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The Anti-slavery Series: Perspectives on the Past and Present

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Across the street from the Royal Courts of Justice sits the flagship store of Twinings, the tea company which began imports to England through the East India Company and which has been the royal supplier of tea for every monarch since Queen Victoria. Despite the devastation of British mercantilism, the Twinings website invites visitors to “explore our wonderful history.” The “History” section of Twinings’ [Wikipedia page](#) is similarly scrubbed, jumping from the creation of the company’s logo in 1787 to its purchase by a multinational food retailer in 1964.

One can find more examples of colonial revisionism throughout London. The East India Company itself has a store in bustling Covent Garden and the Zagat review of its Regent Street location ambiguously calls it a “history-infused tea seller.” Off the shelf, a bottle of Baldwin’s Sarsaparilla – available in many major supermarkets – euphemistically seduces its drinkers with the inscription: “An authentic and refreshing drink with its roots bedded in the Caribbean...Enjoyed by many British families since the trade winds first brought it to our shores.” It seems that some things British, have a history beginning elsewhere.



Twinings' flagship store on the Strand in London.

So when [Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller called on David Cameron](#) to discuss reparations for slavery in Jamaica, during his visit last month, she was articulating the opening lines of a conversation that have gone unanswered for nearly two centuries. In an [open letter to Cameron](#), Barbadian historian Hilary Beckles wrote, “the bonanza benefits reaped by your family and inherited by you continue to bind us together like birds of a feather.” The wealth that has made the colonial powers of Europe great is steeped in centuries of exploitation – marked by uprooting and rearranging people on such a grand scale that intercontinental economies have transformed and histories have become impossible to trace. Its impact has been unavoidable.

By illustrating a debt (although he does not use the word), Beckles breaks from the reigning discourse of British colonial dependency, which described the colonized world as a beholden child and today supports the hush of respectability. He reframes Great Britain as the European brood of slavery in the Americas, and a cousin of Jamaica today. His rhetorical move is a slight-of-hand, accounting for international economic inequality while re-centering the gaze on the global family, together albeit dysfunctional.

It is ironic, and grotesquely fitting, that a spokeswoman for Cameron, in response to calls for reparations, reminded the public of his commitment against slavery. She cited the Modern Slavery Act, recently enacted to combat contemporary instances of human trafficking and forced labor. By invoking the Act, Cameron’s administration is itself attempting a sort of parlor trick; aligning the United Kingdom with the now-anointed abolitionist movement of the 19th century, it obscures the very colonial ties that form the basis of the economic inequality that Simpson Miller, Beckles, and [representatives from other Caribbean nations](#) are talking about. The distinct conjuring of the past that both Beckles and Cameron take part in points to the difficulty of reconciling the history of slavery in the present.



The Door of No Return memorial in Ouidah, Benin.

As we shall see in the coming week, transatlantic slavery and other colonial institutions have legacies embedded in the global political and economic conditions that have made the world fertile for modern slavery.

The Anti-slavery Series is a week-long examination of the conditions that slavery operates in. Articles will be posted daily, covering topics as diverse as the practice of slavery itself: the legal legacy of slavery in the United States, the economics of manumission in British dependencies; the threat of enslavement in the aftermath of the earthquake in Nepal, and the inclusion of modern slavery in global development goals. At moments it attempts to sketch the lives of people who have been implicated in the practice – both enslaved people and slave-holders, then and now. That in the posts on transatlantic slavery, the lives

of enslaved people are measured and represented only in the form of wills, court records, and property logs, points to the difficulty of recounting the past and the horrors of erasure that accompany historic slavery.

Authors in The Anti-slavery Series are researchers and students, advocates and social workers. The posts represent a wide range of efforts in the struggle to deal with slavery. While the Series coincides with the Parliament-designated Anti-Slavery Day, it remains critical of broad political and economic institutions. It is an open engagement of issues, some of which have never been closed. Please feel free to contribute your own voice to the conversation by commenting and sharing.

Conjuring the past is no simple task and one which is, by definition, never complete. Join us at the beginning of a conversation about slavery.



This piece was published as part of the Anti-slavery Series, October 2015.

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