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AWAKENINGS IN THE LAND OF MANY WATERS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRITISH GUIANA

The Huntleys were born at the height of the Harlem Renaissance that spanned the 1920s, when, in an unprecedented cultural movement in the US, Black writers, scholars, musicians and artists were expressing themselves and receiving positive reviews internationally. This movement had a major influence on the Caribbean region, with West Indian writers and activists including political leader Marcus Garvey and poet Claude McKay among those at the core of the new political thinking and artistic expression. During a period of widespread racism, the achievements of the Harlem Renaissance represented the beginning of new hope for African people around the world.

The British abolition of slavery in their colonies predated the birth of the Huntleys by less than 100 years. Jessica was born nine years after the end of World War I and one year before Britain had universal adult suffrage. Significant events during their childhood included World War II and the struggles against colonialism. As young people they saw the rise of the Cold War, the beginning of the civil rights movement in the US and the fight for independence around the world. Unlike the rest of the Caribbean, British Guiana (Guyana after independence) is on the continent of South America with just under 10% of its population Amerindians who are reported to have been on the land for over 10,000 years. Its situation outside the island-cluster known as the Caribbean makes it an unusual member of this community. These historic events, combined with BG's unique placement, would play a significant role in influencing the attitudes and shaping Jessica and Eric's specific brand of activism.

The country into which Jessica and Eric were born was populated with indigenous people long before the Europeans came and brought enslaved Africans, along with indentured East Indians, Chinese and Portuguese labourers. Little was known of the Amerindian groups who occupied the land in earliest times; however, recent works by archaeologists such as George Simon, Neil Whitehead and Denis Williams provide new information about the early settlers that estimates a continuous presence of more than 10,000 years. The country we know as "British Guiana", and later "Guyana" at independence, was created from the land Britain managed to seize from her European rivals. Writers such as John Gillin, Irving

Rouse and Raymond T. Smith believe that the region was occupied by small groups of nomadic Amerindians from diverse cultural groups, the Arawak and Carib-speaking people who are said to have settled across the entire region.

The first European explorers in the 15th century of the area that became known as the Guianas wrote about the diverse landscape, rich flora, fauna, mineral wealth, and the impressive agricultural techniques and produce of the aboriginal people. In 1493 the Pope, whose authority was law in the Christian world, divided the newly discovered lands between Spain and Portugal, awarding Spain possession of all lands 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands and Portugal the right and ownership of all lands to the east, which included Africa and the East Indies.

By the 16th century, the Spanish had already laid claim to Guiana, but did not establish any settlement there. Spain's only interest, along with other Europeans, was in a legendary city of gold within the region that they called El Dorado. Legend has it that one of the Amerindian groups, initially thought to have lived in present-day Columbia, would throw gold into the river as a gift to the gods. Europeans had a great deal of faith in this legend, for they had seen large quantities of gold among Amerindians. They had traded with the Amerindians along the north coast of South America, from what is now called Panama down to the mouth of the Orinoco River. The Europeans brought mirrors, brass items, metal tools, cloth, beads and later alcohol and weapons, which they traded for gold, wood, dye and tobacco. The area was also known as the Spanish Main, famous for pirates and buccaneers who stole mainly from gold-laden Spanish ships returning to Europe.

The Dutch, driven out of Brazil by the Portuguese, moved in the 17th century into the area that is now Guiana. By the end of that century they dominated the coast, occupying Suriname, Essequibo and Berbice. In 1621, the West India Company of the Netherlands was set up to trade in Guiana, the Dutch government providing troops to protect the settlements. The French and the English had sugar and tobacco growing on small plantations on the Atlantic coast of the Guianas. The Spanish, meanwhile, were in nearby Trinidad, the Orinoco and the Pearl Coast. The Europeans were constantly in conflict over borders, as well as pirating each other's ships. Vast fortunes were made. In his research, Hilary Beckles reports that between £100,000 and £300,000 per year was brought to England from such raids on Spanish settlements and ships in the Caribbean during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Sir Walter Raleigh was said to be the first European to begin actively exploring Guiana in 1595. His intention was to find the gold of El Dorado and to establish British dominance in the region against the major force of the Spanish in the Americas. The British were not the only European nation interested in Guiana. A

Dutch fort was built on an island in the Essequibo River earlier than 1621, and the French had a settlement in Cayenne in 1613. When the Europeans arrived in the 17th century, they established friendly relations with the Amerindian people and traded with them. Some Europeans did try to enslave the indigenous peoples but were met with fierce resistance. Europeans found that they needed the Amerindians if they were to survive in Guiana's tropical environment with its mountains, savannah uplands, forests, jungles, numerous rivers and heavy rainfall. It was therefore more rewarding to keep on friendly terms with them than to be in a state of hostility.

The Dutch were the first to create settlements. Traders travelled along the rivers to the interior - Essequibo, Berbice and Pomeroon. The first settlements were to establish a base from where they could search for gold and trade with the Amerindians. However, being skilled in water drainage techniques, the Dutch reclaimed land from waterlogged areas along the coastal plain, and created plantations to grow tobacco in larger quantities. They also grew sugarcane with the technique learned in Brazil from the Portuguese, whose plantations used enslaved Africans. The Dutch settlers grew the sugarcane themselves in the early 17th century, exporting the cane juice to Holland to be manufactured into sugar. Only small amounts of sugarcane were grown in the early stages, tobacco being the main crop; but as Europe's appetite for sugar increased and large profits were made, sugarcane overtook tobacco as the crop of choice.

In the mid-17th century, the Dutch tried unsuccessfully to enslave Amerindians to work their plantations. The Amerindians were nomadic peoples and would not stay long in one place. If they did not die from diseases brought by Europeans, they would disappear into the expansive interior and were therefore unreliable as a constant source of labour. The Dutch, who had captured many of the Portuguese trading posts set up along the coast of West Africa, began importing Africans to work on their plantations as they increased their sugar production.

English settlers came to Guiana from Barbados and joined the Dutch in the 18th century. They were able to establish much larger plantations than had been possible on the small island of Barbados, which was at that time described as the "richest spot in the New World". Sugarcane had been grown for nearly a century in Barbados and the soil was being exhausted from overproduction. The success of the early British settlers attracted more settlers to the region, and within 25 years of their arrival, the British outnumbered the Dutch in the Demerara region.

Sugar production yielded huge profits, and as plantations expanded so did the population of Africans brought in to do the work. There were thousands of square miles of land at and below sea level along Guiana's coastline, and its many rivers,

swamps and heavy rainfall made for great fertility. However, technical knowledge was needed, as was labour to control and maintain the environment for the growth of sugar, tobacco and other produce along the coastal area for export to Europe.

The Dutch were skilled in polder development, having successfully increased their land mass in the Netherlands by reclamation. They applied this technology in the Guianas, creating a sophisticated arrangement of dams and canals to protect the land from the sea. They were able to irrigate the plantations with fresh water from the swamps, and used waterways as a means of transport. In the Netherlands, Dutch peasants and workers were employed to build the polders. In the Guianas, enslaved Africans were mainly used to dig the drainage canals, ditches and waterways that provided the transport. Historian Walter Rodney wrote that millions of tons of soil were moved by these Africans using shovels in the mud and water to create the polders; later it was indentured East Indian labourers who maintained them.

The enslaved Africans who were brought to plantations as labour for the creation of the polders were forced to work from dawn till dusk, being fed a poor diet that contained no fresh meat or vegetables. Armed soldiers guarded them, to prevent them escaping. An agreement was made between the Dutch West India Company and the Amerindians to return any Africans who escaped into the interior, the Amerindians being paid a bounty for each escaped African they caught and returned. This agreement served two purposes: it helped maintain the enslaved labour population, and created tension between Africans and Amerindians, which reduced the likelihood of these two groups forming an alliance against the Europeans. An African who managed to escape, if caught and returned to his owner, would be severely punished. One of the most frequent punishments was to be roasted alive. This served well as a deterrent to other potential escapees. However, despite being guarded by armed soldiers and the threat of being recaptured by Amerindians, many Africans did escape into the interior. This resulted in a large number of “Bush-Negro village” settlements – maroon communities of Africans who had escaped from the plantations. Such settlements existed in all parts of the Caribbean, North and South America where Africans were enslaved.