

Generation Windrush: diasporic landscapes and settlement



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The Windrush scandal

In April 2018, the British government faced widespread public anger and outcry against, and later acknowledged, the mistreatment of hundreds of British Caribbean residents who had settled in the United Kingdom following the Second World War [1]. Migrants from the then British colonies in the Caribbean had been encouraged to cross the Atlantic by the British government and industries and were offered work permits to help re-build an economy and society decimated by war. West Indian migrants arriving between 1948 and the early 1970s came to be known as the 'Windrush Generation', named after the first 492 adults and children arriving from Jamaica, who disembarked from the passenger ship HMT Empire Windrush at Tilbury Docks, London on 22nd June 1948.

and subtle divergence [2]. The Windrush Generation's contributions to the multiculturalism of British life today have been formative and striking [3,4]. Windrush writers and artists, such as Sam Selvon & Linton Kwesi Johnson [5,6]- LKJ - have themselves generated a substantial oeuvre of Black British writing and cultural energy that lies as much at the heart of British society, as do the economic contributions of the early Windrush migrant workers and subsequent generations. Since many children arrived and settled in the United Kingdom legally via their parents' passports, the exact number of the Windrush Generation is not clear, but it amounts to thousands, reinforcing the quantitative and qualitative Caribbean underpinnings of British society today (Figure 1).

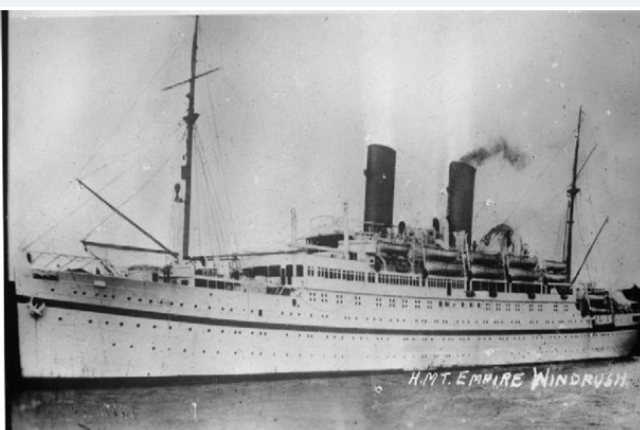


Figure 1: HMT Empire Windrush Wikipedia Commons.

Migrants and settlers from Caribbean societies have shaped British history and society for centuries, and the transatlantic Caribbean diaspora has been built up via layered and interwoven social, cultural, economic and political landscapes of connection



Figure 2: Passengers disembarking from the Empire Windrush at Tilbury Dock.

Given that such deep and positive influences of the Windrush Generation are widely celebrated, it seemed all the more outrageous and perplexing that since 2012, the British government's 'hostile environment' policy has created

great insecurity and uncertainty among many lawful British Caribbean residents. This antagonistic agenda constituted a set of administrative and legislative measures designed to make staying in the United Kingdom more difficult for residents without full citizenship, even if they were entitled to such rights (Figure 2). This proved to be the case for many Windrush settlers and their children, who have faced restricted access to welfare services, internship, and actual or threatened deportation back to the Caribbean, even after five decades of legal residence in the United Kingdom.

Just as writers and artists such as LKJ and Selvon have relayed the hardships of arriving and living in Britain during the Windrush era, and riled at ongoing legacies of empire and slavery, the current targets of this only recently revoked crackdown - May 2018 - are now making their own political and cultural voices heard. New oral and visual diasporic landscapes of resistance and cries for justice are being formed. This live topography reflects longstanding tensions of diasporic landscapes experienced by earlier migrants crossing the Atlantic in the reverse direction from Britain. Those stressed are felt in the need to create a new sense of dwelling and self in strange lands by making fresh pathways, generating mobile identities, while also collating past memories and seeking stasis and settlement in place.

Diaspora, mobility and settlement

Diasporic landscapes explore the intimacies between body and place that mobility continues to create, reflecting spatial scales of embodiment, while highlighting intersections of complex identities with diverse historical and physical trajectories. These embodied landscapes underpin experiences of migration and settlement, reflecting closely Machado's understanding that individual and collective diasporas are rarely pre-determined, always in motion - 'there is no road, the road is made by walking':

Caminante, son tus huellas
 el camino, y nada más;
 caminante, no hay camino,
 se hace camino al andar.
 Al andar se hace camino,
 y al volver la vista atrás
 se ve la senda que nunca
 se ha de volver a pisar.

Machado's serial optimism of re-creation and progressive enlightenment through movement runs counter to more pessimistic or stressed contexts and accounts of diaspora formation and memory. Such tensions are reflected in twentieth and twenty-first century-transatlantic diasporic writings, as well as many before, en route from Britain to North America.

Robert Louis Stevenson's experiences as an emigrant to the United States reflect the more downbeat context of mobility that can shape sombre realisations and intimacies of footfall and motion, through troubling or troubled landscapes. While voyaging across the Atlantic, Stevenson's thoughts were not of an open future, but of a lost past and curtailed present: '... all now belonging for ten days to one small iron country on the deep. We were a company of the rejected... We were a shipful of failures, the broken men of England'. The historical intimacy of his Scottish ancestry is subsumed into the hard, momentary present of a ship's metal hulk. For Stevenson and many others, the flight from home, albeit to build another, was not youthful and full of hope, but engendered a desperate and despondent setting. Acquaintances were scraped together, rather than friendships forged. These intimacies of knowledge and experience, generated by movement, embodied as much distance as proximity; exclusion and inclusion shared in uneven doses. A century beforehand, Johnson [7] had referred to the making of this new Scottish diaspora in the Americas as a dilution of energy, a loss of heat from a waning national hearth: '...for a nation scattered in the boundless regions of America resembles rays diverging from a focus. All the rays remain, but the heat is gone. Their power consisted in their concentration: when they dispersed, they have no effect. It may be thought that they are happier by the change; but they are not happy as a nation, for they are a nation no longer... they must want that security, that dignity, that happiness, whatever it be, which a prosperous community throws back upon individuals (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Newspaper advert for passenger to sail on Empire Windrush.

Traumatic tensions of optimism and pessimism, celebratory recollection and solemn commemoration of place, person and movement are revealed. Transdisciplinary approaches to memory, mobility and mindsets reflect Bergson's [8] thesis on spontaneous (*la mémoire spontanée*) and voluntary (*la mémoire volontaire*) processes of recollection. While time, he suggests runs with a linear, irreversible current, the embodiment of human memory transcends both time and space. The migrant and settler's memory acts vertically, as fleeting, unexpected glimpses of the past and future that cut across and into present constructions of place and senses of belonging. Human memory

unites past and present in one place, joining or displacing the individual or collective in the context of the moment and with intimate depths of human experience, knowledge and identity.

The experiences of 'Generation Windrush' are many miles and eras away from the writing of these two, now celebrated, Scottish writers. Connections, however, may be found in charting a series of pathways through visceral and emotive landscapes, offering the reader and writer a series of routes by which to figure out diverse memories and narratives of diasporic identities. The process of creating a path to a place generates the diasporic landscapes revealed historically and today, and which are emerging now in poignant new political and cultural forms as British society as a whole comes to terms with the woefully misguided notion of a 'hostile environment'. 'Landscape' is often understood as a noun connoting fixity, yet diasporic literature reveals the word as a 'hidden verb': the landscapes are dynamic and cause commotion; they are 'bristling' with identities, memories and the transformative effects of moving through place[9-12].

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