to devise our own performances.

In the brief decolonizing interlude of mid-1970s Jamaica, we were able to perform a critique of colonial institutions and ideologies that we understood we would enter to meet our unmet material needs. But we wanted the audience and the teachers to know this was not a wholesale embrace. We knew the cracks in the facades, and that the middle class literacies and institutions we were being invited to were no better than we were, even if that was how their members and advocates imagined themselves. In the decolonial sense, our knowledge was coming with us, and we would perform, as in act out AND act up, given the opportunity. Beverly Bell, introducing *Walking on Fire*, a collection of testimonies by Haitian women who survived their country's 1990s military dictatorship, revises the traditional definition of resistance. Drawing on Danny Yee's discussion of James C. Scott's "Anthropology Informs Political Economy," she notes that the traditional definition of resistance demands four things: that it must "be organized and collective," "be principled and selfless," "have revolutionary impact," and "negate the basis of domination." Bell adds a fifth element: that resistance also includes holding the line (5), until such time as greater action becomes possible. So, while our play and our composition process did not negate the basis of domination, we did expose it, and, as a form of resistance, prevent it from making additional inroads.

Two Codas

Coda #1: JAMAL. After structural adjustment and neoliberalism came into play, JAMAL went through a period of subsequent decline and has recently been reinvented as the Jamaica Foundation for Lifelong Learning (JFLL). JFLL is in line with global neoliberalism's goals. JFLL's "community education" aspect promises that "Communities where JFLL Community programmes have been implemented have often been able to realize tangible improvements in employability and an increased and improved participation in governance... This turns communities into 'economic opportunity' zones as learners transition to the worlds of work and entrepreneurship" (Jamaica Foundation for Lifelong Learning). Unfortunately, Inquiry and Critical Thinking, Identity, and Self Image are no longer foregrounded, as they were at JAMAL in 1978. We are once more only interesting or useful to society for the labor we provide for capitalism to capitalize on.

Coda #2: Grandma Gray. At the back of the house, Grandma had a standpipe over a square concrete basin. Some mornings, we would go outside to find a huge toad sunk down in the basin, drawn in the night by the water but unable to jump out in the daylight. Grandma would sprinkle a little salt on it, to dull it, then lift it up on the tines of the garden rake, carry it to the back of the yard, and fling it over the fence onto what she called "Seville Property." She always seemed to take a special glee in that. Sometimes she would let me do the throwing. Much later in life, I came to find out that as a young girl Grandma had worked at Seville Property for the overseer's family as a "butleress." When she had to be in the presence of the mistress of the house, she was forced to hide her hands under her apron, so that their delicate sensibilities would not be offended by the signs of her hard work. Half a century later, she was living in her own house on property carved out of Seville Plantation for her benefit, and still had enough strength in those hands, which now worked for herself and whoever she sought to benefit, to fling unwanted toads over her fence onto her now-neighbor's property. This, too, is performance. As I noted at the start, there are more things to be said about what and who are legible and illegible. But who feels it knows it.

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