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‘Windrush generation’ and ‘hostile environment’: symbols and lived experiences in Caribbean migration to the U.K.

2018, the year when U.K. notions of sovereignty were thrown into question by ‘Brexit’, was also the year ‘the Windrush generation’ and ‘the hostile environment’ suddenly became everyday symbols in the British news cycle—keywords in a battle over the moral meaning of immigration in the U.K.

‘Windrush Generation’ was coined in 1996 by Sam B. King and Arthur Torrington who went on to establish the Windrush Foundation.¹ Their aim was celebratory. When the evocatively named Empire Windrush docked in Britain in 1948, amongst its 492 passengers was the advance party for an entire British Caribbean community in-the-making, or so it can appear in retrospect.² The ship and its moment of arrival have become iconic; the actual Windrush manifest may have been small, but the ‘Windrush generation’ incorporates all West Indian migrants who arrived between 1948 and 1971 as well as their descendants, and it celebrates a new way of being British.

In contrast, the idea of a ‘hostile environment’ for immigrants emerged in 2009 as a policy formula of the Conservative government attributed to, then Immigration Minister, Theresa May. The term summarizes, echoes but also re-invents, an intermittent history of anti-immigrant sentiment that dates back at least to the post-war period of decolonization. Notably, the use of a metaphor usually preserved for bacteria control³ give the phrase a contemporary technocratic feel, subtly adapting the more blatant symbolism of immigration as a disease.

When it became known that many longstanding British citizens with a West Indian background were caught up in the ‘hostile environment’ policy drive, the term ‘Windrush generation’ acquired a new meaning. What had seemed to be settled facts concerning the status of the Caribbean community in Britain were suddenly being violently disrupted. At the same time there was growing awareness that racist preoccupations, seemingly dormant in immigration debates over recent decades, were reappearing and gaining legitimacy and even government sanction.

Successful political mobilization around the mistreatment of ‘Windrush’ migrants has forced the U.K. government to instigate a review of all cases involving British citizens or their children who fall in the ‘Windrush generation’ category. The Home Office has begun to reassess cases, but in doing so, as the interviews below suggest, they are opening a door onto patterns of arbitrary treatment and racial discrimination in immigration practice that date back to the very beginnings of this episode of Post-War migration to Britain. Unsurprisingly, for many in the Caribbean itself, the Windrush scandal is viewed as one instance in a much longer history of British-Caribbean colonial relations and as a further reason to call for reparations for slavery and its unresolved aftermath.

The interviews conducted recently with Jamaican migrants by our research group shed light on the lived complexity that underlies the symbols and rhetoric appearing in the media debates. Once we examined the autobiographical experiences of migrants we were in a position to understand how current clashes over the rights of ‘Windrush generation’ migrants give onto longstanding conflicts in the Caribbean-U.K. migration process. These faults run much further back in time—back to the beginning of this episode of emigration in the 1950s

¹ Pers. Comm. Arthur Torrington; <https://windrushfoundation.com/>

² HMT Windrush was not the first ship or even the only one during this specific period carrying West Indian migrants, nor was this its main purpose—Windrush was primarily used as a troopship. It sank in 1954 bringing personnel from the Korean war; passengers included the father of one of the authors of this article.

³ Pers. Comm. Christos Lynteris; cf. Emily Martin (1992) for an overview of metaphorical category-crossing where ‘foreign bodies’ become key metaphors in the field of biology. Here the metaphorical transfer is in the opposite direction—by analogy foreign bodies become bacteria.

in some cases (Wardle and Obermuller, 2018). We should note that our research did not begin with the Windrush controversy but rather as a study of the effects of deportation in the lives of Caribbean migrants. In the process of interviewing and information gathering it became obvious that a significant number of informants fell into the Windrush generation category. Some of this grouping had had their rights to visit or remain in the U.K. revoked long ago. Many of them, in the light of the controversy, have begun an attempt at recovering these rights. The backgrounds of the individuals interviewed were in other ways highly diverse.

Historical context for the Windrush scandal.

Anglophone Caribbean societies have been profoundly migration-oriented since the ending of slavery and the collapse of the slave plantation system in the 1830s. But, until the end of World War II, the circum-Caribbean and North America were far more significant focuses of mobility than the U.K. even though the latter was perceived as the imperial centre and 'Motherland' (Senior and Manley, 1955:5, Phillips 2001). After 1955, though, departures of West Indian migrants to Britain increased rapidly in part due to the active campaigns of recruitment for workers in some of Britain's nationalized industries. In the 1961 U.K. census, approximately 172,877 people were recorded as having been born in the West Indies. By the beginning of 1964, West Indian-born people in Britain numbered over 300,000 (Peach, 1967).

The British Nationality Act of 1948 enabled free movement of citizens of the U.K. colonies to Britain. However, beginning with the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, restrictions were added with each of the subsequent immigration Acts. Repeated changes in the law created arbitrary effects in the lives of Afro-Caribbean people involved and for their family networks. Family members born at one time, or who entered Britain at a certain moment, could find their legal status was fundamentally distinct to others who had moved or stayed under a different rubric. Return to the Caribbean often meant the removal of naturalization rights that should have come with having lived in Britain and the established presence of other family members there.

The inherent historical complexity of the legal status of many migrants with a Caribbean background meant that enforcement of 'hostile environment' policies from 2010 on inevitably caused chaos. A key feature of the 'hostile environment' was that the people targeted would be forced to prove a negative. Migrants must now demonstrate that they or their parents had been in the UK continually since January 1st 1973. However, for many, the Home Office's failure to maintain the records of the people to whom it granted indefinite leave to remain in the 1970s have made this impossible to prove. Leaving the country for more than two years results in a loss of right to 'continuous residency'.

Case Study A: Mr M.

The case of Mr M is typical of many of the cases we have explored where the process toward gaining full rights to British citizenship has repeatedly been interrupted even though M clearly falls into the category of those who naturalised as British before 1971. It also points to the arbitrariness of the systems involved where rules applied at one point are altered or applied differently at another. Mr M first arrived in the UK: September 1954, aged 17.

My father went up in 1948, eventually, he sent for the family. I was the last to leave in 1954. I travelled to the UK on my British Passport. Prior to my arrival, my father had experienced harsh racism so when I got there he wanted me to study, so I enrolled at a

technical college. Things were so bad, that at my age I was bunking with a 54 years old man. My family eventually managed to get a Council flat. At aged 18, I was called to the Royal Air Force. I was in the force for about seven years. After serving in the force, I worked in the UK as a Race Relation Officer.

In 1971, I returned to Jamaica to attend my grandmother's funeral and upon seeing the progress in Jamaica, I was so impressed, that later when I was offered the opportunity to return to work with the Jamaican government I decided to take up the opportunity. At this time, I had a dual citizenship. At the end of my contract with the Ministry, I gained employment with a local company and did not return to the UK.

In 1982, I applied to renew my British Passport in Jamaica; my application was refused on the grounds that I stayed out of the UK too long. I was instead offered a visitor's visa if I wish to travel. I did not make a fuss, as my purpose was to visit my children and family in the UK and the visitor's visa suited this purpose.

However, in 2013, when I apply to renew the visitor's visa, my application was declined. The refusal letter stated that I might not return to Jamaica.

For Mr M, the current Windrush scandal provokes reflection connecting his personal experience of migration to the entire historical situation in which his family and himself became caught up:

To be frank, the whole thing is a fraud. What England seemed to forget is that the immigrants helped to build the UK after the war. My father and others did the dirty jobs; they swept the streets, worked on the garbage trucks, factories and lived in appalling housing, all to help rebuild England.

I am receiving my UK pension every month, but they refused to grant me permission to visit the UK. I have two children living in the UK, both holding respectable jobs with their own homes. I have four brothers and a sister in the UK. In fact, most of my family are residing in the UK.

When I lived in England, I held reputable employment. I do not hold a criminal record, was never involved in any dubious activities.

Living in Jamaica, I have earned sufficient wealth to live a comfortable life. My home is worth \$500,000 USD, I have no debts and more than enough savings, so why did the British High Commission turned down my application. I never asked my children or family members to file for me because my father and grandmother were British citizens. So, the reason for denying my application can only be viewed as racial.

Under the 'Windrush' investigation, I have since submitted my details to the Jamaica High Commission and was informed that I will be allowed to travel to the UK and then proceed with my application for citizenship.

Case study B: Ms L.C.

The underlying significance of the phrase 'Windrush generation' becomes far more complex once we recognise that the complications faced by the group of migrants who arrived before 1971 ramify in unpredictable ways into the lives of their children and grandchildren. Individuals for whom naturalization seems an obvious fact based on having lived most, or their entire, life in Britain as the children or grandchildren of first generation migrants have found themselves caught up in the longstanding failures in terms of resolving the status of Caribbean migrants:

L.C.: I lived in the UK from child[hood] to adulthood. I never had a reason to check my identity or thought I was illegal in the UK. As an adult, I had a little 'run in' with the law and it was then that I discovered that my documents were not in order. I was not charged but some months after the incident I was contacted by the Home Office, it became a long drawn out story to establish my continuous residency in the UK (I produced school records, letters from employers, Church, as evidence but this I guess was not sufficient). I was eventually detained at a detention camp when I arrived, it looked like a prison, so when I was informed that I either get on the plane to Jamaica and continue my matter from Jamaica or be placed in the detention camp, I got on the plane...

Since [arriving] in Jamaica I have tried without success to contact the lawyer I had before leaving the UK. First thing, I do not have access to the internet or monies to purchase phone credit, so I have to go to free wi-fi spots. When I find such spots, the difference in time makes it difficult for me to get to the lawyer's office. When my relative in the UK contacted the lawyer, she informed that I wish to proceed; someone had to pay the legal fees, as legal aid was not available. I certainly cannot and my relatives in the UK are not wealthy people, what little money they have to spare they send for me to survive in Jamaica, as it is difficult to find employment.

My friend in Jamaica collected me from the airport and since then I have been staying in the country [rural Jamaica] with a relative. Jobs are difficult for locals, must less a foreigner, and that is exactly how locals referred to as 'a foreigner'. I do not know of any government aid/funding. I have attended training events put on by Mr Dawkins [National Organisation of Deported Migrants] but that is about it. My friends and relatives from the UK [people I once helped] would send me something or when they come to visit would bring clothes and stuff for me.

I lived most of my life in the UK, I do not have a Jamaica accent or understanding of the country's history. I feel like an alien here, amongst people [so] that if they were talking about me I would not understand. Here you have to know people to get a job, you have to know people to get your TRN, and you have to even know people to get a sim card.

According to the local NGO, NODM:⁴ Most of the returnees have difficulties of meeting the requirements of financial institutions to open bank accounts, access loans and other forms of credits. Difficulties of meeting the requirements of service providers- phones, cable, internet, etc. Difficulties to establish an identity. Social alienation and Discrimination.

Case study C: Sisters A and B.

One of the effects of the constantly changing legal situation for Caribbean migrants between 1948 and the present has been to create arbitrary distinctions between members of family networks. Sisters A and B were separated from each other in the 1960s because British immigration authorities applying new legal restrictions disallowed Sister B the chance to join the rest of her family in Britain. Sister A describes the terrible emotional pain this caused:

Sister A: My parents had five children. In the early 1960s when they decided to move to the UK, three of us moved with them. The oldest and the youngest remained in Jamaica with one of our aunts. The youngest who remained was a three months old girl. The decision to leave her my mother had said was difficult but at that time it was the best

⁴ National Organisation of Deported Migrants; <https://nodmsblogpage.wordpress.com/author/nodmsblogpage/>

under the circumstances. Both parents would be working fulltime in the UK and no one was available to assist with taking care of the baby.

The plan was to have her join the family when she was older. My parents remitted monies to my aunt to care my sister and visited Jamaica to spend time with her. In 1969 when my parents decided to have my sister join us, we found out that the immigration laws had changed.

My parents were not wealthy, they had no influential friends; they were ordinary hard-working people. No member of our family living in the UK had committed a crime; we were not depending on the British government, so it was shocking when the Home Office refused to allow my sister to join us. This was very difficult for my family, I recall my brother giving my mother his savings to assist with my sister's paperwork. Growing up in the UK, I was in a house with four boys; I would look at my female mates with their sisters and wish my sister would be allowed to come live with us. I had to form sisterly bonds with strangers, as my sister was miles away. I watched my mother cry many nights, regretting that she left her baby and now unable to reunite our family. As much as we talk, and we sent money, it was not the same. It was an emotionally painful experience.

There was not a lot that my parents could do, they tried, and I have all the evidence. The hardest blow was when my parents died and my sister was denied 'visitor's' visas to attend their funerals. Like with her paperwork for residency, all the required documentation for the visitor's visa was submitted but once again, she was denied entry. It is horrific that my sister was unable to attend both of her parents' funeral. We did what we need to do but still did not get the visa; I can only see this as racist. My mother tired, it hurt my mother to know her daughter was out there suffering. My sister was suffering out there; separated from her family. The last time her visa application was denied, the letter stated she may not return to Jamaica, how is it that this person is able to say this when my sister never overstayed her time in any country. There was no issue regarding finance, she has her children and grandchildren in Jamaica. I think it is just shameful the way the British government treat its commonwealth citizens.

Caribbean migration has often had the effect that while some family members travel to the migrant destination others remain behind in the care of relatives or friends (Fog Olwig 2012). In Sister B's case this state became permanent. U.K. immigration authorities have made it impossible for the family to live together. This has caused a faultline in her family that has defined how they understand themselves:

Sister B: Growing up I was told that my parents left me [at just a few months, a old toddler] and my older brother in Jamaica when they migrated to the UK in the 1960s with my three older siblings. I remember my dad especially coming to visit me and saying that when I am older I will be joining them in the UK. As I grew older, I thought they just abandoned me; my older brother had also migrated, so I had no family. Life got rough without my family, people took advantage of me, and the monies my parents sent for my wellbeing was diverted to others. I was suffering badly, and then at aged 13, a family friend raped me. My parents tried desperately to move me with them after the incident, I remembered my mother saying that she sent an airline ticket for me to travel but the child services said I could not travel as the immigration rules in the UK had changed.

After the incident, I became depressed; I would blank things, my family, life, etc. You cannot imagine what it was like for me, knowing that they left me behind, and now this

ugly thing happen to me by the very people who they thought would be protecting me. I would say to myself, had I been up there with them, my brothers and my sister would have protected me. My sister is so sweet, and I would often wonder what it would have been like to grow up with her? I would speak with my family over the phone and try to imagine what the house looked like? I used to think of my mother's cooking, if the family ate together, who assisted my siblings with their schoolwork. All these things. What hurts me most is the fact that my parents did try to get me to the UK when I was younger, I thought perhaps they did not try hard. However, when my father and subsequently, my mother died and I tried to acquire a visitor's visa to attend their funerals, I experienced the cruel immigration policies for myself. I submitted all the relevant documents (I do not have a mortgage on my property, business, car, have children and grandchildren in Jamaica, etc), I was travelling to attend a funeral, I was not trying to move to the UK and yet I did not get the visa. That was the final blow, the final nail to the coffin!

Windrush and the limbo of Caribbean-U.K. migration

'Limbo was born, it is said, on the slave ships of the Middle Passage. There was so little space that the slaves contorted themselves into human spiders' (Harris [1970]2008:10). In the limbo dance, the dancer moves under a bar that is gradually lowered until a mere slit remains through which he passes spider-like (Fabre, 1999:42). As Fabre argues, for Caribbean slaves limbo never was just a dance; it expressed the predicament of the captive, caught in the prison of history, and on another level, it embodied the capacities needed to deal with that situation.

Uncertainty pervades the lives of the individuals we interviewed for this research. Several were to all intents and purposes both stateless and homeless; some had no next of kin on the island and no access to resources. Some are trying every means possible to return to the United Kingdom to join their families there. Others await news from Britain on the outcome of their petition. The state of not knowing where to stand is doubly a limbo state.

In the 70th year after the arrival of Windrush, Prime Minister Theresa May noted that 'The fact that Britain has always been their home makes the treatment which some members of the Windrush generation experienced in recent years so very wrong'.⁵ The carefully chosen words point to underlying ambiguities. Some will also note the irony of this speech given by an author of the same 'hostile environment' drive that threw the settled status of these same individuals into turmoil. Nevertheless, the 'hostile environment' in many respects simply extends policy formations that have arbitrarily ruptured and separated families from the very beginnings of the process of Caribbean migration to Britain in the 1950s; a migration process which was first encouraged then increasingly restricted, the bar lowered to a slit.

For their part, many in the Caribbean will likewise understand this new scandal as an extension of the history of colonial relations between Britain and the Caribbean which began with Britain's role in instigating the slave plantation labour system, subsequently its deployment of West Indians as an exploitable labour force in regional projects, through to the current treatment of British-Caribbean citizens as expendable in an immigration control initiative. Director of the University of the West Indies, Centre for Reparations Verene Shepherd has recently argued that the 'Windrush' saga should be seen in the light of demands for reparations for slavery. Indeed, it strengthens these claims and shows the cracks in the

⁵ <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-windrush-anniversary/after-immigration-scandal-britain-remembers-windrush-70-years-on-idUKKBN1J11UY>

British narratives of human rights, democracy and the notion of a 'Commonwealth of Nations'. There is nothing 'common', she notes about the historical accumulation of 'wealth' while the Caribbean has had such a small share of it. Former colonial powers cannot simply walk away without penalty having exploited Caribbean people and Caribbean resources for centuries (Shepherd, 2018).

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