



# CHECKING OUT ME HISTORY KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



**Context** – *The Émigrée* was written by John Agard and was published in 2007.

**John Agard** – John Agard (born 1949) is an Afro-Guyanese poet and playwright who now lives in the UK. When he moved to the UK in the 1970s, he began teaching people about Caribbean culture and worked in a library. He often conveys his Caribbean voice in his poems, using non-standard spelling to represent his accent. His poems are often rebellious in nature, challenging common ways of thinking.



**The Battle of Hastings and Dick Whittington** – The event that the speaker mentions as taking place in 1066 (line 6) is the Battle of Hastings. It is the event in which William of Normandy defeated King Harold. It is a staple topic of history lessons in the UK. *Dick Whittington* is another commonly-taught history folklore – concerning the rise from poverty of a man who sold his cat to a rat-infested country.



**Guyana** – Guyana is a country on the northern mainland of South America. However, it is often considered as a Caribbean region because of its strong cultural and historical links to Anglo Caribbean nations. It was governed by Britain from the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century and known as British Guiana until the 1950s. It gained independence in 1966. Many Guyanese families have since emigrated to the UK – in 2009 there were 24,000 Guyanese-born people living in the UK.



**Toussant L'Ouverture and Nanny de Maroon** – Toussant L'Ouverture was a leader in the Haitian Revolution. He showed strong political and military skill, which resulted in the first free colonial society – race was not considered the basis of social standing. Nanny of the Maroons was an outstanding Jamaican leader, who became known as a figure of strength in fights against the British. Neither of these figures are commonly discussed in the British education system.



## Language/Structural Devices

**Repetition** – Repetition is one of the most powerful tools that Agard uses in *Checking Out Me History*. Aside from the rhythmical effect that it creates throughout the poem, repetition of certain words and phrases reinforces meanings. E.g., the repetition of the line starter 'dem tell me' suggests that what is to follow is not the speaker's own thoughts. The repetition also demonstrates the dullness and monotony that he associates with the version of history he is told.

**Imagery** – There is a stark contrast between the vivid imagery Agard utilises when asserting features of history that he deems as a part of his identity, and the lack of imagery he employs throughout the mention of the traditional British figures in history (e.g. '1066' and 'Dick Whittington') Whilst he is deliberately vague about the details of the latter, he uses light imagery such as 'beacon', 'fire-woman', and 'star' when describing the former – this shows how they enlighten him.

**Quote:** "Dem tell me/ Dem tell me/ Wha dem want to tell me"

**Quote:** "And even when de British said no/ She still brave the Russian snow/ A healing star"

**Colloquialism** – Agard uses colloquial language throughout the poem, creating a number of effects. Primarily, it is used to reflect his lack of conformity to 'standard' ideas (e.g. speaking Standard English) Discourse markers such as 'and all dat' show his disinterest in the topics being transmitted – fillers like these are used in moments where we can't/won't divulge more precise details.

**Non-Standard Spelling** – Agard deliberately uses non-standard spellings throughout the poem in order to reflect the Caribbean accent of the speaker. For example, Agard uses 'dem' in a number of lines across the poem, rather than 'them.' He also shortens the word 'about' to 'bout.' Agard is attempting to give a voice to those in society who are not ordinarily granted one – his non-standard voice reflects this.

**Quote:** "Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat Dem tell me bout Dick Whittington and he cat"

**Quote:** "Dem tell me Wha dem want to tell me"

**Form/Meter** – The poem consists of ten stanzas of varying lengths. Standard font and couplets, triplets or quatrains are used in the sections of the poem that detail the history imposed on the speaker, whilst his own history is written in italics and an irregular rhyme scheme – these features may represent that the speaker's version of history is 'different' and rebellious when compared to what society expects.

**Structure** – *Checking Out Me History* can be split into three rough stages. The first begins with the poet stating his case about having one version of history told to him, with the suggestion that this is done deliberately to 'blind' him to his own identity. The middle section of the poem flits between features of colonial and his own version of history. The final section expresses his refusal to accept the given version.

**Quote:** "Dem tell me bout Lord Nelson and Waterloo But dem never tell me bout Shaka de great Zulu"

**Quote:** "But now I checking out me own history I carving out me identity"

**Themes** – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

**Challenging those in Power** – Agard's poem puts forward a message that rebels against the established order. He refers to those in power as 'dem', and repeats 'dem tell me' in advance of each establishment-prescribed historical teaching. The italicised detail, in addition to the final stanza, reveal the speaker's refusal to accept this.



**Identity** – The speaker's identity is partially evident through their non-standard spellings, reflective of their accent. However, the speaker struggles to find any resemblance to his own identity in the historical teachings that have been imposed on him, which mainly tells the colonial side of events. He resolves to 'carve out' his own identity in the end.



## Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	Dem tell me	<b>Stanzas 1-2:</b> The speaker immediately addresses the key message in the poem, that an unnamed 'dem' (them) are preventing him from exploring his <u>own identity</u> . The style of the <u>non-standard spelling</u> reflects a <u>Caribbean accent</u> , leading the reader to assume that the 'dem' is the community that the speaker has emigrated to (considering the poet and the later content, most likely UK). The <u>metaphors</u> suggest the speaker has been bandaged and blinded in order to stop them learning about their own culture.
	2	Dem tell me	
	3	Wha dem want to tell me	
2	4	Bandage up me eye with me own history	
	5	Blind me to me own identity	
3	6	Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat	
	7	Dem tell me bout Dick Whittington and he cat	
	8	But Toussaint L'Ouverture	
	9	No dem never tell me bout dat	
4	10	<i>Toussaint</i>	
	11	<i>A slave</i>	
	12	<i>With vision</i>	
	13	<i>Lick back</i>	
	14	<i>Napoleon</i>	
	15	<i>Battalion</i>	
	16	<i>And first Black</i>	
	17	<i>Republic born</i>	
	18	<i>Toussaint de thorn</i>	
	19	<i>To de French</i>	
	20	<i>Toussaint de beacon</i>	
21	<i>Of de Haitian Revolution</i>		
5	22	Dem tell me bout de man who discover de balloon	
	23	And de cow who jump over de moon	
	24	Dem tell me bout de dish ran away with de spoon	
	25	But dem never tell me bout Nanny de Maroon	
	26	<i>Nanny</i>	
6	27	<i>See far woman</i>	
	28	<i>Of mountain dream</i>	
	29	<i>Fire-woman struggle</i>	
	30	<i>Hopeful stream</i>	
	31	<i>To freedom river</i>	
7	32	Dem tell me bout Lord Nelson and Waterloo	
	33	But dem never tell me bout Shaka de great Zulu	
	34	Dem tell me bout Columbus and 1492	
	35	But what happen to de Caribs and de Arawaks too	
8	36	Dem tell me bout Florence Nightingale and she lamp	
	37	And how Robin Hood used to camp	
	38	Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry ole soul	
	39	But dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole	
9	40	<i>From Jamaica</i>	
	41	<i>She travel far</i>	
	42	<i>To the Crimean War</i>	
	43	<i>She volunteer to go</i>	
	44	<i>And even when de British said no</i>	
	45	<i>She still brave the Russian snow</i>	
	46	<i>A healing star</i>	
	47	<i>Among the wounded</i>	
	48	<i>A yellow sunrise</i>	
	49	<i>To the dying</i>	
10	50	Dem tell me	
	51	Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me	
	52	But now I checking out me own history	
	53	I carving out me identity	

**Stanzas 3-4:** The speaker references the history that they have been told about, before expressing details about the history that they failed to inform him of. The colloquialism 'and all dat' in reference to the prescribed history that was communicated shows that the speaker does not care for it. The speaker then shows their knowledge of Toussant; the increased pace and rhyme here reflects the speaker's enthusiasm.

**Stanza 5:** The speaker repeats the themes of stanza 3, regarding the prescribed history imposed upon people. However the references become more trivial and insignificant, for example 'de cow who jump over de moon' (a reference to the nursery rhyme). Such teachings appear insignificant when compared to the rich world histories that could have been explored.

**Stanza 6:** In much the same way that the speaker deplored the lack of historical teachings about Toussant, he criticises the lack of education provided about Nanny de Maroon. Once more, he communicates his understanding about this historical figure's achievements, utilising rhyme/half-rhyme to make the topic appear engaging, enthralling. The nature-based imagery further brings the story to life. And yet, the establishment would rather teach about British inventors and nursery rhymes.

**Stanzas 7-8:** The speaker further details the history that they have been exposed to throughout their education. The one-sided colonial view of this history becomes further apparent, as the speaker mentions Lord Nelson (famous for winning many battles for the British) and 'ole King Cole' (another British nursery rhyme) amongst other white-British historical figures, with no mention of the other side. Once again, the poet repeats 'Dem tell me' – thus reflecting the repetitive and unvarying given version of history.

**Stanzas 9-10:** The speaker gives more details about the life of Mary Seacole. At this point the reader is able to note that all three of the historical references to the speaker's history contain associations with light: 'beacon, fire woman, and star.' This demonstrates how these figures illuminate the speaker's true historical identity. The speaker then reiterates their message from the first line, with the added declaration that they are unwilling to accept the given version of history. This sums up the rebellious tone of the poem.

## Poems for Comparison

London	<i>Checking Out Me History</i> can be compared with this poem in approaching the themes of <u>Challenging those in power</u> .
The Emigree/ The Prelude	<i>Checking Out Me History</i> can be compared with these poems in its approach to the theme of <u>identity</u> .

## Words from the Poet

*The sooner we can face the fact that Western education is entrenched with preconceived notions of other societies, the better. It's healthy and liberating to question those perceptions. Has British society made progress in its attitudes. Yes, but there's still a long way to go. I don't think we realise that there is a great possibility here for a genuine enrichment of diversity, despite whatever conflicts exist.* The Telegraph, March 2013.

