

Kei Miller

The Small(minded)ness of Home

You will forgive the writer if his essay is somewhat tangential, because to write about 'home' he would like to write about 'nation' and 'nationalism'. You might say this is almost the same thing, and perhaps what you expected him to write about anyway. They are not exactly the same, but both have to do with a sense of belonging, and both we like to pretend are solid things – like walls and floors and windows and land and trees. But homes and nations are abstractions, powerfully imagined as houses and countries. The writer's tangents continue – because in writing about his own nation – Jamaica – he would like to write about patties. This is a savoury pastry the reader might be unfamiliar with, a flaky turmeric-flavoured envelope filled with the not-so-nice parts of beef. In the writer's experience a beef patty is what Jamaicans are almost always homesick for (...well, that and the desire to live again in a country where they can spank their children soundly without the little brats threatening to call 911). And then, in writing about foods and the way they become symbolic of nations, he would like to discuss hamburgers and America and McDonalds. He would also like to talk about lost passports, airports, the question of what we import and who we deport. He can only beg your indulgence, and ask you to trust that these tangents are really crumbs scattered in a wood; follow them, and he will try to lead you back to the topic at hand – to home.

The writer was a child of the 80s. In Jamaica, this was the time of Edward Seaga. In the wider world it was the time of Reagan and Thatcher and Gorbachev, the Cold War and its end. The writer witnessed, on television, the biggest symbol of what was widely perceived as an American victory: the grand opening of a McDonald's franchise in Moscow. A two mile queue waited for the restaurant's glass doors to open and there was a record-breaking 30,000 customers served in the one day. It would always seem to us, unbothered by the nuances of international politics and attracted to fantastic metaphors, that it was the weight of those golden arches that had squashed communism. How struck this writer was by the power of McDonald's! Almighty. It could strike down prime-ministers. Years later, that very symbol of neo-American imperialism, finally reached to his own Caribbean shores. Macdonald's, which had won the Cold War, opened their doors in the Caribbean. You will understand the writer's and his countrymen's wary sense of the inevitable – the belief that resistance was futile, that as fat as they would become on all that foreign fast food, they were still too small to fight this things. And you will understand then, their great surprise when they won.

It was a modern day David and Goliath – and the Caribbean became the valley of Elah. The little ones who were without breastplates or helmets, armed only with the exactness of their taste buds, the love of pimento, scotch bonnet pepper and healthy servings – they did what no other country had ever done: they forced McDonalds out, out of business and out of their islands. In Trinidad, in

Home/Lands.

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Barbados, in Jamaica it was all the same story. The corporate giants had to slash prices, they had to switch management, they had to launch extravagant promotions – but none of it worked. Caribbean citizens who for a while had no idea they were even fighting or resisting, ended up winning. And most amazing is this – that in Jamaica, wherever Ronald McDonald left a vacant storefront, it was taken over by a patty shop.

Like many Jamaicans this essay's writer also stood on a viewing deck, watching with delight that crazy clown climb the metal steps back into the American Airlines plane which brought him. He was going back to Miami, and from there, who cared? It was the clown's leaving that became the fulfillment of his motto and song – though we cannot be sure on this occasion that it finally happened, that he loved to see us smile. The writer was one of the celebrants, waving green and black and yellow flags; he was one of those caught up in the euphoria – this feeling of sudden significance – not that he and his people were larger than they had imagined, but rather that they were more powerful even in their smallness. It was nationalism that the writer had been swept up in, and reflecting on that now, he does not feel proud.... In fact, he is not sure how he feels. Perhaps, this is an essay of unsurety. Perhaps, most significantly, the writer is unsure of that line where nationalism ends and fascism begins.

Architecture, they say, is the invention of space. Poetry, the invention of silence. These definitions make sense to me – forcing us to look on the other side of the proverbial coin. And I would like to add to that list: Home is the invention of Outside. Homes and nations are always defined by doors and walls and borders. They are just as equally sites of exclusion as they are of inclusion. It is only a firm sense of who a home is meant for, a sense of nationalism as it were, that can celebrate so rapturously a climate that was unwelcoming enough that the unwanted had to leave, this feeling that the home had been disinfected, purified. Any responsible reflection on 'home' must acknowledge these two spaces that the concept creates: the cozy warmth of inside, and the cold severity of outside. And the writer is resisting the easy urge to enter into that most expansive and dull realm of liberalism that cries foul and responds with knee-jerk homilies to every instance that the world proves itself to not be some kind of utopia.

The writer does not in fact have any problem with homes being necessarily exclusive and necessarily small. Indeed, to his mind, they are a celebration of smallness – a place where we are relieved of this global burden to always be big and broad and expansive. At home, we can be small beings with our small thoughts and our small rituals and we can hold on to small beliefs that sustain us – that one day might reveal itself to be bigger than we thought – like the love of pimento. And dare he say this – about homes and what they celebrate – that it is a place where we can even live with our small-mindedness and our small prejudices. We cannot do this in the wide world. In the wide world, we

must have wide thoughts and wide opinions. But how utterly wearying is that!? How untrue is that to ourselves. At times we must slip back home, and become small. If you take away the home's right to be small-minded, you ruin that home.

But of course, of course. The writer knows the danger of his gospel. Because small-mindedness expands quickly. Small-mindedness can become evangelical and fundamentalist. Small prejudices, given time, will become intolerance and hatred. They will become crowds and stones and bullets and murder. How conflicted is this essay, wanting to celebrate homes and nations when by their very nature, they have the potential to become something evil – when it is clearly not so easy a dichotomy to say a home creates a cozy inside and a cold outside – because that inside is often times damaging to those who stay within the home, and that inside is sometime withheld meanly from people who have every right to it. Home is not merely the invention of inside and outside, it is perhaps the invention of love and hate, the invention of benevolence and cruelty.

The writer would like to return to the topic of food. He shared with you the story of MacDonald's collapse and a Patty shop's triumph. He must now add another story to complicate things. The writer, having a predilection not only for tangents, but also, unfortunately, for losing passports or having them stolen from him, found himself, three years ago, being interrogated by immigration officials when he had landed again in Jamaica. He was coming from England where he had been a student. He was traveling on an emergency travel certificate, and the immigration officer wanted to be sure that he was in fact Jamaican (as if there are people who smuggle illegally into developing countries that don't have a surplus of jobs or opportunities). The immigration officer posed this question to the writer: What is the national dish of Jamaica? The official answer would have been 'Ackee and Saltfish'. But 'beef patty' would have sufficed too. The writer, however, answered – "Kentucky Fried Chicken" to which the immigration officer laughed heartily and said, "Yes – you truly are Jamaican. Only a Jamaican would know that."

How arbitrary is this sentiment called nationalism, this construct called nation – that in Jamaica it can, on one hand, throw out MacDonald's as imperialist American plastic-posing-as-food, and on the other, can embrace KFC as its own. Jamaica has one of the top 3 highest grossing KFC franchises in the world, and one of the top 5 highest grossing Burgher King franchises.

The nation is always holding some things, some foods, some music, some people close to her breast, but forcefully pushing away others – and this becomes especially problematic thing when the people she is pushing away are people who indeed have no other nation, and are people who have every right of belonging, are people who grew up under her very sky. Jamaica has been especially guilty of this sin – sometimes violently rejecting her own sons for the most small-minded of reasons, and then claiming her sovereign right to do this. The reader of this essay will have good reason to ask – *is this the kind of small-mindedness the writer would tolerate?* Well...that is complicated. The writer leans towards the position that while homes are a celebration of the small, that smallness is most effectively challenged by those on the inside, or at least by those who have a right to be on the

inside. All other challenges reek of contempt, imperialism and snobbery. Challenges that do not originate from a place of love have little chance in succeeding.

Jamaica has been known not only for the island that finally gave McDonald the boot, or the place of reggae and dancing, or of sprinters, but also recently a place of hyper-masculinity, and conversely, of extreme homophobia. If you've observed the island's culture at all, listened to the music, watched 'How Stella Got Her Groove Back', you might be familiar with this almost iconic image of the ultimate man from Jamaica. Jamaicans would gladly have the world believe that their primary export is not reggae, or ganja, or sunshine which we haven't found out how to package yet, but rather male heterosexuality. It is as if Jamaicans believe that on the underside of every straight man's phallus is a little cotton tag that says: 'Made in Jamaica; wash carefully'. The fact and extremity of Jamaica's homophobia hardly needs to be rehearsed here. On writing this very essay, the writer had to pause to converse with a friend on MSN messenger whose new display pictures were of bruises he had received the night before in a parking lot in Jamaica, given to him by men who had decided his behavior was too effeminate – not hyper-masculine enough – not appropriate for Jamaica. Stories like this have begun to filter through the doors of our small home and made their way into the wider world that has been sufficiently shocked, and has risen up to say Oh No! This is an awful thing that is happening in your country. We demand that this stop! Quite rightly, the world has been offended and has condemned, not only the large acts of violence, but the small-mindedness and the small beliefs that are the seeds of such actions. But these critiques are essentially contemptuous. They are shocked at the coarse, barbaric lives of the natives. The world of socially responsible critics did not stop to think, and indeed in the heat of righteous anger they could not have known, that to critique the ways in which a home is small, is to critique the very essence of that home.

The writer is in no doubt that the criticism is just, but he has had to live to see a backlash that has been tragic. Jamaica has risen up against all these 'outsider' voices to say How dare you! Homophobia is our national right! It is who we are! It is what we stand for! We will not be dictated to by your broad-minded beliefs. And how could they possibly stand to listen to a lecture on human rights by some of the very people who used to own them as mere property on plantations?

And so it is, in direct response to international critique and pressure, the home has fortified itself. The violence against men perceived as gay has gotten worse. In Jamaica, we import guns and the blueprints of the worst kinds of genocide, and we embrace them, over a meal of Kentucky Fried Chicken, and declare these things are intrinsically ours. We allow them to define who we are. And in such a climate, we've made our home so uncomfortable and unsafe to certain men that they are continually deported – either to America or to England or to their graves.

The writer of this essay is a Jamaican writer, and has never wanted to be more – even with the examples of early black writers who simply wanted to be writers, and early female writers who simply wanted to be writers – all these _____ writers who became resentful, who didn't want to be to speak on behalf of the social categories they were supposed to represent. But the writer of this

essay is a Jamaican writer, or more expansively, a Caribbean writer, though many have warned him saying that to be a regional writer is to place oneself in a box. (Oh but what a large box Faulkner must have been in!) This writer does not mind writing from within a small space – from within a home. It is the sounds from that space that he is trying to capture on the page; it is the small beliefs that he celebrates and that sustains him. He is committed to the national, to the homeland – but is aware, always, of its walls, the cold severity of outside, and of those who should have every right to stay in, but are cast out. He is trying to write a literature on their behalf. And that is all this writer can hope to do: to write a literature from within that is so large it begins to push the walls and doors and the roof – slowly, slowly – that it begins to expand the territory of his home. So it is not that the home's smallness must not be challenged, but a question of where does that challenge most effectively come from. If we push the walls too hard from the outside, the whole structure may topple down or else those inside will resist mightily, and neither options is a good one for those of us who love our homes.