The Sunflower Suite: Variations on a Theme of Remembering the Unremembered

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Prelude

Con esitazione poi sostenuto

At one point in my life, I was obsessed with and immersed in sound. Thousands of hours spent in lessons, rehearsals, and performances were devoted to improving the quality and beauty of my own vocal production and deepening communion with other artists. Even meditation, when I first began practicing, was nothing more to me than a technique in service of improved singing. Over time, this slowly changed. My many hours of singing became many hours of meditating. What I first viewed solely as a tool for performance optimization became the doorway through which the entirety of life could be understood. Silence gave me much more than sound ever could, and I have come to understand that it both creates and holds everything, including music.

Silence is so much more than it might initially give away. In his 1952 composition, *4'33",* John Cage catches the listener in the popular misconception that silence is soundless and empty. In his audience, we wait for melody to emerge. Instead, we may hear a sneeze, a shuffle, a siren, a whisper, a sigh, or the weather. Typically disregarded sounds are given center stage, and, for a few moments, they become the music. Silence was never empty. So, too, in the context of atrocity, silence is often not the absence of sound, but the absence of acknowledgement.

This suite listens for and attempts to acknowledge what the world has thrown away or overridden, what has gone missing or is believed to be missing. Silence works in many ways and pinning it down to any single meaning doesn't work. So, I examine it from multiple angles and offer variations on the theme of remembering the unremembered. Each variation differs in scale, impact, and form, yet they all return to how silence can oppress, protect, neglect, overwrite, or bear witness. Many have left the Herero and Nama genocide unremembered. Many have left the

American Civic Association shooting in Binghamton, New York unremembered. Many have disregarded Jamaica Kincaid's silences in "Girl" as soon as they appear. Let this suite be a simple *tournesol,* turning toward lives and voices the world treated as expendable, and a small refusal of the silence that prefers they never existed.

Movement I: Empire

Marche funèbre

Western collective memory prefers to imagine the Holocaust as a sudden and temporary descent into German madness. This narrative morally exonerates the rest of humanity and isolates the Shoah from the long historical continuum of imperial and colonial violence. Yet, as Bauman argues, the Holocaust was not an exceptional breakdown of German civilization, but one of its normal operations (Bauman 83). Both bureaucracy and technology made mass murder possible and tidy. The same modernity that invented railway timetables and the factory line made concentration camps possible that ran on both.

In *The Origins of Nazi Violence*, Enzo Traverso bears witness to the colonial record as documented by matter-of-fact European administrators (Traverso 65-66). The ledgers lay bare statistical evidence as to the routine nature of extermination, and the record itself is unbearable. Across the colonies in Sri Lanka, Algeria, the Congo, Sudan, the Pacific, entire societies fell by half or more in a single generation. Traverso estimates fifty to sixty million dead in Asia and Africa in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Taken together, the numbers show that genocide was not an exception but the rule of life for colonized peoples. And yet this history is enveloped in silence.

Recognizing a fuller history of the Western habit of genocide requires us to look beyond the Trail of Tears and the Holocaust. The point is not to minimize these atrocities but to present a more holistic picture of humanity's atrocious past. Colloquial use of *atrocious* has trivialized its meaning so far beyond the original that it no longer reflects its own truth. I do not refer, therefore, to atrocious handwriting, atrocious weather, or an atrocious cup of coffee. I mean *atrocious* as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary in all its fullness: "Characterized by savage enormity; excessively and wantonly cruel; heinously wicked" ("Atrocious, Adj."). Humanity has not simply committed a couple of atrocious acts. It has woven an atrocious past.

Long before the Third Reich, the Herero and Nama in German South-West Africa were subjected to genocide written into policy. It's a history we barely name at all. The Herero and Nama peoples had lived for generations in what is now Namibia long before German colonization. Under German rule, they were subjected to land theft, forced labor, and terror against which they eventually rebelled. In response, on October 2, 1904, General Lothar von Trotha issued a *Vernichtungsbefehl* (extermination order) against the Herero and Nama peoples (Traverso 65-66). No amount of theory, however, can hope to soften what comes next. The language of the colonizer removes any doubt as to intent:

> "I, the great general of the German soldiers, send this letter to the Herero people. The Hereros are German subjects no longer. They have murdered, stolen, cut off the ears and noses and other body parts of wounded soldiers, and now they are too cowardly to want to fight any longer. I say to the people: whoever delivers captains [chiefs] to my outposts shall receive 1,000 marks, and whoever brings Samuel Maherero shall receive 5,000 marks. The Herero people must now leave the country. If the people refuse, I shall force them with the Groot Rohr [Cape Dutch: cannon].

> Any Herero found within the German frontier, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I spare neither women nor children—I drive them back to their people or I will fire upon them. Such are my words to the Herero people. The General of the Great and Powerful German Kaiser" (von Trotha, *Extermination Order)*.

On paper it was simply policy.[1]

Von Trotha's extermination order set the first genocide of the twentieth century into motion. Between 1904 and 1908, an estimated eighty percent of the Herero population and half of the Nama population perished. Men, women, and children were shot by German soldiers or forced into the desert where wells were poisoned and escape routes blocked. Others died in concentration camps where starvation, thirst, disease, or exposure were common causes of death (Faber-Jonker).

Over a century later, Jephta U. Nguherimo, the great-grandchild of survivors of the Herero Genocide refused to allow Germany and the wider world to indulge in the useful silence of forgetting. In 2019 he published a collection of poetry and photographs to preserve family memories and demand recognition of the genocide by the German state. In his poem "The Bones Speak," Nguherimo gives voice to the skulls of Herero and Nama genocide victims kept on display in Western museums:

[1] No record of the screams.

i am not number 898
i am a victim of hate

i am not number 1512
i am a Herero you keep

let me go rest with my children
i did not come here on a pilgrimage

i am not number 3333
i want you to set me free

let me go rest with my children
i did not come here on a pilgrimage

for a century you played with my skull
and its color has become dark

a hundred plus years is enough
i am tired and fed up

let me go rest with my children
i did not come here on a pilgrimage

i am not number 2464
i am a Bushman you keep

let me go rest with my children
i did not come here on a pilgrimage
(Nguherimo 24)

Nguherimo's repetition of catalog numbers reflects the cold and objectifying tone of ordinary bureaucracy. However, he doesn't allow this dehumanization to dominate. Each rejected catalog number asserts the humanity the archive tries to erase. These bones demand their freedom from colonial imprisonment and the chance to go home. "i did not come here on a pilgrimage" confronts the reader with the choiceless horror of being torn from one's home, one's land, one's country, one's body, and made specimen to be "played with" (24).

In his prologue, Nguherimo makes specific demands of the German government including a formal apology, public recognition of the events of 1904-1908 as genocide, and funds exclusively allocated for communities affected by the genocide. He also makes note of the general lack of awareness both in Germany and worldwide of the existence of another German genocide. Nguherimo's voice was one of many that struggled at length for recognition of the atrocities perpetrated in German South-West Africa (Nguherimo 9). That struggle culminated in a 2021 joint declaration issued by Germany and Namibia. In that declaration, Germany formally apologized, acknowledged the events as genocide, and promised more than one billion Euros in development aid to Namibia over thirty years. Germany has also returned some looted cultural items and human remains. Namibia formally accepted Germany's apology. Germany writes in the declaration:

> "Germany apologizes and bows before the descendants of the victims. Today, more than 100 years later, Germany asks for forgiveness for the sins of their forefathers. It is not possible to undo what has been done. But the suffering, inhumanity and pain inflicted on the tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children by Germany during the war in what is today Namibia must not be forgotten. It must serve as a warning against racism and genocide" ("Joint Declaration").

These are solemn words. Yet critics have argued that they are not enough. Herero and Nama descendants and leaders point out that the declaration says nothing about the return of lands stolen during colonial rule. This matters because land dispossession remains a living wound. A 2024 Reuters article by Nyasha Nyaungwa notes that “white people make up 5% of Namibia's population but control more than 70% of prime agricultural land”, and that Germany’s colonial past “was ignored for decades while historians and politicians focused more on the legacy of Nazi crimes.” Critics like Mutjinde Katjiua, a senior leader in the Ovaherero Traditional Authority, make the point that the Herero and Nama people were not adequately included in negotiations with Germany (Nyaungwa 2024). Germany's apology also fell short because the nation refused to call the payment what it is. Funds have been designated as 'aid' rather than 'reparations' ("Joint Declaration") and are routed directly through Namibia rather than through descendant communities.

Finally, I would be remiss to neglect mentioning the monuments that pay homage to genocide and still stand under protection in today’s Namibia. As one example, the Marine Memorial erected in 1908 in Swakopmund remains standing as of December 2025. It is listed on Namibia’s National Heritage Register (“Heritage Places”) and appears as an tourist attraction on travel websites including *Lonely Planet* (“Marine Memorial”). The memorial depicts a colonial German soldier standing tall and ready for battle during the Herero and Nama uprising. A plaque inscribed “With God for Kaiser and Empire...” (“The Marine Memorial”) lists fifteen battles in which colonial soldiers perished. An additional plaque lists the name and rank of individual fallen soldiers. These German lives have been deemed worthy of individual recognition and remembrance. Nameless human remains of Herero and Nama genocide victims, however, have been categorized as specimens for Western study and amusement.

Silence I

Figure 1: "*Gefangene Hereros*" (Imprisoned Hereros) ca. 1904 - 1908. Koloniales Bildarchiv, Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt am Main. Public Domain Mark 1.0.

The German archive names them "*Gefangene Hereros.*" Silence names what the archive does not.

Movement II: Nation

Andante con fermezza

On April 3, 2009, the deadliest mass shooting in New York State history took place in Binghamton (New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services 12). At the American Civic Association (ACA), a center serving immigrants and refugees, Jiverly Wong, a naturalized American citizen from Vietnam, killed thirteen people in less than a minute before taking his own life. Victims included immigrants or refugees from China, Haiti, Pakistan, Vietnam, Iraq, Brazil, the Philippines, and American-born individuals (McFadden).

The victims were:

Parveen Ali, 26	Roberta King, 72
Almir Olimpio Alves, 43	Jiang Ling, 22
Marc Henry Bernard, 44	Hong Xiu "Amy" Mao Marsland, 35
Maria Sonia Bernard, 46	Dolores Yigal, 53
Li Guo, 47	Hai Hong Zhong, 54
Lan Ho, 39	Maria Zobniw, 60
Layla Khalil, 53	

(“Remembering the Victims”).

There are only limited representations that bear witness to this event. The shooting was initially covered by local and national news, though attention faded quickly. Within just a few days, both state and nation had moved on, leaving a community to grieve a tragedy deemed unworthy of sustained focus. A documentary, *Binghamton Heals: Surviving the Tragedy at the American Civic Association,* was completed by the first anniversary of the shooting. However, apart from a few controlled screenings, it remains inaccessible to the public out of concern for the participants. In an email, producer Nancy Barno Reynolds explained that withholding broad access was a deliberate choice. "We did not make the film readily available to the wider public," she wrote, "in order to protect the participants from being contacted - or even reminded - as the interviews were very raw and all done within the year following the shooting." She noted that the raw interview footage was donated to the Broome County Historical Society "so that participants would always have access to their words." She stressed that the project was a community effort and that she and her collaborators were "just representatives of some narratives. We tried to focus on the day, and the positive ways our community came together to heal. Ultimately, the story belongs to the community and to the brave participants" (Reynolds).

This commitment to protecting participants is deeply honorable. Yet even this honorable choice introduces difficult ethical questions. Without the hope of a clear and easy answer, I ask: at what point does protection create a silence that contributes to the disappearance of an event from collective memory? In this context, the documentary's restricted access becomes complicated. Yes, it protects the dignity of the victims and avoids the spectacle that Susan Sontag warns against. But what happens when protection unintentionally leaves a community with almost no publicly accessible record of its own grief? What happens when local care and caution meet our national habit of forgetting? The silence in this case is augmented by the

absence of public acknowledgement of the massacre on the ACA's website as of December 2025 (American Civic Association). Silence here works toward more than one end. It protects, dignifies, and creates intimacy. Yet it also performs a disappearing act by fueling our collective habit of looking away. This is the silence that rises when an event is too small, too local, too immigrant, or too complicated.

The ACA confronts us with our distinctly American kind of silence. We tell ourselves that we value resilience and diversity, yet we look straight past the actual people who live within those realities. Silence has become a sorting mechanism. bell hooks warns that it is possible to talk endlessly about "Otherness and difference" without ever engaging with the people who live it (2319). Her critique of theorists who write about the Other instead of speaking with them applies here. Our nation does something very similar. We pile narratives upon narratives about violence and belonging without ever meaningfully attending to the communities that endure the consequences of our thoughtlessness. In this way, silence becomes convenient fiction. The story is kept simple by keeping the people out of it.

And local reporting has noticed how quickly many have forgotten.

A 2019 article in the Press & Sun Bulletin ("Why Did the World Forget?") bears witness to the sparse and short-lived media coverage and expresses some local residents' feelings of anger and neglect. Angie Chuang, associate professor at the University of Colorado Boulder notes that the violence was dismissed as "immigrants killing other immigrants." She adds, "These were poor immigrants in a poor town that had a Rust Belt vibe" ("Why Did the World Forget?"). Her assessment well captures how factors like race, class, and geography help determine what our country is willing to see, honor, and grieve.

National coverage has also largely erased Binghamton from the discourse on mass shooting sites and gun violence. In a 2016 feature on gun violence, James King observes how the world forgot about Binghamton:

> "It's not because of the scale of the tragedy: more died in Binghamton than in the killings in Aurora, Colorado, the Washington Navy Yard, and a church in Charleston. Counting the death of the shooter, it was deadlier than the massacre at Fort Hood. Nor is it because it was so long ago; the frequently remembered shootings at Columbine happened 10 years prior, and the Fort Hood massacre was just a few months later in 2009" (King).

Journalism scholar Angie Chuang's content analysis of 145 newspaper articles on the ACA shooting shows how forgetting was built into the coverage right from the start. National papers repeatedly marked Wong as a "Vietnamese immigrant" while rarely noting that he was a naturalized U.S. citizen for over two decades. They framed his job loss and limited English as signs of a failed immigrant "American Dream" rather than as a recession story that could have happened to "people like us." The press worked *really* hard to keep Wong on the foreign side of the border even when he was legally part of the American "we" (Chuang 249-56).

The topic of grievability seems pertinent when considering the ACA shooting. Judith Butler argues that public grief is distributed unequally: "Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as 'grievable'" (Butler 32).

For Butler, grievability does not refer to a private emotional state, but to both a public and political designation that sanctifies certain lives and selectively grants them entry into the collective "we." It is part of an unspoken social agreement in the United States that some lives are worth more than others even in death. We can measure the value of a life in the length of national discourse, the prominence or absence of memorials, political focus and legislation, sustained popular attention, and the availability of funds. Some losses never reach national awareness at all, and the ACA victims fit none of the categories that seem to activate American collective mourning. Many were foreign born, multilingual, economically vulnerable, and ordinary in ways our national narrative prefers not to elevate. Their lives were grieved very briefly and then absorbed into the abyssal background noise our nation prefers not to notice.

Some in the community have argued that Wong, who struggled with mental illness, was also a victim deserving of mourning. Others have entirely rejected this notion. Fourteen tulips were planted in a local park - one flower for each person who died in the shooting including Wong. By the next morning, one of the tulips had been dug up and thrown away (Arsenault). This suggests an unwillingness to tolerate complexity and a preference for a clear division between innocence and guilt.

The question of whether Wong should be remembered as a victim brings larger issues into focus that cannot be explained away with soundbites. To acknowledge his suffering would require us to confront the conditions and taboos of modern American life. First, American public narratives about violence rarely tolerate complexity around perpetrators. They tend to favor moral binaries over the harder work of understanding how violence emerges. In such narratives, attempts at complexity are often misread as disloyalty.

Small American cities like Binghamton often quietly enforce tight boundaries around who actually belongs. It is not lost on me that Wong's violence was directed at the very organization committed to helping immigrants find their footing in Binghamton. The ACA provided support but could not undo the larger conditions in which he lived. Racism, cultural alienation, poverty, scarce mental health resources, linguistic isolation, and a culture that has forgotten what it means to be an immigrant and start over help describe the broader conditions surrounding his life. This does not explain or excuse his violence. But can we honestly claim that the very conditions of his life left no mark?

And while those conditions did not disappear with Wong, the families refused to let their loved ones disappear either. The ACA Memorial Park exists because the families insisted on publicly naming and remembering them. Their insistence was a refusal of the silence around them. The memorial is small: a simple plaque engraved with the names of victims, a few benches, and a symbolic sculpture representing the lives that were cut short all sit at the edge of a busy city intersection. But it exists, and each year on April 3rd survivors, loved ones, and community members gather there to remember.

The shooting in Binghamton has laid bare the limits of our national empathy and memory. Witnessing here is not a demand for spectacle. It is a request to be seen. It resists the speed and silence with which our nation moved on. Forgetting here was not passive or natural. It was chosen. The work that remains is remembering.

Silence II

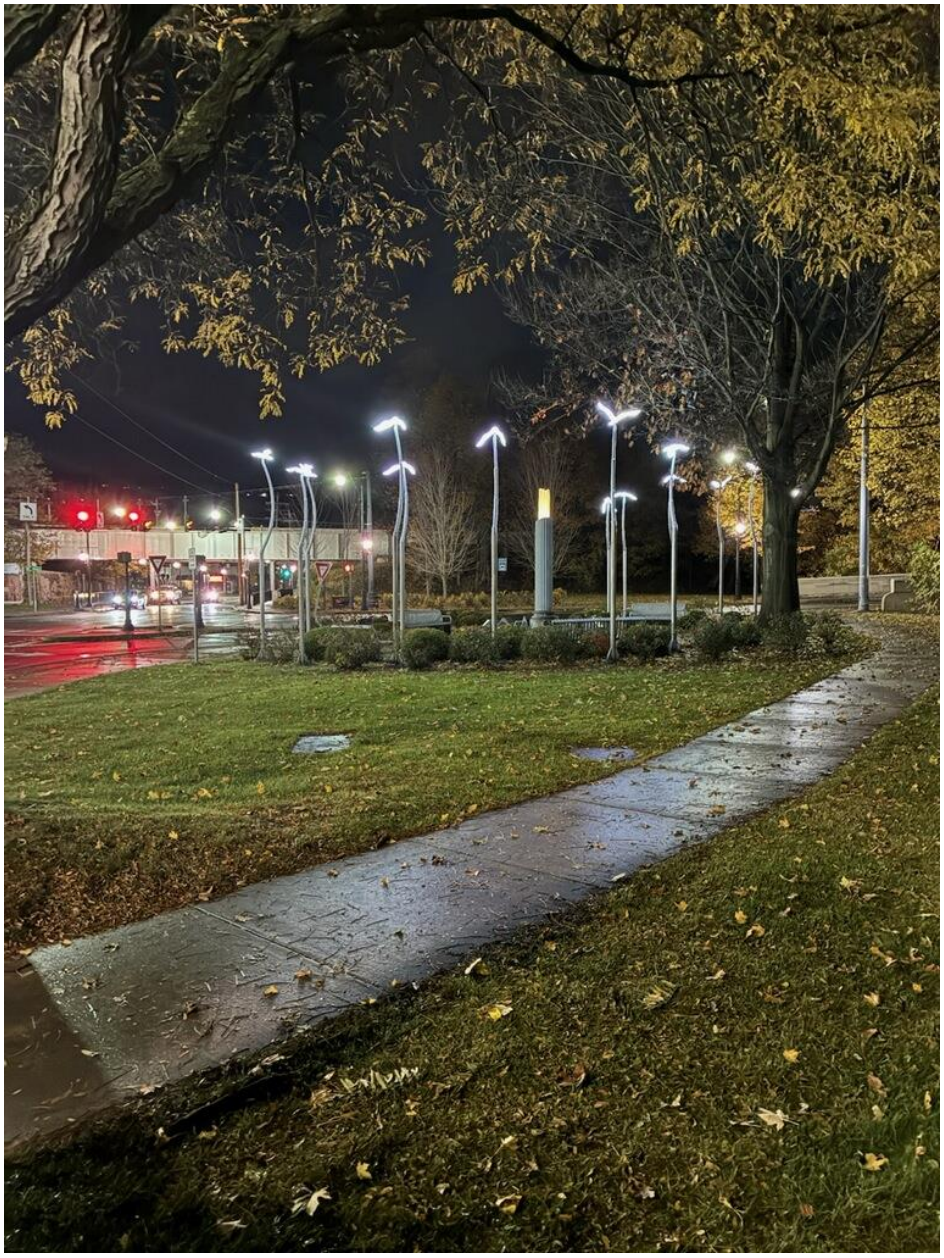


Figure 2. *ACA Memorial*, Binghamton, New York. Photograph by Donna Kadaronak, November 2025. Used with permission.

Movement III: Home

Allegretto pizzicato e tagliente

On the surface, Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" may seem like nothing more than a barrage of directives spouted at a girl. Assumptions are quickly made as to the form of the piece and the narrator's identity. Readers want certainty as to who is speaking, why, and from what position. Yet the text opposes this impulse. Kincaid herself resists such categorizations altogether, remarking "This idea of genre...I think it's one of those European ideas of classifying and pinning things down to analyze and to clarify for themselves" (Storytellers' Studio). Kincaid's writing is precise when she wants it to be. She deliberately chooses culturally significant vocabulary like *benna,* for example. Everywhere else, the piece is suspended in its own universe of uncertainty and possibility.

The temptation to fill in the blanks is often too great to resist. Formally, however, the story anchors very little. The piece is a single paragraph chain of semicolons that function something like a metronome. It never stops. We witness the second-person voice-stream at a distance like we might observe Jupiter in the night sky. Every statement has the same grammatical weight, which also contributes to the piece's feeling of suspension. Kincaid could have removed punctuation altogether, but she didn't. The semicolons help keep the piece suspended in its universe.

A significant leap often made in analyses is the implicit assignment of a fixed and specific identity to the narrator. This presumption is accepted with such confidence that it is rarely interrogated. Scholars including Justin D. Edwards (*Understanding Jamaica Kincaid*) and Diane Simmons ("The Rhythm of Reality in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid") begin their

discussions from the assumption that the narrator's identity is self-evident. But the text does not support this certainty. Why do we insist upon stabilizing a voice Kincaid deliberately leaves unstable? It is true that Kincaid has, at times, referred to the narrator as a mother in interviews, often when an interviewer has already framed the voice that way in a question. The story itself never does. Even more tellingly, Kincaid has noted "When I wrote 'Girl' I had no idea I was writing about mother/daughter. I was just writing about something I knew" (Storytellers' Studio).

Failing to name the narrator is unlikely an oversight on Kincaid's part, yet it is often treated as one. Pinning down an identity "corrects" a piece that needs no correction. Surely, one might argue, the story is an older woman addressing a younger one. Yet Kincaid never identifies the speaker within the text and attempts to do so limit interpretive range and meaning. The omission is the point. Bearing witness to "Girl" as written means allowing for multiple plausible identities without attaching to any of them. The narrator might be any number of individual, collective, or mediated voices including a matriarch, sister, nanny, the "Girl" herself, colonial values, feminine instruction, patriarchy, a radio address, an overheard telephone call, or an echo. The text presents us with a narrative voice rather than a fully developed character. Once the narrator is set in stone as the "mother", we become witnesses to family drama. Allowing the narrator, however, to be potentially plural or even fully undefined opens the story.

The girl's voice barely exists. She speaks twice in the entire piece, and both times she is immediately overridden. Both times her words are swallowed back down as soon as they have dared emerge. These moments of expression might offer a break in the narrator's monologue, but they do not. The girl learns in real time that speaking changes nothing. She is pruned and positioned for the judgment of others. Every line positions the girl as an object of instruction. She is told how to smile, how to walk, how to wash clothes, how to set the table, and how to

keep herself from becoming "the slut" she is already accused of being. The instructions prepare her for life under scrutiny.

The question of where this life takes place is also left ambiguous. The story offers no named setting, but Kincaid's language is full of precise culinary and musical markers that situate the piece within a Caribbean cultural world. Words such as *benna* and *doukona* are not found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, yet they are embedded in Caribbean cultural experience. Alongside these terms, Kincaid uses *okra*, *dasheen*, and *pepper pot,* foods which convey cultural specificity within Afro-Caribbean life. Kincaid declines to translate these for the reader. So, the certainty we find in Kincaid's story comes from this cultural compass rather than a geographic specification. Further, the narrator's fixation on discipline, cleanliness, posture, and respectability reflects the ideals of "civilized" society that colonialism enforced and left behind. The standards did not suddenly disappear with the colonizers. In the end, the entire text points to a certain cultural context the girl lives within.

Despite the narrator's dominance within this context, however, the piece is entitled "Girl." The girl barely speaks, but she is the one we turn toward. Her presence holds the story together, and it is her silence that keeps us transfixed.

Silence III

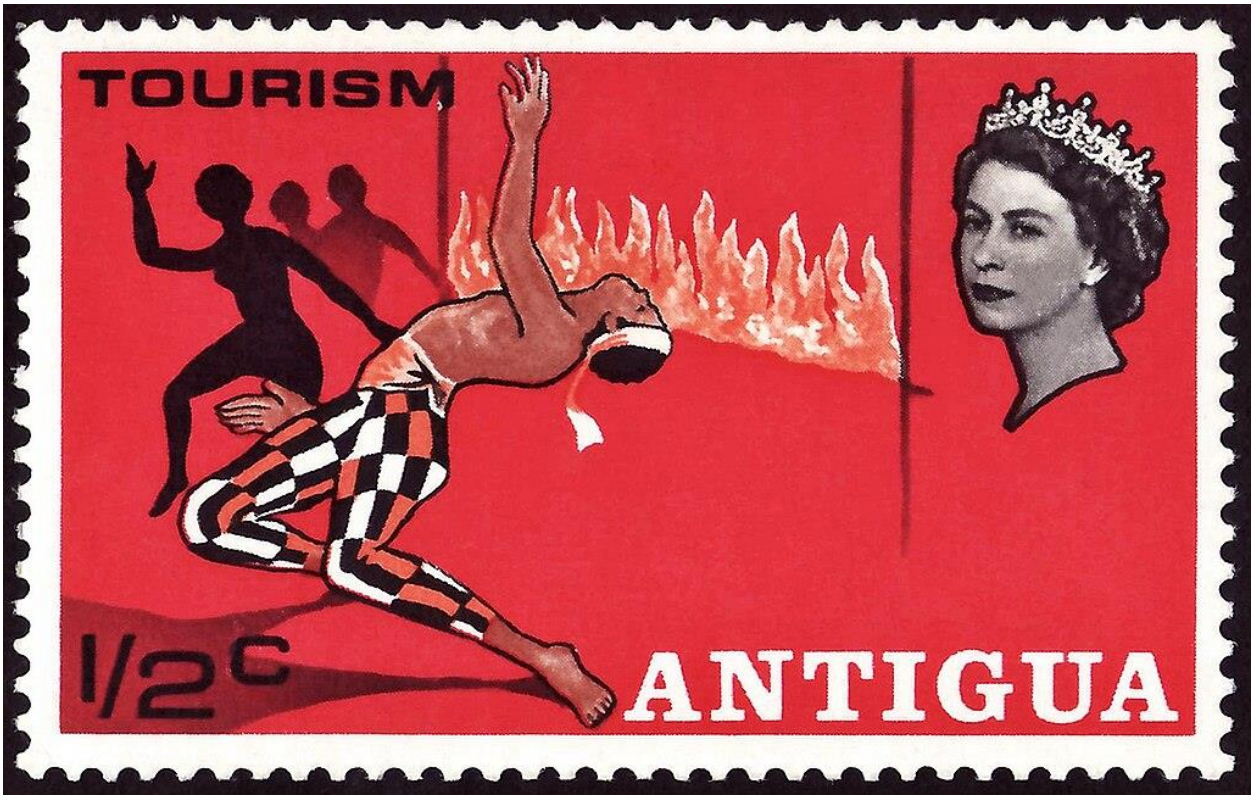


Figure 3. *Antugua [sic] and Barbuda Post Office* (as part of the *British Royal Post Services*), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Coda: Trugschluss

Pianissimo

Standing in the shadow of the *tremendum*, it is clear my language is insufficient.

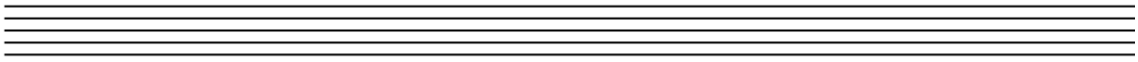
Nothing written here, nothing I could ever write, can meet what it attempts to describe.

I will not pretend to resolve what I cannot resolve.

What I offer is only a refusal to let silence be the end of their stories.

The silence that follows is where my voice withdraws because the subject exceeds me.

Silence IV



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