

Good morning Westover faculty, staff, and students.

I am here today to speak with you about the Caribbean as an introduction to this weekend's COLORES festival, and quite honestly, I agonized for days about what I would say. How was I going to share with you the rich history of the Caribbean in 15 minutes? There is no possible way to generalize the Caribbean. Each island has its own culture, dialect, language, national food, dance, history and the list goes on. So, after all my agonizing, I decided that I would just ask the intelligent Westover ladies to help me speak about the Caribbean and call it a day. With that said, let me ask you: when you think of the Caribbean, what comes to mind?

In my talk today, I can only tell you about the Caribbean I know personally. As a child, I spent summers in a small village called Swetes in my mother's native Antigua, an island whose motto is: 365 beaches, a beach for every day of the year. I climbed trees, which caused my aunt to yell at me because she made clear that boys were to do that, not girls. I took showers in buckets when there was no water, as Antigua is an island that often experiences drought. I learned to boil water before drinking it so that I would not become ill. I went to the sleep to the cricket's nightly symphony. I begged my relatives ferociously to take me to the beaches because I knew I would not see that beauty in my hometown, the Bronx.

But, there is more to the Caribbean. There's more beyond the beaches and paradise and vacations and carnivals and delicious dishes that tantalize us. The Caribbean is a region that was colonized by the French, the Dutch, the Spanish, and the English. It is a region still suffering from the effects of colonization.

Jamaica Kincaid, one of my favorite writers, who is Antiguan, exposes to her readers the remnants of colonization and the effects of modern day tourism on Antigua in her book, *A Small Place*. In her book, Kincaid expresses her anger toward the English who colonized Antigua and who educated descendents of the slaves they brought over to Antigua to admire the country that enslaved them. This same book was used in the documentary: *Life and Debt: Globalization in Jamaica*, which explores the effects of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) policies on developing countries through Jamaica's experience with the organization. The film exposes the reality of life in Jamaica behind the façade of the tourist industry. Inadequate schools, medical facilities and living conditions dominate the areas apart from the plush hotels that dot the coastal beaches.

A similar situation is happening in the Dominican Republic, another Caribbean country close to my heart, a country where I lived and researched for a year. There, the many all-inclusive hotels, walled off from the surrounding countryside, do little to advance the economic situation there, as foreigners own most of the hotels and as the hotel managements import their food and furniture, their designs and designers, their fabrics and fashions from the U.S. mainland, not locally from the Dominican Republic. There has been little democratic participation in tourism planning in the Dominican Republic and not enough attention paid to the needs of the country beyond job creation.

While I lived in the Dominican Republic, I wrote about my experiences like a good Westover girl, and to share with you some of the harsh realities of what I witnessed there, I'll read to you two pieces of my writing which touches on the effects of poverty and on the AIDS epidemic.

The first piece I will share is called *Old Lady on Calle Winston Churchill*, which is about a woman I saw each day begging for money on my way to and from my apartment.

*Old Lady on Calle Winston Churchill*  
February 22, 2006

*The left side of her dirt-stained, flower-patterned dress hangs down from her shoulder, exposing her aged bosom. Her soles are as black as the burning asphalt she walks on each day to beg passers-by for money. With desperation and vulnerability written on the wrinkles of her face, she sticks her hands out in front of her the same way churchgoers do to receive the body of Christ on Sundays.*

*I stand on the sidewalk, waiting for the stencil of the walking man to fill with green light so that I could continue on my way home. I do not ignore her like I have been trained to do on New York City's MTA trains when people beg for money. I do not pretend to be fast asleep or absorbed in book—desperate attempts to be excused from not noticing or not acknowledging panhandlers. There is simply no escaping the pobreza in the Dominican Republic.*

*It shouts at you each day when you run into parentless boys, equipped with tin cans and shoe polish. They roam the streets each day in search for someone's shoes to shine when they themselves do not know what wearing shoes is like. Pobreza whispers in your ear when you read about the exploited boys and girls who have no choice but to be the sexual outlets for oversexed men and women, Dominicanos and foreigners alike.*

*Then, there are the people who scavenge through garbage heaps in richer neighborhoods, making someone else's trash their treasure, reminding me of the "bottom-feeders" who "check the air for the fall of excess / of too much, flecks of extra, / from the higher-up folks in the sky" in Gary Snyder's *Walking The New York Bedrock Alive in the Sea of Information*. Pobreza haunts this country.*

*And now, the light turns green, and I have to leave this old woman who captured my attention during my two-minute wait to cross the street. Though, I wonder if she too would rather be on a journey to some casita she could call home instead of spending her days on Calle Winston Churchill, making a living off of other people's pocket change.*

As is expressed in my writing, poverty is inescapable in the Dominican Republic. Sadly, poverty limits people's access to decent healthcare, schooling, and life opportunities. Another writing piece I'll share with you is called *Conquistador SIDA*, which is about a woman I met in the Colonial Zone in Santo Domingo who was suffering from AIDS.

## *Conquistador SIDA*

*April 9, 2006*

*It was still early so the Colonial Zone's Parque Duarte was not as littered with its usual crowd: rebels, posers, artists, queer people, beer-bottle collectors, and sweet-talking sanky-pankies with foreign partners at their sides. Sitting on a bench, my friends and I discussed politics, gender, race, and sexuality after having just arrived back to Santo Domingo from a campo in San Cristobal. All we wanted to do was relax and keep with us as much of the campo's serenity as possible.*

*Mid-way in a conversation about my hair, a woman approached us to beg for money, completely ruining the mood. I looked up at her, acknowledging her presence, but could not understand a word she was saying in her mumble-speak. Out of nowhere, she lifted up her huge, black blouse and revealed her wet, pee-stained checkered pants to prove to us that she was going to use whatever money we would give her to buy an adult diaper.*

*She continued her testimony by showing us different parts of her body that were slowly deteriorating: her legs, her arms, her stomach, her everything. Several times as she spoke to us, she bent over in pain clenching onto herself and scrunching up her face as though she had just eaten something sour. She confessed to us that she was dying as tears trickled down the premature wrinkles of her drawn-in face.*

*My Bronx instinct told me not to believe her, to think that all of this was some scam to get money out of us, two foreigners and two Dominicans with New York City flavoring, but death and suffering consumed her being. She struggled to support her thin, fragile self up, a thirty-eighth year old trapped in an old woman's body waiting for her last breath.*

*After learning she suffered from AIDS, her frail appearance made sense, and I also realized that although I had worked and talked with HIV patients before, I had never known anyone with full-blown AIDS in my life. Now, all the statistics, all the scholarly journals I had read about AIDS finally had a face—a young woman, invisible to society, with no money, with nowhere to go, and with no family or friends supporting her.*

*Years ago, when she was a younger, vibrant woman at her job in Santiago, she was forced down by some man and raped, only to learn later that his violent and voracious act would be the cause of her death. I sat in shock and in disbelief as she spilled out the events of her life—all the things she had done and those she will never get to do.*

*“What's your name?” She asked, looking deep into my eyes through her wide-framed glasses. “Dena,” I replied eagerly in an effort to remind her of her personhood, which was lost when she was driven to make the streets her home and strangers her family. “Milagros (Miracles) is my name,” she said, and we stared at each other in brief silence as though we were both thinking the same thing: nothing about her life reflected the meaning of her name.*

*Then, she kneeled down to me and broke out into a bachata song about her last hospital visit. She struggled to sing, often taking short breaths from her sprinkled-with-rotten-teeth mouth. I absorbed her lyrics, as the beauty and soulfulness of her voice were mesmerizing. At the end of her song, she walked away, leaving us to try recuperating any remaining campo tranquility while she continued her begging in Santo Domingo's Colonial Zone, having no choice but to spend the rest of her life suffering a brutal and fatal colonization of her body.*

In this specific experience I shared with you, the AIDS epidemic in the Caribbean finally became real to me. In fact, at the end of 2007, an estimated 230,000 people were living with HIV and AIDS in the Caribbean. The Caribbean is the second-most affected region in the world and is now one of the leading causes of death in some of these countries, with Haiti being the worst affected. An estimated 7,500 lives are lost each year to AIDS in Haiti, and thousands of children have been orphaned by the epidemic.

The Caribbean's rich and diverse history and paradise-like settings are unfortunately juxtaposed with its depressing reality. Continue to travel to the Caribbean, but the next time you fly over the enticing landscape of a Caribbean island, think about the many people there struggling to make end's meet, think about the many orphaned children, the people suffering from AIDS; think about what is behind the beauty and beyond the beaches. More importantly, decide what you can do to make this world a better and just place. Thank you.