To Speak Patois

TANEISHA GRANT

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Her essay "A Writing History: From Reluctant and Redundant to Raving and Rampant" was published in the December 1995 issue of "The Compositor," a newsletter from the CCNY English Composition Program. She also won the Lucia Santorsa/Beatrice Coviello Award for the same essay.

AT FOURTEEN YEARS OLD, I thought I knew everything there was to know about everything worth knowing—life, people, and relationships. My mind felt full, especially full of academic knowledge, and I felt that if given ample time for gathering a little experience in the field of teaching, I would be able to teach math and science. I had only completed the introductory levels of these classes but my ambition was not to be deterred by such trivialities. In my opinion, I was already armed with the foundation—more advanced math and science classes were mere applications of the basic concepts. I was also sure that if my "skills" as a relationship expert were to be tested, I would prove myself exceedingly gifted. I counselled all my peers because I knew how Kivette should cope with not having her boyfriend, Rory, call in all of a week, and why Tashika was "keeping malice" with Odetle over something Tashika supposedly hadn't done. I longed for the everyday rigors of life that my mother and her friends were always speaking about on my verandah. I was being anchored by high school—I needed a challenge.

I was born on the tropical West Indian Island of Jamaica, which is just south of Florida. I lived in a beautiful white house on a two-and-a-half acre plot of land. My neighbors and I were surrounded by the greenery that was mango, orange, cherry, avocado, guava, apple, and June plum trees. The neighborhood children would relish in sucking on the hard June plum covered with salt on their ways home until they got to the spiky seed. This sweetish-sourish fruit was particularly satisfying if eaten when "turned" (the point of just ripening). Those school evenings were filled with the lively chatter of noisy students, tired from the day's

work but with just enough energy left over to play a game of scruchie. This was a game in which two people stood about ten feet apart passing a ball between each other while all other participants ran back and forth to face the person with the ball. The object of the game was to skirt the ball as creatively as possible and not to get hit. Our "ball" was made from a juice box stuffed with paper and it really stung upon contact. Needless to say, none of us wanted to get hit and got quite a workout trying to avoid that juice box ball!

The rainy nights of May were a lot of fun because my sister and I were allowed to stay up past our bedtimes and await my cousins' return from crab hunting. The occasional sunshine warmed the water collected in the crab holes. These times were very unwelcomed by the crabs because they would have to leave their holes and would have nowhere to hide if attacked. It was on nights like these, under cover of the darkness, that my cousins went crab hunting by lamp light. Their catch was often plenty and the entire neighborhood would have a big feast of peppered crabs and boiled green bananas. On one of these nights, punctuated by the slightly hissing sounds of crickets, I happened to overhear my mother speaking on the verandah. She was telling Miss Vivene of our upcoming and permanent departure to the United States.

Growing up in Jamaica was everything one could wish for. From its white sandy beaches and crystal-clear waters to its unique reggae music, year-round sunshine, fruit trees, games of sidewalk scruchie, and delicious midnight crab feasts—this island was some sort of NICE! But quite unknown to me, sugar cane and spiced bun were not all that this island was made of. It also held a high cost of living and limited higher education. My parents thought it best for us to relocate (our home) and seize the more abundant educational opportunities offered by the United States.

I was very upset and afraid of leaving Jamaica's familiar sights, sounds, activities of daily living, my friends, my home, my country. My surroundings had always lent a partial definition to who I am. I was Taneisha who attended Titchfield High School, Taneisha who did scripture readings in church on Sundays, rode her bike to Mr. Browning's shop, and Taneisha who could find her way home blindfolded by counting the bumps in the road. I was now Taneisha leaving the familiar and all those other Taneishas behind, and that was heart-wrenching.

I had longed for a challenge and I certainly got one by moving to New York! Living here has been culturally shocking. Though the educational opportunities have been tremendously rewarding, the transition was difficult. Having to adjust to the drastic temperature change,

the restrictions that go with being cautious in a more violent society, and the different educational system have quite fulfilled the challenge I sought. The sights and sounds are different, and the feeling of protection that is almost innate in a Jamaican society is lacking here.

There are many places in New York with high Jamaican populations, and there the culture and environment are closely simulated, but it's just not quite the same. I feel a deep-rooted guilt for leaving Jamaica. Though my family's situation was extenuating, I do feel as if I've abandoned my country. I speak Patois—the Jamaican dialect—as much as I can because one really can't help becoming a little culturally "dilute" when abroad. "Settled" is probably a better word, and it's an effort to keep yourself "shaken up" so as not to betray your country's memory by becoming too well-adapted/too well-mixed. I speak Patois because it serves as a verbal transport back to my homeland. I speak Patois to rekindle, "shake up" the memory of other identities and realize that I am still those Taneishas, the one who lives in New York State and also the Taneisha who will be going home.

I am now nineteen years old and I don't know a whole lot about life, relationships, or people. But I do know that I knew nothing of the rigors for which I longed or of change and the growth that it brings.

Turning points are moments
of conscious or unconscious
decisions to release stability
for a time.

Change is scary because
it means releasing the
comforts of the familiar
in order to embrace the
possibilities that newness
can bring.

Adjustments—coping mechanisms
to deal with changes—
can sometimes subdue the
memories of what was once
precious familiarity.

Dialects and other cultural
signatures help in maintaining
a firmer grasp on the old familiars.

I speak Patois.
Growth is the emotional and/or
physical manifestation of change
—of new.

INTERPRETATIONS

1. What characteristics does the author reveal about herself in the introductory paragraph?
2. How does she portray Jamaica visually, culturally, and psychologically?
3. Characterize her impression of life in New York City. Do you think she regrets having left her homeland? Cite evidence for your point of view.
4. What is the effect of ending the memoir with a poem? What does the poem mean?

CORRESPONDENCES

1. Compare and contrast the concept of assimilation presented in the essays by Rodriguez and Grant.
2. Review Kluckhohn's perspective on culture and discuss its application to Grant's essay.

APPLICATIONS

1. Review Geok-lin Lim's perspective and discuss its relevance to Grant's essay. What evidence is there of sorrow and guilt for leaving Jamaica?
2. Write a journal entry on the significance of Grant's title.
3. Analyze Grant's poem with your group. How do you respond? Are the issues raised in the poem different from those in the essay? How?