

Being Jafaican

by Julia Barnes

Wahgwan? Mi soon come. Mi haffi go. Imagine being a female of Jamaican background and not knowing how to speak or even understand patois. This has been a problem for me since I was a child. My lack of knowledge of patois has brought me much distress, considering that I feel that language plays a huge part in a culture. Language sets common ground between individuals and can help them connect on a deeper level. It makes a difference in the way people are able to identify with certain songs, television shows, books, etc. Without language, people have little to no way of establishing bonds between each other, which can result in feelings of isolation and confusion. Therefore, not knowing patois has caused me to feel a slight disconnect from my Jamaican culture.

Before I discuss the difficulties that have arisen from this lack of knowledge, I suppose I should give some background on my family make-up. Both of my parents were born and raised in New York. My mother's side of the family is from the South, while my father's side of the family is from Jamaica. My paternal grandfather, who has a slight Jamaican accent, told me that he used to speak patois in Jamaica. However, since he came to 'Merica, he hasn't spoken it a lot because he *nuh* see much of a need for it. He, a former cop, also said that when he did need to speak patois at his job, he did so to make the incarcerated who were Jamaican feel more comfortable and trusting of him. Unfortunately, because he rarely spoke any patois around my father, and because my father is not fond of Jamaicans, I have very limited knowledge of the dialect.

My first attempt to actually use patois was when *mi wah pickney inna deh fifth grade*. I had to present a project in *mi* class for culture day. Mind you, I had never been to Jamaica (and still haven't), and many of my classmates of Jamaican heritage had already been multiple times. Since I had a desire to learn more about Jamaica and my family's culture, I figured this project was the perfect opportunity to do so. *Mi* did *wuk ha'd* to find the *hist'ry* of the place, the types of food, currency, and even celebrities. When I came to the patois part, I was completely lost. At the time I was obsessed with learning different languages because my mom would bring me *Time For Kids* magazines. Why was it that I found it easy to learn phrases in languages like Spanish and Russian, but when it came to learning something from my own culture - I was baffled? In order to boost my confidence, I practiced corny phrases like, "*Ya gotta big masquita pon' you foot.*" On the day of my presentation, all went well. I explained my research thoroughly. However, I purposely neglected to recite the patois phrases. *Mi nuh memba why mi nuh say dem* other than the fact that something in me felt unconfident. I may have felt like the other Jamaican *pickney* would have judged me if my accent was poor, or if it didn't sound natural. Having all eyes on me for five minutes was already nerve-wracking, but one mispronunciation could have brought on a wave of taunts. "Why do you speak patois like that?" "You're not a real Jamaican." I may have just been making myself paranoid. In any case, the fact I shied away from the situation shows me now that I still lacked an understanding of my culture.

My lack of understanding of patois also affected my ability to relate with my peers of Jamaican heritage. Throughout high school, the meaning of words like "*claffy*," "*Gaza*," and "*tun up*"

eluded me, making it a bit difficult to understand certain jokes. This often made me feel left out. While others laughed, I only chuckled. Luckily, some of my friends helped me understand some *tings*, but I wanted to comprehend for myself. I wanted to be able to make a *likkle* joke in patois here and there. Unfortunately, I still felt unconfident about using patois. Whenever someone would ask me what my nationality was, I would tell them I was Jamaican, but in my head I was Jafaican - someone pretending to be Jamaican. How could I consider myself Jamaican amongst other Jamaicans *dem*, who clearly had parents born in Jamaica, when my both of my parents were born in New York? How could I incorporate patois into my everyday language without sounding unnatural or like a wannabe? I still struggle with this issue today, but I am coming to terms with it.

I now realize that my current situation can possibly be attributed to the actions of *mi granpa* and *mi fadda*. *Mi granpa* only uses patois in America around his friends, and for the purpose of setting common ground with criminals to get *dem* to talk. *Mi fadda* *nuh* like Jamaicans because of bad experiences *inna deh* past, so he tries to avoid *tings* having do with *deh* culture. *Dis* include music, TV, and *deh* people. He even denies he's Jamaican at all. Because of his dislike, I had little exposure to Jamaican things at home. If it weren't for the fact *dat him nyam* Jamaican food, I might have missed out on delicious dishes like brown stewed chicken, jerk chicken, curry goat, and ox tail. As a result, his neglect figuratively erased bits and pieces of the culture from my life. Had my grandpa taken a different approach to using patois, exposing my dad to Jamaican culture, perhaps my dad would have been more immersed in his heritage. Had my dad had better experiences with Jamaicans and the Jamaican culture, perhaps he would have a different mindset today and would have exposed me to it more.

Identity of I

Identity is not what I promise others
Identity is what I do when I am alone
Identity is what I think of others
Knowing all the hatred they've shown

Identity is what every wound reminds me
Identity is what I learn and what I pass by
Identity is what I see in the mirror
After giving my best try

Identity is what I make out of my given chance
Identity is what I accept and what I deny
No one else has control over me
Life is about me, and what I identify

-Abhiraj Rajadhyaksha

Despite the elements working against me, I know I can still work to enhance myself culturally. Currently, I listen to more Jamaican music. I now have more of an appreciation for artists like Patra, Beenie Man, and Bob Marley. I can also make Caribbean friends and get to

know them through clubs here at Northeastern. *Mi wan fi go a Jamaica.* I certainly hope to go to Jamaica in the future, not just for a week, but at least a month. I *membra* watching the Jamaican vacation commercials *when mi wah pickney, listenin' to dem a sing, "Come to Jamaican an feel alright."* Instead of just listening about the beauty of Jamaica and its entire splendor, I want to experience it in person. Even though going once won't make up for years of underexposure, I feel like it can awaken something deep inside of me. I believe it can even enhance my journalism skills by making me more aware of other environments outside of America, and by pushing me outside of my comfort zone. Considering this lack of exposure has had such a negative impact on me, I definitely want to do the opposite *fi mi pickney. Mi wanna wrop dem up inna deh Jamaican heritage so dem neva fahget it. Culture cyan done.* Culture never truly ends, as long as it is passed down to future generations. Overall, *mi kno dat* even though *mi nuh kno* patois, *dat nuh change deh fact dat me be Jamaican at heart.*