Imaobong Umoren June 12th, 2025

A new history of Britain and the Caribbean – Interview with Imaobong Umoren

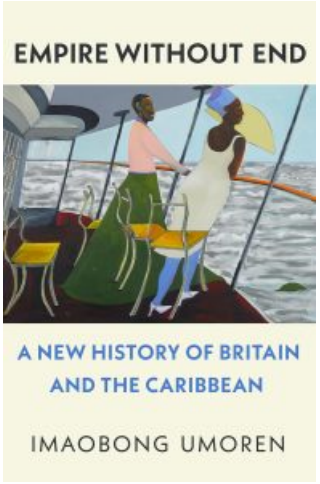
In this interview with LSE Review of Books Managing Editor ***Anna D'Alton****,* ***Imaobong Umoren*** *discusses her new book,* ***Empire Without End: A New History of Britain and the Caribbean****. From the first arrival of Europeans in the archipelago in the 15th century through to the Windrush scandal in the 21st century, the book traces these intertwined histories and the legacies of exploitation, slavery and empire that persist today. Umoren writes against selective, sanitised narratives of the British Empire, arguing that we must reckon with the violence and complexity of this history if we are to understand its impacts today and move beyond them.*

Empire Without End: A New History of Britain and the Caribbean. **Imaobong Umoren. Fern Press. 2025.**

What motivated you to write a new history of Britain's colonial relationship to the Caribbean?

The main reason was my desire to intervene in ongoing public debates about British Imperialism and its legacies. I, like many people, get frustrated with the simplistic, selective understandings of

empire, often rooted in the Victorian era, that celebrate it as an empire of trade or of spreading British values across the globe.



In the work that I do as a historian on the Caribbean, the legacies of British colonialism look very different, especially when you stretch back to the 1400s and the initial contact between Europeans and indigenous people. When we take this longer historical trajectory, we can see how empire operated differently in different times and places, and we can see much more clearly the devastating legacies of empire today.

I also wanted to write a reparatory history. I hope that it helps to contribute to a real groundswell of energy, hope and optimism, that the legacies of the British Empire in the Caribbean, which are rooted in the construction of race and in the spread of structural racism, aren't features that are going to be around forever. Through the history of repair that I'm writing, that lots of people are involved in, we can challenge those racial and class hierarchies that stem from colonialism, and even consider a future where they no longer exist.

You argue that "the roots of contemporary racial and linked class divisions in Britain and the Anglophone Caribbean today lie in the racial-caste hierarchy created in the early days of the Caribbean." What was the racial-caste hierarchy and how did it operate?

It's a term that lots of historians and scholars (like Gordon K Lewis and Charles W. Mills) use to describe a society that emerged during the period of slavery in the Caribbean. The racial-caste hierarchy was a loosely triangular structure with white elites at the top, mixed-race people in the middle who had a variety of different roles within the larger plantation structure of slavery during that period, and enslaved Africans, the biggest group who were labouring on sugar or coffee plantations across the Caribbean, at the bottom.

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The hierarchy was based on the construction of race which emerged because of the development of slavery. But it was not static: it shifted over time and place, and it looked different in different places in the Caribbean. There was some movement within it, in particular within the middle and the top section. It was inflected by class status, legal status, gender. The hierarchy shifted over time and place, but its power and longevity lay in its being founded on violence. It also shaped the discourses of racism in Britain.

I find the concept of the racial-caste hierarchy a useful tool to challenge simplistic understandings of the Caribbean as being a history of black versus white, and to instead enable understanding of linked forms of inequality. It reveals how different groups in society, during the period of slavery and afterwards, interacted with each other, how racism was linked to class inequality, to gender inequality, and how this changed over time.

You claim that the intention of white liberals involved in Britain's abolition, first of the slave trade (1807) then of slavery (1833, then Emancipation came

in 1838) was *not* to upend the system of white supremacy, and that the racial-caste hierarchy survived abolition.

That's a really important part of thinking about the longer legacies of the racial-caste hierarchy. The story of abolition is often told from a British perspective as a celebratory history. The role of white abolitionists was important, but there were many different people who helped to end slavery. Enslaved people themselves, the protests, the revolts that they led also helped to shift the opinion and momentum towards abolition.

The arguments for ending abolition were manifold: missionaries claimed it was part of spreading the gospel and that you didn't need slavery to convert Africans to Christianity. There were economic arguments around how free trade wasn't compatible with the structures of slavery. But abolition did not end white supremacy, and many white abolitionists, who we often hail as heroes, harboured deeply racist views of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean. What you see in the post-emancipation period is actually an increase in white supremacy, in the idea that enslaved Africans are inherently inferior to white Europeans. Many writings of influential figures such as Thomas Carlyle in Britain held explicitly racist views after 1838, in particular, linked to the economic decline of the Caribbean. Certain white Liberals blamed this decline on formerly enslaved Africans, claiming that they were not working hard enough, or they were lazy.

It's crucial to examine how this occurred to understand why abolition didn't mean an end to white supremacy. The book explores numerous examples of the continuation of racism in the 19th century, and also the 20th century – when we think about the First and Second World Wars, for instance.

What opportunities did the world wars present for African-Caribbeans to reckon with and challenge racial hierarchies and discrimination within the British Empire?

Many African-Caribbean people viewed the First World War as an opportunity to challenge racism. They saw themselves as part of this larger imperial family, and when the war started, they wanted to fight to defend king and empire. Many of them were not allowed to because of racism – the belief

that African-Caribbean people are not fit or intelligent enough to be on the battlefield alongside white Europeans. This came as a shock to many people in the Caribbean who thought of empire as a grouping where skin colour didn't matter, because they all felt connected to this larger colonial family. When the opportunity to enlist wasn't extended to those in the Caribbean, there was a lot of resentment and questioning of how they were meant to fit into this empire if they were not being treated the same as white Europeans. African-Caribbean men who did have the chance to serve – mainly in labour battalions rather than fighting – seized the opportunity to contribute to empire and to challenge racist myths, even though they themselves often faced racist treatment from other groups.

> *The legacies of the past become glaring when looking at centuries of history leading up to today. Take the Windrush scandal, for example, and how that continues to unfold, or the rhetoric about immigrants that influenced the Brexit referendum.*

In the book I discuss the mutiny that took place in a camp in Italy and the experiences of figures like Norman Manley, a Jamaican lawyer who was a student in Oxford during the First World War and went on to serve as Premier of Jamaica. In exploring these events in the 20th century, I highlight the tension that emerged in the racial-caste hierarchy between those trying to uphold it and those trying to undermine it. African-Caribbean people challenged it by using this language of inclusion: they want to be included in this larger Imperial family, but they faced resistance to that by multiple groups – the British Government, the Colonial Office, the War Office. But they continued to challenge and chip away at white supremacy, and I chart the ebbs and flows of how this operated as the century went on.

You discuss how, after the Second World War, there was an influx of migrants to Britain from the Caribbean,

accompanied by increased discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment from the State and the public, and the different forms of discrimination people faced in areas from employment and housing to education. Looking at the 21st century, in what ways do you think the legacies of Britain's exploitation in the Caribbean live on today?

Writing this book, what I kept seeing again and again were different iterations of the past in the present; something in the 19th century that recalled something that happened in the 18th century, and so on. This history is a living history. It's infusing our present moment so much because in Britain, we haven't – as a society, as a country – fully reckoned with the legacies of slavery. Although the structural edifice of empire has gone away, the residual, cultural and economic tenets of empire are still very much present in the neocolonialism of today. The policies we see in Britain and the Caribbean in the 21st century, whether that's to do with immigration or economics, demonstrate a lack of real willingness to face the past.

The legacies of the past become glaring when you take a *longue durée* perspective, as I have in the book, looking at centuries of history leading up to today. Take the Windrush scandal, for example, and how that continues to unfold, or the rhetoric about immigrants that influenced the Brexit referendum. The legacies of the past are also shaping the current movement towards reparations. I don't know how reparations will look, exactly, but I think it's becoming ever more necessary to have that debate, and not only to have it but to act on it. Politicians, activists and community figures in the Caribbean are pushing for reparations as part of an attempt to repair the past in the present, given the strangled economic situation that prevails in the Caribbean, its dependency on the West, and in particular on Britain and the United States.

Debates about reparations are going to be crucial in thinking about how we redress the legacies of slavery and empire today. For so long it has been something politicians have tried to overlook or sidestep, because it's such a violent history. But that violence still exists and is ongoing today; it might look different, but it still impacts our present.

Note: *This interview gives the views of the author and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

Imaobong Umoren will be speaking in a panel event, Reckoning with the past: truth-telling and the British Empire at 3.30pm on Saturday 21 June as part of LSE Festival 2025.

Watch a YouTube video with Imaobong Umoren, The entangled histories of Britain and the Caribbean.

Image: *The Bussa Emancipation Statue by Karl Broodhagen (1985) in Barbados, east of Bridgetown. Credit: Barbara Ash on Shutterstock.*

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About the author

Imaobong Umoren

Imaobong Umoren is an Associate Professor of International History at the London School of Economics where she specialises in histories of colonialism, racism, women, and political thought in the Caribbean, Britain, and United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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